**Class and wealth in popular romance fiction**

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Abstract

While class has not generally been a central focus of research on the popular romance, it was a significant interest for some early scholarship on the popular romance novel, most notably research by Jan Cohn and Bridget Fowler. This chapter offers an overview of scholarly work on class and wealth in the popular romance as it has developed from Cohn and Fowler’s early interventions alongside sociological and cultural approaches to studying class. The chapter explores four key themes which have emerged from the study of class and wealth in popular romance novels: intersectionality; cross-class marriage and social mobility; romance as middle-class propaganda; and the implications of romance’s escapist qualities.

Class has not generally been a central focus of popular romance research. However, there is a small but significant body of work on class and wealth in popular romance. This scholarship treats as suspect “the claim of romantic love’s disinterestedness, of its being exempt from issues of hierarchy and inequality in class society” (Weisser 135): romance is not, in fact, universal and class *does* matter.

This chapter offers an overview of this scholarship on class and wealth in the popular romance as it has emerged over the past 30 years. My focus, following the majority of previous scholarship, is on the heterosexual romance novel as it is consumed and produced in Britain and the U.S.[[1]](#endnote-1) I begin by offering a brief outline of sociological and cultural approaches to studying class and the ways these have informed criticism of the romance novel. I also provide a synopsis of the popular romance texts produced by and for specific audiences in Britain and the U.S. that form the basis for scholarship in this area. The chapter then focuses on four key themes that emerge from this scholarship: intersectionality; cross-class marriage and social mobility; romance as middle-class propaganda; and the implications of romance’s escapist qualities. I end with some thoughts on where critical engagement with class and wealth in romance might go next.

**Reading class**

Over the last 30 years, scholarship on class in the popular romance has shifted in line with wider changes in approaches to the study of class. As Jennifer Haytock points out, “discussions of class used to start with Marx and hence with the connection between labor and capital, specifically the interplay between them labelled ‘class struggle’” (7). In Marxist terms, class is understood in terms of its relation to the means of production. Early studies of the romance were influenced by materialist feminism and read romance through the twin lenses of capitalism and patriarchy; Jan Cohn’s *Romance and the Erotics of Property* ([1988](#LinkManagerBM_REF_YFwqNnAm)) is an example of this kind of analysis. In the mid-1980s, the appearance of English-language translations of the work of Pierre Bourdieu prompted a shift away from conceptions of class based on social stratification and toward a more individual, self-determined view of class based on forms of capital, to borrow Bourdieu’s term (1987). Bourdieu viewed class in terms of capital: economic capital (command over economic resources); social capital (resources based on group membership, relationships, networks of influence and support); and cultural capital (forms of knowledge, skill, education). Stuart Hall extends this further to propose that class is *active*: a performance of particular kinds of classed behavior: thus “class has come to be regarded as something between a fixed economic category and a social construction” (Hall, qtd. in Haytock 7).

From the mid-1980s onwards, romance scholarship echoed the “cultural turn” in approaches to class. Fowler’s *The Alienated Reader: Women and Popular Romantic Literature in the Twentieth Century* (1991) uses Bourdieu’s categories of taste—legitimate taste, “middle-brow” taste, and popular taste—to distinguish between her romance readers. Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984), a well-known study of popular romance fiction, describes the educational and cultural capital of her Smithton readers, in addition to their economic situation. Indeed, Bourdieu’s work on *habitus*—“the set of bodily, linguistic, and cultural dispositions acquired during socialization” (Illouz *Why Love Hurts* 49)—has been influential in work on dating, love and romance; Eva Illouz draws on these ideas in her 1997 study *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, where she aims to make class a more central issue in the cultural study of love. Paul Johnson and Steph Lawler point out how helpful these conceptions of class can be when dealing with something seen as “more ‘cultural’ than economic” (Johnson and Lawler n.p.). Twenty-first-century scholarship on class in the popular romance has also explored the neoliberal turn in world economics, and the endorsement of global free-market capitalism—an issue Jayashree Kamblé explores at length in her *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology* (2014).

In general, this work on class in popular romance takes one of two approaches: a focus on working-class readers and material produced and consumed by them; or analysis of the way class is represented in romance fiction more widely. Studies vary in their historical approach, with many tracing the roots of class issues in current romances from their ancestors in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Given the wide range of sources discussed across this scholarship, I will briefly outline the romance novels discussed by critics that were published in Britain and the U.S. from the 1740s onward.

**Class and romance reading in Britain and the U.S.**

***Romance in Britain***

Several different genres and periods of British popular romance have been explored by scholars for their representation of, or relation to, class and wealth. Some critics begin with what Pamela Regis calls the “classic” romances of the eighteenth and nineteenth century: namely, Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Social position is at the heart of these novels; in particular, the “magical social ascent of fairy-tales” evident in romance (Fowler 15). Lillian S. Robinson highlights how Austen’s novels are rooted in an understanding of social change and how it was affecting people (215–16); for Austen’s characters, everything they do is mediated by class (Robinson 220). As for *Pamela*, Fowler argues,

however severe its critique of elitism, however much it softened the practices of a market economy with an appeal to charity or “caring capitalism,” opposition to the desire for social reconstruction championed by the new working class was its secret centre. (17)

In *Pamela*, the heroine’s ascent to become part of a ruling gentry class that governs justly is the fantasy (Fowler 15–17). Subsequent romance fiction was heavily influenced by these classics of the genre; Fowler posits that the birth of mass fiction in the 1840s and 1850s recycled the values of novels like this one.

The most obvious, although admittedly not historically chronological, successor to Austen was Georgette Heyer, whose *Regency Buck* (1935) heralded the start of the wildly popular Regency subgenre of romance. For Robinson, Heyer “shows a society articulated by class and one in which class feeling, especially snobbery and ambition, runs high” (220). The Regency has also influenced non-historical romances; Regis, in her diachronic survey of the popular romance, notes how American author Kathleen Gilles Seidel centers her novel around a Regency-era historical soap opera to create a society defined “by that period’s rigid class structure” in *Again* (1994) (41). Many scholars have looked to the Regency romance, with its strict delineation of social strata, for their exploration of class and wealth (e.g., Osborne; Kamblé).

In the early twentieth century, Edwardian romance novels continued to be preoccupied with themes of class and wealth. Heroes were drawn from the aristocracy, and heroines came either from the upper classes, or the working middle classes (Dixon 6). jay Dixon argues that these novels reflected the instability of the period in terms of class change and fears for the stability of the upper classes, with romance novels often containing an external menace reflecting this threat. She thus concludes “that from the earliest days of their history, Mills & Boon books have symbolically represented aspects of the society in which they were written” (Dixon 14–15). However, these “society” novels, concerned with the English upper classes and set in southern England, had largely disappeared by 1914 (Dixon 14). Dixon also points to a shift in the association of class and wealth. In society novels, class and wealth are combined—higher class means greater wealth—and the hero is often representative of England, with his country estate and aristocratic lineage (Dixon 46). But the heroes of current Mills & Boon romances are no longer associated with England or with the aristocracy; today’s heroes are sheikhs, Spaniards, and wealthy entrepreneurs (Dixon 46, 48), indicating a movement away from class in strict social terms, toward a global, market-driven emphasis on wealth.[[2]](#endnote-2)

It was after 1914 that the first publications specifically targeted at working-class women appeared: “the down-market, consumer-oriented periodical which was, none the less, a class paper” (Melman 107). These cheap, regularly-produced magazines, such as the mill-girl focused *Peg’s Paper*, identified themselves with working-class women, represented working-class experiences, and invited readers to send in their “real” stories (Melman 109, 113). The periodical boom in the post-war era was predominantly associated with women and the working class; by the mid-1920s, “over half the fiction magazines for women catered for the adolescent and adult working-class market” (Melman 110, 112).

In terms of working-class readership, it is worth highlighting the work of Catherine Cookson—a hugely successful British writer of “social democratic” romances from the 1950s onward. Cookson’s domestic romance novels focused on multi-generation stories set in the North of England and offer a microcosmic view of social relations (Fowler 91). Cookson places the domestic at the heart of her novels—“minute detail is included of women’s domestic labour, so as to enhance its use-value” (Fowler 94)—and it has been argued that “the reformist adaptation of working-class radicalism to capitalism represented in the tradition of Methodist unionism is the hidden centre of all Cookson’s naturalist novels” (Fowler 78). Marriage for social advancement is a key motif in Cookson’s novels (Fowler), but critics are divided as to how socially aware her novels are. For Janet Batsleer et al., the focus on “formulaic narrative devices” of romance obscures politics; “in Catherine Cookson’s novels, heredity replaces and displaces class struggle as the motor of history” (87–8). However, in *The Historical Novel* (2010), Jerome de Groot argues that “Cookson’s novels refuse to compromise their message about the privations suffered by women in the past, and in doing so they present a type of historical romance which is idealistic about relationships but clear-sighted about history” (56), thus refuting Batsleer’s argument. For de Groot, Cookson’s novels make apparent the function of hegemonic capitalism to indicate how it might be “challenged, subverted or questioned” (57). Fowler similarly argues that “it is striking how many of these novels are pastiches specifically of the Victorian ‘condition of England’ novels of the 1840s” and “therefore centrally concerned with the relations of labour and capital” (100). Fowler claims that Cookson’s later novels are more explicit in their class politics and “opposition to ‘Victorian values’ can be detected within some recent romances, including the presentation of strikes as legitimate defences of workers’ interests and the linkage of exploitation to high rates of profit” (Fowler 99).

Mills & Boon, the most successful British romance publisher, produced novels in the early twentieth century where the protagonists were both middle-class, white-collar workers (Kamblé 35). However, this changed with the growing popularity of the “capitalist hero” (Kamblé 36) where the hero is presented as the “wielder of bourgeois power” and the novel “dramatize[s]” his effect on the working-class heroine (Kamblé 29–30). Romance novels thus reflect changes in the British economy from Keynesian economics to the free market. From the mid-twentieth century, popular romance also shifted in response to social and historical changes. Batsleer et al. point to the increase in exotic settings that occurred alongside a rise in package holidays and the “transnationalisation of capital” (91). As women worked in a wider range of industries following World War II, romance novels began to feature more diverse working heroines. The career novel, “of which over 50 were published in the 1950s and 1960s, [was] aimed at young girls and designed to encourage the development of career aspirations” (Baum 1187). Thomas Baum focuses his analysis on flight attendants, but romance heroines were imagined in a range of occupations, although these remained predominantly feminized (secretary, teacher, governess) (Markert, qtd. in Liffen 350). A key subgenre in this period is the doctor–nurse romance that emerged in the 1950s in response to the establishing of the NHS in Britain. In these novels, “Mills & Boon authors brought their own work experience as nurses to bear in crafting a more realistic, sometimes gritty background for their love stories” (McAleer 174). Joseph McAleer notes that after World War II women were more interested in having jobs and not just being in the home—the doctor–nurse romances of the 1950s is an indication of Mills & Boon’s editorial policy shifting to accommodate this (176).

***Romance in the U.S.***

While social changes in the U.S. and the U.K. were broadly comparable and many of the romantic texts mentioned circulated in both countries, there are two specifically American genres that appear in scholarship on romance and class.[[3]](#endnote-3) The first is the domestic novel, popular in the mid-nineteenth century. Cohn notes that “the period directly following the Civil War saw a burgeoning market for women writers of popular fiction” (Cohn 49). Described by Nina Baym as “the story of a young girl … deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on … [who] [b]y the novel’s end … has developed a strong conviction of her own worth” (19), the subgenre did not really focus on working-class women (Denning 187). Indeed, the demise of the domestic novel in the 1860s was partly predicated, according to Michael Denning, on a “new visibility of class, of working-women in the culture” (187). Denning focuses his analysis on the second genre, the dime novel, the first popular romance text produced for working-class women in the U.S. (Enstad 14). Emerging in the 1840s, the working-girl novel was a major subgenre of dime novels (Denning 185). Such a distinction, between the longer novel for and about the middle and upper classes, and the serial publication, for and, mostly, about the working class (Melman 148), is common to popular romance on both sides of the Atlantic. As Billie Melman points out, “working-class modes of feeling and thinking about women differed radically from those of the middle classes or élite audiences. The differences manifested themselves in both the form and the language of discourse” (147–8).

To some extent, the way class and wealth are represented in popular romance publishing has changed significantly. Works specifically aimed at working-class women emerged for the first time in the twentieth century, novels are now far more likely to represent women at work (and in a wider range of roles), and there has been a shift away from the domestic focus of nineteenth-century novels. But there are threads that can be drawn from the classic romances of the eighteenth and nineteenth century through to the present day. Kamblé points to a “changing economic milieu” as the “key thematic connection between classic and contemporary romance” (28–9); she traces the association of big business and capitalism with the modern romance hero back to these classic novels and their focus on society and entwining of a courtship narrative (32). Fowler argues that modern romance novels still have “recourse to such hegemonic gentry figures” as we see in novels like *Pamela* (15–17) (this is also clearly evident in the continuing popularity of Regency and Victorian historical novels). Regis similarly recognizes that the society consideration of earlier “classic” romances is not gone, but is simply less important in the popular romances of the twentieth century (123). It is to these common threads and themes that I now turn.

**Key themes in the scholarship of class and wealth in romance**

**Intersectionality**

Romance is a genre written and read by women. It is thus impossible to think about class without also thinking about gender; as Alison Light puts it, “class and gender differences do not simply speak to each other, they cannot speak *without* each other” (19). What’s more, “by seeing that women are constituted not just by their difference from men, but by class differences that separate them from each other, we become more alert to the complex ways women relate to each other and to men” (Amireh xiii–xiv). Unlike much early scholarship on the romance, which focuses almost entirely on gender, all the studies discussed in this chapter are explicit about the way gender and class intersect in romance. The most obvious is the presentation of conflict between the hero and heroine as class conflict, where he is the one with more social *and* more gender power. In her analysis of Catherine Cookson novels, Fowler notes how class preservation is related to control of sexuality and marriage (92–3); in a heterosexual romance novel whose end goal is monogamous marriage, while the heroine might gain social status through the marriage she remains subordinate to the hero, who has top billing in gender and in class (Osborne 145–6).[[4]](#endnote-4) Such subordination is not new: Fowler argues that “the romance’s promise of happiness originated in feudal female vassalage to husbands” (19).

The intersection of gender and class is evident in the way that women’s work is depicted. I have outlined how the work women undertake in romance novels can be feminized—women are often nannies, secretaries, or teachers. Yet, even where women undertake different professions, or where working women are celebrated, heroines often, especially in older romance novels, end up ensconced in the domestic sphere through marriage by the end of the novel with the male hero re-established as the primary earner (Fowler 60). Baum notes that “typically, these novels depicted situations which gave their heroines a taste of independence within a conventional framework, but confirmed their ultimate domestic role through a successful romance” (1187). Romance novels are also revealing of differences between women based on their profession—this is evident in the doctor-nurse romances of the 1950s. McAleer notes that a key difference between romances where the heroine is a nurse and those where she is a doctor is that at the end of the novel the nurse is expected to give up her career immediately, but the doctor-heroine can carry on working (187–8). The distinction between work and the domestic is presented slightly differently in the “corporate romances” of the 1990s. Focusing on the work of Jayne Ann Krentz, Erin S. Young notes how the heroine domesticates the workplace meaning she does not have to give up work in order to share domestic bliss with the hero. However, as Young points out, the flexibility to manage both a successful career and romantic union is dependent on the privilege afforded by her status as a white upper-class woman. There is, therefore, a sharp difference in opportunities for women from different classes and ethnic and racial groups.

It is possible to read the representation of women’s work as symbolic in a larger sense. In her reading of romance novels as allegories of economic change, Kamblé suggests that the double bind women found themselves in during the Thatcher administration (where jobs were lost and women were encouraged to stay at home by the “Tory emphasis on the family” but found themselves financially unable to do so) “is the concealed narrative in many Harlequin Mills and Boon romances of the time, though it is cased in a deceptively simplistic formula of the aggressive male faced down by the scrappy woman” (39). She argues that “the battle of the sexes (reflected in the hostile skirmishes that make up the hero and heroine’s relationship) is the familiar signifier that is reinvigorated by its new meaning (class conflict), a meaning provoked by the growth of multinational capitalism” (Kamblé 40). For Kamblé, “the novels thus represent a socioeconomic drama of the way British national firms and the people in the workforce faced Britain’s changing economic landscape” and “it signals the novels’ response to a larger shift in the mode of production in Britain from social democratic welfare economics to liberal political economy and the doctrine of market order” (40). The gendered conflict between the hero and heroine thus represents wider shifts in British economic culture.

Looking at class alongside gender can also be revealing of other areas of intersection. Batsleer et al. highlight the presence of both “Society women” and working-class women in romance novels but, rather than pointing out their differences, attempt to show how they are connected through a focus on the family; both classes of women are excluded from “full-time work, trade-unionism, politics, the making of ‘history’” (103), all of which are reserved for men. In these novels, “Englishness” is a common theme for “all (white) women” in romances that “place families—rather than class wealth or enterprise—at the heart of the nation” (Batsleer et al. 103). Batsleer et al.’s choice of language here—“all (white) women” is revealing of a glaring omission in much of this scholarship of any attention to race or ethnicity and the ways this intersects with class and gender.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Fowler is one of very few scholars who takes a more intersectional approach to romance novels—she is quick to point out that 1970s and 1980s feminist scholarship on the romance novel failed to take class, ethnicity, and power into account (35). While she does not actually focus on ethnicity in her book-length study, Fowler does mention a Catherine Cookson novel, *Colour Blind* (1953) featuring a cross-racial relationship that shows tensions between working-class people in the North-East of England and immigrants from Africa and Asia. Fowler points out that this is Cookson’s only romance that does not have a positive ending—the cross-racial relationship breaks up the family and, ultimately, can’t be accepted. For Fowler, the morality and message of this book is aligned with native British workers (82–7). Susan Ostrov Weisser points to the interlinking of class and race in contemporary Harlequin Mills & Boon publication. She notices that black romance series explicitly require “aspirational” protagonists, while in series containing predominantly white characters, like “Harlequin Presents,” “most white heroes and heroines are middle-class or upper-class … without the reminder or task of heavy-handed ‘modeling’” (166–7).

In her contribution to the edited collection *Romance Fiction and American Culture*,Erin S. [Young (2016)](#LinkManagerBM_REF_G1dtlSr8) examines how race and class intersect in contemporary romance novels featuring mixed-race Asian heroines. She notes that contemporary China is often identified with the past, from which the Asian heroine is rescued by “the ‘American dream’ of economic independence and social or political power” (209); the “therapeutic power of white economic hegemony” (221). Young argues that rather than the white hero becoming more sympathetic to a “female worldview” over the course of the novel (as noted by earlier romance scholars), it is actually the Asian heroine who is transformed through her introduction to the “(white) British or American corporation” (206) that the white, western hero represents. The happily ever after is thus the “success and security of an American corporation” (213) with attendant implications of whiteness. There are several potential reasons for the general elision of race/ethnicity from the discussion of class in romance (which I will outline at the end of this chapter), but it is clear that a fully intersectional approach to the study of popular romance is overdue.

**Cross-class marriage and social mobility**

In most romance genres, in most periods, the way for lower-class women to improve their social class and gain power is through marriage to the wealthy hero. As Cohn puts it,

bourgeois, patriarchal society reduced women’s economic function to her role in the marriage market. Upward mobility, promised at least in theory to all sober and industrious men, was denied her in her exclusion from the marketplace. Marriage was her only real economic resource; and marriage to a man socially and economically her superior, her only real chance for upward mobility, her only recourse to power. (8)

The heroine, almost always of a lower class or status than the hero, is not permitted access to wealth or upper-class identity in a genre where the hero’s identity is so consistently defined by wealth, upper-class status, and power. Thus, “in the structures of contemporary romance there is no way for the heroine to acquire that power except by acquiring the hero” (Cohn 5). Cross-class marriage is also the most obvious way that class conflict, often the barrier between hero and heroine, can be removed.

Cross-class marriage is thus common in popular romance. Catherine Cookson, whose novels were popular throughout the second half of the twentieth century, used cross-class marriage as a major device (Fowler 82). Analyzing the Regency romances of Georgette Heyer, Robinson notes that Heyer’s heroes are always drawn from “the first circles” of society, and heroines are usually from impoverished families to allow for the emergence of a Cinderella motif of upwardly mobile marriage (216–17). In the U.S., nineteenth-century dime novels regularly featured stories about the transformation of working girls into ladies through marriage (Denning 195–6). Cross-class marriage can even be used to side-step gender inequality. Laurie Osborne, exploring the way romance uses Shakespeare to mediate class, argues that “Shakespeare enables romance novelists to rewrite patriarchal gender inequalities as class or status obstacles” which is meaningful as “class differences can ostensibly be resolved through marriage; gender inequity cannot” (149). This means that apparently immutable gender inequalities can be side-stepped because “class is assumed to be flexible and fantasies of transcending class are particularly potent” (Osborne 149).

However, this interlacement of love, marriage, and power is complicated by the ideology of the romantic story that defines marriage as “based on emotional rather than economic considerations” (Cohn 8). The romance heroine is not permitted to be calculating in her pursuit of advantageous marriage; on the contrary, she must be seen as actively *not* seeking such an arrangement. Tania Modleski points out that while “it is socially, economically, and aesthetically imperative for a woman to get a husband and his money, she achieves these goals partly by *not wanting* them” (50). As Cohn puts it:

the goal of this heroine is to find the right husband, the mature, successful, sensual hero. The problem for the heroine, of course, is that she cannot openly pursue this goal, that she must appear to be doing something else entirely. (95)

This dates back to nineteenth-century classic romance, where desiring a successful marriage to rise above one’s station would be seen as vulgar (Robinson 219).

Thus, socially advantageous marriage is a realistic way for women (in romance and in reality) to gain access to social circles and commodities otherwise unavailable to her. There is, then, a tension between marriage as romantic endeavor, and marriage as social contract or bargain. Kamblé, analyzing late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century Regency historical romances, finds evidence of bargaining and negotiation in conversations around marriage, for instance in Loretta Chase’s *Lord of Scoundrels* (1995) where the hero and heroine negotiate their marriage contract “in the register of the corporate takeover, with its characteristic demands and counteroffers of dividends and stock options” (43). For Kamblé, while this example does point to “the kind of wealth, monetary security, and financial reward that the heroes of Harlequin Mills and Boon promise as husbands” (43), it also indicates “the genre’s immersion in, and suspicion of, business-speak and the ethos of late capitalism” (43). Kamblé writes:

[it is not] that romance novels show marriage to be a system of commoditization and exchange but rather that they reflect the pervasive nature of industrial and postindustrial capitalism’s worldview, with its constant threatening undercurrent of annexation and loss of economic autonomy. (45)

According to Kamblé, upwardly mobile marriage points to deeper issues in popular romance.

**Romance as middle-class propaganda**

Given the development of the working-class popular romance from its middle-class antecedent, it seems inevitable that romance would sometimes focus on middle-class experience to the exclusion of working-class lives. McAleer states that Mills & Boon were careful and deliberate about how they came across “to maintain a solidly middle-class moral worldview that maintained the status quo” (175). Indeed, Fowler argues that the romance magazines of the 1920s and 1930s were adapted from the middle-class romance form “to take account of the deprivations and the wish-fulfilment of an oppressed lower-class readership” (51). Yet, an accusation that has been leveled at popular romance read by working-class women is that it functions as middle-class propaganda.

It certainly seems as though popular romance aimed at working-class women has, at least in the past, been preoccupied with “besieging” working-class families with middle-class values; Fowler posits that from the 1850s onwards popular romance encouraged a halt to the working-class practice of taking in lodgers and encouraged middle-class measures, such as marriage before pregnancy and the surveillance of children (54–5). Equally, when key social conflicts are described (e.g., the great strike) they are usually represented from the point of view of the dominant classes (Fowler 103). Barbara Cartland, who wrote hundreds of novels read by working-class or lower-middle-class women, was herself a “Society” woman (Batsleer et al. 92–3) whose writing endorsed “conservative modes of cultural and social behaviour” (de Groot 59). Judy Giles notes that women represented in romance tend to be bourgeois, which is not particularly helpful as a role model or example for working-class women (289) and Batsleer et al. observe that lower-class and non-white protagonists are often subordinate to the main couple and reliant on them for the success of their own relationships (98). Admitting that many romance novels are “entirely permeated with the ideas of the dominant class and gender,” Fowler points to the problematic desire for white, dominant class heroes by working-class formulaic romance readers (120, 145).

A key way this middle-class capitalist agenda is promoted, it has been suggested, is through the figure of the desirable, dominant class, capitalist hero. Sexual and economic dominance are located in the hero, who is often the focus of the romance novel (Cohn 8), with the connection between “male sexual and male economic power” dating “at least as far back as Richardson” (Cohn 49). The hero’s wealth is a large part of his appeal; his “brand of capitalism—ambitious, go-getting, swift, ruthless” is connected with “his worth as a man, a husband, a social being” (Kamblé 33–4). The promise of no further economic hardship for the heroine is equally appealing. By making the hero’s capitalist world, with its private jets, yachts, and mansions, the primary backdrop of the story the romance implicitly endorses it (Kamblé 36).

But, things are not quite as simple as they seem. While Raymond Williams argues that popular literature has a “moral regulation” function to “control the development of working-class opinion,” popular romance readers are more “selective” in their taking on of “elements of dominant thought” (Fowler 40). Popular romance contains themes that criticize middle-class views of the working classes (e.g., that women are good for sex but not marriage; that they are criminals) and Fowler argues: “in these imaginary documents of social injustice there does surface a cry of pain against the ‘injuries of class’” (67). In her study of the London shopgirl, Lise Shapiro Sanders argues that the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century romance novels she reads often critique “the politics of labour and capitalist production” (82). Equally, there is a limit to how far the dominant class’s views can be “made palatable for a working-class readership”; for instance, the workhouse is often presented negatively in working-class romance novels (Fowler 53). Middle-class values are thus adapted to place them more in line with working-class ideals.

The capitalist hero, too, is not all he seems. Jayashree Kamblé argues that the romance hero wears a “mask” of the capitalist that allows romance novels to personalize the “abstract economic force of the free market” and make the love story about “big business and its impact on others” (Kamblé 32). She admits that in some cases, it seems as though the popular romance is endorsing capitalism, particularly in the celebration of the ambitious, wealthy hero. However, popular romance is more conflicted than it might at first appear about the capitalist hero, stopping short of outward idolizing. Reservations are expressed about “the capitalist’s ethics, often as anxieties over his conduct in his sexual-romantic life” (Kamblé 36) and American novels show “a questioning of the hero’s very nature through the portrayal of his emotions as identical to his economics—an equivalence that seems quite dangerous on occasion” (Kamblé 46). Kamblé points to Judith McNaught’s Regency historicals *Whitney, My Love* (1985) and *Until You* (1994) where the traits that provide heroes success on the stock market are viewed more problematically when they are applied to the romantic relationship, particularly sexual aggression toward the heroine (Kamblé 46, 49). Indeed, Kamblé concludes that romance novels might not condemn current economic structures, but “they are not capitalist propaganda or blind affirmation either; instead, the romantic plot and the figure of the hero voice a terror of the American immersion in advanced capitalism” (47).

Kamblé’s argument echoes Charles H. Hinnant’s (2003) view that romance novels present a feminist critique of capitalism. Conceding that the romance hero is typically associated with “traditional masculine economic ideals of self-sufficiency, rationality, and rugged individualism” (149), Hinnant argues that the “taming” of the alpha male by the romance heroine modifies or overturns these characteristics “by a new commitment to the civilising and feminizing virtues of sociability, empathy, and interdependence” (149). Hinnant thus claims that romance novels—he focuses his analysis on the influential historical novel *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) by Kathleen E Woodiwiss—“correspond … to a certain strain of feminist criticism of mainstream economics” (149) that insists the liberal individualism of capitalism must be tempered by the “virtues of liberality, sociality, and sentimentality” (160). Hinnant sees romance novels as the landscape where capitalism is “transformed from within” and “purged of its more brutal features” (164) recasting “commerce as a civilising process” (161). The romance novel is evidently able to support a more complex reading of capitalism than might at first be apparent.

**Romance as escapism**

Only very immature people or girls whose tastes have begun to be perverted could endure the constant repetition of this kind of description: “Glyn Curtis was the only man who could make her heart throb with longing—the longing to be taken into his arms, to feel his lips upon hers. Not lightly, caressingly as he had kissed her before but—!” (Jephcott qtd. in Giles 283, her emphasis)

I turn, in the final section of the chapter, to working-class romance readers, exploring divergent arguments for and against romance reading. Working-class women are particularly susceptible to romance. Or, at least, that is what Pearl Jephcott claimed in her 1943 report *Girls Growing Up*. The growth in popularity of dance halls, as well as an emerging romance fiction market for working-class women and girls led critics to level such charges against romance novels (Giles 288–9). Scholarship on working-class readers of romance found that working-class women were very aware of this discourse and, in their real lives, actively refused romance “not because of a lesser sensibility, but because ‘being swept off your feet’ was a fate too dangerous, however seductive, to even contemplate, for a consciousness formed from poverty and exclusion” (Giles 290). Giles interviewed women who grew up before World War II and notes that respondents located “pleasure, romance, and sexual flirtation” in the upper classes where there was money, not the working classes, where you had to get married to advance socially or even get by and where reputation was vital (286).

Such messages were evident in romantic fiction. Pamela Fox, analyzing working-class fiction of the early twentieth century, notes its message that working-class women of the time did not have access to the codes of romance available to middle-class women—marriage was economic for them and any working-class women trying to be romantic would be chastised (141). Fowler notes that the sexualized “other” woman in working-class fiction is usually wealthy or from a wealthy family (63). Furthermore, Fowler claims that the femme fatale represents “stereotypes of the evil capitalist” so defeating her offers a “democratic” illusion “in which the negative elements of class conflict can be sealed off” (64). Working-class romance fiction thus contests the “subjectivities offered by middle-class observers which interpellated working-class women as over-burdened victims, sexual predators or peculiarly susceptible to the seductions of romance” (Giles 289). Indeed, Giles is prudent to caution against “applying a single understanding of women’s relation to romance to all women regardless of social, cultural, and historical difference” (289).

A further charge has been laid against popular romance—that it is escapist. Such an accusation will not strike scholars of the romance as particularly surprising. However, escapism takes on a slightly different meaning when connected with class. The aims of popular romance novelists are, according to Fowler’s reading of Leavis, to produce “anti-intellectualist panaceas” (Fowler 37). This is particularly pronounced for working-class romance and its readers. Indeed, Fowler locates a heightened desire for happy endings among lower-class readers, suggesting that “class shapes the pattern of needs to be satisfied in the personal leisure/pleasure economy so that the search for magical escapes via fantasy is more often found in the most exploited or oppressed groups” (139). In her interviews with readers, Fowler found that those who preferred romance did so because of its “reassuring pleasure in a familiar and benign world offered by the genre” (167).[[6]](#endnote-6)

Escapism can be seen as detrimental to the working-class reader. Fowler argues that the “escapist literature of mass culture” is “favourable to market society” (66). This is problematic, Fowler argues, drawing on Gramsci and ideas about pleasure in popular reading, because it “extend(s) to mass culture the Marxist analysis of religion as an opiate” (31); it is “optimistic wish fulfilment at the cost of illusion” (Fowler 34). Gramsci suggests that where the lower classes are trapped by capitalism and denied control over their own lives, popular literature offers “compensatory satisfactions” (Fowler 31–2). In other words, romance novels function as “ideological elastoplasts” or band-aids to solve the problems raised by market society, such as the discontent of work (Fowler 67). This idea is echoed by Radway when she claims that reading romances provides women with “an important emotional release” from their role as primary familial nurturer, identifying “romantic escape” as “a temporary but literal denial of the demands women recognise as an integral part of their roles as nurturing wives and mothers” (95, 97). Osborne points out that romances like Mills & Boon “still engineer analogous fantasy solutions in which societal demands and individual happiness can coincide” meaning “societal contradictions are thus transcended” (14–15). So, romance is escapist for working-class readers because it elides the reality of class discrimination.

However, Robinson has refuted the argument that romance is escapist for working-class women (and that this is damaging). She argues that romance novels show how women are excluded from public life, thus reflecting rather than distracting from their reality. She argues that readers seek these novels out not to escape, but “to receive confirmation, and, eventually, affirmation, that love really is what motivates and justifies a woman’s life” (Robinson 222). Sanders suggests a more complex mode of escapism for turn of the century working-class shopgirl romance readers, characterized by both absorption and distraction and signalling “alternative identificatory structures” (168). Cohn also disagrees with the claim that escapism is harmful for working-class women by positing that romance goes *further* than other popular fiction:

Like all popular formula fiction, romance exists to answer in fantasy needs that cannot be met in real life. But romance goes further; it answers desires that cannot be spoken, so powerfully would they subvert authority. Desire and authority are profoundly at issue in popular romance. Desire, however, must be heavily masked since, at the deepest level, what is desired is authority itself, the power and autonomy the social system denies women. (5)

For Cohn, romance novels constitute a fantasy fulfillment of power for women that they could not otherwise have; “romance fiction insists so heavily on the powerlessness of its heroine precisely because it exists to redress, in fantasy, the powerlessness of women in bourgeois society” (176). Cohn thus assumes not that working-class women are cultural dupes unable to recognize the nature of romance’s fantasy, but that the fantasy romance offers—a satisfying, imaginary fulfillment of a perceived lack of power—serves to emphasize and draw attention to the gender inequalities experienced by women readers.

**Reading class and wealth in romance today**

Part of the draw of popular romance, at least according to publishers like Harlequin Mills & Boon, is that it appeals to everyone: it is “universal.” In some ways, it is true that reading popular romance cuts across all classes (although, as Robinson notes, class will determine where you buy your books) (203). Yet, Fowler’s interviews with readers demonstrate that taste is important to the reading choices women make and to the pleasures they gain from it. The emergence of romances targeted specifically at working-class women is indicative of a fracturing of romantic experience between different classes of women. Equally, Kamblé’s reading of popular romance as an allegory for societal anxiety about capitalism reveals how class can be implicated at a deeper level in these texts. Clearly, class is important to popular romance and it is thus equally important to engage critically with the ways romance represents and expresses class, as the scholarship outlined in this chapter has done.

So, where next for scholars of class and wealth in romance? In the wake of the publication of E. L. James’ *Fifty Shades* trilogy (2011–15) attention was paid to the novels’ veneration of capitalism and consumerism (e.g., see Dymock; Illouz, *Hard-Core Romance*) and to Christian Grey’s role as a “billionaire hero” in particular. In the context of a post-industrial crisis of white masculinity, Claire Trevenen argues that “Christian is an emblematic model of the wounded white male reaping the symbolic power of being the ‘subject-in-crisis,’” thereby permitting “this perception of crisis [to be] be rearticulated in such a way that it sets up the white male character as the victim, rather than the victimiser, in crisis situations” (13). Certainly, there is scope for further work on the intersection between masculinity and class, particularly in light of the development of Men’s Studies as a field. A distinctive trend in romance, emergent in the U.S. in particular, is the “blue-collar” hero. Often described as a cop, mechanic, construction worker, or similar, the popularity of this hero is evident from several blog posts collating examples of blue-collar heroes, a podcast discussion on the popular reader site “Smart Bitches, Trashy Books”that attempts to define blue-collar romance heroes, and collated lists of blue-collar hero novels on sites such as Goodreads.com. But, despite this popular interest from romance readers, there has not been a similar interest among romance scholars on the demand for working-class and middle-class heroes.

Furthermore, as I’ve already mentioned, scholarship has been slow to engage in truly intersectional approaches to romance. While all the scholarship I have introduced deals with questions of class in the context of gender, race and ethnicity are largely absent from these discussions (Kamblé’s brief treatment of class and whiteness, following Richard Dyer’s equating of whiteness and capitalism, is a good starting point for further analysis (133–48)). If, as has been claimed, this lack of focus is due to a paucity of non-white protagonists in mainstream popular romance, then a critical focus on more specialist series (such as the soon-to-be canceled Kimani line) might be appropriate (as has indeed been done with non-heterosexual romance). Alternatively, if romance scholarship lacks the appropriate critical tools for engaging in intersectional research, it can start to build on and extend research on race and ethnicity in romance that does not already consider class.

In the conclusion to their chapter on class in romance, Batsleer et al. claim that romance novels will change only when society changes (105). To some extent, this chapter has shown that this is true; for instance, as society has become more accepting of women workers, romance novels have diversified their own representations of working heroines. However, I want to end this chapter by referring to Fowler’s assertion that reading can have an effect on people’s ideas. While Fowler, writing in the 1980s, does not see romance as “a weapon for human emancipation” (158), it might just be possible for critical scholarship of the romance to further develop our understanding of the way class and wealth work in popular romance, making scholarship just the “weapon” that we need.

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1. Phyllis M. Betz has explored class in lesbian romance novels. She notes that very few lesbian characters are working-class but where they are, novels make use of class conflict to provide a barrier to the relationship and to have the wealthy character provide comfort and luxury to allow the romance to happen, similar to the way it functions in heterosexual romance (esp. 14, 86–96). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In a study of romance novel titles, Cox and Fisher (2009) found that words associated with wealth and resources (millionaire, billionaire, tycoon, fortune, wealth, money, diamond, dollar, inheritance, heir, gift, treasure, rich, and gold) appeared a total of 796 times in 15,019 Harlequin romance titles published from 1949–2009, suggesting that wealthy heroes continue to be present (although the authors do not indicate change over time nor do they analyze this data in any detail) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For examples of class as represented in the romance comic, popular in 1940s and 1950s America (see Barson 153–203). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ann Herendeen’s article on her bisexual Regency romances offers an interesting corollary to these romances, with “the combination of high economic, social, and sexual status as desirable ingredients in the romantic hero” (n.p.) persistent in these non-heteronormative novels. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Weisser pays some attention to class in her examination of African American romance readers, where she notes that black romances are as homogenous as Anglo romances in their representation of class. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. An interesting perspective is offered by Jean Radford in her analysis of Susan Howatch’s *Penmarric* (1971). Radford argues that the historical text presents class relations in a visceral, brutal fashion, but is cushioned by its historical distance: “at no point … is the reader invited to make connections between then and now; it is precisely because of such historical distancing that the text can summon up such an *exposé* while still securely endorsing the contemporary status quo” (180). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)