

The Queer Heroine as a Reimagined Reflection

As a romance author, I play for both teams. In this paper, I will compare and contrast contemporary traditional lesbian romances with their heterosexual romance counterparts by using two of my own books—one published by Harlequin and one by Bold Strokes Books. In so doing, I will make use of Pamela Regis’s formulation of the structure of a romance novel.

On page 4 of your handout, you’ll see that I have excerpted Regis’s eight formal elements essential to a romance novel: “the initial state of society [...], the meeting [...], the barrier [...], the attraction [...], the declaration of love [...], the point of ritual death, the recognition [...] of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal” (30). In addition, she presents three accidental, or optional, elements that frequently appear in romance novels but are not, strictly speaking, necessary: “the wedding, dance or fete; the exile of a scapegoat character; and the conversion of a bad or evil character” (38). In the table on the next page, I’ve noted how these formal elements work in two of my novels: the 2004 Harlequin romance *One Perfect Man*, and my 2010 Bold Strokes Books lesbian romance, *Under Her Skin*.

On pages 5 and 6 of your handout, you’ll see a table that breaks down each novel into its component parts according to Regis’s formulation. The most obvious common denominator between these two novels is the presence of a female love interest who falls for “the hero.” And what are the traits of the hero in a contemporary traditional romance? For starters, many heroes are “beta” instead of “alpha.” A beta hero in a heterosexual romance arrives on the scene with a soft touch; he is a single dad or the heroine’s best friend. By contrast, the alpha hero—whom we will hear much more about from Len Barot in a few minutes—is a powerful and dangerous individual.

Alpha heroes are not as prevalent in contemporary traditional romance as they used to be, though there are some notable exceptions—the work of Susan Elizabeth Phillips, for example. Her heroes are almost always athletes, which isn't supposed to work in heterosexual fiction, and in fact, Phillips's heroes are so alpha at the beginning of their stories as to verge on unlikeable. The way she redeems her men is a master class in romance writing. *Nobody's Baby But Mine* features a heroine who is a bonafide genius. She wants to have a child who's more normal, not such a brain. So she sets out to find a stupid male to have sex with. She hooks up with a professional football player who presents as full-on, grunting, stupid alpha, but as his layers are peeled back, we find out that he's super intelligent. The heroine and hero in this book both have alpha characteristics, but their power and drive manifest in different ways. As he breaks through her shell, she also breaks through his.

I want to problematize this rigid distinction between “alpha” and beta” heroes. My heterosexual romances feature heroes who most people would label as “beta.” In *One Perfect Man*, remember, Tomas became a single dad in high school, and after the baby mama bolted because she wasn't able to handle the responsibility of a kid at age 15, he just tucked his chin, sucked it up, and raised his daughter all on his own. By traditional standards, he's a beta—a nurturing family man. But what is a more alpha trait than facing up to one's responsibilities passionately?

In another of my Harlequin titles, *Deja You*, the hero and the heroine hook up on a one-night stand after meeting in a bar. He's a pyrotechnics expert and she's a fire fighter—both alpha jobs. But when Nate finds out Erin's pregnant, he steps up to be a dad—to be there for whatever Erin needs, even though they really don't even know each other. Like Tomas, Nate's alpha attributes are important to his character development, but subordinated to his beta presentation.

What I'm suggesting here is that lower-key, beta male strength draws upon alpha instincts without being overwhelmed by those impulses. This multilayered hero requires a richly developed heroine who counterbalances him—and vice-versa.

The same is true for my lesbian romances. In *Under Her Skin*, Torien has some of the makings of an alpha heroine, as we can see from Iris's first glimpse of her:

Torien's sleeveless shirt was buttoned low enough to expose a good portion of her sports bra, like she'd thrown it over her body as an afterthought. Sweat glistened on her defined delts and the exposed area of her chest. Mud caked the bottoms of her worn jeans and work boots. Her callused hands—Lord, get a load of those hands—were clearly unafraid of hard, honest, sweaty work.

Torien is strong, capable, and hardworking. Later in the chapter, we learn that she has the “sharp protective instinct” of the classic alpha, and she certainly looks the part. But Tori does not act like the conventional alpha. Instead of recognizing Iris's attraction and acting on it, she berates herself for staring right back at Iris. Tori's self-recrimination is twofold. First of all, she regrets behaving in an unchivalrous manner toward a beautiful woman. “Iris was a lady,” she thinks to herself, “not some *paginas centrales* to be gaped at by *la jardinera*.” But more significantly, Tori is worried that by “disrespecting” Iris, she might lose her job. In this moment, we learn that Tori is not only supporting herself, but also her family: “Torien sent a tidy sum to Máma each month while holding a bit aside for herself and her own dreams for the future. But she'd never be able to reach for her dreams if Señora Moreno fired her. ¡Maldita sea! She shouldn't have stared at Iris.”

The juxtaposition of these two scenes demonstrates that Torien is at once a powerful and sensual figure and, simultaneously, a respectful and nurturing caregiver. Moreover, Torien is racked by guilt that when she was a teenager and her father unexpectedly passed away, she felt anger at having to abandon her goals in order to support her family. “I wanted to walk away from

my family and chase my own selfish dreams,” she confesses to Iris. “What kind of woman am I?” Consumed by what Iris calls her “anvil of guilt” and “overblown sense of responsibility,” Torien believes that she, a lowly gardener, will only hold Iris back. Throughout the novel, Iris is the pursuer and Torien the pursued, until Iris finally manages to convince Torien that “if we don’t fit in either of the worlds we’ve known, we’ll create a new one. Our world, Tori. Yours and mine.” Being **together** allows each woman to be free. Like Tomas, Torien is openly vulnerable when it comes to her family. And like Erica, Iris must gain her lover’s trust that the responsible caregiver can also be the passionate lover whose needs and desires deserve to be fulfilled.

The bottom line is that lesbian and heterosexual contemporary traditional romances are more alike than they are different. The falling in love experience is universal. But there are **some** differences—two in particular. First of all, lesbian romances challenge the preconceived notions of gender roles. Most women are still raised to believe that their happily ever after must include a man. I like turning the tables on ingrained social norms; even in my heterosexual novels I prefer to write stories in which the chaser and the chased are not necessarily the usual suspects. In lesbian romances, I often write against queer stereotypes such as the notion that one woman has to be more “masculine” than the other.

Secondly, most heterosexual romances end with a proposal or marriage. This is not, of course, an option for most lesbians, and so the nature of the protagonists’ commitment is not predetermined. The lovers must create the parameters of their union rather than fall into an institution that already exists. While this is indicative of an imbalance in American society, it also gives authors of lesbian romance the opportunity to do a kind of creative world-building analogous to what is done in fantasy or science-fiction novels. Because there are no rules for

what a romance between two women can become, the author has the freedom to tailor each couple's happily-ever-after to their unique relationship.