

# INCOMPATIBLE GENDER FANTASIES

## Formula Fictions for Men and Women

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My topic today is a comparison of two *series of popular fiction* – one for boys and young men and one for teen age girls. – – The girls’ genre in my project is the short stories of the weekly journal *Det Nye* (approximate translation: “The Latest”). This journal aimed towards – and was predominantly bought by – *teen age girls*. I analysed all the short stories during the first six months of the years 1973 and 1983; in 1973 there were two short stories in each issue; in 1983 there was only one; so I analysed 73 stories altogether. During the years that I investigated, this journal was published in between 150 000 and 75 000 samples a week; but the publishers claim that each issue was read by several persons. 62 % of all girls between 15 and 19 years of age answered that they had read last week’s journal; 29 % of all women between 20 and 24 years were also readers. (IFMs medieindeks 1974/ 75.)

The boys’ genre is a series of novels from the Wild West with a hero called Morgan Kane, written by the Norwegian author Kjell Hallbing, with the pseudonym of Louis Masterson. There were 83 books in the series, published between 1966 and -83, and I have analysed every fourth book in the series, i. e. 20 books. The series about Morgan Kane was extremely popular; each novel was published in between 12000 and 80 000 samples. The publishing company claims that altogether eleven million samples have been sold only in Norway; that is a lot for a country of 5 million people; in

addition these books have been translated into several foreign languages. It has never been investigated which social groups the readers belonged to; but the series idealises a traditional masculine gender role, and I have assumed that it has its main emotional appeal to teen age boys and young men.

My basic assumption for this investigation is that these two literary genres function as “*premanufactured fantasies of fear and hope*” for *men* and *women* respectively. This is because both genres involve our imagination in fictions of fear and tension, but the plot gradually leads us through all the difficulties and up to a happy end. – Both genres seem to concern the relationship between the sexes, but they idealise incompatible versions of that relationship.

My analyses are inspired by the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp and the so called “structuralist” school in literary scholarship. The “structuralists” were those scholars who adapted *linguistic* theories to literary studies – or even to certain social sciences like social anthropology. It is almost as though I try to establish the grammar of literary genres – the “grammatical” rules that structure each genre. But in my case I look for the “*compositional grammar*” of “my” two genres: I assume that there are certain “compositional laws” that are shared by all the love stories, and another set of “compositional laws” that are shared by the Westerns. Once I have established the “compositional grammar” of each genre, I shall go on to discuss the *psychological appeal* that these genres seem to have.

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I will start out with the “compositional grammar” of the love story. It goes without saying that my observations will be coarse – there will be no room for the peculiarities of singular

texts. Not only do I focus exclusively on *general* features in each genre, but I also reduce my description to two single compositional entities within each genre – I shall call them the *agents* and their *actions*. Again, my method resembles the analysis of a sentence – except that I only distinguish between *nominal* clauses and *verb* clauses; I presuppose that the *genre agents* are similar to the *nominal clauses* of the sentence – the nouns, the pronouns, the adjectives. This means that the *genre agents* comprise all the “*persons*” of all the individual stories – and everything pertaining to them. The *genre actions* are similar to the *verb clauses* of the sentence, and contain everything in the plot that represents *movement, change, development or transition*.

In the love story I claim that the main *action* (pervasive *verbal* structure) is always a transition *from* a state of non-existent or unhappy partnership *towards* a happy love relationship. This requires that all the emotional relationships in the plot are *tested*, which in its turn implies that the true character of each person is revealed, above all *who* among the characters is the *right partner* for the heroine.

The *genre agents* (*nominal* clauses) employed to undertake this testing procedure may be grouped as *three couples*: The *heroine* and the *hero*, the *rival* couple, and the *confidant* couple. We do not meet all six of them in all the stories. Only two of them are absolutely obligatory in the genre as such, those are the young woman and the young man, who end up as happy lovers in the end. I call them the *heroine* and the *hero*, and I shall give a short description of them.

Normally the *heroine* is the protagonist of the story, and the point of view is usually with her; thus, *she* is the only person whose thoughts and emotions the reader may observe “from the inside” as it were; all the others are only *observed* – by *her* or by the *narrator* – so that the *reader* only gets to

know what they say and do, – not what they feel or think. I assume that the *heroine* is the character within the fiction that the *reader identifies with*.

The heroines are generally younger than the heroes. Without being aware of it themselves, the heroines are good looking. Also they are warm, tender, illogical and emotional, basically insecure, and rather helpless when confronted with the hard facts of reality in the competitive society outside the family circle.

That is one of the reasons why she needs the support of the *hero*, who represents rationality and security; he is friendly, faithful, mature, and *sensitive* – particularly to *her* emotions. Because he is older and more mature, he understands the heroine better than she understands herself. - - Do remember that the point of view is with the heroine; therefore, the *reader* shares *her* impression that *he* is more mature. We must also remember that the hero of the story is a *projection* of the desires of the *reader*; *real* people (like us) always have some selfish desires – some demands of their own; but mental *projections* – like the hero of the popular love story – are designed in such a way that they are totally focused on the needs and desires of the heroine – with whom the *reader identifies*. – Last, but not least, the hero of these stories is quite handsome, although not necessarily dazzling.

If we meet someone dazzling, chances are that it is the *rival couple*. They do not occur in all stories, but in many of them. The *rival girl* is invariably a revelation of sex appeal, who knows how to use all she has got, and who is doing her utmost to capture the hero. The *rival boy* is strikingly handsome, charming, athletic, often rich, and an almost irresistible temptation to the heroine. Both of them are likely to be unfaithful in love relations.

Finally, there are the *confidant* couple, who, like the rival couple, appears in *some* stories but *not* in *all* of them. The confidants are just *friends* of the heroine or the hero; they are trustworthy and supportive, but they are *not sexually interesting*. They might for instance be the siblings of the hero couple, or elderly friends – even their parents – in short persons who enjoy the trust of the hero couple, who are willing to listen to them, and to give them advice on the values of domestic life, monogamous love, and traditional gender roles.

These *genre agents* are the “nominal clauses” of the “compositional grammar” in the love story, and we shall now turn to the *actions* (verbal clauses) of the genre agents. As indicated above there is one pervasive verbal structure that dominates these stories, i. e. the transition *from* a state of non-existent or unhappy partnership *towards* a happy love relationship. As I also mentioned, this requires a test or evaluation of the *essential qualities* of the persons surrounding her. This testing is done through a limited number of character *transformations*. The individual character in the story may be transformed during the plot from one type of genre agent into another. Let us have some examples:

1.

In the beginning of the short story the heroine is dissatisfied with her boy friend, or simply ignores a certain fellow, because he seems too much like a confidant. However, as the story moves along, *he reveals his real heroic nature*. Or, put in another way: A boy, who is at first *disguised* as a confidant, in the end *reveals himself as the hero*. This is the most frequent of all the character transformations of my material.  
“confidant” → hero

2.

Another transformation, which might very well be combined with the first one, develops this way: A person who in the beginning of the story is disguised as the hero, actually by and by reveals that he is a confidant, i. e. the heroine's boy friend gradually becomes too dull.

“hero” → confidant

3.

A third transformation is when an absolutely stunning fellow, who may appear to have girl friends everywhere, finally demonstrates his shy clumsiness, and confesses his love for the heroine. This I would classify as a boy, who is at first disguised as a rival, but who in the end proves to be a hero.

“rival” → hero

4.

A fourth example is when the fellow who in the beginning of the story is the heroine's steady boy friend; but all of a sudden this boy betrays the heroine with the rival girl. In that case a boy, at first disguised as the hero, turns into a rival.

“hero” → rival

So far the character transformations have revolved around how to choose the right partner. However, as indicated, it is not only a question of how the partner should be, but also of how the heroine should be. This is the underlying problem of the last couple of character transformations that I will mention.

5.

The protagonist of the story is a girl who in the beginning of the story prefers fun, excitement, freedom, and a career, who flirts with more than one, or who prefers the rival rather than the hero. However, as the story moves along, she realises the emptiness of freedom and a career, and rejoicingly submits to the hero and the duties of a true heroine. Here the protagonist develops from the characteristics of a rival girl to the “right” qualities of the heroine type.

“rival girl” → heroine

6.

The girl in focus is a very ordinary girl; she herself, and apparently the hero, are afraid that she is just a little bit too ordinary. The hero seems to ignore her, or prefer the rival girl, in the beginning. But as the story moves along, it becomes clear that he really loves the heroine, and finds her absolutely perfect – body and soul. Here the girl is disguised as a confidante in the beginning of the story, but finally turns out a heroine.

“confidante” → heroine

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We shall then look at the boys’ genre. We all know that a basic requirement of the western is the milieu of the American frontier – most often after the civil war of the 1860s.

According to our fiction Morgan Kane was born in 1855, so his adult years run from the 1870s into the early 1900s. During most of the novels he is a US Marshall, i. e. a policeman employed by the federal authorities, not the local ones. The western frontier was a society with a lot of conflicts. In the formula fictions about the Wild West the main conflict is quite

often between the law abiding citizens of some little town, and on the other side a gang of gun slinging villains. It is a mixed population; we meet cowboys and Indians, gold diggers and adventurers, capitalists and paupers; people travel on the horse back or by stage coach, some times even by train; all men wear their “ten gallon hats” and their sixguns.

But what is especially relevant for my discussion here, is that the plot structure of the Western resembles the plot of the “action thriller” – where we know who the villain is all along, and the excitement arises from the *competition between the hero and the villain* – the elopements and pursuits, the fist fights, the shoot outs etc. – in short all the acrobatic miracles that these men perform.

This also means that the “compositional grammar” of the Western is quite different from that of the love story. Where the verbal structure of the girls’ stories was a *slow* movement of emotions and insights, in the Western the verbal structure is more like the acrobatics of a circus – a rapid sequence of stunts – performed by incredible athletes. And we know all about the true personalities of these stunt men from the beginning; we know it already from their looks; the villains *look evil* – whereas the hero looks like the hero of a 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic novel; therefore, the characters in these novels rarely *change* from a disguised to a revealed genre agent.

Some of you may remember that Vladimir Propp lists the miniature actions of the Russian fairy tale, and we might outline the main events of the Western in a similar way:

*First* – Morgan Kane gets a mission – to take down the villain who is pestering the lives of decent people in some frontier town.

*Second* – MK takes off to confront the villain.

*Third* – MK observes the hangout of the villain

*Fourth* – MK is confronted by the young, pretty woman, who either “belongs to” the villain, or is his captive.

*Fifth* – MK and/ or his helpers and/ or the woman is taken prisoner and/ or tortured.

*Sixth* – MK manages – with or without the help of the woman or his helpers – to take down the villain and his gang.

*Seventh* – MK is rewarded for his victory by the woman.

The story always stresses the superior resources of the enemy – in warfare potential, such as men, arms, horses, money – and even in skills and shrewdness. Throughout each novel the focus is on the war between the hero and the villain. The genre seems to presuppose that the reader is primarily anxious to read everything about how this war develops. The tricks and technicalities of the combats are minutely described: Who pulls which tricks, what stunts are performed, how is the fight elaborated and settled, and, finally, not *who* wins – because that is always Morgan Kane, but *how* he wins.

The “inner life” of the characters mainly consists of the sensations accompanying the battles: the countless types of physical pain due to the beatings and the bullets, the kicks and the falls, – in addition to consequences like nausea and dizziness – and, finally, the motivating emotions like envy, hatred, jealousy, fear, and hope. The general atmosphere of fear and respect within society around the main characters is also important. – All of this indicates, in my view, that the

main excitement here, to the reader, is the competition between the hero and the villain – *how it is performed*, just as much as *who wins*.

As indicated in the plot outline, one of the resources of the villain is the woman, who in the beginning of the story “belongs to” the enemy, and represents a special danger to our hero. Because – between us – Morgan Kane has two weaknesses – women and gambling – in that way he resembles James Bond! The pretty woman may be the mistress of the villain – in that case she opposes Morgan Kane in the beginning – until she finally gives in to his masculine charm, has sex with him, and begins to support him in the main conflict. In other cases the woman is just the captive of the villain; then she loves Morgan Kane from the very beginning. It is worth noticing, though, that the woman in the book is usually not the centre of attention and excitement; she is there more as a special challenge; the mission of eliminating the villain becomes more complicated when the hero has to protect the woman. The fact that he still succeeds contributes to demonstrate his qualities as a hero and a man. And it adds some extra spice to the plot that our hero meets a new woman in every book, that she falls in love with him, and that they have sex. But then he leaves her – for a new woman in the next novel. Thus, the main object of interest – that which occupies most pages, and is described with most excitement – is *the war between the men*. The sexy woman is there as a prize for the winner – and as another proof of his extraordinary masculinity.

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We have now seen that *both genres* offer a *dream lover for the winner* of the conflict. But, as we have also seen, this

particular reward is stressed very differently in each genre. In the boys' genre we see that to the hero – and presumably to the reader – it is the relationship with *the other boys* that is important – whether it be the citizens of the little frontier town or the villain and his gang. The woman occupies less space in the novel; we must conclude that she is of secondary importance – as is the quality of the love relation.

In the girls' genre all that counts, is establishing *the right love relation to the right boy*. There is very little “action” going on. The relatively few events that actually take place, serve to characterize the persons – in order to reveal their real character. But the *emotions of the heroine* dominate the text *more* than the rendered *events*; thus, the focus is on the minute descriptions of the *emotions* provoked by the changing interrelations. Also, it is taken for granted that the love relation that is established in the happy end of the story is a lasting one.

One very striking difference between these two genres is that where the boys' genre focuses the technicalities of *outward action* between boys – and on the inner level on hostility and emotional *distance*, – the girls' genre elaborates *emotional shifts*, and yearns towards emotional *nearness*, *trust*, *tenderness*. One might expect that the love story focuses sex. But in the material I analysed, there is very little of that, probably since my girls' journal was directed towards quite young girls.

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These differences between the literary genres lead us to some reflections on what psychological problems the *readers* may seek solace for in their preferred reading. Here I can only very briefly present some of my thoughts. And I will attempt to

interpret the emotional appeal of these stories on two different levels: One level is our *transhistoric*, instinctual, biological, or existential self, that part of us which is unavailable to the influence of historical change – the other level is that part of our mind which is partly *shaped by history* and our social environment.

On the *transhistorical level* it may seem that the boys' genre appeals to its readers in 3 different ways:

1. I see these novels as a modern version of *the ancient heroic adventure story*, where I believe that a very important underlying wish is the defiance of death; the heroes of this kind of story way back to Odysseus exposed themselves to deadly peril, but survived. This seems to mean that the story is an imaginative *resistance against death*, and a disguised expression of our own *fear of death*.
2. The second appeal of the Morgan Kane novel on this transhistoric level concerns the ambivalence between our *social* and our *anti-social* impulses. These stories let us live out our anti-social aggression when we identify with the *hero who kills*; but since the villain is evil, and threatens society, the hero who kills him, is *good*; thus, our hero is anti-social and social at the same time.
3. The third level on which I believe these stories function to their readers, concerns *the Oedipus conflict: The hero kills his rivals on our behalf*; sometimes they are his rivals in that they control the woman, but always they are his rivals when it comes to who is superior in masculinity; the killing of the villain is a revenge for the readers' shortcomings in the masculine competitions of his childhood.

4. And, finally, still on the transhistoric level, these stories obviously have an appeal to the *sexual desires* of the reader – although the sex scenes constitute a minor part of the plot outline.

On the more *historic level* I believe that the extreme masculine strength and virility of the hero functions as some kind of wishful compensation for a *loss of masculine identity* in real life throughout the last few generations. The industrial revolution has reduced the social position of the man on two different arenas: versus boys and versus women.

1. Technology has practically eliminated the need for physical strength; masculine identity can no longer be connected to certain types of work; therefore, the role of the father as a teacher for boys in the necessary skills of adult work has practically disappeared.
2. Also, very few jobs are for men only; women acquire the same education, the same legal rights, and the same economic independence, as he. Women are therefore – if it were not for the emotional ties – free to leave him. May be this new status of women causes a new insecurity – a fear of becoming emotionally vulnerable? And perhaps it functions as a momentary compensation when the fantasy hero is adored by all women, but insists on not becoming emotionally dependent on them?

So much for the boys' genre, - what about that of the girls? I believe that here, too, there is an appeal on a *transhistoric* as well as on a *historic* level. If we look at the transhistoric level first, I believe that we may discern 3 factors in the life of the

reader that the modern popular love story may offer momentary compensation for.

1. The longing for love is obviously the most apparent desire in the reader that these stories appeal to. But “love” is, as we have seen, different phenomena in the two genres: In the MK series it was sex – often with some tenderness, too, but quite often just plain sex, even with a certain emotional distance. In the love story the yearning for love is not so focused on sex, but seems basically to be a longing for acceptance, for being appreciated just because one is that kind of person, for coming emotionally near to someone. – Note that I consider this yearning for emotional nearness just as transhistoric as sex. I think it has to do with our common experience of being an infant and a toddler, and the nearness of our childhood to a mother figure – a nearness that remains in us as a subconscious memory – and which remains within us as one part of our yearning for love – even as adults.
2. The ambivalence between *social* and *anti-social* impulses is probably relevant in the modern popular love story, too. We remember that in the boys’ genre this conflict was involved when the hero was licensed to kill for us – and for society and social values. Here in the girls’ genre the pressure of the *social* impulses – towards subordination – appears stronger, as we remember that the heroine had to give up her rival girl tendencies and remain faithful to the traditional, bourgeois feminine sex role. It appears to me that this problem is solved for the *reader* by the fact that the sweetheart of the heroine is a *dream lover* – especially shaped just for *her* personality:

As indicated above the fictitious *hero* is a projection of the reader's desires and longings – not a living individual with his own ego and his own likes and dislikes.

3. The oedipal triangle we probably also meet in the girls' genre as well as in the boys'. While King Oedipus and Morgan Kane *killed* their rivals, the heroine of the love story *eliminates* her rival girl by *capturing the love object*. In freudian categories the rival *girl* is, of course, the mother equivalent. The rival *boy* is the unfaithful father who preferred mother. And the *hero* is the good father that the ego loved.

On the historical level it may seem surprising that the love story sells in spite of its persistent confidence in ever lasting love at a time when nearly every other couple is divorced, and in spite of its reactionary feminine gender role. The only explanation I can think of is that the happy union of the hero couple is a *compensation for the emotional uncertainties of modern life* – the estrangement and anonymity, the fear of loneliness, the turmoil of our modern social environment. The divorce rate of our time demonstrates the shortcomings of the modern conjugal family *in real life*. But the love story avoids real life – and focuses solely on *the modern ideals of romantic love*. And these ideals combine *the feudal tradition of life long monogamy* and the *bourgeois idea of passionate love*. Therefore, the love story takes for granted that the passionate love of the final kiss shall last for ever – in that way the story softens the emotional scars of real life.

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To conclude, then, I find it remarkable that the general focus of *both genres concerns what position the protagonist achieves in relation to men*. But it is no less remarkable that the *wishful dreams of love* in the two genres are incompatible: The love relationship in the boys' genre corresponds to the negatively valorised promiscuity of the rival couple in the girls' genre. And the love relationship in the girls' genre is non-existent in the boys' genre.

Of course, it is important here to remind us all once again that this is not real life, and that these fictitious characters are not real people. Obviously, the hero of the boys and the heroine of the girls are totally narcissistic – to the extent where they use other people for their own well-being. Morgan Kane kills men and consumes women whenever the story calls for it, and the heroine of the girls' genre is not really interested in her sweetheart – who *he* is and how *he* is – he only concerns her as he who gives *her* that thrill of being loved and of being in love.

Also, we have to remember that the “victims” that are “consumed” by the protagonists of these genres, are just as unreal as those who consume them – they are also just *projections* of the fancies and desires of the *readers*. It would be silly to moralise against these fictitious figures. – And yet, it remains a puzzling question what it is that makes people buy and read these day-dreams of fear and hope? It must be because they have some kind of appeal – they do something to us, – and that very fact probably tells us something important about ourselves as well as about our modern society.

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I will not leave this topic without some questions. An objection to my project here, which might seem near at hand,

is that my material may seem old – it may well represent the attitudes of the 1960s and -70s and -80s, but that is already half a century ago, and the world has changed since then. The Morgan Kane series is still sold, but not in great numbers. And the girls’ journal has changed, and is less popular now than before. – And yet, I believe there is a certain element of *arch type* in my material, so that I think that some of my findings are valid even today. My impression is that you even today find a *difference* in popular fictions, be it within films or in the written mass media, between what is directed towards *women* and what is directed towards *men*. And there are still fiction genres directed towards *women* with happy endings that promise us a *lasting love relationship*, whereas there are still “masculine genres” that excel in *physical competitions between men*, and where *the hero risks his life, but survives*. – – There is one element in my material, however, which seems to have disappeared, and that is the promiscuity of the hero of the boys’ genre. Contemporary film heroes like Clint Eastwood, Bruce Willis, Harrison Ford, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Sylvester Stallone – are not made to act parts where they cheat on their women. So the fictional idealisation of masculine promiscuity may well be a fashion of the 1960s and -70s. – – But other than that I think that important elements of “my” two gender fantasies still live *on* in formula fictions of today.

A second objection to my project might possibly be that it reflects some kind of a *condescending attitude* towards the average consumer of mass media – some sort of cultural arrogance? As an answer to that I want to stress that my focus is not a supposed difference between social groups, but an assumption that we are *all heterogeneous personalities*: All of us have a capacity for play and for fun and games – as well as for pondering the profound riddles of life. I also believe that

*popular fictions* generally are *more playful* – by intention – than the “high” genres: The comic strip about *Tarzan* is a game and a wishful dream for boys; *Brothers Karamazov* offers wisdom to adults. But we are all – children as well as adults – able to indulge in the wishful dreams of mass media in a naively receptive way, suspending analysis, willingly drowning ourselves in the emotional turmoil of the plot. And my project here today has been an attempt to understand the *subconscious appeal* of some of these *games*.

Finally, I turn to a third objection to my argument here, which might appear sensible: Having asserted that the consumer is *everybody* – *all* social groups – , and having diagnosed that consumer the way I just did – by my discussion above on the psychological appeal of these genres – do I not reveal a radically *pessimistic picture of man*? – As an answer to that I want to remind you of my recent point, that our personality is heterogeneous; and I believe that enjoying popular fictions does not involve the whole personality, – not the cognitive part, the responsible part, that part of our personality which we employ when we seek insight. And I take for granted that we all *have* this kind of a cognitive potential; consequently, I do *not* have a radically pessimistic picture of man. But my discussion here today concerns primarily *another* potential within our soul: i. e. the playful and irresponsible *part* of it.

Also, when I assume an essential distinction between “high” literature and popular mass media literature, it corresponds to my belief that “high” literature “nourishes” my conscious “me” – that part of me that seeks *insight*, and which is *not* a total prey to unconscious impulses, – even though I realise, of course, that “high” literature also has its emotional appeal.

This does not mean that I declare myself neutral to what people read or what cultural products they consume. I believe that it is more important to acquire insight than to play, i. e. to read good literature and see good films rather than to consume popular mass media genres. And I do resist the attitudes we meet in the genres we have just looked into. But I insist that we must distinguish between what people *dream* in their fantasies of fear and hope – and what they actually *do* to each other.