



**Gender in Romance: Impressions of Nicholas Sparks' Novels**

A Thesis in the Field of English  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Master of Arts Degree

Heritage University  
Department of Literature and Languages

20 May 2025

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Gender in Romance: Impressions of Nicholas Sparks' Novels

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## **Abstract**

Contemporary romance writing is a genre that continues to evolve and express elements of our current world through literature. Perceptions of women in romance writing reflect the cultural norms of their historical eras. For literature, many critical frameworks decipher how women are portrayed. However, throughout history the romance genre reflects a patriarchal system that has disparaged lead female characters. Writing historical romance novels published since 1996, Nicholas Sparks has quickly become a popular, public figure who does not mirror current society, using storylines that do not portray diverse gender roles within 21<sup>st</sup> century romantic relationships and values. Sparks has sculpted many of his novels around outdated gender and relationship norms. Throughout his storylines, he presents and perpetuates problematic societal norms related to female gender roles.

Applying a feminist lens and utilizing a selection of four of Sparks' novels, my research identifies relationship patterns that show how Sparks' popular romance novels subject his female audience members to traditional female roles and to stigmas for any deviations from the traditional role. The final answer to my research question is that Nicholas Sparks novels unequivocally contribute to stereotypical female gender roles of the romance novel genre by featuring narrow cultural norms for female characters, promoting a single lens for a narrative and story, and dismantling any true movement toward feminism in his lead female characters.

### **Research Question:**

In what ways do Nicholas Sparks novels contribute to stereotypical female gender roles typical of the romance novel genre?

### **Keywords:**

Feminism in Contemporary Fiction, Feminist Views, and Historical Romance Novels

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## **Acknowledgements**

For my parents who migrated to a state completely unknown to better my life and my sibling's lives and opportunities. For them, who arrived with nothing and provided me with everything. For they have sacrificed opportunities to work in agriculture and provide for their three children. For my two older siblings who have served as vital role models to pursue higher education and break the stigmas surrounding our culture. With immense gratitude, I thank my parents, Etelberto and Silveria Barragan, siblings, Brenda Lizet and Julio Zecar Barragan, Monique Anayeli Sanchez, and partner, Genaro Hernandez Jr. I also express sincere regard and thanks to the following who have supported my research journey. My advisors and support faculty; Dr. Dugan, Dr. Schmidt, Mary James, and the late Dr. Sol Neely. Your support is immensely appreciated. Because of your support, patience, and guidance I have produced work I will forever be proud of.

### **Positionality Statement**

As a Latina with a background in researching gaps within the romance genre, I am aware of the differences I hold from those of others. As a survivor of violence and abuse, mental health disorders, and a person with experience of exclusion and discrimination, I am aware of the trauma-created biases I hold. I also acknowledge that these experiences and perspectives of my respected culture have influenced, to some degree, the core of my research project. My research evidence of the selected topic supports the argued question of gender views within the romance genre.

## **Thesis Title and Terminology**

**Thesis Title:** “Gender in Romance: Impressions of Nicholas Sparks’ Novels”

### **Definition of Terms:**

#### **General Terms**

**Contemporary Fiction:** A genre of fictional writing that explores and discusses social, political, and cultural themes.

**Cultural Studies:** A field of academic research and writing that explores how culture molds our understanding of the world and its events.

**Discrimination:** Unfair or prejudiced treatment largely based on age, ethnicity, sex, sexuality, disability, political stance, or religious status.

**Dim Light:** Under a weak perspective or perception.

**Feminism:** Advocacy of women’s rights

**Gender Studies:** An interdisciplinary field designed to analyze gender and its interaction with feminism, politics, and sexuality.

**Traditional Views:** Belief, practices, or customs created from a previous time or era. A specific view brought or applied to current time from previous history or society.

**Sacrifice:** Giving up valuable pieces of life whether it is a physical piece, moral decision, or life change.

**Stereotype:** A simple overview of groups and categories of people.

**Suffering:** Undergoing pain, distress, or ache in social, economic, physical, social, or emotional state.

## **Romance Genres**

**Contemporary Romance:** Present day stories exploring modernized themes and norms of life.

**Historical Romance:** A story set in the past, focusing on historic eras and their respective themes.

**Young Adult (YA) Romance:** Stories that are targeted towards young adult audiences utilizing the age frame to create main characters.

## **Novel Summaries**

### ***The Notebook (2014)***

*The Notebook* follows two characters that fall in love and conquer all obstacles presented on their path. It begins with a wealthy female, Allie, having interest in a mill worker, Noah. Although Allie's parents are adamant in their disapproval of their love, Noah and Allie choose to prove otherwise. However, when Noah leaves to serve in World War II, he survives with the hope of returning to Allie. This idea becomes one-sided upon his return. In the interim, Allie begins an affair with Lon Hammond. Noah and Allie reconnect and quickly recognize that their love for each other is far from its end. After living a long life together, the novel proceeds to detail how both characters pass away together, in each other's presence.

### ***Safe Haven (2017)***

*Safe Haven* centers around a young woman named Katie. Upon arrival to a small town, she raises many questions to the townsfolk. Soon into planting her roots she meets Alex, a local store owner, and his two children. Although Katie intends to keep to herself, plans quickly change once she and Alex become closer. What many do not know about Katie, including Alex, is that she arrived in Southport, North Carolina to escape her alcoholic and abusive husband. Katie, later known as Erin, begins to fight against the idea of a happy life with Alex because of previous events. However, her abusive husband's (Kevin) infatuation with her threatens all that she has created in North Carolina with Alex and his small family. Ultimately, Katie resumes a happy relationship with Alex as Kevin dies while attempting to harm Katie and Alex's family; as self-defense, Katie ends his life.

### ***A Walk to Remember (2019)***

*A Walk to Remember* takes place during the 1950s and follows two individuals on their path of love. Landon Carter never believed he would fall in love with a girl like Jamie Sullivan. Jamie compared to others is different in the way she carries herself. She is the town minister's daughter who cares for books, cares for hurt animals, and prioritizes morals in life that girls Landon's age typically do not care for. On the other hand, he holds a popular social status while she remains a shy and quiet student. In need of a homecoming date, Landon decides to ask Jamie. She accepts but in return, she asks him to remember not to fall in love with her. During the time period of the novel, Landon reflects upon the love that fulfilled both him and Jamie over their time as friends. What Landon does not know is Jamie's warning is literal: she has been diagnosed with terminal leukemia. In further events, Jamie peacefully dies, whereas Landon reminisces about his experience with Jamie but continues to move forward with his life.

### ***The Longest Ride (2012)***

*The Longest Ride* surrounds two separate couples. It is a dual perspective story revealing events of one previous experience while the other takes place in a more recent time. While one takes place in 1940, the other takes place in the beginning of 2011. Ruth is an immigrant relocating from Vienna and arrives in North Carolina, where Ira resides, just before the violence of World War II begins to unfold. Ruth and Ira explore life, while also discovering challenges, such as Ira having a gunshot wound to the pelvic area consequently removing his ability to produce children; Ruth lacking fulfillment being married to Ira because of her desire to be a mother; and a flawed foster and adoption system that does not allow the couple to adopt. Even after these obstacles, they jump through each hurdle and live life to its fullest extent. Peacefully, Ruth passes away. Years later, Ira travels to see a favorite portrait of Ruth's when he steers off

the road. Luke and Sophia (the second perspective love story) help rescue Ira from the accident. He continues his and Ruth's story and passes each lesson of triumphs and struggles to Luke and Sophia through re-reading letters he dedicated to Ruth over the previous years.

## Introduction

As an avid reader of romance novels, I have discovered a constant theme within Nicholas Sparks' books that relates to gender studies in contemporary fiction. For young readers, Sparks' novels have solidified their position as popular romance books in Young Adult fiction. Their film adaptations have increasingly pushed the success of Sparks' romance stories. However, his novels seemed to have a gap, which is a lack of relevance in their portrayal of female roles and values in the 21st century. Sparks has sculpted many of his novels around outdated gender and relationship norms. Throughout his storylines, he predominantly presents and perpetuates problematic societal norms related to gender and sexuality. Sparks' storylines are worthy of attention because of how popular Sparks' works have been with diverse audiences domestically and abroad. His novels have been translated into over 50 languages and have sold over 100 million copies, with the Spanish translations being the most popular, all the while, having a primarily female audience (Sparks, 2017, back cover). In addition, the novels adapted to film have a home on seven different popular platforms that increasingly sustain Sparks' system of rigid theories and themes (Entertainment, 2022).

In spite of a diverse, global readership, Sparks' novels present limited female identities and roles. In hopes of bringing attention to the unjust representations that novels like these perpetuate, my project calls for a deeper feminist critique of the cultural and gender conception of the "happy ending" narrative which Sparks repeatedly delivers to his audience. Ultimately, I aim to highlight the ways in which female diversity is crucial through the inclusion of different feminist representations and the breaking of stereotypical female roles within the romance genre. A more diverse approach to historical romance novel writing needs to be encouraged among popular authors such as Sparks. Because of Sparks' widespread impact, he should modernize

gender roles and norms for the purpose of well-balanced and equal relationship representation. This analysis of gender norms in Sparks' novels helps illuminate issues that are long-standing within the world of romance literature, especially considering the overall impact these ideas create for gender movements of the 21st century.

## **Delimitations**

### **Limitations to the Scope of Research and Discussion**

This research will discuss the portrayal of narrow cultural norms for female characters exclusively within the four novels chosen for close readings: *The Notebook*, *Safe Haven*, *A Walk to Remember*, and *The Longest Ride*. The themes and main content focus will discuss the portrayal of females under specific roles within the books, relaying information regarding discriminatory undertones of the romance novels. This research thesis will not discuss cultural matters such as religious theories of feminism, cultural absence of sexual identities, social justice movements for sexual and racial identities, and intersectional feminism with consent, sexual harassment, and body image remaining outside of this research scope. Future research should occur, on the aforementioned subjects, illuminating exclusion and lack of diversity of characters and plots in the romance category.

### **Implications of the Feminist Analysis**

It is important to note that a deeper analysis of a feminist approach does not dismiss the traditional idea of a woman needing or wanting a fulfilling love. Along with analysis of the Sparks' novels, this critique allowed for a close look at the attributes of each female main character. Although arguing toward a feminist view of women having unrestricted life choices, a woman also has the right to her decision in life choosing to stay alongside her partner. Sparks has gathered popularity amongst young adults and romance genre readers because his stories can serve as a positive outlet that many readers seek. The conflict at hand reflects Sparks' disregard for a woman's right to have independent goals within a love relationship. His stories have gathered public praise but continue to lack plots and characters of modern society. This analysis does not diminish his writings as an author; rather, it analyzes the portrayal of females and their roles in the storylines created.

## Perspective of and Methodology for the Study

### Methodology

To fully explore my research question, “In what ways do Nicholas Sparks novels contribute to stereotypical female gender roles typical of the romance novel genre?” I have conducted a thorough literature review, including a review of the history of romance novels and selected the Feminist Criticism theory as my primary literary lens; my research identifies and acknowledges incorporating the life experience of feminist groups into popular narratives. To address these gaps, I have studied several chapters of *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, in addition to searching for related peer-reviewed analysis of historical romance novels, and critiques of Nicholas Sparks in particular.

To achieve a better understanding of my research question, I utilized peer-reviewed articles of my literature review to explicate areas of the feminist framework. The literature review created space to further analyze potential thinking patterns of the author, Nicholas Sparks. Each selected resource was hand-picked to articulate how Sparks has either consciously or unconsciously, created standards surrounding women. Sparks’ views have in turn negatively affected ideas of some women in society (economically, socially, and religiously). Specific instances in his novels lack exploration of the complex depths of a woman. By only portraying one angle of women—a linear slope of seeking for love—Sparks creates a repetitive pattern that is worth deconstructing. This deconstruction is particularly important because, in the novels, the lead male figure will oftentimes interfere with the woman's life to create the perfect relationship status that Sparks aims to achieve.

The most effective tools to find sources that best complimented my work were derived from the Heritage University library, public journal articles located from Google Scholar, and results from a general Google search that provided basic information of Sparks’ digital footprint.

The search terms used were “feminism in contemporary literature”, “Young Adult (YA) genre and feminist views”, and “history of romance”. Selecting the sources for my thesis consisted of reading a brief excerpt of the abstract and assuring that it used the feminist eye as a driving force to conclude how a romance novel might not cater towards feminist ideals. It was also critical to find a variety of publication dates as I also discuss the timeline of the romance genre.

Once articulating the proper critical lens that encompassed my analysis, I took further steps to identify which of Sparks’ literary works I would apply a closer reading to. The following were selected as they each held different timelines, narratives, and tropes: *The Notebook*, *Safe Haven*, *A Walk to Remember*, and *The Longest Ride*. Having gathered the designated novels, I then was able to juxtapose how non-inclusivity has been consistently implemented, therefore, driving a distortion of women in our society. First, I identified the themes of each novel. Next, I analyzed the attributes of each theme that promoted Sparks’ popularity in romance writing. A recurring theme included historical references taking place mainly during the 1950s. A dual perspective of history was most applicable and provides the best evidence as the author creates numerous occasions that preview how he views a woman notwithstanding the era. To document this distortion of women, my close reading information will be presented in four tables dedicated to a specific novel. The following headings will be utilized for each table deconstructing the themes and how they are present within the novel: traditional views, sacrifice, shifting perspectives about female protagonists, and women’s suffering.

For future thesis research, it will be important to create an outline of themes to identify in each novel selected for close reading. It became an overwhelming experience when deciphering which themes I needed to focus on. The process of selecting each novel presented a new concern. Sparks has close to two dozen novels, each revolving around a new story with new sets of characters. The wide spectrum of his novels was challenging to choose among because I aimed

to select novels with enough range in content diversity which also had gained significant popularity. It also became a challenge to stay within the scope of my research as there are multiple conversations that can be created from one idea. An added frustration emerged because of the limited work surrounding the scholarly feminist analysis of Sparks' novels. I was able to locate multiple findings of those who praised Sparks work but failed to examine underlying issues of female representation. Direct criticism of Sparks' novels meant I applied feminist analysis of topics to the framework of Sparks' writing patterns. Moments of joy occurred midway through the writing process as the organization began to fall into place. It is difficult not to fall into a writing-slump when analyzing pieces of work for an extensive period. It took one solid conversation with my mentor and a source aligning almost perfectly with my work to reignite the passion for my research question.

### **Perspective**

My perspective heavily follows the spectrum of a feminist view. Dobie's (2015) definition of feminism stood as a base for the framework, "women are not born inferior but rather are made to be so" (p. 107). Within the feminist view, a critical lens details the foundations in which prejudices can be viewed in romance literature. Dobie creates depth to the feminist lens and recites important factors of which contribute to feminist movements. Other novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen were considered as a prime example of intertwining both historical ideas, romance, and feminist values. The foundation of strong feminine romances is undermined by Sparks' narratives as he continuously utilizes stigmas that interfere with how his lead female characters progress within the novels.

Many details, characteristics and tropes create a distinct path for the direction of Sparks' novels. Based on a series of characters, and applying novel arcs created by historic authors, Sparks perpetuates the idea that women's roles are in service of the male and of making a home

for the male. Supported evidence is gathered to create a strong claim of the ways Sparks violates rules of feminism and its definition. Although the novels hold power in literature because of Sparks' endearing way of creating romance plotlines, feminist analysis can identify problematic undertones to each story.

I considered each story's portrayal of the feminist critique in the selected novels by Sparks, examining the outcome of his characters and the perceptions they provide. Although his film adaptations are also crucial to consider, they do not compromise the majority of my thesis. Instead, peer-reviewed articles provide the majority of the analysis of the depths and layers that reveal Sparks' traditional, stereotypical reflections of a woman's role in relationship to a man. Along with my thesis, it is important to consider that a crucial point of the feminist spectrum expands its wings to those who also choose a conservative and narrow path in literary choices. It is a choice for many to create a livelihood around simple/traditional living. Instead of discounting the ideas and goals that these characters have for their life, which Sparks creates, this thesis lens is utilized to highlight how Sparks has created restricting undertones of how each main female character is perceived. This analysis meant letting go of my own biases and goals as a woman in the scholarly world to analyze the characteristics and situations these female characters are implemented in. The series of novels by Nicholas Sparks, Heritage University databases, and Google research provided more evidence to my work as it transitioned from a simple idea to a developed thesis. It is my final belief that Sparks creates a multiverse of female characters that have complex backgrounds. However, it is also my belief that although he creates stories with characters who seek a simple life, which is completely acceptable and subject to personal choice, he simultaneously installs a paradigm that restricts the potential of a woman in her relationship, career, and personal life preferences.

## Review of Literature

### History of Romance Stories

To address my research question regarding the absence of diverse stories and the misrepresentation of females in Nicholas Sparks' novels, key sources assisted this analysis. Kamblé et al. (2021) define romance literature and the ideas that classify each romance genre. Kamblé et al. also provide a brief idea of the origin of romance before diving into critical ideas and critiques of the genre and its literary existence and presence. Influences that have impacted female writings have also sculpted the idea of women in the romance genre, and Kamblé et al. help describe the impact by including "Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847)-two classic novels that would become ur-texts for romance plots even if, in their own time, they were not originally read as romance novels and did not enjoy the status and popularity they would garner in the twentieth century" (Kamblé, 2021, p. 3). The foundation for classic romance literature developed even before it was solidified into its very own definition.

Ficke (2021) begins our introduction to the history of romance by explaining the historical periods as well as what each era entailed. We begin with Greek literature being the basic blueprint of our current literature (Ficke, 2021, p.118). Romance can then be traced to gothic fiction where authors began to romanticize the idea of action-adventures (Ficke, 2021, p.118). The historical romance notion derives from this idea as each story begins to develop in a specific setting or era. Twentieth century literature calls for historical romance to be classified as a subgenre of romance novels, as it has continuously evolved for author writings.

Dixon's (2021) chapter, "History of English Romance Novels," is included within the collection of Kamblé et al. 's (2021) reference volume, discussing the romance genre and its empire. We see a layout being depicted of what romance means to each era of our history. Dixon discusses general history and characteristics of romance novels. Kamblé et al. (2021), Ficke (2021), and

Dixon (2021), interrogate the patriarchy of society by analyzing how ideas of sex, gender, and misrepresentation of women are viewed in literature and social media (of the time). Kamblé et al. and Dixon claim to see more of a diverse embrace of inclusivity beginning from the 1930s and further. Dixon also explains how the,

‘happy ever after’ (HEA) ending that we expect from romances up to the later nineteenth century were to end with the death of the hero for, as Anderson says, a tragic ending which parted the lovers could be satisfying for readers because ‘traditionally, the truest, purest romantic love is a fatal love’ (26). (Dixon, 2021, p. 28).

Dixon notes an important aspect of romance tropes. The female lead character more than often will end their story by dying. It is a theme well exemplified in historical romance as well as in Sparks’ writing.

Simultaneously, Kamblé et al. (2021) reflect upon topics that create the main concepts for romance genres. An introduction is given to build a foundation beginning with where romance writing originated to where it has expanded to in the present (pp. 3-6). Dixon (2021) introduces the characteristics and early history of the romance genre idea with this quotation: “As Hall says, ‘The history of the romance novel might begin as early as the first century CE, with Chariton of Aphrodisias’s prose romance, *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, the earliest surviving ancient Greek novel” (p. 27). Dixon’s passage discusses the earliest creation of romance stories and the direction they have since taken from early Greek novels whereas Ficke helped bridge crucial topics that intertwine with other genres and how the romance genre came to be. Dixon (2021), Kamblé et al. (2021), and Ficke (2021) each elaborate on diverse authors with distinct perspectives, such as Lady Mary Wroth author of *The Countess of Montgomerie’s Urania*, that have influenced centuries of writing and the evolution of the definition of ‘romance’ (p. 28). The definition of romance has evolved with a more modern perspective on positions of gender.

Ficke (2021), Dixon (2021), and Kamblé et al. (2021), bring context to the current state of the romance literary world by examining countless popular stories and their distinction of social media and literary influence. Dixon (2021) emphasized the context of the literary types stating, “there is a distinction between the ‘novel,’ which depicts everyday life, and ‘romance,’ which is a more elevated form concerned with high emotion, and pastimes. A century later, ‘romance’ became linked with male adventure novels” (p. 27). A century's worth of novels are surrounded by male adventure novels, which explains the origin of the adventure narrative. The history provided by each of *The Routledge Research Companion to Romance Fiction* sources allowed me to understand how Sparks might have constructed his own work based on the foundation set by previous popular stories similar to Samuel Richardson’s, *Pamela*, a male author and piece of early romance literature, written in the 18th century. Richardson was situated among strong female authors displaying different spectrums of gender roles and standards (Kamblé et al., 2021, pp. 3-6). This romance style of writing continued:

In the mid-nineteenth century, after Charlotte M. Yonges bestselling novel *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) inspired other writers such as Rhoda Broughton and Mary Elizabeth Braddon to write novels about English heroes and heroines who fall in love and experience internal and external opposition to the consummation of their love, romances were just as likely to end in a tragic parting of the lovers through death as in their marriage. A happy ending was not always assured, nor did readers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century require one. However, between the ending of the First World War and the start of the Second, the meanings of ‘romance’ and ‘romantic’ as ‘terms of literary description became more narrowly specialized and signified only those love stories which end happily in marriage’ (Light, 1991, p. 160, as cited in Dixon, 2021, p. 27).

Dixon (2021) illuminates an important construct that highlights how tropes post-WWII have been created and the narrative and role each character plays. The form and technique of adventure novels and new significance of the romance genre being applied to romance tropes completes a more elaborate connection for why Sparks might continue to use this form of writing. In the 1960s, non-fiction women authors challenged restricted roles for women. Churchill (2025) explains that the term “feminine mystique” was coined by Betty Friedan to describe assumptions that “women could find fulfillment through housework, marriage, sexual passivity, and child rearing alone. Further, prevailing attitudes held that ‘truly feminine’ women had no desire for higher education, careers, or a political voice; rather, they found complete fulfillment in the domestic sphere” (Churchill, 2025, Women’s Rights Movement, para. 3). This movement is relative to the post–World War II period Sparks sets multiple stories in. The transition in feminist roles after entering male dominated fields transitioned as they now held a presence in social, political, economic, and in this case, literary and scholarly environments. Dixon (2021) weaves in a definition of romance: “I use the term ‘romance(s)’ as a general term for any novel whose foremost concern is a love relationship between the main protagonists: fiction in which the relationship between hero and heroine is paramount” (p. 27). This framework heavily applies to the happy ending Sparks creates on countless occasions. For Katie in *Safe Haven*, we see her narrative end happily when in most real–life outcomes, this can vary. This provides a glimpse of how Sparks may have created the blueprint of *Safe Haven* and how various scholars, like Ficke (2021), have found this general love relationship pattern misleading about gender roles and constructs.

The base of the feminist criticism of Sparks' work is rather more focused on the shape romantic love takes and the repetitive configuration of how the relationships are being presented as opposed to the pattern of a happy ending. Teo (2021) clarifies that “[romantic] love is not a

specific, precise emotion; it is a bundle of ideas, values, and feelings, and a historically changeable set of cultural practices” (p. 454). It is a key factor to consider as it is the impact of the environment that adheres to the structure of love. Popular writers have the responsibility to match changes in audience demographics and/or cultural norms for gender roles. After reading Teo (2021), the next step of my literature review was a closer analysis of the repetitive storyline/plot that Sparks presents and the lack of 21<sup>st</sup> century gender norms or inclusivity incorporated in his novels.

### **Feminist Criticism of Romance Literature**

Dobie (2015) explains that critics using feminist criticism will approach literature with a range of analysis such as studies of difference, studies of power, and studies of the female experience. Studies of difference cover the contrasts between male and female experience depicted in literature writing. Studies of power analyze the sociological elements of feminism in the realm of social, political, and cultural impacts. Studies of the female experience is the category most relevant to the lens I applied as it covers areas of social norms and women’s deconstructing of their portrayal and perceptions (Dobie, 2015, p. 104). These analysis categories provided by Dobie have proven to be a pivotal point of this study as I uncover limitations and restrictions in Sparks’ female characters.

Perceptions of women constantly evolve. In literature, there are many frameworks that discuss portrayal and decipher how women are presented. Sparks has created a constant pre-conception of women being placed in a harmful scenario that ultimately leads readers toward a male protagonist and away from possible male antagonists. Culajara and Obeso (2017) in their article, “Depiction of Domestic Violence in Nicholas Sparks’ “Safe Haven”: A Feminist Approach,” perform a Duluth Model analysis of Katie’s experience in the novel *Safe Haven*, highlighting the shift of the media from praising Sparks to now scrutinizing issues within Sparks’

novel. Culajara and Obeso (2017) alternate between discussing effects of domestic violence and the feminist lens topic because of gender inequality and utilizing a feminist approach to track patterns of misrepresentation.

Alex defined Katie's physical profile as he imagined her chestnut hair dancing in the breeze while walking by the seashores. Also, he described her having delicately boned features which may explicate that she can easily be broken and pleasing to the senses in many ways. Women as weaker sex. Women nowadays are continuously viewed as a weaker sex compared to men....Kevin, a then-stranger at that moment, helped her to get away from them. A depiction of men as a stronger sex is embedded in this specific narrative since without him, the female character will not be saved. It also posits that women are susceptible to premature evaluation. (Culajara & Obeso, 2017, pp. 20-21)

Singh (2019) also conducts an in-depth review of how presentation of women has evolved over time. We are provided with information in order to understand where the shift began in literature, where women authors began to have an open and accepted space as writers. Singh (2019) specifically recalls how female characters up until recently were written by men through their lens and their perception of females. It is viable and critical to note that women should portray many characteristics to expand social understandings of gender constructs. Singh (2019) references Chaucer's earlier works and compares the "*The Canterbury Tales*" narrative to Jane Austen's "*Pride and Prejudice*" and notes the differences between each author. Chaucer limits the appearance of women and utilizes specific terms portraying them under a dim light. Jane Austen portrays her female characters as strong and although they hold complexity in characteristics, still utilizes neutral and positive terms to continue her storyline. "Since the author Jane Austen is also a female, we can conclude that females prefer to use more positive terms and neutral terms instead of negative terms" (Singh, 2019, p. 40). Differences between Chaucer and

Austen's work can be determined simply by its response. "The portrayal of women was without doubt prejudiced as the society was ruled by the men and most of the published writers were men until modern times. Therefore, the journey of women being neglected and dominated has been occurring historically throughout in [sic] Literature" (Singh, 2019, p. 40). Singh reminds us that a perception is fragile and can be easily deteriorated by the slightest infliction of negative notions.

Thelwall (2017) focuses on readership perception by noting who interacts with each genre or piece of literature. Thelwall (2017) discusses how some novel genres are heavily picked up by a specific gender. There is an active gender bias when it comes to specific genres, tropes, ideas, and length of novels. In the earlier centuries, writing literature was male dominated: As women began to write literature, they were initially criticized heavily on any work they produced. However, Thelwall (2017) notes, "By the end of the nineteenth century female authors were apparently outselling males (Stanton, 1988), with this rise leading to public complaints from male writers (e.g., Nelson, 2001)" (p. 3). Publication numbers then created an open outlet for the entrance of women in literature and how they were perceived along with their works. The once male dominated field was beginning to expand and touch audiences who preferred new ideas and plotlines.

While only Culajara and Obeso (2017) specifically refer to the work of Sparks, Dobie (2015), Singh (2019), and Thelwall (2017) assist the analysis with general ideas of feminism within the romance literary world. Dobie and Singh are specific in discussing where romantic novels fail to uphold the potential of a woman.

### **Feminist Analysis of Young Adult Literature**

Christian-Smith (1987), like Culajara and Obeso (2017), determines the gaps in literature that can become confusing due to characterization of the female protagonist within the story that

unfolds. Christian-Smith (1987) articulates how romance narratives, including selective portrayals of female characters, can affect young adult/teen romance reading. This landscape has greatly evolved through time as there are now dozens of writers stepping away from writing specific shapes of love. Christian-Smith (1987) not only recognizes this important feminist change but also gathers detailed arguments that acknowledge how authors of romance novels reopen harmful tropes. These tropes can be damaging and may not serve as a full representation of females and their overall developed personalities. Christian-Smith writes in 1987, “In particular, Scholastic's reputation for supplying quality books through its book clubs (Bridgman 1984) has been questioned as of late by parents and professionals within the field of children's literature and library science because of the limited representations of femininity produced in these novels (Harvey 1982)” (p. 368). Assuming that these standards were more rigid in 1987, Christian-Smith’s comments seem significant:

“Lanes (1981) notes that in her interviews of male and female educators, parents and librarians the general consensus was that the teen romances center their versions of femininity on devotion to home, heart and hearth, that woman is incomplete without a man” (Christian-Smith, 1987, p. 368).

Christian-Smith, writing in 1987, discusses the theme that Culajara and Obeso apply directly to Sparks in 2017. Culajara and Obeso identified multiple occasions where this notion of “incomplete without a man” has been repeated in writings, specifically within Sparks’ novels, because of the misunderstood or harmful views they provide to young or average readers (Culajara and Obeso, 2017, p. 16).

Chris Crowe (2002) critiques an in-person experience of what occurs when providing YA literature pieces, such as *Running Loose* by Chris Crutcher, to young students. Crowe places in context this observation of implementing YA literature in a classroom setting. By viewing how

issues arise when a story is presented, whether it be a classic novel or a more modern one, a reader is influenced and impacted. Crowe actively realigns the importance of YA literature with current social standards and reflects upon why authors can cause misinterpretation in literature.

One student opened conversation to say,

I think that there is a lot more good to be found in the YA lit. The adult novels that are so popular, much as I love them [YA], don't seem to have anything to learn in them... There is something in them that can make your life better if you choose, and I find that most of the YA lit I have read does the same thing far better. (Crowe, 2002, p. 114)

This student's perception of YA literature is one of many that Crowe presents. It continues the conversation discussed by others of how crucial it is to have proper representation of gender roles because of the heavy influence it proposes. Crowe continues to emphasize why content that is implemented in stories is as important as educational learning. Sparks' novel, *A Walk to Remember*, is given as a small example toward the end of the article as a piece of literature that provides learning elements of life following the "opposites attract" theme but does not mention the issue of stereotypes in the high school romance story.

A study by Crawford (1994), "Rethinking the Romance: Teaching the Content and Function of Gender Stereotypes in the Psychology of Women Course," gathered information regarding the stereotype functions in romance novels and how these stereotypes are absorbed. Crawford assigned college students to examine stereotypes within an essay assignment, which included reading a Harlequin-style novel to analyze ideas about gender stigma and stereotypes. Crawford (1994) further explains:

It is important for students to learn the content of gender stereotypes (i.e., the characteristics that are ascribed to women and men)... Moreover, many students mistakenly believe that the women's liberation movement of the 1970's freed women

from sexism and discrimination, so that today's woman can be and do anything she wants. They are surprised to learn that gender stereotypes [continue and] show considerable cross-cultural consistency (p. 151).

Crawford develops the argument and presents ideas of cross-cultural consistency in regard to stereotypes. Crawford began this conversation before the publishing of Sparks' novels which allows us to determine how little romance novels have evolved. Perspective is a critical element within character and plot line development as it determines how a role or narrative unfolds. The many novels' Sparks has curated are given through the male perspective which leaves the female character vulnerable to the potential portrayals she is displayed in.

In connection, the initial response of the reader is important as it cements the perspective of the characters and narrative. Harding (2014) relays information about the Formalist Criticism approach and states,

Fetterley wrote, 'American literature is male. To read the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature is perforce to identify as male' (1978, p. xii).

Fetterley argued that because they have been taught through previous reading experience to read as if they were male, women find themselves 'in effect no one' (1978, p. xxii) unless they learn to resist the text. (Harding, 2014, p. 71)

Emotional or psychological reactions are largely dependent on the initial interaction with the literature content. Harding (2014) and Crawford (1994) demonstrate the areas where emotional, psychological, and social awareness are key to recognizing sexism in society. Without training in identifying stereotypes, these characteristics are difficult to distinguish. Harding and Crawford stress the importance of finding key factors that expose areas where stereotypes fulfill traditional social norms, which have misconstrued movements that intended to further gender equality.

Sparks produces negative stereotype results as he actively abandons gender equality for the purpose of a love story.

Christian-Smith (1987) and Culajara and Obeso (2017) cover feminist ideas in a much wider spectrum. Christian-Smith and Culajara and Obeso agree in terms of a woman not being limited to a structure or a framework where they only exist within the presence of a man. Thelwall (2017) contributes to the conversation by revealing the importance of genre readership reflecting on the large movement women have created and the path they have paved for romance writing and publishing. The above authors each cover damaged attributes (such as stereotypes surrounding females) the literary world has constructed which can now be applied to Sparks' writing and the relationships he has created.

Zakarya Ameer-Said and Wassila Hamza Reguig-Mouro (2021), in their article "Beyond Literary Boundaries: A Postmodern Analysis of the Cinematographic Adaptation of Nicholas Sparks' *The Longest Ride*," discuss postmodern critical theories and techniques. This journal article delves into postmodernism, using *The Longest Ride* as its driving force to exemplify each postmodern device, such as multiple narrators. Given that Sparks' readership follows various age groups, we must consider the patterns and reflections his narratives perpetuate, as a result of his own lens as a male writing romance stories. The study provides an extensive analysis interpreting the process of writing Sparks embraces. Ameer-Said and Reguig-Mouro, begin by attempting to understand the novel itself and how it mirrors and impacts the adapted film.

Another metafictional stratagem is the presence of multitudinous narrators present within the selfsame fiction (Pantaleo, 2014, p. 326), and this is the case of *The Longest Ride*, where there is more than one chronicler extant within the confines of the story. Ira Levinson is the first narrator reporting to the audience what happened to him and his late wife, Ruth Levinson, when they first met during their teenage days back in the 1940s

until the wife's passing. All that happened in the past is recounted from Ira's viewpoint and the letters he wrote to put on record his life stages with Ruth, (Ameur-Said & Reguig-Mouro, 2021, p. 752)

Analysis of the narrator illustrates the female experience is filtered through the husband's perspective. Therefore, any idea presented is in the eyes of a biased character explaining the story in their favor. Sparks romanticizes real life experiences to generate a story fitting to his shape of love, that is, Sophia sacrificing her career to stay near her partner and Ruth sacrificing her dream as a mother to stay in relationship with Ira.

Crowe (2002), Crawford (1994), and Harding (2014) create a more general foundation for the impact and influence that a romance novel narrative can leave. Zakarya Ameur-Said and Wassila Hamza Reguig-Mouro (2021), Crowe (2002), Crawford (1994), and Harding (2014), bring experiences of a person's life that can be applied to analyze the impact Sparks has created. While Zakarya Ameur-Said and Wassila Hamza Reguig-Mouro (2021) are specific with the instances that are reflected within Sparks' writing, touching base with terminology and literary impacts is equally as significant. All the aforementioned critics identify social, emotional, and psychological instances that should be used to rewrite previously rigid gender views of society.

## The Study and Findings

### The Study

For my literary analysis to be successful in observing the writing patterns of Sparks, a specific lens and perspective needed to be applied. This literary lens is feminism. Dobie (2015) provides insight into the feminist lens by examining the waves of feminism and detailing exact occurrences between each wave. Dobie also provides a glimpse of the female experience through the centuries. By definition, feminism is the theory of analyzing

texts by women, to reevaluate other texts, and to examine the cultural contexts in which works were produced. They [feminists] analyze the male/female power structure that makes women the other (the inferior), and they reject it. They work to abolish limiting stereotypes of women. They seek to expose patriarchal premises and the prejudices they create. Often, they challenge traditional, static ways of seeing gender and identity.

(Dobie, 2015, p.114)

The above feminist structure was applied while deconstructing the work of Sparks. Under this microscope of gender power relationships, stereotypes of women, and patriarchal prejudices, we can analyze narratives in Sparks that challenge feminist values. Through a feminist eye, there are problematic themes in the writing of Sparks that suggest sexist views of the current and previous feminist movements. The first, second, and third wave of feminism can be applied to expose the areas that are flawed in Sparks' novels by pointing out subtle instances where Sparks does not pursue female characters' progression toward feminism. The feminist eye helps determine that Sparks tends to produce similar female characters in each of his novels. Keeping in mind that for "feminist critics, it meant looking at the depiction of women in male texts in an effort to reveal the misogyny (negative attitudes towards women) lurking there" (Dobie, 2015, p. 107). In

multiple pieces of Sparks’ writing, a feminist lens can determine that women’s core goals are disregarded and are sacrificed to the storyline of a perfect love story or a “happy ending.”

The stories that Spark creates remain in previous era narrations and present unjust stigmas for females not only in past but also present–based stories. The most well-known novel and film adaptation is, *The Notebook*. For Allie, Sparks creates a very clear statement that females must uphold stereotypes of the time, disregarding the idea that a woman is still able to hold values and ideals of their own. This example in fact amplifies how little feminist diversity is layered into his romance stories.

**Table 1. *The Notebook***

<b>Themes</b>	<b>The Notebook</b>
<b>Traditional Views</b>	<p>“It was a terrible thing for a girl to learn. That status is more important than feelings” (p. 57). [Noah about Allie]</p> <p>“My parents didn’t think it was proper for someone like me to paint for a living” (p. 63). [Allie]</p>
<b>Sacrifice</b>	<p>“You’re not going to stay, are you?” He smiled weakly. ‘You want to, but you can’t.’ ‘Oh, Noah,’ she said as the tears began again, ‘please try to understand...’ He shook his head to stop her. ‘I know what you’re trying to say-I can see it in your eyes. But I don’t want to understand it, Allie. I don’t want it to end this way. I don’t want it to end at all. But if you leave, we both know we’ll never see each other again” (p. 139). [Noah and Allie]</p>
<b>Shifting Perspectives about Female Protagonists</b>	<p>“Is your fiance here on business?’ She shook her head, ‘No, he’s still in Raleigh.’ Noah raised his eyebrows. ‘Does he know you’re here?’ She shook her head again and answered slowly. ‘No. I told him I was looking for antiques. He wouldn’t understand my coming here.’ Noah was a little surprised by her answer. It was one thing to come and visit, but it was an entirely different matter to hide the truth from her fiance” (p. 45). [Noah and Allie]</p>

**Women's Suffering**

“Most of the summer, she had to make excuses to her parents whenever they wanted to see each other. It wasn't that they didn't like him—it was that he was from a different class, too poor, and they would never approve if their daughter became serious with someone like him. ‘I don't care what my parents think, I love you and always will,’ she would say. ‘We'll find a way to be together.’ But in the end they couldn't” (p. 24). [Noah]

Allie's parents' attitudes surrounding Allie's career and relationship with Noah help us understand the limits and restrictions created for her role and character. Noah's judgment of Allie for visiting also fits into this pattern of restrictions and limitations. Overall, there is suppression as well as a pivotal change in how the audience perceives Allie, as we are seeing her and the actions she takes in through the eyes of Noah. Sparks (2014) idolized the notion of “happily ever after.” Moreover, inclusiveness for female characters in any aspect does not proceed. *The Notebook* continues to produce ideas that ignore feminism, minorities, and the breaking of stereotypes because of the cliché plot inherently dating back to the traditional romance era that reflects one version of a female. The era of the story is dated to World War II times. Given the roles minorities had in this era, a reader could understand why there is little representation. Even so, solely Allie is created to be the antagonist reflecting offending suggestions about the female character as she faces judgment from both her parents and her love interest. The traditional values engraved within these novels creates an implicit idea of tradition enhancing the idea of an outdated and stereotyped love story where the female's future is dictated by others and her sacrifice derives from making those individuals directing her life, content. In *The Notebook*, Sparks has neglected any further movement towards evolution and progress for a lead female character in his romance plots.

Perhaps even more troubling within a feminist analysis, in *Safe Haven*, Sparks (2017) discussed elements of abuse which led to removing focus from survivors of abuse and instead romanticized a resolution by providing a traditional “happy ending.” With the author's well-known conservative views, the novels and films become problematic in the eyes of the newer feminist generation. The popularity he gains continues to drive narrow-minded notions. *Safe Haven* is then counted herein as the second novel that relies on previous conceptions of what opportunities a woman in a romantic relationship should have in the world. Sparks releases these narrow ways of living to a modern world of future feminists, sending unhealthy narratives surrounding violence and what a woman should endure.

**Table 2. *Safe Haven***

Themes	Safe Haven
<b>Traditional Views</b>	“Why can’t you just be happy with the way things are? Why do you have to push so hard for me to be the person you want me to be rather than the person that I am?” (p. 282). [Katie to Alex]
<b>Sacrifice</b>	“Love doesn’t mean anything if you're not willing to make a commitment,’ she said, ‘and you have to think not only about what you want, but about what he wants. Not just now, but in the future.’ She continued to stare at Katie across the table, her brown eyes unwavering. ‘Are you ready to be a wife to Alex and a mother to his kids? Because that’s what Alex wants. Maybe not right now, but he will in the future. And If you’re not willing to make a commitment, if you’re only going to toy with his feelings and those of his children, then you’re not the person he needs in his life” (p. 217). [Jo to Katie]
<b>Shifting Perspectives about Female Protagonists</b>	“Kevin felt dizzy as he watched Erin and the grey-haired man kiss, seeing the way Erin flirted with him. He saw her lean down and smile at the little girl. Watched as she tousled the hair of the little boy...And Erin-his wife-was playing along. Liking it. Encouraging it. Cheating on him with her new family, as if Kevin and their marriage had never existed at all” (p. 314).

**Women's Suffering**

"I chose him, remember? I married him. I let it happen once and then again, and after that, it was too late. I still cooked for him and cleaned the house for him. I slept with him whenever he wanted, did whatever he wanted. I made him think I *loved* it" (p. 167). [Katie to Alex]

In *Safe Haven*, Sparks (2017) highlights how Katie, much like other lead female characters in Sparks' library, is a paradigm of a young woman finding a solution through a male advocate. This pattern is important to consider especially when Sparks is creating a lead female character, such as Katie in *Safe Haven*, who yearns for a loving, strong male figure in order to be protected and saved from domestic violence. "She'd fallen in love with Alex and she'd fallen in love with the children and she already knew that she couldn't imagine a future without them. It was time to go home, she thought, it was time to see her family" (Sparks, 2017, p. 381). Katie's narrative alludes to the "happy ending" that she seeks after the abuse and hurt she has endured. Sparks' resolution of a happy ending aligns with historical romance since WWII but disregards the portrayal of the women's story and life. The film and novel incorporate stereotypes that apply to women where the female seeks for a safe outlet from her complicated past. Instances as these revolve around the happy ending notion Sparks continues to rewrite and the trauma that is induced specifically onto the female protagonist only. Rigid stigmas surrounding a female are utilized to produce the narration and final product of the storyline that is upsettingly conventional. Alex provides the element missing within Katie's life. Before the death of Kevin, Katie sacrificed the possibility of a stable life, not having to constantly run or hide from her abuser, out of fear of her abusive husband. The pattern is in fact repeated by Sparks in two more instances within *The Notebook*, where Allie's parents ingrain social standards and Noah expects her to uphold them, and within *A Walk to Remember*, where Jamie is painted as the ideal example of a young female.

*A Walk to Remember* reflects traditional beliefs and continues to present a pattern Sparks (2019) chose for women requiring that they abide by social norms. The religious aspect presented is implemented into Jamie's belief system by a male, her father, and is set to live under rules she must submit to. While religion plays a role, it is a male who enforces and restricts the female lead to be oppressed into a long-established way of being and living that is subordinate to a father or husband.

**Table 3. *A Walk to Remember***

<b>Themes</b>	<b>A Walk to Remember</b>
<b>Traditional Views</b>	<p>“Jamie didn’t care much about outward appearances, because she was always looking for things like ‘inner beauty,’ and I suppose that’s part of the reason she looked the way she did” (p. 15). [Landon]</p> <p>“Jamie carried her Bible wherever she went, and if her looks and Hegbert (Jamie’s father) didn’t keep the boys away, the Bible sure as heck did” (p.16). [Landon]</p>
<b>Sacrifice</b>	<p>“Jamie also taught me the value of forgiveness and the transforming power that it offers. I realized this the day that Eric and Margaret had come to her house. Jamie held no grudges. Jamie led her life the way the Bible taught. Jamie was not only the angel who saved Tom Thornton [Jamie’s father], she was the angel who saved us all” (p. 156). [Landon]</p>
<b>Shifting Perspectives about Female Protagonists</b>	<p>““Why didn’t you tell me?” This was the one question I hadn’t asked her, the one that I’d been thinking about. I hadn’t slept that night, and my eyes were still swollen. I’d gone from shock to denial to sadness to anger and back again, all night long”” (p. 129). [Landon]</p>
<b>Women’s Suffering</b>	<p>“I’m dying, Landon” (p. 126). [Jamie to Landon]</p> <p>“She had leukemia; she’d known about it since last summer” (p. 127). [Landon]</p>

Jamie was the perfect and unobtainable female figure who suffered from a life-threatening illness resulting in her passing from a terminal medical condition. In turn, Landon learned from Jamie, allowing him to change the course of his life. He lived a long life full of challenges and love after the events, yet it took Jamie to sacrifice the remainder of her life to teach and pass along morals and important life lessons for him to realize the greater depths to life itself. Sparks makes *A Walk to Remember* about Landon, guiding the narrative towards the male character and revolving the story around him and Jamie's impact on him. This narrative reflects the underlying issue within many of the above pieces of literature, of the sidelining intent towards female characters. The traditional views pressed upon Jamie, the disease once again being applied to the female, and the shifting perception of Jamie because of her choice to keep Landon unaware of her condition. Sparks' novels are a continuation that amplifies issues with negative impacts for women. The portrayal of how women should behave to the larger audience of readers, including young women, creates unjust standards for self-expression.

In *The Longest Ride*, Sparks (2012) portrays backstories of the characters' romantic relationships displaying beautiful as well as difficult moments. Ira and Ruth have a happy beginning. However, as soon as issues arise, Sparks reveals how independence for a female, regardless of time, does not coexist with romance without the presence or inclusion of the male lead, turning the perspective to Sophia sacrificing her career for her relationship and Ruth her ambition of being a mother.

The choices and sacrifices of Sophia and Ruth's dreams all but depend on Ira and Luke and their overall choice. Their reflections are shifted as they are left to make difficult and relationship-altering choices. Although the female establishes her choice in remaining in her relationship, because of their literary portrayal, the audience is guided by the author towards an antagonistic view when she pursues other elements in life. As previously mentioned, female lives

and futures are largely deterred by the changes of the man's life; for Ruth, that means no children; for Sophia that means no New York internship; which therefore counters these women's strong and resilient personalities with large sacrifices each must make.

**Table 4. *The Longest Ride***

<b>Themes</b>	<b>The Longest Ride</b>
<b>Traditional Views</b>	“Twice, I brought Ruth to a movie, and once, I took her and her mother to lunch. And always, I would walk her home from the synagogue, her parents trailing ten paces behind” (p. 70). [Ira]
<b>Sacrifice</b>	“Though she knew about the mumps and had married me anyway, I knew that Ruth had always clung to a secret hope that the doctor had somehow been mistaken... We made love frequently in our first years of marriage, and though Ruth was reminded every month of the sacrifice she had made by marrying me, she wasn't initially bothered by it. I think she believed that will alone, that her profound desire for a child, would somehow make it happen” (p. 265). [Ira]
<b>Shifting Perspectives about Female Protagonists</b>	<p>“She blamed me, and I blamed myself as well... Conversations became stilted, and we began to argue for the first time. Sometimes it seemed to be a struggle for her to sit in the same room with me” (p. 266). [Ira]</p> <p>“She did not want to and I was too afraid to try, and we continued to drift further apart. There was even a period when she wondered whether she wanted to remain married too, and in the evenings, after she'd gone to bed, I would sit in the living room, wishing that I were someone else, the kind of man who'd been able to give her what she wanted” (p. 266). [Ira]</p>
<b>Women's Suffering</b>	“She died nine years ago, the day I felt my life come to a full stop. I had called to her from the living room, and when she didn't answer, I rose from my chair. I could move without a walker back then, though it was still slow going, and after reaching the bedroom, I saw her on the floor, near the bed, lying on her right side... Ruth my wife of more than fifty-five years, had died” (p. 9). [Ira]

There is an apparent theme amongst female lead roles, which is the sacrifices female characters had to make and the benefits the males acquired because of said events and changes. In, *The Longest Ride*, Sparks (2012) interprets one limiting reality of a female, Ruth, longing to become a mother and shelving any hope to be one, for the purpose and benefit of her relationship. For Sophia, in *The Longest Ride*, this means fully dismantling her career plan to remain in her relationship, and Allie in *The Notebook*, where high restricting standards expected of her shelve her dreams to become an artist.

For Sparks, traditional values, female sacrifices, and restricted female roles are necessary for the male protagonist to navigate life in all aspects. However, these themes become contributors to mis-portrayal of women in relationships because Spark's novels proceed to merge damaging issues of gender stereotypes, influencing prominent media outlets within our society. As I presumed and as Sparks has demonstrated, his work is strictly traditional and patriarchal as plots undermine romance with a feminist scope. The term traditional within romance novels means that "any development of a romantic relationship between two (or more) people—as well as an ending that was emotionally satisfying (usually happy but not always) became the two core guidelines that romance novels follow" (Pagan, 2019, para. 2). Sacrifice is needed to create dimension and connection for characters, but sacrifice is made strictly by the female and only her. The satisfying ending is led by Sparks therefore guiding his audience into a negative attitude of the role they play in the narrative. A constant form of Sparks' creative decisions derives from projecting a negative angle of the female and her decisions that consequently impact anything that includes disrupting a happy ending from the perspective of the male protagonist.

## **Findings**

The feminist lens was the most effective filter as it identified most clearly the emphasis on male protagonist needs for Sparks' work and the foundation he has cemented into his

reputation, revealing that he does not cater towards values of the feminist universe. Sparks creates the opposition of female perception that produces novels that contribute to exclusivity of heterosexual male gender norms. Applying feminist criticism was an effective element in the research process. The intersection between each aforementioned critic has called attention to has revisited the dim light Sparks provides for his female characters. Their and my analysis allowed me to understand the areas that create limitations for Sparks' audience and the productive feminist movement he refuses to interact with according to this analysis of his published works. This narrow portrayal ultimately creates the narrative that Sparks does not focus on the importance of the female presence and movement, but disengages when women subscribe to complex ideas of life for the purpose of creating a repeated pattern of old romance literature.

The portrayal of characters within Sparks' series of books contains many layers. The most relevant to this analysis notes the type of character label each figure is classified under. In every story there is a protagonist, along with an antagonist, along with a plethora of characters that help build the environment of the story. With a close reading accompanied by the feminist lens, each figure is easily distributed to their respective categories, that is, the male being the protagonist creating solution or safety, and the female creating the challenge or issue interfering with the success of a love story. In *The Notebook*, Allie is portrayed as the antagonist engaging in infidelity. In *The Longest Ride*, Sophia is portrayed as the villain who decides in favor of her future instead of the male; Ruth chooses herself over her marriage; and Sophia chooses her career over her relationship, painting both females as antagonists' until they return to their male companions. Although Katie is the protagonist character in *Safe Haven*, she still commits a trauma inducing act by ending the life of her abuser because of Kevin's malicious act to locate her and cause harm. Sparks' reflections of female characters portray them as difficult, placing immense pressure on their shoulders and creating a negative light on the female roles due to

audience and reader response to their actions. The traditional view women are placed in, the sacrifices they are forced to make to resume Sparks' happy endings, the shifting perspectives about female protagonists, and the pain, death, and diseases inflicted only on women project the problematic undertones of each novel. We must once again consider Sparks' influence and the impact of his novel outlines: His confined view of women's roles in society transmits restrictive ideas to his audience and young readers.

In the mind of Sparks, it is easy to assume that he may be stuck in a traditional era of a female's role in life and generates an inexperienced lead female in each love story with every novel he publishes.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **General Conclusions**

My conclusions support the hypothesis initially created where I became aware of the dim light female characters in Nicholas Sparks' novels were experiencing. Sparks' impact on female audiences is an important aspect to consider as millions of women reflect on and engage with Sparks' writings. Once again highlighting why it is important to create an all-inclusive environment for those reading young adult novels because Sparks' romance plots can easily imprint values and norms of behavior. Through this thesis, I learned how common gender stereotypes are as well as how active they remain in our society even though it has evolved. As an audience, we should be aware of the social constructs implemented within everyday content. Every author utilized in this thesis explores different areas of the feminist theory that creates positive movement in literature. It is important to note that the happy ending and everlasting love notion continuously produced by Sparks is a moral of life, which is perfectly acceptable regardless of who is seeking it and the contentment they feel from it. However, the core objective of this analysis is rather to identify the rigid constructs created by Sparks which limit gender roles and narrows the life pathways attempting to be expanded by modern feminists. It is my ultimate belief that Sparks creates a multiverse of female characters that do not have complex backgrounds. It is also my belief that although he creates stories with characters who seek a traditional way of life, which is completely acceptable and subjective to personal choice, Sparks also implements a paradigm that limits the potential of a female in her relationship, career, and personal life preferences.

Further findings also prove that his novels have amplified misconceptions of women that add to societal issues which reduce the inclusion of diversity. Many of these novels interrupt any movement to further diverse pieces of work due to Sparks' literary impact on young adult

readers specifically within the realm of women's presence in society. It is important to highlight the broken system that has been perpetuated from the Greeks to Chaucer but challenged by female authors such as Jane Austen. The lead male figure will oftentimes interfere with the woman's life in order to create a perfect relationship status, which Sparks aims to achieve. The problem derives from the difficult positions he has placed female characters in as they tackle large life events. The final answer to my research question is that Nicholas Sparks novels unequivocally contribute to stereotypical female gender roles of the romance novel genre by featuring narrow cultural norms for female characters, promoting a single lens for a narrative and story, and dismantling any true movement toward feminism in his lead female characters.

### **Recommendations**

As an author that receives a large amount of publicity and popularity, Nicholas Sparks could contribute to a healthier world for women by adapting his writing to cultural norms outside of the traditional, binary social construct. The female gaze has all in all, migrated towards a life that includes more than a single devotion to one man, and this migration deserves presentation and preservation within our modern literature. Deconstructing the foundation of Sparks' work to then scrutinize the theories that build his characters is essential because it is these exact characters that perpetuate the continuous issue of restrictive female roles. It is a noteworthy occurrence and should be further analyzed to hinder his views as a popular figure. Future research will open a larger conversation that discusses the intent behind narrow feminine paths. Authors, writers, and scholars produce work that settles into the homes and libraries of women of color, Indigenous people, LGBTQ+ community members, persons with non-heterosexual gender/sexual identities, and feminists. It is up to authors and us as readers to maintain responsibility for social justice equality as influencers and voices of the public by promoting a new modern and all-inclusive style of romance genre writing.

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