(Un)happily Ever After? The Romance Novel Reinvented in Louise O'Neill's *Almost Love*

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Abstract

This article examines the tradition of romance fiction in Almost Love (2018) by Louise O'Neill. Through close analysis of the novel's characters and narrative structure and drawing on the theoretical framework of Pamela Regis and Janice A. Radway, the study argues that Almost Love is a feminist reimagining of the romance genre. While it adopts the core conventions of romance fiction—such as the quest for true love, the meeting scene, the attraction between hero and heroine, and the redemptive happy ending—the novel ultimately distorts these conventions, a narrative twist that reframes the romance novel as a feminist call for self-acceptance. Rather than culminating in romantic fulfilment, as is typical of the genre, O'Neill's novel, through the suppression of the hero's attraction towards the heroine, foregrounds dysfunctional relationship marked by unreciprocated obsessive love, self-erasure, power imbalance, and eventual separation, thus redefining the conventional happy ending as a heroine's journey towards self-acceptance and liberation from toxic relationship.
Keywords: *Romance, rewriting, subversion, Almost Love, Louise O'Neill,*

Résumé

Cet article examine la tradition de la fiction romantique dans Almost Love de Louise O'Neill. À travers une analyse des personnages et de la structure narrative du roman, et prenant appui sur les cadres théoriques de Pamela Regis et Janice A. Radway, l'étude soutient que Almost Love

s'inscrit dans une logique de réappropriation féministe de la romance. Bien qu'il reprenne les conventions du genre romantique—telles que la quête de l'amour véritable, la scène de la rencontre, l'attirance entre le héros et l'héroïne, ainsi que la promesse d'un dénouement heureux et rédempteur—il en subvertit finalement ces codes. Ce renversement narratif reconfigure le roman sentimental en une revendication féministe de l'acceptation de soi. Plutôt que de se conclure par l'union heureuse de l'héro et l'héroïne, comme c'est habituellement le cas dans ce genre, le roman d'O'Neill met en lumière une relation dysfonctionnelle marquée par une obsession unilatérale, l'effacement de soi, un déséquilibre des rapports de pouvoir, et finalement une séparation. Ainsi, il redéfinit le dénouement heureux comme un parcours de prise de conscience de l'héroïne et de sa libération d'une relation toxique.

Mots-clés *: la romance, réécriture, subversion, Almost Love, Louise O'Neill*

Introduction

Published in 2018, *Almost Love* tells the story of Sarah Fitzpatrick, a twenty-year-old woman who becomes entangled in an obsessive and self-destructive love affair with an old man called Matthew Brennan and later with Oisin, a series of love affairs in which Sarah becomes no more than a sexual slave. Upon its publication, the novel has been marketed as a romance novel, a generic classification that is not shared by some critics. The German romance writer Kai Spellmeier, for instance, cautions readers on Goodreads, warning that despite its misleading title, the book is far from a typical romance novel. He writes: "Don't be fooled into believing that this is a romance novel. It is not, even if the title suggests otherwise" (Spellmeier, 2018). As a writer who focuses on queer relationships, Spellmeier himself cannot be admitted as a writer of romance because romance, in the conventional sense of the word, is about the

love and courtship between a man and woman. However, his comment, which happens to be in contrast with the editorial opinion about the novel's classification, deserves critical reflection, an aspect that constitutes a significant lacuna since the criticisms on O'Neill's works, so far, concentrated on *Only Ever Yours* (2014), *Asking for It* (2015), *The Surface Breaks* (2018) and *After the Silence* (2020) only, exploring themes of sexual violence (Barr, 2022, p. 197; Clark, 2024, p. 80; Hickey, 2025, p. 132; O'Brien, 2023, p. 109) and women's oppression through beauty ideology (Elices, 2016, p. 73; Lebel, 2019, pp. 48–49; Muraveva, 2018, p. 134; Sánchez Moll, 2018, p. 38).

The existing literature on O'Neill's works is a fast-growing field with recent studies by critics like Donna Michell and Paide Reynolds. Michell examined *Only Ever Yours* through the lens of posthuman monstrosity, and feminine identity construction within the Gothic mode (Mitchell, 2017, pp. 177–198). As for Reynolds, she identified O'Neill's engagement with "the stubborn mode" of modernism that underscores the persistent cultural problems facing women and interrogates the aesthetic and political affordances of refashioned modernist practices (Reynolds, 2023, p. 134). These studies clearly opened new directions in the critical discourse on O'Neill's fiction. However, because none of them paid attention to *Almost Love*, the issue raised by Spellmeier's comment remains, so far undiscussed, and the question of whether *Almost Love* falls within the generic category of romance fiction remains opened.

The aim of this article is to situate *Almost Love* within the tradition of romance fiction by examining both its

alignment with and deviation from the conventions of the genre. Prose romance, as M. H. Abrams explains, has a long history that dates to the Gothic novel of the eighteenth century and the chivalric romance of the Middle Ages. The chivalric or medieval romance emerges in France in the twelfth century and develops from the earlier epic and heroic literary forms with Homer's *The Odyssey* as its foundational text (Abrams, 2003, pp. 34–35). However, if the epic concentrates on the heroic age of tribal wars, chivalric romance, as its name indicates, represents "a courtly and chivalric age." Centring on courtly love, it usually depicts a single, brave, honourable and loyal knight undertaking a challenging but always triumphantly successful quest to obtain a lady's favour. Through the emphasis on the perilous journey, as Abrams points out, "with tournaments fought and dragons and monsters slain for the damsel's sake; it stresses the chivalric ideals of courage, loyalty, honor, mercifulness to an opponent, and elaborate manners; and it delights in wonders and marvels" (Abrams, 2003, p. 35). A brave man's desire and victorious pursuit of romantic coupledom has therefore been central to the romance fiction since its origins.

The emergence of the novel in the eighteenth century, which focuses on realistic projections of society rather than the marvellous imaginations that had characterised prose romance until then, had a significant influence on romance fiction, sparking changes that have continued to evolve until our twenty-first century. Rather than confining to the stereotypical structure of a knight winning a virtuous woman through quasi-unrealistic bravery, a trope that is clearly misogynistic since it presents the

woman as an object rather than subject of desire, the romance novel—from the classics of the eighteenth and nineteenth century like Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1994), and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1897) to the recent popular forms published by Mills and Boon publications since the 1930s, the Harlequin collections since 1940s, and Silhouette series since 1980s—emphasises the heroine and endeavours to offer a realistic representation of courtship and romantic relationships. This is why Pamela Regis, Kristin Ramsdell, and Janice A. Radway define romance as a prose work about the courtship and betrothal of one or several heroines whose purpose is to offer the vicarious pleasure of experience romantic fulfilment (Radway, 1984, p. 130; Ramsdell, 1999, p. 13; Regis, 2003, p. 22).

After the 1970s and until recently, the endeavour to present more realistic imagination of courtship and romance takes a more important shape in the romance novel, as authors like Kathleen Woodiwiss, Nora Robert, Barbara Freethy, Susan Elizabeth Phillips, Janet Dailey, and Marian Keyes attempt to incorporate the feminist rhetoric of empowerment in their characterisation, portraying "independent, career-minded heroines with more casual, but not necessarily promiscuous, attitudes toward sex," a shift that reflects "the changing lifestyles and sexual mores of society" (Ramsdell, 1999, p. 10). As a cultural product of the twenty-first century, *Almost Love* is to be understood as part of this evolution. In light of the definition of the romance novel by Ramsdell, Regis, and Radway, this study investigates how O'Neill's novel conforms to and deviates

from the conventions of romance fiction and why this style is important both for O'Neill's social criticism and for the evolution of the genre itself. It is my contention that O'Neill's novel subversively engages with the romance genre, adopting yet reframing familiar tropes such as the quest for romantic fulfilment and the happy ending to challenge the patriarchal ideologies embedded within the genre.

The Quest for Romantic Fulfilment

Despite its unsettling tone, *Almost Love* adheres to the pursuit of romantic fulfilment motif central to romance fiction. Based on a large selection of romance novels including classics like Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Pamela Regis, in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, theorises the structure of the romance novel, identifying eight essential narrative elements, which collectively function to establish the specificity of the romance novel. As she notes,

> in one or more scenes, romance novels always depict the following: the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal (Regis, 2003, p. 35).

Though not explained in the same terminology as Regis, this plotline is echoed by a number of other critics like Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff (2006, p. 6), Tania Modleski (1982, p. 37), Helen Charles (1995, p. 17), and Vilhelmiina Laura Mäkinen, who even seems to take back Regis's words: "the typical formula or plot pattern for the romance narrative is that a boy and a girl meet, they fall in love, the course of their relationship encounters obstacles but the couple eventually solves the problems, marry, and the narrative ends with the impression that they will live happily ever after" (Mäkinen, 2018, p. 15). This convergence of critical opinion suggests the universality of the boy-meets-girl, they-court-and-marry formula of the romance genre. It could be summarised, in light of the theories of these critics, that the formula of the romance novel is based on a young woman and man's challenging yet successful quest for romantic fulfilment.

While *Almost Love* may not completely fulfil this Regisian eight-staged plotline, the quest for romantic coupledom is present in distorted yet recognisable form, through the characters of Sarah Fitzpatrick, Matthew Brennan, and Oisin. Though there are more than one romantic relationships, as is the case in classics like *Pride and Prejudice*, O'Neill's novel evolves around the relationship between Sarah, a teacher at St Finbarr's School, and Matthew, a wealthy, older man, and later with Oisin, relationships which, at least to some respect, echo the conventional pursuit of true love that is central to the romance novel. The episode that most illustrates this connection is when Sarah and Matthew first meet at St

Finbarr's School, as Matthew comes to the regular teacher-parent meetings:

> 'Hello,' he said again as he sat down. He was so large that he looked as if he was sitting on a child's play seat. 'I'm Matthew Brennan.' 'Sarah? That's a pretty name,' he said. 'But I must say, it suits you.' 'Wow, thanks,' I said. 'Sarah is a super-unusual name all right.' I looked over his shoulder. 'Mrs Kavanagh-Brennan not with us tonight?' 'She's not "Mrs" anything anymore,' he said. 'And we decided we would take turns coming to these meetings'(O'Neill, 2018, p. 24).

In this episode, O'Neill reinvents the "meeting scene" that Regis identifies in the classical romance novel, reworking it to resonate with her more feminist conscious twenty-first-century context. As Regis explains the meeting is the moment in the narrative, usually in the beginning but sometimes in a flashback, when the hero and heroine meet for the first time and when "hint of the conflict to come is often introduced" (2003, p. 37). Typical examples are Elizabeth and Darcy at the Meryton Ball in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* where Darcy's disdainful remark "She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me"(Austen, 1994, p. 9), sets out the initial tension and the pride-prejudice dynamic that will define their relationship. The meeting moment also and very often signals the potential romantic connection between the hero and heroine as is the case with Jane and Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* or with Jane and Rochester in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, where Jane's fateful encounter with Rochester—when she helps him after

his horse fall—establishes not only romantic potential but also the social and emotional gulf that must be traversed.

Sarah's first encounter with Matthew clearly echoes this conventional meeting episode and its prediction of a potential romantic connection with obstacles to surmount. Through the passage quoted above, one witnesses the mutual awareness that typically initiates romantic pursuit. Just as Bingley dances with the Bennet girls, demonstrating his romantic attraction, Matthew signals Sarah out with a compliment: "Sarah? That's a pretty name... it suits you"—a gesture that signals flirtation. Sarah's reaction, tinged with sarcasm, "Sarah is a super-unusual name all right", reflects a defensive posture, yet one that still engages with the flirtation, in much the same way as Elizabeth Bennet's witty resistance to Darcy's initial pride and condescendence. This initial repartee between Sarah and Matthew foreshadows the emotional dynamic to come, one characterised by imbalance and subtle domination, where Sarah's initial discomfort is overruled by a growing fascination with Matthew's confidence, wealth, and attention. The scene also hints at the barriers that will structure the narrative, which is characterised by Matthew's age, his authority, his past relationship, and most importantly, his emotional detachment. Much like the initial encounter between Darcy and Elizabeth, Jane and Bingley, or Jane and Rochester, Sarah's meeting with Matthew, therefore, functions as the first spark of desire shadowed by the seeds of conflict.

However, while in those classics of the genre, this meeting scene occurs in domestic and more social contexts such as a ball, as is the case in *Pride and Prejudice*, or in moments where the heroine helps the hero, as is the case

with Jane and Rochester in *Jane Eyre*—a conventional configuration that foregrounds the heroine's patriarchal role as a potential caring housewife—O'Neill rather makes this scene occur in a more formal and professional context, a parent-teacher meeting where Matthew meets Sarah, his son Harry's teacher. This reconfiguration is important, as it enables O'Neill to reimagine the heroine as the modern "independent, career-minded" young woman of the twenty-first century (Ramsdell, 1999, p. 10). In her theory of how patriarchal ideologies are conveyed by genre fictions like romance, fairy tales, detective fiction, and science fiction, Anne Cranny-Francis claims that traditionally women's presence in literature is limited to being 'Woman,' "an idealist construct composed from the negatives of masculinity. As 'Woman', women are represented as basically good or bad (according to whether they help or hinder masculinist practices); female characters have no complexity, no subtlety, no 'real' presence" (Cranny-Francis, 1990, p. 23). The substitution of the ballroom in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* for a staff room operates as O'Neill's empowering reinvention of the meeting convention through which she reclaims the romance heroine. By relocating the meeting to Sarah's workplace, O'Neill gives Sarah "complexity" and "real presence." Unlike her literary predecessors in *Pride and Prejudice* or in *Jane Eyre*, Sarah is not introduced through her beauty at a dance, nor through her domestic capability or nurturing qualities, but rather through her role as an employed, educated woman, one in a position of relative autonomy that reflects the professionally active woman celebrated by feminism (de Beauvoir, 1956, p. 682; Friedan, 1997, p. 351).

The pursuit of romantic fulfilment, as suggested by Regis's structural theory of the romance novel is enhanced by the love or, as Regis calls it, "the attraction" between the hero and the heroine. The attraction is "a scene or series of scenes scattered throughout the novel that establishes for the reader the reason that this couple must marry" (Regis, 2003, p. 40). It is the love or any other motivation that "keeps the heroine and the hero involved long enough to surmount the barrier" (Regis, 2003, p. 40). In addition to the meeting convention, *Almost Love* reinvents this code. In *Pride and Prejudice*, as Regis has had the merit to point out, this convention is exemplified by Charlotte Lucas and Mr Collins, who, each, has golden reasons to couple with the other. Charlotte Lucas, for instance, is a woman of lower social status whose ambition is to marry for financial security, as she admits to her friend Elizabeth: "I'm not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home, and considering Mr Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast entering the marriage state" (Austen, 1994, p. 101). This materialistic vision of marriage of Charlotte's along with Mr Collins' burning desire to marry in fulfilment of his status as a clergyman establishes and cements the attraction between both lovers. If this conventional element of attraction is present in *Almost Love* between Sarah and Matthew, it exists only as a unilateral force, though.

Unlike the relationships between Charlotte and Mr Collins or Jane and Bingley, where partners are mutually attracted towards each other, in Matthew and Sarah's relationship, Sarah is the only partner who expresses the

desire of a genuine emotional involvement. After their initial encounter, which is charged with flattery, Sarah becomes emotionally dependent on Matthew, constructing her sense of worth around his attention. This is evident through her relentless attempts to keep contact with Matthew through invitations to weddings, events that she hopes could be an opportunity for her to exhibit Matthew as her boyfriend: "I had asked Matthew to come to Ciara and Eoin's wedding with me. I wanted him there, handsome and tall by my side" (O'Neill, 2018, p. 137). Sarah's relationship with Oisin, which we learn about through the "now" section of the novel, is also characterised by this unilateral love, as can be observed in the following scene:

> 'Where are you off to, then?' she asked. 'I have to go into town. I need to get a haircut before the wedding next weekend. Alannah has very specific ideas about how she wants the groomsmen to look.' 'Why do you have to go into town for that? What's wrong with the barber in Dun Laoghaire?' 'I have to go to someone who actually understands what to do with my hair, Sarah; you know that.' 'But it's Saturday,' she said, pouting. Saturday is supposed to be our day' (O'Neill, 2018, pp. 16–17).

As in her relationship with Matthew, Sarah, in her relationship with Oisin, remains the emotionally invested partner, seeking closeness and validation while her partner appears distant and indifferent. As can be observed in the above scene, while Sarah yearns for shared time and romantic rituals, Oisin is more concerned with grooming

obligations and social appearances. This dismissiveness evidenced in Oisin, which clearly echoes Matthew's emotional detachment, reinforces the recurring motif of one-sided pursuit of love in the novel. In contrast to the traditional romance narrative, where the hero's growing affection and pursuit of the heroine is a key structural and emotional component, O'Neill's novel deliberately suppresses the hero's attraction. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Bingley's open admiration of Jane Bennet, Mr Collins's awkward but earnest proposal to Charlotte, and Darcy's gradual attachment to Elizabeth Bennet, all serve to affirm the heroine's desirability and establish mutual romantic interest. In *Almost Love*, however, the heroine's desirability is never reciprocated. Neither Matthew nor Oisin is able to express sustained or passionate desire for Sarah, whose emotional hunger only magnifies in the face of their emotional indifference.

Through this impoverishment of the conventional element of mutual attraction, O'Neill offers a nuanced exploration of the complexity of romantic relationships. She innovatively moves beyond the stereotypical framework that assumes that men fall in love in predictable and uniform ways, exploring instead the varied emotional landscapes and psychological dynamics that shape human intimacy. This deconstructive dynamic is reinforced by O'Neill's subversive treatment of the conventional ending, which critics unanimously claim as the most important moment of the narrative, as it embodies the novel's underlying politics.

The Happy Ending and the Politics of Romance Reimagined

Perhaps, where *Almost Love* most strikingly departs from the romance genre is in its refusal to offer resolution, a healing, or redemptive love. According to Regis's structural theory of the romance novel, the attraction between the hero and the heroine is the driving force of the narrative's evolution to the union or the promise of union between both partners. It helps surmount the barrier and the point of ritual death—the moment in the narrative when "it seems that the barrier will remain, more substantial than ever", making the union appear impossible (Regis, 2003, p. 42). It propels the plot to the recognition—the instance where the discovery of a new piece of information makes the lovers overcome the barrier (Regis, 2003, p. 44). And ultimately, it leads to the declaration of love—the moment when "the hero asks the heroine to marry him and she accepts; or the heroine asks the hero, and he accepts" (Regis, 2003, p. 46).

In *Almost Love*, the unreciprocated attraction that characterises Sarah's relationship with Matthew and Oisin annihilates this conventional plotline, turning the narrative into an account of a heroine's descent into despair rather than the traditional rise to a happily ever after social status, as exemplified by the Bennet sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* or Jane in *Jane Eyre*, who ultimately moves from a poor, maltreated orphan to a financially independent woman who not only obtains a husband but also one who can boldly claim herself as being her "own mistress" (Brontë, 1897, pp. 731–732). Unlike these classical romance heroes, Sarah's

partners, especially Matthew abuses her obsessive love, turning her into a mere sex toy that he regularly uses to fulfil his occasional sexual needs. When Sarah finally confronts him, suggesting that they take their relationship from mere occasional meetings in a hotel to a serious dating, Matthew's reaction is rudely indifferent and dismissive: "'I thought things were going just fine,' … 'I think I'm a little old to be having the boyfriend and girlfriend talk, Sarah. … I don't have more time to give you, Sarah. Not with work and with Harry. I thought you understood that'"(O'Neill, 2018, p. 205). The romance hero, as Gill and Herdieckerhoff observe, is initially "mocking, cynical, contemptuous, hostile and even brutal, and the heroine is confused" (2006, p. 6). But at least "by the end he reveals his love for her and misunderstandings are cleared away" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006, p. 6). As can be observed through the passage above, this principle of behavioural transformation does not apply to Matthew, who remains condescending, emotionally distant, and devoid of remorse and growth. Unlike Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* who gradually outgrows his pride and declares his love to Elizabeth Bennet, Matthew maintains his cold detachment, treating Sarah as a disposable object of convenience rather than a partner.

This creative deviation from the conventional happy ending of the romance novel is a significant narrative twist that enables O'Neill to engage critically with the received ideas underpinning the romance genre's structure. According to critics like Jan Cohn, Kay Mussell, and Germaine Greer, the romance novel enslaves women to the patriarchal system, as it teaches those women that their life goal is

confined to getting married and living happily ever after (Cohn, 1988, p. 176; Greer, 1970, p. 176; Mussell, 1984, p. 189). In refutation of this feminist condemnatory argument, Regis and Radway argue that the romance novel empowers women, and this empowerment resides in the happy ending. For Regis, far from being enslaved, the heroine's movement in the romance novel is "from a state of unfreedom to one of freedom"(Regis, 2003, p. 35). As a woman who was initially in love with her partner yet prevented by internal or external barriers to fulfil this quest, when the barriers are ultimately removed and she fulfils her dream of finding true love, she achieves freedom, the freedom to love. As she notes,

> the removal of the barrier usually involves the heroine's freedom from societal, civic, or even religious strictures that prevented the union between her and the hero. This release is an important source of the happiness in the romance novel's happy ending. The barrier's fall is a liberation for the heroine. It is a moment of rejoicing for the reader, whose response to the heroine's freedom is joy (Regis, 2003, pp. 39-40).

Similarly, through her analysis of readers' experiences of romance reading, Radway theorises the romance novel as a source of emotional compensation, as it assures female readers that they are valued, understood, and ultimately secure:

> Romance reading compensates women in two distinct ways. Most important, it provides vicarious emotional

> nurturance by prompting identification between the reader and a fictional heroine whose identity as a woman is always confirmed by the romantic and sexual attentions of an ideal male. … This attention … reinforces her sense of self because … the hero implicitly regards that woman and, by implication, the reader, as worthy of his concern. This fictional character thus teaches both his narrative counterpart and the reader to recognize the value they doubted they possessed (Radway, 1984, p. 113)

Through Sarah's experience, O'Neill not only challenges these assumptions about the romance novel but also revitalises the debate over whether the genre truly empowers women or whether its politics merely reinforce patriarchal ideals. Unlike the classics of the genre, *Almost Love* ends with Sarah's return to her father's home—the place where she was born and raised. This physical homecoming is indeed a move from "a state of unfreedom to one of freedom," but not in the sense of being released from the barrier to freely enter coupledom and live happily ever after, as Regis sees it. Sarah's freedom is one from the emotional subjugation, manipulation, sexual exploitation, and self-erasure that Matthew inflicts on her to the quest for emotional stability marked by the self-acceptance that postfeminist critics suggest through their theories of how popular culture enjoins women to enter domesticity in the disguise of choice and empowerment (Genz, 2010, p. 101; McRobbie, 2009, p. 49; Negra, 2009, p. 25; Taylor, 2012, p. 6). Sarah's feeling "exhausted" and "wanting nothing more than crawl into bed, pull the duvet over her head and fall

asleep for hundred years" (O'Neill, 2018, p.303) is a powerful imagery that symbolises not merely defeat but a necessary withdrawal—a pause for healing and reclamation of self after the psychological devastation caused by her romantic entanglements. Unlike the euphoric closure that characterises the romance novel's happy ending, this quiet and solitary moment marks an alternative kind of liberation, one that is achieved through the rejection of toxic love and the beginning of a journey towards introspection and self-understanding rather than through the union with a romantic partner.

Sarah's romantic experience also redefines the romance novel's role as a source of emotional compensation, as theorised by Radway. Sarah's journey teaches readers "to recognize the value they doubted they possessed" (Radway, 1984, p. 113), but this didacticism is not achieved through readers' admiration of a hero's validation of a heroine as "worthy of his concern" (Radway, 1984, p. 113). It is rather achieved by the heroine's ideological repositioning expressed in the form of regret and confession, as captured in the following dialogue with her father:

> 'Have you texted Aisling at all? Does she know you're home?' 'Not yet.' 'She's off to Brisbane in a couple of weeks, Sarah; don't be hanging around, now.' 'I don't know if she wants to hear from me,' Sarah said. 'I haven't spoken to her since Christmas.' 'Of course she wants to hear from you.' 'I don't think I've been a very good friend to her, this last year.' 'I just wish . . .' She swallowed hard. 'I wish I had done things differently'(O'Neill, 2018, p. 270).

This scene of confession and regret demonstrates how *Almost Love* interrogates the notion of "happily ever after" associated with romance fiction, exploring new possibilities of empowering the heroine and entertaining the reader. After following Sarah through her passive experience of Matthew's inhuman treatment, the reading of this scene of confession and regret will likely establish a sense of satisfaction comparable to the emotional compensation that Radway talks about and the liberation that Regis sees in the conventional romantic union scene. In O'Neill's conception, the happiness that the romance novel provides to readers resides in the observation of a tormented heroine finally awakening from her innocence. The vision of romance as a source of women's empowerment is given a new aesthetic life, as it shifts from merely offering emotional compensation to emphasising feminist notions of choice, autonomy and self-worth. In the context of the twenty-first century, where first and second wave feminist movements have urged women to embrace independence and self-determination, readers derive pleasure not merely from seeing a heroine win a hero but also from witnessing her recognise and valuing her worth.

Conclusion

Almost Love is therefore a feminist reimagining of traditional romance. While it retains key elements of the genre such as the initial meeting between hero and heroine, the quest for romantic fulfilment, and the presence of emotional barriers, it simultaneously distorts these

features and dismantles the ideological scaffolding upon which conventional romance fiction is built. Unlike the traditional romance novel, which usually ends with a triumphant union or idealised resolution of the conflicts opposing the lovers, *Almost Love* offers a bleak but honest alternative where the narrative ends with the heroine's emotional awakening through suffering. By denying the reader the satisfaction of a happy ending and instead featuring a heroine who must reconstitute herself in solitude, O'Neill questions the ideological underpinnings of the romance novel that equates a woman's worth with romantic success. Besides, by relocating the traditional plot functions like balls into professional and contemporary settings like schools and teacher-parent meetings, O'Neill reclaims the figure of the romance heroine from the patriarchal fantasy and redefines her in her own contemporary and feminist terms that foreground autonomy and self-worth. *Almost Love*, thus, functions as a feminist reimagining of the romance genre, one that deconstructs the fantasy of redemptive love and instead offers a narrative grounded on emotional realism, feminist consciousness, and psychological introspection. O'Neill's novel does not reject the traditional romance outright but reimagines its potential. By highlighting the often-ignored aspects of love such as obsession, emotional dependence, and power imbalance, *Almost Love* innovatively expands the boundaries of the genre, extending its capacity for social critique and offering readers a different form of narrative pleasure, a narrative pleasure not as the comfort of seeing the heroine win the hero but the satisfaction of seeing her finally

recognise her worth and free herself from a dysfunctional relationship.

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