

The Use of Free Indirect Discourse in J. R. Ward's Black Dagger Brotherhood series

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ABSTRACT: Although the romance genre has received a lot of attention in feminist and gender studies, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, it is still largely ignored by narratologists and other literary theorists. When romance is subjected to any scholarly treatment it tends to be as a cultural phenomenon, and *in bulk*, rather than as individual texts. The purpose of this article is to examine J. R. Ward's Black Dagger Brotherhood paranormal romance series purely from a narratological perspective, exploring how Ward's narrative technique serves to satisfy the conventions of the romance formula while also yielding an original and engaging story. The primary area of interest in this article is Ward's use of narrative voice, particularly her extensive use of free indirect discourse, and the impact this has on the formula romance plot.

KEYWORDS: popular romance; J.R. Ward; Black Dagger Brotherhood; narratology; free indirect discourse



While pioneering romance critics Janice Radway and Ann Barr Snitow demonstrated the need to explore the socio-cultural reasons behind the mass appeal of popular romance, particularly for female readers, there is a definite gap in the scholarship concerning the precise nature of romance novels as *text*. Radway herself accounts for this gap by claiming there is a “common assumption that because romances are formulaic and therefore essentially identical, analysis of a randomly chosen sample will reveal the meaning unfailingly communicated by every example of the genre.”¹ However, what this article will demonstrate is that formulaic literature can generate narrative complexity, and that romance novels do warrant literary analysis as individual texts. It is for this reason that a narratological methodology has been adopted for exploring J. R. Ward’s *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series, in preference to the more traditional areas of romance criticism, including feminist, cultural, genre, and reception studies. Like these dominant methods, narratological analysis still allows for broad structural claims about the genre, while also promoting close textual reading of individual instances within the genre. As Susana Onega and José Ángel García Landa note in the introduction to their collection, *Narratology*, “each medium and each genre allows for a specific presentation of the fabula, different point-of-view strategies [and] various degrees of narratorial intrusiveness and different handlings of time.”² This article will focus particularly on Ward’s use of point-of-view strategies in this series, as an especially effective and densely layered example of the narrative technique of free indirect discourse (FID). I will argue that adhering to the formulaic conventions of the romance genre does not diminish the capacity of romance texts to achieve narrative complexity, and that it is worthwhile approaching the romance novel as literary text, rather than merely considering it as an interchangeable example of a mass cultural phenomenon.

ROMANCE AND LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP

In her article, “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different,” Snitow claims that it is “at best grossly incurious, and at worst sadly limited, for literary critics to ignore a genre which millions and millions of women read voraciously.”³ However, one issue facing such critics is how to approach popular romance in a manner that

moves past merely denigrating it as “pulp” or “trash” fiction. This is particularly important when considering the unique socio-political position of romance, often touted as a genre written about women, by women and for women. In *Loving with a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski notes that romance criticism has generally adopted one of three attitudes toward such examples of woman-centred writing: “dismissiveness; hostility—tending unfortunately to be aimed at the consumers of the narratives; or, most frequently, a flippant kind of mockery.”⁴ Mary Bly refers to the current state of romance scholarship as being “in its infancy” and “theoretically naïve, depending on essentialized versions of both gender and genre.”⁵ More than anything this demonstrates the need for alternative methods of analysis for formula romance texts, especially when considering the sheer size and impact of the romance fiction industry.

When it comes to literary analysis of formula romance texts, little attention has been paid to structural conventions, such as the formula itself, or the use of different narrative voice techniques among romance authors. However, as this article hopes to demonstrate, the use of narrative voice techniques is one element in which Ward’s *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series excels, particularly through extensive engagement with FID. According to narratologist Michael Toolan, FID (also known as narrated monologue) denotes the point where “the narration is no longer detached and external: it adopts the character’s viewpoint.”⁶ There is some disagreement among theorists regarding the fundamental criteria of FID, though, with Toolan’s definition varying somewhat from that provided by narratologists Stefan Oltean, Gertrude Schuelke or Dorrit Cohn. Nevertheless, according to various common criteria much of Ward’s narrative in the *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series would best fall within this category. Through the use of this technique, Ward allows the reader to experience the story from the perspective of multiple characters. This has wide ranging implications for authors and readers working within a formulaic tradition, such as popular romance, as will now be considered.

THE “FORMULA”

While each publishing house has its own romance formula guidelines, there is a basic pattern that is typically employed across the genre. The classification of four distinct stages in the formula romance plot has been supported by such critics as Snitow,

Radway, John Cawelti, and Catherine Belsey. Belsey claims that despite individual variances and deviations across sub-genres, *all* romances “generally centre on a reassuring tale of obstacles overcome and love finally and eternally required.”⁷ To situate Ward’s writing within this tradition, it is also necessary to consider the specific elements of the romance formula common to the paranormal context, as demonstrated below:

STAGE ONE: LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

While this stage seems the most obvious, the “love at first sight” experienced in many romance novels is actually described as an instant antagonism between the primary characters. That the reader interprets these encounters as signs of an impending romance is owed to the familiarity the romance reader has with the conventions of the romance formula. The purpose of the “love at first sight” stage is to clearly identify the principal characters of the romantic story and begin to establish their compatibility. This can be achieved either by having the characters describe feeling naturally drawn to one another, or by having the characters demonstrate a passionate dislike of one another, in both cases due to certain similarities in their personalities. Even in tales involving love triangles, there is rarely any ambiguity regarding which characters will end up together in the end. In paranormal romances, this stage may be expressed as love at first sight, sound, smell, or taste, and may also involve more tangible manifestations of instant attraction, in the form of animal-like bonding behaviours; telepathic connections, or sometimes the lack thereof; intense hunger; or even outbursts of violence, particularly of a territorial nature.

STAGE TWO: OBSTACLES AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

This stage is generally responsible for providing the bulk of a romance plot, as the two principals must fight to overcome whatever obstacles stand in the way of their developing relationship. Such obstacles can range from simple misunderstandings, to physical separation, familial interference, or previous relationship histories, all of which serve to provide a degree of tension and suspense for the reader. As the primary purpose of a romance is to explore the development of a romantic relationship, this stage is vitally important for ensuring the narrative is not resolved too quickly as this would decrease reader satisfaction. In a paranormal context, obstacles and

misunderstandings can also arise from the couple belonging to two different species—such as human and vampire—often involving very different mating rituals, and can be compounded by pre-existing conflicts between rival factions.

STAGE THREE: TRANSFORMATION

According to Belsey, this stage determines for the reader whether “the protagonists are really in love or simply subject to overwhelming desire.”⁸ The romance author must be able to provide evidence that the couple has progressed from either their initial dislike or of purely animal attraction to one another, to the development of a firm foundation for a long-term relationship. This often involves a significant emotional transformation, particularly for the hero, which will later lead to a declaration of true love. In paranormal romances this stage may also involve a literal transformation of either one or both of the main characters into a vampire, werewolf, or other supernatural being.

STAGE FOUR: THE HAPPILY-EVER-AFTER RESOLUTION

According to Fredric Jameson, “genres are essentially contracts between a writer and [their] readers,” and there is no genre in which this contract is more strictly enforced than the romance genre wherein exists the demand for an uplifting ending to a romance novel.⁹ The resolution of most romance novels involves the hero and heroine declaring their love for one another and making plans for the future. In very rare cases one of the love interests may die, however, this is only permitted if the overall message is that true love has the power to transcend even death. This latter element plays a large role in some paranormal romances, particularly those involving the undead, ghosts and the spirit realm.

THE BLACKDAGGER BROTHERHOOD SERIES AS FORMULA ROMANCE

Ward, a pseudonym for author Jessica Bird, describes the Black Dagger Brotherhood series as an “urban paranormal romance,” distinct from her other works of fiction which include various contemporary romances.¹⁰ The series follows the lives of a band of vampire warriors, the Brothers, as they fight to protect their species from the soulless, vampire-slaying *lessers*, former humans who have sold their souls to the malevolent Omega. The series currently comprises seventeen novels (with two more already in production), a short story, and a novella. In addition, there is a spin-off

series, *The Black Dagger Legacy*, consisting of three novels, with a fourth due for release late 2019.

Although thoroughly hybridised with the fantasy genre, every novel clearly progresses through the four stages of the romance formula identified above. Each relationship begins with an initial meeting between the two love interests, with responses varying from instant attraction to instant loathing, and each novel continues then to present a series of obstacles and misunderstandings that must be overcome. Finally, as Sarah Frantz notes, each “hypermasculine” hero undergoes some form of emotional transformation, and “demonstrates through his tears his acceptance of the necessity of unconditional love to complete him.”¹¹ This inevitably leads to a declaration of love and the subsequent happily-ever-after resolution. As such, this series proves itself to be an ideal choice to study in terms of the narrative techniques involved in writing a formula romance, while also allowing for some discussion of the relationship between the romance and fantasy genres that is exposed in the increasingly popular paranormal romance sub-genre. By using a narratological methodology, it is also possible to demonstrate the value of analysing *specific* romance texts in the light of their formulaic nature, rather than treating the genre as a whole. This is due to narratology’s privileging of conventions, form and structure, over other areas of interpretation. The following section will explore how these characteristics of FID, in terms of tense, person, perspective and language can enhance the romance formula using the *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series as a case study for analysis.

NARRATIVE VOICE: FREE INDIRECT DISCOURSE

In her article on narrative voice, Julie Choi describes FID as “the effect created by the translation of what ‘sounds’ like first-person or direct discourse, in the present of ‘speech’ or ‘thought’, into the third-person past of the narrative.”¹² Unlike external narration, such as “The man waited at the bus stop,” in which the perspective provided comes from outside, FID is described by Schuelke as a “slipping” into the character’s own words, for the purpose of providing an insight into that character’s personal perspective or consciousness.¹³ However, while FID may present the illusion of direct communication between the character and the reader, the narrator is still mediating the exchange. For romance, this illusion fosters a more intimate connection

with the character, providing a basis for the reader's interest in the developing romance plot.

As mentioned above, there are differing views about what constitutes FID, however, there is still a general consensus that there must be a smooth transition between the external third-person (heterodiegetic) narrator and the assumed voice of the character, as demonstrated by the continued use of past tense and third person pronouns. An example of Ward's use of this narrative technique can be seen in the following extract from *Lover Enshrined*:

Time dragged and Butch prowled around the Pit while waiting for V to get back. Finally, unable to shake the Scotch haze and still dizzy as shit, he went in and lay down on his bed. As he closed his eyes, it was more to dim the light than with any hope of sleep.

Surrounded by a dense quiet, he thought about his sister Joyce and that new baby of hers. He knew where the baptism had been held today: Same place he'd been dipped. Same place all the O'Neals had been dipped.

Original sin washed away.¹⁴

Here it is difficult to separate the voice of the narrator from that of the character, Butch, whose irreverence for religious ceremony taints the description of his nephew's baptism. Although Butch is still referred to here in the third person, his attitudes and characteristic swearing are presented as if he is narrating himself in the first person. Also, while the narration is in the past tense, it refers to Butch's present. According to Yael Sharvit, the use of the "temporal perspective" of the character is a necessary requirement for FID, always referring to the character's "now."¹⁵ In this scene, time is not objectively dragging, merely perceived by the character as such; likewise, *today* is defined according to Butch's perspective and not any external chronology.

In the above example, FID occurs when the reader can sense the impartiality of the external narrator being dissolved and replaced with Butch's own cynical attitude toward the Catholic tradition. Cohn refers to such a technique as a "superimposing" of the character's voice onto the narrator's, allowing the narrator to articulate feelings and attitudes of the character not otherwise manifest in their behaviour or quoted speech.¹⁶ Thus, FID can be said to expose the narrator's

appropriation of the character's voice, while attempting to explore what is going on in that character's mind. As romance narratives are primarily focused on the exploration of thoughts and feelings, and in particular the resolution of a romantic storyline,¹⁷ this element of FID is especially valuable, and is heavily represented in Ward's own use of the technique. However, effective use of this style requires a dedication to remaining within the confines of each individual character's knowledge and experience, as demonstrated in the following quote from *Lover Unbound*:

There was a moment of silence; then Red Sox looked back and forth between Jane and the patient like he was recalibrating a law of physics—and having difficulty with the math.¹⁸

Despite the fact that both the reader and the narrator know “the patient” is Vishous and “Red Sox” is Butch, they are not named here as the episode is narrated from Jane's perspective. As she will not learn the other characters' names until later in the text, she nicknames them according to whatever distinguishing features she is privy to, like Butch's Red Sox cap. Jane herself is still referred to in the third person, but it is her current knowledge that determines the information available to the reader. The obvious “risk” exposed here is that the extensive use of FID in Ward's writing will yield an unreliable narration, as each character has a different perception of narrated events that could lead to a degree of misrepresentation. However, it is this very element that allows Ward to explore interesting comparisons between characters, with each character presenting their own perceived version of events and substantiating it through the borrowed authority of the third person narration.

Another common feature of FID used by Ward is the lack of qualifiers such as “he said” or “she thought” in the narrative. In his article, “Dual Perspective,” Paul Hernadi refers to this as a “lack of *verbum dicendi*” leading to FID assuming the “grammatical disguise of narrated fact.”¹⁹ One example in Ward's novel is the first encounter between Vishous and Cormia, both victims of an arranged marriage (or “mating” as it is referred to in the text). While the reader has already experienced Cormia's horror at her predicament in preceding chapters, the following describes the perspective of Vishous, a.k.a. “V”:

As she was rolled forward, it became clear that she was in fact fixed on something. There were bands around her upper arms, ones that were camouflaged with jewels to match her robes, ones that appeared to be holding her up.

Must be part of the ceremony. Because what was under that robe was not only prepared for this presentation and the mating ritual that would follow, but was no doubt psyched as hell to be the number one female: The Primale's first Chosen had special rights, and he could only imagine what a rocking good time that would be for her.

Even though it might not be fair, he resented the hell out of what was under that splendor.²⁰

The reader already knows Cormia is not even remotely "prepared" for this ritual, and later it will be revealed she is actually tied down against her will in a manner not at all "part of the ceremony." However, since the narrative voice is adopting V's perspective, his judgments and opinions are related as fact, regardless of how flawed they may be. This element of FID provides the basis for a lot of the narrative tension arising in Ward's series, relying on the different perspectives of the characters to produce a story teeming with dramatic irony. In the above example, the use of FID is certainly yielding an unreliable narration, in which the reader is presented a version of events that might not be accurate according to the "norms of the work," (as Bruno Zerweck would have it).²¹ However, far from hampering the reader's comprehension, this serves to increase their knowledge of V's character and attitudes.

Another element of FID exposed in the above passage is the exploitation of the "stylistic peculiarities" of the character's speech.²² Oltean notes that the language of FID commonly employs the "idiosyncratic lexical elements" of the assumed character's speech, including the use of slang and colloquialisms as used by the character in direct dialogue or internal monologue.²³ This can be seen above in V's description of Cormia being "psyched as hell," and anticipating her "rocking good time." These phrases are recognisably in V's own "voice" and carry specific meaning for him as a character. The use of such distinctive speech patterns in FID allows the reader to interpret the narrative in light of their knowledge of the character involved,

and determine whether the narration is reliable. This is of particular interest when deciding whether a specific description is intended literally or metaphorically, and whether it is likely to be realistic or exaggerated.

In terms of language, each character in the series, no matter how minor, has a unique way of speaking which is adopted by the narrator whenever narrating from their perspective. For example, as a deeply religious “Chosen” who has never lived in the human realm before, Cormia has a “voice” and vocabulary that can be easily distinguished from that of other characters. Narration from her perspective is very eloquent, almost lyrical, containing grandiose descriptions of everyday household items with which she is unfamiliar. Only the prim and proper Cormia would refer to a sleeping man as being “in repose,” or through inexperience call a shower “the falling bath.”²⁴ By contrast, each of the Brothers and *lessers* have their own choice curses to employ when the occasion calls for it, as well as an array of other stylistic characteristics, as demonstrated in the following extract from *Lover Unbound*:

Breaking into things was one of V’s specialties. He was tight with safes, cars, locks, houses ... offices. Equally facile with the residential and commercial shit. S’all good.

So, cracking wide the door to the St. Francis Medical Center Department of Surgery’s palatial suite of offices was no BFD.²⁵

Not only does the narration successfully impersonate V’s general speech here, it also includes the coarse language, colloquialisms and acronyms the character uses in dialogue. There is no explanation provided in the text for what “BFD” stands for, although readers can look up the definition in Ward’s glossary of terms. Presumably, since V would not have to explain the acronym to himself, the narrator, whilst appropriating the perspective of V, does not explain it to the reader.

Another good example can be seen in *Lover Enshrined*, from the perspective of the Texan cowboy *lesser*, Mr D:

Dang it, under that there Mr R. as *Fore-lesser*? Back in the eighties? The company ran good-like.

Not so much anymore. And that was his problem. He should probably find out where all the accounts were, but he didn’t have no idea where to start. ...

Maybe when he got there he'd luck out and find that the piggy bank was full up, just lost in the shuffle. But he had a feeling that weren't going to be the case.²⁶

These two examples demonstrate a different level of narrative layering, although both are examples of FID. In the first instance, the narration is identifiably “double-voiced,” with the narrator and V both contributing to the account, whereas in the second, the narrative more closely resembles a stream of consciousness, with the narrator’s voice almost completely absent. However, while the second passage may present the illusion of being Mr D’s own thoughts and consciousness, the use of third person pronouns reminds the reader that this is still FID, and therefore the narrator’s influence is still detectable. The narrator has not given either character free rein, falling short of what Oltean refers to as the full “yielding” to the character than occurs in internal monologue.²⁷ A contrast to this can be seen in the following extract from *Dark Lover*, from Wrath’s perspective:

Welcome to the wonderful world of jealousy, he thought. For the price of admission you get a splitting headache, a nearly irresistible urge to commit murder, and an inferiority complex.

*Yippee.*²⁸

Such instances of internal monologue are rare in Ward, and are generally distinguished by the typography used, such as the italics above. As opposed to appropriating Wrath’s voice, this excerpt merely transcribes his thoughts and thus is distinct from the FID used in the earlier examples involving V and Mr D.

When considering the Black Dagger Brotherhood series as an urban fantasy/formula romance hybrid, another important element to consider is how the distinct linguistic style and vocabulary of the characters is facilitated by the fictional world created for the series. For example, Cormia’s unique tone and language is made possible only because Ward’s fictional world-building incorporates a rich social and religious heritage for her paranormal community. While Cawelti claims all romance narratives necessitate the creation of a fantastic world in which the myth of the “all-sufficiency of love” can be sustained, the super-imposition of an urban fantasy narrative onto the traditional romance plot demands the creation of a more in-depth

alternative reality for paranormal romances, akin to the world-building seen in epic fantasy and science fiction.²⁹ For a sub-genre whose tales are necessarily similar at the core, fictional world-building can thus provide an avenue for narrative distinctiveness, one that Ward successfully pursues through the Black Dagger Brotherhood series.

FUNCTIONS OF FREE INDIRECT DISCOURSE IN ROMANCE

Having identified some of the characteristics of FID, and demonstrated their use in Ward's series, the next step is to examine what this narrative style achieves for the romance genre. The first element to address is characterisation, with FID proving a valuable tool for exploring each character's mind and establishing their personality. Jakob Lothe suggests that FID often has a "characterizing function," which is "particularly clear when the character's speech is individualized and distinguished."³⁰ As demonstrated in the previous section, Ward's use of FID capitalises on this opportunity to explore a character's innermost thoughts and feelings, in a voice that is recognisably their own. The use of FID also enhances all four of the central elements of the romance formula, being particularly effective for the misunderstandings and transformations often depicted in the narrative.

CHARACTERISATION

While acknowledging that it is important for any fiction to provide characters that the reader can readily identify with, this is especially important in romance, as the success of the story hinges on the author's ability to elicit empathy for the characters. For a romance novel to entice, the reader must be made to care about the plight of the lovers, and this emotional connection must be secured from early in the story. This is mostly because the plot of a romance novel depends not on external action, but on the internal drama for the major characters.³¹ Ward ensures the reader feels this drama by using FID to explore the hidden depths of her characters' minds, often perpetuating misinformation according to their own mistaken beliefs throughout the narrative. The characterising effect of FID also allows Ward to sustain an unusually high number of supporting characters in her romances, characters that would typically only exist as two-dimensional constructs serving to advance a particular plot element.

It is not just the inner voice of the hero and heroine that the reader gets to experience in this series, but also that of their friends and even their enemies.

That Ward succeeds in creating memorable characters is evidenced not only by the popularity of the series itself, but also by the intense fan devotion the Brothers themselves enjoy. According to Robert Miles, characters “constructed” through FID possess the illusion of being independent agents—an illusion Ward actively promotes for the Brothers through her website and online message-boards.³² On these sites, Ward supplies “updates” and interviews with the characters, claiming she was merely “picked” by the Brothers to document their lives and has “no control over them.”³³ For this reason, the more enthusiastic fans of the series have dubbed Ward the Brothers’ “WARDen,” rather than author, referring to themselves as the “Cellies.” Through these sites the characters “interact” with the reader, demonstrating a three-dimensional characterisation that can transcend the original narrative. This supports the “illusion” Miles claims can be created through characterisation using FID.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND THE USE OF FREE INDIRECT DISCOURSE

As demonstrated above, FID can sustain the reader’s fantasy that the character is directly communicating with them in a more personal way. However, it also has the additional benefit in romance literature of allowing the reader to experience the misunderstandings between the love interests *as they occur*. FID allows the reader to occupy a privileged space in which they know more than the characters, especially when the characters’ misapprehensions colour their perception of narrated events. According to Choi, FID therefore exists “between the two poles of ironic distance and absolute empathy.”³⁴ One of the best examples of this in Ward’s series can be found in the following scene in *Dark Lover*, between the human police officer, Butch, and the virgin vampire, Marissa:

He stuck his hand out. Then retracted it, rubbed it vigorously on his pant leg, and offered it again.

She lost her nerve. Touching him was too much, and she took a step back.

He dropped his hand slowly, not looking at all surprised that she’d rejected him.³⁵

This short encounter depicts the first of many misunderstandings that will occur between these two characters, unfolding in real time as the narrative perspective shifts mid-way to accommodate both characters' points of view. It is only Marissa who believes that shaking Butch's hand would be "too much" for her nervousness to handle; likewise, it is Butch, and not the narrator, who mistakenly interprets her timidity as rejection.

According to the romance formula, the climax of a romance narrative can only be reached once all obstacles and misunderstandings are overcome, which for Butch and Marissa will take another three novels and over 1400 pages of text. Butch and Marissa's relationship is fraught with misunderstandings, ranging from Butch's initial assumption that Marissa is a sex worker, to her mistaking him for a vampire and exposing the species' secret by dematerialising in front of him. Butch also spends the entire second novel believing Marissa refused to see him after he first kissed her in *Dark Lover*, a misconception the reader originally shares, since only Butch's perspective of this event is provided in the intervening text. It is later revealed in Butch and Marissa's own story, *Lover Revealed*, that it was Marissa's brother who was conspiring to keep them apart and had Butch dismissed from their family home. Further conflict arises from this misunderstanding when Butch, believing he has been rejected, seeks cold comfort from another female vampire. This incident provides a good example of how FID can shift between providing dramatic irony in a romance, and actually involving the reader in the misunderstandings of the plot through unreliable narration. When Butch is hospitalised in *Lover Revealed*, Marissa mistakes the woman he cries out for in his delirium for one of his nurses and reads Butch's attempt to protect her from his "contagion" as a rejection of her company. Butch later misconstrues Marissa's meetings with the character Rehvenge, leading to a violent outburst against the male in his club. In each of these instances FID plays a vital role in exposing the inherent misunderstandings of the romance plot, by exploring the different perspectives of the characters involved.

While misunderstandings may provide the bulk of the tension in a romance plot, their success depends on the reader finding them authentic, something that can be promoted through the use of FID. Evidence of this can be seen in the textual example provided at the beginning of this section. Given Marissa's behaviour, it is

reasonable for Butch to assume that by not shaking his hand she is rejecting his offer of friendship, even when the reader observing the exchange knows better. The use of FID here not only lends credence to the legitimacy of the misunderstanding, but also adds another layer of dramatic irony, one not dependent on later explanation from the other character's perspective. However, while this example presents both Butch and Marissa's voices in the one paragraph, in most other cases one character's interpretation of an event will be immediately followed by the other's, yielding an interesting comparison. For Butch and Marissa, one such example occurs toward the end of *Lover Revealed*, just after they have had sex in V's car following Butch seeing Marissa with Rehvenge. The two describe the motivation behind the sex as follows:

Marissa closed her eyes, her chest hurt so badly she had trouble breathing.

...

Oh ... so this was about an act of aggression directed toward Rehvenge, and not about feeding her. She should have known. ...

But there was not one hint of the bonding scent. Not one hint. She couldn't bear to glance at him as she walked away.³⁶

This is immediately followed by Butch's perspective:

As his eyes started to burn, he thought about Marissa and remembered every single thing about her, from the shape of her face to the fall of her hair to the sound of her voice and the scent of her skin. Here in privacy, he let his feelings out, giving in to the aching love and the hateful yearning that refused to let him be.

And what do you know, the bonding scent made an appearance once again. He'd somehow managed to withhold it when he'd been around her, feeling as though marking her wasn't fair. But here? Alone? No reason to hide.³⁷

It is clear from this passage that Marissa's assumption is incorrect regarding Butch's lack of "bonding scent" being evidence of a lack of affection for her. However, what is perhaps most interesting about Marissa's narrative is the subtle flashback it provides to her previous opinion of herself. Throughout the earlier novels, Marissa exhibited a self-image plagued by low self-esteem, which was grounded in a belief that no man

would ever find her attractive or want to bond with her. By stating here that she “should have known better,” the narrator is appropriating Marissa’s own feelings of inadequacy, highlighting the detrimental effect this has on her interpretation of Butch’s behaviour toward her. The reader can observe the same pattern of self-loathing in Butch, as he feels he is unworthy to leave his “mark” on Marissa, despite the fact that this is actually what she wants. Although this misunderstanding is keeping the couple apart, the similarity it exposes between the two lovers’ opinions of themselves demonstrates that at their core they have a lot in common. Thus, the reader can watch the drama unfold between the two characters, while also becoming confident that their eventual “happily-ever-after” will be founded on mutual compatibility. Thus, Ward’s use of FID not only allows the creation of memorable, relatable characters, but also offers a degree of plausibility for the misunderstandings that are rife in the *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series.

TRANSFORMATIONS AND THE USE OF FID

One of the major criticisms of the romance genre is that the character developments that occur in the narrative are, at best, overly simplistic and, at worst, utterly unbelievable. This is particularly problematic when considering the number of male characters who must transform from cold, distant, or sometimes even cruel antagonists, into tender, loving romance heroes. For Rita Hubbard, such radical transformations, instead of developing over time through hard work and good communication, are often brought about merely through the “magic” of love.³⁸ Nevertheless, for a genre whose success is often judged by the credibility of the emotional transformations it explores, this element of the formula is supremely important in reassuring the reader that what the couple feel for each other at the end is really “true” love.

In her book, *Compelling Engagements: Feminism, Rape Law and Romance Fiction*, Wendy Larcombe claims that love can be seen as a “transformative fiction” in popular romances, “operating to tame the ultra-masculine, autonomous individual ... the reformation of masculine desires.”³⁹ However, as noted above, critics of formula romance often protest that there is insufficient evidence of the male’s transformation provided in the text, calling into question the authenticity of his redemptive narrative.⁴⁰ Feminist concerns about the genre often focus on the dangers of

attempting to reform the “cruel-but-tender” hero, claiming it romanticises dysfunctional relationships in the real world by teaching women that badly behaved men are merely misunderstood.⁴¹ What is missing from such analyses, however, is a study of how romance readers actually interact with the formula itself to “fill in” the gaps left in the narrative. While adopting the same suspension of belief required of all fiction readers, the romance reader can accept the plausibility of a character’s transformation, even in cases where textual evidence is lacking, because the romance formula itself has primed them to make such inferences as are required to do so. This does not signify transference of the logic of the romance world into the real world, but rather an acceptance of the interpretative effort required to read beyond what is explicitly mentioned in the text. For Ward’s series, however, the level of characterisation achieved through the use of FID removes any potential ambiguity, lending authority to the genuineness of the transformations of her major love interests. The reader can therefore successfully interpret the signs of change in each character, based on a thorough knowledge of that character’s inner thoughts and feelings, in addition to making intuitive leaps based on accumulated knowledge of the romance form and the rules that govern the fictional world in which it is created. Note, this does not mean every reader *will* accept the invitation to respond to the text in this way, but for those who engage extensively with the genre there is likely a high motivation to do so, and for *Black Dagger Brotherhood* readers in particular, Ward’s use of FID within the conventions of the romance formula works to facilitate this process.

According to Catherine Emmott, a successful mental character representation must allow for the reader to change their opinions of the character and reinterpret previous narratives “in the light of a new belief frame.”⁴² This requires the creation of a fluid conception of the character that can be constantly reviewed and updated, without the need for retroactive narrative reading repair. This is certainly necessary for readers of *Lover Avenged*, which details the romance between the characters Rehvenge and Ehlena. From the beginning of the novel, most readers are already familiar with Rehy, presumably having read the preceding volumes in which he is described as a drug-addicted, drug dealing, *symphath* “half-breed” pimp. Furthermore, he has been both directly and indirectly responsible for hindering the

developing relationships between earlier couples in the series. Not only does he try to prevent Bella from seeing Zsadist in *Lover Awakened*, he also forms part of the love triangle complicating Butch and Marissa's relationship in *Lover Revealed*. In addition, he encourages Butch to sleep with Xhex when he believes Marissa has rejected him, and provides access to both the drugs and paid sex that seek to ruin Phury's relationship with Cormia in *Lover Enshrined*, and Rhage's relationship with Mary in *Lover Eternal*. With such a track record it would be reasonable to assume Rehv is a completely irredeemable character. However, this is exactly where the romance formula provides the reader an opportunity to re-evaluate their previous judgments. When Rehv is granted his own story, the romance reader is already primed to forgive him his transgressions and reinterpret his previous actions in the light of a "new belief"—in short, to believe him misunderstood.⁴³ The very success of the romance narrative is dependent on the reader's ability to adjust their previous conceptions of a character to facilitate this reading. Rehv has been assigned the role of romance hero in this novel, a role he simply cannot fulfil unless the reader is willing to suspend their disbelief and approach his character as one capable of change. Thus, it is not only the character than must undergo a transformation in the story, but also the reader's opinion of him.

While it is unlikely, given his past behaviour, that the reader is enamoured of Rehv at the outset of his story, the reader's knowledge of the romance formula provides a reassurance that somehow, even here, the transformative power of love will prevail. Many of the developments in Rehv's character, such as his drastic transformation from a cold-hearted criminal to a devoted family man, are convincing to the reader due to Ward's use of FID. This can be seen by comparing the following extracts from *Lover Avenged*, each demonstrating the progression in Rehv's character over the narrative:

Rehvenge walked in through a side door, his entrance quiet but as obvious as a grenade going off ... the guy shrank the size of the space, not just because he was a huge male dressed in a sable duster, but because of the way he looked around.

His glowing amethyst eyes saw everyone and cared about no one.

Rehv—or the Reverend, as the human clientele called him—was a drug lord and a pimp who didn’t give a shit about the vast majority of people. Which meant he was capable of, and frequently did, anything the fuck he wanted to.⁴⁴

Though this passage appears to be straightforward third-person narration, the frequency and style of swearing mirrors Rehv’s characteristic speech. The evaluation of his character is in keeping both with Rehv’s self-image, and the perception other characters in the series have of him at this point. The next excerpt occurs when Rehv meets Ehlena, the female vampire nurse he will fall in love with, and who finally helps him control his homicidal *symphath* side:

The *symphath* in him said, *Whatever, just lie to her*. Trouble was, from out of nowhere there was another competing voice in his brain, one that was unfamiliar and faint, but utterly compelling. Because he had no idea what it was, however, he led with his routine.⁴⁵

While Rehv may not recognise the sound of his conscience, the reader can see the first signs of his transformation building here. This is further developed the first night Ehlena visits Rehv at his home and he cooks her dinner:

“Well, I love your perfume,” he said, because he was a dolt.

...

Fuck him, but he went for it. Rehv put his numb elbow on the table and leaned into her. As he closed the distance, her eyes got wider, but she didn’t pull back.

He paused, to give her a chance to tell him to cut the shit. Why? He had no clue. His *symphath* side was into pauses only for analysis or to better capitalize on a weakness. But she made him want to be decent.⁴⁶

The language here is clearly representative of Rehv’s inner thoughts, as it is he, and not the narrator, who thinks his complimenting Ehlena makes him sound like a “dolt.” Since Rehv has been the villain of previous romances in the series, the pressure to prove the genuineness of his emotional transformation regarding Ehlena is unusually high. However, as the above quotes demonstrate, this task can be achieved by allowing the reader into the mind of the character, through the use of FID. Ward

thus reassures her readers that Rehv's desire to be "decent" is genuine, showing through his own thoughts how far he has come from that drug-lord who "cared about no one" at the start of the narrative.⁴⁷

While misunderstandings and transformations are the elements of the romance formula most benefitted by the use of FID, the reader's experience of the "love at first sight" moment and their faith in the "happily-ever-after" conclusion of the story are also facilitated by this narrative technique. By providing the reader with a unique glimpse into the internal perspective of the characters involved, FID can greatly enhance formula romance, lending credibility to the plot and aiding the characterisation of the fictional creations within it.

CONCLUSION

Although generally reserved for classical literature and literary fiction, applying a narratological methodology to the study of Ward's paranormal romance series demonstrates one way literary academics can approach such genre fiction. Importantly, scholarly treatment of romance literature need not be *in spite* of its formulaic nature. Rather, scholars can actually use this formula as the basis for analysis. This shows that romance criticism need not be limited, as it has been in the past, to gender and reception studies, but can also engage with the narrative techniques involved in the production of the romance novel as text.

In the *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series, Ward uses a combination of distinct narrative techniques to fulfil the requirements of each of the four stages of the romance formula. In particular, Ward's use of FID allows for a greater degree of characterisation for her fictional creations, in addition to providing authentic reasons for the misunderstandings common to romance plots, through the exploration of different characters' points of view. FID also serves to legitimise the transformations of the major love interests, exploring their emotional development from within. As such, Ward's narrative techniques are worthy of meaningful scholarly criticism, not in isolation from, but rather in light of the romance formula's tropes and traditions, rules and regulations. Ward's series therefore has the potential to expand current knowledge of the nature of formulaic literature, and the nuanced narrative techniques that can be involved in creating a work of popular romance.

There are many possible avenues for further research regarding formula romance in general, the paranormal subgenre more specifically, and of Ward's writing in particular. In the first instance, it is common for literary theorists to dismiss the romance genre, despite its popularity, claiming that the formulaic nature of the romance plot means there is no interpretative work left for the reader. However, in this article, it has been argued that character and setting should be the focal point of discussions of narrative complexity in romance literature. With regards to paranormal romance, the overwhelming success of serialised narratives within this subgenre warrants further investigation, both for adult and young adult series. Given the formula's usual demand for a complete and unambiguously happy resolution at the conclusion of each novel, serialisation exposes a challenge for romance authors, requiring the introduction of delayed gratification into the romance format. Finally, with regards to Ward's series, the most obvious need for further study arises from it being a continuing series, with readers anticipating several more instalments in the future. The significance of this is noted in Bly's analysis of *Dark Lover*, which focuses on the "ideology mobilized in support of patriarchal control ... and an eroticization of male homosocial culture that structures, and eventually disrupts, Ward's portrayal of normative heterosexual marriage."⁴⁸ These narrative elements change dramatically over the course of the series, with many of the overtly patriarchal systems being challenged and dismantled in later instalments, in addition to the incorporation of explicitly homosexual romantic relationships, including in *Lover At Last*, published in 2013. There are also various thematic elements that fell beyond the scope of this article, which would each create an interesting focus for future analysis. Some examples include the treatment of religion in the series, the significance of the disproportionately high number of orphaned characters, and the negotiation of women into the world of the hypermasculine Black Dagger Brotherhood.

In conclusion, a narratological study of J. R. Ward's Black Dagger Brotherhood series demonstrates the potential for serious academic engagement with such works of popular romance fiction, highlighting that there is still a lot of pioneering work to be done in this area of popular culture research.

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