



Friendship vs. Romance: The Blurred Lines in Literature

Manpreet Kaur (Author)

Assistant Professor

Lovely Professional University

Abstract:

This paper examines the relationship between friendship and romance in the literature, focusing on stories that explicitly create uncertainty around whether the relationships depicted are platonic or romantic relationships. Texts that could be considered span a variety of genres and time periods. It is important to consider how emotional connection, character development, and cultural context inform representations of relationships that don't fit neatly into a binary categorization. Within the analyzed texts, some characters transition from friendship into love, while others maintain a close and meaningful friendship without it developing into romance. Using a literary analytic approach in tandem with some philosophical and psychological perspectives, the paper explores how writers leverage ambiguity as a storytelling device, how clearly friendship-romance relationships reflect cultural shifts, and what it indicates about human desire or connectedness to one another. In conclusion, the paper argues that the friendship-romance continuum is a valuable source of inquiry and an important and persistent theme in literature that continues to test how we think about love and companionship.

Introduction:

Literature has long been a reflection of human relationships and the complexities of human emotion. Friends and romantic partners may experience an array of human relations and emotion which, in storytelling, separate, overlap, reinforce, or negate one another. Friendships describe non-romantic relationships based on trust and care, but these relationships are encumbered by desire and exclusivity resulting in idealized emotionless. In literature, romantic feelings can certainly be described as a part of the friendship experience.

There are many examples in literature of two characters who begin in a friendship, and slowly transition into a lover in a way that does not feel forced, nor does it surprise the reader. There are also many examples of characters that form strong emotional attachments to one another, but those emotional attachments do not make the friendship romantic or overtly romantic, they remain rich with platonic expressions. Both scenarios can create slow-building tension, curiosity, thoughts, and reflection and exposes authors to consider possibilities or alternatives to healthy love, loyalty, and companionship. The interplay that exists between friendship and romantic love becomes a reference in itself, rather than simply a fictional device.

This study intends to examine the complicated relationship between friendship and romance in literature by investigating examples of stories in which characters either move into romance from friendship or intentionally stay friends. By looking at selected examples from both traditional and modern texts, I will examine how authors depict emotional intimacy, readers make meaning from uncertain relationships, and what cultural shifts influence authors' depiction of bonds between people. In doing so, this study will highlight the significance of the grey zone between friendship and romance in literature, with implications for narrative meaning and reader meaning making.

2. Theoretical Framework: Defining Friendship and Romance

To analyze the overlapping definitions of friendship and romance in literature, we should first clarify how these terms are defined when they begin to overlap. While friendship and romance are both emotional experiences, sometimes both can become complicated because of expectations, boundaries of physical intimacy, and the narrative intent of the author. Theoretical considerations from related literature, psychology, and philosophy help set up the boundaries—and find the expanses—that are shared between the two.

2.1 Literary Definitions and Depictions

In literature, friendship is often depicted as something with emotional intimacy, sharing trust, loyalty, attitude, values, and emotional support. It is also often represented with stability and consistency. Romance, on the other hand, tends to focus on passion, desire, exclusivity, and almost always incorporates an idealized version of the beloved. Romance in Western literature develops through a trajectory of courtship, conflict, resolution, and ends with either union or separation.

Even with the two types of relationship described, literary critics have long suggested that such binary categories are difficult to define. The emotional resonance found in relationships in literature, like that of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, or Frodo and Sam in the Lord of the Rings, leads one to suggest emotional intimacy beyond friendship while it remains theoretically platonic; shows us that literature explores emotional intimacy while borrowing from the language and intensity of romance.

2.2 Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives

In a philosophical sense, the difference between friendship and romantic love dates back to Aristotle, who classified friendships as friendships of utility, pleasure, and virtue. He argued that virtue friendships are the most permanent and satisfying because they depend on a shared appreciation of someone's character and values, the same attributes that characterize romantic relationships.

In psychology, researchers have researched the nature of love. Robert Sternberg, for example, proposed a Triangular Theory of Love, which consists of three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. In this example, friendship is only based on intimacy, while romantic love has both intimacy and passion, and consummate love has all three elements. The Triangular Theory demonstrates the structural similarity of a close friendship to romantic love, where we can also see there is no complicated distinction involved in moving from friendship to romantic love, or vice versa, as it is just a question of adding or suppressing aspects.

2.3 Cultural and Historical Contexts

Cultural norms and historical context have redefined the perceptions and roles of friendship and romance throughout the ages. In the 19th century, heated same-sex friendships—especially female same-sex friendships—were common,

even celebrated in literature and/or society, without the assumption of sexual relations. Today, those same same-sex friendships are warped in the eyes of society into an emotional intimacy that is grounded in a queer or romantic context.

The scope of human interaction is changing, and contemporary lit reflects this growing recognition of emotional multi-dimensionality and spectrum relationships, such as queerplatonic partnerships and/or asexual romances, that complicate the distinctness of "friendship" and "romance." This shift of cultural assumptions is important to analyze in regard to approaches to modern literary representations of relationships that exist between friendship and romance.

3. The Grey Zone: When Friendship Imitates Romance

Some of the most interesting relationships in literature are ones that try to evade labels. These are friendships that have the emotional intensity, vulnerability, and passion associated with romance yet are decoupled, at least somewhat, from that tradition. The grey zone, as it is commonly known, is important to both character development, reader investment, and thematic development. By establishing relationships in the grey zone, authors can deconstruct love, loyalty, and identity without the obligation of traditional romantic conclusions.

3.1 Emotional Intimacy Without Romance

Friendships that are similar to a romantic relationship can have a deep sense of emotional interdependence, become incorporated into shared life experiences, or have a feeling of a shared understanding of each other that doesn't need to be verbalized. These friendships can be as intense, or even more intense, than the bond in a romantic relationship. For example, in *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, the relationship amongst the primary group of student characters - especially Richard and Henry - has a closeness and emotional intimacy, but isn't ever expressed romantically. The relationship feels charged, emotionally dependent, full of tension, but never shared that in the name of friendship.

This type of relationship raises questions, because it can fill many of the psychological and emotional needs that we associate with romantic love, such as companionship, exclusivity, emotional safety, and a kind of jealousy. The similarities, however, are considerably limited due to the fact that the relationship is without the explicitness of a romantic or sexual component. This force the characters and the reader to wonder about what the difference between real romantic love and deep platonic love is.

3.2 Ambiguity as a Deliberate Narrative Device

It is common for authors to explore the blurring line between friendship and romance. This action allows for different interpretations, and provides a chance for readers to invest themselves in how the characters, and in turn, their relations with one another are understood and or interpreted. Through *The Great Gatsby* for example, the relationship between Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby is read by several readers or scholars as one of extreme admiration, feelings of repressed romantic desire or attraction. Since the novel does not explicitly confirm this, the ambiguity itself becomes thematically weighty.

Not only does this ambiguity honor the emotional difficulties and complexities of real human relationships, but it also subverts communal expectations (societal expectations) of providing clear labels to relations or experiences. Additionally, by doing so and refraining from making romantic declarations, authors allow the possibility of exploring character's identity, desire and emotional intimacy without the traps of heteronormativity.

3.3 Reader Reception and Interpretive Flexibility

Reader perception is essential to understanding how these ambiguous relationships are read. All too often, readers impose romantic interpretations on emotionally robust friendships, especially within fan culture and online communities linked to literature. This practice not only embodies wishful thinking but also represents an updated perspective on forms of love and companionship that cannot be categorized.

This flexible approach to interpretations is particularly salient in contemporary young adult (YA) literature and fanfiction, where fans frequently "ship" characters who evidently demonstrate emotional chemistry despite textual confirmation of romance. This framework of engagement represents reader involvement and demonstrates how the grey area is welcome for interpretations, thus rendering that story more diverse and inclusive to an audience.

4. From Companionship to Courtship: Friends Who Fall in Love

The transition from friend to romantic lover is one of the oldest and most accessible tropes in literature. This type of arc, which is often labelled "friends to lovers," requires emotional development, reciprocal knowledge, and the gradual change of feelings to come to fruition. This type of story allows readers to observe the development of love from companionship allowing them to perceive the basis of their love as trust, rather than the impulsivity of attraction and/or infatuation. This gradual transition is inherently satisfying on a narrative level but it also has some verisimilitude to real-life dynamics in many relationships, which perhaps explains its appeal across genres and eras.

4.1 Narrative Arcs and Character Development

In "friends to lovers" narratives, romance is usually - but doesn't have to be - all natural and occurs through the characters being friends first and being able to share their vulnerabilities, dreams, and experiences; thereby developing an emotional closeness. Romance grows out of that intimacy, whereas falling in love at first sight or infatuation, occurs quickly. The development of a "friends to lovers" scenario happens through emotional layering, and this element is necessary for the romance to feel authentically earned.

One of the earliest and finest examples is Jane Austin's *Emma* (1815) which features Emma Woodhouse and how she slowly begins to warm to Mr. Knightley as she develops feelings for him. Emma and Mr. Knightley have a mutual respect relationship, in addition to a credible intellectual and emphatic compatibility that founders on a deeper connection shared by mutual trust, understanding the romance that Austen is ultimately critiquing through Emma's fascination in romance, not-love.

Another canonical example is Anne Shirley and Gilbert Blythe in L. M. Montgomery's *A of G* series, which illustrates the competition between rivals as we follow their journey within multiple books as they mature from rivals in order to become friends and ultimately in love. The slow growth of their relationship covers the topics of emotional maturation as necessary for establishing a romantic relationship, on top of needing to be personal growing in order to find romantic satisfaction.

4.2 Emotional Transformation as a Thematic Tool

The process of progressing from platonic to romantic love is not only an element of plot, but also a thematic investigation of trust, vulnerability, and transformation. In John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel and Augustus begin as friends, who share a love of literature and acute emotional awareness of each other's pain. The development of their love for one another is ultimately quiet and unavoidable, suggesting that the strongest love often develops from shared experience and emotional resonance (Green).

Contemporary young adult literature tends to leverage this plot element as a counter-commentary for those who idealize extreme or romantic portrayals of "love." For example, in Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park*, the growing emotional closeness defies high school stereotypes because it develops into a safe emotional friendship that grows into love, without excessive pomp and circumstance, and with only a rudimentary concept of dating (Rowell).

4.3 Subversion and Modern Interpretations

Modern literature increasingly plays with this convention, frequently upending audience expectations. For example, Marianne and Connell, the main characters in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, shift back-and-forth between friendship, romance, and estrangement. They cannot settle on one stable identification of their bond, which helps give the novel its emotional realism. Rooney is careful not to create an ideal of love, rather she shows the blurry and often painful realities of evolving relationships (Rooney).

Furthermore, the "friends to lovers" trope is not exclusive to heterosexual relationships. In Casey McQuiston's, *Red, White & Royal Blue*, the relationship between Alex and Prince Henry begins with friendship forced politically but turns romantic in a heartfelt (and delightfully queer) way. This novel shows the potential reclamation of the trope for LGBTQ+ narratives by showing that friendship is often a safer place to begin emotionally complicated and socially challenging love stories (McQuiston).

5. Choosing Friendship Over Romance

While romantic resolutions are often considered the natural endpoint for emotional closeness in fiction, many authors intentionally choose to retain the platonic nature of intimate relationships. These accounts disrupt reader expectations and offer equally compelling representations of non-romantic love that is just as, if not more, lasting. These texts argue in favor of the emotional commitment of non-romantic love, and question the commonplace hierarchy of romantic love over all other relationships.

5.1 Literary Celebrations of Platonic Bonds

One of the most significant literary portrayals of platonic friendship can be found in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. According to Tolkien, "There is no higher love than friendship," and while Harry and Hermione share some emotional and physical closeness, it is not romantic, nor does it ever romantically transition. Their friendship is so deeply connected, grounded in loyalty, trust, and hardship, that the idea of men and women being platonic friends without romance flouts the convention that intimacy between men and women must be romantic. Rowling's choice to not bring Harry and Hermione together romantically received both praise and condemnation but, for me, illustrated that emotional intimacy does not always have to culminate in romantic consummation (Rowling 2007).

Another example of deeply enduring platonic love is found in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*. The story concerns a group of four friends, and, while all of their friendships have significance, the relationship between Jude and Willem is remarkable. What is extraordinary about their friendship is the emotional impact of their connection—there is the most immense emotional support and emotional depth even when Jude and Willem become physically intimate in the latter parts of the story. The friendship does not love in the typical romantic sense, but rather, the emotional intimacy does not fall under conventional friendship because Jude and Willem never share sexual and romantic relations. Their friendship is difficult to categorize and highlights the range of love that is not subjected to normative definitions (Yanagihara 2015).

5.2 Thematic Relevance of Platonic Choices

Often when friendship supersedes romance, the narrative highlights broader notions of maturity, boundaries, and self-regard. In Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, its layered depiction of the relationship between Elena and Lila can be understood as a life-long, entirely platonic friendship, marked by rivalry, admiration, betrayal, and love. Their friendship develops as one of the most influential forces in each other's lives that is charged with more than friendship, but is unequivocally not to be construed as romantic. Ferrante's portrayal underscores how friendship can be a form of identity and self-knowledge (Ferrante 2012).

Literature that upholds friendship tends to inhabit a broader emotional space. Authors are freer to explore loyalty, grief, support, and companionship by avoiding romantic closure. These stories imply that a relationship having deep affection does not need to become romantic, ringing counter to the dominant romantic myths found in fiction.

5.3 Reader Response and Societal Implications

Sometimes, if a close friendship does not lead to romance, we consider it as being “unresolved” or “incomplete”. But literature that establishes and maintains platonic closeness resists a romantic culture that assumes all forms of emotional closeness must turn romantic. These stories allow for a complete friendship experience and even validate friendship as fulfilling/okay.

We also find modern literature and media exploring asexual, aromantic, and queerplatonic relationships—real-life categories that do not reflect traditional romance norms and the complexities of human relationships. In choosing to write intentionally about friendship, authors are contributing to literature that seeks to represent human connection rather than allow everyone's ideas about friendship, love, and intimacy become too narrow (Devor and Milbrath 2020).

6. Gender and Queer Readings of Friendship and Romance

The concept of gender roles and queer theory profoundly shapes the ways we read and understand interpersonal dynamics (friendship and romance) in literature. The expectations tied to gender have always been socially imposed, leading to perceptions about how emotional intimacy can occur, especially across sex (again, mostly). Queer readings specifically provide a pathway to other meanings, rather than fixing meanings with binaries and heteronormativity, ultimately providing a greater and more fluid analysis of humans relating to each other.

6.1 Gendered Expectations in Emotional Bonds

Friendships of males are characterized in canon literature as stoic, loyal and active exchanges while female friendships are presented as emotional and nurturing connections. Both of these friendship conventions limit the

emotional experiences male characters can express without straying into the realm of romantic or sexual meaning. For example, in *Of Mice and Men*, George and Lennie's relationships go far beyond the mild intimacy of dependence and companionship and are emotional to the point that the reader is required to image the source of the emotional charge that arises from their friendship. However, despite closeness and a highly emotional relationship, the relationship between George and Lennie can be classified only as nonromantic and heteronormative, although, many contemporary readers/scholars are suspicious about whether such an intimate relationship could even exist between two men in the modern world (Steinbeck 1937).

6.2 Queer Readings and Subtextual Romance

Queer theory prompts readers to challenge heteronormative assumptions in literary texts and examine how repressed or unarticulated desires are embedded in character relationships. Many classic texts include deep same-sex friendships written so intimately and admiringly that they appear to contain romantic undertones. For example, although the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in *The Iliad* has been interpreted as either a heroic friendship or a romantic partnership, readers and scholars alike cannot escape their romantic relationship illustrated throughout the text. As Miller notes, "What is left to possibility and conflict appears highly suggestive of at least homosexual concern" (Miller 2011, 165). In Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles*, she sticks closely to the Homeric source and ultimately recolors the ambiguity of their relationship, as she candidly depicts their love as both romantic and sexual (Miller 2011). The fluidity of their relationship is a function of the ambiguity of the text, and should not be taken as a statement of the authenticity of their love, a feature that Miller actively resists in both manner and style of writing and only enlightens readers on their love through formal literal interpretation of the text.

Similarly, Forster creates a situation in *Maurice* where the protagonist struggles to define his sexuality within the limits of Edwardian England and draws attention to how society limits all expressions of love and friendship. The novel critiques the limited possibilities of a public queer relationship when male friendships were jealously policed to ensure that there was no cause for suspicion (Forster 1971), and yet Forster gives the reader reason and a vehicle to explore these well-established friendships through the lens of queer theory.

In comparison, female friendships such as Celie and Shug Avery in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are often allowed to carry more emotional extremity, so that Walker can articulate either deep friendship or romantic and sexual love through those different emotional contexts without the baggage of heterosexuality limiting the interpretation. Although Shug and Celie have developed their shared connection into a romantic sexual connection, it is based upon deep friendship and healing. Walker intentionally mixes the friend/lover abstraction with queer love that existed outside of the patriarchal structure and confines of sexuality whose boundaries define sociocultural meanings of friend/lover (Walker 1982).

6.3 Beyond Binary: Queerplatonic and Asexual Narratives

Modern literature increasingly captures relationships that fall outside the neat categories of "friendship" or "romance". The experience of asexual and aromantic people has contributed to the creation of stories that depict queerplatonic relationships, which consist of bonds that include emotional commitment and sharing of life with someone without romantic or sexual specifications. Sarah Raughley's *The Effigies* series showcases how the relationships among female protagonists do not fit the romantic mold but instead capture themes of loyalty, emotional survival, and chosen family, while showcasing how a deeply human connection can arise beyond notions of romantic ideal (Raughley 2016).

These narratives are important to include in fiction as they help to diversify the emotional trajectories available. They lend credence to the experiences of readers who live outside cultural normative romantic arc and highlight how literature does change and evolve to facilitate new understandings of intimacies, identities, and belonging. (Katz 2020).

7. Cultural and Historical Shifts in Representation

The understanding of friendship and romance in literature has transformed drastically over time, based on new normative cultural forms, religious ideologies, gender considerations, and social movements. Notions that were previously considered platonic in one era, can be conceived of as romantic – or queer— in the next. Clearly, it is important to understand the changing historical contexts in order to understand exactly how literature reflects and shapes societal ideas of intimacy.

7.1 Classical and Medieval Literature

Friendships—in particular, between men—were frequently constructed as the highest form of affect in classical literature. For example, "platonic love," based on ancient conceptions, refers to a spiritual (i.e., non-carnal) bond, a concept expressed in several ancient texts, including "The Symposium," written by ancient Greek philosopher, Plato. Additionally, The Iliad, composed by Homer, has character productions of a high emotional bond between the characters Achilles and Patroclus, with Homer often seen as both homoerotic and non-homoerotic by different audiences in antiquity (Halperin 1990).

Medieval literature, particularly in its overt way, was influenced deeply by Christianity, which taught against strong affirmation of romantic or sexual bonds between individuals, especially outside of marriage. The love expressed by medieval authors, when written as intense human bonds, often utilized Christian spiritual metaphors or the metaphor of courtly love, where men bonded by love may have found intense friendships in the approximation of unconsummated romantic relationships, especially found among groups of monks, associations of knights, or communities of noblewomen (Dinshaw 1994).

7.2 Renaissance to Victorian Era

The Renaissance initiated a revival of emotional intimacy, particularly amongst men. Shakespeare's sonnets, many of which are addressed to a 'fair youth', have a value of deep connection that scholars have ranged back and forth about as being romantic, platonic, or homoerotic (Shakespeare). In this same vein, although Hamlet is a tragic play, the enduring bond between Hamlet and Horatio is one of emotionally intense male relationships.

The Victorian period ushered in stricter moral codes of conduct, as well as pervasive social regulation of all things gender and sexuality related. However, the Victorian era was also a time when "romantic friendships" flourished, again, primarily amongst women. These very deep emotional connections, conducted mostly through letters and poems, were deemed acceptable in public contexts if they did not come across as sexual. The relationship between Emily Dickinson and Susan Gilbert, which is sustained through hundreds of letters, has ignited a critical conversation surrounding love, intimacy, and the nuances of lesbian identity.

7.3 20th and 21st Century Literature

There were radical changes throughout the 20th century in how gender, sexuality, and relationships were conceived. The rise of psychology, feminist ideology, and queer theory has had a profound effect on literature. Writers like James

Baldwin (Giovannis Room) and Virginia Woolf (Orlando) provide us with richly textured literature that challenges heteronormative and binary reconstructions of intimacy. Many of these works testify to the nuance between friendship and romantic love and often include narrative ambiguity as a way to illuminate experiences of marginalization (Baldwin 1956, Woolf 1928).

In literature today, the range of relationships is more fully recognized. In late-capitalist contemporary young adult fiction, for example, we often see friendships that shift to queer romance (Becky Albertalli's Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda) as well as friendships that remain strong as platonic lifelines (Angie Thomas's The Hate U Give). These works, like those of Baldwin and Woolf, capitalize on an increased social acceptance and willingness to entertain alternate identities, which results in alternate relationships and conveys a systemic devaluation of traditional emotional experiences that upholds romanticism as superior.

As more individuals embrace non-normative identities, the literature that uses love and friendship as verbs has expanded alongside it. Today, many writers are exploring intersectional and inclusive fiction that honors friendships that can occur alongside romance, replace romantic experience, or may provide a deeper and meaningful relationship than romance.

8. Conclusion

The boundary between friendship and romance has been a longstanding fascination within literature, as it continues to evolve with society's perceptions of cultural forms, gendered encounters, and theoretical perspectives. As this paper has shown, literature does not only reflect society's understanding of affection, it also shapes, troubles, and expands our understanding of affection. From formal equality in tales of fellows and spiritual love to contemporaneous stories that invite intricacies of queer, asexual, or fluid relationships, literature has consistently explored meanings of human connections.

Further exploring stories where friendships become romantic relationships, we have narratives that prioritize emotional foundations, enact trust, and develop respect. "Friends to lovers" arcs shape a culturally functional ideal of love that is both deep and eternal. Conversely, when authors situate characters in friendship and choose to maintain platonic intimacy, they take a radical standpoint; not all emotionally implicated relationships need, or gain value from, romantic relations. These narratives normalize and validate friendship as a meaningful and complete form of love.

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