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Romance Novels and Possibilities in Life

Analyzing Ethical Aspects in *Happiness* and *Happy Place*

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Abstract:

This thesis examines two contemporary romances novels through the framework of hermeneutic narrative ethics. Danielle Steel's *Happiness* (2023) and Emily Henry's *Happy Place* (2023) are both recent contemporary romance novels by popular authors. They are genre-typical and provide heteronormative and relatively uncomplicated romance narratives targeted to the masses.

Hanna Meretoja's framework of hermeneutic narrative ethics (2018) allows for the examination and comparison of the ethical aspects of the two narratives. The model identifies six aspects of storytelling that both enable and diminish the sense of the possible. Hermeneutic narrative ethics' focus on the interpretative structure of narratives and experiences facilitates the examination of how cultural narrative webs and our own prior experiences influence the new and how the new also has the ability to alter what is already known. It is possible, then, to analyze what effect (literary) narratives can have by placing them on a continuum from narratives that perpetuate harmful stereotypes to those that provide alternative perspectives.

To examine the sense of the possible opened and diminished in contemporary romance novels, this thesis utilizes Pamela Regis' eight essential narrative elements of romance novels. By focusing on different themes found in these narrative elements, this thesis examines whether Steel's and Henry's novels encourage ethical exploration or perpetuate society's harmful master-narratives.

This thesis shows that the two novels contain narratives that both enable and diminish the sense of the possible. I argue that while these novels contain both diminishing and enabling features throughout, counter-narratives are offered more often before the conflict that keeps the couple apart begins to unravel. After this point, the narratives turn to perpetuate harmful master-narratives more often. By utilizing Meretoja's model, this thesis examines these ethically challenging narratives, reveals underlying mechanisms of power, and adds to the growing feminist research done on the romance novel genre.

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1 Introduction

A girl meets boy. They fall in love, encounter some troubles but ultimately live happily ever after. A tale as old as time, as the teapot sings in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. The booming industries around romance and romantic stories keep telling us the same basic narrative with only slight alterations. And the target audience loves it, indeed, has been loving it since what can be considered the first best-selling romance novel, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded*, was published in 1740 (Regis 63). Today, the broad romance genre and its conventions can be found in everything from literature to movies to advertisements for almost any kind of product. This ubiquity, naturally, has ethical implications. What kind of stories of love are told? Whose stories are being told? Do these stories merely perpetuate stereotypes, or do they also provide space for different kinds of lives and points of view? In this thesis, my focus will be on what kind of ethical aspects are found in contemporary romance novels. As examples, I will use Danielle Steel's *Happiness* and Emily Henry's *Happy Place*, both published in 2023, and examine what kind of ethical aspects are found in their narratives.

The two American authors are established writers of the romance novel genre. Steel has been writing consistently since the 1970s, and her main genre is romance novels. Throughout her career, she has published over 210 books, which have been translated into 43 languages and have sold over a billion copies (About Danielle). In 2023 alone, Steel published eleven novels altogether. Emily Henry's career began in 2016, and she has published eight books so far. Her earlier works were mostly young adult fantasy romances, but she has exclusively written romance novels since her first adult novel *The Beach Read* came out in 2020. So far, her books have sold over four million copies (Whiting), and she has become a household name for the new, younger generation of romance readers. The two novels studied here are very typical of the genre and provide heteronormative and relatively uncomplicated romance narratives targeted to the masses.

Even though the romance genre has spread so far and wide, its genre specific restrictions are rigid. Patrick Colm Hogan notes that romance plots must have three elements – the couple that falls in love, something that initially blocks their romance from reaching the happy end, and the moment when the block is resolved (135). This is what he considers the "full version" (135). Pamela Regis argues for a similar definition. In her view, for a literary love story to be considered a romance novel, it must be "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" (22). Regis expands this base definition and

identifies eight essential narrative elements of romance novels, for example, the meeting between the future lovers, the love declarations, and the barrier keeping them apart – features that are found in all romance novels from the time that *Pamela* was published to today. By analyzing how these elements are presented in the novels, I can examine different themes found in the novels from an ethical point of view. My focus will be on the sense of the possible that the themes, such as portrayal of womanhood and communication, open and close for the characters and the implied readers.

Hanna Meretoja's framework of hermeneutic narrative ethics allows me to examine and compare the ethical aspects of the two narratives. Central to her approach is the sense of the possible that narratives can either expand or diminish for readers (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 142). She identifies six overlapping aspects through which the presence of possibilities can be examined. These aspects focus on different features that help us interpret narratives that we encounter. According to Meretoja's narrative hermeneutics, both "narrative and experience have an interpretative structure" (84). When looking at the relationship between narratives and experiences in this way, we recognize that their relationship is dialogical, and that both the cultural narratives that surround us and our own personal prior experiences influence our interpretation of further experiences as well as the new narratives that we encounter (84). This dialogical nature also allows narratives to have the ethical potential Meretoja elaborates on through her framework. The aspects she identifies examine, for example, how understanding of ourselves and of our culture influence our understanding of narratives and how it is possible for narratives to work as tools for ethical inquiry (90). Meretoja argues that narratives can be placed on a continuum from harmful narratives that reinforce stereotypes to narratives that purposefully work to provide alternative perspectives (91).

Ethics around storytelling and narratives has, of course, been studied from a multitude of angles. One notable figure is James Phelan, who has developed narrative ethics further by identifying four aspects: the "ethics of the told", the "ethics of the telling", the "ethics of writing/producing", and the "ethics of reading/reception" (Phelan par. 2–8). These issues touch upon many of the same points that Meretoja's framework does. While Phelan's model does also focus on the real world and its effect on the stories and the readers, Meretoja's framework functions better in my examination of the underlying societal master narratives and their effect in the novels. Her focus on the possibilities that open and close allows me to examine the effect that these master-narratives, possible counter-narratives, and narratives in-between can have on both the characters and implied readers. This is because her focus is not

only on the deliberate communicative choices made by the authors and readers who engage with the novels. Instead, this approach works well with novels that do not purposefully intend to provide ethically complex stories, but where complex ethical issues are present covertly – like in the case of romance novels.

The popularity of the romance novel genre continues to hold. The genre has also become more diverse with the surge of popularity in subgenres such as queer romance novels. This broadened inclusion becomes clear when examining current academic research done on the genre. For example, recent articles published in the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* show a wide array of often interdisciplinary topics ranging from feminist to postcolonial in nature. However, while the research often touches on the topic of ethics in passing, it has rarely been the focus. The two novels I examine in this thesis belong to the very broad contemporary romance novel subgenre. In their form and conventions, they are recognizable to anyone who has encountered the genre, even if only by name. This thesis seeks to provide an opening to further research on the ethical aspects of romance novels. Up until now, ethical literary research has most often been focused on narratives that reside on either end of Meretoja's continuum, ones that either aim at perpetuating harmful narratives or at opening possibilities. I am interested in the narratives that reside somewhere in between. In this thesis, I argue that Meretoja's hermeneutic narrative ethics enables the examination of ethically ambiguous narratives and helps to reveal underlying mechanisms of power. By applying her model to Danielle Steel's and Emily Henry's romance novels, I show how the different narrative elements of the narratives both open and diminish the sense of the possible that the hermeneutic concept of (re)interpretation enables. I argue that while these novels contain both diminishing and enabling features of ethical possibilities throughout the novels, counter-narratives are offered more often before the barriers between the lovers begin to break. Once the barriers have been overcome, these narratives turn to perpetuating harmful master-narratives.

My thesis aims to take part in the feminist discussion on romance novels and to examine the two novels and their plot points form an ethical point of view. I focus on what types of narratives are presented, and how they affect the sense of the possible for the main characters and implied readers. For example, much of recent and earlier discussion has focused on the genre's complicated relationship with feminism. On the one hand, the female characters have adapted to the contemporary world, and on the other, many argue that the endings with happy, heterosexual romantic relationships imply a disconnect with feminism and point towards

participating in patriarchy (e.g., Arvanitaki; Brouillette; Weisser). My analysis adds to this discussion by revealing the interplay of different kinds of narratives within romance novels as I look at the different cultural narratives and the possible deviances offered.

As far as I have been able to establish, neither author's work has been academically studied prior to this thesis. Nevertheless, non-academic discussion around their works is still plentiful. For example, Danielle Steel was interviewed by Good Morning America, a morning news show by ABC News for *Happiness* ("Danielle Steel discusses her latest book, 'Happiness'"), and *The Washington Post* published a review of Emily Henry's *Happy Place* (Whiting). The discussion around their works is also abundant in online communities, such as the Amazon owned *Goodreads*. The platform allows for readers to rate and review books easily. While *Goodreads* does not reveal median ratings across genres or overall, both novels have an average rating higher than four stars (out of the maximum of five) indicating that they are liked by the readers. Henry's *Happy Place* was also voted as the Best Romance of 2023 by the platform's users. However, from an ethical standpoint, the written reviews on the platform are more interesting than the plain numbers. The readers whose reviews are on the lower end of the scale raise questions about issues that they found ethically problematic in the narratives. Such themes are, for example, the portrayal of the minor characters and characterizations of female characters in the novels. This means that even if the readers do not explicitly raise questions around the ethical aspects, they do pay attention to these issues.[1]

In what follows, I will first give a brief description of the plots of the novels. In chapter two, I will give an overview of the romance genre, with the focus on contemporary romance novels. Then, I will present Meretoja's theoretical framework of the ethics of storytelling as well as give an overview of narrative hermeneutics. In the third chapter, I will begin to analyze the two narratives from an ethical point of view, focusing on the sense of the possible. I will look at how the society has been constructed at the beginning of the story, how the two characters meet, and how their attraction is portrayed as well as analyze the barrier that keeps them apart. In the final chapter before conclusions, I will examine how the point of hopelessness is portrayed for the couple and how they overcome it and the barriers. I will also look at the admissions of love and how the happy end is constructed.

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[1] See https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/74951530-happiness?ref=nav_sb_ss_3_18 and https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/61718053.

1.1 Happiness

Danielle Steel's *Happiness* tells the story of Sabrina Brooks, a successful American thriller author in her 40s, who lives a solitary life with her two dogs in Massachusetts. Having already been twice divorced, she has come to the conclusion that finding love is not going to happen for her. As her late father's brother dies, Sabrina finds out that she has now inherited both the title of a Lady and an estate with a mansion in the United Kingdom. In order to find out more about her father's family, she travels to see the estate and meets the attorney Grayson (Gray) Abbott who is responsible for handling the estate. They feel immediate attraction towards each other but are unable to further their relationship because Gray is married, though unhappily. They begin a long-distance relationship across the Atlantic as they wait for his divorce to go through. However, his wife, Matilda, is making this difficult at every turn, and their correspondence slows down before stopping altogether. Unsure of their future together, Sabrina still decides to leave her old life behind and move to the UK with her dogs. Finally, days after her arrival, Gray and Sabrina meet again, and he tells her that he and Matilda have come to an agreement to get a divorce. This meeting also brings the story to an end as Gray proposes, and they become happily engaged.

1.2 Happy Place

In Emily Henry's *Happy Place*, Harriet Kilpatrick is doing her residency in brain surgery in San Francisco. She lives alone after her ex-fiancée Wyndham (Wyn) Connor broke up with her suddenly five months earlier. Because they had not told their friend group about the end of the engagement, they end up spending a week pretending to still be together on their annual holiday. Harriet's memories reveal their romantic relationship from its beginning to the arrival at the holiday home, and the reader finds out that Harriet and Wyn broke up due to problems with communication and mental health. Shortly before the breakup, Wyn's mother's recent diagnosis with Parkinson's disease forced the couple to start a strained long-distance relationship. The present time narration follows the friend group as they grapple to come to terms with growing up and the subsequent changes to their friendship. As the week comes to an end, the friend group has come to terms with the changes, but Harriet still leaves for the airport alone. Before boarding the plane, Harriet decides to live her life for herself and rushes back out. At the parking lot of the airport, she meets Wyn, who has come to find her. In their happy ending, Harriet quits her residency and moves to Wyn's place in Montana to pursue her newly found passion for pottery.

2 Theoretical Background

In this chapter, I will first examine the romance novel genre in more detail and present the eight essential narrative elements of romance novels that guide my analysis. The second half of the chapter is dedicated to narrative hermeneutics and hermeneutic narrative ethics, as well as Hanna Meretoja's six aspects of ethical potential in storytelling.

2.1 Romance Novels

The term romance novel requires two types of defining – what is romance and what is a romance novel. The first term is especially elusive and difficult to define, as both Pamela Regis and Susan Ostrov Weisser point out. Weisser argues that because the phenomena of romantic love and romance are so largely socially constructed, their looks varies at different points in time (Weisser 6–7). Similarly, romance as a literary category is elusive and has changed its shape multiple times (Regis 19–20). Still, the broader definition of romance has stayed stable, as the storyline of "passionate love, separation, and triumph" (Regis 20) was already present in fourth century literature. In my thesis, I will focus on how the social phenomenon of romance manifests in contemporary romance novels. As both novels are written by American authors, the focus will be on the Western perception of romance.

Regis' study, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, was written at a time when the romance novel genre looked somewhat different than it does today. This is evident, for example, in the gendered way she defines the main characters as "heroines" (22). While the basic narrative has stayed the same, it is important to recognize how the genre has changed during the past few decades. For a start, queer love stories have become more mainstream, changing the gender dynamics in the narratives. This also means that women are no longer the default main characters whose perspective the readers follow. The courtship statement still holds true, but betrothal, in its traditional meaning of an agreement to marry, is no longer necessary – at least in Western romance novels. As I already discussed in the introduction, Patrick Colm Hogan's definition of the romance narrative follows the same principles as Regis' does. He finds that the full version of the narrative plots of romances always involves two characters who fall in love, are separated for one reason or another, but find each other again (135). Hogan thus identifies prototypical narrative elements of plots to include a romantic union as a happiness goal and physical separation to prevent the lovers from fulfilling said goal (137). Despite these rather strict parameters, the romance novel genre is

notable in its ability to adapt in other regards. Publishers and authors follow the changes in what readers are interested in and quickly adapt when readers begin to show interest in something (Brouillette 455).

Another change taking place within the romance novel genre that speaks of its ability to adapt is serialization. An Goris points out how peculiar this seems to be when one of the defining elements of the genre is the happy ending (Goris). In many cases the serialization allows for a post happy ending (post-HEA) narration which Goris finds to serve two purposes. It allows for the exploration of "the fantasy of committed romantic love" (Goris) and addresses "potentially problematic gender politics" (Goris). Henry's *Happy Place* seems to fit this post-HEA space that Goris identifies, despite the novel not belonging to a serial. As the narration includes the initial meeting before the timeline of the story begins, one breakup, and two happy endings of Harriet and Wyn, the post-HEA narration is present. In a way, it acts like a romance-based series where the reader follows the same couple through two or more novels to their ultimate happy ending. Yet, Henry's post-HEA is not conformist to the genre because the couple has broken up when the story begins. Steel's *Happiness*, instead, belongs strictly in the non-serialized subgenre. In a genre-typical fashion, only the last chapter provides a brief, but meaningful, glimpse to the post-HEA relationship of Sabrina and Gray.

Up until the late 1990, much of the critique on romance novels was based on narrow and specific sub-genres or was conducted by interviewing a small sampling of real readers (Regis 5–6). In Regis' eyes, this has led to "hasty generalization" (6) and condemnation of the whole genre (6). One of her critiques on the discourse around romance novels is that many researchers have drawn broad conclusions based on analysis of Harlequin romances which, she argues, excludes novels outside this specific subgenre (6–7). The term Harlequin Romance describes short romance novels that are published every month (Regis 4). The name originates from one of the most prolific publishers but has more broadly come to mean novels published in this fashion. There are also other categorizations of romance novels. For example, Romance Writers of America (RWA) – a non-profit trade association that looks to improve the public's knowledge of the genre and to help romance authors (RWA Home, Governance) – does not make this distinction between Harlequins and other contemporary romance novels. They define sub-genres based on the setting of the elements of the plot (RWA About the Romance Genre). They differentiate between contemporary romance, erotic romance, and romantic suspense, among other things. The two books by Steel and Henry are both contemporary romances, but the RWA's way of defining contemporary romance novel

means that many Harlequin novels also fit the definition as their narratives take place after the year 1950. In this thesis, I adhere to the RWA's definition as I find that the sense of th possible is not affected by the publishing type.

Regis remarks already in her book's preface that romance was overwhelmingly the most sold genre in the mass-market at the end of the 1990s (xi). To this day, romance continues to be one of the most popular genres, despite the change in the literary landscape due to the rise of social media and technology. Claire Parnell notes on this change in the publishing industry and argues that while traditional publishing houses continue to do well, "digital-first (or digital-only) imprints" (4) and self-publishing have gained relevancy (5). Despite the genre's popularity, it is not always viewed or reviewed favorably by non-readers or even scholars, as I have explained earlier. Regis explains that despite their enormous popularity in the late 1900s, books in this genre were rarely reviewed in magazines or newspapers (xi). This trend is still noticeable. Steel's and Henry's novels have mainly been reviewed by readers in blogs or other online platforms. Weisser argues that in addition to the lesser interest of book reviewers in news outlets, the genre of mass-market romance has historically been viewed as trivial and shallow, even by feminists (131–132).

Both Weisser and Regis examine feminist criticism towards the genre. Regis explains that the tone of critique took a turn with second wave feminism in 1960s and 1970s when the argument of romance novels as "enslavers of women" became commonplace (3–4). Feminist critics looking at Harlequin romances and the genre more broadly claimed that these novels reinforce patriarchal views of society and womanhood (4–5). In addition, they argued that the genre confines women to monogamous, heteronormative relationships where motherhood is at the forefront. Weisser agrees with Regis in these assessments, but notes that in the 1990s feminist views had in large part entered the general way of life in the United States (Weisser 132–133). As a result, Harlequin romance novels and their protagonists changed. Eirini Arvanitaki addresses more recent changes in the romance novel genre and argues that the narratives nowadays start from a second-wave feminist space only to turn into neoliberalism and post-feminism (22). She defines post-feminism according to Angela McRobbie as a "a sentiment of anti-feminist within an individual framework which incorporates elements of feminism" (qtd. in Arvanitaki 21). She links it with neoliberalism that she examines from a cultural perspective with a focus on individuality, entrepreneurship, and freedom of choice (21). Ultimately, Arvanitaki argues that romance novels, at their core, present the protagonists as independent, second-wave feminist women whose "salvation can only be found in a stable

home and in the arms of a good man" (25). At the end then, the protagonists disavow feminism and yield to the patriarchy (25–26). In her view, this rejection of feminism is painted as a feature of choice as she quotes Anthea Taylor: "women are no longer indoctrinated into believing a man will make them happy, they now (apparently) actively choose to believe" (qtd. in Arvanitaki 26). The two novels examined here provide a similar narrative structure, as I will demonstrate through my analysis.

Maleah Fekete, a doctoral student at Harvard University, recreated Janice Radway's influential study on women who read romance from the 1980s to examine the change in the expectations of romance readers between 1980 and 2016. Her goal was to find out what has changed over time as gender roles and expectations have changed significantly (Fekete 3). Regis has criticized Radway's original study because in her view Radway drew too broad conclusions about the whole genre. I agree that both Fekete's and Radway's studies have too small a sampling to show any concrete results. However, find myself mostly agreeing with Fekete's main findings. They echo the arguments about the change in romance novels that other scholars, such as Weisser, have made based on the changes in the genre. The change in the genre parallels the change in the contemporary Western society, where the importance of sex has increased while the emotional aspects of the narratives still tend to follow traditional gender roles more closely (Fekete 5; Weisser 136–137). In a small sample study of romance novels, Claire Parnell also found that no matter the publishing medium, romance novels still follow and reinforce traditional gender roles – both within the sexual sphere and outside of it (18–20). She found that sexual scenes are often more digressive, but that they still largely subscribe to Western gender norms (21). While sex is not a theme that I analyze in my thesis, as neither of the novels places enormous emphasis on it, both novels contain multiple references and/or depictions of sex scenes. They demonstrate how the emotional connection that is accompanied by sex has become an important feature in the contemporary romance novel.

Sara Kolmes and Matthew A. Hoffman have recently argued against the earlier feminist critique of romance novels objectifying women. They go as far as to claim that, instead, these novels and their genre conventions act as shields against the objectification for their subjects (30–31). They especially address Radway and others' claims that the sexual content in romance novels strips the protagonists of their agency and objectifies them (Kolmes and Hoffman 31–33). To counter these claims, they utilize A.W. Eaton's criteria of how art objectifies its subjects. Their argument is certainly interesting and brings forth a new way of

viewing the often-applied feminist criticism. Therefore, I expect that further research on their topic could benefit the research of romance novels. Despite in general agreeing in part with their arguments, I find that especially those made of ownership, autonomy, and silencing would require further inspection. Of course, my focus is more broadly on themes that raise and close the sense of the possible in romance novel narratives, and Kolmes and Hoffman focus more specifically on the sexual encounters and the objectification of the female heroines. Still, I would like to address some of their justifications for their arguments. They argue that communication is what prevents the love interest's ownership of the female lead and thus prevents her objectification: "Communication and understanding are not part of an ownership relation, but they are central to the romance novel's narrative" (37). In the case of autonomy, they argue that "Romance novels are focused on their heroines making the decision to be in a relationship with their coprotagonists" (36). Lastly, Kolmes and Hoffman's argument against the silencing of the protagonists is that "Romance novel heroines may not speak very often (if the protagonist is shy, for example), but their point of view and their desires are constantly foregrounded" (38). I will address these arguments in the conclusions of the analysis chapters. Additionally, while they do not specifically focus on the ethics, their lens will help me better highlight some ethically questionable features.

As mentioned earlier, I will examine the novels by Henry and Steel through the essential narrative elements of romance novels that Regis has identified. There is no strict order or requirement that the elements can occur only once, but all the essential elements are always present (Regis 30). The first element is the *current society*, or what she calls the *society defined*. The society can play a notable role or barely be mentioned, but it is the setting for the story to begin (31). This current society is always somehow flawed, and the main couple must overcome these flaws to be together. As the couple overcomes the obstacles preventing their relationship, they ultimately remake the society for themselves. The second narrative element is *the meeting*, or *the first meeting* in this thesis, where the couple meets for the first time (30–31). This can happen either within the novel's narration or as a memory. This scene already hints to what the barrier or obstacle preventing the couple from being together will be. In the same subchapter, I will also discuss *the attraction* between the future couple. The scenes where the reader finds out how the characters feel about each other are typically scattered (33). This narrative element is not merely about how the characters would rate the other person's looks, but they include such themes as friendship, similar goals in life, what society expects from them, and financial standing. I will end my first analysis chapter with the

element of *the barrier*. This covers the scenes depicting the reason(s) why the couple cannot form, and they are usually found in multiple places in the narrative (32). The barrier, or the conflict between the future couple, is also most often what moves romance novels from start to finish. Regis makes a distinction between internal and external barriers (32). The internal barriers are those that stem from the characters' – usually either the main character's or the love interest's – own minds, for example from their beliefs or their psychology. External barriers are obstacles from the outside and might have something to do with, for example, the current society, geography, or their economic situations. In the case of both Steel's and Henry's novels, the barriers are multifaceted and comprised of both internal and external elements.

I will analyze the last four essential elements found in romance novels in chapter 4. First is *the moment of hopelessness* or, as Regis calls it, *the point of ritual death*. Here, the barrier seems so impenetrable that all hope for the couple to form has diminished (35). The death is only ritual, in so that the main character can be freed from the barrier as the story moves on to the next element, *the overcoming of the barrier*. Regis calls this moment *the recognition* (36–37). Typically, some new information is revealed in these scenes. This allows the couple to form and ends the internal and external barriers. External barriers are most often removed, whereas internal barriers are resolved. The disappearance of the barrier does not necessarily happen immediately, or even rapidly, but does so eventually to enable the happy ending. In the element of *the love declaration*, both the main character and the love interest profess their love for one another (34). These confessions can happen in the same scene, or they can occur in different parts of the narrative. Regis's final essential element is *the betrothal*, and I will examine it together with the love declarations. In this scene the couple is formed (37–38). Regis' naming is based on the historically conventional ending of marriage (or at least a formal engagement). The final remnants of the barrier have finally been shed, and both characters are free to pursue their happiness together. The change in the genre has diminished the need for engagement or marriage, and many romance novels today merely end with the couple forming. As both Regis and Weisser explain, the romance novel genre has changed throughout its existence and come to reflect, and reinforce, the broad societal views of their times (e.g., Regis 205–207; Weisser 132–133).

2.2 The Ethics of Storytelling

For narrative hermeneutics, the understanding of narratives, experiences, subjectivity, and memories are all connected in the process of interpretation (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 43). Hermeneutics argues that interpretation is a constant, involuntary, and automated process (44). Therefore, it is done regardless of whether the individual wants to or not. This changes the way people view and move around in the world, and how they add interpretations and meaning to experiences and things that they encounter. Hanna Meretoja, Professor of comparative literature at the University of Turku, has worked extensively in the field of narrative hermeneutics, or on narrative as a practice of interpretation. For her, it is not merely "an *object* of interpretation" but rather "*a mode of interpretation*" (44, original emphasis) where people make meaning both by narrating their own experiences and by engaging with other narratives around them. She defines narrative as "both the activity of storytelling and the product of such an activity" (48). She builds narrative hermeneutics on the ideas of, for example, Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur and argues that narrative as an activity means that interpretation happens through cultural models of sense-making that intertwine with experiencing (48). Social webs of meaning always influence narrativization of experiences, both as internal monologues or when told to others (48–49). For Meretoja, there are three key concepts and advances of narrative hermeneutics (44). First, the theory allows experience and narrative to be understood as separate entities, not as opposites but as a continuum. Second, life can be understood as a process where narrative interpretation is constantly changing rather than as a single, set narrative. Finally, narrative hermeneutics enables us to see how narrative webs and individuals are always connected. They are in a dialogue with one another, and this allows us to reveal embedded power dynamics within them. The dialogic approach is crucial for Meretoja: "A key thesis of the dialogical approach to narrative and subjectivity is that cultural webs of narratives only exist through individual interpretations, and individual subjects, in turn, are embedded in and become who they are in relation to cultural narrative webs" (Meretoja, "Dialogics" 31). By building on Mikhail Bakhtin's theories, she argues that it is crucial to understand how different types of narratives and individuals influence the sense making processes (31).

From these concepts arises the idea of the sense of the possible. Drawing on the ideas of Ricoeur, Jerome Bruner, Jens Brockmeier, and Molly Andrews, Meretoja argues that storytelling has an effect on how we view the possibilities around us (*Storytelling* 52). For example, Bruner argues that to understand narratives is to see the possibilities, and

Brockmeier argues that narrative imagination opens the options, extending what is real. Through the hermeneutic process, then, it is possible to look forwards to what could be instead of being constricted to what is. Within this framework of narrative hermeneutics, it is essential for ethical perspectives that narrative practices can simultaneously "be oppressive, empowering, or both" (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 2). This also allows the examination of ethical potential while taking into consideration the multitude of dimensions in storytelling that could make narratives ethically open or potentially harmful (89). Next, I will present the six aspects of narratives that Meretoja outlines for the identification and analysis of the sense of the possible in storytelling.

The first one is the power to cultivate the sense of the possible (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 89). For Meretoja it is crucial to recognize how narratives have the potential to "expand our sense of the possible" (90). Naturally, this also means that narratives can diminish that potential. She sees narratives as being beyond representations, and that they have an ability to change or shape the lived reality of readers. The process of interpretation happens unconsciously and involuntarily (82). Our narrative unconscious is in dialogue with dominant narratives of our culture, and our unconscious becomes "dynamic, changing, intersubjectively constituted, and narratively mediated" (82). On a sociocultural level, this means that we make sense of experiences automatically through cultural narratives, and through sociocultural narrative unconscious we perpetuate harmful dominant narratives. On an individual level, narrative unconscious consists of our earlier experiences mediated through cultural narratives (82–83). Humans perpetuate these individually learned judgements of the world as they come into contact with new experiences and narratives.

It is possible to become partially aware of our narrative unconscious, and for these active elements to become part of the narrative imagination (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 83). This way we can potentially challenge culturally dominant narratives and consider which ones are worthy of keeping. When considering narrative unconscious and narrative imagination, Meretoja argues that literary narratives have an important role in challenging those cultural narratives that are part of our unconscious and are often just simply accepted as the truth (90–91). They draw on those cultural modes of sense making embedded in the narrative unconscious which can be unsettled by alternative narratives. Meretoja argues that there is a continuum between the two ends (91). At the other end, there is full perpetuation of what is already known by our narrative unconscious. These narratives act subsumptively and appropriatively and diminish the chances of broadening the narrative unconscious. At the other end, narratives encourage

the narrative imagination as they offer alternative narratives and create the possibility of changing pre-existing cultural narratives. Romance novels provide interesting ground for the sense of the possible. Their premise is to provide a fantasy of romantic love to their readers, and they achieve this by following the eight essential elements. Still, the narratives themselves are diverse and take different routes to reach their end goal. This thesis examines different dominant cultural narratives around, for example, femininity, masculinity and romantic love in Steel's and Henry's novels to see whether they are used to broaden or to diminish narrative imagination.

The second aspect is self-understanding. In narrative hermeneutics, narratives are seen as important for both a person in understanding themselves as well as to who they are (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 98). The ethical potential lies in how changing oneself is possible through finding different and new ways of interpreting our own lives and narrating our stories. However, Meretoja emphasizes that there is no evidence that having a strong narrative identity would lead to stronger self-responsibility – it merely opens the possibility for it (99). By engaging in narrative self-reflection, it is possible to start processing those cultural narrative models that lie within the narrative unconsciousness and thereby to begin to notice possible harmful forms within the narrative webs surrounding us (99–100). Meretoja identifies two ways that narrative self-reflection is present (100). Through telling our own stories, there is the potential to reflect on the ethical issues and choices we encounter (100–101) and by engaging with stories told by others "We reflect on our lives in relation to the narratives we hear and read" (103). Again, while there are no guarantees of more ethical behavior, the ability to identify both with literary and non-literary narratives enables the possibilities to understand society's narratives and own experiences better (104–106). Romance novels often tell stories of ordinary people as the protagonists. Weisser argues that because of the guaranteed outcome, they prevent acts of challenging or examination (142). I argue against this because I find that despite the set narrative structure, romance novels still can provide space for narrative self-reflection.

Meretoja's third aspect of ethical potential in narratives is the non-subsumptive mode of understanding others. She argues for a non-subsumptive model where understanding does not mean that some new fact or narrative is subsumed, or assimilated into pre-existing knowledge, but rather that understanding follows the hermeneutic circle (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 109–110). Hermeneutic circle of understanding supposes that understanding does not merely happen based on the pre-understandings we have that influence the experiences and encounters we

come across (47). Rather, there is a dialogue between what is known and the new, and the new has the potential to challenge what is already known. There is possibility for subsumption but also for non-subsumption. Meretoja argues that there is a continuum between structurally subsuming, violent narratives and narratives that act non-subsumptively (112). The non-subsumptive narratives present and encourage different points of views and counter-narratives. For Meretoja, counter-narratives "consciously challenge stereotype-reinforcing hegemonic narrative practices" (112; see also Meretoja, "Dialogics" 36). They allow us to look beyond generalized ideas and help us to examine individuals as individuals.

Meretoja has later expanded on master-narratives and counter-narratives. She argues how they can operate on both explicit and implicit levels ("Dialogics" 36). Master-narratives operate more often implicitly, as they are those hidden parts of the overt narratives that still crucially influence on the interpretation (37). Counter-narratives are usually more explicit because their aim is to challenge prevalent master-narratives. Alas, both can operate on opposite levels as Meretoja shows through her example on how the Finns Party in Finland uses the implicit counter-narrative on immigration to create negative feelings in their followers (38). Through this example she also showcases how counter-narratives are not inherently good and ethically open narratives. Considering this context, it is not surprising that Meretoja emphasizes the narrative's aim (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 112). Her example novels, with their purposeful non-subsumptive narratives, also showcase the importance of this. I will explain her examples further later, but they largely deal with themes of oppression through a multitude of different angles. The novels I examine fall outside of this emphasis. Many of the features in romance novels are subsumptive in nature as they pertain to many cultural master-narratives around gender and love. Yet, both novels also provide deviations from these master-narratives in the form of non-subsumptive counter-narratives.

The fourth element is the narrative in-betweens. Society's master-narratives, those underlying narratives that legitimize, for example, different ideologies and identities, can be unsettled through narrative in-betweens that show our narrative imaginations different ways of thinking about things (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 120). Meretoja explains that "Storytelling creates a relational space – a space of possibilities – that allows us to become heard and visible as subjects of speech and action. The narrative in-between shapes what is thinkable and sayable, visible and audible, experienceable and doable within different subject positions" (117). This is where their ethical power lies for Meretoja. Narrative in-betweens can provide space for opening new possibilities if they are dialogical and inclusive, and they are ethically suspect if

they reinforce harmful stereotypes and narratives (125). Narrative in-betweens become shared spaces for communities because they alter the shared sense of the possible (124). Through sharing stories, the participants share narrative imagination which ultimately influences how we interpret and make meaning of experiences and stories (118). Narrative in-betweens can be placed on a continuum where, on one end, they diminish the sense of possibilities and open them on the other. In this thesis, I will consider the types of narrative in-betweens that have been established between the characters and others around them. I will, for example, examine how the protagonists share stories with the other characters. I will also touch upon society's larger shared narrative in-betweens, such as womanhood in the contemporary Western world. This will allow me to show what kind of possibilities the characters are able to imagine for themselves.

The fifth aspect is a continuum of perspective-taking and perspective-awareness. There is an inherent power aspect to whose perspectives are narrativized (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 125). Meretoja argues that being able to recognize other points of view, often distant both culturally and temporally, allows for the ethical potential (125–126). Our understanding of narratives or experiences of others does not happen clinically, and our own social, cultural, and historical world affects the way we are able to take on other perspectives (127). In the case of narrative fiction, Meretoja argues that "Narrative fiction frequently gives rise to a readerly dynamic based on the interplay between emotional participation and distanced reflection fueled by an awareness of the literary constructedness of the text" (130). Therefore, the readers feel for and with characters and process how they became to be themselves (131). When our own perspectives are in a dialogue with different ones, there is the possibility of becoming more aware of harmful societal narrative webs (128–129). Still, perspective-awareness does not equate more ethical actions in the future. One end of this continuum holds the narratives that impose certain perspectives, and the other end holds those that create space for being aware of one's own perspective and being able to take on differing perspectives (131). Perspective-awareness and perspective-taking through literary narratives therefore could encourage us to "widen our horizons, enrich our interpretative resources, and show new possibilities for us" (132). As mentioned earlier, romance novel narratives are fantasies of love and companionship. The genre has become to be more inclusive with more diverse storylines, featuring more diverse cast of characters and narratives. These types of romance novels certainly offer at least some possibilities for perspective-taking and perspective-awareness. It has also become increasingly popular to include the main love interest's narration in the

stories. This is the case for *Happiness* where some of the scenes are focalized through Gray. These glimpses do provide some space for the reader to understand why he acts a certain way, but his perspective still overwhelmingly focuses on his relationship with Sabrina. The novels with only the main character's perspective shows even less potential in this regard as the reader is only allowed one point of view.

The last aspect of Meretoja's framework is ethical inquiry. Narratives can work in both ethical and non-ethical ways (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 133–134). Meretoja draws distinction from the ideas of narratives having instructive qualities or the ability to train the reader (134). She sees that this would require a prior understanding of the right and the wrong. Instead, Meretoja argues that "the ethical potential of narrative fiction lies more in the questions it poses and in shaping or refining our sense of the complexities of the moral space we inhabit than in the answers it proposes" (135). Narratives have the ability to influence "our overall visions of good lives and just societies" (141). She also argues that through these features narratives can influence how we ethically view different situations. Temporality is essential for this aspect to be realized. Using the modern novel as an example, Meretoja argues that the ethical reflection is temporal for both the readers and the characters as the characters live their lives, and readers then judge the actions and inactions through the lens of their own prior experiences (141). When narratives unsettle the readers, they truly act as a form of ethical inquiry by forcing them to look beyond what is known:

> In thinking of narrative fiction as a mode of exploration that can function as a form of ethical inquiry in its own right, we should consider the possibility that the ethical lies in the power of literary narratives to function as a form of ethical questioning that unsettles us, rather than in the affirmative moral positions or arguments they may present. (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 142)

This is even more powerful when ethical imagination is also needed, and the narrative works non-subsumptively (142). Narratives can expand our sense of what is possible instead of repeating subsumptive narratives that aim to declare. Typical romance novels rarely cater ethically unsettling narratives. Still, I argue that they hold space for potentially encouraging ethical inquiry in how the different aspects of the narratives come together.

Another scholar who has examined the sense of the possible in storytelling is Amy Noelle Parks. She has done research on possibilities from a Bakhtian point of view on young adult (YA) romance novels. For both Parks and Meretoja, Bakhtin's theories of the dialogic notion of literacy are important. Parks utilizes his theory to analyze how narratives are able to

influence the reader's ideas of themselves and the world they inhabit (3–4). Meretoja in turn builds on Bakhtin's dialogical approach as she constructs narrative hermeneutics and hermeneutic narrative ethics. She centers the dialogue between narratives, personal and cultural narrative webs, and individuals experiencing and interpreting narratives and experiences (e.g., Meretoja, *Storytelling* 74–75; Meretoja, "Dialogics" 31–33). Parks argues that YA romance novels facilitate feminist possibilities in the narrative choices that the authors have made and that through these the readers are able to "grapple with questions related to love, pleasure and relationships rather than to absorb the author's intended (or unintended messages)" (2). Parks argues that it is possible to examine harmful societal structures and how they are visible in women's lives by acknowledging that women are free to choose to take on roles that can be viewed as more "traditional" or "oppressive" (3). My analysis Steel's and Henry's novels examines same themes, but Meretoja's broadened lens allows for the analysis to look beyond the conscious choices made about pushing specific narratives.

Before turning to my analysis, I will examine how Meretoja's model has been both criticized and praised, and how exactly my thesis can answer some of the criticism. Andreea Deciu Ritivoi finds much to agree with. She argues that Meretoja's model helps explain why it is possible for "powerful narratives" to influence us from an ethical point of view, even if they do not have a strict moral agenda (Ritivoi 118–119). She argues that Meretoja's model could help with developing one's own skills at engaging with narratives more ethically, with learning to listen instead of pushing one's own ideas of right and wrong (121–122). Others, like Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar, finds that the works that Meretoja uses as examples are so specific that their reach can be hindered because of that (28). He also argues that these literary narratives seem to encompass automatically all the features that Meretoja looks for in ethically open narratives (28). Moenandar's view is that Meretoja should have expanded beyond literary realm to other forms of storytelling. Liesbeth Korthals Altes also echoes this same sentiment (747). In my thesis, I expand the nature of the literary narratives to be closer to what Moenandar and Altes' criticism asks for.

To better show the difference between my primary material and Meretoja's, I will compare my findings to her own analysis on two works: Julie Francks's *Die Mittagsfrau* (English translated name *The Blind Side of the Heart*) and David Grossman's *To the End of the Land* (original name *Isha Borachat Mi'bsora*). *Die Mittagsfrau* tells the story of a German half-Jewish woman, Helene. The novel focuses on explaining her reasoning behind abandoning

her son at a railway station, and it does this by focusing on her youth and adulthood. In her childhood, her mother's mental illness was especially transformative as was her later marriage to a Nazi soldier. The marriage forced her to assume an Aryan identity to survive. In her analysis of Franck's novel, Meretoja focuses on how silence affects the narrative and what roles narrative in-betweens hold in the realm of possibilities. She also emphasizes the role of narrative imagination. In the chapter on Grossman's novel, she examines how dialogue and shared narrative in-betweens are explored. Through this novel, Grossman ultimately argues for ending the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The narrative follows Ora whose son is in active duty in the Israeli army. The narrative is constructed from present-day narration and Ora's flashbacks to her past. The flashbacks reveal, for example, her love triangle with two men. In the present-day narration Ora fears that she will get the news that her son has died, and this triggers her to go on a journey through Israeli countryside with her son's father. During that time, they share stories and refamiliarize themselves again with each other and their son.

Meretoja's framework, or elements of it, have already been used in research prior to this thesis. For example, Ada Schwanck has examined how documentaries utilize subsumptive and non-subsumptive storytelling when presenting the stories of LGBTI asylum seekers. Schwanck focuses on the dialogical elements of interpretation. She also examines the ways that the narratives of two example documentaries break away from the Western hegemonic view of asylum seekers and their queer identities (126–147). She argues that "By taking a non-subsumptive approach, I could focus on elements in the narratives that complicate and challenge hegemonic practices" (147). Similarly, by examining romance novels, I will be able to look at narratives that do not attempt to provide either subsumptive or non-subsumptive narratives. I will also center hegemonic cultural narratives and examine the ways that the novels occasionally break away from them. Meretoja's model enables me to show where and how the narratives diminish and enable the sense of the possible.

3 From Beginning to the Barrier

In this chapter, I will examine the first four essential narrative elements of romance novels through the six aspects of Meretoja's model. The elements analyzed in this chapter are the current society, the first meeting, the attraction, and the barrier. The first meeting and the attraction will be analyzed together, as the two overlap and complement each other. First, I will examine themes present in the current society. I will focus on the themes of emotionally orphaned characters, portrayal of women and men, the diversity of the characters, and how friendships and romantic relationships are viewed. Next, I will examine how attractiveness, courtship, and the love at first sight and "soulmate" narratives are portrayed. Finally, this chapter ends with the analysis of the various barriers the characters encounter: how marriage and divorce are presented, long distance as a relationship form, and how mental health issues are dealt with.

3.1 The Current Society

The society at the beginning of a romance novel always contains elements that the protagonist and the love interest must overcome (Regis 31). This sets many parameters for the novel, showcasing what is possible and what is not in the realm of the narrative. This means that alongside of the obvious fault in the society, its other features also play a role in what kind of possibilities are opened or closed for the characters and the implied readers. Both works examined here spend time crafting the societal details of their story worlds, from the beginning of the narratives to their ends. I will begin my analysis with a focus on those more static portrayals of the beginning and discuss the possible change in them in the second analysis chapter.

An emotionally orphaned main character is a significant theme in both *Happiness* and *Happy Place*. Orphans are common main characters in romance novels (Regis 91). Originally, this allowed the main character to have more freedom to choose their spouse as there is no family to consult. Furthermore, this feature also allows the barrier to become internal for the main character (91). Both Steel and Henry use this feature to establish their main characters and to set up the internal barriers of the narratives. Sabrina, Steel's main character, is traditionally orphaned. Her father died when Sabrina was in her early twenties, and her mother left them when she was a child (Steel 5–7). Her orphaned status is further emphasized by how she was emotionally orphaned by her father. From the narration, we find out that Sabrina's father

made sure that she had everything she might need physically, including a good education. However, he never made an emotional connection with his daughter – not even at his deathbed (6–7). Similarly, Henry's main character, Harriet, spent her childhood in a home that did not support her emotionally (Henry 71). Harriet's physical needs were met, but the lack of communication between the family members and the harshness of her upbringing have had a significant impact on her life. Harriet is even estranged from her older sister, and the two have a cold and distant relationship (187). The narrative in-between that has been established between the two main characters and their respective families showcases many subsumptive elements. By omitting love and connection, and by refusing to tell Sabrina about his past (e.g., Steel 7), her father's actions have led to Sabrina's sense of the possible to become suppressed. Similarly, the narrative in-between of Harriet's family hinges on silence and omittance of feelings. This is reflected in her behavior and what she views as possible in her life.

As I noted earlier, the plot device of orphaned characters is so popular that it has become a staple in the romance novel genre. When examined from an ethical point of view, this overt master-narrative of romance novels contains many negative traits and often closes possibilities. Weisser argues that when deployed, this narrative promotes the idea of a poor girl with good qualities and high intellect whose reward in life is to find a man to provide her with the life that she deserves (39). Indeed, the orphan narrative works subsumptively in both Steel's and Henry's novels as it pushes forward the idea that a man must rescue women from their current lives. Both main characters are intelligent but withdrawn women, and only a few people know how to appreciate them. In *Happiness*, the reader finds out that Sabrina has been incredibly unlucky in love (Steel 9–11) with two broken marriages (14–15) and an unsuccessful past with internet dating and matchmaking (18–19). When the narrative begins, Sabrina is a successful author who pours all her time into writing, has only a few friends, and has made the decision that this life is good enough for her (17–21). Similarly, Harriet has a past of unsuccessful dating experiences (e.g., Henry 11–12, 28–29) and a broken engagement (16). Her intelligence is also emphasized with her brain surgery studies (8–9). Already here, it becomes evident that subsumptive cultural master-narratives push the idea that the lives of the main characters are lacking due to them being single, even if Sabrina in *Happiness* claims to be happy and content with her life as the narrative begins (21).

While the portrayal of the main characters as emotionally orphaned is very similar in the novels, there are key differences in how diversity, gender roles, and gendered expectations are portrayed within the current society. Both Sabrina and Harriet fit the description of a second-

wave feminist woman. They are successful in their careers, and their friends and families are supportive of them. In *Happiness*, there is even more emphasis on a progressive image of women, as the protagonist is a voluntarily childless woman in her 40s (Steel 16–17). Sabrina also *chooses* to be alone and even wants her friends to stop their matchmaking (20, own emphasis). Weisser argues that Victorian ideals still influence the portrayal of womanhood today (3). Sabrina's portrayal goes against these ideals. For example, Sabrina is not self-sacrificing and pursues the life she deems worth living, showing the readers another way of being a woman. The beginning of the *Happy Place* provides a more typical depiction as Harriet continually sacrifices her own needs – even for complete strangers on a plane: "Ordinarily, I would consider myself to be a superb seatmate. I'm more likely to get a bladder infection than to ask a person to get up so I can use the lavatory." (Henry 5). Nevertheless, Harriet's portrayal fits the feminist image of a young 21st century woman as she, for example, pursues her own career.

Like Harriet and Sabrina, the two male love interests share some features. They both stray from the way male leads are typically portrayed in romance novels. In this sense, their portrayal offers a counter-narrative. Neither Wyn in *Happy Place* nor Gray in *Happiness* fit the stereotype of an overtly masculine man, as they do not demonstrate their physical power over the main characters. Allan argues that traditionally romance novel heroes follow the ideals of hegemonic masculinity in that they are successful in life, overtly masculine in behavior, and daredevils to the point of aggression (27–28). Parnell agrees with this view in her examination of more recent romance heroes. She argues that they are "initially depicted as stoic and determinedly unemotional, an affect that is typically described as a behavior learned from their fathers and undone upon meeting the heroine" (18). Weisser adds to this from her point of view of Victorian ideals and argues that men were, and still are, often viewed as the mind, where women are the heart (3). Examination of Gray, Wyn, and their fathers contradicts the more expected behavior and male ideals in many ways. For example, it is evident that Wyn sees himself as intellectually inferior to Harriet (e.g., Henry 268–270). He is not afraid to go against the ideal of stoicism and being unemotional as he tells Harriet:

> "I don't know. I was embarrassed."
>
> "Embarrassed," I repeat, like it's my first introduction to the word. It might as well be. "What could you possibly be embarrassing about this?"
>
> "I've never been like you," he says. "I wasn't brilliant. I wasn't someone with a ton of goals. I've spent my first thirty years tripping through life." (Henry 268)

Likewise, Gray also discusses his feelings openly, a point that I will touch upon further when I analyze the narrative element of overcoming the barrier in chapter 4. The depictions of Wyn's and Gray's looks and how they pertain to this counter-narrative around masculinity are also explored later as I discuss the features of attractiveness in this chapter. Instead, here I will discuss the transformative narrative in-betweens between the fathers and the sons. In both novels, the inadequate parent-child relationship of Sabrina and Harriet is contrasted with the loving and healthy family dynamic of the male leads. In the case of what Parnell argues about the father-son relationship, neither novel subscribes to that dynamic. In a later scene in *Happy Place*, where Wyn is teaching Harriet how to fight, he tells her that "this information came straight from Hank [Wyn's father]" (317). This is salient also in the scene where Harriet narrates her memory of Hank running to meet his son and his new girlfriend (172). Together, these scenes show that the narrative in-between of male relationships and masculinity does not adhere to what is expected of a romance hero. Similarly, Gray in *Happiness* has a warm relationship with his father, albeit slightly more stoic. Even before his father's accident, Gray visits him as often as he can (Steel 54). Later, after the accident, Gray moves in with his father to help him (235–236), and when Gray begins his divorce process, he confides in his father (242, 246). While the depictions are not as warm and open as between Wyn and Hank, this still demonstrates deviance from prevalent master-narratives of masculinity.

When discussing Julia Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau*, a novel about a woman of Jewish origin in Nazi Germany who has to hide her identity, Meretoja argues that the rigid gender roles of Nazi Germany set strict parameters for the characters' sense of the possible (*Storytelling* 153–154). For example, the novel contrasts gender roles and expectations and how adherence to them affects the possibilities in the lives of the characters: "Helene's mother is more attached to the cultural stereotypes of what is appropriate for women than Helene's father, who is more open-minded and questions conventional gender roles" (153–154). Helene's father's influence is short-lived as he dies when she is a child. His death also negatively affects the main character's hopes and dreams of becoming something that is not expected of women. As I have argued here, both Steel's and Henry's novels also challenge the master-narratives around gender, especially strongly in the case of masculinity. This shapes the possibilities that are open for Sabrina, Harriet, and their love interests. In the society of the beginning of the novel, the two women are both able to live independently. They can pursue their careers while the men are depicted as more vulnerable. However, the prevalent view of the necessity of

romantic love still affects both protagonists as they continue to attempt to date, a point that I will return to later.

The portrayal of side characters continues to divide the two narratives. *Happiness* hardly offers any representation of minorities, and the story is that of a straight, white, able-bodied, and affluent couple. The novel diminishes chances for perspective-taking and perspective-awareness as it does not offer alternative narratives. *Happy Place*, instead, does do so while portraying a typical heterosexual love story. The novel provides the readers an opportunity to relate and to take in different perspectives through Cleo and Kimberly, a queer couple. Meretoja argues that in the Western world there is a "heteronormative master narrative of a nuclear family as the basis of a happy life" ("Dialogics" 38). She adds that this master-narrative has been extended to same-sex couples, but in a way that still necessitates monogamous relationships (38–39). The force of this can be seen in *Happy Place*, where the portrayal of Cleo and Kimberly caters a more neutral stance on queerness by not explicitly stating their sexualities. Still, the storyline of Cleo and Kimberly allows for a dialogue between multiple voices to take place. This can help expand the (implied) reader's perspective-taking skills as they potentially encounter new, different narratives.

Queerness is not the only way Henry brings diversity into *Happy Place*. The ambiguity, however, follows in this too. She provides some descriptions of her characters' looks but strays away from explicitly stating the ethnicities of the characters. For example, Cleo has "dip-dyed box-braids" (1) which are a hair style common among individuals of African American descent while Harriet's other friend, Sabrina, is "honey-haired" (1). This as a natural hair color points to her most likely being of European descent. The reader does not find out the main couple's ethnicities either, but Harriet's last name Kilpatrick and Wyn's last name Connor point to the British Isles. While *Happy Place* does provide a more ethically open narrative that allows different types of exploration, the ambiguity also sets strict limits to it. The lives of the characters are never set in context, hindering any deeper self-identification or perspective-taking by readers.

Meretoja argues for the importance of historical imagination (*Storytelling* 94), and how it contributes to the sense of the possible. She argues that through narratives we can understand what kind of possibilities a specific historical moment in time afforded to those inhabiting it, and how everyday people shape history (94). More importantly in the context of this thesis, narratives enable us to see how the past influences the possibilities of today, the future, and

their interconnectedness (95). Therefore, while the narrative in *Happy Place* does not reinforce harmful stereotypes about queerness or different ethnicities, the decision to omit full references also prevents it from offering explicit counter-narratives as well as historical and political contexts. This hinders possibilities of perspective-taking and the creation of narrative in-betweens that could help readers with ethical inquiry. Through her analysis of *Die Mittagsfrau*, Meretoja points out the power relations in whose stories are being told (*Storytelling* 160). Her analysis of the "us" and "them" of Nazi Germany shows how narratives are linked to power and how these shape our sense of self. While the novel she analyzes draws attention to this purposefully, this effect is more covert in these two romance novels. *Happiness* does not provide any type of alternative narratives, and while *Happy Place* does, the ambiguity stops the narrative from providing a non-subsumptive narrative in its full potential.

Just like with the theme of diversity, the two novels differ in how friendships, romantic relationships, and the hierarchy between them are portrayed. *Happiness* is the more traditional of the two. In the Western world, the master-narrative around friendships shows that female friendships are perceived as deeper and more emotionally fulfilling. In *Happiness* the reader finds out about Sabrina's friendships, and how she has one close friend, Olivia (Steel 18–19). She is important to Sabrina, and they often call or meet each other (e.g., 43). In contrast, Gray's friendships are barely mentioned other than to reveal that his wife has had an affair with one of his friends (186). Here, the narrative provides a subsumptive narrative. The image of romantic relationships appears at first to lean more towards a non-subsumptive narrative. Sabrina is happy being by herself (e.g., 21) and Gray is content enough in his unconventional marriage not to file for a divorce (98–99). Still, the supremacy of romantic relationships becomes clear through the narrative. Gray is hesitant to divorce, and Olivia never ceases her matchmaking attempts. The hierarchy is similar in *Happy Place*. Friendships are viewed more non-subsumptively as there is a greater emphasis placed on them, but they are still seen as secondary. Their friend group is described to be extremely close ever since Harriet, Sabrina, and Cleo met in college (Henry 1). The narrative in-between that the three have created is still not strong enough to counter the master-narrative. For example, Harriet believes that as soon as her breakup with Wyn is reveled, their friend group will also break up (e.g., 19). This way the narrative shows that even though friendships are important and meaningful, they are secondary. As I analyze the happy endings of the narratives later, I will come back to the

themes of the current society to draw final conclusions based on how genre typically they were utilized.

3.2 The First Meeting and the Attraction

The first meeting and the descriptions of attraction between the future couple reveal a great deal about the society of the novels and the sense of the possible in it. Regis places emphasis on how the first meeting often shows some features of the barrier (31), while the attraction reveals the reasons why the couple is compatible (33). Here, the focus is on how the physical and emotional attraction, courtship, and the love at first sight and soulmate narratives are portrayed. As *Happy Place* presents two first meetings – the meeting after the breakup that opens the narrative and Harriet's memory of them meeting for the first time – I will examine both.

When discussing the portrayal of womanhood and manhood earlier, I argued that men are still often viewed as the minds and women as the hearts of a relationship (Weisser 3). This divide is also visible in how attraction is portrayed, and the two novels reinforce prevalent Western gender norms. For example, the representation of physical attraction provides a rather neutral, genre typical approach to attractiveness. Sabrina describes Gray's looks in a more precise manner: "He was so good-looking that she couldn't help staring at him, the way one looked at beautiful women" (Steel 47). Harriet's praise of Wyn's looks is less direct, but still conveys similar levels of physical attraction as when she recounts the memory of their first meeting, she describes his looks as "striking" (Henry 30). She also likens him to an actor or a model when the accidental sight of his naked midriff distracts her (42). In the descriptions of Gray's and Wyn's conventional attractiveness, the two novels revert back to alignment with hegemonic masculinity. Still, neither man's masculine physique is overly highlighted which continues to provide a slight deviance to the norm.

Likewise, Sabrina's and Harriet's looks are described conventionally. Gray's focalized narration in *Happiness* reveals that he finds Sabrina to be very attractive: "he found her just as irresistible, and the forces of attraction pulling them towards each other were the most powerful he had ever felt" (Steel 85). However, his focalized narration rarely comments on her looks directly, aside from when he tells her that she looks "incredible" on their first date (88). Because *Happy Place* does not include Wyn's narration, the reader only hears how he feels about Harriet through dialogue. He is more direct in these instances. For example, after Harriet has claimed that men do not generally think of her as sexy to start with, Harriet

remembers his response: “He doesn’t seem to hear me, instead studying me with a furrowed brow. ‘You’re not slow-release hot’” (Henry 37). Parnell argues that the romance novels she examined show women taking a passive role as sexual objects (16). Neither *Happiness* nor *Happy Place* reinforce this narrative, and the descriptions of attraction are more even, pointing towards a non-subsumptive narrative.

The emotional aspects of attraction turn this theme into a more subsumptive narrative. Both Sabrina and Harriet become the metaphorical hearts of the relationships, taking on the emotional labor. Throughout the narrative, and especially in the beginning stages of their relationship, Harriet has to build up Wyn’s self-esteem by telling him how his insecurities are only in his head (e.g., Henry 75, 268–269). Of course, this is not completely one-sided as Wyn also reminds Harriet of her brilliance (e.g., 79). Nonetheless, Wyn’s reminders are spontaneous while Harriet builds up his confidence purposefully. Similar pattern is found in *Happiness*. Gray describes Sabrina as “gentle” and “vulnerable” (Steel 59), reinforcing feminine stereotypes. He is also attracted to her intelligent side:

> Gray loved hearing how engaged she was. She had an inquiring mind, she wanted to know more about everything, and she liked being involved in how everything worked. She was full of life and energy, and having read her books, he understood her better now. Her mind was always going a million miles a minute and he was never bored talking to her. (Steel 83–84)

However, Gray’s attraction feels superficial compared to Sabrina’s analysis on him:

> He was the most appealing man she’d ever met. Tender, kind, funny and smart, he had a great sense of humor and she could tell he had a good heart. He was from an eminently respectable background and had a successful career. He wasn’t crazy, angry, neurotic, demented, or bitter, didn’t hate his parents, and wasn’t angry at the world or politically weird like every other man she’d ever gone out with or being fixed up with. (Steel 93–94)

Both novels push the implicit subsumptive master-narrative that emotional attractiveness is more important to women, and that women are the inherently nurturing partners. They show this by having the women do most of the emotional labor. Gray and Wyn do both somewhat take part in this work, but it still largely resides with the protagonists, therefore reinforcing harmful narratives of gendered roles in relationships. It becomes clear how cultural narrative webs permeate literary narratives. As Meretoja explains, cultural dominant narratives become a part of our narrative identities (*Storytelling* 82–83). These master-narratives around gender have been internalized as parts of the narrative identities of the four characters, and they build their sense of selves by constantly reinterpreting these narratives (65–66). There is still space

for narrative imagination in the novels, especially in *Happiness* where Sabrina challenges these subsumptive narratives through her pursuit of a career and her deliberate decision to be childfree.

In both novels, Wyn and Gray pursue Harriet and Sabrina. This makes the theme of courtship also subsumptive as it reinforces harmful master-narratives around gender roles. Even after feminist ideology has become more widely accepted, this dynamic is common (Weisser 14). This is especially salient in *Happiness.* Gray asks Sabrina out on their first date (Steel 84), he initiates their first kiss (102), he also follows Sabrina to her home in the US to make amends (143), and finally, he proposes to her (284). The narrative in *Happiness* paints Sabrina to be a passive follower; the narrative portrays an image of courtship where women neither have nor take agency. Harriet has some more agency in *Happy Place*. Wyn organizes their first date (Henry 147), tells their friend group that they are together (150), and proposes to Harriet (224). Yet, Harriet does challenge the narrative of passive women by initiating their first kiss (120) and deciding to go live in Montana with Wyn at the end of the story (368–374).

The narrative elements of first meeting and attraction also contain judgements around how love and relationships are viewed. Love at first sight and soulmate narratives are common in romance novels. These promote a depiction of love and romantic relationships that closes the sense of the possible as it portrays a worldview of monogamy as the only way to happiness. Love at first sight enables the barrier to become about societal pressure that the woman must be freed from (Regis 34). In the contemporary understanding of love, there still is the idea of the one and the wrong persons to love (Weisser 9). This soulmate narrative also promises eternal passion in relationships, a theme that is important to contemporary readers (Weisser 9–10; Fekete 3–4). The love at first sight narrative is stronger in *Happiness*, and it is visible already in how attraction between Sabrina and Gray is described. From the beginning, Sabrina's focalized narration reveals that she is thinking of Gray in a romantic manner: "But she wasn't dating him. He was just the attorney for the estate." (Steel 51). The reader finds out that Gray feels similarly, as his focalized narration reveals that his feelings are romantic and something that he has not felt in years (59). The soulmate narrative becomes clear through the Sabrina's focalized narration of attraction:

> She was more confused than ever and had no idea why she felt this way about a man she barely knew. It was as though just by being there all the powerful emotions of her lifetime had come bubbling up to the surface, and spilled everywhere the moment she saw him. What she felt defied words, and

> explanations, and even reason. It was all chemistry and instinct. They barely knew each other but her soul had recognized a kindred spirit. (Steel 62–63)

Sabrina and Gray's romantic relationship is built quickly, and the special quality of their love becomes clear after their first kiss: "He held her after they kissed, as though it was the most natural thing in the world, and he felt as though he had been waiting for her all his life" (Steel 102). In *Happy Place*, these narratives are presented more subtly, but they are still woven into the story. Harriet and Wyn also experience instant attraction that keeps building. While it is not fully a depiction of love at first sight, their relationship is still described as something more meaningful. For example, Harriet questions their relationship when they have sex for the first time: "*Will we still be friends after this,* I'd whispered, and he'd smiled as he told me, *You've never been just a friend to me*" (Henry 145, original emphasis). The soulmate narrative is present in *Happy Place*, albeit expressed in a more implicit manner than in *Happiness*. This theme is shown in the way Harriet describes her attraction to Wyn: "Like my body will never stop trying to find its way back to his" (62). Another example of this is when Harriet and Wyn are close to being intimate with each other. Harriet narrates that it has always been difficult to tell "where one of us ends and the other begins" (214) during such moments. The love at first sight and soulmate narratives act subsumptively in both novels as the prevalent master-narrative of one right person for each is presented as the only option.

3.3 The Barrier

Marriage and divorce, long distance relationships, and mental health are prevalent themes of the barriers in both novels. The barriers show the reader what is stopping the couple from forming, and they often consist of both internal and external parts (Regis 32). In *Happiness* and *Happy Place*, these themes are both internal and external and contain elements that both open and close the sense of the possible.

The importance of marriage shows in how Steel and Henry paint it as the culmination of romantic relationships. However, the portrayal of divorce differs in the novels. In *Happy Place*, Harriet and Wyn were engaged to be married before breaking up. Their friend Sabrina, who has earlier been opposed to marriage as a concept, has realized that she wants to marry her boyfriend Parth after all (Henry 23). Cleo and Kimberly's relationship is the exception, as there is no indication or discussion around their wishes and plans for marriage. Because marriage is clearly an important end goal for romantic relationships in the novel, the ambiguity around this topic inadvertently promotes the idea that marriage is not for queer

couples. Bridget Kies offers one alternative explanation for this. Kies argues that nonproposals have become more common in queer romances, be it in a literary or onscreen form (2). She argues that the trend in queer romance narratives is for the marriage and happily ever after (HEA) to be exchanged for a happy for now (HFN) ending (Kies 4). She continues that while queer marriages are becoming legal in more places, the nonproposals stand as opposition to the normative act of marriage as the ultimate happy ending (11). Kies' examples, the movie *Bros* and the novel *Husband Material*, are from 2022 and were popular upon their release. Therefore, there is a possibility that this trend has influenced Henry even though she focuses on writing heterosexual romances. In the end, Henry's ambiguity when discussing this theme prevents it from becoming a non-subsumptive narrative. Cleo and Kimberly's nonproposal is also countered with another traditional relationship goal. At the end of the novel, Cleo reveals that they are having a child (325–329). While the novel simultaneously offers a narrative of a happy queer couple expanding their family, which provides space for perspective-awareness and perspective-taking, it also pushes the more traditional idea that romantic relationships need the next step to be fulfilling.

Negative depictions of romantic relationships form a significant part of the internal barrier in *Happy Place*. This is especially clear when examining the shared narrative in-between of Harriet's family. When she narrates her memory of her and Wyn visiting her parents for the first time, she tells him: "'If we're making each other unhappy,' I say as evenly as I can, 'we can't keep going. I couldn't stand living every day knowing you resent me'" (Henry 247). In this scene, they have had dinner with Harriet's family, and she has told him about her childhood and how her parents have long since fallen out of love. The novel counters this harmful narrative in-between by presenting other perspectives on marriage and romantic relationships. Like mentioned, Harriet's parents stay married despite clearly being unhappy and not in love with each other (e.g., 71–73). This depiction is contrasted with both the happy marriage of Wyn's parents (Henry 176) and the happy divorce of Cleo's parents (57). Finally, Sabrina's parents' many unhappy marriages and divorces bring one more voice into the narration (23). From the hermeneutic narrative ethics' point of view, these provide a more open narrative that allows ethical exploration. By allowing the reader to see a multitude of depictions of marriage and divorce, the novel provides space for a non-subsumptive narrative.

The effect of the non-subsumptive narrative is emphasized in how the characters in *Happy Place* do not marry quickly. This is not the case in *Happiness*. The portrayal of marriage and divorce is more traditional, and one of the main external barriers for their relationship is

Gray's marriage to Matilda. Gray got married very young (Steel 151) and has not divorced because it is uncommon in his social circles (156). Some of the internal barrier also resides in this theme. Sabrina has been divorced twice, and where the first marriage was a green-card marriage, her second husband turned out to be abusive (153). The marriage of her parents also ended in divorce, leading her to have many bad representations of marriage. In the narrative element of the barrier, *Happiness* almost seems to promote a counter-narrative where marriage becomes a caricature of itself. The effect of perspective-taking becomes evident in this theme. Similarly to the examples that Meretoja presents, for example David Grossman's novel *To the End of the Land* which centers the Israel-Palestine conflict (e.g., Meretoja, *Storytelling* 270), perspective-taking in these two romance novels functions as a deliberate way of showing a multitude of experiences and points of view. In both the Grossman's novel and the two romance novels examined here, narrative in-betweens play crucial and transformative roles. Meretoja shows how the dialogue between the characters and their inner dialogue slowly transform the narrative in-betweens in *To the End of the Land* (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 268). Likewise, Harriet's and Sabrina's narrations show how they interpret marriage and divorce through their own experiences and the shared experiences of others around them, and these influence the possibilities they perceive themselves to have in life.

In both novels, long-distance relationship is the primary relationship mode for the couples for quite some time, and it is one of the larger barriers. It works on both internal and external levels, and it is made to seem like a bad option. A large part of the internal barrier relates to communication, a theme that I will leave aside here and analyze in the next chapter. The narrative around long-distance relationships is quite subsuming as neither novel provides alternative ways for the reader to consider these types of relationships. In *Happy Place*, the distance causes problems between the couple and the friend group. As they are unable to meet often due to living in different parts of the country, their group dynamic begins to change. The same happens to Harriet and Wyn's relationship. They are forced to live in different states and are often unsuccessful at their attempts to meet each other due to external reasons (Henry 277). In *Happy Place*, this external barrier is created due to sudden circumstances, and it expands to have a significant internal element as well.

In *Happiness*, the barrier of distance is in place from the beginning as Sabrina lives in the US, and Gray lives in the UK. Sabrina and Gray are conscious of this from the beginning as they explore the options for their relationship (e.g., Steel 84–85). The narrative is subsumptive because neither character believes such a romantic relationship would be a viable option. For

example, as Sabrina accepts Gray's date invitation, the narration notes: "It didn't make much sense, and she would probably end up selling the Brooks estate and would never see him again. But the prospect of having dinner with him was irresistible" (85). Unlike in *Happy Place*, this same barrier does not exist for friendships in *Happiness*. Sabrina does not worry about her friendships becoming long-distance, and her focalized narration states that her friends could come visit her in the UK (77–78). *Happiness*' focus on romantic relationships makes the depiction even more sumpsumptive. In comparison, *Happy Place* provides a slightly more open narrative as it considers friendships as well. Meretoja identifies questioning as another important feature in creating non-subsumptive narratives (*Storytelling* 270–271). She argues that "Genuine questions are open in the sense that they do not predetermine the answer: they indicate a willingness to learn and alter one's preconceptions." (270) Such questioning is not happening in either *Happiness* or *Happy Place* regarding long-distance relationships. Instead, the overt and covert questioning in these novels has the opposite effect and strengthens the subsumptive narrative around long-distance relationships.

The final theme I will analyze in this chapter is mental health. This is an internal barrier that is explored in both novels, but it is more prevalent in *Happy Place*, where it is an overt theme that builds the barrier. In *Happiness*, it is a covert theme that is talked about more overtly. Sabrina has gone to therapy for years due to her emotionally traumatic childhood (Steel 5). Her trauma, the years in therapy, and the resulting healing are discussed clearly and precisely (170). Yet, the narration makes it clear that at least some of the reasons why Sabrina keeps her distance from Gray are due to her past. After their communication has stopped towards the end of the long-distance relationship, she continues to keep her distance and reinforces in her mind the narrative that she is alone: "She hadn't heard from him in days, and her imagination ran wild as she worried that he would give up on an excessively expensive divorce and stay married. Her mother's leaving her when she was a child had left her with abandonment issues, which surfaced now in full force" (261). In the novel, Sabrina also decides to visit her mother to gain closure (171, 183). There is a level of self-realization in Sabrina's narrative that helps provide a non-subsumptive narrative around mental health and therapy. The narrative also helps normalize the idea that mental health issues can come back. Sabrina is able to narrativize her own life and cultivate her own narrative imagination beyond being in a dialogue with dominant cultural narratives. When Meretoja discusses this, she examines what the effect of storytelling is in Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau*: "Storytelling is presented in the novel as a way of telling where one comes from – making the past intelligible to others in the

present – but also as a way of orienting oneself to the future and imagining possible futures with others" (*Storytelling* 156). Sabrina does discuss her past with Gray, but the effect of dialogical storytelling is more meaningful between the narration and the implied reader. The narration is told in third person, but the third-person narrator focalizes Sabrina's feelings closely. Therefore, this theme becomes part of a shared narrative in-between that allows the reader to understand Sabrina's motivations to build and uphold the barriers, even though mental health is not presented as an overt theme in the narrative.

Mental health issues form a large part of the barrier for Harriet and Wyn, and in many ways, they are at the forefront in *Happy Place*. In *Happiness*, only Sabrina has struggled with her mental health, but in *Happy Place*, both Harriet and Wyn have their own issues. However, these are often discussed more indirectly. As I argued earlier, Harriet does more of the emotional labor in their relationship due to Wyn's low self-esteem. Wyn has a habit of belittling himself and diverting attention away from him (e.g., Henry 148–149), and once Wyn's father dies, his depression and self-isolation become larger themes (272). Later, he openly tells Harriet that he is taking antidepressants (287). Harriet's mental health struggles instead are revealed less directly through the first-person narration. The reader finds out that due to the emotional neglect Harriet suffered in her childhood, she has become a people pleaser who is even willing to harm herself for the well-being of others (5). She is also unable to handle conflict and always looks to diffuse the situation (167–168). Harriet also chose to suffer her heartbreak alone, without confiding in her friends: "He asked if I'd told Cleo and Sabrina. The thought nauseated me. Telling them was going to destroy our friend group, ten years of history down the drain" (43). The first-person narration brings the dialogue between Harriet and the implied reader closer. As the reader is privy to Harriet's thoughts, there are greater possibilities for perspective-taking. Nonetheless, this element shows more potential for a non-subsumptive narrative due to the covert handling of Harriet's mental health.

3.4 Conclusions

Both novels contain ethically complex and interesting narratives. In many instances, *Happy Place* offers more space for ethical inquiry than *Happiness*. Henry's portrayal of minorities, while not reaching its full potential, still allows for perspective-taking practices. Henry also places more emphasis on the importance of friendships, often providing a more non-subsumptive narratives around the theme. Yet, she still often perpetuates both master-narratives of romance novels and the real world in her stories, this way hindering the sense of

the possible. This is the case, for example, with the gendered portrayal of women and courting.

While some of the more conservative narrative elements can be surprising in the younger author's work, they are slightly less so in Steel's novel. As an established romance author with a long career, the stricter and more traditional emphasis on the importance of marriage is almost expected. However, alongside of the many narratives that lean on the subsumptive side, Steel also provides narratives that provide space for ethical inquiry. The narrative around mental health is especially promising, as it is dealt with openly and purposefully. Steel's main love interest, Gray, also deviates somewhat from traditional romance heroes in his willingness to discuss emotions and his lack of aggressive behavior.

Earlier, I presented preliminary arguments against Kolmes and Hoffman's claim that romance novels inherently oppose the (sexual) objectification of the female leads. I will now broaden them further. Sex and sexual desire are not centered in either novel, and as a whole, the scenes provide narratives of equal participation. For example, after Wyn and Harriet fight, she asks whether he was able to find condoms, therefore moving the scene along (Henry 321). Likewise in *Happiness*, the omniscient narration tells the reader that "—they flew into each other's arms and began pulling each other's clothes off in desperation" (Steel 149–150), indicating equal sexual desire. Nevertheless, I would not argue that these novels are free of objectification. Kolmes and Hoffman argue on autonomy that "Other than the sexual content, the primary focus of romance novels is the choices the heroine makes. Thus, the structure of romance novels puts the heroine's autonomy at the forefront" (36). As I have shown, the theme of courtship is subsumptive in nature in both novels as the men take lead. This means that the two male leads have more power, and, therefore, take away agency from Harriet and Sabrina. The two women are willing participants in both sex and courtship, but still, they do not have full agency, and as a result, their characters still contain elements of objectification.

4 From Hopelessness to Happy Ending

In this chapter the focus is on the remaining four essential narrative elements of romance novels. In the element of the moment of hopelessness, the focus will be on two new themes: lack of communication and career focused main characters. From this narrative point onwards, I will revisit earlier themes to see how they have changed as the narrative has progressed and what effect these changes have on the sense of possibilities. In the element of overcoming of the barrier, I examine what has happened to the communication, Harriet's and Sabrina's focus on their careers, and the view on long-distance relationships. Finally, the examination of the love declarations and the betrothals reveals the changes in the orphan main character narrative, the portrayal of women, and whether romantic relationships are still valued over friendships.

4.1 The Moment of Hopelessness

In the moment of hopelessness, it seems impossible for the main character and the love interest to become a couple (Regis 35). While the themes of the barrier (marriage and divorce, long distance relationships, and mental health) play a significant role in the creation of this moment, I shift the focus to two themes in Steel's and Henry's novels that build the momentum the most. I will examine how the lack of communication affects the sense of possibilities for Sabrina and Harriet and how the portrayal of the career focused main characters has changed.

The lack of communication is a prevalent theme in both novels, but Steel and Henry approach it differently. Some of this is due to the reader being privy to the love interest's thoughts in *Happiness* but not in *Happy Place*. Harriet's first-person narration ensures that the reader is also left in the dark. In contrast, the third-person narration focalized through Gray reveals his motivations to the reader – this way, the lack of communication is only between the two characters. The lack of communication between the characters is built quickly in *Happiness* and primarily resides in Gray's decision not to tell Sabrina that he is married before dating her. She unexpectedly meets Gray's wife, Matilda, which makes Sabrina feel betrayed to the point of asking Gray not to contact her again (Steen 108–113). This scene also reveals much about Sabrina's and Gray's moral compasses. Sabrina tells Gray that "Sins of omission are just as bad as sins of commission" (111), and later, she equates her own life to be "honest"

and Gray's, as a default then, dishonest (122). The disconnect between their view on marriage and cheating further underlines this:

> "And what did you think would happen when I found out? I'd forget or wouldn't care? You live with her, and you want to date and go to bed with me?"
>
> "It's never mattered before. I haven't met anyone I cared about in ten years we've been leading our own lives. Now it matters, and I have to figure it out. I was going to discuss it all with you tomorrow. I see now what a mistake I've made with this arrangement." (Steel 110)

In this scene, Sabrina questions Gray's actions, and his response explains why he does not view his actions strictly as cheating. Here, there is the possibility of a counter-narrative against the society's master-narrative on cheating. However, the effect is short-lived since Gray quickly conforms to Sabrina's morals. Still, it is worthwhile to acknowledge that the novel presents possibilities of perspective-awareness through Gray's focalization. The reader learns about his wife relatively early on, after Sabrina and Gray's first date (95). The fleeting counter-narrative reveals that his marriage is in name only, and that Gray had intentions to explain the situation to Sabrina (96). The third-person narration that is focalized through both Sabrina and Gray also brings the reader into a dialogue with the characters. Right after Sabrina has met Matilda and left Gray, Gray analyzes his own behavior and takes full blame of the situation (112). By offering a narrative in-between to be established between the reader and Gray, the narrative blurs the strict moral barriers Sabrina is attempting to uphold. These features also enable further perspective-taking and awareness as the reader understands each characters' motivations.

The lack of communication and the consequent state of not-knowing also affect the characters in *Happy Place*. As I argued earlier, Wyn's and Harriet's failure to communicate their needs led to their relationship ending. The silence between them caused neither of them to be sure of the other's intentions regarding their relationship, and as a result, Wyn broke off their engagement during a short, four-minute phone call (Henry 7). The narration of the present time reveals that both have their own assumptions about what happened to them. For example, Harriet believes that Wyn had planned the breakup because he was able send her belongings back to her so quickly (43). Later, Wyn prolongs the moment of hopelessness by withholding information from Harriet when they attempt to discuss the topic (184–187). At this stage, the narration is more subsumptive than in *Happiness* because of the one point of view and the lack of open communication.

Silence and the inability to communicate their life stories ensure that dialogue between the characters cannot take place in Steel's and Henry's novels. In Meretoja's examples, like in the case of the *Die Mittagsfrau*, muteness becomes destructive as the main character, Helene, loses the people she has shared dialogue and narrative in-betweens with (*Storytelling* 157–158). Helene's own identity becomes even more unstable after the Nazi party steps into power, and as a half-Jew, she is forced to take on a role of the oppressor to survive. Meretoja argues that through Helene's struggles, the novel demonstrates the importance of storytelling as a way to cultivate the sense of narrative-self. Similar effects of silence are visible in Steel's and Henry's novels as the lack of communication severely diminishes the sense of the possible for Sabrina and Harriet. This also changes their sense of themselves and their identities. In *Happy Place*, the first half of the narration shows Harriet's struggle with her identity as she evades questions about her brain surgery residency and her life in general (e.g., Henry 9). In *Happiness,* the lack of communication makes Sabrina revert to her earlier identity as an American with no claim over her British inheritance (Steel 115).

The effects of silence also play a similar role in the friendships in *Happy Place*. The lack of communication between Harriet, Wyn, and the rest of the friend group partially contributes to the moment of hopelessness for Harriet and Wyn. Furthermore, the lack of communication also directly affects the friend group, and they experience their own moment of hopelessness. Through perspective-taking and perspective-awareness, the reader can understand why Harriet chose not to tell their friends about their breakup. Harriet reveals early on that she fears that their friendships are going to end. The lack of communication has created a barrier between the friends by transforming the previously shared narrative in-between, which is evident in Sabrina and Cleo's new strained relationship (e.g., 89–90). Finally, in their shared moment of hopelessness, Sabrina reveals that she and Parth know about the breakup, which causes the group to seemingly split for good (303–308).

Another significant, but more covert aspect of the moment of hopelessness is the independence of the two protagonists. I argued earlier that the novels present a more open, explicit counter-narrative to womanhood. Both Sabrina and Harriet are independent and able to pursue their careers. The narratives continue this trend, even during the points of the novels when there is no hope of being together with their soulmates. Sabrina and Harriet still see possibilities for themselves, and the unattained love does not mean the end of the world for either of them. After finding out about Gray's marriage, Sabrina's focalized narration notes in a comforting manner that "She had been happy and content with her life before she had met

him, and she knew she would be happy again" (Steel 121). Sabrina is also afraid that a relationship might hinder her career (78–79). The image of the woman she is afraid she might become, one that has "to be present, come home to meals or even cook them, keep him company and talk to him and listen to his problems, and make him tea and soup if he had a cold" (78), is synonymous to the traditional and dominant expectation of women as spouses in Western societies. It is ethically significant that at this point in the narrative, where all hope is seemingly lost for her to be together with her soulmate, Sabrina chooses to think positively about her future. Even within the confines of the romance novel genre, where the readers know that this is not how the story ends, this allows for an alternative narrative to flourish.

Happy Place's narrative begins with the moment of hopelessness. Harriet and Wyn have broken up, and there is no hope for their relationship. The counter-narrative around Harriet's possibilities is presented more covertly than Sabrina's, but it is no less significant. Harriet is less optimistic about her future but does continue to strive to meet her work goals. Since the breakup, she has also tried dating, and while she is not yet happy (Henry 289), the elements of moving on and possible happiness in the future are present. This allows the reader to question what would have happened if they had never been forced to pretend to still be engaged. Unlike Steel, Henry does not provide explicitly worded critique of traditional gender expectations in relationships. The relationships of the friend group, including Harriet and Wyn's, are all more equal, reflecting the way younger generations tend to view relationships. For this reason, Henry's narrative is just as, if not slightly more, capable of offering potential for ethical inquiry at this point in the story.

4.2 The Overcoming of the Barrier

After the moment of hopelessness, a romance novel moves towards the dissolution of the barrier(s). This can be done in one scene, or throughout multiple scenes (Regis 36). There is no single moment that breaks the barriers in *Happiness* or *Happy Place*. In this subchapter, the analysis will revisit earlier themes, and I am able to begin to draw conclusions on how well these narratives facilitate ethical inquiry. Better communication is the most significant barrier breakers in both novels. Alongside it, the analysis looks at how the views on long-distance relationships and the two career-driven protagonists have changed.

Both Steel's and Henry's novels use the lack of communication to keep their couples apart for most of the novels. Therefore, it is logical that communication also plays a significant role in breaking down the barrier. The two novels have surprisingly similar approaches to the silence

and its breakdown, as they both provide relatively open narratives that encourage ethical exploration. Still, there are some differences in how they achieve this. As Harriet and Wyn begin a more open dialogue in *Happy Place*, it becomes evident that their breakup was caused by multiple smaller things. After Wyn reveals that he had started apprenticing for a designer while they were still together, Harriet's narration notes that "In the scheme of things, it's not a salacious reveal, but it is disorienting. To realize the rift between us began even longer ago than I realized" (Henry 268). In a later scene, Harriet and Wyn discuss their breakup and the reasons behind it. By divulging to each other how they felt then and how they feel now, they once more begin to build a shared narrative in-between (286–289). These conversations happen slowly, during multiple points in the narrative. As Harriet is the only narrator, the discussions between Wyn and Harriet shed light onto Wyn's motivations and his character in general. This continuous dialogical aspect creates a non-subsumptive narrative that provides space for perspective-awareness and perspective-taking. Compared to the reputation that romance novels often contain shallow plots (Weisser 131–132), *Happy Place* presents a more nuanced narrative where the problems presented are multifaceted, as are the solutions.

Happy Place continues to build on the non-subsumptive narrative around communication as it also uses new dialogical narrative in-betweens to break down the friend group's moment of hopelessness. After their falling-out, Harriet talks with Cleo (Henry 327–332), and together they talk with Sabrina (356–360). Their open communication enables them to find a way to continue their altered friendship. Meretoja's discussion on Grossman's *To the End of the Land* makes an interesting point about the narrative moving between the past and the present: "It is simultaneously a process of looking back and moving on; it is an activity of transforming their narrative in-between as to create a new space in which unprecedented experiences and identities – such as that of a shared parenthood – become possible" (*Storytelling* 263). This means that through sharing information, the characters share their traumatic pasts and are able to alleviate some of their pain (262–263). Similar effect is visible in *Happy Place* as the present and past narration is focused on life altering events in Harriet's life. The shared stories and discussion begin to alter Harriet's sense of self and the possibilities she sees in her life.

Similarly, better communication begins to break down the barrier in *Happiness* as Sabrina and Gray open up to each other. When the conversations between friends provide an added dialogical element in *Happy Place*, Grays attempt at open communication with his wife, Matilda, has a similar effect in *Happiness*. The reader is provided with possibilities for perspective-taking, though the non-subsumptive effect is lesser than in *Happy Place*. For

example, while Gray visits Sabrina in the US, they discuss their lives up to that point with relative openness, demonstrating a change for the better in their communication (Steel 145–146, 151–167). After Gray returns home, he openly and directly tells Matilda that he wants a divorce (191–194). Their conversation is less effective because Matilda does not fully participate in creating a narrative in-between that would facilitate possibilities for them both. Instead, her resistance hinders the sense of possibilities for Gray. Still, in both cases, these scenes provide starts of new, shared narrative in-betweens that in theory are able to open the sense of the possible for the participants. However, there are elements of dominance in Gray's conduct that reflect more stereotypical gender roles and contradict his earlier descriptions. For example, despite Sabrina's refusal to meet him or discuss their situation after she finds out that he is married, he follows her to her home in the US (143–144). This way, as he forces the communication to happen on his terms, he reinforces the stereotype of ideal romance heroes being dominating, overtly masculine men (Allan 27–28). Meretoja argues that the intention of the dialogic storytelling and the ability to not merely subsume new information are crucial (e.g., *Storytelling* 268). In discussing *To the End of the Land* she notes that "Ora and Avram reach toward each other through dialogic storytelling that is not an attempt to appropriate or define the other, but a search for understanding that involves thinking beyond their preconceived categories" (268). There are clear elements of subsumptive narratives in Gray's behavior and the narrative choices that follow, mainly Sabrina's submission to his behavior.

As the stories progress, Steel's and Henry's novels turn to judge long-distance relationships differently. Earlier, both provided a rather one-sided, negative depiction of this relationship form. In *Happiness*, no counter-narratives are offered that would change the earlier depiction of long-distance relationships. This barrier is also never fully broken, and by the end of the novel, Sabrina has a home in both countries and intends to divide her time between them (Steel 266). She makes this decision when the communication between her and Gray has stopped completely, and she is unsure if he still wishes to be with her. Even when communication is established again, the topic is only discussed briefly and superficially. Gray tells Sabrina that her place is in the UK and at the manor she inherited (282). After Sabrina agrees with him, Gray continues: "It would have been so wrong if you'd sold it. You can still have your barn in the Berkshires, but you need to be here, at least some of the time" (282). This is not enough to provide a counter-narrative to the previously presented negative depiction of long-distance relationships because the issue is never discussed with clarity. As a result, the reader is left with the earlier subsumptive narrative.

While the narrative in *Happy Place* changes its stance on long-distance relationships by the end, it does not become a fully non-subsumptive counter-narrative. The narration challenges its earlier view in the scene where Harriet and Wyn become a couple again. Wyn tells Harriet: "And if you get out to Montana and realize there's somewhere else you need to be, there's nothing I'm not willing to do to make it work. I would rather have you five days a year than anyone else all the time" (374). The story does not end with them in a well-working long-distance relationship, but the narrative still explicitly presents it as a viable alternative. The discussion around their possible long-distance relationship is brief, but direct and explicit. There is no danger that the reader might misunderstand the meaning.

Where long-distance relationships were viewed negatively in the beginnings of both novels, the image of Harriet and Sabrina as career focused women provided non-subsumptive narratives. However, both the narratives become more subsumptive and begin to hinder ethical potential as the stories progress. They achieve this by different means. Like with the long-term relationship theme, *Happiness* ignores the importance of the protagonist's career almost entirely after setting the barrier up, while *Happy Place* destroys it to push another narrative altogether. In *Happiness*, the meaningfulness that Sabrina finds in her career is ignored. This is significant because the reader knows that Sabrina is afraid of getting romantically involved with a man, for she fears that her priorities in life would change. The reader finds out that Gray is supportive of her career through his focalized narration: "Professionally, she had a full, busy life, and she seemed to take her success in stride and was very modest about it. He liked that about her too" (Steel 91–92). Yet, the reader never sees this enter their shared dialogue. The silence that stretches over this topic lasts until the end of the novel. The reader is left to assume that Sabrina was able to combine her career and her relationship with Gray in a satisfactory fashion. Steel hints at this in the opening of the final chapter, where Gray accompanies Sabrina on one of her work-related trips (287). Still, I argue that the vagueness of the ending dampens the non-subsumptive narrative in *Happiness* as the lack of explicit communication leaves too much on mere interpretation.

At times, it is possible to see the effects of the age difference between Steel and Henry. One example is the way that Henry navigates the change in Harriet's career goals. Because Harriet grew up seeing how her parent's regretted their unfulfilled life goals, she learned to push her own needs aside (243–246). Towards the end of the novel, it becomes clear that being a neurosurgeon was never Harriet's dream but rather something she did to please her parents. There is an inherent feminist notion of choice embedded into Henry's narrative as Harriet

chooses to give up her career to become happy (375–379). There is also an attempt to present this as a positive counter-narrative as, for example, Wyn tells her that "Your job doesn't have to be your identity. It can just be a place you go, that doesn't define you or make you miserable" (347). Nevertheless, the lack of realism in the situation makes this ending ethically suspect. Harriet has severe student loans, and by the end of the novel, she leaves her current career path to be with Wyn. To have some means of making money, she pursues a hobby of pottery that she has only recently begun and has not perfected yet (376).

Meretoja notes that "As readers engage in a dialogue with the novel [*To the End of the Land*], they draw on their cultural background and the narrative traditions to which the novel refers." (*Storytelling* 264). Therefore, it is no wonder that real readers have criticized this plot point for how it adheres to patriarchal gender expectations. For example, the starter of a discussion thread in Reddit points out that they are disappointed in Harriet for throwing away her career to pursue a hobby and to be with a wealthy man (Reddit). Many other users in the thread agree with them. In addition, they argue that there were barely any hints that Harriet might not be happy with her career choice. Here, I must slightly disagree with the Reddit users. Henry seems to hint at Harriet's dissatisfaction by portraying a character who is tired and unwilling to discuss her work in detail (e.g., Henry 9). Readers' confusion is understandable as this is not made explicit clear before the end. Within the narrative tradition of romance novels, it has been customary for the hero to either be wealthy or become wealthy during the narrative (Allan 29). Parnell remarks that this reflects the master-narrative of American dream that values the idea of being self-made (19–20). Reproduction of this narrative takes away agency from Harriet as there is the covert assumption that Wyn will help her financially. Gray's portrayal in *Happiness* also adheres to this narrative, but his wealth is balanced by Sabrina's significant financial success. In comparison, Harriet becomes an old-fashioned romance heroine who relies on the hero to support her emotionally and financially. This makes the non-subsumptive narrative of the beginning turn subsumptive as it hinders the sense of the possible in Harriet's life.

4.3 The Love Declaration and Betrothal

In the final part of the analysis, the focus will be on the elements of the love declaration and the betrothal. The placement of love declarations shapes the plot of the romance novel (Regis 34). In *Happiness*, the early love declarations solidify the love at first sight narrative, and in *Happy Place*, the late declaration prolongs the barrier. Regis focuses only on the first

declarations, but my analysis covers other significant love declarations as well. The element of betrothal consists of a proposal and acceptance (Regis 37). In *Happiness*, the betrothal is more traditional as it contains a formal engagement. Gray proposes to Sabrina after she has moved to the UK, and she agrees to marry him (Steel 284–285). Harriet and Wyn's engagement is not renewed at the end of *Happy Place*, but their relationship starts again (Henry 370–374). In this narrative element, I will revisit the themes of emotionally orphaned characters, the portrayal of women, and how friendships and romantic relationships are regarded.

Steel's *Happiness* provides a more ethically questionable narrative around love declarations, especially in the case of Gray's declarations. In contrast, the love declarations in *Happy Place* are more neutral, verging on providing a non-subsumptive narrative. The first love declarations in *Happy Place* take place in the narration of the past. Harriet recalls their first date after their secret relationship had begun. This is the initial betrothal, and the scene is quite traditional with Wyn instigating the declaration and Harriet returning the sentiment immediately (Henry 150). After their mutual love declarations, they tell their friends of the new relationship (150–152). In the current time narration of the novel, the love declaration scenes are more complicated and do not lead to immediate happy endings. As better communication begins to break down the barriers, the novel provides its first love declaration scene after their breakup. Harriet and Wyn talk about their love for each other, and how it still has not subsided (288–290). In this scene, Harriet tells Wyn that their conversation and the sex that follows is "one last *I love you*" (290, original emphasis). Later, this idea of unrequited yet mutual love persists. Wyn tells Harriet again that he loves her after their friends have found out about the breakup, and Sabrina and Parth have gotten married (364–365). Harriet refuses his declaration as she is not able to vision a future for them. This narrative is quite typical in romance novels, but still, the way Henry crafts it allows for a counter-narrative to be realized. For a moment, it seems like Harriet and Wyn might continue to live their separate lives despite still being in love with each other. This counter-narrative is broken by the love declaration that leads to the second, final, betrothal. After they have agreed to become a couple, Harriet tells Wyn that she loves him, and he reciprocates:

> My arms twine around him, my heart speeding wildly as the wind batters us. "I love you," I tell him.

> "In every universe." He kisses me then, a windblown curl caught between our lips. Like it's a first and a last. The end of one era and the beginning of another. (Henry 374)

This changes the narrative's course and returns it to a more standard, expected happy ending of a romance novel where the soulmate narrative subsumes every other possibility for their future.

Happy Place entertained the possibility of an alternative ending that would have turned the story away from the romance novel genre. Some similar features are present in *Happiness*, but overall, this element's effect is subsumptive. Sabrina and Gray profess their love to each other both before (Steel 166) and after the barrier breaks down (281–284). These mutual scenes provide rather standard love declarations. This makes them stand in a more neutral position in Meretoja's model. However, Gray's love declarations during the moment of hopelessness turn the narrative towards subsumptive. Two separate times he tells Sabrina that he loves her in an attempt to manipulate her. In the first scene, Sabrina has just found out about his wife and is trying to leave the situation (111–112). Gray tells her in person that he is "falling in love with you [her]" (111), and after she has left the situation, he texts her that "I'm sorry, I was wrong, and yes, I'm an asshole but I love you" (112). The attempt to manipulate Sabrina into forgiving him continues as he follows her to the US. He shows up unannounced on her doorstep to have her sign some legal paperwork (143–146). During this scene he is able to explain himself and apologize. He also tells Sabrina once more that he is in love with her (145). Sabrina does not verbally reciprocate his feelings in neither of these scenes. Nevertheless, Gray's manipulation results in Sabrina inviting him to stay for the weekend, and the barrier begins to break down. The love declaration element has turned subsumptive because it offers only one way for a woman to behave in such a situation: to accept the man's apology and love.

Earlier, when discussing Harriet's change of mind about her career, I argued that readers base large parts of their (re)interpretations on cultural narrative webs (Meretoja, *Storytelling* 264). In her discussion of Grossman's novel, Meretoja explains that the novel draws on the cultural narrative webs of Israeli nationalism and the novel *One Thousand and One Nights.* Of course, this is also found in romance novels, for example in the descriptions of womanhood. The contemporary readers will draw from cultural master-narratives of the 2020s and possibly from other romance novels that they have already read. The master-narrative of orphaned main characters persists in *Happiness*. Even though Sabrina travels to meet her mother, there

is no change in their non-existent relationship (Steel 117–183). The ending deviates from traditional happy endings where all difficult relationships are fixed at the end. This promotes perspective-taking and perspective-awareness, and therefore, holds space for ethical inquiry. However, the portrayal of gender in *Happiness* turns to perpetuate many subsumptive, harmful master-narratives.

Sabrina's mother, Simone, and Gray's wife, Matilda, are used to contrast Sabrina's femininity. Their womanhood is diminished through two notable ways. First, their looks are contrasted with Sabrina's in order to establish Sabrina's superiority. Sabrina's natural beauty if highlighted, as Gray praises her looks despite her not wearing makeup and while she is wearing very casual clothes (Steel 49). A similar look on Matilda is not praised (94–95). Later, their femininities are contrasted further in the scene where Matilda and Sabrina meet. Sabrina is the epitome of the right kind of woman, as she has dressed up appropriately, while Matilda arrives in a too-casual attire and uncombed hair (106–107). Sabrina's superior femininity is also emphasized in how Simone's looks are described: "Her hardness showed on her face, her youth and beauty gone. She looked bitter and tired, used" (181). The portrayal of Simone's and Matilda's motherhood also diminishes the earlier positive counter-narrative of Sabrina not choosing to have children. Matilda is portrayed as a bad mother (180) and Simone's wish to not be a mother is vilified (243–245). For Sabrina, her womanhood enables the sense of the possible, but in Simone and Matilda, similar traits are described subsumptively. This dampens the effect as a whole.

Happy Place provides a more non-subsumptive narrative about womanhood as it provides space for the sense of the possible by having Harriet take more control over her own life. Harriet's decision to move to Montana to be with Wyn and to quit her brain surgery residency leads to her having more open dialogue with her parents. Harriet establishes new, possibilities encouraging narrative in-betweens with her parents and her sister (Henry 375–381). This portrayal of Harriet also allows for perspective-taking as she has become more independent. Nevertheless, I still maintain that Harriet's ending simultaneously perpetuates harmful narratives because her decision to give up her current life for a man goes against feminist ideals – no matter how much it is painted to be a choice (Arvanitaki 25–26; Brouillette 461).

The final theme I will return to is the relationship between friendships and romantic relationships. Earlier, *Happiness* provided a more subsumptive narrative as friendships, while important, are secondary in the novel. While the narrative continues this subsumptive path,

the friendship between Sabrina and a widower, Caleb, provides a small counter-narrative. The importance of marriage and romantic relationships is emphasized when Sabrina and Gray become engaged by the end of the novel (Steel 277–285). Many features of this proposal are ethically suspect. Their long-distance relationship is very strained towards the end, and their communication even stops completely. At the time of the proposal, Gray's divorce is agreed upon but has not gone through, and they have spent less than two weeks together in the same place. The quick engagement combined with how ready Sabrina is to uproot herself from her home and move to the UK shows the subsumptiveness of the relationship hierarchy.

The friendship between Sabrina and Caleb has a slight lowering effect on the hierarchy. Their friendship starts on the line between a friendship and romantic relationship, but they never cross it due to Sabrina's relationship with Gray and the recent passing of Caleb's wife (Steel 253). Both acknowledge that there could have been a romantic relationship but choose to continue as friends. This is an explicit counter-narrative to the implicit dominant narrative against friendships between men and women. The placement of this friendship adds to its significance. In the short final chapter, Caleb calls Sabrina after noticing her engagement ring in a televised interview (287–288). He tells her that "I guess it wasn't our destiny" (288) and congratulates her on her happiness. Sabrina then invites him to come meet Gray and to see her estate. Caleb agrees to come meet them, and Sabrina's focalized narration concludes the entire novel: "Caleb was a lovely man, and he was going to be wonderful friend" (288). This deviates from earlier depictions in *Happiness* where close friendships were only between the same sexes, and in addition, shows that it is possible to stay friends despite earlier romantic connotations.

Previously, the hierarchy between friendships and romantic relationships in *Happy Place* was similar to *Happiness* except for the inclusion of close friendships that provided an alternative narrative. This continues as the narrative of *Happy Place* comes to its end. It is significant that the barriers and moment of hopelessness for their friend group breaks down before Harriet and Wyn get their happy ending. The resolving of the friend group's barriers is not done quickly, and Henry spends time providing their happy ending. Still, the inherent emphasis on the importance of romantic relationships persists with the romantic happy endings of all the members of the friend group. Sabrina and Parth get married (361–365), Cleo and Kimmy are expecting (e.g., 359), and Harriet and Wyn get back together (374). Therefore, *Happy Place*'s narrative replicates cultural master-narratives that uphold the hierarchy.

4.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I analyzed the last four essential narrative elements of romance novels and examined how they enable and diminish the sense of possibilities. In the end, *Happiness* and *Happy Place* provide ethically complex narratives with elements that both diminish and enable ethical inquiry. However, the narratives turn more subsumptive as the stories progress. The moment of hopelessness in *Happiness* enables ethical inquiry even though Gray fails to tell Sabrina of his marriage. Gray's focalized narration reveals his reasons for not disclosing this information to Sabrina, and this allows for the reader to understand his decision better. The feminist narrative of an independent woman is also significant here. There is a strong push in the narrative to present a future of happiness for Sabrina even if she and Gray do not end up together. As the barrier begins to break down, better communication provides some counter-narratives. Sabrina and Gray have open dialogue about their lives and their situation. However, Gray begins to present more stereotypical romance hero characteristics as he forces the communication to happen by following Sabrina to the US. He also uses love declarations to manipulate Sabrina into forgiving him. The overall view of women and womanhood also stays more conservative with the juxtaposing of Sabrina against the depictions of her mother and Grays's wife. However, the narrative shifts towards enabling for a moment with the portrayal of Sabrina's friendship with Caleb.

In *Happy Place*, there are larger themes promoting ethical inquiry. The theme of better communication enables new dialogical narrative in-betweens between Harriet and Wyn, her family, and her friends. These enable the characters' perspective-taking and help solve the barriers. Henry relies on the feminist notion of choice when Harriet decides to change her career goals and begins to follow her own path to happiness. However, this same narrative point also acts subsumptively, which diminishes the feminist impact – it adheres to negative cultural master-narratives where a wealthy man takes care of the woman who casts her career aside for him.

In this chapter, I have showed what role silence and communication play in Steel's and Henry's novels. For Kolmes and Hoffman, communication is the key to defeating ownership in relationships (37), and they argue that because the heroines of romance novels are not silenced by the male leads, they are also not objectified (38). From this point of view, my analysis of the silence and communication in *Happiness* and *Happy Place* is even more interesting. Both Sabrina and Harriet, to an extent, are silenced by Gray and Wyn. Wyn's

characterization resists the idea of "a near-telepathic connection between the lovers" (Kolmes and Hoffman 38) as he is unable to read Harriet's mind in regard to their relationship. This results in him silencing Harriet as well as almost preventing her from making her own decisions (Henry 348–349). Similar effect is also found in *Happiness*. Gray's focalization reveals to the reader that even though he seemingly understands Sabrina, he still dominates her and her wishes. He effectively silences her and takes away parts of her autonomy. The proposal finalizes this as Gray does not wait for Sabrina's verbal response before assuming her acceptance (Steel 248). Despite this thesis only examining two romance novel narratives, the findings still offer resistance to the universal claim by Kolmes and Hoffman.

5 Conclusions

Romance narratives are ever popular and come in a multitude of forms. In this thesis, I focused on contemporary romance novels, a field that is one of the most popular literary categories and which caters to a wide array of tastes – today the genre has even become more inclusive with a larger portion of ethnically diverse characters and queer stories amongst its lineups. The genre also branches out to other genres with, for example, paranormal and fantasy romance novels gaining popularity. Despite the recent changes, feminist critique of romance novels points out how these novels still heavily rely on many patriarchal values, such as (heterosexual) monogamous romantic relationships. Therefore, the romance novel is an interesting genre to study from an ethical point of view. The adherence to a strict and specific narrative structure is still an imperative and separates the genre from other narratives. In my analysis, I utilized Pamela Regis' set of eight essential narrative elements of romance novels. Her narrative elements are a broadened version of the shorter definition where the couple meet, face barrier(s) that keep them apart, overcome said barrier(s), and have their happily ever after. The terms that I adopted for her narrative elements in this thesis are the current society, the first meeting, the attraction, the barrier, the moment of hopelessness, the overcoming of the barrier, the love declarations, and the betrothal.

The framework that I used to analyze the varied ethical themes found in the narrative elements of these romance novels is Hanna Meretoja's ethics of storytelling. In it, she develops hermeneutic narrative ethics in order to identify how narratives can enable and diminish our sense of the possible. She identifies six different aspects that do this: how narratives are able to facilitate our sense of the possible, how they can influence our sense of self and our self within our culture, how it is possible for narratives to work in a way where they enable us to not merely subsume the new experiences but also challenge them, how narrative in-betweens can work in providing space for possibilities, how narratives can encourage perspective-taking and our awareness of other perspectives, and how narratives can potentially work as a medium for ethical inquiry. Of course, not all narratives enable ethical potential, or they might do this to differing levels.

Meretoja has been criticized for not providing enough evidence of her model's usefulness in cases of literary works that do not purposefully aim to provide ethically open narratives. One aim of this thesis was to answer this criticism by examining ethical features of two contemporary romance novels: Emily Henry's *Happy Place* and Danielle Steel's *Happiness.*

Research on romance novels is increasingly interdisciplinary, but little research has been done that focuses on the narrative ethics of the genre. Therefore, the quest here was twofold. By focusing on two contemporary romance novels depicting genre-typical straight romances, I wanted to contribute to the discussion around romance novels from an ethical point of view. In addition, I wanted to apply Meretoja's framework to works that do not explicitly aim to open the sense of the possible. Certainly, while both Henry and Steel must have made conscious choices with many of the narrative practices found in their novels, the narratives' simultaneous reliance and rebellion against many master-narratives keeps them around the middle of the continuum of Meretoja's model. The two romance narratives push and pull on the different continuums of ethical storytelling, at times conforming to and at other times challenging traditional and harmful societal views. *Happiness* and *Happy Place* do not leave the reader unsettled and pondering on what is morally right and wrong, something that Meretoja argues is an important enabler of ethical potential in narratives. However, they do still contain elements that could contribute to ethical inquiry and the sense of the possible for their readers.

I analyzed the two novels through themes that were common to the narrative elements of both novels. I found that despite the significant age difference of the authors, most of the themes were dealt with surprising similarity. There are always some differences with one narrative demonstrating elements that open or close the sense of the possibilities more than the other, but as the narratives come to their ends, these differences become smaller. In the first half of my analysis, I focused on themes around the elements of current society, the first meeting and the attraction between the couple, and the barrier that attempts to keep them apart. In the second analysis chapter, I examined the elements in the moment of hopelessness, the overcoming of the barrier, the love declarations, and the betrothal. Overall, many of these narrative elements showed more potential for enabling the sense of the possible, especially in the beginning of the novel, when the barriers are still in place. During the first half of my analysis, I showed how *Happy Place* provides more space for ethical inquiry with its narrative in-betweens that enabled perspective-taking. Steel's novel does still provide space for possibilities during the first half of the narrative elements, especially with the portrayal of Sabrina as a woman and in how openly issues of mental health is viewed. However, both novels also perpetuate subsumptive master-narratives of the Western world around love. This becomes even more evident in the second halves of the novels, when the barriers are overcome and the narratives progress towards their happy ends. In both *Happiness* and *Happy*

Place, the narratives begin to turn many of the earlier non-subsumptive themes towards perpetuating master-narratives that limit the sense of the possible.

Both main characters, Sabrina and Harriet, are presented as emotionally orphaned heroines. This master-narrative of romance novels is used in the novels to craft particular narrative in-betweens for the main characters where the sense of the possible in their lives has become diminished. This affects many of their life choices, especially regarding their romantic relationships. Otherwise, the two main character's portrayals are in concordance with contemporary ideals of women. Sabrina and Harriet are independent and free to pursue their own career related goals in life. Their love interests are more unconventional as they present explicit counter-narratives to the hegemonic masculinity found in both Western society and in romance novels. Both men are more in tune with their emotions and do not attempt to dominate the heroines. Yet, the theme of courtship and attraction adheres to more traditional gender expectations with the male leads doing most of the courting and the heroines being left to bare most of the emotional labor.

The first theme that begins to make a larger distinction between the two novels is that of diversity. Steel's *Happiness* poses a very singular image of both gender and ethnicity as it narrates the love story of a cisgendered heterosexual white couple. In *Happy Place*, Henry caters a more diverse narrative with two of Harriet and Wyn's female friends being a couple and by sharing some physical features of the side characters that point to them not being white. Nonetheless, the ambiguity with which Henry approaches diversity means that the narrative does not reach its full ethical potential. For example, the reader is unable to partake in historical imagination where they could better understand the sense of the possible in the characters past, present, and future. The portrayal of friendships is also different. In *Happiness*, female friendships are viewed as important, but the reader never finds out about Gray's friendships in any detail. In contrast, Harriet and Wyn belong to the same friend group that consist of both women and men. The importance of this group is highlighted in the narrative. Still, both novels adhere to the master-narrative that places more significance on romantic relationships, in the end demonstrating a subsumptive narrative trait.

The images of love and romance also demonstrate the typical romance novel narratives. For example, soulmates and love at first sight narratives are prevalent in both novels, and these are inherently subsumptive in nature as they do not allow for alternative options. This subsumptive trend carries over to the theme of long-distance relationships as both novels

present it as an inferior relationship option with no hope of success. At the very end, *Happy Place* breaks away from this view for a moment when a long-distance relationship is presented as a viable option for Harriet and Wyn. The theme of marriage and divorce is important in the novels and contributes to the barriers in the novels. Henry presents a much more dialogical narrative, as there is a multitude of representation of different kinds of marriages and divorces. In comparison, Steel presents a rather one sided, negative depiction. Both authors rely on narrative in-betweens where the shared narratives between friends and family influence the protagonists' views on the institution of marriage. The result is subsumptive in *Happiness* as the effect diminishes Sabrina's sense of possibilities in life while for Harriet, the theme is slightly more enabling.

The theme of mental health is important in both *Happiness* and *Happy Place*, and the novels present non-subsumptive narratives around it. Sabrina's mental health journey enables more possibilities as the narrative showcases her experiences of going to therapy. The narrative even cultivates potential for perspective-taking in the readers as Sabrina's mental health issues are not presented as something strictly from the past but as something that might reoccur even after years of self-work. In *Happy Place*, Wyn's mental health is discussed in more detail, again showcasing a non-subsumptive narrative, but the more ambiguous depiction of Harriet's mental health problems dampens the effect.

Communication plays a key role in building the barriers and in overcoming them in Steel's and Henry's novels. The lack of communication prevents the couples from forming. In both cases, this is a complicated theme where the narration shows both diminishing and enabling traits. As the barrier is overcome and the communication between both couples turns for the better, the ethical implications are different. Both couples begin to build their shared narrative in-between, and Henry showcases how open dialogue can promote a non-subsumptive narrative. On the surface, Steel does the same, but Gray's way of forcing the communication to happen turns his character into a more traditional depiction of a romance hero, and this hinders the effects of the dialogical turn.

The images of both Sabrina and Harriet also take a turn when the narratives move towards the betrothal. This feature of romance novels inherently diminishes the sense of the possible with its reliance on the patriarchal master-narratives. Sabrina's character stays relatively stable but Steel's decision to omit many discussions around her career after their marriage and the uncertainty of Sabrina's role in their relationship do not explicitly enable any possibilities in

life either. Harriet's case is more desolate because she simultaneously demonstrates the feminist ideal of choice by refusing to follow her parents' dreams and steps into the patriarchal subordinate role by leaving her current life to be financially supported by her boyfriend. Overall, both narratives lean into harmful, stereotyping master-narratives of romance and Western society in general. Still, there are meaningful deviations from these, especially in the beginning of the novels, that offer space for ethical inquiry.

My thesis has shown that Meretoja's model can also be used to analyze narratives that do not typically intend to provide space for the sense of the possible. The model is useful in analyzing narratives such as romance novels because it allows access to underlying cultural narratives and power structures through its emphasis on the continuous process of interpretation. My research leaves space for a broader ethical analysis of the contemporary romance novel genre. Especially the comparison of the realization of the themes I have raised in queer romance novels could reveal even more covert power structures that are perpetuated in the genre. As Meretoja points out, we are most often unaware of these power dynamics that still influence our (re)interpretations of narratives. Only by identifying these are we able to even begin to change the harmful reproductions of cultural master-narratives, a task that romance novel research is heavily invested in and this thesis has contributed to.

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