

Original Research Paper

## The Afterlife of Marriage in Contemporary and Historical Fiction

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the persistence and transformation of the marriage plot from nineteenth-century realist fiction to twenty-first-century experimental literature. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism and theoretical frameworks from feminist, queer, and affect studies, the research employs a qualitative comparative method to analyze how marriage functions as both a narrative form and an emotional economy. Through close readings of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* alongside contemporary works such as Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*, Sarah Manguso's *Liars*, Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*, and Miranda July's *All Fours*, the study finds that contemporary "post-marriage" novels fragment and reconfigure the traditional plot to represent emotional labor, gendered fatigue, and the collapse of romantic closure. These texts inherit the structure of the classical marriage narrative only to dismantle it through recursive form and affective dissonance. The findings suggest that the marriage plot endures not because it resolves desire, but because it continues to express the contradictions of intimacy, care, and autonomy in modern life. By linking narrative structure to emotional economies, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on gendered labor and the affective afterlife of marriage in contemporary fiction, and points toward future research on non-marital intimacy, alternative kinship forms, and the evolving narrative representation of care and autonomy beyond the couple.

**Keywords:** Affect Theory, Cruel Optimism, Feminist Narratology, Marriage Plot, Post-Marriage Fiction.



## 1. Introduction

The marriage plot has served as a foundational structure in the English-language novel, anchoring stories of romantic fulfillment within broader social and ideological systems. From the Victorian bildungsroman to contemporary autofiction, narratives of love and domesticity have reflected shifting ideals of gender, class, and autonomy. Historically, marriage operated as both a narrative endpoint and a mechanism of social order, a form through which individual desire was reconciled with collective norms. Yet as cultural attitudes toward intimacy and kinship evolve, so too does the literary function of the marriage plot.

Recent sociological and literary scholarship has documented the transformation of intimacy in late modernity. Giddens conceptualized the “pure relationship” as one based on emotional satisfaction rather than obligation [1], while Illouz identified the paradoxes of freedom and dependency that constitute “the emotional cost of autonomy” [2]. These frameworks illuminate a larger cultural contradiction: the pursuit of personal freedom coexists with persistent affective attachment to traditional relational scripts. Literature becomes a privileged space for exploring this tension, as the breakdown of romantic convention produces both formal experimentation and new modes of feeling.

Within literary studies, critics such as Armstrong and O’Connell have traced how the marriage plot historically functioned to reconcile private passion with public ideology [3] [4]. While early feminist readings emphasized constraint and coercion, recent approaches emphasize negotiation, affect, and labor—revealing how the marriage plot encodes emotional economies that persist even as its ideological legitimacy wanes. Blake argues that modern narratives displace marriage from closure to crisis, using disintegration and ambiguity to expose its residual power [5].

Despite the decline of marriage as a dominant social imperative, the plot endures as a compelling narrative logic. Contemporary fiction often revisits its ruins, staging ambivalence, fragmentation, and refusal where earlier novels sought fulfillment and order. This persistence raises a key question: if marriage no longer guarantees social meaning, why does its narrative form remain so potent? The tension between the collapse of an institution and the endurance of its narrative scaffolding defines what this study terms the post-marriage novel a genre that dwells within the emotional and structural aftermath of marriage rather than abandoning it.

To address this paradox, the article draws on Lauren Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism the attachment to forms that no longer sustain the subject [6]. Through this lens, the marriage plot becomes not a path to resolution but a site of impasse, where emotional labor, asymmetrical care, and exhaustion replace romantic closure. Following Sara Ahmed’s notion of “emotional economies,” the analysis understands intimacy not as a private sentiment but as a social affect shaped by inequality, repetition, and resistance [7]. The frameworks of Berlant and Ahmed together reveal how literature transforms emotional fatigue into formal innovation.

This study therefore, asks: What does the persistence of the marriage plot in contemporary fiction reveal about cultural investments in intimacy, autonomy, and care? It argues that the post-marriage novel transforms the structural and affective logic of the traditional marriage plot, converting resolution into recursion and fulfillment into critique. By connecting nineteenth-century realism to twenty-first-century autofiction, the paper situates literary form within broader transformations of gendered labor, affective economies, and narrative ethics.

The primary objective is to demonstrate how the marriage plot endures as a fractured, self-conscious form in modern fiction no longer offering closure but inviting critical reflection on emotional work and social expectation. Through close readings of *Middlemarch*, *The Awakening*, *Dept. of Speculation*, *Liars*, *Motherhood*, and *All Fours*, the study shows how formal fragmentation and affective ambivalence articulate new possibilities for care and connection beyond institutional marriage. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates in feminist, queer, and affect studies by reframing narrative structure as a record of emotional and ideological struggle.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Marriage Plot

The centrality of the marriage plot in the English-language novel has long been acknowledged as a narrative mechanism that reconciles private desire with social order. Nancy Armstrong identifies it as a key form through which fiction linked the domestic sphere to ideological reproduction [3]. In George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1991), Dorothea Brooke’s idealism and intellectual ambition are redirected through marriage, producing what Armstrong calls the illusion of moral and emotional resolution. Yet, as Eliot’s narrator reveals, Dorothea’s fulfillment collapses into disillusionment her story becomes an emblem of constrained aspiration rather than closure.

Recent critics expand this reading by emphasizing how the marriage plot simultaneously produces and critiques the social order it narrates. Galvan and Michie observe that the plot “grounds our sense of the long nineteenth century,” yet continues to provoke revision and resistance [8]. Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (2016), for instance, dramatizes outright refusal: Edna Pontellier’s rejection of maternal and marital identity subverts narrative teleology and replaces resolution with disappearance. As Freeman argues, this form of resistance enacts “chrononormative” disruption—the refusal of time organized by reproduction and domesticity [9].

Contemporary scholars also caution against universalizing the term “marriage plot.” Lubey notes that applying it retroactively to eighteenth-century texts risks obscuring formal diversity and ideological instability [10]. Lisa O’Connell traces its emergence to a specific Anglo-Protestant legal context—the Hardwicke Marriage Act—linking literary form to the consolidation of religious and state authority [4]. These studies demonstrate that the marriage plot is not a timeless device but a historically contingent system of representation shaped by law, theology, and gendered ideology.

Further scholarship reframes earlier feminist critiques by recognizing forms of agency within constraint. Schaffer’s notion of “familiar marriage” describes unions grounded in shared labor and duty rather than idealized romance [12], while Fisher extends this analysis to faith-based narratives that contest closure through spiritual redefinition [13]. These readings reposition women not merely as victims of the form but as affective negotiators who inhabit and reshape its limits.

Transnational perspectives deepen this picture. Seidman argues that in Jewish literature, marriage mediates tensions among tradition, diaspora, and modernity [14]. Likewise, Jordan reveals how novels such as *Pamela* and *Mansfield Park* dramatize the legal and moral negotiations surrounding consent and female agency [11]. Such research insists that the marriage plot cannot be detached from cultural and institutional hierarchies—race, class, religion, and coloniality all shape its moral logic. Intersectional frameworks emerging from South Asian and postcolonial contexts further underline that gender and caste are structural, not incidental, determinants of intimacy and legitimacy [15].

In sum, the nineteenth-century marriage plot functioned as both ideological resolution and affective critique, a structure that naturalized social order even as it revealed its psychic costs. This duality provides the foundation for understanding its persistence and reinvention in contemporary fiction.

## 2.2. Feminist, Queer, and Intersectional Critiques

Feminist and queer theorists have transformed the study of the marriage plot by exposing its entanglement with labor, normativity, and affective discipline. Federici’s *Wages Against Housework* reframed marriage as a site of unpaid reproductive work [16], while later writers such as Rodsky and Mangino document the enduring imbalance of domestic and emotional labor within modern households [17] [18]. These insights link the institution of marriage to broader capitalist economies of care, demonstrating that its narrative representation mirrors real material inequalities [19].

In literature, such dynamics are rendered visible through formal fragmentation and narrative fatigue. Jenny Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation* captures this through a nonlinear structure that mirrors the protagonist’s psychological disarray: “Women rarely become art monsters,” the narrator laments [20]. The fractured form itself becomes an index of disrupted labor, illustrating the psychic cost of carework. Here, domestic fragmentation is both content and structure—aestheticizing exhaustion without resolving it.

Queer theory extends this critique by challenging the heteronormative temporality embedded in marriage narratives. Edelman’s *No Future* repudiates reproductive futurism as an ideological fantasy [21], while Halberstam’s *the Queer Art of Failure* reclaims incompleteness and refusal as modes of dissent [22]. Novels such as Heti’s *Motherhood* embody this ethos: the narrator’s recursive indecision symbolized by repeated coin flips performs resistance to closure, rejecting the binary logic of reproduction. Similarly, in July’s *All Fours*, life is described as “a series of rooms, with no doors between them,” dismantling linear narrative expectation and substituting openness for progression.

These formal and thematic disruptions operate as queer tactics: by suspending decision and dissolving plot coherence, they deny the moral teleology that underpinned the classical marriage narrative. Blake reads such ambiguity as an “anti-closure aesthetics” that translates political disaffection into literary form [5].

Intersectional scholars further reveal that access to intimacy and legitimacy is unevenly distributed. Seidman’s work on Jewish literature situates romance within religious and diasporic obligation [14]; Ghosh and Roy et al. highlight how caste and gender codetermine relational possibility in South Asian contexts [15] [23]. These perspectives emphasize that the emotional regimes represented by the marriage

plot are inseparable from systems of power. The novels analyzed here, while predominantly Western, operate within and often reproduce these global hierarchies. Acknowledging that limitation enables a more reflexive, situated reading practice.

Collectively, feminist, queer, and intersectional approaches recast the marriage plot not merely as a narrative convention but as a social technology that organizes emotion, naturalizes inequality, and sustains heteronormative temporality.

### 2.3. The “Post-Marriage” Novel

Contemporary fiction has not abandoned the marriage plot. It has transformed it into a field of affective recursion and narrative dissonance. Scholars identify a shift from romantic closure toward repetition, fragmentation, and temporal disruption. Lewis interprets Victorian repetition as a precursor to modern anti-closure strategies [24], while Blake connects contemporary ambiguity to queer middlebrow experimentation [5].

Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation* employs discontinuous vignettes to dramatize emotional exhaustion: “My plan was to never get married. I was going to be an art monster.” The narrative’s fragmentation mirrors the protagonist’s psychic erosion and reflects the “cruel optimism” of attachment to unsustainable ideals [6]. Manguso’s *Liars* intensifies this through disjointed fragments that refuse resolution: “If you are waiting for an ending, I cannot give you one.” Both novels translate the collapse of intimacy into textual form, converting the affect of fatigue into a narrative principle.

Heti’s *Motherhood* and July’s *All Fours* push this experimentation further, enacting refusal and improvisation as alternative ethics of care. The recursive questioning in *Motherhood* (“What if I regret it?”) performs the impossibility of coherent identity under neoliberal demands for self-definition. In *All Fours*, July replaces linear development with associative movement, imagining intimacy as momentary rather than teleological. These texts collectively suggest that narrative fragmentation functions as a feminist and queer reconfiguration of intimacy an art of survival within emotional exhaustion.

Ahmed’s and Illouz’s analyses of emotional economies clarify the social dimension of these formal tactics [2] [7]. The dissolution of plot mirrors the precarity of contemporary emotional life, where labor and love are entwined in cycles of fatigue and desire. The post-marriage novel thus emerges as both symptom and critique: it inherits the structure of romantic narrative only to dismantle it from within.

### 2.4. The Marriage Plot in Pedagogy and Popular Discourse

Beyond the page, the marriage plot continues to shape emotional imagination in classrooms and popular culture. Felski observes that students often experience canonical texts through affective identification, finding their own desires and frustrations mirrored in older forms [25]. Pairing *Middlemarch* with *Dept. of Speculation* reveals both continuity and rupture in representations of female agency and emotional labor.

Seresin’s notion of “heteropessimism” captures this ambivalent engagement: the simultaneous critique and repetition of heterosexual scripts [26]. In Heti’s *Motherhood*, the narrator’s indecision exemplifies this attitude neither affirming nor rejecting reproductive futurity but inhabiting its anxiety. Such texts invite readers to recognize dissatisfaction not as failure but as an affective condition of modern subjectivity.

Meanwhile, digital culture perpetuates and contests the marriage ideal. “Trad wife” influencers aestheticize submission and domesticity, recycling Victorian imagery, while contemporary fiction like July’s *All Fours* counteracts such nostalgia with queer improvisations of care. As July writes, “I make tea for a stranger, and it feels like love... an interval, not an answer.” This redefinition of love as transient rather than teleological reflects the post-marriage novel’s broader ethos of temporal openness.

Pedagogically, intersectional teaching practices highlight that the marriage plot’s appeal and critique vary across cultural contexts. Galvan and Michie advocate teaching it as a historically contingent genre structured by race, class, and religion [8]. Comparative classroom pairings of Chopin with Heti, or Eliot with Offill, reveal that affective patterns of ambition, disappointment, and exhaustion persist even as their ideological frameworks shift. Such transhistorical reading exposes the marriage plot as both durable and unstable: a narrative grammar we have not yet ceased to feel through, even as we critique it.

## 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing a comparative and critical analysis framework to explore the transformation of the marriage plot in Anglophone fiction from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. The methodology is designed to examine narrative form and affective content

through the theoretical lenses of feminist theory, queer studies, affect theory, and narrative critique, to uncover how marriage operates as a site of formal disruption, emotional labor, and unresolved intimacy across literary history.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1. Historical Foundations: Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Chopin's *The Awakening*

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* remains a cornerstone of the marriage plot tradition, yet modern critics emphasize its profound ambivalence toward romantic fulfillment [3] [8] [14]. Dorothea Brooke's intellectual and moral idealism, initially invested in Casaubon's promise of shared purpose, deteriorates into disillusionment, an embodiment of what Berlant calls cruel optimism [6]. Her devotion becomes the mechanism of her limitation: attachment to a form that cannot sustain her ethical or intellectual desire.

This reading reframes Dorothea not as a passive heroine but as an early instance of the affective labor that underwrites the marriage plot. Her emotional and intellectual contributions are invisible yet essential, reflecting what Federici identified as the unpaid reproductive work that sustains social order [16]. Lubey's insight that *Middlemarch* privileges "reorientation over resolution" [10] anticipates the open-ended, self-reflexive forms of the post-marriage novel.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* radicalizes this trajectory by collapsing the distinction between personal awakening and narrative dissolution. Edna Pontellier's declaration "I wouldn't give myself" and her final walk into the sea dramatize refusal as both a thematic and structural act [28]. Critics diverge on whether this represents autonomy or annihilation, but, as Blake argues, *The Awakening's* indeterminate closure is a queer tactic: a refusal of normative temporality and reproductive destiny [5].

Together, Eliot and Chopin illustrate the historical groundwork of the post-marriage novel. Their protagonists' disillusionment, self-sacrifice, and resistance expose how marriage operates as a site of emotional depletion and ideological negotiation. The novels turn the marriage plot inward, using its very constraints to question the cultural scripts of gender, happiness, and care.

##### 4.2. Contemporary Collapse: Offill's *Department of Speculation* and Manguso's *Liars*

Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* exemplifies the fragmentation and affective exhaustion that define the post-marriage narrative. Constructed from brief vignettes, aphorisms, and non-sequential reflections, it mirrors the narrator's psychic disarray. Her assertion "I liked being alone so much, but I couldn't stop wanting love" [20], epitomizes Berlant's cruel optimism: an attachment to intimacy that endures despite its erosion.

Scholars such as Blake, Galvan, and Michie interpret Offill's fractured style as a literary manifestation of the emotional fragmentation experienced by contemporary women balancing care and creativity [5], [8]. The famous "art monster" passage ("Women almost never become art monsters") underscores this contradiction, illustrating Rodsky's and Mangino's observations that domestic responsibility continues to undermine women's autonomy [17] [18]. Form and content converge: fragmentation becomes both a symptom and a critique of gendered labor.

Sarah Manguso's *Liars* extends this strategy through a minimalist, fragmentary composition built entirely from questions and negations: "Is it lying to keep loving someone who hurts you?" [29]. The refusal to provide closure or plot progression literalizes Illouz's concept of "negative relations," where intimacy persists through compromise rather than satisfaction [2]. Manguso transforms emotional exhaustion into a narrative principle, the absence of resolution itself becomes the story.

Halberstam's theory of failure [22] provides a productive lens here. Both Offill and Manguso reimagine failure not as defeat but as critical practice. By refusing teleological progress, these novels enact what Ahmed calls "feminist killjoy" politics: exposing the emotional costs of compulsory happiness [7]. Their narratives reject the fantasy of equilibrium, replacing resolution with endurance.

These findings demonstrate that the contemporary marriage plot no longer resolves affective tension but sustains it. Fragmentation, negation, and non-closure serve as aesthetic strategies for depicting emotional labor as an ongoing process rather than a temporary obstacle. The formal innovations of Offill and Manguso thus reframe the marriage plot as a site of critique rather than reconciliation.

##### 4.3. Refusals and Reinventions: Heti's *Motherhood* and July's *All Fours*

Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018) transforms indecision into narrative architecture. The narrator's repeated question "What if I regret it?", articulates the tension between autonomy and social expectation. Her recursive coin flips literalize the randomness of choice under neoliberal individualism, enacting what Edelman terms "refusal of reproductive futurity" [21].

This circular form exemplifies Berlant's notion of the "impasse," a temporal suspension where desire and exhaustion coexist. Rather than resolve her dilemma, Heti sustains it, demonstrating that indecision itself can be an act of resistance. The novel's structure of essayistic, fragmented, self-correcting are mirrors the rhythms of ambivalence that define contemporary femininity and creative life.

Miranda July's *All Fours* (2024) queers this structure further, dissolving narrative continuity in favor of associative intimacy. The protagonist describes her story as "a series of rooms, with no doors between them," symbolizing both porous identity and refusal of closure [30]. Casual encounters and transient relationships replace marital teleology; care becomes improvisational rather than institutional.

July's representation of "interval love" ("I make tea for a stranger, and it feels like love") reframes intimacy as an event rather than endurance. This aligns with Ahmed's "queer orientation," which privileges relational possibility over stability [7]. In both *Motherhood* and *All Fours*, refusal is not negation but invention, the transformation of uncertainty into creative ethics.

Together, Heti and July articulate a new relational grammar: one that values process over destination, improvisation over permanence. Their works extend feminist and queer theories into the domain of form, showing that non-linearity and openness can embody political as well as aesthetic critique [31].

#### 4.4. Pedagogies, Student Response, and Transhistorical Reading

The endurance of the marriage plot across centuries is also evident in its pedagogical afterlife. Galvan and Michie note that canonical novels like *Middlemarch* continue to elicit strong emotional identification among students, revealing the plot's residual affective power [8]. Seresin's concept of "heteropessimism" helps explain this phenomenon: readers critique the institution of marriage while remaining emotionally attached to its promises [26].

Felski's theory of "attachment" supports this observation, suggesting that affective engagement can coexist with critical distance [25]. When students encounter Edna Pontellier's refusal or Heti's indecision, they recognize their own ambivalence, caught between skepticism toward romantic scripts and longing for connection. This classroom dynamic underscores the transhistorical force of the marriage plot: its ability to organize emotion even after its ideological decline.

Teaching the marriage plot through intersectional and transhistorical frameworks reveals it as a living form rather than an antiquated trope. Pairing nineteenth-century realism with contemporary autofiction encourages recognition of both continuity and rupture, as well as the persistent emotional economies of care, sacrifice, and exhaustion that traverse literary time.

#### 4.5. Formal Disruption as Critical Gesture

Across all six novels, formal disruption operates as both method and message. Offill's aphoristic fragments, Manguso's interrogative minimalism, Heti's recursive essays, and July's associative prose collectively demonstrate how contemporary fiction reimagine form as a site of critique.

Fragmentation, repetition, and non-linearity serve as aesthetic correlates to affective experience—registering the dissonance of contemporary intimacy. Berlant's concept of "genres in crisis" [6] captures this transformation: when social forms collapse, narrative form adapts to represent the aftermath. The disintegration of structure becomes a representation of lived precarity.

Lewis and Blake both argue that repetition and incompleteness are not failures of modern fiction but deliberate tactics [5] [24]. These techniques foreground the impossibility of closure in emotional life. Ahmed's notion that "happiness is a technique of social control" [7] is vividly illustrated in these texts, where disruption becomes a refusal of ideological consolation.

Form thus performs political work: it exposes how literary structure naturalizes social expectations, and how breaking that structure can create new affective possibilities. Fragmented narrative is not simply postmodern experimentation. It is a feminist and queer strategy for representing the emotional labor of survival.

#### 4.6. Affective Economies and Gendered Labor

A central finding across the corpus is the persistence of gendered emotional labor as both theme and structuring principle. Dorothea's intellectual servitude, Edna's maternal refusal, Offill's domestic exhaustion, Manguso's endurance, Heti's indecision, and July's improvisation all foreground the invisible work that sustains relationships.

These narratives confirm Ahmed's argument that emotions circulate unevenly through systems of power [7]. Offill's narrator dreams of artistic autonomy but remains tethered to domestic care, illustrating Rodsky's and Mangino's findings on the disproportionate burden of unpaid labor [17] [18]. Manguso's

relentless questioning “Is it lying to pretend you’re okay?”, captures Illouz’s negative relation: a state where emotional labor substitutes for intimacy [2].

July’s queer reframing of care as an ephemeral connection challenge this dynamic. By dispersing emotional responsibility across transient encounters, she transforms care from obligation into creative practice. This shift reimagines intimacy not as endurance but as mutual attention within finite moments, offering a radical alternative to the heteronormative marriage economy.

In these works, narrative fragmentation functions as both an aesthetic strategy and a metaphor for labor’s repetition and fatigue. The disjointed form mirrors the cyclical nature of emotional work, rendering visible what earlier marriage plots naturalized as invisible duty. Intersectional critiques by Seidman [14] and Roy et al. [15] [23] remind us that such labor is distributed unequally across race, class, and culture. The marriage plot, even in its postmodern form, remains tethered to these hierarchies.

#### 4.7. Pedagogy and Transhistorical Reading

Collectively, the findings reveal that the post-marriage novel sustains the emotional and structural logic of the marriage plot while transforming its narrative economy. Across historical and contemporary contexts, three consistent patterns emerge:

- 1) Emotional Labor as Narrative Engine  
From Dorothea Brooke to Offill’s unnamed narrator, women’s unpaid and affective work drives plot progression even in its collapse.
- 2) Fragmentation as Form of Resistance  
Disrupted chronology and incomplete resolution function as feminist and queer strategies of critique.
- 3) Ambivalence as Affective Continuum  
Rather than romantic fulfillment or cynicism, these novels inhabit a spectrum of longing, fatigue, and survival.

The persistence of these patterns demonstrates that the marriage plot endures not because it resolves desire but because it continues to articulate the contradictions of intimacy and autonomy. The post-marriage novel inherits its structure to reveal its failures, thereby keeping the form alive through its own undoing.

### 5. Conclusion

This article has argued that the marriage plot continues to exert narrative and cultural force—not as a stable or universally fulfilling story arc, but as a structure that is haunted by the contradictions, failures, and affective residues of its own history. From the redemptive aspirations of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* to the ambiguous renunciations of Heti’s narrator in *Motherhood*, we see how literary texts persist in returning to marriage not to affirm its promise, but to question the emotional labor it demands and the social scripts it sustains. In reading these novels side by side, it becomes clear that the marriage plot survives not despite its crisis, but because of it. The plot’s perceived collapse becomes the site of new formal experimentation and psychic exploration, what I see as the most compelling literary response to the social and emotional disillusionments of the present.

Contemporary authors like Offill, Manguso, July, and Heti do not simply reject the marriage plot. Instead, they inhabit its ruins. Their narratives are saturated with ambivalence toward care, desire, intimacy, and closure, yet they also retain a kind of affective fidelity to what the plot once promised. This is what makes them powerful: they do not offer neat alternatives but dwell in the difficulty of finding new forms. Drawing on feminist, queer, and affect theory, particularly the work of Berlant, Ahmed, and Halberstam—this article has shown that the post-marriage novel is not defined by refusal alone. Rather, these texts suggest that refusal itself can be a generative act, opening up alternative relational imaginaries and new narrative architectures that reject heteronormative teleology in favor of ambiguity, process, and survival. I find this tension, between attachment and critique, between exhaustion and invention, to be the most intellectually and emotionally rich terrain of the marriage plot’s contemporary afterlife.

Crucially, this study has also foregrounded how gendered labor remains central to the marriage plot’s endurance. From Dorothea’s self-erasure to the quiet depletion of Manguso’s protagonist, we see how women’s invisible work, emotional, intellectual, and reproductive, functions as the engine of both plot and life. Rather than simply critiquing this dynamic, contemporary fiction makes it visible, fragmenting the traditional narrative form to represent what has long been left unsaid or unrecognized. The work of Federici, Rodsky, and Mangino helps contextualize these fictions within broader economic and social

critiques, yet literature adds something unique: a lived, felt account of what it means to inhabit such conditions. My reading suggests that narrative itself becomes a site where gendered exhaustion is not only depicted but metabolized.

Pedagogically, the marriage plot retains its critical potency. Teaching these texts alongside one another has shown me that students encounter their own affective attachments and resistances through these narratives. As Seresin and Felski argue, the classroom becomes a space for working through both recognition and mourning. I believe this is particularly important when approaching the marriage plot transhistorically, as students are able to see that what feels personal is, in fact, historically and culturally constructed. They begin to understand that their emotional responses to these plots are part of a larger affective economy, one that literature both reflects and critiques. This is where the marriage plot becomes not just a topic of study, but a tool for thinking about selfhood, relationality, and the ways we are shaped by and resist social scripts.

Looking ahead, this project opens the door for further research that is both broader in scope and more methodologically diverse. Future studies should extend beyond Anglophone, Western texts and incorporate non-normative kinship structures, racialized dynamics, and class-based exclusions that this article has only begun to touch on. The marriage plot in memoir, television, and digital media also warrants attention especially as those forms increasingly blur with literary fiction. Moreover, there is a need for empirical approaches to reader reception that might deepen our understanding of how marriage plots continue to resonate or fail to resonate across different audiences. Ultimately, the marriage plot is not a relic of the past, nor simply a form in decline. It is an unfinished narrative: one that continues to absorb, reflect, and provoke our deepest questions about love, labor, and the stories we tell about what makes a life.

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