

How is the ideal male represented through physical description in modern mills an...



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Mills and Boon, the renowned publisher of romantic fiction for over 100 years, primarily targets a female readership. As societal attitudes have altered due to the rise of feminism and the success of equality for women, the portrayal of the female characters in these novels has also changed; the heroines now develop careers and are shown to eschew more traditional roles. However, the representation of the male characters is remarkably constant. In three Mills and Boon novels, published in the last two years, each hero is almost identical, tall, dark and handsome, with similarly guarded natures.

As the novels progress, it is clear that a key characteristic identifying the “ideal male” is that of power and dominance, especially over the female protagonist. Each author employs similar linguistic techniques to establish the males as superior in relation to the females. In “Memoirs of a Millionaire’s Mistress”, the protagonists are property developer Cameron Black and waitress/artist Didi O’Flanagan. Cameron is presented, from Didi’s perspective, through the clichéd hyphenated phrase “man-to-die-for” using the third person voice which complements the narrative conventions of the genre.

This novel in particular falls into an erotic subgenre, which is demonstrated through the emphasis on physical masculinity. “The maroon and black tie’s sheen accentuated his snowy white shirt, drawing her attention to a prominent Adam’s apple and solid neck.” Within this genre, men are represented as clothes horses rather than characters in their own right. In the independent clause, the lexical field of clothing is more prevalent than the hero: Cameron’s tie is the subject of the clause, the shirt its object.

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Even in the subordinate clause, Cameron is not described as a separate entity: rather, each physical attribute is described in turn, which ultimately objectifies him. Pronouns replace proper nouns. A modifying adjective, “prominent”, emphasises male virility, as does the common noun “Adam’s apple”, a traditional symbol of masculinity. The semantic choices extend the lexical field of masculinity and virility, as does the anatomical description; the physical adjective “solid” creates the impression of sporting prowess and physicality.

Cameron’s representation exudes masculinity, strength and virility. His power is further established through his appearance, this time relying on the cost of his suit. “He wore a pinstriped charcoal suit and she knew from her experience with fabrics that it was Italian and expensive.” This complex sentence serves to reiterate this chasm of difference in status. Cameron is the subject of the dominant clause while Didi is second once again.

Her purpose in the sentence is to qualify his clothing, hence the adjectival phrase “pinstriped charcoal suit” is the object of the dominant clause, the two modifying adjectives and one common noun, create a stereotypical visual representation of a wealthy businessman, the romantic object of every Mills and Boon heroine. Once again, Cameron takes precedence over Didi in this sentence in the first independent clause. In “Buttoned-Up Secretary, British Boss”, famous novelist, Alexander McDonald, is also described from the heroine’s perspective.

Again, pronouns replace proper nouns. The hero is objectified here but not by his clothing, but by his hair, which is the subject of the main clause in the

compound sentence. “ His dark, tousled hair had begun to grey slightly at the temples... ” Although the emphasis is not on virility, the adjectives “ dark” and “ tousled” create an air of masculinity, beginning to establish a rugged and Byronic figure contrasting with the smooth suavity of Cameron Black and Case Darrington, yet representing a stock character of the romantic genre. There are only so many heroes one can have.

The verb adjective “ tousled” is tactile, appealing to the senses. The adjective “ grey” in this context denotes sagacity, life experience and knowledge “ But the penetrating, inky blue-black eyes were clear and discerning as he looked down at her. ” The use of the definite article in relation to Alexander’s eyes in place of a possessive adjective serves to objectify him further. James uses a classic sexual innuendo, a common device employed in Mills and Boon novels which introduces the idea of sexual attraction into the novel very early on.

The participle “ penetrating” is of course highly erotic, and together with the descriptive triad creates a sense of emotional depth in the character. The rather cliché compound description of his “ inky blue-black eyes” is a thinly-veiled reference to Alexander’s profession as a writer as well as suggesting intensity of feeling. Again, the subordinate clause “ as he looked down at her” emphasises the stark height difference and his masculinity in contrast to the feminine and petite Sabrina, as well as implying that Alexander is superior both in stature and social status.

His voice was businesslike, strong and authoritatively resonant, and Sabrina couldn’t help but feel just slightly in awe of him as he led her up the thickly

carpeted stairs... ” A triad of attributive post-modifying adjectives all belonging to the semantic field of power and strength is used in order to further stress Alexander’s control over the situation. The key purpose of the description is to repeatedly establish power, a common stylistic feature in this genre of literature.

Similar to Oliver, James relegates Sabrina to the second clause. To further heighten the gap in status, the abstract noun “ awe” describes her emotions and promotes Alexander to the level of a deity. Maguire’s “ Taking on the Boss” is set in a typical office environment. Tahlia Moran is represented as a driven career woman unlike Didi or Sabrina, while Case Darrington is noticeably more similar to Cameron than Alexander.

“ Tahlia looked down, finding her footing and the guy’s shiny black, very expensive-looking shoes. Although Tahlia is the subject and agent here, the rest of the sentence only serves to represent her as inexperienced and unprofessional in comparison to Case. The finite verb “ looked down” brings to mind feminine modesty and submission to men, while the independent clause suggests that Tahlia is nervous and insecure in the presence of a powerful male, bringing out aspects of femininity and vulnerability which she normally conceals. “ Finding her footing”, yet another cliché phrase, implies gaucheness.

It also conforms to the genre’s hackneyed concept of “ falling for a man”. The literal meaning creates embarrassment and evokes sympathy for the heroine. A colloquial noun “ guy” informs the reader that Case is relatively young, making his confidence and success even more impressive in contrast

with Tahlia's confusion and dismay. The convention of an adjectival pre-modifying triad is deployed, as with Cameron's suit; the focus with Case is again with appearance, in particular, shoes, a sign of a 'well-heeled' man.

His soft blue shirt was covered by a black suit jacket that was tailored to perfection, emphasising just how wide the guy's shoulders were. " Maguire uses the passive voice in this sentence to amplify the objectification of the hero. As in other examples, the finite verb " was covered" has the pragmatic effect of turning Case into a clothes horse to be admired. " Covered" is also an antonym for " exposed", another highly sexual term that is instantly brought to mind by Maguire's choice of language.

Obviously, " tailored to perfection" in the relative clause highlights his wealth and accompanying social status. The pre-modifying adjective " wide", describing Case's shoulders, confirms his masculinity, strength and potency, attributes which are prized highly in a typical Mills and Boon hero. The semantic field of sex is continued with the description of Case's lips as " firm and sensual and full of promises". This triad is joined by two conjunctions rather than one conjunction and a comma, slowing the pace of the sentence.

Maguire employs both sibilance and fricatives in this triad in order to mimic whispers, which creates an air of sensuality. All three adjectival phrases are themselves overtly sexual: " firm" hints at strong, stubborn masculinity; " sensual" is lexically very close to " sexual" and connects the basic anatomy of the mouth with more erotic interpretations; " full of promises" extends the triad more than a simple adjective would, consisting of both the adjective "

full”, which carries traditional sexual connotations, and of the abstract noun “ promises”, hinting at romance and matrimony.

The three heroes of these stories are undeniably similar; all fulfil the traditional portrayal of a tall, dark and handsome charmer, both masculine and sensitive. Perhaps most noteworthy is the way in which the authors employ very similar pragmatic techniques in order to illustrate the power that these men exude over the heroines, sidelining the role of the women as primary narrators in the novel. This prioritisation of men allows them to become the focus of the novel, as the women are simply windows for the readers to peer through, imagining themselves in the story.