

Gender Roles and Social Expectations in Nicholas Sparks's Novels

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Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and
German Language and Literature – Education Studies

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Supervisor: Dr. Biljana Oklopčić, Full Professor

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Abstract

This master's thesis focuses on the layering of gender roles and social expectations in the literary works of Nicholas Sparks, the renowned writer of famous romance novels. Through a detailed analysis of male and female characters as well as gender relations and interactions, this research investigates gender dynamics, gender identity, and its interweaving with social and cultural norms in Sparks's novels. In the course of research, the question whether Nicholas Sparks supports the stigmatization and submissiveness of women in relation to the men, strengthening patriarchal power, or whether his works promote feminism and empowerment of women, will be answered. The aim of the paper is to make readers aware of new viewpoints on Sparks's literary contributions to the gender representation and cultural influences on society.

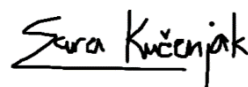
Keywords: gender, gender roles, social expectations, Nicholas Sparks, popular fiction

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Introduction

Nicholas Sparks, a prominent American writer and film producer, is renowned for his romance novels that observe complex interpersonal relationships and social paradigms. This master's thesis delves into the differences and similarities of the representation of male and female gender, as well as social norms and expectations in Sparks's works. The focus of the thesis is on the analysis of how the characters in his novels are embodied and whether they challenge traditional social expectations or simply conform to them. It explores the ways in which the characters in Sparks's novels are presented; what kind of personality they have, what is their relationship with the rest of society, and whether they have a traditional or non-traditional gender roles. Moreover, relationships and dynamics between the same-sex and male and female characters is thoroughly reexamined. This paper attempts to answer the question whether Sparks supports the construction of gender roles and social norms present in his novels, or condemns them. It also exposes Sparks's perspective on the dynamics of society and gender, and its potential impact on the readers' viewpoints.

This master paper is structurally divided into several chapters. The initial chapter consists of a theoretical framework that dives into the topic of feminist literary theory, gender performance, and the social construction of gender. This is followed by a chapter with a brief overview of Nicholas Sparks's literary works and career. The main part of the thesis deals with a detailed analysis of gender roles in Sparks's novels, i.e. with the similarities and differences of gender roles and their interrelationships, with social statuses and expectations. The concluding chapter summarizes the main points of the thesis, arguing that Sparks's novels offer a predominantly traditional view of gender and interpersonal relationships, with some nuanced attitudes toward these notions. This thesis will certainly lay the foundations for further discussions on the topic of gender, as well as social dynamics and power relations between genders in the literary realm.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Feminist Literary Theory

Feminist literary theory emerged from the feminist movement that arose at the end of the nineteenth century. It studies the systematic prejudice of patriarchal ideas, motifs, and structures in literary texts and literary criticism. Moreover, this theory probes into the depiction of women in literature and reconceptualizes the writing of literary texts, their reception based on gendered viewpoint, and the literary canon as a whole:

Feminist theory therefore defines the object of study (women's writing) but the relationship between the two goes deeper than this. Many texts by women express the same concerns as feminist theory: the unique experience of women in history; the notion of female consciousness; the definitions of gender that limit and oppress; and the cause of women's liberation from those restrictions. (Madsen 9)

The impact of the feminist literary theory on reading and evaluating literary works is undeniable. Its main purpose is to explore the gender constructs, as well as their representations within language in literature (Madsen 14). The subchapters to follow deal with the key concepts of the theory and its influence on literary texts.

1.1.1. *History of Feminist Literary Theory*

The origins of the feminist literary theory can be traced back to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, to the first feminist movements (Rampton). This period is characterized by the protests for women's suffrage and the battle for better professional and educational opportunities for women. Writers such as Virginia Woolf and Kate Millett can be considered some of the pioneers and proponents of this theory, applying further pressure on the society for gender equality through their literary texts (Madsen 15). With her extended essay "A Room of One's Own," published in 1929, Virginia Woolf has supported both women's intellectual and financial independence, which she deemed crucial for the creation of great literature and artwork. This work has served as a foundation for a more structured literary criticism that observes literary texts through a feminist prism.

Yet, feminist literary theory achieved a more serious impetus during the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s (“Feminism: The Second Wave of Feminism”). In 1971, Kate Millett, a writer and an activist, published her controversial debut study *Sexual Politics*, in which she explicitly delves into the subject of male dominance and sexism in literature and arts throughout the twentieth century: “*Sexual Politics* exposed the patriarchal prejudice and sexual violence celebrated in classic modern texts such as D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, or Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*” (Madsen 15).

Her work has served as an example for succeeding academic studies as it depicted the exploitation and oppression of women. Millett presents patriarchy as a belief constructed and appropriated by society, and provides detailed explanations of how it pervades not only literature, but also politics, sociology, psychology, and philosophy:

The aim of feminist literary critics such as Millett was to promote a positive image of women in art and therefore in life, and also to raise the consciousness of women to their own oppression. The method pursued by Millett is to look at how female characters are portrayed and in what positions/situations they are placed in “great” literary works. (Madsen 15)

Millett unmasks the portrayal of patriarchal prejudice and female oppression in classic literary texts, thus challenging the adopted concept that great literature is gender-neutral. In her incendiary work, Millett meticulously dissects famous classics – from D.H. Lawrence to Norman Mailer. She calls them out for perpetuating gender inequalities, degrading women, and imposing patriarchal values in their literary texts (Madsen 15).

In her work *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice*, Deborah L. Madsen further explains that feminist literary theory had the role of exposing the patriarchal influence, highlighting the key roles of women and their achievements throughout history, and forming women's perception of cultural and critical theories:

Feminist literary theory had three main aims: to expose the workings of the ubiquitous patriarchal power structure; to promote the rediscovery of women’s historical achievements (including literary history); and to establish a feminine perspective on critical, literary, political, scientific, philosophical (and other) theories of the cultural forces that shape our lives. The intended aim was to change the sexist bias of traditional educational and social practices. (4)

This was accomplished through a thorough examination of gender roles and social expectations of women in literature. By exposing these issues, feminist literary theorists strive to construct an unbigoted and inclusive perception of literature.

1.1.2. The Concepts of Feminist Literary Theory

Although the words “female,” “feminine,” and “feminist” have the same root, they bare meanings significantly different from one another. Toril Moi thus concludes that in terms of writing, female writing simply refers to literary texts written by female authors (220). Its meaning does not insinuate any particular stance. Feminist writing, on the other hand, defines literary texts that convey an antipatriarchal approach, ultimately disputing sexist societal norms and paradigms and promoting gender equality (Moi 220). Lastly, feminine writing is often a reflection of the numerous voices of women that have been silenced, due to the unapologetically dominant patriarchal order in society, politics, linguistics and literature (Moi 220). In her *Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*, Mary Eagleton emphasizes the importance of this diversity when analyzing literary works because not all womens’ literature is feminist as some female writers accept the patriarchal norms within society:

we cannot presume that female writing – that is, writing by women – is necessarily feminist writing. There are many women writers who are indifferent to feminism and, indeed, a tradition of women making lucrative livings out of castigating other women. Occasionally, despite all evidence to the contrary, the most unlikely women are reclaimed for feminism. (153)

With the popularization of feminist literature, feminist literary critics have emerged to challenge the obsolete traditional views and literary canons. They have expressed their displeasure with the society’s tendency to marginalize or even reject female writers. Feminist literary critics have approached this problem in a few different ways. While some critics advocate for the incorporarting of female writers within the existing literary canon that almost exclusivly consisted of male writers, other critics fight for creating completely new canons, in which the female writing would be preferred:

Some critics have approached the problem by nominating marginalized or entirely forgotten women writers for a place within the standard canon, arguing that the excluded writers meet its traditional criteria. Others have proposed counter-canons of radically distinct traditions, seeking to dismiss once-revered figures from the syllabus.

These approaches are corrective, righting the wrongs of exclusion and misreading, and they are obviously connected to feminism's "gynocritical" (Showalter) interest in women writers. (Rooney 8)

Even though they have different ideas for the inclusion of women in literature, they have had one thing in common – they all want to erase traditional patriarchal beliefs and societal norms in their entirety.

Some feminist theorists have directed sharp criticism against the very notion of tradition. Critics have gone to extremes with their harsh criticisms on the topic of tradition because of their belief that traditional narratives automatically readapt the ahistorical expectations about female writers, alongside their experiences and perspectives (Rooney 8). With feminist literary theory, feminist literary critics have sought to eliminate the deeply rooted stereotypes regarding women, as well as controversial teleological perspectives (Rooney 8).

In the fight for women's rights, literature has played the key role as a means of criticism and study. Through poetry, prose and drama, feminist literary theory contributes to the argumentation of its theoretical criticism. There are numerous factors that can influence and further change feminist literary theory, such as literature language and form, which can provide unique insights into identity and gender constructs. Virginia Woolf claims that during the nineteenth century, female writers prioritized the gendered nature when it came to literary production. Furthermore, they tended to observe the characters and stress their emotional side: "[all] literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room" (Woolf 70). This provided them with a unique advantage and ability to stand against the dominant patriarchal norms with their sense of sensibility.

In recent decades, feminist literary theory has also focused on the role of race, ethnicity, religion, and other social and cultural constructs in literature and culture. For instance, Toni Morrison, a renowned author and editor, writes about the grim narratives of African American people, more specifically African American women. Her literary work encapsulates the way literature can unveil the excluded and subordinated. With her literary texts, Morrison reveals some of the great omissions, injustices, and discrepancies in the discourse of the time:

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison argues that literature is a particularly fertile ground for recognizing difference. For Morrison, literature prompts and makes

possible [the] process of entering what one is estranged from and helps us see omissions, contradictions, and conflicts that register the presence of the excluded, the marginalized, the subordinated, and the non-hegemonic. (Goodman 2)

Therefore, Morrison participates in empowering feminist literary critics to reconceptualize the social reality. Her literary concepts provide a deep insight into recognizing differences, thus highlighting the vast potential that literary text can yield to feminist literary theory.

The feminist literary theory also encompasses a critique of hegemony and aesthetic acculturation. By supporting literary genres such as testimonies, autobiographies, and diaries that were trivialized, feminist literary theory opposes hegemonic aesthetic values:

a critique of the aesthetic may involve turning toward once-belittled forms, . . . (genres to which women in certain periods and places have had significant access), in order to disclose their substantial but overlooked aesthetic value. Or feminist literary theory may champion an avant-garde, as in the case of what French feminist He'le'ne Cixous calls *e'criture fe'minine*, which she finds brilliantly embodied in the works of Jean Genet and James Joyce. All of these approaches intervene to redefine aesthetic value. (Rooney 9)

As indicated in the quote, some feminist critics argue that sentimentality should be privileged over patriarchy and modernist distaste, thus redefining the aesthetic values (Rooney 9). Others completely disregard the renewal of aesthetic values, viewing the aesthetic perception as too ideological: "certain feminist critics have dismissed proposals to renovate the aesthetic, relegating aesthetic judgment to the history of taste. From this perspective, aesthetic values are inevitably compromised by ideology" (Rooney 9) and thus have to be replaced and a focal point should be put on the cultural history of literature (Rooney 9).

Feminist literary theory also resists generalizations as it is characterized by its plurality (Rooney 9). A variety of approaches, ideas, and practices represent the complexity of feminist beliefs, avoiding compartmentalization and totalization. This theory incorporates a variety of perspectives, from the critique of tradition and patriarchy to the scrutinizing of aesthetic values and hegemony, which can be perceived as both strength and weakness (Rooney 9). Feminist literary theory celebrates diversity in terms of writing and approaches. However, this makes hard to define and categorize the field. In order to acknowledge the multiplicity of the field, "feminist literary theories" – the plural form of the term – is used:

Replacing the potentially monolithic concept of feminist literary theory with the multiplicity of feminist literary theories allows us to renounce any effort to totalize them or misrepresent them in a singular form. This is not a trivial gesture; the sheer wealth of material engendered by feminist literary studies across fields and national traditions, especially in a globalizing moment when “transnational literacy” (Spivak) is an urgent project, presents an empirical challenge that simply cannot be overcome. (Rooney 9)

Feminist literary theory also questions the role of gender in various contexts such as cultural, social, political and national, which makes it inherently cosmopolitan (Goodman 6). It captures the exceptional essence of noticing feminist voice and its ability to adapt in different settings on a global level (Goodman 6). The cosmopolitan nature of feminist literary theory is noticeable when analyzing the divergent form of literary traditions and the interweaving of the motifs of gender with the motifs of identity and power (Goodman 6). In order to ensure the smooth development of inclusive feminist literary criticism, global perspective is pivotal in understanding the complexity of gender in various cultures.

Feminist literary theory has altered the way people read and interpret literary works. It has prompted people to reevaluate literature and cast a different light on the outdated patriarchal and aesthetic values, as well as the traditional structures. With its popularization, it has paved the path for new ways of interpreting gender and identity. The divergent aspects of the theories indicate the ongoing problems with reinventing both societal and cultural norms within the literature. As it evolves, it will constantly shape and be shaped by feminist literary writers, with the aim of nurturing a more inclusive literary landscape.

1.2. Gender Performance and Performativity

In social and cultural theory, gender performance and performativity are deemed one of the crucial concepts. With the rise of the transdisciplinary field of performance studies, the interpretation of the concept of performance has changed (Horanyi 374). Previously understood simply as a type of entertainment (Horanyi 374), nowadays the term performance holds a new meaning as it is viewed as “a way of creation and being” (McKenzie 7). Thus, the concept of performance now encompasses a somewhat broader spectrum and affects various academic fields, including interactions and everyday actions, as well as cultural events off the stage

(Horanyi 374). As a term, performance is associated with various scientific fields such as sociology, gender studies, psychology, linguistics, performativity, and also cultural and theater studies (Horanyi 374). It, therefore, represents a complicated interrelationship between the individual, society, and culture.

In *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, performance is defined in a few ways: an instance of performing a play or piece of music, etc.; and an occasion on which such a work is presented. According to Elin Diamond, performance can be characterized as “something that is done and that is being done,” representing not only an action but also an event (1). Therefore, it incorporates both action and representation, as well as the concepts of the past, the present, and the future. The academic sphere that surrounds performance often alternates between the numerous definitions, in order to adjust to a certain disciplinary approach and ensure the advancement of the discipline. For example, ethnography views performance as a set of joint actions performed by situated individuals in their daily routine, but it also views it as cultural performances, rituals and ceremonies that encompass social action (Turner 4). On the other hand, Ervin Goffman describes performance in two ways: as an unconscious representation of one's self in society, and as a conscious performance that aims to impress management, similar to the act of acting (8). Jean-Francois Lyotard (2005) and Jon McKenzie (2006) define performance as a fundamental postmodern and late capitalist mode (6).

Alongside these different perceptions of performance, a similar term, performativity, has become a popular topic of discussion. Performance and performativity have often been used as synonyms, however there are some differences that require clarification. The concept of performativity has emerged from the evolution of the theory of the famous philosopher J. L. Austin on the concept of performative utterances (Horanyi 377). In his *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin describes performative utterances as utterances within a language that are not only descriptive, but also action-oriented (3). This raises further questions about the agent who performs the act, because performative statements and actions serve the purpose of enacting something. Furthermore, it poses potential issues regarding both power structures and chance of resistance.

Yet, what role do performance and performativity play when it comes to gender? Both terms represent crucial concepts that have altered our perception of gender identity and its social constructs. These seemingly identical terms are actually quite different. For instance, Erving Goffman introduces the term gender performance, which studies how individuals

embody certain roles in society in their daily lives, emphasizing the theatricality of society (10). Goffman believes that individuals in different situations and environments take on different roles in order to meet social expectations:

Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status require this kind of expression and not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression. (3)

On the other hand, Judith Butler's theory of performativity builds on the works of J.L. Austin on the topic of speech acts, considering gender itself to be performative (Horanyi 379). Austin laid the foundation by stating the difference between performative and constative utterances, pointing out that sometimes phrases serve not only as a means of description but also as a means of constitution (6). According to Butler, this belief can also be applied to gender, which she does not consider fixed:

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted social temporality. (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 519)

By experiencing similar situations and through repeating actions, the individual strengthens normative expectations (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 520). With her theory of performativity, Butler clashes with the traditional understanding of gender, undermining the essentialist standpoint that views gender simply as a biological sex (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 520). She perceives gender as an identity that is the result of a social construct and not an inherent trait (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 520). This belief not only denies that gender identity is natural, but also promotes it as a product of social paradigms, and norms. Butler considers gender performative, thus drawing attention to fluid identities that are often performed (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 520).

Gender is embodied through everyday situations and behaviors, reinforcing social norms, which is considered as gender performance (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 527). Gender identity is embodied in each and every action, i.e. through clothing, communication with the environment, and even body posture and gesticulation (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 527). Even though the actions of the individual are unintentional, they occur because of deeply rooted cultural and social paradigms and contexts. Social expectations and culture prescribe acceptable behavior and appearance for the male and female sex. Thus, society indirectly encourages individuals to express their gender within specific limits in different situations. Therefore, social norms are crucial for the regulation and categorization of gender performances in private and public life settings (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 527).

Culture is also an element that affects gender performance and performativity as it imposes norms that individuals internalize and unconsciously implement (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 523). Culture differs from society to society and dictates female and male behavior within it. Society uses socialization, which starts from an early age, in order to make individuals develop an understanding of the role of gender and their whole identity (Horanyi 393). In addition to culture, gender is shaped and perceived through contextual factors such as media, religion, and politics (Horanyi 394).

Gender performance and performativity have had a great impact on activism and feminist literary theory. Butler's theory of performativity studies the impact of gender and gender practices on the positions and power dynamics in society. Butler encourages resistance to oppressive practices and supports opposition to views that limit individuals because of their gender by pointing out the contingent nature of gender identity. Feminist activism has thus been based on the theory of performativity with the purpose to disassemble gender stereotypes and make room for various expressions of gender identity. These views also emphasize the importance of intersectionality as they recognize the ways in which culture, race, sexuality, and class are intertwined with gender.

1.3. Social Construction of Gender

From birth, gender shapes us into the person we are and determines our status in society. Everything about our identity is consciously or unconsciously gendered: our body, character,

posture, actions and even the way we regulate our emotions. Our identity is formed through naming, dressing, social interactions in private and business life, and in many other ways. It can be said that gender is determined in most cases on the basis of biological sex, which classifies people into the categories of male and female. As physiology determines the life manifestations of our organism, so chromosomes and fetal hormones determine human anatomy (Steele 279). However, this view is challenged by the significant differences between the female and male genders in various cultures.

Social constructionists emphasize the difference between gender and sex, considering gender as a social framework that divides society into “men” and “women,” and sex as a biologically determined property (Steele 279). They believe that society's expectations and social attitudes are predetermined by gender, and shaped unconsciously through the social process (Steele 279). Although social control through upbringing, education, religion, and the media imposes a normative view on women and men, gender differences are not innate. Gender is a socially constructed concept, which is deeply rooted in our society: “above all [it is] a matter of the social relations within which individuals and groups act” (Connell 10). Connell further explains that “gender must be understood as a social structure. It is not an expression of biology, nor a fixed dichotomy in human life or character. It is a pattern in our social arrangements, and in the everyday activities or practices which those arrangements govern” (10). The gender order can, however, be transformed, through conscious processes of reshaping through the collective efforts of society (Steele 279).

1.3.1. The Key Themes in the Social Construction of Gender

The social construction of gender is characterized by two main approaches: gender as a process and gender as a structure (Lorber 5). Gender as a process marks the way people embody the idea of gender through social interactions – “the differential effects of structures and policies upon men and women” (Beckwith 132). On the other hand, gender as a structure explains how gendered divisions represent restrictive systems in society (Lorber 5).

Both approaches complement and conflict at the same time because gender processes establish and build gender structures, and structures limit the processes at the same time (Lorber 5). The proponents of the constructionist perspective initially emphasized the processes of gender equality, advocating change through individual action (Lorber 5). However, they later

promoted the idea of gender as a structure, which resists change and prescribes adequate rules of behavior for the male and female genders (Lorber 5). Now the theoretical works deal with the study of structures and their issues and various systems of social control.

The intertwining of process and structure is extremely important for the perception of gender. Gender norms and paradigms permeate social systems such as family, education, culture, politics, and religion. Gender roles are overdetermined by the gender hierarchy, and they are created and maintained by social interactions:

As gender beliefs write gender hierarchy into the interpersonal relations through which people create new social forms, the people in effect rewrite gender hierarchy into the new social practices that develop to define the new occupation or industry. In this way, gender beliefs and social relational contexts conserve gender hierarchy in the structure of society and cultural beliefs themselves despite ongoing economic and technological change. (Ridgeway and Shelley 523)

Individuals who try to deviate from the established roles often face condemnation from the environment. There is thus no doubt that gender is an embodied system of inequality as it promotes the idea of an innately natural and unchanged aspect of life. This idea is additionally nourished by the lack of critical thinking and the abstractness of the concept. The dual nature of gender, its performance and subjection to it, strengthens the system. This is where the concept of gender deconstructions arises. In the subchapters to follow we are going to explain in more detail what gender as process, gender as structure, and gender deconstruction are.

1.3.2. Gender as Process

The study of Agnes, published by Harold Garfinkel in his collection *Studies in Etymology* (1967), is of exceptional importance because it provides an etymological view of the construction of the genus (1). The subject of the research was nineteen-year-old Agnes, who had both male and female anatomical predispositions (Garfinkel 1). Although she presented herself as an intersex person, she was a transsexual person born as a man, but with the desire to become a woman. Agnes used hormone therapy to look and sound more like a woman. She made great efforts to embody the natural appearance and behavior of the female gender (Garfinkel 1). In order to appear more feminine, Agnes used feminine facial expressions and gestures, spoke in a higher and softer tone of voice, and dressed like a woman (Garfinkel 1). Given all this, Garfinkel has concluded that not only Agnes but also society has the ability

to notice the difference between male and female gender identity, both on a conscious and subconscious level (1). Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna follow up on Gerfinkel's conclusions in their *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, arguing that gender attribution maintains the divergent nature of the two sexes (18). Kessler and McKenna also emphasize that although our genitalia initially determine our gender at birth, social beliefs, norms, and expectations promote and reinforce gender differences (18). The construct of gender is considered a social product, which is normally divided into two genders – male and female: “All persons create both the reality of their specific gender and a sense of its history, thus at the same time creating the reality of two, and only two, natural genders” (Kessler and McKenna 139). Yet, when reanalyzing Agnes's story, Mary Rogers, a feminist writer, proposes Garfinkel's unconscious strengthening of patriarchal beliefs, traditional gender roles, and the re-establishment of power dynamics as in the 1950s Agnes had to navigate this dynamic to achieve her goals (169). Feminist theories have taken these ideas and expanded on them by suggesting that socialization and media influences raise girls and women to appropriate gender behavior (Lorber and Moore 6). Studies also show the promotion of assertive and aggressive behavior in boys and men through sports (Steele 281). Research on sexist language and cross-gender interactions additionally confirms the nurturing of gender roles through social norms (Steele 281). In their work *Gender & Society* (1987), Candice West and Don Zimmerman have presented a completely new concept of “doing gender,” arguing for the idea that gender is performed and promoted through interactions with the rest of society: “Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the ‘essentialness’ of gender’ (137).

With their viewpoints, Garfinkel, Kessler, and McKenna have laid the foundation for gender studies, showing how gender standards influence the shaping of social structures and personal identity. Judith Butler's theory of performativity, presented in her *Gender Trouble* (1990), sees gender as a continuous performance determined by social norms: “The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (146).

Although Butler originally believed in the destabilization of fixed genders, she later accepted the ingrained gender norms in our society, as well as our anatomy, in her collection of essays *Undoing Gender*:

[D]oes it turn out that the “I” who ought to be bearing its gender is undone by being a gender, that gender is always coming from a source that is elsewhere and directed toward something that is beyond me, constituted in a sociality that I do not fully author? If that is so, then gender undoes the “I” who is supposed to be or bear its gender and undoing is part of the very meaning and comprehensibility of that “I.” (16)

All these beliefs and theories accept gender as a socially constructed performance process, which is constantly reinforced through interaction and societal expectations.

1.3.3. Gender as Structure

In the late 1980s, gender studies turned their attention away from processes and focused on structures. The task of structuring can be described as the determination of interactive norms in social practices, the creation of gender organizations and systems for the purpose of stabilizing the social order (Giddens 1). Gender structuring establishes the dominance and power of gender, by accepting institutionalized patterns of behavior and gender frameworks (Wilson 282). An excellent example of the gender structure are workplaces where most business duties are categorized and divided into men's and women's work. In the business world, there is also a hierarchy of business positions, which is accompanied by greater salary differences. Such division in the workplace is a reflection of business policy. Business culture therefore influences employment, valuing and categorizing “masculine” traits such as objectivity and strength, and stigmatizing women as not only sensitive, but also mediating. As a result, men reap significantly greater economic advantages compared to women, regardless of the gender structure of the job (Wilson 282). Rooted cultural stigmas support the degradation of the female gender, inequality in relation to men, and job segregation (Wilson 282). Of course, gender regimes intertwine across various sectors and are rooted in racial, class, and ethical compartmentalization. In the gender structure, the concept of hegemonic masculinity appears, which is characterized by various educational and economic privileges, and is completely supported by subordinate masculinities (Wilson 282). However, hegemonic masculinity in the West is different from the theocratic regimes present in the Middle East (Lorber 15). Islamic gender regimes are subject to changes in the possibilities of men and women, due to political motives. Gender differences are encouraged by “vindicated” constructive divisions that are additionally supported by social paradigms and statuses, to maintain male dominance and female subordination (Wilson 282). Although Western media

and some social movements advocate for gender equality, structural inequality between men and women is still ubiquitous. Discrimination against women begins in the family environment and continues throughout education and in the workplace. The fight for true gender equality continues.

1.3.4. Deconstructing Gender

Gender deconstruction is a process that includes unveiling the construction of gender and its reconstruction (Lorber 20). Postmodern feminism and queer theory question socially acceptable binary norms, emphasizing the fluidity and changeability of gender (Lorber 20). Thus, transgender and intersex people refuse to be classified in the imposed conventional binaries of the idea of gender identity (Lorber 20). Therefore, the opposition between male and female is re-examined and possibilities outside the traditional gender framework are recognized. Although traditional gender theories often neglect individual action, postmodern viewpoints emphasize autonomy in the process of shaping gender identity, which is realized through expression and conscious independent choice. The proponents of “degendering” promote the elimination of gender differences in everyday situations and social institutions such as education and workplace (Lorber 20). In this way, they try to remove gender prejudices and expectations and promote equality. The focus should be on the person's abilities, talents and qualifications, not necessarily on their gender. Except gender, there are still factors that influence the promotion of inequality in society, such as race and property status.

2. Nicholas Sparks: Life and Work

Nicholas Sparks is a respected American novelist, film producer, and screenwriter (“About”). He has written and published twenty three novels, all of which have been declared *New York Times* bestsellers (“Nicholas Sparks”). Additionally, he has published two nonfictional works. His literary works are sold worldwide and have been translated in around fifty languages (“Nicholas Sparks”). By writing about romance and heartbreak, Nicholas Sparks has gained global popularity. Born in 1965 in Omaha, Nebraska, as the second child of three children, Nicholas Sparks and his family were constantly relocating, due to his father's career pursuits (“About”). From his early childhood Sparks excelled both in his scholarly pursuits and athletics (Walters). As a young adult he attended the University of Notre Dame on a track scholarship (Walters). However, due to his injury, he was directed towards a writing career (Walters). His early encroachment on writing, which includes his two unpublished novels, paved the way for his future literary success. In 1988, Sparks graduated from university with a degree in finance (“About”). He explored various job opportunities, such as real estate and sale of dental supplies, before cowriting *Wokini: A Lakota Journey to Happiness and Self-Understanding* with Billy Mills, an Olympic gold medalist (“About”). With over 50,000 copies sold, he glanced at the possibilities of success that awaited him. Sparks started to seriously pursue writing, which paid off with his romance novel *The Notebook*, published in 1994, earning him a \$1 million advance, and leading to the famous movie adaptation (“About”). His career kept blossoming with bestselling romance novels like *Message in a Bottle* (1998) and *A Walk to Remember* (1999), both of which later became a popular movie adaptation (“About”).

The way Sparks uses his talent for storytelling has proven to be very popular with readers. This is supported by the fact that his novels have been on the bestseller list for many years and are also translated into countless languages. Although Sparks experienced severe tragedies in his private life, such as the loss of his parents and sister, this had not prevented him from continuing to create new literary works in which he often uses the motifs of love and the loss of a loved one. Sparks rejects the title of “popular romance novelist,” emphasizing the wide range of psychological and emotional characteristics that the characters in his works embody. His works are not just love fiction because they touch on serious life problems of people such as loneliness or sadness. Thanks to richly nuanced characters and carefully crafted plots, Sparks's influence has extended from book to film, with numerous successful film adaptations bringing him substantial profits. In addition to his career as a writer, Sparks is also

a philanthropist, passionately advocating for and supporting education (“About”). By founding the *Nicholas Sparks Foundation* in 2011, he has decided to support educational programs and provide scholarships to young people in a financial disadvantage (“About”). Furthermore, he has contributed significantly to the *Creative Writing Program* at the University of Notre Dame and founded the Epiphany School in North Carolina (Walters). With these impressive accomplishments, Sparks decided to share his knowledge and passion for athletics with others, trying his hand at a track and field coach (Walters). With his team, he achieved enviable national records and thus continued to live his love for the sport. Even today, Sparks continues to inspire readers around the world with his novels, in which he delves into the depths of the human soul, studying the emotional side of people and interpersonal relationships in society. His success extends beyond the pages of his books to film adaptations and various humanitarian causes.

3. Gender Roles in Nicholas Sparks's Novels

Gender norms and expectations for men and women differ and are omnipresent within our society. This includes thoughts and perspectives shared on television, in literature, and on social media. In Sparks's literary works, the motif of gender is predominant. It is meticulously woven into his way of storytelling, sometimes conforming to the traditional social expectations of gender roles, and other times challenging them. This chapter explores how gender is portrayed in Sparks's novels *The Notebook*, *Best of Me*, and *A Walk to Remember*. Furthermore, it analyzes the relationship between the protagonists of the novels that are of the opposite gender. The assumption that we start from is that Sparks's characters perform more traditional male and female roles: men may have a strong masculine presence and may refrain from expressing their emotions; women may be depicted as emotionally intelligent, vulnerable characters, with nurturing qualities. However, we believe that the relationships presented in Sparks's novels would rise above the stereotypical gender identities as they may be nuanced and complex, offering the reader a glimpse into personal interactions that reflect our contemporary society.

3.1. *The Analysis of Female Characters in Nicholas Sparks's Novels*

The main female protagonist of the novel *The Notebook* serves as a prime example of the conflict between the traditional gender roles and individual aspirations. Allie comes from a very traditional family, which had, from her early age, instilled in her the conventional values of the 1940s. She is raised to prioritize social status, marriage, and her family. In their society, those values hold precedence over women's personal desires, passions, and even love. Coming from a wealthy background, Allie is expected to marry a rich man, who can sustain her comfortable lifestyle and provide her security. Her fiancé, Lon Hammond Jr., perfectly embodies the person she is expected to marry:

[Lon] was handsome, intelligent, and driven, a successful lawyer eight years older than she, and he pursued his job with passion. . . . [Allie] understood his vigorous pursuit of success... . . . In the caste system of the South, family name and accomplishments were often the most important consideration in marriage. In some cases, they were the only consideration. Though she had quietly rebelled against this idea since childhood and had dated a few men best described as reckless, she found

herself drawn to Lon's easy ways and had gradually come to love him. (Sparks, *The Notebook* 18)

Allie appreciates Lon's success, wealth, and social background; she likes the notion of comfortable life he could offer her, and considers passion an unimportant aspect of their relationship:

Though he wasn't Noah, Lon was a good man, the kind of man she'd always known she would marry. With Lon there would be no surprises, and there was comfort in knowing what the future would bring. He would be a kind husband to her, and she would be a good wife. She would have a home near friends and family, children, a respectable place in society. . . . And though she wouldn't describe theirs as a passionate relationship, she had convinced herself long ago that this wasn't necessary. . . . Passion would fade in time, and things like companionship and compatibility would take its place. (Sparks, *The Notebook* 106)

However, she condemns the social hierarchy rooted in Southern society. To her, society is like a caste system as people's lifestyles and opportunities are determined at birth. She is annoyed with the social structures even though she aims to exploit them by marrying into wealth. Allie opposes societal norms and class boundaries by falling in love with a working-class man, Noah Calhoun:

Most of the summer, [Allie] had to make excuses to her parents whenever they wanted to see each other. It wasn't that they didn't like [Noah]—it was that he was from a different class, too poor, and they would never approve if their daughter became serious with someone like him. "I don't care what my parents think, I love you and always will," she would say. "We'll find a way to be together." (Sparks, *The Notebook* 25)

In their youth, Noah and Allie's relationship was wrapped in a veil of secrecy, which negatively affected them. Despite their deep connection, their relationship was strained from the beginning because it was based on hiding from Allie's parents. Namely, they had nothing personal against Noah, but simply wanted Allie to find someone who would match her class rank or even be above it.

Allie is torn between obeying her parents and surrendering to her strong feelings for Noah. This clearly portrays the enormous societal pressure put on women, who were expected

to conform to their prescribed roles, often at the cost of love, personal aspirations, and happiness:

Do you remember sneaking over here the night you first told me about this place? . . . I got home a little late that evening, and my parents were furious when I finally came in. . . . My mother had a long talk with me later that night. She said to me, "I'm sure you think that I don't understand what you're going through, but I do. It's just that sometimes, our future is dictated by what we are, as opposed to what we want." . . . It was a terrible thing for a girl to learn. That status is more important than feelings. (Sparks, *The Notebook* 58)

Nevertheless, Allie succumbed to her parents' beliefs that status was much more important than feelings. Until she re-enters Noah's life, that belief is her driving force.

Her journey accentuates many difficult choices women are facing whilst having to balance between social norms and their own fulfillment. Allie ultimately chooses to follow her heart and picks Noah, which signifies rejection of the tradition and a break from societal expectations:

"What are you going to do?" her mother asked, pulling back. There was a long pause. "I don't know," Allie finally answered. They stood together for another minute, just holding each other. . . . On her way out the door, Allie thought that she heard her mother whisper, "Follow your heart," but she couldn't be sure. (Sparks, *The Notebook* 137)

Yet, to come to this decision, she has to face many challenges throughout the novel as she struggles with internal conflicts regarding her values and beliefs. Her decisions have serious consequences that she has to bear, such as taking full responsibility for her actions, accepting the outcome of her actions, and standing behind her decisions, even when her parents strongly disapprove of them:

"You can't live your life for other people [Allie]. You've got to do what's right for you, even if it hurts some people you love." "I know," [Allie] said, "but no matter what I choose I have to live with it. Forever. I have to be able to go forward and not look back anymore. Can you understand that?" (Sparks, *The Notebook* 141)

Furthermore, her character depicts the intricacies of the role gender plays within romantic relationships. In her relationship with Noah, Allie discovers her independence by

standing up for her own decisions and diving into her artistic endeavors. Moreover, surrendering to her true love, she transcends social limitations and establishes an egalitarian partnership, where she and Noah are equal partners to one another. Allie is thus an embodiment of the ever-evolving-woman who resists societal pressure and cherishes love, independence, and identity over the established norms.

In Nicholas Sparks's *A Walk to Remember*, Jamie Sullivan embodies an internally strong female character. She continuously resists Beaufort society and the expectations it places on women. Although Jamie is portrayed as a quiet, withdrawn and seemingly simple young woman, her character is complex and layered. She is driven by her faith in God, which is why she is rejected by her peers. Her lack of concern for her appearance also results in frequent ridicule from the rest of society: "Jamie wasn't exactly what I considered attractive, either. Despite the fact that she was thin, with honey blond hair and soft blue eyes, most of the time she looked sort of... plain" (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 16). Jamie's appearance operates here as an example of quiet rebellion against social norms. Although she is described as "plain," she is a multifaceted character used by Sparks to reject superficiality. Instead of adapting to societal standards, Jamie showcases her moral resilience, posing as a role model, who transcends social judgments and shows an incredible sense of self and complete acceptance of herself as she is. Throughout the novel, Jamie refuses to conform to socially imposed norms and stereotypes regarding women, their way of dressing, and proper behavior. She dedicates her life to helping others and lives according to her principles and beliefs. Through the character of Jamie Sullivan, Nicholas Sparks encourages readers to look deeper and ignore social prejudices in order to discover the multicolored character qualities of a person.

There are several reasons why the character of Jamie is embodied in this particular way. In this literary work, her character has not only a thematic purpose, but also a narrative one. Jamie is the catalyst that completely changes the life and moral perception of Landon Carter, the novel's protagonist and narrator. The older version of Landon describes her as an "angel who saved [them] all" (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 166). Troubled and rebellious Landon, in Jamie's company, learns important life lessons about love, faith, and family, which contributes to his personal development and the complete maturation of his character. Through her altruistic nature, Jamie encourages Landon to look at the environment and himself from other perspectives, to question his own actions and the values he possesses: "Even when I was mean to her face and said the most spiteful things, she could find some reason to thank me. She was just that kind of girl, and I hated her for it. Or rather, I think, I hated myself" (Sparks, *A Walk*

to Remember 90). Even when facing hostility, Jamie is graceful and forgiving. Her ability to respond with kindness to hurtful words shows her emotional resilience and nurturing behavior. Hence, her selflessness and moral strength do reflect traditional gender expectations. With Jamie, Sparks reinforces the women's stereotypical traits like empathy and compassion while underlining the self-reflection this evokes in others.

Furthermore, Jamie criticizes the superficiality and cruelty of society towards women, which is the result of gender stereotyping. In *A Walk to Remember*, resistance to social cruelty and gender stereotyping can take many forms, including silence. Jamie responds to social condemnation with silence, an argument that speaks louder than words, thus proving that quiet defiance is just as powerful as other more overt means of protesting. She defies Beaufort society with her silence, thereby encouraging the readers to consider the imposed norms, as well as their individual strength, and to value their own authenticity. Jamie has no need to justify herself and loudly stands up for herself as well as for her position in society. She does not change herself to fit the stereotypical mold of what is considered acceptable and desirable for a woman. Her strength lies in the fact that, despite the pressures of society, she remains true to herself and her values.

Being one of the main motifs in *A Walk to Remember*, love, and in particular Jamie's ability to love, is showed as a feeling that has transformative abilities, completely changing Landon and transforming him into an overall better and a more compassionate person. Jamie overtly displays her need to be loved and married, which also aligns with the traditional female aspirations: "'I want to get married,' she said quietly. 'And when I do, I want my father to walk me down the aisle and I want everyone I know to be there. I want the church bursting with people'" (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 71). She embraces the conventional woman's dream of a wedding, mirroring societal expectations of female characters regarding marriage. Her desire to wed in church filled with people she loves, while her father walks her down the aisle, highlights her connection to the community, family, and traditional norms. While her character is strong and independent, she still accepts some traditional aspects of the female gender role.

Jamie further illustrates the kindness that inspires people to strive for a better and more positive society. Her character shows that true strength and beauty come from within. She encourages the reader to resist the urge to conform to societal standards and, instead, to embrace their individuality. Moreover, Jamie embodies unwavering faith as she surrenders her life into God's hands. She is still hopeful, which provides her with strength and purpose. Her

religious beliefs offer her courage to face her deadly illness, whilst inspiring others to live purposeful lives. The faith can be seen as Jamie's source of comfort, underlining the importance of spirituality in navigating through life's hardships:

[Landon:] "With Jamie, everything was in the Lord's plan. That was another thing. She always mentioned the Lord's plan whenever you talked to her, no matter what the subject. The baseball game's rained out? Must be the Lord's plan to prevent something worse from happening. A surprise trigonometry quiz that everyone in class fails? Must be in the Lord's plan to give us challenges. Anyway, you get the picture." (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 10)

Like Jamie from *A Walk to Remember* and Allie from *The Notebook*, in the novel *The Best of Me*, Amanda, the female protagonist, faces the negative impact that traditional social expectations and gender roles have on women. She is torn between her familial devotion and her love for Dawson. She prioritizes the family union, i.e. her unhappy marriage and motherhood while neglecting herself, her desires, and feelings. Amanda is waging an emotional war with herself due to her internalized belief that she must put others, specifically her family, first: "Would she even recognize the woman who now looked back at her in the mirror?" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 30). Before Amanda is re-introduced to Dawson, she questions her life choices, wondering if her life would look differently if she had married her true love. She is not her true self as she has not prioritized herself. Amanda is confused and lives an unfulfilling life.

Despite her love for Dawson, she is reluctant to part with her husband, portraying the enormous impact that traditional gender roles and social pressure have on a woman: "The recognition scared her, even as she admitted that Dawson had awakened something inside her that she hadn't felt in a long, long time" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 68). Amanda is frightened by her reemerging feelings towards Dawson as they have been buried for a long time. Although she is partially excited, she is scared of the life-changing impact this situation may have on her: "Something had changed between them in the last few hours—a fragile rebirth of the past, perhaps—that both thrilled and terrified her" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 123).

Amanda compares her life with the unfortunate destiny of the entrapped otters. By telling her mother their story, she indirectly expresses her feelings of being lost and despondent in her life:

[The otters] probably didn't understand how it happened, but they seemed to understand that they were in a cage and couldn't get out. It wasn't the life that they were meant to live, or even wanted to live, but there was nothing they could do to change it. (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 148)

Although she feels as trapped as these animals, she is unable to take action to change her circumstances. As the storyline progresses, Amanda's mother encourages her to take control of her own life and bravely face the consequences of her choices: "'Exactly,' her mom said. 'Don't take my advice. Or anyone's advice. Trust yourself. For good or for bad, happy or unhappy, it's your life, and what you do with it has always been entirely up to you'" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 196). This response represents a turning point in their relationship. It shocks Amanda because she regarded her mother as an insensitive and controlling woman, whereas her mother just wants the best for her.

Amanda is afraid to make a decision for herself and her happiness, so she conforms to the rules crafted by the society. Yet, her bottled-up resentment towards her alcoholic husband gets triggered when he jeopardizes her son's life in an accident: "My son is on life support and his time is running out because I never had the courage to leave you" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 268). Amanda is overwhelmed by the hardships she faces at the mere thought of losing her child. She is even more appalled that she almost lost Jared because of her husband. She blames herself for not leaving him as she, in that way, failed to shield her son from his own father.

Her character embodies the huge amount of pressure that society puts on unhappy married women to stay within the marriage institution. Despite the pressure, Amanda eventually decides to accept her gender role by choosing family over her true love: "'I love you,' she whispered into the silent room, feeling her future being swept away like so many grains of sand, a future that already felt almost like a dream" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 203). The "silent room" is a metaphorical representation of Dawson's absence and the deep void she is feeling. The motif of sand being washed away by waves represents a beautiful fleeting romance she and Dawson experienced together. Amanda compares their relationship to a dream, illustrating her inability to actualize the beautiful life they could have had. The societal pressure weighs down on her when she thinks about the life that she is living with her current husband and children and the romance that she has experienced with Dawson: "But even then, her responsibilities continued to press down on her, and ever so slowly, she removed her foot from the brake" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 218). Whilst driving to meet up with Dawson, she

makes the tough decision to turn the car around and in that climactic moment she chooses her husband and children over her true love. She finally manages to overcome her indecisiveness, which is a major problem that had haunted her throughout the novel. Amanda musters the strength to make a decision and chooses to stay with her current husband, settling for a tolerable and semi-functional marriage.

Her life story casts light on the cross that women carry, trying to meet society's expectations and find happiness at the same time. Through her character, Sparks explores the different ways in which the roles predetermined predominantly by gender mold women's life choices, leaving them grappling with strenuous decisions and experiencing emotional turmoil.

3.2. The Analysis of Male Characters in Nicholas Sparks's Novels

In *The Notebook*, Noah Calhoun is portrayed as a hardworking and spiritual character attached to nature and simple things life permits. Although male, he has a sensitive soul, which is evident through years of pining for Allie. Life did not pamper him. Because of the trauma of losing his mother as a baby, he dealt with stutters in his childhood. To aid his speech hardships, his father encouraged him to learn by heart Alfred Tennyson's and Walt Whitman's poems, which results in his great love for poetry: "in the evenings he would read the works of Whitman and Tennyson aloud as his father rocked beside him. He had been reading poetry ever since" (Sparks, *The Notebook* 22). Through this remark, Sparks reveals Noah's sensitive side that is not usually associated with the masculine ideal. By connecting Noah's vulnerability to his masculinity, Sparks disputes gender stereotypes. He embraces both his sensitivity and strength through narration about his hardships and passions.

During his teenage years, in his hometown of New Bern, Noah meets Allie Nelson, a young woman from a wealthy respected family, with whom he falls deeply in love. During the summer of 1932, Allie and Noah both develop strong feelings for one another. However, the fleeting romance ends abruptly after Allie returns to her hometown. Noah writes her letters every day, but he never receives a response from her: "Only the summer is over, Allie, not us, 'he'd said the morning she left. 'We'll never be over. ' But they were. For a reason he didn't fully understand, the letters he wrote went unanswered" (Sparks, *The Notebook* 23). In this way, Noah displays his persistence and dedication. Rather than becoming stoic and detached, which is expected from a stereotypical male character, he is not afraid to show his emotional side.

Sparks shows the reader that male strength is not only physical but can be found in emotional openness and perseverance. Noah is not afraid to show compassion when facing rejection.

To escape from his feelings for Allie, Noah leaves his hometown for fourteen years. As an adult, he is still recovering from the many consequences that his life brought him, such as the Great Depression and the traumas he experienced on the battlefield during World War II, among which the loss of his best friend Fin and his respected employer Morris Goldman weigh down on him the most. Despite the hardships he has experienced, he retains a positive attitude towards life. With the help of funds provided by Goldman, Noah works restlessly to restore the house on a plantation in New Bern where, as teenagers, he and Allie dreamed of living:

“So that's the ghost you been running from.” When asked what he meant, Gus said, “You know, the ghost, the memory. I been watchin' you, workin' day and night, slavin' so hard you barely have time to catch your breath. People do that for three reasons. Either they crazy, or stupid, or tryin' to forget. And with you, I knew you was tryin' to forget. I just didn't know what. . . . This girl you been tellin' me about was your first love. And no matter what you do, she'll stay with you forever.” (Sparks, *The Notebook* 14).

Allie represents the invisible presence that had left a deep open wound in Noah's life. Gus, his friend with whom he spends several nights a week drinking, warns him that no matter how hard he throws himself into work, he will never be able to outrun his strong feelings for Allie. She is omnipresent, yet only reachable in his memories. Noah's character challenges the repression of sensitivity in traditional male roles. He highlights emotional depth in men by exposing his profound inner wound to his friend. Because of his attachment to the past, he is vulnerable and does not want to hide it.

Allie is the pain that has haunted Noah since she left him, the pain he would like to forget but cannot live without. Because of his socioeconomic status, Allie's parents never gave them the opportunity to fully explore their love and compatibility. When Allie visits Noah after many years, he is mostly shocked but also excited at the thought of what could be. During the weekend Allie spends with Noah, he tries to show her what kind of life they could have together. Their relationship blossoms into an intense romance while he shows her the beauty of simplicity and true love:

I am nothing special; of this I am sure. I am a common man with common thoughts, and I've led a common life. There are no monuments dedicated to me and my name

will soon be forgotten, but I've loved another with all my heart and soul, and to me, this has always been enough. (Sparks, *The Notebook* 2)

Noah has always lived by a particular value system, driven by love. As the eighty-year-old narrator at the beginning of the novel, he asserts he has always stayed true to himself, his morals, and the power of love. He signals to the reader that his life holds no specific significance, but he feels that life spent in love is the greatest accomplishment for him. Noah cherishes things that money cannot buy. He is bored by the thought of material wealth and social status and cannot understand why society prioritizes those things: “Besides, thinking about money usually bored him. Early on, he'd learned to enjoy simple things, things that couldn't be bought, and he had a hard time understanding people who felt otherwise” (Sparks, *The Notebook* 9). He refuses to be influenced by the societal pull towards money and status and is, instead, heavily focused on the development of his emotional intelligence. Noah nourishes his feelings for Allie as he loves her purely for who she is. Moreover, Noah rejects social norms and nourishes sensitivity and humility. By prioritizing love over power, wealth, and success, he once again challenges the traditional gender division.

Noah appreciates Allie's hobby of painting, and encourages her to develop it. Furthermore, he values her immensely as a woman, encouraging her to choose between him and her fiancé, and respects her choices: “You can't live your life for other people. You've got to do what's right for you, even if it hurts some people you love” (Sparks, *The Notebook* 141). He is ultimately the catalyst of Allie's development.

In his old age, Noah suffers from rheumatoid arthritis and prostate cancer, yet the greatest pain he experiences is not physical but emotional. Namely, Allie has succumbed to Alzheimer's disease, which causes memory loss. Sparks underscores Noah's devotion to Allie and his deep emotional pain, which he deems far worse than physical suffering. Noah is very clearly experiencing emotional distress, due to the fact that his beloved wife, to whom he has now been married for forty-nine years, does not recognize him. Nevertheless, he does not give up and his faith in the power of true love does not waver. Every day Noah reads to Allie from the notebook in which she wrote their love story. He tries to bring back Allie's memories even for a fleeting moment: “This is why Allie is considered a miracle, because sometimes, just sometimes, after I read to her, her condition isn't so bad. There is no explanation for this” (Sparks, *The Notebook* 185). His faith in love is truly unshakable because he believes that not even illness can separate them. Through his words and actions, he encourages Allie to choose

love above logic, to overcome materialism, to embrace spiritual fulfillment, and enjoy a life full of genuine love.

In Sparks's novel *A Walk to Remember*, Landon Carter is a seventeen-year-old protagonist-narrator of the novel:

I close my eyes and the years begin to move in reverse, slowly ticking backward, like the hands of a clock rotating in the wrong direction. As if through someone else's eyes, I watch myself grow younger; I see my hair changing from gray to brown . . . Lessons I've learned with age grow dimmer, and my innocence returns as that eventful year approaches. (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 2)

At the beginning of the novel, the reader meets Landon as a middle-aged man, telling his love story. Sparks utilizes retrospection to highlight the personal growth Landon has achieved through maturing.

Landon comes from a rich and respectable family from Beaufort, North Carolina. He is considered a conventionally handsome young man, which is partially why he is accepted and embraced by the popular kids in high school. On the surface, he is a well-behaved teenager, an average student who respects his teachers, attends church on Sundays, and has many friends. This alone makes Landon Carter feel superior to the so-called "nerds" who are rejected by the rest of the school precisely because of the "popular kids" who constantly judge them. In the Beaufort high school, individuals are ranked based on their social status, appearance, ways of dressing, and their beliefs.

Landon does not contribute to the society in any particular way. He is a self-centered person, who hides behind sarcastic remarks and is afraid to embrace diversity. Through his character, Sparks utilizes personal traits such as superficiality and egocentricity to emphasize his conventional masculinity. Landon goes through life standing on the sidelines and making fun of the people who choose to lead their life in an unconventional way. He puts in minimal effort in his relationships with friends and family and everything he does. He is expected to perform mediocrely and be average. He depicts a stereotypical young male by exhibiting emotional detachment and disengaged behavior – the traits that are often accepted and even encouraged by society. Landon only puts in more effort if there is a greater personal gain for him. However, he is “slowly coming to the sinking realization that . . . [he] was a loser” (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 23).

Although Landon seemingly has a happy life, he is lost as an individual. He is unable to dig deeper and analyze his character flaws. Sparks uses Landon as a blank hero who later on experiences a great character transformation. He showcases Landon's lack of self-worth to depict the fact that fitting in the social mold of the prescribed gender role can lead to an unhappy existence. Landon's own perception of himself as a "loser" signifies the inner conflict of the protagonist, hinting at personal growth. As he begins to seek meaningful relationships, Landon finally confronts the limiting traditional male stereotypes.

The distance between Jamie's and Landon's houses are a physical manifestation of their different social backgrounds, values, and upbringing. While Landon is wealthy and lives in a prestigious neighborhood with a water view, Jamie lives in a middle-class part of the town:

I left my house twenty minutes early, so I'd have plenty of time to get there. My house was located near the waterfront in the historic part of town, just a few doors down from where Blackbeard used to live, overlooking the Intracoastal Waterway. Jamie lived on the other side of town, across the railroad tracks, so it would take me about that long to get there. (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 51)

The journey that Landon takes to get to Jamie symbolizes his departure from his comfort zone.

In the novel *A Walk to Remember*, Landon's sense of identity gradually evolves from craving social acceptance to caring about what is morally right. Due to him being self-conscious about his image and how the rest of the society perceives him, he wants to avoid being seen with people who are not considered "cool." Hence, he is embarrassed of hanging out with Jamie as she is an outcast. For him, Jamie represents the catalyst as he compares himself to her and is able to see his character flaws.

The character transformation of this seventeen-year-old occurs when Landon sees his life as meaningless. He starts to strive for a purpose in life, so he follows his heart and tries to be merciful and compassionate towards others. This transformation occurs when he is forced to participate in a school play where he takes up the role of the main character "Tom Thornton". During the preparation for the play, Landon puts a lot of time and effort into a satisfactory presentation of the character he portrays. The sudden change of the course of his life makes him both frustrated and bewildered: "You keep acting like we're friends, but we're not. We're not anything. I just want the whole thing to be over so I can go back to my normal life" (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 90). Nevertheless, from a moral perspective, he wants to give a good

performance to brighten the lives of orphans, which indicates the beginning of his personal growth:

I spent fourteen hours memorizing my lines, cursing my friends, and wondering how my life had spun so out of control. My senior year certainly wasn't turning out the way I thought it would when it began, but if I had to perform for a bunch of orphans, I certainly didn't want to look like an idiot. (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 65).

His character development comes to the fore only because he allows it to happen. Landon's character continues to develop: from being image-conscious to embracing vulnerability. His willingness to step out of his comfort zone indicates the beginning of his moral awakening. With this shift, Landon steps away from traditional masculinity fixated on status and self-interest. Furthermore, he switches to a more compassionate life approach. His inner battles and a growing sense of responsibility underline his emerging moral growth and deepen his character's sensitive side, thus challenging traditional male roles. By breaking free from the societal pressures, Landon embodies a more emphatic and purpose-driven character.

Landon's evolving respect for Jamie later leads to their love blossoming. As he becomes aware of Jamie's deathly illness, and the little time he has left with her, he decides to propose. Rather than being focused on Jamie's death, Landon ends his love story by describing their wedding. For both him and Jamie, this was a pivotal moment that they will remember until they die. Through their act, Sparks wants to convey a message that love is eternal. Even though Jamie has long been gone, Landon still wears his wedding ring, representing his life-lasting devotion to her. She is not physically present, yet he remains married to her for the rest of his life:

I may be older and wiser, I may have lived another life since then, but I know that when my time eventually comes, the memories of that day will be the final images that float through my mind. I still love her, you see, and I've never removed my ring. In all these years I've never felt the desire to do so. (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 169)

In the end, Landon defies the traditional notions of masculinity by showing emotional vulnerability, sense of love, and boundless commitment. Instead of focusing on Jamie's impending death, he shifts his focus to more joyful memories of their wedding day. Landon does not shy away from the emotional pain of his love story. He embraces it.

In the novel *The Best of Me*, forty-two-year-old Dawson Cole is an oil rig worker living in New Orleans. His character is reclusive and the reader has the opportunity to get to know him not only through his thoughts and actions, but also through the standpoint of other characters. He embodies an archetypal rebellious man, who is misunderstood for a tough and violent person because of his dark family past. He describes himself as a “solitary figure in a vast landscape” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 69). As a teenager, he was a model student who avoided trouble. However, due to the criminal reputation his family upheld, Dawson was mistreated and unfairly punished for involuntary manslaughter because of which he went to prison. Troubled by guilt and haunted by his past, Dawson supports Dr. Bonner’s family by sending them money to redeem himself in a way. He clings to the past due to his negative perception of self: “Most people wouldn’t or couldn’t have lived their lives that way, but they didn’t know him. They didn’t know who he had been or what he had done, and he wanted to keep it that way” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 6). Dawson represents a stereotypical stoic and misunderstood male figure. His guilty consciousness and reclusive nature reflect the societal pressure on men to suppress their emotions and suffer in silence. He has a tendency to internalize pain, which aligns with male ideals. Instead of expressing his feelings of guilt, he strives to redeem himself through personal sacrifice.

His love for Amanda persists even twenty five years after their breakup. As he spends his life in solitary, in her absence his feelings for her continue to develop: “Dawson, like Tuck, was one of those rare people who could love only once, and if anything, separation had only made his feelings grow stronger” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 154). His being is filled with guilt and his goal is to make amends for the past. The only way to get rid of the haunting guilt is to forgive himself and turn over a new leaf in his life, which he is unable to do. The trailer he lives in, although meticulously maintained, is dilapidated and perfectly mirrors his inner battle: “squatted on stacked cinder blocks, a temporary foundation that had somehow become permanent over time” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 4). Dawson aims to keep the past alive by repairing and thoroughly scrubbing his old trailer. His loyalty to Amanda is unwavering. He is permeated by the qualities of constancy and emotional depth, which are often valorized as traditional male ideals. Through his character, Sparks emphasizes the societal expectations of men to endure their guilt in silence and practice self-punishment in order to redeem themselves.

Unlike Amanda, who is an emotionally unstable and more dynamic protagonist, Dawson represents the role of a stable presence in their relationship. Although he accepts his fate as it is and is, above all, humble, his meeting with Amanda awakens in him a glimmer of

hope for a better life filled with love. Amanda depicts Dawson as a “solitary figure in a vast landscape” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 69). He is led through life by “an almost stoic acceptance of the way things are” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 109). Although he initiates the start of his and Amanda’s relationship after being re-introduced to her, he is fundamentally afraid of change, and the progress it may inevitably come with it, stating that: “change isn’t always for the best” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 118). He accepts his current situation as it is and has no plan to take an action that would introduce a change in his life. By pursuing Amanda, Dawson feels anxious and uncomfortable, which further corroborates his fear of changing. His personality is rooted in the stoic stability as he tends to resist change. In doing so, he embodies a stereotypical male who internalizes emotions and avoids actions that could jeopardize his perceived stability. His stoic acceptance of life as it is reflects his fear of vulnerability and uncertainty of what could be.

However, when Amanda chooses her husband over him, Dawson regrets trying to change his life situation by pursuing love: “[Dawson] shouldn’t have come back home...there was nothing here for him...it was time to leave” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 213). After Amanda ended their relationship, and Marilyn Booner unleashed him from his chains of guilt by asking him to move past the accident, Dawson is lost: “What was his purpose now that the compass points of his life were gone?” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 229). When he is freed from his past, he loses a direction in life. The quote also implies that, for Dawson, there is no future without Amanda. He regrets his decision to change and returns to his familiar stoicism. Without guilt and sense of duty, Dawson lost his purpose. Sparks thus highlights the traditional aspects of man’s role that require a close link between his identity, his responsibilities, and a woman in his life. His self-worth is strongly associated with his sacrifice and protection, which again reflects male stereotypes.

In donating his heart to Jared, Amanda’s son, he finally uncovers the purpose of his existence and metaphorically finds his way back to his true love. By sacrificing his life, Dawson is finally freed from guilt and brings closure to his and Amanda's relationship, leaving a lasting impact on her. Because of the heart transplantation a part of Dawson is always going to be near Amanda for the rest of her life. Through this act, Dawson is able to fulfill his role as a savior and a guardian figure even in his death.

4. Social Expectations and Gender Roles in Nicholas Sparks's Novels

As the characters in Sparks's novels have been analysed in terms of gender roles and their relations, it is also important to look at the narration surrounding the characters and their relationships. So, the next step is to examine Nicholas Sparks's views on gender as implied in his work by analysing the narration in each novel respectively.

As afore-mentioned, the main subject of Sparks's novels is love and romantic relationships between two protagonists of the opposite sex. It is, however, also important to see how the characters represent Sparks's views on gender roles and norms both on intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. We assume that it will be rather hard to conclude whether Sparks accepts the gender norms or dejectedly describes them through his characters as most of the novels' narration is heavily influenced by their respective time periods.

4.1. Social Expectations in The Notebook

Sparks oftentimes provides the time period that contextualises certain gender ideologies that have played an important role in either enforcing or rejecting certain gender roles imposed on the characters. The historical context in *The Notebook* is pivotal for better understanding of characters' attitudes and actions, especially in terms of their response to social expectations. The time period mentioned in *The Notebook* ranges from the pre-WW2 to the post-WW2 era of the USA and contextualises the time of the Great Depression. Amidst this setting, the novel illustrates main characters who rebel against the conservative ideas regarding both men's and women's place in society. This helps the reader understand how Sparks shapes his language and expressions to explain the story and the way his characters are described.

It is also important to analyse the way Alley has been depicted in the novel. She is portrayed as an assertive, confident person: "she had always been confident, even as a child. She remembered that it had been a problem at times, especially when she dated, because it had intimidated most of the boys her age" (Sparks, *The Notebook* 20). She disobeys her parents for the entire summer just to meet up with Noah. Additionally, this is what makes her stand out from "other women" and impress Noah, her romantic interest:

He'd seen beautiful women before, though, women who caught his eye, but to his mind they usually lacked the traits he found most desirable. Traits like intelligence, confidence, strength of spirit, passion, traits that inspired others to greatness, traits he aspired to himself. (Sparks, *The Notebook* 32).

At this point in the novel, Allie is only seventeen, so it makes sense that she would show more of her true colours and feelings in spite of socialisation and upbringing from her parents.

Although Noah has a great personality and charisma, that is not enough for her parents: “It wasn't that they didn't like him--it was that he was from a different class, too poor, and they would never approve if their daughter became serious with someone like him” (Sparks, *The Notebook* 25). This exemplifies the parental attitude towards marrying away their daughters: they are to marry into wealth since women risk losing everything if they marry a poor man. In addition, Allie shares this sentiment by the near-end of the novel: “no matter what I choose I have to live with it. Forever. I have to be able to go forward and not look back anymore. Can you understand that?” (Sparks, *The Notebook* 141) All of this is further proven by her engagement to Lon later in the novel, who loves her for different reasons from Noah's:

He thought about her then. He loved her, he was sure of that. Not only was she beautiful and charming, but she'd become his source of stability and best friend as well. After a hard day at work, she was the first person he would call. She would listen to him, laugh at the right moments, and had a sixth sense about what he needed to hear. (Sparks 53)

Lon sees her as his companion who is non-critically there for him. Even as she pleads with him to spend more time with her, he disregards her request and continues to work late in his office. Although he loves her, his reasons for love largely evolve around her supporting him and her not challenging his long working hours, which is further noticeable in the fact that they do not fight about it: “She didn't like to argue with him about it . . . Trial work was demanding, . . . yet she couldn't help wondering sometimes why he had spent so much time courting her if he didn't want to spend the time with her now” (Sparks. *The Notebook* 58). This represents another aspect of Allie's emotional world in this novel: while women's feelings are not commonly explicitly stated, they are heavily implied in behaviours and rather visceral reactions. Even when showcasing emotions, they are wrapped in cryptic descriptions that would require a reader's life experience and intuition in order to properly understand them:

She caught herself fighting for control. She hadn't expected this to happen, didn't want it to happen. She was engaged now. She hadn't come here for this., yet... Yet... Yet the feeling went on despite herself, and for a brief moment she felt fifteen again. Felt as she hadn't in years, as if all her dreams could still come true. (Sparks, *The Notebook* 29)

What here also enforces women's role as a companion is the fact that Allie, since her breakup with Noah, would usually seek to please people, instead of focusing on her own aspirations. The first person to challenge this issue is Noah: "You can't live your life for other people. You've got to do what's right for you, even if it hurts some people you love" (Sparks, *The Notebook* 141). This quote proves how this particular role for women has been enforced on Allie, stemming from the parents' concern for their daughters to marry off into wealth.

When it comes to the depiction of the male gender roles in the novel, they are based on the comparison of Noah and Lon. The first obvious difference between them is Noah's aforementioned socioeconomic status, which is the only concern Allie's parents have when considering the seriousness of their connection. Aside from Noah's status, he sees himself as an ordinary man without extraordinary achievements: "I am nothing special; of this I am sure. I am a common man with common thoughts, and I've led a common life. There are no monuments dedicated to me and my name will soon be forgotten" (Sparks, *The Notebook* 2). Although Noah is keen on describing himself as plain, Allie sees him as a hard-working man who has appreciated simple things in life such as poetry. All these things made him more sexually desirable in her eyes, as opposed to the more ambitious, successful and wealthier Lon. Lon is used to a life in a large American city and comes from a wealthy family, which naturally led him to pursue a more challenging, monetarily competitive career of an attorney. He fits into description of what Noah holds is true to men: "At least in the basic, most primal ways. As far as he could tell, man had always been aggressive, always striving to dominate, trying to control the world and everything in it" (Sparks, *The Notebook* 21). Lon is keen on asserting control whenever situations deviate from his assumptions. The most obvious example demonstrating this is his calling Allie four times, once he realises that she stayed out of her inn late in the night. What this dichotomy between Noah and Lon shows is mostly the division between male stoicism and male competitiveness. These personality traits, usually seen simultaneously in most men, are divided between two men characters, which leaves Allie with a question whom she prefers more. However, this debate is already compromised as the novel alternates between the third person narrator and Noah as the first person narrator.

4.2. Social Expectations in *A Walk to Remember*

A Walk to Remember is set in 1958 in Beaufort, South Carolina. It is important to keep this year in mind because certain ideas regarding gender roles appear in this work more

explicitly than in *The Notebook*. Since this novel includes Landon as the first person narrator, it also depicts women from a man's perspective. The first instance showing women gender roles in the novel is Landon's statement that the majority of his life was spent with his mother: "Now she was a nice lady, sweet and gentle, the kind of mother most people dream about. But she wasn't, nor could she ever be, a manly influence in my life" (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 6). Although Landon sees his mother as a sweet person, he implies that the lack of a father figure has left a gap in his life, which a mother cannot fill, i.e. a son would inherently need a father's presence to thrive. This is further proven in his claim that that made him a rebel since young age. Although a maternal figure is considered sweet and kind, she is also not someone Landon would want to relate to at his age. In addition, Landon describes his mother as lacking in homemaking skills, thus needing a cook and a maid, yet her marriage to a wealthy congressman allows her to have this skill underdeveloped.

Apart from the way maternal figure is spoken about in the novel, the narrator also reflects on female stereotypes of his time that were based on the following dichotomy: beautiful yet lacking intelligence, or intelligent yet outright ugly. The society prioritized beauty over intellect in women at that time, which is exemplified in Landon's run for a student body president against a girl named Maggie:

Maggie Brown was another matter. She was a good student as well. She'd served on the student council for the first three years and had been the junior class president the year before. The only real strike against her was the fact that she wasn't very attractive, and she'd put on twenty pounds that summer. I knew that not a single guy would vote for her" (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 13).

In men's eyes, beauty meant more than intelligence: "He was taking Margaret Hays, who was the head cheerleader at our school. She wasn't the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree, but she was nice in her own way. By nice, of course, I'm talking about her legs" (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 19). The fact that female looks are prioritised is also seen in Landon's attempts to find a homecoming dance partner. Although he admits that there is not a lot of pretty girls in his school, he is desperate to find someone to go to the homecoming dance with. Yet, even the smaller imperfection could in his eyes subtract from a girl's beauty and make her an undesirable dance partner: "[Sally]'d had a crush on me for years, . . . she had a glass eye, and that was something I just couldn't ignore. Her bad eye reminded me of something you'd see stuffed into

the head of a mounted owl in a tacky antique shop, and to be honest, it sort of gave me the willies” (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 33).

The issue of the homecoming dance partner introduces the reader to Jamie. Landon explains that she was not his type of a woman in terms of physical appearance: “But Jamie wasn't exactly what I considered attractive, either. Despite the fact that she was thin, with honey blond hair and soft blue eyes, most of the time she looked sort of... plain, and that was when you noticed her at all” (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 9). Yet, although plain and unnoticeable, she catches his attention by not behaving like other girls her age do:

But it wasn't just the way Jamie looked that made her different; it was also the way she acted. Jamie didn't spend any time hanging out at Cecil's Diner or going to slumber parties with other girls, and I knew for a fact that she'd never had a boyfriend her entire life. Old Hegbert would probably have had a heart attack if she had. But even if by some odd turn of events Hegbert had allowed it, it still wouldn't have mattered. (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 9)

In addition, Jamie's faith set her apart from her peers as she keeps carrying her Bible with her: “if her looks and Hegbert didn't keep the boys away, the Bible sure as heck did” (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 9). Overall, she is described as a person who deeply cares about her community, from fund-raising to simply helping her neighbours repaint the house. Although Jamie is mostly seen as a pure woman and is described through the lens of her virtues, she is not exempt from the male gaze that Landon exercises: “when Jamie turned to face us, I kind of got a shock, like I was sitting on a loose wire or something... but there were two new bumps on her chest that the sweater couldn't hide that I swore hadn't been there just three months earlier” (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 11). She is also constantly depicted through the singular dimension of her faith and traditional ideas, for instance when she mentions to Landon that her only goal in life is marriage, claiming that this is all she wishes for. Landon has an impression that she is afraid of ending up alone like Miss Garber, a drama teacher, who was “big, at least six feet two, with flaming red hair and pale skin that showed her freckles well into her forties. She was also overweight – I'd say honestly she pushed two fifty – and she had a fondness for wearing flower-patterned muumuus” (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 8).

On the other hand, Jamie is presented in the same way as other girls her age. Firstly, she, too, has the down-to-earth concerns of how good at kissing she was during her first kiss with Landon. Secondly, she also seeks a special treatment as a non-verbal confirmation of a boy's

feelings. As Landon confesses to falling in love with her, he also perceives her as a more ordinary girl than he had initially thought. This portrayal can initially be misleading as the readers might consider Jamie the embodiment of traditional conservative value system and upbringing. Furthermore, they could come to the false conclusion that her limited aspirations in life are the result of social expectations imposed on women. Later in the novel, the reader discovers that Jamie's ordinariness, i.e. the lack of ambition for career and higher education, stems from her terminal diagnosis of leukaemia. In Jamie's case, her lack of ambition is merely a product of dire circumstances. However, she does have a goal in life – marriage, which she has to achieve in just a few months before she dies. It is important to understand that her character has her own reasons for shaping how others perceive her, especially within her father's congregation. She insists on keeping her terminal illness a secret, asking her father not to announce it publically. Hence, she controls how the community perceives and treats her.

In the novel, the male characters are also divided into stereotypical groups: the clumsy, unlikable boys and the popular, assertive, competitive boys and men. The first man character the reader encounters in the novel is Landon's congressman father. One of the first things the reader gets to know about his father is his absence due to his career:

And he wasn't such a bad guy, not really, especially if you consider the fact that he didn't beat me or anything. But he wasn't there for me growing up. I hate to say that because nowadays people claim that sort of stuff even if their parent was around and use it to excuse their behavior. My dad... he didn't love me... that's why I became a stripper and performed on The Jerry Springer Show.... I'm not using it to excuse the person I've become, I'm simply saying it as a fact. (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 6)

While it remains unclear whether Sparks intentionally reinforces certain gender stereotypes, it is clear that the portrayal of his characters is influenced by the historical context of the novel. The story Landon recounts takes place during the winter of 1958-1959, even though he narrates it from the perspective of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The context displays the historical reality of the particular era where men's absence from their children's lives was common because of their career demands. Rather than emphasizing contemporary gender stereotypes, Nicholas Sparks places this dynamics within the societal norms of that time. Landon's father is thus further described as “a stranger, someone I barely knew at all. . . . I thought all fathers lived somewhere else. It wasn't until my best friend, Eric Hunter, asked me in kindergarten who that guy was . . . that I realized something wasn't quite right about the situation” (Sparks,

A Walk to Remember 6). Although there is no explicit portrayal of men wielding dominance and influence over a larger crowd, this is subtly implied through the tension between Landon's and Jamie's father. Landon's grandfather gained wealth and power through ethically questionable means and was thus unchallenged due to people's fear of his retribution. Additionally, the notion of male power is further reinforced through assertive speech and pride associated with the Carter family name: "We Carters always win" (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 12). Landon was clearly under pressure to live up to his father's expectations. This also meant for Landon that his father wanted to shape him into a junior version of himself, which he was strongly against, especially because of his father's ideas of what Landon should do with his time and life, making him feel like a loser. Aside from his father, other cooler boys/men appearing in Landon's narration are Eric and his ex's new mechanic boyfriend: "His primary attribute, . . . a really nice car. . . . he'd lean against the hood of his Thunderbird, looking back and forth, saying things like 'Hey, baby' whenever a girl walked by. He was a real winner, if you know what I mean" (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 13). Eric was Landon's best friend and the most popular boy in high school: "he'd led the football team to back-to-back state titles as the star quarterback. He was a stud. Even his name sounded cool" (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 12).

The less likable version of men is shown through three examples: John Foreman, Carey Dennison, and Eddie Jones. These characters give an insight into how boys who are socially awkward, unpopular, or non-athletic are treated by others. John Foreman is Landon's opponent for a student body president and is described as a smart, but socially awkward young man: while he is intelligent and active in class, he is the type of person to pick at a listener's clothes in a conversation and to show off to the classmates with every intelligent and correct answer. Carey, on the other hand, is described as a person whose physical development is limited: "his body looked all out of proportion, as if he'd stopped growing halfway through puberty. He had a great big stomach and gangly arms and legs, . . . He also had a high-pitched way of talking" (Sparks, *A Walk to Remember* 14). Eddie is similar to Carey except for his build and his quirks (squinting eyes and stage fright). When Eddie was chosen to play Tom in the Christmas play, Jamie intervened by stating that Eddie, despite being a good, nice guy, would be mocked by other students if she and Eddie were the protagonists in the play. Although Jamie has the kindest heart of all of the characters in the novel, she was afraid of the public perception of the play if a boy like Eddie played the leading male role, which implies that even if you are good and kind, you would not choose people who do not fit certain masculine or feminine standards.

This novel shows how women are not necessarily held to certain rules of conduct, but instead to stereotypes and expectations in categories of looks and intellect. Men, on the other hand, have been defined by their popularity, success, and looks, with intellectual capabilities being not so important.

4.3. Social Expectations in *The Best of Me*

The Best of Me is set in a more contemporary setting – in 2009 and 1984, showing that certain gender role expectations have prevailed even into the twenty first century. When it comes to women's roles, the focus of the novel is on Amanda Collier, the female protagonist. She is considered pretty and popular: "She was popular, the kind of girl who sat surrounded by friends at a table in the cafeteria while boys vied for her attention, and she was not only class president but a cheerleader as well" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 19). Aside from her good looks, popularity and wealth, she is also opinionated: "Sometimes it was about little things—Amanda was nothing if not opinionated—and they'd bicker furiously for a while, usually without any sort of resolution" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 21). Due to her opinions, attitudes and values, she faces troubles, mostly with her family who despise Dawson for being a member of the criminal Cole family:

He was a Cole and she was a Collier, and that was more than enough cause for dismay. At first, they clung to the hope that Amanda was simply going through a rebellious phase, and they tried to ignore it. When that didn't work, things got harder for Amanda. They took away her driver's license and prohibited her from using the phone. In the fall, she was grounded for weeks at a time and forbidden to go out on weekends. Never once was Dawson allowed into their home, and the only time her father ever spoke to him he called Dawson "a worthless piece of white trash." Her mother begged Amanda to end it, and by December her father had stopped speaking to her altogether. (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 21)

Amanda and Dawson face the same issues in their relationship as Allie and Noah in *The Notebook*: the girls' parents envision them married into wealth and status, which their respective boyfriends do not possess. In a lot of ways, Amanda shows similar behaviour patterns as Allie. Her depiction also resembles Allie's. Both are mostly unhappy in their families and feel best around their lovers. This implies that the female protagonists, as rebellious as they are in their romantic choices, are also fully ready to put their entire mental

and physical trust in their partners – meaning that they see their partners as virtuous and reliable, which is afore-discussed in the analysis of the male roles. The main difference between Allie and Amanda is the family behind them. While Allie’s parents implicitly disapprove of Noah due to his social class, otherwise finding him likeable, Amanda’s parents attempt to intervene in her romantic relationship, threatening her with eviction before she is to leave for college. This demonstrates how little she means to her parents and how she has no say in her circumstances: her mother “told Amanda that if she continued to see Dawson, she would have to move out of the house in September and start paying her own bills, and they wouldn’t pay for her to attend college, either” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 23). Her relationship with Dawson represents a threat to her life trajectory and the only punishment her parents could think of is cutting her off financially. The more problematic part of the novel in terms of narration comes with an argument between Amanda and Dawson:

“We’ll move in together,” she said, her cheeks still damp. | [Dawson] “Where?” he asked her. “Here? In the garage?” | [Amanda] “I don’t know. We’ll figure it out.” | Dawson remained silent, studying the floor. “You need to go to college,” he finally told her. | “I don’t care about college,” Amanda protested. “I care about you.” | He let his arms fall to his sides. “I care about you, too. And that’s why I can’t take this from you,” he said. | She shook her head, bewildered. “You’re not taking anything from me. It’s my parents. They’re treating me like I’m still a little girl.” | [Dawson] “It’s because of me, and we both know that.” He kicked at the dirt. “If you love someone, you’re supposed to let them go, right?” . . . | [Dawson] “Where? With what? I have nothing. Don’t you understand that?” He let the words hang, and when she didn’t answer, he finally went on. “I’m just trying to be realistic.” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 23)

It is important to closely look at his last words: “I’m just trying to be realistic,” which imply that it is unrealistic for her to risk her future and career for love.

Afterwards, the reader gets to know the new, married Amanda. The first glimpse at her shows that her arguments and argument style are not reported; what is reported is that “over time she’d learned to numb herself to the anger and anxiety that had come to define [her and Frank’s] relationship” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 26). Amanda is now a person who feels happy talking on the phone with her children, being “thankful for the distraction” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 26). Aside from being devoted to her children, the reader discovers that she is “a stay-at-home mom, and while she’d embraced and mostly relished that role, there’d always been a

part of her that chafed at its limitations” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 27). This again shows Amanda to be a woman who is simultaneously happy and full of regret because her life boils down just to motherly and homemaking roles. However, the biggest source of her dissatisfaction is Frank, her husband, and his alcoholism:

he would remain an alcoholic. And yet what did that mean for her? That she had to make a *choice*. That she had to *decide* whether or not she would continue to put up with it. That she had to form a list of *consequences* . . . all it did was make her angry. If he was the one with the problem, why was she the one who had to take responsibility? And if alcoholism was a disease, didn’t that mean he needed her help, or at least her loyalty? How, then, was she—his wife, who’d taken a vow to remain with him in sickness and in health—supposed to justify ending the marriage and breaking up their family . . .? She’d either be a heartless mother and wife or a spineless enabler.” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 31)

This is one of the rare instances where woman’s role as a wife and mother is explicitly examined through the circumstances Amanda finds herself. Frank’s actions, and their consequences, primarily stem from his addiction and individual choices whereas Amanda’s repercussions extend far beyond herself. Moreover, Frank’s failure to address his children’s growing disrespect towards him, due to his alcoholism, highlights his tendency to avoid responsibility. This is especially apparent when his character is compared to Amanda’s and her burden of constantly managing the fallout. Even when she meets Dawson, she is reminded that “she needed to be careful . . . [because] . . . she had a husband and children” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 54).

Other women characters do not have an important role in the novel as they are insignificant compared to Amanda, the love of Dawson’s life. This is demonstrated during Dawson’s flight back to his hometown when he sits “next to a young woman: red hair, mid-thirties, long-limbed, and tall. Not exactly his type, but pretty enough” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 20). Dawson treats her with indifference by looking out of the window in an attempt to avoid a potential conversation with her.

In *The Best of Me*, men characters seem to be described in the same way as in *The Notebook*, especially Dawson. He works at an oil rig, which is one of the physically most body-taxing jobs, implying that he is a physically strong man with a traditionally male job. Aside from that, it is important to mention again that Dawson is alienated from other people as he

lives alone in a trailer and thus embodies a stereotypical male trait of self-reliance and emotional detachment. The idea of male stoicism is further reinforced in a claim that Dawson's life is hard: "Most people wouldn't or couldn't have lived their lives that way, but they didn't know him. They didn't know who he had been or what he had done, and he wanted to keep it that way" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 12). Dawson's greatest hindrance is his familial connection: as a Cole, he is a member of a family who were "moonshiners and drug dealers, alcoholics, wife beaters, abusive fathers and mothers, thieves and pimps, and above all, pathologically violent" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 15) – men with criminal records and people often avoided by the rest of the society.

Thus, his family connection brings Dawson into a direct and inevitable conflict with the quintessential example of the destructive traits of Cole's family, i.e. his father. Dawson's father is a man with serious anger issues and ready for retribution for petty reasons:

Nor did he blame her for not taking him. Men in the Cole family were strangely proprietary about their offspring, and he had no doubt his father would have hunted his mom down and taken him back anyway. He'd told Dawson as much more than once, and Dawson had known better than to ask his dad what he would have done had his mom refused to give him up. Dawson already knew the answer. (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 15)

Although the narration does not focus on male traits of Dawson's father, it shows his abusive language: "You're alone out here at night and you ain't gonna have no alibi, and for all I care, you can just rot away for the rest of your life surrounded by iron and concrete" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 18). The depiction of male roles in the novel becomes more complex when compared with Dawson's behavior as it starkly differs from that of his own family. The contrast is particularly evident in his relationship with Amanda. Although she is argumentative, he still "couldn't help admiring her honesty" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 21), which directly opposes the "wife-beater" stereotype of Dawson's male family members.

Other instances of Sparks's narration on men in this novel pertain to Frank. He is not explicitly described at first, the only thing the reader gets to know about him is that he is non-violent in arguments: "and in the end Frank had muttered a curt apology before leaving for work" (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 26). Later, it is found out that he and Amanda met at a frat party at Duke. They married after her graduation, after which both of them worked in their respective fields: Frank was a dentist while Amanda was a teacher. The reader does not learn how

Amanda became a homemaker. Yet, what is implied is that for Frank there was no compromise between his career and family, especially as he opened his own practice. He also portrays a competitive and heavily ambitious person as he “refused to accept offers of help from either family” (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 28). There are, however, several instances when Frank shows negative traits. While Amanda grieves their loss of Bea by fulfilling her motherly obligations more dedicatedly than before, Frank is drinking his pain away, becoming an alcoholic. This demonstrates that men usually have more self-destructive tendencies than women. Frank’s self-destruction leads to another negative trait – the lack of responsibility:

A few years ago, after eating some spoiled seafood, Amanda had spent hours throwing up in the bathroom. At the time, Jared had his learner’s permit and wasn’t allowed to drive at night, and Frank had been on one of his binges. When she was nearing dehydration, Jared ended up taking her to the hospital around midnight while Frank lolled in the backseat and pretended to be more sober than he really was. Despite her near delirium, she noticed Jared’s eyes flicking constantly to the rearview mirror, disappointment and anger warring in his expression. (Sparks, *The Best of Me* 30)

The analysis of novel narration is reduced to only a few chapters of the novel because they have provided a lot of information on the view of gender – the rest of the novel follows the similar pattern. While men are either competitive or stoic and happy with whatever they get, defending firmly their values, women are usually made to reconsider their options and choices. Amanda, for example, initially pursues a specific set of ambitions, but her first chance at love almost cost her everything. Later on, she settled into marriage and motherhood, ultimately confining herself to the role of the homemaker. The narration is also heavily focused on the way women are held accountable both for their own actions (Amanda’s wish to run off with Dawson) and the actions of those around them (e.g. Amanda has to bear with her husband’s alcoholism as he is her husband and father of her children).

Conclusion

This master's thesis analyzed gender roles and social expectations in Nicholas Sparks’s novels *The Notebook*, *A Walk to Remember* and *The Best of Me*, revealing a complex interplay

between modern and traditional ideals. The characters portrayed in his works embody a spectrum of gendered behaviors, reflecting cultural norms and social expectations of their time periods. The analysis of the characters also showed the way Sparks utilizes historical context in order to present gender dynamics in his novels. Settings and time frames provide a backdrop that further highlights the struggles Sparks's characters have to endure by rebelling against gender norms and social expectations, thus allowing the reader to explore the influence of societal norms on individuals and their choices regarding marriage, career, and personal gratification. This thesis showed that while the characters in the afore-mentioned novels do conform to some traditional aspects of gender roles, they also often rebel against them. For example, in *The Notebook* Allie is conflicted between following her heart and clinging to her family's expectations, unmasking the unyielding social structures that dictate women's lives. Likewise, in *The Best of Me*, Amanda personifies the struggle that women often face whilst attempting to balance personal fulfillment and societal expectations in terms of marriage and motherhood. In *A Walk to Remember*, Jamie transcends societal judgment by embracing her faith in God and her moral strength.

Yet, despite the characters' complexity, Sparks's narratives mainly reinforce the *status quo* instead of subverting it. While male characters do unveil their sensitive side occasionally, they are still primarily shaped by traditional male ideals, such as stoicism, strength, or emotional restraint although all the male protagonists – Noah, Dawson and Landon – tend to oppose traditional norms by merging conventional masculinity and emotional vulnerability. All of the male characters demonstrate strong emotional commitment towards their love interests in one way or the other. This is evident in Noah's everlasting love for Allie, Landon's character changing from superficial and negligent to compassionate, and in Dawson's unwavering dedication to Amanda.

Sparks oftentimes rebels against traditional norms, emphasizing the importance of emotional equality and mutual respect in a relationship. Noah and Allie's romance progresses into an egalitarian relationship while Dawson develops a sense of respect towards Amanda's choice to disregard her personal desires and return to her imperfect family. Furthermore, Jamie's impact on Landon's character development further corroborates this as Landon transforms into an emphatic and compassionate young man.

Throughout his novels, Sparks subtly criticizes the rigid social expectations on characters, confining them in the process. The narratives particularly emphasize the issues

women face in pursuit for their personal happiness whilst navigating through societal pressures. All of his female protagonists have to endure the physical and emotional toll of social expectations and the difficulty of choosing between complying with societal duty and personal desires. Sparks's narratives propose that while social norms impose certain roles on an individual, true contentment lies in opposing them and following one's heart.

The thesis leaves room for further analysis. This work focuses mainly on the main characters of the following novels: *The Notebook*, *A Walk to Remember*, and *The Best of Me*. Future study could broaden the exploration of the scope of Spark's literary works and characters, branching out to supporting characters, and his other works. Another sphere of interest could be directed to the adaptation of Spark's novels into movies. His literary works could be compared to the movies in order to explore the way visual medium might either alter or reinforce gender dynamics represented in the original texts. Moreover, a comprehensive research between Sparks's literary works and those of other contemporary romance writers could provide further insight into the evolution of gender roles in popular literature. This study contributes to the ongoing discussions about gender roles in literature, underlining the necessity for continuous exploration of the way popular romance novels both mold and are molded by society's cultural contexts in which they are produced.

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