

## The Hypermasculine and Ubersexual Men in the Harlequin Novels of the 1980s and 2000s

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### ABSTRACT

Harlequin novels are so popular that Harlequin romance emerges as a genre. Unlike on the heroines, there are scarcely any studies or works on the heroes, thus, I want to focus my study on the heroes of Harlequin Romance. By analyzing using the Male Sex Role in the 1980s and themes of masculinity in the 2000s, I will prove that there are four types of ideal men in the 1980s Harlequin novels whose characteristics originated from the ideal men in the society at that time, the Hypermasculine men with extreme masculinity and avoidance of any feminine sides. I will also prove that there are three types of ideal men in the 2000s Harlequin novels whose characteristics are in accordance with the Ubersexual men's, the ideal men in the society in 2000s having positive characteristics of traditional manliness with some "feminine" characteristics. The reason behind these changes is because of the changes in the heroines and the characteristics of men in the society in time and these push for the changes in the heroes. As a publisher, Harlequin's goal is the highest selling rate, thus, they adjust to the market's demand.

Key words: Harlequin, heroes, Hypermasculine men, Ubersexual men.

Because of the popularity of Harlequin novels, any romances with the characteristic of Harlequin novels although they are not published by Harlequin publisher are considered still as Harlequin novels. This is in accordance with the definition of Harlequin Romance in Macmillan Dictionary, a meaning of any of a series of romantic novels with simple stories about romantic relationships between men and women ("Harlequin Romance," para. 1). I choose to discuss Harlequin novels because Harlequin is "the world's largest publisher of romance fiction, a market segment reckoned to account for half of all mass market paperbacks purchased" ("About," para. 1). Harlequin novels are not only famous abroad but also in Indonesia. Romance fiction has the biggest market share compared to other genres as we can see the statistics from Simba Information inside the website of Romance Writers of America ("Romance"). As Janice A. Radway (1991) stated in her book, *Reading the Romance*, reading romance has "its therapeutic value" to the readers, and that "the activity of romance reading is pleasurable and restorative as well" (p. 119). Reading romance will make the readers feel better, especially after a long tiring day, or a busy schedule, or even when we feel lonely or bored. Still according to Janice Radway, reading romance novels that match their preferences, will "guarantee . . . a vicarious experience that leaves them feeling hopeful, happy, and content" (p. 119).

Bearing in mind the importance of Harlequin romance, I will only use the works of famous Harlequin authors who have gained their reputation to ensure that the novels I am going to analyze are really popular. The popularity aspects of the authors I use are the selling of their books, the awards they or the novels have received, and their popularity since 1980s until now. From the works of the following six authors, I will use eight Harlequin romance novels, five novels from 1980s and four novels from 2000s. For the novels from 1980s, I will use the works of Nora Roberts' *Opposites Attract*, Diana Palmer's *The Tender Stranger*, Penny Jordan's *Fight for Love*, and Debbie Macomber's *Navy Blues*. Moving to the Harlequin novels in 2000s, I will use works of Linda Lael Miller's *McKettrick's Heart*, Robyn Carr's *Temptation Ridge*, Diana Palmer's *Heartbreaker* and Nora Roberts' *Vision in White*.

In reading these Harlequin novels, there are some things that I come to notice. In many diverse Harlequin novels, the heroines, or the main female characters have various types and a considerable amount of works and analyses on the heroines have been done. However, this is different in the case of the heroes, compared to the works done on the heroines, the study about the heroes are just a few. Moreover, from reading these novels, I notice some changing characteristics

in the heroes that I would like to find out more. From the earlier explanation on the background of Harlequin novels, I already mention that there are shifting movement of romance characteristic, in which occurred for the heroes and heroines. As Kate Cuthbert stated in H.E.A.R.T. Newsletter, "heroines became stronger and more outspoken, feisty. They had careers, marriage, and families. . . . editors and publishers began to push for a new hero" (p. 2). In her interview with Dianne Moggy, the Editorial Director in Harlequin Enterprises, Trish Morey, a romance writer, stated that romance "isn't a static beast", there are "developments that reflect changes in attitudes in society" and Dianne Moggy agreed and said that romance is "an ongoing evolution" and romance novels "have reflected . . . roles in society and those changing roles have led to changes in the style and tone of our books" (para. 13). From the changes from the shifting movement of romance characteristics in 1980s, there followed the changes in 2000s. This is supported by Brenda Chin's answer that "the role of the hero since 9/11 had changed significantly" and that "the trend was now ordinary men who were heroes" to the question of whether there were any trends in romance novel these days (Hur, 2009, para. 2). From the compiling reasons above, I am intrigued to find out about the characteristics of the heroes of Harlequin novels.

I want to find out the characteristics of the heroes in the Harlequin novels of the 1980s and 2000s and how they reflect the changes of the ideal men in the society. In doing so, it is my goal to reveal the characteristics of the heroes in the Harlequin novels of the 1980s and 2000s are changing and that they reflect the changes of the ideal men in the society.

Linda Brannon also cited that according to R. Brannon in his book published in 1976, the four themes of the Male Sex Role included:

1. No Sissy Stuff: The stigma of all stereotyped feminine characteristics and qualities, including openness and vulnerability.
2. The Big Wheel: Success, status, and the need to be looked up to.
3. The Sturdy Oak: A manly air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance.
4. Give 'Em Hell: The aura of aggression, violence, and daring (p. 171).

In order to be the perfect man wholly, a man must fulfill his role as a male. If a man wishes to be a true man, he would have to possess these characteristics.

Will Meek, a licensed psychologist as well as the Assistant Director of Counseling & Training at the University of Portland and an Adjunct Professor of Counselor Education at Portland State University, proposes the following three themes of masculinity in the 2000s:

1. Strength: emotional toughness, courage, self-reliance, aggression, rationality
2. Honor: duty, loyalty, responsibility, integrity, selflessness, compassion, generativity
3. Action: competitiveness, ambition, dominance, risk-taking (Meek, para. 8).

In further proving that the changes of the heroes in Harlequin novels are in accordance with the changes of ideal men in the society at those periods, I will use the characteristic of ideal men in real life at those periods. For the 1980s, I will use the characteristics of hypermasculine men; while for the 2000s, I will apply the characteristics of ubersexual men.

According to Encyclopedia of Race and Crime, the term hypermasculinity:

. . . an adoption of extreme machismo in males and according to Matt Zaitchik and Donald Mosher, it is an exaggerated form of masculinity, virility, and physicality, as well as a tendency toward disrespecting women. . . . any embrace and exhibition of emotion is feminized as inherently weak. Mosher suggested that three distinct characteristics identify the hypermasculine personality: (1) the view of violence as manly, (2) the perception of danger as exciting and sensational, and (3) callous behavior toward women and a regard toward emotional displays as feminine (Craig, "Hypermasculinity").

Marian Salzman, co-writer of *The Future of Men*, said that, "Ubersexuals are confident, masculine and stylish, and committed to uncompromising quality in all areas of life" (Harris, 2005, para. 2). The authors of *The Future of Men* further said that, "In short, the ubersexual possesses what the authors call "M-ness," a type of masculinity "that combines the best of traditional manliness (strength, honor, character) with positive traits traditionally associated with females (nurturance, communicativeness, cooperation)" (Valeo, p. 1). Furthermore, Salzman also said that ubersexual men embrace confidence, leadership, passion, and compassion, without disrespect toward women and emotional emptiness. Ubersexual men are passionate about causes and

principles, treat and respect women as equals ("Move," 2006). I will use the characteristic of ubersexual men and compare it to the characteristic of the heroes in Harlequin novels in 2000s.

## **THE HYPERMASCULINE MEN IN THE HARLEQUIN NOVELS OF THE 1980S**

### **The Big Wheel Men**

The Big Wheel men are described as ambitious, competitive, independent, leaders, and they strive for success and status. These men focus on their career and seek for higher position in their work path. They are also activity and achievement oriented. The activities that they do are both physical and intellectual.

The competitive, ambitious, and determined hero is represented in Travers, the hero in *Fight for Love*. Jay is a big wheel man type because of his ambition. Jay's ambition is shown in his unusual way of keeping the ranch in his family. "No, the only way to make sure this ranch is safe... the only way to stop you from squandering and destroying it, is to marry you myself!" (Jordan, 1988, p. 107). In Jay's eyes, marrying a woman whom he disliked is excusable. He tricked the drunken Natasha Ames into marrying him so that he would not lose the ranch that had been in his family's. His ambition drives him into justifying doing things that are morally wrong in order to reach his goal.

### **Give 'Em Hell Men**

The Give 'Em Hell men are described as aggressive, powerful, assertive, and boastful. These men are dominant. They are physically and mentally powerful. They ooze the aura of aggression, violence and daring. The give 'em hell men are the hero of *The Tender Stranger*, Eric James van Meer. Eric is a very dominant and powerful man.

She swallowed, a little intimidated as her eyes swept over a muscular physique, blond hair and a face that looked positively hostile. . . . over six feet. . . . the blond giant . . . was world-weary and cynical . . . Muscular, graceful, and with the face of a Greek statue, male perfection in the finest sense (Palmer, 1985, p. 1-17).

From the proof above, there are three impressions the heroine, Danielle St. Clair, gets from meeting the hero, Eric. They are about his physique, attitude, and impact on other people. Eric has a magnificent physique. He is very macho and yet has a graceful feature. Eric has a rude and hostile attitude. Not only his physique shows his aggressiveness and sense of violence, he is, in reality, a very aggressive man in attitude. The impact of his demeanor is very strong on other people. Like the reaction from the heroine above, people will feel intimidated and instinctively aware that he is a very capable and even dangerous man.

Aside from his physical look and peculiar job as a professional mercenary, another thing about Eric is his sense of violence and daring.

"I know more about knives than guns, as a rule, although I've used both." He reached into his inside blazer pocket, produced a large folded knife and put it on the table. . . . I have something of a reputation with that knife. I made it myself." (Palmer, 1985, p. 19-47).

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"A consulting firm. . . . It's exciting work. Even a little risky. He asked if you might be interested. He needs someone experienced in tactics and strategy." "A desk job," Dutch [Eric's nickname] scoffed (Palmer, 1985, p. 62).

His dominance is even more enunciated with his work as a professional mercenary. Even though Eric is specialized in logistics, he is handy with guns and even has a way with knives. His tactical moves, strategy and his skill with knives even save him and everybody else when his plane is hijacked. His sense of violence is very strong. He considers working in a consulting firm as a desk job, not as manly as his violent job as a mercenary.

### **The Sturdy Oak Men**

The Sturdy Oak men are described as level-headed, logical, self-controlled, and unemotional in dealing with other people and the world. They have a manly air of toughness, confidence, self-reliance, stay composed and in control.

The heroes, Eric and Ty are sturdy oak men. Eric James van Meer of *The Tender Stranger* is a level-headed man and from his action on dealing with difficult situation, it is clear that Eric is confident and has a manly air of toughness.

He smiled. . . . She could taste her own fear, but Dutch seemed oddly confident. He also seemed to know what he was doing. . . . Dutch shrugged. "Pure self-interest," he said. "He was holding up my coffee." . . . "It wasn't a live grenade," he called, the authority in his voice pacifying the nervous passengers. "It's all over, just sit quietly." (Palmer, 1985, p. 41-45).

He is confident he can subdue the hijackers with his professional knowledge of weaponry and tactical approach. Aside from his confidence in himself, the impact of his confidence on other people is that they also feel confident in his action. His flat reaction when the pilot thanks him for saving their lives shows toughness. His demeanor makes people believe that he can save them from the problem they are in. His manly toughness makes him into an authoritative figure that the passengers can lean on.

In addition to Eric, Ty Starbuck of *Opposites Attract* is another sturdy oak man. Ty is a self-controlled and unemotional man. This can be seen in his way of dealing with the heroine, Asher Wolfe.

The challenge. Yes, Ty admitted with a frown, he was a man who couldn't resist a challenge. Something about the cool, distant Asher Wolfe had stirred his blood even when she had been little more than a child. He'd waited for her to grow up. And to thaw out, he reminded himself ruefully. (Roberts, 1984, p. 27).

When presented with his attraction toward Asher, Ty faces it with self-control. With the heroine being still rather young, Ty controls himself and waits patiently. His way of handling what he feels toward Asher is thought thoroughly and in an unemotional way. Even when he feels the attraction, it is more sexually rather than romantically.

### **No Sissy Stuff Men**

The No Sissy Stuff men are described as avoiding all stereotyped feminine characteristics and qualities such as openness, vulnerability, emotions, passiveness, dependence, purity, refinement, and delicacy.

The no sissy stuff man is Steve. Steve Kyle, the hero of *Navy Blues*. He avoids openness and vulnerability. This can be seen in his relationship with his wife.

He already knew what Carol was going to tell him. . . . She was remarrying. Well, more power to her, but he wasn't going to sit back and blithely let her rub his nose in the fact. . . . He hadn't told either of them the details that had led to his and Carol's divorce. He preferred to keep all thoughts of the disastrous relationship out of his mind (Macomber, 1989, p. 8-9).

Steve tries to keep his feeling by not telling the story of how he gets divorced to his sister and her husband. He avoids emotion. He does not want to be pitied, believing that his wife left him for another man. Rather than considering that he might be wrong about his wife, he chooses to believe that his wife is the one to blame. He is unwilling to even consider that he may be wrong because he does not want to feel vulnerable.

The heroes of the Harlequin novels in 1980s fulfill the types of the ideal men at that time. They all have strength, especially magnificent physical strength. Their appearance shows their extreme manliness. People can acknowledge their strength and masculinity just by seeing them. They embrace their masculine characteristics. No heroes are pictured as vulnerable; they are all strong and sturdy. These masculine characteristics are in line with the concept of hypermasculinity, which are the view of violence as manly, the perception of danger as exciting and sensational, and callous behavior toward women and a regard toward emotional displays as feminine (Craig, "Hypermasculinity"). These heroes are virile, overly masculine, danger and violence as attractive, disrespectful toward women, and avoiding any feminine characteristics. So, the heroes of the 1980s Harlequin novels can be considered to be the hypermasculine men, where all the masculine characteristics are "hyper." They are the best specimen of masculine men.

## THE UBERSEXUAL MEN IN THE HARLEQUIN NOVELS OF THE 2000S

### Strong Men

Even though the characteristics of strong men are similar to those in sturdy oak and give 'em hell which is physical, the strength that is emphasized in strong men is their emotional strength. The "Strong men" are described as having emotional toughness, courage, self-reliance, aggression, and rationality. For the "strong men", the mental strength does not have to be equal to the physical quality. Meanwhile, for the sturdy oak and give 'em hell men, their physical and mental strength must be aligned and they emphasize on their emotional strength.

Carter and Luke represent the "strong men." Carter Maguire from *Vision in White* has emotional strength. He proves himself as a "strong man" by showing his courage in dealing with problems he faces when he helps the heroine, Mackensie "Mac" Elliot, doing her wedding business.

"He was half drunk so there wasn't that much behind it. He shouldn't have put his hands on you."

"You never even raised your voice. You shut him down—I could see it happen in his face, even before the troops arrived. And you never touched him or raised your voice."

"Teacher training, I suppose. And a wide and varied experience with bullies. Did the newlyweds get off all right?" (Roberts, 2009, p. 105).

Although he is physically slim and does not seem to have any physical advantage, he shows his courage by confronting the drunken best man when he hurts the heroine, unlike the heroes in 1980s whose physique is exceptionally strong and muscular. In dealing with the problem, he shows rational thinking, even by using his experience in getting bullied. Even after this commotion, he still manages to show his concern toward the newlyweds, the supposedly center people of the wedding.

Luke Riordan, the hero of *Temptation Ridge*, is another "strong man". As a "strong man", he relies on himself. This can be seen when he goes horse riding with the heroine, Shelby MacIntyre. He went to his truck and pulled his Remington .338 rifle out of the rack. "I'll feel a little better if I don't have to rely on you to protect me."

"Ninny," she said, smiling. "That's pretty, but way more gun than you need."

"It makes me feel manly," he said (Carr, 2009, p. 83).

As a "strong man", Luke prefers to protect himself, and the heroine, when needed, although the heroine is able to protect herself and Luke. As a "strong man", Luke accepts his weakness and is not embarrassed to confess that by having a gun, he feels more manly and stronger. He is opened to his feeling and vulnerability different with the 1980s heroes who avoid showing their feeling and vulnerability.

### Active Men

Albeit the characteristics' similarity with the big wheel men's characteristics, there is some difference between the two; where the big wheel men are more into physical oriented, the "active men" are not only into physical activities but also into intellectual or mental oriented. Their goals are not for themselves, but for the good of others. The "Active men" are described as competitive, ambitious, dominant, and risk taking.

The "active man" with big ambition is Carter Maguire of *Vision in White*. His ambition is even seen in the efforts he puts in preparing for a date. "No, no. He had a rehearsal on Tuesday. Can you imagine that? . . . He went to so much trouble, and it was, well, lovely. And fun. Bob made a list." (Roberts, 2009, p. 91). It is never heard before for anyone, moreover a man, to rehearse for a date. In his effort to ensure that his date with Mackensie runs smoothly, he has a rehearsal before the real date. Carter even asks his friend, Bob, for advices in dating and to make sure that he does not do anything wrong. His determination is clearly shown by the length he goes to ensure his date's success. Carter's thoughtfulness in making sure his date with the heroine runs smoothly is the opposite with the 1980s heroes who tend to belittle and disrespect women.

The last example of Carter's ambition is shown in his work as an English teacher in his high school alma mater.

His goal in the in-depth study of the play had been to guide his students under the surface of what might appear to be a light romantic comedy full of jokes and clever banter to the currents beneath. Under all that, Carter supposed, his goal was to make his students think (Roberts, 2009, p. 159). His ambition is consistent with his goal. From the previous proof, Carter's goals are always about other. His first goal is for Mackensie to overcome her trauma so that she can be with him, and his second goal is for his students to think, to become better people. His job as an English teacher is an intellectual job, and in the 1980s heroes who are very physical, a profession as a teacher would be considered to be "sissy" as a teacher whose job is to "nurture would be considered to be feminine. Carter's goals which are for the good of other and for his romantic relationship are also different compared to the heroes of the 1980s whose goals are for themselves.

### **Honorable Men**

Unlike the previous two themes with the similarity with the characteristics of the men from 1980s, the characteristics of "honorable men" are the opposites from the characteristics of no sissy stuff men. The "Honorable men" are described as dutiful, loyal, responsible, having integrity, selfless, compassionate, and generative.

The "honorable men" are J. B., Luke, and Keegan. One incident that shows that J. B. Hammock from *Heartbreaker* is an honorable man is when he helps Tellie Maddox, the heroine.

He'd rescued Tellie from a boy in the foster home where she'd been staying since her mother's death. . . . All that had changed with the attempted assault by another foster child in care with the same family. . . . He'd taken her straight to Marge [his sister] for sanctuary (Palmer, 2006, p. 1).

His helping Tellie although they are not related and his thoughtful act in helping her, so that she will not be disgraced by gossip if she lives with him, shows that J. B. is a man with integrity. Unlike the heroes in the 1980s who will not be found helping other people if they themselves are not also in trouble thus their acts can be consider as helping themselves, J. B.'s acts of helping shows deep consideration of the future of those he helps and care of other people, precisely a child in need of help and rescue.

Moving to the next hero, Luke Riordan from *Temptation Ridge* is another "honorable man". His concern and compassion toward other people starts since he was little. It is particularly when he helps people suffering Down syndrome.

He'd only known one kid with Down's while growing up—a neighbor kid. . . . Luke and his brothers all looked out for him. . . . So Art is on the run from an abuser. . . . Luke thought about calling someone, get this guy some help. But he only thought about it for five seconds. He couldn't have some agency toss this guy back into a group home where he was mistreated (Carr, 2009, p. 78).

Luke is also concerned about "weak" creatures. Unlike the heroes of 1980s who only help if they are also in trouble, Luke helps when there are people in need of help. When Luke decides to help someone, it is not just on the surface. Apart from that, he also treats Art with respect. He makes sure that his problem is really solved legally. He makes sure that Art will be independent in taking care of himself. When Luke helps, it is not an empty promise, he stands by his words.

Another "honorable man" is Keegan McKettrick from *McKettrick's Heart*. Keegan keeps his word. His integrity as a man can be seen when Psyche, his dying friend, asks him to promise her to take care of her adopted son, Lucas, when she dies.

"Molly will raise Lucas, but I'd like you to serve as my executor." . . . "Let me bring him up, Psyche," Keegan said, and she knew he meant it, bless his heart. . . . "I give you my word, Psyche . . . McKettrick-true," he promised (Miller, 2007, p. 1613-1616).

His offering to be Lucas' father is not only from his compassion in helping his friend, but from his genuine sincerity and willingness. His integrity in taking his responsibility and keeping his promises is widely known as "McKettrick-true." His willingness to be more than just a legal guardian for the child not his own will not be found in the 1980s heroes.

The three types of the hero of the Harlequin novels in 2000s show feminine characteristics. These heroes embrace their feminine characteristics not as a sign of weakness but as a sign of strength and caring. Thus, the heroes in 2000s have both the feminine and masculine characteristics. These combined characteristics are in accordance with the concept of ubersexual

men who possess "'M-ness," a type of masculinity "that combines the best of traditional manliness (strength, honor, character) with positive traits traditionally associated with females (nurturance, communicativeness, cooperation)'" (Valeo, p. 1). They are the best version of the modern men.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that the hypersexual men from the 1980s are different from the ubersexual men in 2000s. Since the heroes are the portrayals of the ideal men in each period, then the changes or differences also occur for these heroes. Some paradigm shifts of the ideal men are from the outer to inner element and view of strength. As mentioned before, the heroes of the 1980s are identified by their outer appearance while the heroes of the 2000s are from their inner element. As for the strength, physical strength is emphasized in the heroes of 1980s while for the heroes of 2000s, the emotional, intellectual and mental strength are the emphasis.

The occurrence of these changes is in accordance with the changes in the society regarding the ideal characteristics of men, thus the readers also demand changes in what they read. With the majority of the readers as female, Harlequin novels seek to fulfill the reader's desire of a good romance reading. As Leslie Rabine stated, "Harlequin may owe its dramatic growth in popularity to the fact that the romances now respond to specific needs of working women" (as cited in Warhol and Herndl, p. 976). Rabine also mentioned that "the Harlequin formula responds to new needs of women . . . and how that formula might change in the future" (as cited in Warhol and Herndl, p. 977). This shows that since the readers' demand is changing, Harlequin should also change to fulfill the demand of the market to stay popular with its readers. Since the women alone change in time, this change pushes for the change in men also (Cuthbert, p. 2).

What women want of an ideal man changes and to meet the market demand, the heroes in Harlequin novels also change, following the society's or the market's regard of an ideal man at the time. These changes in men are as reflected in the changing concept of ideal men in the society. In 1980s, the ideal men are men with Hypermasculine characteristics and then it changes into Ubersexual men as the ideal men in the society in 2000s. It can be concluded that there must be changes in the Harlequin novels to meet the reader's preference and understanding, thus, fulfilling the market demand, as the Harlequin Enterprises goal is to stay popular with its loyal readers or else Harlequin would lose its position as the world's leading publisher.

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