Choosing The Monster: Otherness, Desire, And Masculinity In Contemporary Monster Romance

Mira Pedersen Kjølner 20215736

Department of Culture and Language, Aalborg University

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Professor Marianne Kongerslev

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This thesis examines contemporary monster romance as a literary and cultural form in which monstrosity becomes central to romantic fulfilment. It focuses on a corpus of one hundred contemporary monster romance texts, with close readings of *A Soul to Heal*, *Deceived by the Gargoyles*, *Wicked Creation*, *Wolves and Whipped Cream at Hallow's Cove*, *Whispers of the Deep*, *The Revenant's Heart*, *The Saltwater Curse*, and *A Darkness So Sweet*. The thesis argues that monster romance enacts a sustained reversal of the traditional relationship between self and Other. Rather than positioning the Other as something to be feared or excluded, these texts construct the monster as the primary site of desirability and ethical relationality. The concept of the Preferred Other captures this shift, highlighting how difference is not only accepted, but actively preferred over normative human alternatives. This reversal is not simply thematic, but structural, shaping the conditions under which desire is articulated and fulfilled. By consistently aligning human masculinity with absence, insufficiency, or harm, and monstrosity with care, stability, and emotional depth, these texts reconfigure the boundaries of desirability itself.

The thesis situates monster romance within scholarship on monstrosity, romance, gender, desire, and power. Monster theory, particularly Cohen and Halberstam, is used to understand the monster as a culturally meaningful figure whose body marks difference, instability, and boundary-crossing. Romance scholarship, especially Radway, provides a framework for reading popular romance as a serious cultural form concerned with emotional fulfilment, care, and gendered desire. The theoretical framework also draws on Foucault's understanding of power and biopower, Ahmed's work on orientation, Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, Connell's theory of masculinity, Butler's theory of gender performativity, Hall's work on representation, and hooks's critique of consuming the Other. Methodologically, the thesis combines cultural analysis, quantitative pattern-tracking across the corpus, and close reading of selected primary texts.

Chapter One establishes the cultural context for the project by examining reproductive autonomy after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the rise of manosphere discourse, and the polarisation of gender relations. The chapter argues that contemporary heterosexual intimacy is shaped by legal uncertainty, bodily risk, and declining trust. These conditions do not directly cause monster romance, but they help explain why fantasies that move romantic fulfilment away from ordinary human masculinity may become culturally meaningful.

Chapter Two turns to the literary corpus and develops the concept of the Preferred Other. It argues that monster romance repeatedly reverses the traditional position of the monster by making the nonhuman love interest preferable to human alternatives. The chapter shows that this preference is not dependent only on human male violence, since the monster remains preferred even in texts without direct human male threat. It also argues that monster romance reconstructs masculinity through ethical intimacy, care, consent, emotional openness, and communication. Finally, the chapter suggests that the genre queers heterosexuality by directing desire toward bodies that remain visibly nonhuman As opposed to than restoring romance to familiar human embodiment.

Chapter Three brings the cultural and literary arguments together by interpreting monster romance as a compromise fantasy. The chapter argues that the genre does not simply reject romance, masculinity, or heterosexual desire, but rearranges them. The monster allows romance to preserve intensity, protection, devotion, and fulfilment while distancing these pleasures from ordinary human masculinity and its social authority. In this way, monster romance becomes both a critique of patriarchal power and a fantasy that remains ambivalently attached to some of romance's older structures.

The thesis concludes that contemporary monster romance should be taken seriously because it reveals how desire adapts under cultural pressure. Its central contribution is the

concept of the Preferred Other, which names a structure in which the monster is not redeemed by becoming normal, but chosen while remaining Other. Monster romance therefore does not offer a simple escape from patriarchy or a clean feminist utopia. Instead, it exposes a contradiction within contemporary desire: romance remains deeply wanted, but ordinary masculinity has become increasingly difficult to trust as the figure through which fulfilment can be imagined.

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Introduction - Beastly Beginnings: A Tale As Old As Patriarchy

What does it mean when women would rather meet a bear in the woods than a man?

In 2024, this question spread across social media with unusual speed. It was framed as a hypothetical, almost ridiculous in its simplicity: if you were alone in the woods, would you rather encounter a man or a bear? Yet the answers were not treated as a joke. Many women chose the bear. Not because the bear was harmless, but because its danger seemed easier to understand (Adams). A bear might maul you, but it would not ask what you were wearing. It would not follow you home, minimise your fear, or rely on a culture trained to doubt women's accounts of violence. The point of the debate was never that bears are safe. The point was that many women understood the bear as the more honest threat.

This thesis begins from the discomfort, and the irony, of that answer. In the viral debate, many women chose the bear because the animal appeared less frightening than the unknown man. In contemporary monster romance, a similar reversal takes literary form: women choose the monster. The figure that should represent danger becomes the figure through which safety, intimacy, and fulfilment are imagined. The irony is not that women suddenly mistake monsters for harmless beings. Further, it is that the monster's danger is often easier to read than the danger attached to ordinary masculinity. The monster is visibly strange, and because of that, he does not have to pretend to be normal. His difference is announced from the beginning.

This cultural moment offers a useful entry point into contemporary monster romance, a genre in which the monstrous figure is not avoided, killed, or transformed into an acceptable human man. Instead, he is desired. Monster romance turns toward demons, gargoyles, mermen, revenants, wolf-like beings, and other nonhuman figures, asking what happens when the monster is not the threat, but the better alternative. At first glance, this may seem like a niche or sensational form of romantic fantasy. Yet its popularity suggests something more significant

about contemporary desire. If women are joking, and confessing online that they would choose the bear over the man, then the rise of romances in which the monster becomes the safest and most desirable figure should not be dismissed as coincidence. The provocation at the centre of this thesis is therefore simple: contemporary monster romance is not only about wanting monsters. It is about what happens when ordinary men no longer feel capable of carrying the fantasy of romance. The genre does not necessarily reject heterosexual desire, or romantic attachment. In fact, it often intensifies them. Its monsters are powerful, protective, erotic, and emotionally consuming. What changes is that these qualities are displaced onto figures who stand outside ordinary human masculinity. The monster becomes desirable not because he is harmless, but because his danger is legible, contained by fantasy, and detached from the institutions and social scripts through which patriarchal power is exercised.

This makes monster romance culturally relevant not only as a literary curiosity, but as part of a broader conversation about gender and desire. The genre has often circulated through online spaces, particularly through indie publishing, e-books, fan communities, and BookTok. However, it is not limited to obscure digital niches. Several texts considered in this project were found in physical bookstores as well as online platforms, suggesting that the genre's readership is supported by both digital circulation and more conventional retail visibility. This institutional and market presence matters because it complicates the assumption that monster romance is merely marginal or unserious. Its movement across online recommendation cultures and physical bookshops suggests that the genre is becoming increasingly visible within contemporary romance markets(Creamer).

This movement away from ordinary men, however, is not unique to the present moment. American women's history contains repeated examples of women creating distance from male authority in order to access safety, political agency, intellectual life, and emotional

community. This distance has taken many forms. Sometimes it has meant formal political organising. Sometimes it has meant legal struggle, women's clubs, feminist presses, health collectives, rape crisis centres, domestic violence shelters, women's bookstores, separatist experiments, or simply spaces where women could speak to one another without first being interpreted through male authority. The point is not that women have historically rejected men in one simple or unified way. Women have repeatedly had to create spaces where their experiences could be named, believed, and organised beyond the immediate control of husbands, fathers, courts, employers, churches, and male-dominated political institutions.

In the nineteenth-century United States, women's organised resistance to male political authority became especially visible through the women's rights and suffrage movements. The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention brought together around 300 women and men to debate Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Declaration of Sentiments*, which directly challenged women's unequal legal and political status (Library of Congress). The suffrage movement later developed through broader reform networks, including abolition, temperance, racial justice, and labour organising, which helped women build the skills and political structures needed to demand public authority (National Park Service). Furthermore, the legal history of women's autonomy makes this pattern even clearer. Under coverture, married women's legal identities were historically absorbed into those of their husbands, meaning that marriage often involved the loss or limitation of independent legal personhood. Questions of property, citizenship, labour, and bodily autonomy were therefore inseparable from women's relationship to male authority("Coverture - Women and the American Story"). The struggle for women's rights in the United States has repeatedly involved resistance to this absorption, whether through property reform, suffrage, reproductive rights, workplace rights, or campaigns against sexual violence. Women's autonomy has had to be fought for not only as a matter of individual

freedom, but as a challenge to the legal and social structures that positioned men as representatives and owners.

This pattern continued into the twentieth century through women's liberation movements and the creation of women-centred support structures. Second-wave feminism expanded women's rights activism beyond suffrage and formal legal equality, bringing attention to issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault, workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, and unequal domestic labour. The National Women's History Alliance notes that activists created battered women's shelters and rape crisis hotlines to support victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence (National Women's History Alliance). These spaces mattered because they allowed women's experiences to be treated as social and political problems rather than private failures. In this sense, women's liberation continued the longer pattern of creating spaces where women could name harm, organise collectively, and challenge male-dominated institutions. Some strands of radical feminism pushed this logic further, arguing that distance from men could itself become a political practice. Lesbian feminist groups in the 1970s, such as the Radicalesbians, argued for woman-centred identification as a challenge to male-defined social structures. Their manifesto, "The Woman-Identified Woman," clarifies this because it frames women's relationships with women as politically significant, not only privately or sexually meaningful (Radicalesbians). These debates were specific and contested, but they show that women's separation from men has repeatedly appeared as one response to patriarchal authority.

This history matters for the present project because monster romance belongs to a much longer pattern of imagining alternatives to male authority. The genre does not create separatist spaces in a literal political sense, nor does it reject heterosexual desire outright. Most of the texts examined in this project remain formally heterosexual. What they do instead is relocate

romance away from the ordinary human male figure. The monster becomes a way of preserving intimacy while moving it away from the social scripts through which men have historically been positioned as husbands, protectors, authorities, and threats. In this sense, monster romance does not simply continue feminist separatism or political lesbianism. It does something stranger and more ambivalent: it keeps the emotional and erotic structure of heterosexual romance, but places it in the hands of a figure who is not quite a man.

The point, then, is not that women have always wanted separation from men, or that monster romance should be read as a direct continuation of any single feminist movement. American women's history shows that distance from male authority has often been necessary for women to articulate their own experiences and desires. Monster romance can arguably, be understood as a contemporary cultural fantasy shaped by a related logic. It does not create women-only spaces, but it does imagine intimacy after the authority of ordinary masculinity has been displaced. Its fantasy is not simply that the heroine escapes men. More precisely, it imagines romance after the human male figure has become insufficient as the primary bearer of desire. More broadly, the popularity of monster romance belongs to a wider moment in which romance, fantasy, and speculative intimacy have gained significant cultural traction. Romantasy, paranormal romance, fantasy romance, and monster romance all participate in a reading culture where desire is frequently mediated through impossible bodies, alternative worlds, and heightened emotional structures. Monster romance is distinct within this landscape because it places monstrosity itself at the centre of romantic fulfilment. It does not merely use supernatural elements as background or atmosphere. It asks what happens when the figure historically associated with fear and bodily abnormality becomes the preferred romantic subject. This project examines contemporary monster romance as a literary and cultural form through which dissatisfaction with normative masculinity and heterosexual intimacy can be negotiated. Its central claim is not that readers literally prefer monsters to men, nor that monster

romance should be read as a straightforward feminist utopia. Instead, it argues that the genre uses monstrosity to reorganise desire.

The thesis is grounded in the assumption that popular romance should be taken seriously as a cultural form. Romance fiction is often dismissed as formulaic, commercial, or escapist, but such dismissals overlook the ways in which the genre engages with desire, emotional labour, gender roles, and the imagined conditions of intimacy. Radway's study of romance readers is useful here because it treats romance reading as a meaningful practice within women's everyday lives, particularly where readers describe it as a temporary "declaration of independence" from the demands placed on them as wives and mothers (Radway 11). She further argues that romance reading can create "hope," provide "emotional sustenance," and produce a sense of "well-being," which makes the genre important for understanding how romantic fantasy responds to unmet emotional needs (Radway 12). Because romance is largely written and consumed by women, its repeated fantasies can offer insight into the contradictions shaping women's relationships to love, safety, sexuality, and power. This does not mean that romance fiction simply mirrors women's lived experiences, nor that readers consume it in uniform or predictable ways. Rather, the genre can be read as a space in which cultural tensions are reworked through narrative. Monster romance is especially indicative for this purpose because it makes the romantic object strange. By replacing the normative male love interest with a nonhuman figure, the genre draws attention to the conditions under which masculinity becomes desirable, trustworthy, or emotionally viable.

Methodologically, the project combines cultural analysis, quantitative pattern-tracking, and close reading. The first part of the thesis situates monster romance within contemporary debates surrounding bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, manosphere discourse, and the growing polarisation of gender relations. The second part examines a corpus of one hundred

contemporary monster romance texts, with closer attention to selected primary works including *A Soul to Heal* (2022), *Deceived by the Gargoyles* (2022), *Wicked Creation* (2023), *Wolves and Whipped Cream at Hallow's Cove* (2023), *Whispers of the Deep* (2024), *The Revenant's Heart* (2024), *The Saltwater Curse* (2025), and *A Darkness So Sweet* (2025). These texts were selected as representative examples of broader tendencies across the corpus, some of which were also found in traditional bookstores. Each text was coded according to recurring features relevant to the project's central concerns, including whether the monster is positioned as preferable to human men, whether human male threat is present, whether the monster requires taming, whether female agency is present, whether consent is explicit, and whether the monster remains nonhuman. These categories are not intended to reduce the texts to data alone. They provide a way of identifying structural tendencies across the genre before examining how those tendencies operate in specific narratives. This is data is shown in Appendix A.

The thesis is structured in three main chapters. Chapter One establishes the cultural context by examining the regulation of women's bodies after the overturning of Roe v. Wade, the rise of manosphere discourse, and the increasing polarisation of gender relations. Chapter Two analyses the monster romance corpus, focusing on the monster as Preferred Other, the reconstruction of masculinity through ethical intimacy, and the queering of heterosexual desire through nonhuman embodiment. Chapter Three brings these strands together by arguing that monster romance functions as a cultural fantasy of renegotiation, one in which desire for the monster becomes a critique of patriarchal power and a way of imagining intimacy otherwise.

The broader purpose of this thesis is therefore to examine monster romance not as a strange exception within romance fiction, but as a culturally meaningful development within contemporary narratives of desire. The genre's central question is not simply why women desire monsters. It is what the desirability of monsters reveals about the conditions surrounding

masculinity, intimacy, and power. This thesis therefore argues that monster romance enacts a sustained reversal of the traditional relationship between self and Other. Rather than positioning the Other as something to be feared or excluded, these texts construct the monster as the primary site of desirability and ethical relationality. The concept of the Preferred Other captures this shift, highlighting how difference is not only accepted, but actively preferred over normative human alternatives. This reversal is not simply thematic, but structural, shaping the conditions under which desire is articulated and fulfilled. By consistently aligning human masculinity with absence, insufficiency, or harm, and monstrosity with care, stability, and emotional depth, these texts reconfigure the boundaries of desirability itself.

Literature review - From Villain To Valentine

Monster romance draws on several overlapping fields, but it is not fully contained by any one of them. Monster studies explains why the monster is culturally meaningful. Romance studies explains why popular romance matters as a genre of desire, emotional fulfilment, and gender negotiation. Paranormal romance scholarship explains how supernatural lovers have already become familiar within romantic fiction. Fairy-tale scholarship explains the longer history of the beastly lover. However, these fields do not fully account for the specific contemporary structure this thesis examines: the monster as a preferred romantic subject who remains visibly nonhuman.

Monster theory provides the first necessary context. Cohen's claim that "the monster's body is a cultural body" establishes the monster as a figure through which culture gives shape to fear, desire, and exclusion (Cohen 4). This is useful because it prevents the monster from being read as merely decorative or sensational. If monsters appear at moments of cultural tension, then their transformation into romantic heroes also requires explanation. This thesis builds on monster theory, but shifts the question from why the monster frightens culture to why the monster becomes desirable within romance.

Halberstam's work on Gothic bodies helps clarify aspects in similar fashion. In *Skin Shows*, monstrosity is tied to visible difference and to bodies that trouble classification (Halberstam 1–3). This matters for monster romance because the love interest's body is rarely incidental. Horns, claws, scales, tails, stone skin, gills, tentacles, and stitched flesh keep the monster outside ordinary human masculinity. Where Gothic monstrosity often emphasises threat or social disorder, monster romance uses the visibly nonhuman body as part of the romantic structure. The genre therefore does not abandon Gothic monstrosity. It redirects it through romance.

Paranormal romance scholarship provides the closest generic context, but it still does not fully explain monster romance. Supernatural lovers such as vampires, werewolves, ghosts, demons, and shapeshifters have long occupied a space between danger and attraction. Tobin-McClain's work is helpful because it understands paranormal romance as a form where the fantastic enters romance in ways that are difficult to classify as simply empowering or regressive (Tobin-McClain 294–97, 303–06). This ambivalence is important for the present project. Monster romance also contains danger, dominance, and eroticised power, but it often reorganises these elements through care, communication, and consent.

The difference is that paranormal romance often allows the supernatural hero to remain recognisably human or conventionally attractive. Vampires and werewolves may be dangerous, but they frequently pass as men. Monster romance pushes beyond this. Its love interests are often not human-passing, and their desirability depends on features that would usually mark them as unsuitable romantic subjects. This is why monster romance should not be treated as only a subcategory of paranormal romance. It intensifies the problem of the romantic body. The question is not only whether a supernatural man can be loved, but whether a visibly nonhuman body can become the centre of romantic fulfilment.

Fairy-tale scholarship also helps situate the project, especially through the Beauty and the Beast tradition. Lee's work on romance novels as reworked fairy tales is useful because it connects popular romance to repeated narrative patterns of fantasy, recognition, and romantic resolution (Lee 52–62). The beastly lover has long allowed romance to stage danger and tenderness in the same figure. However, many Beauty and the Beast structures resolve monstrosity through transformation, revealing the human man beneath the beast. Contemporary monster romance often refuses this resolution. The monster does not always become a prince, and the heroine's love does not necessarily restore him to humanity. This is one of the central distinctions this thesis makes: the monster is not merely a temporary form that must be overcome. He is often the desired form itself.

Romance studies provides the other major context, as mentioned in the introduction Radway is relevant. Her study takes romance reading seriously as a practice embedded in women's everyday lives. She describes romance reading as a temporary "declaration of independence" from the demands placed on women as wives and mothers, and as a source of emotional sustenance and hope (Radway 11–12). This is useful because it shows why romance should not be dismissed as empty escapism. Romance fantasy can reveal how readers imagine care, recognition, and emotional repair under patriarchal conditions.

This project therefore brings monster studies and romance studies together in order to examine a pattern that neither field fully explains on its own. Existing scholarship has shown that monsters are culturally meaningful, that romance is a serious popular form, that paranormal lovers are ambivalent figures, and that beastly lovers have a long history. What remains less fully addressed is the contemporary pattern in which the monster is not only loved but preferred, and in which his nonhuman difference is not erased by romantic resolution.

The contribution of this thesis is therefore not the claim that monsters can be attractive, that has already been established across several genre traditions. Its contribution is the claim that contemporary monster romance uses visible monstrosity to reorganise the terms of romantic desirability. The monster is not simply feared or redeemed. He is chosen while remaining Other. This choice is what makes monster romance culturally significant, and it is the point at which this project intervenes in the existing scholarship.

Chapter 1 - In The Belly Of The Beast: The Reconfiguration Of Intimacy

Contemporary debates surrounding gender, sexuality, and bodily autonomy are not neutral or purely individual concerns. They are shaped through cultural and political systems that determine what can be said, regulated, recognised, and desired. This matters for a thesis on monster romance because romance fiction does not exist outside the world in which intimacy is lived. Its fantasies of safety, vulnerability, protection, and fulfilment are shaped by the conditions under which bodies and relationships are made thinkable. The argument of this chapter is not that political events directly cause literary trends in a simple one-to-one relationship. The chapter examines the cultural conditions under which certain fantasies of intimacy become especially meaningful. When reproductive autonomy becomes legally unstable, and when heterosexual relations are increasingly framed through distrust or antagonism, the romantic imagination does not remain untouched.

Foucault's account of power is helps explain here because it moves beyond the idea of power as something held only by formal institutions or exercised only through prohibition. Power is "everywhere," not because it controls everything from one fixed centre, but because it "comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). This allows gendered bodies to be understood as

sites where norms surrounding sexuality, reproduction, intimacy, and identity are produced and contested. In this sense, the body is not simply personal. It is where private life and public authority meet. This is particularly important in the context of recent socio-political developments in the United States, especially the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. The decision did not only alter abortion law, but reasserted the regulation of women's bodies within legal, medical, and political discourse. Foucault's concept of biopower is especially useful for understanding this shift. Modern power increasingly operates through the management of life itself, replacing the older right "to take life or let live" with "a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault 138). The post-*Roe* landscape can therefore be understood as part of a broader pattern in which bodily autonomy becomes contingent, regulated, and unevenly protected. This matters for romance because intimacy often depends on fantasies of trust, bodily vulnerability, and chosen dependence. When the body becomes a site of legal uncertainty, those fantasies are pressured. Sex, pregnancy, care, and vulnerability can no longer be imagined as purely private matters, because they are shaped by the legal and institutional conditions that determine whose body is protected and under what terms.

Ahmed's work helps extend this argument from the regulation of bodies to the direction of desire. She argues that "orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance" (Ahmed 3). Desire can therefore be understood as socially directed, shaped by the norms that make some bodies appear familiar, desirable, or reachable, while others are positioned as strange or improper. This is crucial for monster romance because the genre redirects desire toward bodies that would usually fall outside normative romantic legibility. The monster becomes significant because he remains strange while becoming desirable. His difference is not erased, but its meaning changes.

At the same time, Berlant's concept of cruel optimism helps explain why this redirection does not mean abandoning romance itself. Berlant describes cruel optimism as a relation in which the desired object becomes "an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Normative romance may remain desirable even when ordinary heterosexual structures feel unstable or insufficient, because romance still promises recognition, attachment, and fulfilment. Monster romance preserves that promise while changing the figure through whom it is imagined. The genre does not simply reject heterosexual desire. Instead, it relocates romantic possibility onto a figure who stands outside ordinary human masculinity.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that contemporary experiences of gender and desire are shaped by regulation, contradiction, and attachment. Dissatisfaction with normative gender relations, particularly forms of masculinity associated with dominance, entitlement, emotional detachment, or institutional authority, can therefore be understood as a response to broader structural conditions rather than individual discontent. Within this context, alternative configurations of desire become meaningful. It is precisely this shift in the conditions of desire that provides the broader framework for understanding the emergence of the monster as a romantic figure. The following sections therefore examine reproductive autonomy, manosphere discourse, and gender polarisation as cultural contexts that help explain why contemporary monster romance can imagine the monster not as the figure to flee from, but as the figure through whom intimacy becomes possible.

1.1 Swallowed Whole: The Unmaking of Reproductive Autonomy

The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 marks a decisive and far-reaching shift in the legal and medical regulation of women's bodies in the United States. For nearly fifty years, the ruling had secured a federal right to abortion, establishing a relatively consistent legal framework across states, even if access in practice was never entirely equal. Its reversal did not simply

remove that protection, but transferred authority over abortion law to individual states, fundamentally restructuring access to reproductive healthcare (Totenberg). As a result, abortion policy is no longer governed by a unified national standard, but by a patchwork of state-level legislation that varies widely in both scope and severity.

In practice, this shift has resulted in widespread restrictions and, in many cases, outright bans. According to the Guttmacher Institute, the immediate aftermath of the decision was characterised by "bans, confusion and chaos," as multiple states moved rapidly to restrict or prohibit abortion access ("State Policy Trends 2022"). Many of these restrictions were implemented through trigger laws, pre-existing legislation designed to take effect as soon as federal protections were removed (Center for Reproductive Rights). This meant that legal changes were not gradual, but immediate. As of late 2022, abortion was no longer accessible across large parts of the country, while other states moved to protect access, creating a deeply uneven system. Reproductive autonomy has therefore shifted from a federally protected right to a geographically dependent condition, shaped by state legislation instead of national law. This unevenness is important because it changes bodily autonomy from a general legal principle into a condition determined by location, resources, and institutional interpretation. A right that depends on crossing state lines, finding an available clinic, taking time away from work, arranging travel, and absorbing financial cost is not experienced as equally available. The Center for Reproductive Rights' state-by-state mapping of abortion law makes clear that post-*Roe* access is now organised through legal fragmentation rather than national protection (Center for Reproductive Rights). This fragmentation matters because it makes autonomy conditional. The body remains the same, but the meaning of what can be done with or for that body changes depending on where it is located. For this thesis, that conditionality is significant because it shows how bodily vulnerability is never only physical.

The consequences of this restructuring become most visible within healthcare systems. In states with restrictive laws, doctors and hospitals must now operate under conditions of legal uncertainty, where the boundaries of permissible care are often unclear or inconsistently defined. This uncertainty has had direct and measurable consequences for patient care. Reports document cases in which women experiencing miscarriages, ectopic pregnancies, or other severe complications were denied or delayed treatment due to fear of legal repercussions (Associated Press). In Georgia, for example, a woman died following delays in receiving care for a pregnancy complication (Surana), while in Texas, a patient with a non-viable pregnancy was refused immediate treatment despite serious health risks (Jaramillio). These cases illustrate how legal restrictions are not abstract policy decisions, but mechanisms that shape medical decision-making in real time, sometimes with life-threatening consequences. Furthermore, This has consequences for how care itself is understood. Medical care is usually imagined as a response to bodily need, but restrictive abortion laws can transform care into a problem of legal risk. When providers hesitate because the legal boundaries of treatment are unclear, the patient's body becomes subject to interpretation by institutions beyond the clinical encounter. Foucault's account of biopower is useful here because it shows how modern power operates through the management of life, health, populations, and technically death rather than through law alone (Foucault, History of Sexuality 135–45). In this context, the body is not only treated medically. It is governed through the relation between medical judgement and legal liability, additionally it is further influenced by political discourse. The result is a form of vulnerability in which the need for care does not guarantee access to care.

This pattern is supported by broader public health and human rights research. Studies indicate that abortion restrictions have created a climate of uncertainty and fear among healthcare providers, leading to delays in care and increased medical risk for patients (Center for American Progress). In this context, doctors must weigh legal liability against clinical

necessity, often prioritising compliance with the law over immediate patient needs. Medical practice is therefore no longer governed solely by professional judgement, but increasingly by legal interpretation. This has contributed to what is often described as "defensive medicine," in which providers act conservatively to avoid potential legal consequences, even when such caution may conflict with optimal patient care. Beyond individual cases, the post-Roe landscape has intensified existing inequalities in access to healthcare. The Guttmacher Institute notes that abortion bans disproportionately affect individuals who already face structural barriers, including those in low-income communities and rural areas ("State Policy Trends 2022"). Many patients are now required to travel across state lines to access care, a process that is financially, logistically, and emotionally burdensome. This has also placed increased pressure on clinics in states where abortion remains legal, further limiting timely access to services. In effect, access to reproductive healthcare is increasingly determined not only by geography, but by socioeconomic position, reinforcing broader patterns of inequality within the healthcare system.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* has not simply altered legal frameworks, but fundamentally reshaped the conditions under which bodily autonomy can be exercised. Rather than existing as a stable and guaranteed right, reproductive autonomy is now contingent, uneven, and subject to ongoing negotiation within legal and institutional constraints. Power, in this sense, does not operate solely through prohibition, but through the structuring of what is possible, shaping what can be recognised, permitted, and enacted within everyday life (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 93). The regulation of reproduction therefore becomes a key site through which power is exercised, not only at the level of law, but through the lived experience of the body.

1.2 Something Rotten: Masculinity and the Rise of the Manosphere

The increasing regulation of women's bodies does not occur in isolation, but alongside significant shifts in how masculinity is constructed, experienced, and understood. In recent years, researchers have identified the rise of online communities collectively referred to as the "manosphere" as a key site in which contemporary masculinities are being rearticulated. These loosely connected digital spaces, which include men's rights forums, incel communities, and "red pill" networks, are characterised by the circulation of anti-feminist and often explicitly misogynistic narratives. As Sugiura argues, these spaces function as sites of a "virtual war against women," in which gender relations are framed as inherently antagonistic (Sugiura 3–5). Instead of remaining marginal, these discourses have become increasingly visible and, in some cases, influential, particularly among younger men. Digital platforms play a central role in this development, enabling the rapid circulation and reinforcement of shared grievances and allowing individuals to form communities around perceived experiences of exclusion, rejection, or injustice (Mamié et al.). These environments do not simply reflect existing attitudes, but actively shape how masculinity is understood, performed, and negotiated, creating feedback loops in which particular ideas about gender are continuously reinforced.

This is reflected more broadly in changing social attitudes. Data from the Pew Research Center indicates a growing divide in how men and women perceive gender roles and equality. While many women continue to support feminist ideals and structural change, a significant number of men express increasing scepticism toward feminism and uncertainty about their role within a changing social landscape ("How Americans See Men and Masculinity"; "Men, Women and Social Connections"). Masculinity, in this context, appears less stable and more contested, shaped by competing expectations rather than a single coherent model. Within manosphere communities, these broader social shifts are often reinterpreted through a specific ideological lens. Experiences of loneliness, romantic rejection, or economic instability are

framed not as structural or social challenges, but as evidence of systemic bias against men. This reframing is particularly visible in discussions of heterosexual relationships, which are frequently conceptualised through competitive, market-based logics. Women are positioned as gatekeepers of sex and intimacy, while men are cast as competitors within a hierarchical system of value, reinforcing antagonistic understandings of gender relations (Sugiura 45–48; Mamié et al.). Intimacy, in this framework, is no longer understood as mutual, but as something to be negotiated within unequal conditions. The importance of this rhetoric lies in the way it changes the emotional grammar of heterosexuality. If intimacy is imagined as a market, then desire becomes something measured through value and scarcity, rather than mutual recognition. Women are positioned as the arbiters of access, while men are encouraged to interpret rejection as deprivation or injustice. Sugiura's analysis shows how such narratives transform loneliness and romantic frustration into ideological claims about women's power over men (Sugiura 45–48, 63–67). This is not simply a private problem of dating disappointment. It becomes a discursive structure through which masculinity is taught to understand vulnerability as humiliation and desire as something owed.

One of the most extensively studied subgroups within the manosphere is the incel community, composed of men who identify as "involuntarily celibate." As Sugiura demonstrates, these communities are structured around shared narratives of rejection, entitlement, and resentment, in which women are constructed as responsible for men's lack of access to intimacy (Sugiura 63–67). These narratives are produced and reinforced collectively within online spaces, creating environments in which misogynistic beliefs are normalised and, over time, intensified (Mamié et al.). While only a minority of participants engage in or advocate for violence, the broader discursive environment often legitimises hostility toward women, making such beliefs more difficult to challenge. Furthermore, these developments cannot be understood solely as an online phenomenon. They are closely tied to broader social

and economic transformations that have altered traditional structures of masculinity. Changes in labour markets, increasing economic precarity, and shifting expectations around gender roles have contributed to a sense of instability for many men, particularly in relation to the declining relevance of traditional masculine roles associated with authority and economic provision (Sugiura 101–104). At the same time, global reports indicate that women's rights remain unevenly protected and, in some contexts, are actively being rolled back ("Women's Rights Under Attack"). This creates a situation in which progress toward gender equality coexists with backlash, contributing to heightened tensions in gender relations.

Within this context, the manosphere provides a framework through which broader structural anxieties are reframed as gendered grievances. Furthermore, instead of directing frustration toward economic or institutional conditions, these discourses redirect it toward women and feminism. As Sugiura argues, this process transforms personal dissatisfaction into collective ideological narratives, reinforcing a perception of gender relations as a zero-sum conflict (Sugiura 112–115). The rise of these narratives therefore reflects not simply an online trend, but a wider reconfiguration of gender relations, in which shifting social conditions are interpreted through increasingly polarised and antagonistic frameworks. This is crucial for the thesis because monster romance often keeps masculine intensity while removing precisely this framework of entitlement. The monsters analysed in Chapter Two may be possessive, physically dominant, dangerous, or aggressive but their desirability is frequently built through attentiveness and negotiated intimacy, instead of festering in resentment. Connell's account of masculinity as historically and socially produced helps make sense of this contrast, since masculinity is not a fixed essence but a position formed through gender relations (Connell 76–81). Monster romance does not reject masculine power altogether. Instead, it imagines that power detached from the grievance-based masculinity visible in manosphere discourse. This

contrast helps explain why the monster can become desirable even when he appears more physically dangerous than an ordinary man.

1.3 The Bitter Aftertaste: Gender Polarisation and the Breakdown of Trust

The developments outlined earlier should not be understood as isolated phenomena, even though they are often treated that way in public and academic discourse. Rather, they form part of a broader set of overlapping transformations that together reshape contemporary gender relations in the United States. The restriction of reproductive rights, the rise of manosphere discourse, and the increasing polarisation of gendered identities do not operate independently, but intersect in ways that influence how gender, power, and relationality are experienced in everyday life. Instead of a singular "crisis," it may be more accurate to understand this moment as a reconfiguration, where previously dominant frameworks of stability, reciprocity, and mutual recognition are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

This shift is not limited to a single national context. Reports from international organisations suggest that women's rights are currently "under attack" across multiple regions, indicating that these transformations form part of a broader global pattern rather than an isolated development ("Women's Rights Are Under Attack."). What becomes visible, then, is not simply a change in policy or discourse, but a restructuring of the conditions under which gendered lives are lived and understood. These changes operate simultaneously at the level of material conditions and discursive meaning. The regulation of reproductive rights does not simply function as a legal restriction, but reshapes what can be done, recognised, and legitimised within institutional contexts. Power, in this sense, does not operate only through prohibition, but through the production of possibilities, structuring the field of action itself. As Foucault argues, power works through a "multiplicity of force relations" that define and organise lived experience (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 93). The removal of federal protections therefore does not only limit access to care, but reorganises how bodily autonomy

is encountered, negotiated, and understood within everyday life, particularly within healthcare systems. Moreover, gendered identities are increasingly constructed through oppositional frameworks, in which meaning is produced relationally through difference than shared experience (Hall 225–27). Masculinity and femininity begin to appear less as interdependent categories and more as competing ones, a shift that is reinforced through both political discourse and digital environments. This reorientation contributes to a broader sense of division, where gender is experienced not as relational, but as adversarial.

One of the most significant consequences of this shift is the reorientation of the female body as a site of heightened risk. As outlined earlier, the regulation of reproductive rights introduces a form of uncertainty that extends beyond legal restriction, shaping how women navigate institutions, relationships, and healthcare systems. The body becomes not only a biological entity, but a politically charged site through which broader struggles over autonomy, control, and legitimacy are articulated. In this context, risk is unevenly distributed, determining whether the state will "foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 138). This uneven distribution is not only theoretical, but materially observable, as ongoing reports continue to document the consequences of restricted access to care, particularly for already marginalised groups ("Women's Rights Are Under Attack."). Furthermore, masculinity appears increasingly unstable, shaped by shifting social and economic conditions that challenge previously dominant models of identity. Traditional markers such as authority, economic stability, and relational dominance are no longer guaranteed, contributing to a sense of fragmentation rather than coherence. Masculinity becomes something that must be continually negotiated instead of assumed (Connell 76–81). This instability is reflected in contemporary survey data, where many men report uncertainty about their role in society, alongside a sense that expectations surrounding masculinity are unclear or even contradictory (Pew Research Center, *How Americans See Men and Masculinity*).

These uncertainties do not exist in isolation, but circulate within digital environments that often amplify dissatisfaction as opposed to resolving it. Within manosphere spaces, structural anxieties are reframed as gendered grievances, reinforcing the perception that gender relations are defined by competition and conflict. At the same time, women's experiences of legal and bodily precarity generate forms of caution, anxiety, and, in some cases, withdrawal. These affective dynamics are not secondary to structural conditions, but are central to how those conditions are lived and understood. Emotions such as resentment, fear, and frustration actively organise social relations, shaping how individuals interpret and respond to their experiences (Ahmed 24–26). This adversarial framing is important because it changes how intimacy is approached before any relationship begins. If gender is increasingly imagined through opposition, then heterosexual intimacy is no longer presumed to be a space of mutual recognition. It becomes something that must be negotiated against a background of suspicion. Hall's work on meaning and difference is clarifying here because identities become intelligible through the contrasts that organise them (Hall 225–27). In a polarised gender climate, masculinity and femininity are not only different positions within a shared social world. They are increasingly framed as competing interests. This affects romance because romance depends on the possibility that difference can become relation rather than conflict.

Taken together, these developments contribute to a broader erosion of trust within heterosexual gender relations. Where intimacy has traditionally been framed as a site of mutual recognition and emotional connection, it increasingly becomes structured by asymmetry, uncertainty, and potential harm. This shift is not only theoretical, but reflected in observable changes in relationship patterns. Recent data suggests that the United States is experiencing a significant decline in dating and relationship formation, with many young adults choosing not to participate in dating at all (Cox and Hammond). As the report notes, "many young adults are not dating at all," signalling a broader disengagement from traditional relationship structures.

This disengagement, however, should not be understood as a simple rejection of intimacy. Instead it reflects the conditions under which intimacy is currently pursued. For many individuals, particularly women, stepping back from dating is less about rejecting connection and more about avoiding the emotional and psychological costs associated with it. Reports suggest that repeated negative experiences can lead individuals to disengage in order to "protect their sense of self-worth" (Cox and Hammond). Additionally, cultural commentary has observed that many women are increasingly 'fine' with remaining single, not because desire has disappeared, but because existing relationship dynamics are perceived as unsatisfactory or unequal (Otte).

This shift reflects a broader recalibration of what constitutes fulfilment and autonomy. Relationships are no longer universally experienced as pathways toward stability or emotional security, but as uncertain and, at times, risky engagements. The expectation of reciprocity, which has traditionally underpinned romantic narratives, becomes more difficult to sustain within a context where gendered experiences of vulnerability are unevenly distributed. Intimacy becomes something that must be negotiated, rather than assumed, reshaping how relationships are approached from the outset (American Survey Center). At the same time, the asymmetry between male and female experiences further intensifies this instability. While women navigate materially grounded risks tied to bodily autonomy, healthcare access, and personal safety, men's experiences of instability are more often articulated through perceived loss of status, clarity, or relational certainty. These experiences are not equivalent, but their coexistence contributes to a widening divide in how gender relations are understood and lived. This divergence is reflected in survey data on social connection, which indicates that men and women increasingly experience and interpret relationships in different ways (Pew Research Center, *Men, Women and Social Connections*).

Despite these shifts, the desire for connection does not disappear. Instead, it becomes more complex, shaped by competing impulses toward attachment and self-protection. Attachments to intimacy persist even when they become difficult to sustain, or become "impossible to attain the transformation" (Berlant 2) of the desired relationship outcome. This tension does not result in the abandonment of desire, but in its transformation. Desire becomes more conditional, more cautious, and more closely tied to questions of safety and stability. It is within this context of instability and renegotiation that shifts in cultural representations of desire become particularly significant. Cultural texts do not simply reflect these conditions, but actively participate in their rearticulation, shaping how intimacy is imagined and understood (Hall 225–27). When existing frameworks of intimacy fail to provide stability or fulfilment, alternative configurations begin to emerge, offering new ways of imagining relationality beyond the limits of normative gender structures.

In this sense, contemporary articulations of desire do not emerge despite the instability of gender relations, but precisely because of it. The tensions, asymmetries, and contradictions that define the present moment do not simply constrain intimacy, but reshape the forms it can take, opening up new possibilities for imagining connection, care, and relationality in ways that depart from traditional frameworks.

Chapter 2 - Sugar, Spice, And Creatures Of The Night.

This chapter turns from cultural context to literary pattern. If Chapter One established the conditions under which ordinary masculinity and heterosexual intimacy appear unstable, this chapter examines how monster romance gives that instability narrative form. The focus is not on proving that every text in the corpus makes the same argument in the same way, but on identifying recurring structures through which monstrosity becomes desirable. The chapter therefore moves from the monster as Preferred Other, to the reconstruction of masculinity

through ethical intimacy, to the queering of heterosexuality through nonhuman embodiment. Across these sections, the central question is how the monster's difference becomes valuable as opposed to merely acceptable. The chapter argues that this shift is not only thematic. It is built into the organisation of the romance itself: who is made desirable, what kind of body can carry intimacy, and why the monster does not usually need to become human in order for fulfilment to occur.

This chapter approaches monster romance through representation, drawing on Stuart Hall's understanding of meaning as socially produced rather than inherently given. Cultural texts do not merely depict gender, desire, or difference. They help shape how these categories become recognisable. This is especially relevant to monster romance, where the monster's meaning depends on the distinction between the human and the nonhuman. Hall's work on otherness is useful because he argues that "difference matters because it is essential to meaning" (Hall 234). The monster is built through this logic, since it is defined against the human, the normal, and the socially acceptable. However, monster romance changes the value attached to that difference. The monster remains Other, but the narrative repositions otherness as desirable over threatening. Hall's framework therefore allows this chapter to read monster romance as a site where dominant meanings of difference, intimacy, and gender are reworked. Cohen's monster theory provides a foundation for understanding monstrosity as unstable and culturally meaningful. Rather than treating monsters as fixed figures, Cohen argues that "the monster always escapes" (4). Monstrosity resists containment because it changes across cultural contexts, carrying different fears, desires, and contradictions depending on the moment in which it appears. This instability is central to contemporary monster romance, where figures traditionally associated with threat are reimagined as romantic subjects. The genre does not remove the monster's difference. Instead, it changes what that difference means. In this context,

the monster becomes a figure through which the boundaries between fear and desire, human and nonhuman, exclusion and intimacy can be renegotiated.

Halberstam's work on Gothic monstrosity helps explain why the monster's body matters so much in these texts. In *Skin Shows*, Halberstam argues that Gothic fiction produces "deviant subjectivities" against which "the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known" (2). Monstrosity therefore makes cultural boundaries visible. It shows what a culture defines as abnormal, excessive, or threatening. This is important for monster romance because the monster's body is rarely incidental. Horns, claws, scales, tails, fur, gills, stone skin, tentacles, and stitched flesh keep the love interest visibly outside ordinary human masculinity. Yet these features do not simply mark him as undesirable. Instead, they become part of the romantic fantasy. Halberstam's framework helps show how monster romance redirects Gothic monstrosity through desire, making visible difference central to intimacy rather than a barrier to it.

Radway's work provides a framework for taking romance seriously as a cultural form. As opposed to dismissing romance as empty escapism, her study shows that romance reading can be understood in relation to women's emotional needs, frustrations, and negotiations with patriarchal life (Radway 16–18). This matters for the present chapter because monster romance still depends on the emotional logic of the romance genre. It is organised around care, recognition, and fulfilment, even when the romantic figure is visibly nonhuman. Monster romance draws on this wider structure of romantic fulfilment, but changes the figure through whom fulfilment arrives. The genre retains romance's concern with emotional resolution while placing those qualities onto a monstrous love interest. The monster disrupts the expected romantic pairing, but the emotional logic of romance remains recognisable. This tension allows the genre to explore alternative forms of desire while still working within romance convention.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is helpful because it treats masculinity as historically and socially produced rather than fixed. Connell writes that "'hegemonic masculinity' is not a fixed character type," but a form of masculinity that occupies a dominant position within a particular pattern of gender relations (77). This means that masculinity can change across contexts, and that dominant masculinity always exists in relation to other possible masculinities. Monster romance uses this instability by detaching masculine traits from ordinary human masculinity. The monster may remain powerful, protective, or physically dominant, but these traits are often combined with emotional openness and care. The genre therefore does not reject masculinity altogether. It reworks masculinity through nonhuman figures who can carry masculine intensity without being fully attached to ordinary patriarchal authority.

Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain how masculinity can be separated from the human male body. Butler argues that gender is "the repeated stylization of the body," meaning that it is produced through repeated acts instead of expressing an inner truth (33). Gender is therefore not simply something one is, but something made recognisable through performance. This is useful for monster romance because the monster often performs masculinity while remaining visibly nonhuman. His masculinity is produced through behaviour, relational position, and narrative framing rather than through ordinary human embodiment. The genre can therefore keep certain masculine traits while changing the body and social meaning attached to them. Butler's framework helps show how gender is both reproduced and transformed within these texts.

Taken together, these theoretical approaches provide a framework for analysing how monster romance constructs otherness and masculinity within desire. Hall helps explain how difference becomes meaningful, Cohen and Halberstam show why monstrosity is culturally significant, Radway situates romance as a genre of emotional fulfilment, and Connell and

Butler make it possible to read masculinity as changeable rather than fixed. The following analysis therefore treats monster romance not as an isolated niche, but as a cultural form in which the boundaries of desirability and relational power are actively renegotiated.

2.1 A Taste For The Beast: Reversed Othering

This chapter examines a recurring structural tendency within contemporary monster romance, namely the reversal of the Other from a figure of exclusion to one of desirability. Drawing on a corpus of one hundred monster romance texts, this analysis identifies a consistent pattern in which the non-human love interest is positioned not merely as acceptable, but as preferable to human alternatives. The primary texts discussed here, including *A Soul to Heal* (Reyne 2022), *Deceived by the Gargoyles* (Lark 2022), *Wicked Creation* (Vrana 2023), *Wolves and Whipped Cream at Hallow's Cove* (Raven 2023), *Whispers of the Deep* (Hamm 2024), *The Revenant's Heart* (Gray 2024), *The Saltwater Curse* (St. Graves 2025), and *A Darkness So Sweet* (Hamm 2025), function as representative examples of broader patterns observed across the dataset. While these texts vary in tone and narrative structure, they share a common logic in which human men are either absent or actively harmful. At the same time, the monster is positioned as the only viable site of intimacy and desire. This recurring pattern suggests not simply a variation within the romance genre, but a more fundamental shift in how otherness itself is constructed and valued within contemporary narratives of desire.

This pattern is not only evident at the level of individual texts, but is borne out across the corpus as a whole. In 100% of the analysed texts, the monster is positioned as preferable to human men, indicating that this dynamic is not incidental but structurally embedded within the genre. While human male threat is present in 58% of cases, a significant 42% of texts contain no such threat, which suggests that the desirability of the monster does not depend upon the failure or violence of human men. Furthermore, non-human permanence is nearly universal, at 98%, indicating that the monster is rarely assimilated into normative humanity, but instead

remains Other while still being desired (Appendix A). This is quite important, as it suggests that the appeal of the monster is not conditional, but sustained.

Within traditional frameworks of representation, the Other is produced through systems of difference that define what is normal, desirable, and intelligible by contrast. Meaning, as has been argued, is constructed relationally, through oppositions that stabilise cultural categories and position the Other as that which exists outside the norm (Hall 225–27). The monster, in this sense, emerges precisely from these boundaries, functioning as a "cultural body" that embodies what a given society fears or excludes (Cohen 4). However, the texts examined here do not simply reproduce this structure. Instead, they retain the monster's position as Other while fundamentally altering its value. The monster is not assimilated into the norm, nor is its difference erased. These moments are important because they show that the monster's body is not simply re-coded as desirable after the narrative has neutralised its difference. In *A Soul to Heal*, the heroine's gesture of gripping the monster's "animalistic chest" for comfort makes bodily otherness part of the scene's emotional security instead of its obstacle (Reyne 116). The detail matters because the body remains explicitly nonhuman at the moment it becomes comforting. The text does not separate care from monstrosity, as though emotional intimacy can only emerge once the monster's body has been imaginatively softened. Instead, the heroine's comfort is attached to the very surface that marks him as other. The monster's furred, animalistic body becomes a site of reassurance, which reverses the expected association between bodily abnormality and threat.

A similar movement appears in *Deceived by the Gargoyles*, where attraction is directed toward the gargoyle as gargoyle rather than toward a hidden or symbolic humanity beneath the monstrous surface. The line "Unexpected heat warms me the longer I let my eyes wander over the gargoyle in front of me" frames desire as a response to the visible monster body, not as a denial of it (Lark 74). The heroine does not have to look past the gargoyle's difference in order

to desire him. Her attraction develops through looking at him. This distinction is central to the Preferred Other because the monster's body is not treated as a barrier that romance must overcome. It is part of what makes desire possible. In both examples, the texts shift otherness from a category of exclusion into a category of intimacy. The monster is not accepted after his difference is reduced. He is desired while that difference remains materially present.

To account for this transformation, this analysis introduces the concept of the Preferred Other, defined as a figure that retains its status as Other while being positioned as superior to normative alternatives within the narrative. The Preferred Other is therefore not identical to the Other as it appears in Hall's account of representation, nor to the desired Other described by hooks. Hall's work is helpful because it shows that otherness is produced through systems of difference: the Other becomes meaningful because it is positioned against what a culture defines as normal, familiar, or acceptable (Hall 225–27). In that framework, difference helps stabilise the norm by marking what stands outside it. Monster romance begins from this structure, since the monster is still recognisable as Other through his body, social position, and distance from ordinary humanity. However, the genre changes the direction of value. The monster does not simply confirm the boundary of the human by remaining excluded from it. Instead, he exposes the human norm as insufficient. His otherness does not only define what he is not; it becomes the reason he is preferred. This is also where the Preferred Other differs from hooks's critique of the commodified or exoticised Other. In "Eating the Other," hooks warns that dominant culture can turn difference into a pleasurable object of consumption without challenging the structures that make that difference marginal (hooks 21–39). That caution is important for monster romance, since the genre can risk making monstrosity into an erotic flavour: strange enough to excite desire, but not necessarily disruptive enough to challenge power. However, the Preferred Other names a more specific pattern than exotic consumption alone. The monster is not only desired because he is different. He is preferred

because the normative human alternative has been made inadequate within the narrative. In other words, the monster's difference is relationally charged. It gains value through contrast with human masculinity, which is repeatedly associated with absence, failure, danger, or emotional insufficiency. The concept of the Preferred Other is useful because it holds these tensions together. It does not claim that monster romance is automatically radical, nor that desiring the monster escapes the politics of othering. It identifies a structural reversal within the genre. Hall helps explain how the monster is produced as Other; hooks helps warn that desire for otherness can become consumption; the Preferred Other describes what happens when the Other is not merely consumed, tolerated, or included, but narratively chosen as the better site of intimacy. This means that the monster's difference is not softened into acceptability, nor simply used as decorative excess. It becomes the condition through which romance redefines what counts as desirable.

This is evident in *Whispers of the Deep*, where the heroine's interactions with human structures are characterised by constraint and surveillance, while the monster offers a form of engagement grounded in mutual recognition, "They do not understand the value or the worth of your life, Kairos, and I will not stand for their mistreatment of you." (184). Similarly, in *The Saltwater Curse*, the monster's difference is framed not as a deviation from the norm, but as an ethical improvement upon it, "I may be the king, but I bow to her, and she bows to no one."(117). The Preferred Other therefore functions as a relational category, defined not in isolation, but through the failure of normative figures to meet the emotional and ethical demands of the narrative. Importantly, this preference does not only emerge in response to harmful masculinity, but persists even in its absence, which makes it structural rather than reactive.

One of the primary mechanisms through which the Preferred Other is established is the systematic marginalisation of human male characters. Across the corpus, human men are

frequently absent or rendered narratively insignificant, creating a kind of vacuum in which the monster becomes the only viable romantic subject. This absence is often established early in the narrative, positioning the heroine within a context of emotional deprivation and social isolation. In *A Soul to Heal*, the protagonist's lack of meaningful human connection foregrounds the significance of the monster's attentiveness, which is framed as both unexpected and transformative, she thinks "How can such a creature be more accepting than most humans I know?" (105). In *Wicked Creation*, the absence of a direct human threat does not result in the presence of a viable human alternative, but instead reinforces the centrality of the monster as the sole site of relational possibility, when presented with the opportunity to come back to human civilisation, and stay there, she says, "I know now I can't stay here. I don't belong here anymore" (Vrana 292). This suggests that the exclusion of human men is not incidental, but structural, functioning to clear narrative space for the emergence of the Preferred Other.

In other cases, human men are not merely absent but actively constructed as sources of harm, reinforcing the contrast between normative and monstrous masculinity. This is particularly evident in narratives where the heroine's prior or surrounding experiences are marked by control or violence. *The Saltwater Curse* depicts human interactions as unstable and potentially dangerous, with trust repeatedly undermined through betrayal or neglect, "to prove to myself Tommy's rules hold no bearing on me, the fear his family has ingrained in me is still here" (81). Even in texts such as *Wolves and Whipped Cream at Hallow's Cove* and *The Revenant's Heart*, where the threat is not exclusively male, the human world is consistently framed as a space of uncertainty and vulnerability, in *Wolves and Whipped Cream at Hallow's Cove* it is familial pressures "We'll disown you... you will be cut out of the family" (138), where in *The Revenant's Heart* it is similar in the way that it is the monster's creator who poses a threat for both monster and female main character(209). The repeated association of human

masculinity with harm contributes to a discursive environment in which the monster's difference becomes not only acceptable, but necessary (Hall 59).

In contrast, the monster is consistently constructed as an ethically and emotionally superior partner, embodying a form of masculinity that departs from normative expectations. Monstrosity, in this sense, makes visible what is otherwise repressed, allowing for the articulation of alternative relational models (Halberstam 2–3). This is further reinforced through the performative nature of gender, where masculinity is constituted through repeated acts rather than fixed identities (Butler 33–34). Within monster romance, masculinity is detached from the human body and re-performed through figures that prioritise emotional intimacy and communication. In *A Darkness So Sweet*, the monster's attentiveness is framed as central to his desirability, explicitly contrasted with prior experiences of loneliness and neglect, her father had died and since "Fewer nobles wanted to give a woman money when she was running the business" (Hamm 12), but the monster "would see to it his bride was well" (308) and "this massive troll who had saved her life, who had been so kind"(315). Furthermore, in *The Revenant's Heart*, the love interest's body is described through images of physical reconstruction, as "Lines of stitches and metal staples crisscross his body, piecing together sections of flesh that are green in hue" (Gray 15), providing an apt metaphor for masculinity within the story. Moreover, he's described as "someone safe to care for. Someone who won't leave me" (104), indicating that revenant's difference does not prevent intimacy, but becomes part of how emotional recognition is built This makes desirability depend on a body that remains visibly outside normative human embodiment.These representations suggest that monstrosity does not negate masculinity, but provides a space in which it can be reconfigured.

This reconfiguration of masculinity is closely tied to the structure of desire within the romance genre. Romance narratives are traditionally organised around the fulfilment of emotional needs, particularly the desire for care and relational security (Radway 16–18).

Monster romance retains this structure, but relocates these qualities onto the monster rather than the human male protagonist. Across the corpus, non-human permanence is nearly universal, with 98% of texts retaining the monster's non-human form at the conclusion of the narrative. This is significant, as it indicates that desirability is not contingent upon assimilation into normative humanity. At the same time, dominant models of masculinity, which emphasise hierarchy and control, are disrupted (Connell 76–78). Instead, these texts construct a form of masculinity that is relational rather than dominant, attentive rather than distant. The repeated association of these traits with the monster reinforces its position as the Preferred Other, suggesting that desirability itself is being redefined.

2.2 Sweet Tooth, Sharp Teeth: Alternative Masculinities and Ethical Intimacy

While the previous section established the monster as the Preferred Other, contemporary monster romance does not merely replace the human male protagonist with a nonhuman alternative. The genre also reconstructs the forms of masculinity through which intimacy itself is imagined. Across the corpus, monstrous masculinity is repeatedly characterised through emotional attentiveness, communicative openness, and caregiving behaviours that contrast sharply with more traditional masculine ideals centred on emotional restraint and dominance. Instead of presenting emotional vulnerability as weakness, these texts frequently position it as a core component of desirability.

One of the clearest recurring patterns across the corpus is the emphasis placed on emotional labour. Monsters are repeatedly shown monitoring emotional states, responding to distress, and prioritising reassurance during moments of intimacy. In *A Soul to Heal*, for example, much of the relationship develops through scenes in which the demon carefully responds to the heroine's fear and uncertainty, "Is there a way I can fight your dreams for you?... I do not like that you are afraid of them." (109) and "content with caring for her... didn't pressure her to talk about her problems when she didn't want to." (110), thereby offering her

emotional intimacy and care. Furthermore, in *The Revenant's Heart*, emotional openness becomes central to attraction, particularly through scenes where vulnerability and communication are framed as desirable rather than emasculating, "his surprise when i suggested painkillers, how he told me no one had even tried before"(Gray 77) and "I didn't expect you to be kind" (129). These moments reposition emotional attentiveness as masculine more than feminine, destabilising hegemonic models of masculinity structured around emotional distance and control (Connell 76–81).

Communication also functions as a central mechanism through which intimacy is reconstructed. Across the corpus, emotional transparency frequently replaces the withholding or miscommunication often associated with traditional romance conflict. In *Whispers of the Deep*, for instance, emotional honesty becomes a defining feature of the relationship between the heroine and the merman. Conversations surrounding fear, trust, and vulnerability occur repeatedly throughout the narrative, allowing intimacy to emerge gradually through mutual understanding and learning the other, "We've been talking to each other for quite some time now. Just not in so many words." (249). Likewise, *Deceived by the Gargoyles* consistently foregrounds negotiation and reassurance before physical intimacy occurs, framing communication itself as erotically significant, "No matter how silly you consider it or how embarrassing it may be, I'd rather you say when you don't like something than for you to be uncomfortable" (184) and "We will always respect your boundaries" (214). These scenes slow the progression of desire, shifting narrative emphasis away from domination and toward reciprocity.

This emphasis on communication is particularly visible in the treatment of consent. Across the corpus, consent is rarely presented as a brief procedural moment before intimacy, but instead structures the emotional logic of romantic interaction itself. Physical intimacy is frequently preceded by verbal reassurance, emotional negotiation, or explicit discussions of

comfort and boundaries. The significance of these consent scenes lies in the way they transform restraint into a desirable masculine trait. In many romance structures, erotic tension is produced through urgency, pursuit, or the hero's inability to control desire. Monster romance often keeps the intensity of desire, but redirects its meaning by making restraint part of the monster's appeal. When *A Darkness So Sweet* pauses the sexual scene through the question "Is this what you want?" the interruption does not weaken erotic charge; it reframes desire as something that must remain responsive to the heroine's comfort (Hamm 316).Moreover, *The Saltwater Curse* positions emotional trust as a necessary condition for physical intimacy, repeatedly framing consent as an ongoing process rather than a singular moment, "even though I could tell he wanted more, he didn't try to take his pleasure out on me, didn't ask or suggest" (147). Desire is therefore not imagined as less powerful because it is controlled. It becomes more trustworthy because it can stop. This matters for the chapter's argument about alternative masculinities because the monster's desirability depends on the separation of physical power from entitlement. These figures are not desirable because they lack intensity. They are desirable because their intensity is made accountable to the heroine's agency.

The corpus also repeatedly associates masculinity with caregiving instead of authority. Monsters frequently perform acts of physical and emotional care that would traditionally fall outside hegemonic masculine structures. Scenes involving feeding, tending injuries, monitoring wellbeing, or providing physical comfort recur across multiple texts. In *Deceived by the Gargoyles*, emotional intimacy develops gradually through repeated acts of caretaking, particularly in scenes where the gargoyles prioritise the heroine's comfort and emotional security over sexual access, for example one says, "It is our pleasure to take care of you" (132) after offering their home to the female main character, after her apartment was broken into. Additionally, in *A Soul to Heal*, acts of nurturance repeatedly become central to the progression of intimacy, positioning care itself as erotic more than a secondary to desire, for example

through asking to brush her hair, and offering to learn how to style it (135-136). These patterns align closely with Radway's argument that romance fiction frequently centres emotional reassurance and recognition as forms of fulfilment (Radway 16–18). However, monster romance relocates these qualities onto nonhuman figures rather than normative masculine subjects.

Importantly, these texts do not simply remove masculine power altogether. Many monsters remain physically imposing, socially dangerous, or visibly nonhuman. However, physical power is repeatedly separated from emotional threat. In *Whispers of the Deep*, the merman's body initially appears frightening, yet the narrative gradually relocates danger away from the monster himself and toward the human institutions surrounding the heroine "That amount of trust in someone like him? It was... unprecedented" (249) and "You live in a beautiful place' 'One that your people have destroyed' 'i cant argue with that'" (323). A similar pattern emerges in *The Saltwater Curse*, where betrayal, coercion, and emotional instability originate primarily from human relationships, by being hunted by her abusive ex's family, the Gallaghers (20) and "My friend gave me up to the fucking Gallaghers" (355). The literature therefore destabilises traditional associations between bodily abnormality and violence. As Cohen argues, monsters have historically functioned as embodiments of cultural fear and instability (Cohen 4), yet contemporary monster romance increasingly redirects those anxieties toward normative social structures instead.

This shift becomes particularly significant when situated within the broader social context outlined in Chapter One. Contemporary anxieties surrounding gender relations, bodily autonomy, and emotional instability shape the conditions under which intimacy is imagined. Within this context, monstrous masculinity frequently operates as a response to dissatisfaction with normative heterosexual structures. The monster's desirability is therefore not rooted solely in physical difference or erotic novelty, but in the construction of alternative relational

behaviours that appear emotionally safer, more reciprocal, and more stable than those associated with traditional masculinity. Rather than rejecting masculinity altogether, these texts reconstruct it through emotional labour, communication, and care. Masculinity is not abandoned within monster romance, but reorganised around behaviours and relational practices traditionally excluded from hegemonic masculine performance. In this sense, the genre does more than eroticise the nonhuman. It uses monstrosity as a framework through which alternative forms of intimacy and masculine subjectivity can be imagined.

2.3 Strange Appetites: Queering Heterosexuality through Monstrosity

Although contemporary monster romance overwhelmingly centres male monster/female human pairings, the relationships constructed within these narratives frequently destabilise normative heterosexual structures. While the genre outwardly retains recognisable heterosexual romance conventions, the forms of embodiment, sexuality, and relationality operating within these texts often resist the assumptions that traditionally organise heterosexual desire. As discussed in the previous sections, monster romance reconstructs both desirability and intimacy through nonhuman figures. However, the implications of these reconstructions extend beyond the monster itself, gradually destabilising the normative frameworks through which heterosexuality is conventionally understood. More than functioning as straightforwardly heterosexual romances, many of these texts produce relationships that remain formally heterosexual while simultaneously operating through queer forms of embodiment, and desire. This distinction matters because heteronormativity is not only a matter of male/female pairing. Berlant and Warner define it as the "institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations" that make heterosexuality appear coherent and privileged (548). The relationships examined here may remain heterosexual at the level of pairing, but they unsettle the bodily and social conditions through which heterosexuality is usually made recognisable.

One of the clearest ways these narratives destabilise heteronormative structures is through their treatment of bodily legibility. Across the primary texts, desire is repeatedly directed toward bodies that resist stable categorisation within normative understandings of sex and sexuality. In *Deceived by the Gargoyles*, the gargoyles' bodies remain visibly inhuman throughout the narrative, with physical intimacy structured around bodily excess, multiplicity, and nonhuman materiality rather than familiar human embodiment, such as "his skin appears thicker than mine" (75), "I almost miss the sight of the horns" (133) and "will you please consider being courted by us?" (86). Similarly, *Whispers of the Deep* repeatedly foregrounds the merman's bodily otherness through descriptions of movement, touch, and scale that complicate conventional assumptions surrounding masculine physicality and heterosexual attraction "But oh, he was so beautiful. Those hard edges of his face, almost human but not quite close enough. The sharp teeth bared at her" (14), "His black tail, so long it tangled in the kelp, was at least 10 feet long. Blue slashes of fins" (11) and "His gills fluttered" (294) . In *The Revenant's Heart*, bodily fragmentation and reconstruction further destabilise the relationship between desirability and normative embodiment, producing a romantic dynamic centred around a body that is neither fully human nor fully stable "dangles loose with his detached arm" (Gray 61), "his hand is still detached" (38), and "his detached thigh" (160).These texts therefore complicate the assumption that heterosexual desire must remain oriented around recognisable or socially legible bodies. This is where the queer potential of monster romance becomes visible. If "what is reachable" is shaped by orientations already taken, then desire is not simply natural, but directed through social patterns that make some bodies available and others strange or improper (Ahmed 56). Because gender is produced through repeated acts rather than fixed bodily truth, these nonhuman bodies can still become legible as masculine while disrupting the assumption that heterosexual desire must be organised around recognisably human bodies (Butler 33–34).

Importantly, the instability introduced through these bodies is rarely resolved through assimilation or normalisation. As noted in the previous section, monsters frequently remain physically monstrous at the conclusion of the romantic narrative. However, the significance of this persistence extends beyond the simple retention of bodily difference. Because the monster is not transformed into an acceptable human subject, the relationship itself never fully returns to normative heterosexual stability. In *A Soul to Heal*, the demon's body remains visibly monstrous even after emotional intimacy has been established, while *A Darkness So Sweet* also, refuses to frame humanity as the endpoint of romantic fulfilment "No matter what she was safe here. With him"(Hamm 410). Instead of resolving bodily instability through transformation, these narratives allow heterosexual intimacy to continue existing alongside forms of embodiment that remain socially and biologically illegible. In doing so, the texts destabilise the assumption that successful heterosexual romance must ultimately reaffirm normative bodily structures. The refusal of bodily assimilation matters because it prevents the romance from restoring the monster to normative social intelligibility. If the monster is "difference made flesh," then its continued presence keeps difference at the centre of romantic fulfilment rather than resolving it into ordinary humanity (Cohen 7). In this sense, the monster remains a body through which the normal is defined, but monster romance changes the value attached to that difference.

The queering of heterosexuality is also visible in the ways these texts reconstruct sexual interaction itself. Because monster bodies frequently function outside normative human anatomy, sexuality is repeatedly framed as something that must be negotiated and reinterpreted more than naturally understood. In *Whispers of the Deep*, physical intimacy requires ongoing navigation of bodily difference, with erotic tension emerging through uncertainty and adjustment instead of than familiarity, "They shouldn't be interested in each other... They were two puzzle pieces from two separate boxes and no matter how hard they tried to jam themselves

together, it wouldn't work" (211). The line does not simply describe awkwardness between individuals. It frames intimacy as something that cannot rely on the assumed fit of familiar bodies. Desire has to proceed through difference, uncertainty, and adjustment. This unsettles the naturalised logic of heterosexual romance, where bodily compatibility is often treated as self-evident because the lovers are recognisably male and female.

Furthermore, *Deceived by the Gargoyles* complicates conventional heterosexual sexual structures through multiplicity and nonhuman physicality, destabilising assumptions surrounding singular pairings and normative bodily interaction "The men who'd be courting me are lovers. If I agree to date them, it's with the knowledge they will be with each other in bed rather than with only me" (95). In *Wolves and Whipped Cream at Hallow's Cove*, animalistic instincts and nonhuman behaviours repeatedly interrupt conventional romantic and sexual scripting, producing forms of intimacy that resist stable heterosexual categorisation "My hindbrain threatens to override any sense of civility and propriety I have" (31) and "Wolves can smell their mate? That's how they form packs" (82). Here it is important to note, that despite clear reference to animal instinct, this does not change the fact that the love interest does not act upon them without explicit consent from the female main character. Sexuality within these narratives therefore becomes contingent and constructed rather than fixed or naturalised. Rubin's work is helpful here because it challenges the idea that sexuality is merely biological or natural. She argues that sexuality is "as much a human product" as other social practices and institutions (149). Monster romance literalises this constructed quality by making sexual compatibility something that must be negotiated across bodily difference as opposed to assumed through familiar human anatomy.

Several of the primary texts further complicate the relationship between heterosexual romance and normative social futurity. Traditional romance narratives frequently resolve through reintegration into stable social structures such as marriage, domestic legitimacy, or

reproductive futurity. Monster romance often unsettles these trajectories. In *Wicked Creation*, intimacy develops outside conventional frameworks of social belonging, with the relationship itself remaining detached from normative structures of legitimacy and recognition, she has "Four mates" (Vrana 347) who are in the relationship with her. Likewise, *The Saltwater Curse* positions romantic fulfilment outside stable human social systems, ultimately prioritising emotional attachment over reintegration into conventional society, "I'm not going to let myself lose the one place I've felt a semblance of safety... We can swing it somehow" (365). These endings do not reject romantic fulfilment altogether, but they repeatedly detach heterosexual intimacy from many of the institutional frameworks through which heterosexuality is traditionally stabilised and reproduced. This detachment from social futurity matters because heteronormativity is not only private, but produced through "the forms and arrangements of social life" (Berlant and Warner 554). Monster romance does not necessarily reject romantic fulfilment, but it loosens that fulfilment from the institutions that usually make heterosexuality socially recognisable, including marriage, domestic legitimacy, and reproduction.

Crucially, these texts do not queer heterosexuality through explicit rejection of male/female romantic pairings, but through the instability introduced into the structures surrounding those pairings. Across the primary corpus, heterosexual romance remains present at the level of narrative form, yet the assumptions organising embodiment, sexuality, intimacy, and romantic fulfilment become increasingly unstable. Bodies exceed categorisation, sexual interaction becomes negotiated rather than naturalised, and romantic closure no longer depends upon reintegration into normative social structures. Monster romance therefore retains the outward appearance of heterosexual romance while simultaneously destabilising many of the conventions through which heterosexuality itself is traditionally understood.

Chapter 3 - The Measure of a Monster

The discussion therefore treats Chapter One and Chapter Two as parts of the same argument rather than as separate contexts. Chapter One showed why intimacy is culturally pressured; Chapter Two showed how monster romance restructures the romantic object under those conditions. Chapter Three asks what follows from that movement. Its purpose is not to repeat the corpus analysis, but to interpret its significance: why preference matters, why nonhuman permanence matters, and why the monster can function as both critique and compromise. The chapter therefore reads monster romance as a genre that keeps the pleasures of romance while altering the figure through whom those pleasures become believable. Thus, making it a form of discursive structure of desire instead of as a simple reflection of social reality. The genre does not merely express what women want, nor does it stand outside the historical conditions that shape wanting. Instead, it organises contemporary anxieties about desire, bodily autonomy, heterosexual intimacy, and masculinity into a repeated romantic form. Foucault's account of power is useful here because it rejects the idea that power only represses from above. Power produces categories, meanings, and possible forms of subjectivity; it shapes what can be recognised as normal, desirable, or legitimate (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 92–102). Monster romance therefore matters because it stages a reorganisation of desire within culture. The monster is not a random erotic object, but a figure through which the genre makes dissatisfaction with ordinary masculinity narratively and emotionally legible.

The cultural conditions examined in Chapter One are central to this reorganisation. The renewed regulation of women's bodies after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, alongside increasingly antagonistic forms of masculinity in online discourse, produces a context in which heterosexual intimacy becomes difficult to separate from risk. Foucault's account of sexuality is helpful here because it links sex to both individual bodies and broader population

management. As he writes, “Sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species” (Foucault 146). In this context, sex, pregnancy, dependence, and vulnerability are not only private matters. They are shaped by legal, medical, and cultural systems that determine what kinds of bodies are protected and under what conditions. Monster romance does not directly narrate abortion law or manosphere discourse, but it emerges within the same cultural atmosphere. Its fantasies of care from nonhuman figures become meaningful because they imagine intimacy outside the ordinary structures that have made women’s bodies available to public regulation.

The literary patterns identified in Chapter Two show how this pressure is transformed into romance structure. Across the corpus, the monster is repeatedly positioned as preferable to human masculinity, while intimacy is organised through care, consent, and emotional labour. Connell’s account of hegemony clarifies why this matters, since dominance is not secured only through force. As she argues, “the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, is the mark of hegemony” (Connell 78). Monster romance disrupts this claim to authority by giving the monster masculine intensity without fully attaching him to the ordinary social position of men. The genre is therefore not merely imagining a better individual partner. It is imagining masculinity with its usual claim to authority weakened.

This chapter argues that contemporary monster romance functions as a cultural fantasy of renegotiation. It preserves romantic desire while altering the body, power, and social position through which romance becomes imaginable. Ahmed’s work on orientation is clarifying here because desire is not understood as a purely private instinct, but as something shaped by direction, proximity, and social habit (Ahmed 25–65). Monster romance changes that direction. It repeatedly turns desire away from the ordinary human male figure and toward the monster, whose otherness allows romance to continue without returning fully to the social

meanings attached to ordinary masculinity. The desire for monsters can therefore be read as a critique of patriarchal power, though not as a complete escape from it. Berlant's concept of cruel optimism helps explain why the genre remains attached to romance even when ordinary romantic structures appear compromised (Berlant 1–3). Monster romance does not abandon the promise of intimacy. It changes the figure through which that promise can still be believed.

3.1 Acquired Taste: Why the Monster Becomes Desirable

The monster becomes desirable within a cultural moment where the promises attached to heterosexual intimacy have become unstable. Chapter One showed how reproductive autonomy in the United States has become legally uneven after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, while Chapter Two showed how monster romance repeatedly relocates safety and care away from human men. These two findings should not be collapsed into a simple cause-and-effect argument. The point is not that monster romance is "about" abortion law. Foucault's account of power helps explain why changes in bodily autonomy also affect the cultural imagination of intimacy. Power does not only forbid; it structures the field of what can be done, recognised, and protected (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 92–95). When women's bodies become legally precarious, the fantasy of intimacy is also pressured, because sex and romance can no longer be imagined apart from the systems that regulate bodily vulnerability.

This pressure is intensified by the broader crisis of confidence surrounding heterosexual relations. Manosphere discourse often frames relationships between men and women through resentment and opposition, turning intimacy into a site of grievance rather than mutual recognition (Sugiura 3–5). Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity makes this pattern more than a matter of individual bad behaviour. Masculinity is socially organised through relations of dominance and legitimacy, meaning that the problem is not simply that some men fail romantically, but that dominant models of masculinity are attached to wider structures of power

(Connell 76–78). Monster romance responds to this instability by moving romantic desirability away from the human male figure most closely associated with ordinary gender power. The monster can remain masculine, but his masculinity is not identical with the social authority of ordinary men.

The corpus data supports this reading because it shows that monster preference is not dependent on direct male violence alone. Human male threat appears in 58% of the analysed texts, but the monster is positioned as preferable in 100%. If the genre were only compensating for violent men, one would expect monster preference to depend more directly on human male harm. Instead, the pattern is broader. Hall's theory of representation helps explain this because "meaning depends on the difference between opposites" (Hall 235). The monster becomes desirable because he is set against a human masculine field that appears absent, insufficient, or unsafe. His value is not produced in isolation. It is created through contrast, and that contrast allows the genre to make a wider claim about the inadequacy of normative masculinity as a romantic ideal. In *Wicked Creation*, this movement away from the human world is framed not simply as romantic preference, but as a claim over the heroine's future. When Leilani states, "but what I can't do is give them my life. It belongs somewhere else" (Vrana 292), the choice of the monster is also a refusal to let human structures determine where her life should be spent. This is important because the text does not require a single human male villain in order to make the nonhuman alternative preferable. Instead, human belonging itself becomes insufficient. The alien bond becomes desirable because it offers a future that the human world can no longer contain.

Cohen's monster theory deepens this point because the monster marks the boundary where cultural categories become unstable. Cohen describes the monster as "difference made flesh," a formulation that is especially helpful here because monster romance does not erase difference in order to make the monster desirable (7). The monster's danger remains visible,

but its meaning changes. He is excessive, strange, or physically unreadable, yet those qualities allow him to stand apart from ordinary masculinity. The monster becomes desirable not despite his difference, but because his difference prevents him from collapsing back into the category of the human man.Furthermore, Ahmed's account of orientation helps explain how this reversal operates at the level of desire. If desire is shaped by repeated social directions, then the monster's desirability signals a reorientation rather than a simple preference. Ahmed argues that "bodies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force" (145). Monster romance disrupts this repetition by making the improper body romantically reachable. It trains desire toward bodies that would usually be excluded from romantic legitimacy, while making ordinary masculinity less persuasive as the expected object of longing. This is why the genre's fantasy is not merely that the heroine finds an unusual lover. The deeper movement is that romance itself is redirected toward a figure who remains outside normative social and bodily expectation.

The monster's nonhuman permanence makes this reorientation structurally significant. In 98% of the analysed texts, the monster remains nonhuman, which means that the genre is not simply flirting with difference before restoring normality. Halberstam's work on Gothic monstrosity helps explain why this matters, since Gothic is designed to produce "fear and desire within the reader" (2). Monster romance keeps this double response in place, but changes its balance. The monster does not need to become human in order to become romantically meaningful. His visible difference becomes the condition of fulfilment, not an obstacle to it. If he were transformed into an ordinary man, the fantasy would lose the distance from normative masculinity that makes it culturally meaningful.

This is why monster romance registers dissatisfaction without giving up desire. The genre does not suggest that romance has lost its cultural force. It suggests that romance must be reconfigured in order to remain believable. Berlant's concept of cruel optimism is useful

here because it explains how subjects remain attached to fantasies of the good life even when those fantasies are compromised or difficult to sustain (Berlant 1–3). Monster romance remains attached to the promise of intimacy, protection, and emotional recognition, but it relocates that promise onto a figure who does not carry the same social burden as an ordinary man. The monster becomes desirable because he allows romance to continue while changing the conditions under which romance can be trusted.

3.2 Something Raw: Masculinity Untouched by Institutions

The fantasy of monster romance is not simply that the love interest behaves better than a human man. The more important point is that his masculinity is imagined at a distance from the institutions that produce ordinary masculine authority. Connell's work is useful here because masculinity is not treated as a private identity or a natural possession. It is formed within gender relations, and those relations are tied to social power. This means that the monster's difference cannot be reduced to appearance alone. His body matters because it changes the social position from which masculinity is performed. He may be male-coded, dominant, or protective, but he is not usually situated within the same legal, medical, familial, or digital systems that make ordinary masculinity powerful over women. Monster romance therefore imagines masculine power without placing it entirely inside the social machinery of patriarchy.

This distinction changes the meaning of strength within the genre. The monster may be physically dangerous, but his power is usually excessive and embodied rather than bureaucratic or legally authorised. He is not the doctor deciding whether treatment is permissible, the judge interpreting bodily autonomy, or the online masculine subject turning grievance into ideology. Foucault's account of modern power helps clarify why this matters. Power does not operate only through direct force, but through systems that make bodies knowable, governable, and available to institutional interpretation (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 135–45). Monster

romance separates eroticised power from that institutional field. The monster can remain powerful because his power is not usually the kind that decides whether a woman's body will be believed, protected, or regulated. This distinction is visible in *Whispers of the Deep*, where the monster's response to human harm is not abstractly protective, but ethically outraged. His question, "They were hurting her? Her own people?" marks human society, in contrast to the monster, as the source of betrayal (Hamm, *Whispers* 334). The force of the line lies in its disbelief. Harm is not coming from the visibly nonhuman figure, but from the community that should have represented recognition and care. This supports the section's broader claim that monster romance separates embodied power from institutional or social authority. The merman may be frightening, but the human world is the structure that has failed her.

This becomes especially significant in the post-*Roe* context discussed in Chapter One. Reports of delayed treatment, denied care, and doctors hesitating under restrictive abortion laws demonstrate how institutional power enters moments of bodily vulnerability (Center for American Progress, Center for Reproductive Rights). These cases matter here not because monster romance directly represents abortion law, but because they reveal the cultural atmosphere in which fantasies of care circulate. Butler's reading of Foucault is helpful for making this connection because she notes that "to be sexed" is to be subjected to social regulations that shape sex, gender, pleasures, and desires as principles of interpretation (Butler 122). In other words, the body is not only lived. It is read through systems of authority. Monster romance imagines a romantic figure whose power is not grounded in those systems. The monster may touch, protect, or desire the heroine, but he does not usually translate her vulnerability into a legal or medical problem.

This is why the monster functions as more than an improved romantic hero. He operates as a fantasy of masculinity removed from patriarchal administration. Connell's concept of the "patriarchal dividend" helps explain the significance of this removal, since men benefit from

patriarchy through the “overall subordination of women” even when they do not personally embody the most dominant masculine ideal (Connell 79). Monster romance interrupts this arrangement by making the desirable masculine figure less clearly attached to the category of ordinary men. The monster is masculine, but he does not straightforwardly participate in the social dividend that attaches to human male authority. This does not make him innocent or politically pure. It does, however, explain why his masculinity can become easier for the genre to desire. His power is displaced from the structures that usually make masculine power socially consequential.

The spaces surrounding the monster make this displacement visible. His ocean, isolated home, hidden community, or supernatural world is rarely just decorative setting. These spaces create distance from the locations where patriarchal authority appears as ordinary life. Ahmed’s account of orientation helps explain why space matters here, because bodies are shaped by the directions and environments that make some actions possible while closing others down (Ahmed 25–65). The heroine’s movement toward the monster is often also a movement away from the spaces where she is legible through human social rules. The sea, the forest, the monster’s home, or the supernatural threshold allows intimacy to be reorganised because the relationship develops somewhere that ordinary authority cannot fully reach.

This spatial separation also changes how the genre handles protection. In patriarchal culture, protection is often entangled with control. Women are promised safety through institutions or relationships that also restrict their choices. The post-*Roe* landscape makes this contradiction visible because the language of protection can coexist with laws that make women more vulnerable to legal and medical uncertainty (“State Policy Trends 2022”). Monster romance reverses the emotional direction of that arrangement. Protection is moved away from public authority and into an intimate bond with a figure who is powerful but not publicly authorised. The fantasy remains ambivalent, since many monsters are possessive or

dominant. Yet the genre makes that dominance desirable by detaching it from the forms of surveillance and regulation that structure women's vulnerability in ordinary life.

The corpus statistics support this reading because they show that the monster's desirability is not dependent on turning him into a conventionally acceptable man. The "monster requires taming" category was not dominant, while nonhuman permanence was nearly universal. Cohen's monster theory helps explain why this matters, because the monster's cultural force depends on its resistance to containment (Cohen 3–25). If the monster were tamed into ordinary masculinity, the fantasy would lose the distance that makes it meaningful. The genre does not usually solve the problem of masculine power by domesticating the monster into humanity. It changes the context in which power is made desirable. The monster does not become safe because he becomes human. He becomes desirable because his power remains outside the social contexts that make human masculinity suspect.

This is also where the genre becomes more complex than a simple fantasy of escape. Monster romance does not imagine a world without hierarchy. It often keeps hierarchy and eroticises it. Rubin's work on sexuality is useful here because it treats sexuality as socially organised rather than naturally innocent, shaped by systems that assign value to some forms of erotic life while marking others as improper (Rubin 149–52). Monster romance does not remove erotic hierarchy from romance. Instead, it changes the conditions under which hierarchy becomes readable as pleasure instead of threat. The monster's dominance is still a form of power, but it is staged through fantasy, negotiation, and emotional responsiveness. That does not make the politics simple. It means the genre is working through the problem of desiring power without wanting the institutions that usually support it.

The "so what" of this pattern is that monster romance exposes a tension within contemporary heterosexual desire. Many traits associated with traditional masculinity remain

erotically powerful within romance fiction, especially strength, intensity, devotion, and protection. Yet those traits have become difficult to separate from patriarchal structures in ordinary social life. Connell's account of masculinity as historically produced helps make sense of this tension, because masculinity can change when the relations that support it change (Connell 82–83). Monster romance solves the problem symbolically by relocating masculine intensity onto a figure who cannot easily be mistaken for an ordinary man. The monster allows the genre to keep the charge of masculine power while refusing the institutional world that has made such power unstable. The fantasy is not masculinity abolished. It is masculinity re-situated, made desirable by being placed outside the systems that usually give men authority over women.

3.3 A Private Feast: Intimacy Without Public Permission

Another important implication of monster romance is that intimacy often becomes meaningful without ordinary social approval. This is not only a matter of unusual bodies or unconventional sexuality. The broader point is that the genre repeatedly imagines relationships whose emotional validity does not depend on public recognition. Berlant and Warner's account of heteronormativity is helpful here because it shows that heterosexuality is not simply a private relation between individuals, but a public structure supported by norms of legitimacy, respectability, domesticity, and reproduction. Their claim that "there is nothing more public than privacy" makes visible the contradiction at the centre of normative intimacy: private life is treated as personal, yet it is shaped through public expectations about what kinds of relationships count (Berlant and Warner 547). Monster romance enters this contradiction by imagining bonds that remain emotionally serious even when they are socially strange, hidden, or difficult to recognise.

This matters because many monster romance relationships do not seek public validation as the final proof of fulfilment. The couple may live at the edge of the human world, within a

supernatural community, beneath the sea, in an isolated home, or in a space that does not fully answer to ordinary human authority. These settings are not just decorative fantasy. They alter the relationship between intimacy and recognition. Berlant and Warner argue that heteronormative culture organises not only sex, but "the forms and arrangements of social life" through which some intimacies become legitimate and others remain improper (554). Monster romance loosens this arrangement. The relationship may still retain the emotional form of romance, but its fulfilment does not always require marriage, family approval, social reintegration, or reproductive futurity.

The corpus statistics make this pattern more than a matter of atmosphere. If 98% of the analysed texts retain the monster's nonhuman form, then the genre is not simply moving through strangeness on the way back to normality. It repeatedly allows romantic fulfilment to coexist with social illegibility. Hall's theory of representation is useful here because cultural meaning depends on recognition: figures become intelligible through the systems that classify them as normal, deviant, familiar, or strange (Hall 234–35). Monster romance refuses to treat the monster's failure to fit these systems as a romantic failure. Instead, the monster's illegibility becomes part of the relationship's value. Love does not become meaningful because society can name it properly. It becomes meaningful because the narrative grants emotional authority to a bond that ordinary recognition cannot easily contain.

Butler's theory of performativity helps clarify why this pattern unsettles heterosexuality without necessarily abandoning it. The relationships often remain male-coded/female-coded at the level of romantic pairing, but the monster's body disrupts the repetition through which heterosexuality usually appears natural. Gender and sexuality become recognisable through repeated acts that create the appearance of coherence (Butler 33–34). Monster romance repeats some of the emotional conventions of heterosexual romance, but it changes the body performing them. The monster may protect, desire, court, or care for the heroine, yet his

nonhuman embodiment prevents those gestures from settling comfortably into ordinary heterosexual realism. The result is not a clean rejection of heterosexual romance, but a loosening of the terms through which heterosexual romance becomes socially legible.

This is why bodily autonomy remains relevant to a section about public recognition. In the cultural context established in Chapter One, intimate life is not fully private: pregnancy, healthcare, sexuality, and family are all sites where public authority can enter the body. Monster romance responds by imagining relationships that are harder for ordinary society to reach. This does not place the couple outside power altogether, but it does move intimacy away from the institutions that usually define its legitimacy. The monster relationship becomes meaningful because it takes place elsewhere, at the edge of recognition. Its fantasy is not only that the heroine is loved, but that she is loved in a way that does not require her desire to be translated into respectable social terms.

Radway's work on romance helps explain why this remains romance rather than simple escape. Romance as a genre is organised around emotional fulfilment, recognition, and repair, even when it negotiates contradictory gender expectations (Radway 16–18). Monster romance keeps that emotional structure while changing the social pathway through which fulfilment arrives. The relationship counts because it provides care and recognition, not because society confirms it. This distinction matters because it shifts the authority of romance inward. The bond itself, rather than public legitimacy, becomes the proof of fulfilment.

The cultural force of this pattern lies in what it implies about ordinary heterosexual structures. If fulfilment is repeatedly imagined outside social recognition, then the genre may be registering dissatisfaction with the systems that usually grant recognition. Monster romance does not simply ask whether women still want love. It asks what love might look like if it did not have to pass through the same structures that regulate women's bodies and organise their

dependence. Berlant and Warner's framework makes this point especially clear: heteronormativity is powerful because it presents its social forms as ordinary life. Monster romance does not abolish romance, but it imagines romance becoming meaningful where ordinary life cannot fully authorise it.

The "so what" of this pattern is that monster romance exposes the burden placed on intimacy by public legitimacy. If romance must be recognised by institutions or social norms in order to count, then intimacy remains vulnerable to the rules those institutions enforce. Monster romance imagines an alternative by giving emotional seriousness to relationships that remain socially strange. This does not make the genre utopian, because these romances often preserve hierarchy, possessiveness, and masculine intensity. However, it does make the fantasy culturally revealing. The genre imagines being loved in a way that does not require submission to the ordinary terms of patriarchal recognition.

3.4 A Hunger Half-Sated: The Monster as a Compromise Fantasy

The cultural significance of monster romance lies partly in its contradictions. The genre does not offer a clean rejection of heterosexuality, masculinity, or power, but it also does not reproduce them unchanged. Instead, it creates a compromise fantasy in which romance remains desirable even as its ordinary conditions are made strange. Berlant's concept of cruel optimism is helpful here because it explains why subjects may remain attached to fantasies of the good life even when those fantasies are compromised or difficult to sustain (Berlant 1–3). Monster romance remains attached to the promise of love, protection, and fulfilment, but it alters the figure through which that promise becomes bearable. The monster is therefore not simply an escape from romance. He is the form romance takes when its familiar human object no longer feels sufficient.

This compromise matters because the genre keeps many elements associated with patriarchal romance: possessiveness, size difference, protective dominance, erotic danger, and masculine intensity. These elements are not politically innocent. They can reproduce familiar hierarchies even when they are displaced onto nonhuman bodies. Yet monster romance also changes the conditions under which those elements operate. The monster's dominance is usually staged through fantasy and emotional responsiveness instead of through ordinary social entitlement. Connell's work remains useful here, but only as background: masculine power becomes hegemonic when it is attached to authority and legitimacy within gender relations (Connell 76–78). Monster romance keeps the charge of masculine power while weakening its connection to ordinary male authority. This is the compromise. The fantasy does not abolish the pleasures of dominance, it relocates them.

hooks offers an important caution for reading this relocation. Desire for the Other is not automatically resistant. In "Eating the Other," hooks warns that difference can become a consumable pleasure, a way for dominant culture to enjoy otherness without challenging the structures that produce it (hooks 21–39). This matters because monster romance cannot be treated as progressive simply because it desires the monster. The question is what happens to difference within the narrative. If monstrosity were only a decorative erotic flavour, the genre would risk turning otherness into spectacle. However, the corpus suggests something more complicated. Because nonhuman permanence is nearly universal, the monster's difference is usually not erased at the end of the romance. It remains visible, erotic, and structurally necessary. The genre still risks consuming difference, but it also makes difference central to the reorganisation of romantic fulfilment.

Rubin's work on sexuality further clarifies why this reorganisation matters. Sexuality is not simply natural or biological; it is shaped through social hierarchies that distinguish legitimate from illegitimate forms of erotic life (Rubin 149–52). Monster romance literalises

this point by making sexual desire cross the boundary between human and nonhuman bodies. Sexual compatibility cannot be assumed as a natural fit between familiar bodies. It has to be negotiated, interpreted, and made meaningful within the relationship. This is why the genre's repeated emphasis on consent, communication, and bodily adaptation matters. The monster body makes visible what normative heterosexuality often hides: intimacy is always constructed through permission, interpretation, and social meaning. The compromise structure also appears in the genre's treatment of relationships that exceed ordinary monogamous pairing. In *Wolves and Whipped Cream at Hallow's Cove*, the line "Just cause fate matched us together, don't mean we're instantly perfect" complicates the idea that supernatural bonding automatically resolves relational difficulty (Raven 102). Fate may create attachment, but it does not remove the need for negotiation. Additionally, *Deceived by the Gargoyles* frames the relationship through collective completion when the gargoyles are urged to "Claim her, and make our clan whole" (Lark 370). The language is possessive and communal at once: the heroine is desired as part of a bond that exceeds the couple, but that bond is also organised through claiming. These examples show why monster romance should be read as a compromise fantasy over a simple liberation fantasy. The genre moves beyond ordinary heterosexual monogamy, but it does not necessarily leave hierarchy, possession, or gendered power behind.

The compromise fantasy therefore works by rearranging rather than rejecting the materials of heterosexual romance. The genre remains attached to romantic fulfilment, but it loosens fulfilment from ordinary human masculinity. It remains attached to erotic power, but it places that power in a body that is visibly outside the social category of man. It remains attached to heterosexual form, but it often detaches that form from marriage, reproduction, and public legitimacy. Berlant's framework helps explain why this matters: attachments are not easily abandoned just because they become compromised. Monster romance shows desire adapting to compromised conditions by shifting the object of attachment. The monster becomes

the figure through which romance can remain affectively powerful without returning unchanged to its ordinary structure. *A Darkness So Sweet* offers another version of this compromise through the language of devotion. Ragnar's statement that "An honorable troll knows his wife is the most beautiful being he will ever see in his life" frames desire through a specifically monstrous code of honour (Hamm, *Darkness* 168). The line is tender, but it is not simply modern egalitarian romance in monstrous costume. It binds beauty, wifehood, honour, and possession together through troll culture. This makes it helpful for understanding the genre's ambivalence: monstrous masculinity becomes desirable because it is devoted and emotionally certain, yet that devotion is still expressed through structures of belonging that are not entirely free from hierarchy. The monster is preferable, but not politically uncomplicated.

This is why monster romance should not be read as simple liberation. It rarely imagines a world without hierarchy, nor does it fully escape the pleasures of dominance. What it does instead is reveal that the ordinary structures of romance have become difficult enough to require transformation. The monster exists at precisely this point of tension. He is powerful enough to satisfy the fantasy of intensity, but strange enough to detach that fantasy from ordinary masculinity. He can be desired as masculine without being fully absorbed into the social authority of men. The genre's politics therefore lie in its ambivalence, not in any clean feminist solution.

The corpus data supports this reading because monster preference appears across every analysed text, but the reasons for that preference vary. In some texts, human men are explicitly threatening. In others, they are absent or simply unable to carry the emotional demands of the narrative. In several, the human world as a whole appears unreliable rather than any one male figure. This variety matters because it suggests that the monster is not a single allegory. He is a flexible fantasy structure. Cohen's monster theory is useful here because the monster gathers

cultural contradictions without resolving them neatly (Cohen 3–25). In monster romance, those contradictions are not only fearful. They become romantic.

This flexibility is central to the monster's symbolic power. He can represent danger and safety in the same figure, embody physical excess while offering emotional recognition, and remain outside society while sustaining a deeply intimate bond. An ordinary human male character would struggle to carry these contradictions because he is already loaded with existing cultural associations. The monster does not escape meaning, but he carries it differently. His otherness allows the genre to reorganise familiar romantic desires into a form that feels newly possible, while still leaving the contradictions visible.

The final significance of this chapter lies in the relationship between critique and attachment. Monster romance critiques patriarchal power not by standing outside it, but by showing the pressure it places on desire. The genre remains attached to romance while altering the figure through which romance is imagined. It remains attached to masculine power while separating that power from ordinary male authority. It remains attached to heterosexual form while loosening its dependence on public legitimacy. These tensions are not weaknesses in the argument. They are the point. Monster romance is culturally meaningful because it does not resolve the contradiction between wanting romance and distrusting the structures attached to it. It gives that contradiction a body.

Ultimately, contemporary monster romance suggests that desire does not disappear under oppressive conditions. It adapts by moving sideways. The monster becomes the measure of what normative masculinity is failing to provide, but also of what romance still promises. He preserves the fantasy while altering its terms. That is why his body must remain strange, why his power remains excessive, and why his relationship to the heroine often exists outside

ordinary recognition. The monster is not simply the opposite of man. He is what romance creates when man is no longer enough.

Conclusion - Happily Ever After (Pending)

This thesis has examined contemporary monster romance as a literary and cultural form through which desire, masculinity, and otherness are renegotiated. Its starting point was the discomforting logic of the "man or bear" debate: the idea that a visibly dangerous creature might feel less threatening than an ordinary man because its danger is easier to recognise. Monster romance gives this cultural reversal a narrative and erotic form. Again and again, the figure traditionally associated with fear, bodily abnormality, and exclusion becomes the figure through which intimacy and fulfilment are imagined. The monster is not desirable because he is harmless. He is desirable because his danger is legible, his difference is visible, and his relation to the heroine is often detached from the ordinary social authority of human masculinity.

The central argument of this thesis has therefore been that contemporary monster romance enacts a sustained reversal of the traditional relationship between self and Other. Rather than positioning the monstrous Other as something to be feared, excluded, overcome, or transformed into an acceptable human subject, the texts examined here construct the monster as the primary site of desirability and ethical relationality. The concept of the Preferred Other names this shift. The Preferred Other is not simply an outsider who becomes acceptable once his difference is softened. He is a figure whose difference remains visible while being actively chosen over normative human alternatives. This distinction matters because the genre does not usually resolve monstrosity by restoring the monster to humanity. Instead, romantic fulfilment

frequently depends on the monster remaining visibly nonhuman. His otherness is not the problem romance solves. It is the condition through which romance becomes possible.

This argument has required moving between cultural context and literary form because the monster's desirability is not meaningful in isolation. The contemporary monster romance love interest becomes significant against a cultural background in which ordinary heterosexual intimacy is increasingly difficult to separate from risk, mistrust, and uneven vulnerability. The regulation of reproductive autonomy after the overturning of Roe v. Wade demonstrates that women's bodies remain subject to legal, medical, and political control. At the same time, manosphere discourse and wider gender polarisation reveal how masculinity can be articulated through resentment, entitlement, and opposition. These developments do not directly cause monster romance, and the texts do not need to mention abortion law or online misogyny in order to matter. Rather, they form part of the cultural atmosphere in which fantasies of care, protection, and romantic trust become charged. When the ordinary structures of intimacy appear unstable, the fantasy of a love interest outside ordinary human masculinity becomes more than a niche erotic preference.

The monster therefore enters the argument as a figure of displacement. He allows the genre to preserve romance while changing the body through which romance is imagined. In the corpus examined in this thesis, the monster is repeatedly positioned as preferable to human men, while nonhuman permanence is nearly universal. This pattern suggests that monstrosity is not merely decorative, nor simply an obstacle that must be overcome before the happy ending can occur. The monster does not function like the traditional beast who must be transformed back into a prince. In contemporary monster romance, the beast often remains beast. His horns, claws, scales, gills, stitches, fur, stone skin, tentacles, or other forms of bodily difference are not erased by romantic resolution. They remain part of what makes him desirable.

This is why the genre's treatment of otherness is so important. In many cultural and literary traditions, the Other is positioned as threatening because it marks the boundary of the normal. Monster romance retains that boundary, but reverses its value. The monster remains strange, but strangeness becomes desirable. He remains outside ordinary humanity, but that distance becomes part of his appeal. The genre therefore does not simply humanise the monster or make him safe by removing his difference. It changes what difference means. The monster's body becomes a site where danger, care, fear, desire, and recognition can coexist. This is the central structural reversal identified by the thesis: the Other is not simply welcomed into the romantic field, but becomes its preferred centre.

This reversal also changes how masculinity operates within the genre. Monster romance does not reject masculinity altogether. Many of its monsters are physically powerful, protective, dominant, possessive, or erotically overwhelming. The genre often keeps the charge of masculine intensity, but it detaches that intensity from ordinary human male authority. This distinction is crucial. The monster can be powerful without being a judge, doctor, husband, employer, internet misogynist, or representative of the institutions that regulate women's lives. His power is embodied and excessive in contrast to the socially normalised. This does not make it innocent, but it does make it different. The fantasy is not masculinity abolished. It is masculinity re-situated.

At the level of intimacy, this re-situation matters because the monster's desirability is repeatedly built through care, communication, consent, and emotional responsiveness. The texts analysed in this thesis frequently associate monstrous masculinity with attentiveness rather than entitlement. Monsters tend wounds, offer shelter, ask questions, respond to fear, respect boundaries, and make vulnerability central to the development of intimacy. This does not mean that monster romance is free of hierarchy, dominance, or possessive fantasy. It is not.

Instead, the genre's complexity lies in the way it keeps some of the pleasures of masculine power while trying to separate them from the forms of neglect, resentment, or control associated with ordinary patriarchal masculinity. The monster becomes compelling because he can carry intensity without carrying exactly the same social meanings as the human man.

The genre's use of nonhuman embodiment also unsettles the assumptions through which heterosexual romance is usually made legible. Many of the texts remain formally organised around male-coded monster/female human pairings, but the bodies involved disrupt ordinary heterosexual realism. Desire is directed toward bodies that are scaled, horned, stitched together, animalistic, aquatic, undead, or otherwise outside normative human form. Sexuality often has to be negotiated through difference rather than assumed through familiar anatomy. In this way, monster romance remains attached to heterosexual romance while making it strange. It does not necessarily leave heterosexuality behind, but it loosens the bodily and social terms through which heterosexual desire is expected to operate. The genre keeps the shape of romance while altering the body at its centre.

The broader significance of this pattern is that monster romance functions as a compromise fantasy. It does not offer a clean escape from patriarchy, and it does not reproduce patriarchal romance unchanged. Instead, it stages the contradictions of contemporary heterosexual desire. Romance remains deeply wanted, but the ordinary human male figure appears increasingly insufficient as the bearer of safety, fulfilment, and emotional recognition. Masculine power remains erotically charged, but it becomes difficult to separate from entitlement or institutional authority. Intimacy remains desirable, but public structures of legitimacy are not always experienced as protective. The monster holds these contradictions together. He is dangerous and safe, strange and intimate, powerful and caring, outside the

human world but still recognisable as a romantic subject. He allows romance to continue, but only by changing its terms.

This is why the monster should not be understood simply as a better boyfriend in an unusual body. He is a fantasy solution to a cultural problem that cannot be fully solved inside the texts themselves. He allows the genre to keep the pleasures of romance while shifting them away from the figure that has become compromised. The monster's desirability reveals that the issue is not simply whether women still want romance. The issue is what kind of figure can now sustain the fantasy of romance. Contemporary monster romance suggests that desire has not disappeared under conditions of gendered mistrust and bodily vulnerability. It has adapted. It has moved sideways. It has found a body strange enough to carry what ordinary masculinity can no longer reliably hold.

The contribution of this thesis lies in naming that movement. The concept of the Preferred Other helps describe a recurring structure in contemporary monster romance: difference is not merely accepted, but actively preferred. The monster is chosen not because he becomes normal, but because he remains other. This concept also helps explain why nonhuman permanence matters so much. If the monster were transformed into an ordinary man, the genre's central reversal would collapse. The fantasy depends on the monster remaining outside normative humanity because that distance is what allows him to reorganise desire. The Preferred Other is therefore not a temporary deviation from romance convention. He is a structural response to the instability of contemporary romantic fantasy.

At the same time, this thesis has not argued that monster romance is politically simple. The genre's fantasies are often ambivalent. Possessiveness, hierarchy, eroticised dominance, and protective control remain common features. The monster's difference can also risk becoming consumable, turning otherness into an erotic object rather than a challenge to systems

of exclusion. For that reason, monster romance should not be treated as a straightforward feminist utopia. Its value lies less in offering a perfect alternative than in revealing the pressures placed on desire. It shows how romance tries to preserve itself when the ordinary terms of romance have become difficult to trust. Its contradictions are therefore not failures of the genre. They are evidence of the cultural tensions the genre is working through.

There are several limitations to this project. The first concerns the corpus itself. Although a corpus of one hundred texts makes it possible to identify broad patterns across contemporary monster romance, it cannot represent the entire genre. Monster romance is expansive, fast-moving, and difficult to define with fixed boundaries. It overlaps with paranormal romance, fantasy romance, dark romance, alien romance, horror romance, erotica, and romantasy. New works appear constantly, especially through indie publishing and digital platforms. The corpus used in this thesis should therefore be understood as a structured sample rather than a complete map of the field. It is large enough to demonstrate recurring tendencies, but it cannot account for every variation within monster romance.

A second limitation is that the project has focused on textual patterns over reader reception. This means that the thesis cannot make direct claims about why individual readers choose monster romance, how they interpret these texts, or whether they consciously connect monster desire to experiences of gendered fear, dating dissatisfaction, or distrust of ordinary masculinity. The argument has instead focused on what the genre makes available as fantasy. This distinction is important because a textual pattern does not automatically equal a reader's motivation. Readers may approach monster romance for many reasons, including erotic curiosity, humour, escapism, aesthetic pleasure, emotional comfort, community participation, or enjoyment of fantasy worlds. A reader reception study would therefore be necessary to understand how the genre is actually experienced by its audience.

A third limitation concerns the scope of the theoretical and cultural focus. This thesis has concentrated primarily on gender, masculinity, bodily autonomy, and heterosexual desire. That focus has allowed for a sustained argument about the Preferred Other and the reconfiguration of masculinity, but it also means that other important dimensions remain underexplored. Race, disability, queerness, and class all require more detailed attention than this project has been able to provide. This is especially important because monstrosity has historically been used to represent racialised, disabled, queer, and otherwise marginalised bodies. Future research would need to examine more carefully when monster romance challenges oppressive structures of othering, and when it risks reproducing them through eroticisation, symbolic displacement, or consumption.

Race is particularly important for future work because the monster is often marked through bodily difference, animality, danger, excess, or social exclusion. These symbolic structures have racialised histories even when individual texts do not explicitly address race. A future project could examine how whiteness operates in monster romance, how racial difference is displaced onto nonhuman bodies, and how interracial or racially coded dynamics shape the genre's fantasies of otherness. Such work would also need to ask whether the monster's difference sometimes functions as a substitute for engaging with racial difference directly, or whether some texts use monstrosity to challenge normative ideals of beauty, humanity, and desirability.

Disability is another necessary direction for future research. Many monster romance texts centre bodies that are scarred, fragmented, stitched together, transformed, non-normative, or dependent on alternative forms of communication and care. These features can challenge narrow ideals of bodily desirability, but they may also risk turning bodily difference into erotic spectacle. A disability-focused study could examine how monster romance represents pain,

embodiment, dependency, accessibility, cure, transformation, and care. It could also ask whether the genre values non-normative bodies as they are, or whether romance becomes the mechanism through which those bodies are made acceptable.

Queerness also deserves fuller attention. This thesis has argued that monster romance can queer heterosexuality by directing desire toward nonhuman bodies and loosening the social scripts attached to heterosexual romance. However, that is not the same as analysing explicitly queer monster romance, queer readerships, or queer forms of relationality in the genre. Future research could examine monster romances that centre queer couples, polyamorous relationships, nonbinary monsters, trans protagonists, or forms of intimacy that move further away from the male monster/female human structure. Such work would make it possible to ask whether monstrosity opens space for queer desire, or whether the genre often returns queerness to a recognisable heterosexual frame.

Class also remains an important question. Many monster romance plots involve economic precarity, isolation, debt, labour, social exclusion, or escape from ordinary human systems. These elements are highly relevant to the genre's fantasies of care and protection. The monster often offers shelter, resources, safety, or a different social order, which may become especially meaningful when the heroine's human world is defined by instability. A class-focused study could examine how economic vulnerability shapes the appeal of monstrous protection, and whether monster romance imagines alternatives to capitalist precarity or simply relocates security into romantic dependency.

Future research could also examine BookTok, online reading cultures, and publishing markets in more depth. This thesis has noted that monster romance circulates through digital platforms, indie publishing, e-books, fan communities, and physical bookstores, but it has not been able to study those networks fully. BookTok and related recommendation cultures are

especially important because they shape how taboo or niche desires become visible, marketable, and discussable. A future project could examine how readers talk about monster romance online, how humour and sincerity coexist in these discussions, and how digital platforms help transform niche subgenres into recognisable commercial categories. Publishing-focused research could also ask how indie publishing, Kindle Unlimited, rapid-release author models, algorithmic recommendation systems, and bookstore visibility shape which monsters become popular and which fantasies become marketable.

Related genres would also offer helpful comparisons. Dark romance, in particular, could illuminate how readers and texts negotiate danger, power, consent, and desire when the love interest remains human rather than monstrous. Paranormal romance, alien romance, romantasy, and horror romance would also provide important points of comparison. Such comparisons could clarify what is specific to monster romance. Is the crucial difference the nonhuman body, the refusal of assimilation, the displacement of ordinary masculinity, or the eroticisation of visible otherness? Examining neighbouring genres would make it possible to refine the concept of the Preferred Other and test whether it applies beyond monster romance.

Ultimately, this thesis has argued that monster romance should be taken seriously because its fantasies are culturally revealing. The genre asks what happens when the figure associated with fear becomes the figure through which intimacy is made imaginable. It turns danger into devotion, otherness into preference, and monstrosity into a condition of romantic fulfilment. In doing so, it exposes a central contradiction in contemporary desire: romance remains deeply wanted, but the ordinary structures attached to it have become difficult to trust. Monster romance does not resolve that contradiction. It gives it a body. That body matters. It has teeth, claws, scales, horns, stitches, fur, stone, tentacles, gills, and hunger. It is not the body romance was supposed to choose. Yet across contemporary monster romance, it is chosen again

and again. The monster remains Other, but the meaning of that otherness changes. He is not simply the threat outside the door. He becomes the one invited in, the one desired, the one trusted, the one through whom fulfilment becomes possible. The happy ending offered by monster romance is therefore not entirely clean, and not entirely safe. It is strange, excessive, and unresolved. But that is precisely why it matters. The genre's happily ever after is not a return to normality. It is a fantasy of staying with the monster, and finding in him a form of romance that ordinary masculinity can no longer provide.

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