

Nicholas Charles Sparks's The Notebook: A Novel Of Love Or Romance?

^[1]L. DIVYA BHARATHI , ^[2]Dr. K. MUTHURAMAN

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English,
Annamalai University.

²Professor of English Annamalai University.

Abstract

The central question with regard to Nicholas Sparks's The Notebook is whether it is a novel of love or romance. Novels of love and romances are not the same. In romance novels, the character description is not limited. They can be described as common people with ordinary jobs or they can be socialites with extravagant profession. But the characters in love stories must be as real as possible. They cannot be luxurious people with extravagant jobs. A novel cannot be considered as a romance if there is no happy ending. But there is no clear explanation to what kind of ending a love story has to have. According to Sparks's views on characteristics of romance and love, he considers The Notebook as a novel of love. Even though, as readers, we respect the author's interpretation, the characters of his novel have typical romance characteristics, and it is likely that it was marketed as a romance novel because of the second cover of the novel.

Index Terms: Romance, love, extraordinary, extravagant, real.

Introduction

Nicholas Sparks is well known for his wrenching, emotional, and passionate love stories. In all his novels, Sparks shows how fate, destiny, and also romance intertwine, tracing the relationship between lovers both young and old. The Notebook is his third novel, but the first one to be published, and the novel has been widely seen as "the love story to end all love stories." Also the novel has become the multi-million international best seller.

The novel tells the story of a young couple, Noah Calhoun and Allie Nelson, who met and fell in love during the summer of 1932 in New Bern, North California. At the end of summer, the lovers drifted apart only to be reunited after a gap of fourteen years. This kind of love story, love, separation, reunion, and happy life thereafter is very common and most liked by readers. This is one of the reasons for the popularity of the novel. The other reason is the way the love story is narrated by the author.

The Notebook is frequently identified as a romance by readers and critics. But Sparks refutes this argument, and states that such a view is really untrue and upsetting. Further he is well known for taking a stand the romance genre and refuses to call himself a writer of romance. His claim is that he writes only love stories, not romances. In his interview with Jeff Rivera in "So What Do You Do, Nicholas Sparks, Best Selling Romance Novelist?" Sparks explains his process, and why he hates the label "romance."

"It's an error; that's what bothers me. It's like saying two plus two equals five. It just bothers me for that sake and the simple fact that it's wrong. I haven't written a single book that could even be accepted as a romance novel. I mean, there's a completely different voice, They've got very different structures; they've got very specific character dilemmas; they end completely different. And they've got certain character arcs that are required in their characters." (P.1)

In the interview, Sparks gives us a few examples of what makes him different from a romance writer, but he does not explain how the structures of both genres are different, how his works are not romances or what it is wrong to claim his work as romance.

The meaning and structure of a text can be interpreted in different ways. What matters is substantiation with authentic textual evidences. The readers or critics need not agree with the view of the author about his work. They may have a different ideas about a text.

As mentioned above, according to Sparks, romance novels and love stories are not the same. He defines the romance genre as stories that are about extraordinary characters that have extravagant lifestyle. For instance, Sparks states that Cinderella is a typical romance, and what we find in

Cinderella is not common or universal. Love stories, on the other hand, are universal:

“Universal” means you feel as if they are real. You feel like you can know them. I don’t write stories about astronauts or CEOs of Fortune 500 companies or millionaires or movie stars. These are stories of everyday people put into extraordinary events that are very real in ordinary people’s lives: accidents, as past you want to get away from, a husband that got violent. (Church Well P. 311)

This idea reveals that readers of love stories should relate to the characters in the novels as well as the setting. Sparks believes that if readers cannot relate to a character, they should know someone who can relate to a character in a love story. Love stories allow readers to feel a variety of emotions from the beginning till the end of the novel. This indicates that love is not the only emotion that has to be or needs to be evoked. For instance, anger, betrayal, and hope are a few other emotions that ought to be incorporated in love stories. It is important that actual love story is central in love stories. As viewed by Sparks, a love story cannot be viewed as such if there is no focus on the actual love and if the main characters are not prepared to sacrifice everything for their relationship. Sparks further believes that it is vital for love stories to be created by the difficulties the characters experience. One aspect that Sparks is not clear about is whether or not love stories are unpredictable.

The romance is often misinterpreted, and it is difficult to define a romance novel, because critics and authors define it differently in different ways (Langbauer P.63). Romance novels are sentimental and some critics dislike that they evoke certain feelings in readers (Solomon P.225). The critics frequently consider sentimental literature to be manipulative, superficial, and tasteless (P.225). At this juncture, it is essential to consider the similarities between a love story and a romance novel. Love between the hero and the heroine is very important and is the focus of the novels in both genres. The protagonists also encounter obstacles in both genres. The two genres also share the same view on how to portray the antagonists. The antagonists should be humanized.

Also we must identify the differences between love stories and romance. The characters in love stories must be as real

as possible. They cannot be luxurious people with extravagant jobs. In romance novels the character description is not limited and the genre enjoys abundant freedom in this regard. They can be described as common people with ordinary jobs or they can be socialites with extravagant professions. A novel cannot be considered a romance if there is no happy ending. There is no clear explanation to what kind of ending a love story must have. Sparks mentions that love stories can end happily and is also acceptable to have a bittersweet ending. It is because life is not always perfect and not everything ends happily.

It is known to all that romance is one of the world's most popular genres; however, it is important to know that there are different types of romance novels. There are five main subgenres of romance: Regency, suspense, paranormal, historical, and contemporary romance.

Sparks's *The Notebook* is classified as a romance by majority of critics and readers. Noah has similar characteristics of contemporary romance hero. He is a strong and tough man, who is also emotional and sensitive. Allie, on the other hand, comes from a wealthy family and is a socialite. It indicates that Allie is endowed with romance characteristics. The heroine in a romance novel is described as beautiful with intelligence and passion. Specifically, in a contemporary romance, the heroine is independent and does not rely on a man to solve her problems. Sparks portrays Allie as passionate and beautiful. Furthermore, in romance novels, the heroine is never materialistic when it comes to men; she never chooses the man who has more money than her, but the man she truly loves. This is very similar to Allie's actions.

Sparks's definition of love story is very similar to how a contemporary romance is defined. Sparks is justified in calling *The Notebook* a love story, because it is a love story. The characters have typical romance characteristics.

Critic Regis lists a few vital elements that a novel must have in order to be categorized as a romance: The meeting between the hero and the heroine is often described early in the novel. The meeting can also be introduced in a flashback. *The Notebook* follows this pattern in that Allie and Noah's first meeting is described in a flashback at the beginning of the novel. It is hinted soon that to the readers

that Allie and Noah are inseparable. The readers also come to know that Allie and Noah will face obstacles in their relationship during the introduction of the lovers' meeting. Noah's friend also predicted that the relationship will not work due to the obvious differences in the lovers' social classes.

Another external obstacle is Allie's illness. Allie has memory loss because of her Alzheimer's and Noah becomes essentially a stranger to her. The internal barrier is Allie's engagement to Lon. Lon is someone who her parents approve of. He hails from a wealthy family and is successful in his profession. This creates a difficulty in the mind of Allie to choose between Lon and Noah.

The attraction between the characters can be affected by different factors, such as sexual chemistry and friendship. It is described early that it was love at first sight for Allie and Noah. Their reunion makes Allie feel like "she has finally come home" (The Notebook P.38).

Point of ritual death is when the happy ending is at risk. Here it seems to the readers that the couple might not end up together, and it is often the heroine who is the target of this element and the one who should be liberated. In *The Notebook*, there are two scenes where the point of ritual death occurs, and Allie is liberated in both. The first liberation gives Allie a happy life with Noah. She becomes a famous artist with paintings in museums around the world. The second liberation is her remembering Noah. The novel ends with Allie not sick and both the lovers are reunited because of her great love.

Further the recognition is where information occurs that makes the barriers fall, and the heroine has a central role in this element. The recognition takes place in *The Notebook* when Allie's mother visits Allie and Noah. She gives the letters to Allie during her visit. Further Mrs. Nelson tells her that no one can make the decision for her and that she should follow her heart.

The betrothal is the happy ending. Sparks ends *The Notebook* with the following words:

She murmurs softly, "Oh, Noah...I've missed you." Another miracle—the greatest of all ! and there's no way I can stop the tears as we begin to slip toward heaven itself. For at that

moment, the world is full of wonder as I feel her fingers reach for the buttons on my shirt and slowly, ever so slowly, she begins to undo them one by one. (P.213).

According to Regis, it is symbolic in romance that the heroine becomes free at the end of the novel. Allie becomes free from her Alzheimer's disease and the couple is finally together after everything they had gone through, and both of them are happy.

Nicholas Sparks is justified in calling *The Notebook* a love story, because it is indeed a love story. However, a detailed analysis of the novel shows that it is not inaccurate to classify *The Notebook* as a romance novel. The root of the novel derives from the romance genre. The plot of the novel has all the elements that a romance novel must have. The characters also have typical romance characteristics and it is likely that it was marketed as a romance novel as revealed by the second cover of the novel.

One could argue that love story is a subgenre of romance, in particular contemporary romance. Sparks's definition of love story is very similar to how contemporary romance is defined.

There are several factors which confirm that *The Notebook* has romantic features, from characters to content, to formula and marketing. The fact that the novel contains all the essential characteristics listed by Regis proves that *The Notebook* is indeed a romance novel.

References

- [1] Sparks, Nicholas. *The Notebook*. New York: Warner Books, 1996. Print.
- [2] Church Well, Sarah. "Master of Sentiment: The Romance of Nicholas Sparks." *Must Read: Rediscovering American Bestsellers: From Charlotte Temple to The Da Vinci Code*. New York: Continuum, 2012. Print.
- [3] Langbaeur, Laurie. *Women and Romance: The Consolations of Gender in the English Novel*. New York: Cornell UP, 1990. Print.
- [4] Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2007. Print.
- [5] Rivera, Jeff. "So What do you do, Nicholas Sparks, best Selling Romance Novelist?" *Mediabistro*. <https://www.mediabistro.com/interviews/so-what-do-you-do-nicholas-sparks-best-selling-romance-novelist/>
