



The Romance Trap

The dictat of gender roles is so pernicious that, not content with pushing women into romantic relationships, it enjoins us to engage in such relationships for no good reason. Yes, of course, there's love. But love is not, and never has been, the only factor in the process that pushes people into becoming a couple.

Girls and boys are socially conditioned from an early age: even little children are expected to have a sweetheart. At an age when the expression makes no sense, the question rings out: 'Have you got a boyfriend?' At the age of four, 'having a boyfriend' (or

a girlfriend) means nothing other than that: 'possessing' someone you give that title to, whom you can have for yourself in a way that's completely irrational rather than anchored in anything concrete. We teach children from a very young age that not having a girlfriend or boyfriend is almost a problem — but happily, we also let them understand that there's 'still time'. But we never give them the option of *not wanting one*. With girls, it's reinforced by an armada of clichés and conventions conveyed through the fairy stories they absorb, from the sleeping beauty waiting for a kiss from a prince to be brought back to life, to the lonesome wicked witch who devours other people's children. Boys, meanwhile, grow up with a more nuanced vision, thanks to a fantasy world peopled by solitary heroes who achieve extraordinary things because of their superpowers.

The message is fundamentally the same, but boys have more opportunities to develop different perspectives. They're not so bound to this image of themselves trapped in a depressing and inert solitude. Their sense of self-worth is not conditioned by the fact of having a girlfriend or a wife. They're encouraged to be actors in a turbulent life, to reach for their dreams, to give their all to reach the top of the mountain.

Little girls, meanwhile, must wait for their Prince Charming to turn up. Later, when they get older, they'll discover that it's considered strange for a woman to make the first move in a romantic relationship. (Not to mention that it's considered scandalous for a woman to recognise and be able to express her desires.)

Women *need* to be in a couple, for a single woman doesn't have as much value in the eyes of the world as a woman who belongs to a man. We imagine single women who don't have children to be selfish and bitter, while their sisters who are married and mothers have the freedom to bestow their generosity and natural kindness. A great deal of energy is deployed in persuading a woman that being in a relationship is the most advantageous thing available to her — and much of the time she allows herself to be convinced, for the spectre of the crazy cat lady looms ominously over the life a single woman.

Paul Dolan, professor of behavioural science at the London School of Economics speaking about his book, *Happy Ever After*, at the 2019 Hay Festival, said:

"You see a single woman of 40, who has never had children — 'Bless, that's a shame, isn't it? Maybe one day you'll meet the right guy and that'll change.' No, maybe she'll meet the wrong guy and that'll change. Maybe she'll meet a guy who makes her less happy and healthy and die sooner."

The fact that so many women are encouraged to throw themselves into the arms of a man is more about securing the happiness, or at any rate the peace of mind, of men. Convincing a woman that she can only be fulfilled in a relationship is a way of pushing her into a corner. She no longer believes in herself.

When women give themselves permission to live alone, to experience single life as a life like any other, with its shortcomings as well as its rewards, rather than as a punishment, they (re)discover that they don't actually need a man, or at least not just any man, in their lives. They relish their autonomy and freedom. And when they do find a partner, it isn't because they *need* one, it's because they've met a person they genuinely want to commit to, with the intention of creating a relationship based on mutual fulfilment. Not because being single is a terrifying idea and *Monsieur* needs someone to wash his socks and organise his diary.

All too often, women fall into a trap — that of believing in the personal relationship as the default option, inherently normal, without questioning what it is that gives meaning to a relationship for both parties. Entering a romantic relationship is no more natural than wearing clothes or cycling to work in the morning.

For far too long women have been duped into believing that their fulfilment is only possible with the involvement of a man, however unremarkable, lazy or dull he may be: anything rather than being alone.

No.

Let's discover *joie de vivre* through and for ourselves. Let's look for good reasons to commit to a relationship, avoiding the automatic mechanism that makes us afraid of being alone. Let's build a network of solid, meaningful, and sincere non-romantic relationships, so we can be loved and appreciated even if we don't have a partner. Let's learn what our limits are, what we think is acceptable and what we don't, and try to expand these limits. And because this is not about claiming that every relationship is bound to be destructive, let's hope that if we're in tune with our expectations we'll have a better chance of meeting people who deserve us, for whom a romantic relationship is based — as every personal relationship should be — not on possessing and exploiting the other person, but on respect, listening and mutual support.