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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROMANCE NOVEL IN XX-CENTURY FRENCH LITERATURE

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Abstract. This article examines transformations in the genre and poetics of the romance novel in twenty-first-century French literature through the works of Marc Levy. It analyses the integration of romantic plots with elements of fantasy, adventure, and psychological representation, as well as the connections between romantic relationships, personal choice, memory, and moral responsibility. Particular attention is paid to the reinterpretation of conventional romance motifs, including encounters, obstacles, and separation, within new narrative situations. The article also explores the role of character development, narrative techniques, and time in shaping romantic conflict.

Keywords: romance novel, genre transformation, genre interaction, romantic conflict, psychological representation, personal choice, novel poetics.

Introduction: The romance novel offers a productive framework for examining how literature represents intimacy, individual identity, and personal choice. Its familiar narrative patterns – encounter, attraction, obstacles, separation, and possible reunion – provide a basis for exploring changing expectations of human relationships. In studying contemporary French fiction, the transformation of these patterns can be considered through their interaction with other genres and through the new meanings assigned to romantic conflict.

The term romance novel requires clarification in this context. It may refer narrowly to a genre organised around a central love story and an emotionally satisfying resolution, or more broadly to fiction in which love constitutes a major thematic and structural concern. This article adopts the broader perspective while recognising the distinction between a novel about love and a work that follows established genre conventions. Such an approach allows the analysis to address hybrid narratives without assuming that every love-centred novel belongs to the same category.

M. Levy's fiction provides a relevant case for investigating these boundaries. The article focuses on how romantic relationships interact with extraordinary situations, ethical dilemmas, and questions of memory and identity. Rather than treating fantastic or adventurous elements as additions to a conventional love story, the analysis considers whether they alter the conditions under which characters meet, establish trust, confront separation, and make consequential choices. Genre transformation is therefore understood as a change in the organisation and function of romantic narrative, rather than simply the presence of several themes within one work.

A central issue concerns the relationship between external obstacles and internal development. Romantic conflict can arise from circumstances that prevent characters from being together, but it can also involve uncertainty, conflicting responsibilities, or difficulties in understanding another

person. Examining how these forms of conflict intersect makes it possible to assess whether love functions primarily as the narrative's destination or as an experience through which characters reconsider their identities and values.

Narrative form is equally important. The arrangement of events, the distribution of information, and the representation of time can influence the meaning of an encounter or separation. A delayed revelation may change the reader's interpretation of a relationship, while a return to the past may connect present choices with unresolved experiences. Attention to these devices helps establish how thematic changes are realised through the structure of the novel.

The aim of this article is to examine the transformation of the romance novel through selected works by M. Levy, with particular attention to genre interaction, romantic conflict, character development, and narrative time. The study uses close reading and comparative textual analysis to explore how conventional romantic motifs acquire new functions within hybrid narratives. Its conclusions concern the selected works; broader claims about twenty-first-century French literature require comparison with a wider range of authors and texts.

Materials and methods: This study adopts a qualitative approach combining close reading, comparative analysis, and narratological interpretation to examine the transformation of romantic narrative in M. Levy's fiction. Its conceptual framework draws on John G. Cawelti's discussion of popular narrative formulas, Gérard Genette's narratology, and Tzvetan Todorov's theory of fantastic literature. These approaches provide complementary perspectives on genre conventions, narrative organisation, and the relationship between realistic and extraordinary events.

The proposed corpus comprises Et si c'était vrai…, Sept jours pour une éternité…, and Le Voleur d'ombres. The first novel, published in 2000, is treated as a transitional reference preceding the twenty-first-century works. The selection enables a comparison of romantic relationships with broader forms of attachment and of different ways in which extraordinary situations structure human encounters. The discussion below offers analytical applications based on the works' established narrative premises; detailed textual verification requires references to the editions used.

The analysis begins by identifying conventional romantic motifs, including encounter, attraction, obstacles, separation, and the possibility of reunion. These motifs are examined according to their function within each narrative rather than treated as a checklist of genre membership. Particular attention is paid to whether an obstacle merely delays a relationship or changes the characters' understanding of trust, responsibility, and personal identity.

In Et si c'était vrai…, Arthur's ability to perceive Lauren while her body remains in a coma establishes an unusual condition for interpersonal contact. The encounter can be interpreted as a transformation of a familiar romantic motif: the difficulty of reaching another person becomes a problem of recognising a presence that others cannot perceive. From this perspective, the extraordinary premise connects romantic attraction with belief and responsibility. The analytical task is to determine how particular episodes develop this connection and whether the relationship changes Arthur's decisions. Such an interpretation should be supported by passages showing the relationship between perception, trust, and action.

Comparative analysis is then used to distinguish similar devices that perform different functions. In Sept jours pour une éternité…, the seven-day contest involving Lucas and Zofia introduces a predetermined opposition between good and evil. The relationship between personal attachment and assigned allegiance provides a basis for examining romantic conflict. Unlike an obstacle arising solely from social circumstances, this opposition belongs to the organisation of the fictional world. Its transformation into a personal dilemma can therefore be investigated as an interaction between romantic narrative and ethical questioning.

Narratological analysis focuses on temporal order, duration, focalisation, and the distribution of information. In the same novel, the seven-day limit establishes a bounded period within which events must unfold. This distinction between the duration of the story and the space devoted to individual events helps identify which encounters or decisions receive particular narrative emphasis. The presence of a deadline alone does not demonstrate suspense; its effect must be examined through the sequencing of events and the postponement of resolutions.

Thematic analysis extends the discussion beyond romantic partnership. In Le Voleur d'ombres, maternal affection, first love, and enduring friendship provide a basis for considering how different attachments contribute to the representation of identity. The comparison asks whether romantic love operates as the exclusive centre of emotional development or forms part of a wider network of relationships. If changes in one relationship influence the character's understanding of another, this would support an interpretation of love as a relational experience rather than an isolated romantic event.

Todorov's theoretical distinction between uncertainty about an extraordinary event and its acceptance within the fictional world guides the analysis of fantastic elements. Their presence is not sufficient to classify every selected work as fantastic in the same sense. Instead, the study considers how characters interpret extraordinary experiences and how the narrative guides the reader's understanding. This prevents genre transformation from being reduced to the simple addition of supernatural content.

Interpretations are assessed through the relationship between narrative evidence and the claims made about it. A distinction is maintained between describing a plot feature and explaining its poetic function. For example, identifying a time limit is descriptive, whereas arguing that it intensifies a conflict requires evidence from the arrangement of scenes and decisions. Similarly, identifying a love relationship does not establish that a work follows all the conventions of a genre romance.

The methodological scope is textual and interpretive. It does not measure audience responses or establish the selected novels as representative of all contemporary French fiction. Its purpose is to explain how particular romantic motifs may be reorganised through genre interaction, narrative time, and the representation of personal choice.

Results and discussion: The comparative discussion of the selected novels suggests that the transformation of romantic narrative in M.Levy's fiction involves changes in the function of familiar motifs rather than their complete replacement. Encounters, obstacles, separation, and attachment remain recognisable narrative elements. However, their interaction with extraordinary

circumstances and ethical dilemmas creates possibilities for interpreting love beyond the formation of a romantic partnership. These observations concern the narrative premises discussed here and should be developed through passage-level analysis in the final study.

In Et si c'était vrai…, the encounter between Arthur and Lauren transforms the conventional problem of romantic access into a question of perception and recognition. Arthur can communicate with Lauren while her body remains in a coma, creating an unusual distinction between physical presence and interpersonal contact. Within this framework, the relationship depends on acknowledging an experience that cannot be shared with others in an ordinary way. The extraordinary premise can therefore be interpreted as a means of connecting emotional attachment with trust.

This interpretation shifts attention from the novelty of the situation to its consequences for characterisation. The relevant question is how recognising another person's presence becomes a basis for responsibility. Love, in this reading, involves more than attraction: it raises the issue of whether a character is willing to act on an understanding that others may reject. The fantastic element consequently acquires a potential ethical function within the romantic plot.

The novel also illustrates the need to distinguish thematic interpretation from strict genre classification. An extraordinary event may provide the conditions for a love story without making the work a conventional fantasy novel. Likewise, a central romantic relationship does not automatically establish that the narrative follows every convention associated with genre romance. The interaction between these elements is more usefully examined through their contribution to conflict and character development. Since Et si c'était vrai… was published in 2000, it functions in this study as a transitional reference for examining Levy's subsequent fiction.

A different configuration emerges in Sept jours pour une éternité…. The opposition between good and evil establishes roles and allegiances before the characters' personal relationship is considered. Romantic conflict can thus be examined through the tension between an assigned identity and an emerging attachment. The obstacle is embedded in the fictional world's organising principles, giving the relationship a significance that extends beyond private preference.

From this perspective, the transformation of the romantic plot lies in its capacity to question predetermined categories. Personal attachment introduces the possibility that a character's conduct cannot be explained entirely by the role initially assigned to them. However, this possibility should not be confused with a claim that the novel eliminates moral distinctions. A more precise interpretation concerns how relationships complicate the connection between identity, allegiance, and individual choice.

The seven-day framework adds a temporal dimension to this conflict. A defined deadline limits the period available for action and provides a structure against which decisions acquire urgency. Its narrative importance depends on how events are distributed within that period. Where an encounter or hesitation receives extended attention, narrative duration may indicate its emotional or ethical weight. The deadline therefore offers a basis for investigating how romantic development interacts with the pressure of an externally imposed task.

Comparing the two novels reveals that extraordinary circumstances can perform distinct functions within romantic narrative. In Et si c'était vrai…, the premise raises questions about recognising another person's existence and experience. In Sept jours pour une éternité…, it establishes a conflict between personal attachment and prescribed allegiance. The shared presence of fantastic elements should therefore not obscure differences in their narrative purpose. Genre interaction is significant because of the particular problems it creates for the characters.

Le Voleur d'ombres broadens the discussion by placing romantic attachment alongside maternal affection and friendship. This thematic range provides a basis for understanding emotional development as a process shaped by several relationships. Romantic love can be considered within a wider network of care, memory, and belonging rather than treated as the character's only meaningful bond.

Such a perspective also changes the analytical status of separation and continuity. In a narrowly defined romantic plot, separation may function primarily as an obstacle to reunion. Within a broader account of attachment, its significance may also concern how relationships remain influential despite distance or change. Establishing this distinction requires close attention to the passages through which past connections inform present choices. The thematic breadth of the novel supports this question, although it does not independently demonstrate how every relationship contributes to the narrative.

Taken together, the selected examples suggest three connected dimensions of transformation. Romantic obstacles may become problems of recognition or ethical responsibility; extraordinary situations may reorganise the conditions of intimacy; and love may be represented within a broader field of interpersonal attachments. These dimensions do not make conventional romantic motifs irrelevant. Instead, they indicate how familiar patterns can acquire additional functions through their interaction with other narrative structures.

Cawelti's approach helps explain the coexistence of familiarity and variation. Recognisable situations provide an intelligible framework, while unusual premises modify the conditions under which those situations unfold. Genette's narratological categories direct attention to how this modification is realised through time, perspective, and information. Todorov's framework, meanwhile, encourages a distinction between the presence of extraordinary content and the specific interpretive uncertainty associated with the fantastic. Used together, these perspectives support a more differentiated account of hybrid romantic fiction.

The discussion does not establish that these features are unique to Levy or representative of twenty-first-century French literature as a whole. Nor does textual interpretation demonstrate how readers experience the novels. Its contribution is to identify relationships between genre conventions, extraordinary premises, and the representation of personal choice. Further comparison with other authors and systematic analysis of specific passages would be necessary to determine the broader literary significance of these patterns.

Conclusion: The discussion of M.Levy's selected novels suggests that the transformation of romantic narrative involves the reinterpretation of familiar motifs through genre interaction, extraordinary circumstances, and ethical questioning. Encounters, obstacles, and separation retain

their structural importance, while acquiring additional meanings associated with recognition, trust, responsibility, and personal choice.

In Et si c'était vrai…, the extraordinary premise connects emotional attachment with the recognition of another person's presence. In Sept jours pour une éternité…, romantic conflict intersects with prescribed allegiances and a limited period for action. Le Voleur d'ombres broadens the thematic perspective by situating romantic attachment alongside maternal affection and friendship. Together, these examples indicate that love can function both as a narrative concern and as a means of exploring individual development within a wider network of relationships.

Levy's fiction can therefore be approached through the coexistence of conventional romantic patterns and their reorganisation within hybrid narratives. These conclusions remain limited to the selected works and the narrative features considered. Detailed textual evidence and comparison with other authors are necessary to establish their broader significance for twenty-first-century French literature.

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