
Romance Formula in *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2022)Farahdhila Kusuma Wardhani¹✉, Abu Fanani²

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the romance formula in *Where Crawdads Sing* (2022) through the theoretical framework of John G. Cawelti's concept of formula, which emphasizes the interplay between convention and invention in cultural narratives. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, this research examines how traditional elements of romance are preserved and reinterpreted within the film. The findings reveal that *Where Crawdads Sing* maintains several conventional aspects of the romance genre, including a narrative structure featuring the first encounter, emotional conflict, and reconciliation between the central characters. The presence of the hero and heroine, Tate and Kya illustrate the emotional and moral growth typical of romantic storytelling. Additionally, the natural marshland setting reinforces the film's emotional tone, evoking themes of isolation, hope, and affection. However, the study also identifies inventive elements that modernize the traditional formula. These include the integration of romance with themes of survival and self-discovery, a heroine depicted as intellectually capable and socially alienated, and a hero defined by emotional sensitivity rather than dominance. Through these elements, *Where the Crawdads Sing* redefines the classical romance framework by merging conventional romantic an ideal with a contemporary portrayal of resilience, individuality, and mutual understanding.

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Email: farahdhilakusuma@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary industrial world, Romance is the most popular genre, appealing to audiences of all ages. Theoretically, Romance is the structural core of all fiction: mode, myth, genre, plot type, and even imagination itself (Arata et al., 2015). According to Goris (2012) Romance strives to bridge the gap between the human mind and body by consistently linking intense sexual sensations with moral and emotional feelings associated with commitment and love. One of the essential elements in creating a literary work is the plot. Romantic plots are a standard in literary works and involve the development of a relationship between two characters (Novesia & Sa'adah, 2024). According to Klein and Parker in Jusrianti's article, they argue that the romantic film genre focuses on Romance and romantic relationships between two or more characters. They also conclude that the romance genre explores themes of emotional development, focusing on intimacy and affection between characters, which are always associated with either a happy ending or a tragic ending. In general, recurring elements characterize the romance genre, also known as a formula. In popular literature, a formulaic storyline is interpreted as following cultural conventions and taking a uniform, identical form, meaning that every romance must follow the same formula (Jusrianti et al., 2024). In other words, the plot is a tool used by writers to connect the motivational and causal relationships that occur in the events of a storyline, driving the narrative logically from the beginning, through the middle, to the end of the story, triggering a specific emotional response in the reader and giving meaning and cohesion to the overall sequence of the story. Saricks (2001) argues that romantic storylines are structured by a strict, essential formula, meaning the narrative must focus on the development and progress of the romantic relationship between the main characters. Meanwhile, every subplot, event, and conflict in a romantic storyline is secondary to the process of direct introduction, which primarily creates obstacles for the hero and heroine to overcome together.

According to Cawelti, Romance is not simply a representation of the process of falling in love or sentimental affection. It is structured around a narrative of adventure, search, and the ultimately successful resolution of difficulties faced by a hero or a pair of characters. Within this framework, romantic bonds serve both as a narrative driver and as a means of resolving emotional conflict (Cawelti, 1976). Netflix released a romance, drama, and mystery movie based on Delia Owens's 2018 New York Times bestseller, titled

Where the Crawdads Sing. This film tells the story of Kya, who her beloved family abandoned as a child. As a result, she chooses to live in solitude and fight for her own survival. Kya has lived in isolation since she was young, separated from the outside world. She survives by collecting freshwater mussels and selling them to local traders near her home. Kya develops a passion for painting, often creating images of animals and the natural surroundings around her. As she grows older, she blossoms into a beautiful young woman and reunites with her brother's childhood friend, Tate. Tate is the first person to interact with Kya after her years of solitude, truly. He teaches her how to read, since Kya never attended school due to the psychological trauma she experienced early in life. Their growing bond gradually develops into love. However, their relationship faces many challenges along the way.

Where the Crawdads Sing (2022) presents a unique romantic story that is far from conventional, and it introduces Kya Clark as a strong, intelligent, and independent female lead. Kya spends her life in the marshes of North Carolina, isolated from the outside world, earning her the nickname the marsh girl. Kya's character is considered significantly different from the female protagonists in other romantic stories, who are often portrayed as dependent and always in need of help. However, the male hero of the film, Tate Walker, is not portrayed as a perfect or dominant figure, nor as a tough man with several strengths. Tate is described as a humble and empathetic individual who always respects Kya's independence and intelligence. This characterisation defies the romantic stereotype Cawelti puts forward, which holds that men are ideal, successful, and attractive, while female heroes are often seen as ordinary and socially insignificant. Therefore, *Where the Crawdads Sing (2022)* develops its own variation of the romantic formula, combining conventional and innovative elements. Based on this perspective, the researcher attempts to analyse in greater depth the conventions and innovations in the romantic formula in the film.

This study aims to analyse romantic formulas using the formula theory developed by John G. Cawelti in the film *Where the Crawdads Sing (2022)*. Cawelti (1976) claims that conventions refer to recognizable components between scriptwriters and their audience, including recurring storylines, familiar character types, widely accepted ideas, and distinctive literature expressions. Meanwhile, innovation can refer to the creative

contributions of writers and new aspects that introduce originality to a work through characterization, narrative structure, and unique language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Romance is a form of formula in literary works that covers the entire process from the introduction of conflict to its resolution (Machmuri et al., 2025). Wijanarka (2022) says that this type of formula applies a fixed plot development pattern, including an ending that always appears happy, depicted as a celebration of the union of the hero and heroine, who previously struggled hard to face problems that threatened their story.

Recently, romance formula has been discussed by several researchers; Wardana (2019) in her article *Romance Formula Constructed in the Notebook Novel by Nicholas Sparks* Discovering the six elements contained in the novel *The Notebook*, which consist of love at first sight, being madly in love, empty love, love without blessing, self-love, and finally, true love. Nurraatnasari (2015) In her analysis, which draws on the popular romantic narrative theory developed by John Green in *The Fault in Our Stars*, she speculates that the main focus of this study is the plot in the development of romantic relationships. Machmuri (2025) Found thirteen elements of the ideal narrative structure of romance using Janice A. Radway in Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees*. These formulas involve the transformation of the main character's social identity, the emotional tension in the male hero, and the resolution of their relationship through a declaration of love. This study shows that the novel maintains the basic structure of the romance genre. Safitri & Dewi (2021) In their research analysing the romance formula in *Rainshadow Road*, they found that the novel contained romantic elements in the characters and plot that corresponded to John G. Cawelti's romance formula. For the last article discussing the romantic formula in O. Henry's short story, which assumes that the romantic formula applied to the short story, the plot of 'The Gift of the Magi' can be categorised into four stages (Firsta et al., 2025).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method. The qualitative approach is used to conduct an in-depth examination of the researcher's object (Dawson, 2009). This research applies a descriptive qualitative method to identify and analyses the romance formula that occurs through the romantic experience of the hero and the heroin, Kya and Tate, in *Where the Crawdad Sing* (2022). The primary data source for this study is film

transcripts, which serve as the primary textual material for analyzing narrative patterns and dialogue, as well as for scenes that reveal the romantic structure of the story. The data collection process involved several steps. The researcher first watched the film to gain a comprehensive understanding of the plot and character development, then annotated the transcript to identify scenes and dialogue relevant to the depiction of conventions and the discovery of romance formulas. Based on the above process, the researcher considered using the descriptive qualitative method as appropriate for analyzing the data and achieving the research objectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Convention of Romance Genre

This stage introduces the characters, the problem, or the story's setting, and marks the beginning of a romance story. Based on a scene from *Where the Crawdads Sing (2022)*, the film begins with an introduction to the problems Kya faces as the heroin. The introduction to these problems is shown in the image below.

The emergence of trust in solitude

Kya: "Ma never came back. And everybody else was quick to get out the same way.

Murph was the first to leave. A few months later, Mandy and Missy. Then, finally, Jodie."

Jodie: "Kya, listen. I have to go, Kya. I can't live here no longer. Kya, you be careful, hear? If you're in trouble, run and hide deep in the marsh way out where the crawdads sing. Like Ma always says." *Duration: 00:12:57-00:15:22*

This scene illustrates the beginning of Kya's emotional and Psychological journey, marking the stage of introduction within the romance narrative. It reveals the origins of Kya's solitude and the abandonment that shapes her. The moment her family leaves, especially the departure of Jodie, the last person who showed her affection, becomes the defining moment of her childhood. This abandonment later influences Kya's perception of trust and love, framing her character as both self-reliant and vulnerable. Thus, this introductory stage not only establishes the background of the protagonist but also lays the groundwork for the development of the romance formula that unfolds throughout the film.

In *Where the Crawdads Sing (2022)*, the film continues with the introduction of the main male character, Tate. This stage marks the early development of the romance

formula, where the narrative begins to present the background, personality, and daily life of the hero.

Tate: “Hi. It’s me. Tate. Tundra swan. How do you know birds?”

Kya: “My ma liked birds. I can’t read your note.”

Tate: “Oh, all I said was I’d seen you a couple times when I was out fishing, and it got me thinking that maybe you could use some seeds and a spark plug. I had extra. Thought it might save you a trip to town. And, uh, I don’t know, I figured you’d like the feathers.”

Kya: “All right, then.”

Tate: “All right, then. Well, I better be going, so... I could teach you to read.”

Duration: 00:34:00-00:35:26

In this scene, the film portrays Tate as a kind, intelligent, and gentle young man who respects Kya's Independence and understands her relationship with nature. At their first meeting, Tate taught Kya how to read and helped her learn about the nature around her. Tate's return to Kya's life signifies the revival of the emotional bond that had been lost since their childhood. This meeting managed to make Kya open and not afraid of the presence of outsiders. This activity made them closer Tate taught Kya many things because Kya's love for flora and fauna made Tate who every day imparted knowledge by bringing beautiful animal fur and books for Kya to learn. This encounter serves as a physical and emotional space that connects hero and heroine. As seen in the scene, it acts as a narrative bridge between loneliness and intimacy, initiating the emotional development that defines their romantic relationship. Furthermore, the use of their relationship, is in line with the traditional romantic motif in which love is beautiful with purity and simplicity.

Characterization

The characteristic of romance stories is the presence of hero and heroine who become lovers and continue the romance story.



Figure 1: Tate Walker (Hero)

From the picture above, it is apparent that the main character is Tate Walker. He is portrayed as a kind-hearted, intelligent, and caring young man who understand Kya better than anyone else. Growing up near the marsh, he loves nature and feels connected to it,

just like Kya. Tate treats Kya with respect and kindness, unlike the villagers who often judge her.



Figure 2: Kya Clark (Heroine)

And the heroine, Kya Clark is a strong and independent girl who grows up alone in the marsh after being abandoned by her family. She survives by learning from nature, collecting shells, and drawing wildlife. Despite being judge and isolated by the townspeople, Kya remains brave and kind. Her life changes when she meets Tate, who teaches her to read and helps her open her heart, showing how she finds strength, love, and peace through nature and her own courage.

Based on the explanation above, it can be seen that *Where the Crawdads Sing (2022)* continues to follow the conventional formula of the romance genre typically feature a hero and heroine whose relationship become the central focus of the narrative. In this movie, the presence of these two figures is clearly represented through the characters of Tate Walker and Kya Clark, whose emotional connection and personal growth drive the romantic storyline. Their bond reflects the familiar pattern of love, separation, and reconciliation that defines the traditional structure of a romance narrative.

Conflict

Conflict is an element of plot development that is deliberately created to make the story more colorful and interesting. The following is a description of the conflict in the film *Where the Crawdads Sing (2022)*.

Tate: "You know I'm going away soon. To college."

Kya: "You talked about it. When? Not right away."

Tate: "Soon. I got a job at the biology lab. Starts next week, so..."

Kya: "Stay here."

Tate: "And do what? No, look. I just mean there's no work for me here."

What am I gonna do? I don't want to be a shrimper like my dad. I'm going to get a degree and be something, Kya. So, could you?"

Kya: "What do you want me to be?"

Tate: "That's not what I meant."

Kya: "You're never gonna come back."

Tate: “Yes, I will. I won’t leave you, Kya. I promise. I’m gonna come back to you. Kya! Kya, stop! Ky... You can’t run away from every whip stitch!”

Tate: “Come on. What can it hurt?”

Kya: You’re gonna forget about me. When you get busy with all that college stuff, all those pretty girls.”

Tate: “I could never forget you, Kya. Ever. I’ll be home in a month. I promise. For the Fourth of July. Okay? I’ll be back before you know it. We’ll meet on your beach and watch fireworks together.”

Kya: “Goodbye.”

Duration: 00:50:26-00:53:55

The pictures depict the scene between Tate and Kya emotional conflict between the hero and heroine, which serve as a central element in the romance formula. This moment occurs when Tate tells Kya that he is leaving for college to pursue his career and studies, creating a painful separation for both of them. That makes Kya feels abandoned once again and fears losing someone she deeply loves. Her reaction reflects her emotional vulnerability and mistrust, shaped by her past experiences of being left behind by her family. Tate, on the other hand, expresses his ambition and hope for the better future while trying to reassure Kya of his commitment. However, his promise to return does not ease her sense of insecurity. This scene highlights the emotional tension between hero and heroine. This type of conflict is a common pattern in classic romance formula, where love is tested by distance, time, or circumstances.

Kya: “Tate and life and love had been the same thing. They were all gone.”

Duration: 00:57:18

This scene is a continuation of the scene above and reflects to Kya’s heart break after Tate did not keep his promise to meet Kya at beach in 4th July. This scene illustrates the culmination of abandonment and heartbreak that defines in heroine life. For Kya, Tate symbolized not only romantic love but also connection, safety, and belonging elements that she had. When Tate leaves, it feels as though her entire sense of life and love disappears with him, reinforcing her emotional isolation and mistrust toward human attachment.



Figure 3: Kya at her favorite place

The setting depicts the place where the events described in the literary work take place. From the female protagonist's point of view, the swamps of North Carolina are not just her home, but another soul that fills her spirit. For Kya, isolated from the outside world, the swamps are like light, family, and friends. For her, it is the only place that understands her soul; everything she needs is available there. The swamp is a very special place for the heroine because it creates an emotional world for Kya Clark. The beauty of nature reflects her inner strength and creativity, enabling her to continue living.



Figure 4: Kya and Tate spend time together

When Kya and Tate shared moments exploring their surroundings, Tate carefully help her to study feathers and rowed boats, using them as models for her drawings. Although she did not receive a formal education, her skills and the support of her natural surroundings gave Kya hope of continuing to live. Through the waterways and on the beach, or sitting together under the open sky while drawing everything she encountered in nature, Kya felt alive again in her solitude. The marsh transforms into a landscape of connection and tenderness, becoming Kya's most comfortable home. Nature is also the primary factor that allows Kya to feel love and trust again.

Invention of Romance Genre

Narrative structure is a literary element that generally explains the structural framework underlying the sequence and manner of presenting a story to readers, listeners, or viewers in a literary work. Cawelti (1972) identifies three narrative structures in popular romantic stories: the Cinderella pattern, the Pamela pattern, and the Contemporary pattern.

Cinderella Pattern

Therefore, the film *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2022) tells the story of Kya Clark, a girl who lives alone in the marshes after her family abandoned her. This suffering has made her a strong woman who does not need anyone. Kya does not care about love because she believes it is just a deception, since everyone she has loved has left her. However, there is

a young man with an angelic heart, Tate Walker, who cares deeply for Kya and becomes the first man to interact with her and take an interest in her, convincing her that there are still people who care about her and give her sincere love. *Where the Crawdads Sing 2022* features a Cinderella-like character, as evidenced by Kya's life, which fits this pattern perfectly. The Cinderella story tells of a poor, isolated girl who falls in love with a rich man or nobleman. However, in this story, the male protagonist is portrayed as someone from a humble background. Tate is the son of a shrimp fisherman and lives far from wealth and nobility. Although it still follows the Cinderella pattern, the author adds a new formula to the narrative structure, giving the romantic story a fresh impression and successfully breaking the traditional romance narrative formula.

Pamela Pattern

The Pamela pattern tells the story of a female character who strives to overcome her vain desires to build a genuine romantic relationship. But, in this film, the characters are reversed. In this film, the male character, Tate, struggles to overcome his futile desires and win Kya's heart. Although he feels very guilty about breaking his promise to Kya, he cannot lie about his feelings for her, even after she has turned away from him. Tate discovers that Kya's new boyfriend is a fraud and is only using Kya.

Tate: Hey, Kya. Hey, what the hell? Wait! Kya, wait! Please. Look, I just wanna talk.

Kya: Get out of my lagoon, you dirty creep!

Tate: Kya, please! I just need to talk to you!

Kya: I don't care what you want! I never wanna see you again. Ever.

Tate: Kya, I need to talk to you about Chase, okay?

Kya: About Chase?

Tate: He's not good enough for you.

Duration: 01:22:35-01:22:56

This scene takes place after Tate meets Chase, Kya's new boyfriend, who deliberately says bad things about Kya. This concern shows how much Tate loves Kya; he does not want anyone to say anything bad about her. He immediately goes to see Kya, even though she rejects him, and he accepts all the risks that come with it. This evidence proves the existence of the Pamela pattern in this film. However, in the following pattern, namely the Contemporary pattern, the researcher found no elements of it in the story. Thus, the film *Where the Crawdads Sing* only adapts two patterns developed by Cawelti.

CONCLUSION(S)

Based on an analysis of *Where the Crawdads Sing (2022)* using John G. Cawelti's romance formula theory, this film preserves and simultaneously changes the traditional conventions of the romance genre by presenting elements of romance, such as the presence of male and female heroes, emotional conflict, and the development of intimacy that exhibit the characteristic structural features of Cawelti's formulaic framework. However, the plot of this film deviates from the conventions of classic romance through its portrayal of the female lead. These findings reveal that this film adapts two of Cawelti's three romantic narrative patterns: the Cinderella and Pamela patterns. Therefore, *Where the Crawdads Sing (2022)* can be seen as a redefinition of the romance formula in contemporary cinema, exploring emotional resilience and expanding the boundaries of the romance genre.

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