III. THE LOVE STORY
LOVE has been the main theme of most novels, whatever the time and place of their writing. Predictably, this universal theme also conditions the bulk of the American fiction under discussion. It is fiction written for the most part by inexperienced authors, to whom love was indeed "the meat and drink of fiction," and who related "what the lovers suffered or enjoyed in getting married, or whether they got married at all or not." This romantic love, usually treated in a moralistic spirit and occasionally given a sensational emphasis, tended to assume a guise of sensibility to which the readers of fiction could be expected to respond.

These treatments of the love story will be grouped according to the several plot elements which seem to shape the course of their action, that is, to further or prevent the fulfillment of the central love relationship. Where there is an organic connection between the plot material and the characters, the procedure is evidently likely to yield illuminating results. But such focussing on single plot-elements may be thought arbitrary in the many instances when these elements are by no means clearly more important than other features. Since the first American novels possess little individuality, however, to label them according to thematic categories at least provides a temporary definition of their character; out of this it should be possible to develop a less artificial definition and a more subtle assessment of the various contributions of the novelists. Quite often, parallels and contrasts suggest themselves across the more or less arbitrary limits fixed upon. It is of course essential to establish cross-references of this kind when different works of the same author are treated under separate headings.