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## Romantic Fiction and the Controversy of 'Desire'

Sexual Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*  
(1847) and Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us*  
(2016).

Word count: 4150

Bachelor's thesis in Lektorutdanning i språkfag  
Supervisor: Yasemin Nurcan Hacıoglu  
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## Introduction

Romantic fiction is one of the most popular genres among readers, and despite the genre's predominance of male authors romance has always been heavily associated with women (Holmes 30). What is special about the romantic genre is how it portrays desire, especially subjective sexual desire. As more female authors were published, new perspectives on sexual desire emerged, resulting in a popular novel that functions mimetically and seems more 'real' for female readers, engaging more with their emotions. Combined with the growing access women have to books, female authors in the twenty-first century have started dominating popular fiction within this genre by writing about the desires and experiences of women in the patriarchal society (Holmes 31). This increased visibility of female authors is important because of the way the patriarchal society until now mostly favored *male* authors (Eagleton 18). These books did not only portray female desire, but wrote about it connected with social issues, such as how desire, and *love*, can hinder you in seeing red flags and/or prevent you from leaving an abusive relationship (NDVH). The result of this is a genre written by women *for* women with fiction that depicted female fantasies imbedded with sexual desire as well as addressing societal issues from a female point of view.

In this thesis I will examine how female sexual desire is represented in both popular gothic and contemporary romantic novels, and how it contributes in ongoing social debates. To avoid over-generalization, I will be using *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë and *It Ends with Us* (2016) by Colleen Hoover, and examine the portrayal of desire and its role within the relationships in these novels. In addition, I will investigate how culture and social media affects the novels' popularity, by looking at aspects of today's reading culture and best-seller lists. Debates surrounding the topic "desire" is still present today, as it was in Brontë's contemporary. However, today it has a different emphasis going beyond the discussion surrounding Christian morality.

When examining desire in *Jane Eyre* I will investigate how Jane's character contributes in the novel's realism, and how Jane's desire towards Mr. Rochester was enhanced by the subjective first-person narrative and the seductive discourse of their dialogue. In regards of *It Ends with Us*, I will examine how desire fits into the novels narrative and how it has turned more explicit. Additionally, how depictions of desire have evolved in its portrayal along with social issues, such as domestic violence, by looking at what role desire takes when Lily experiences abuse from her partner, Ryle. Further, I will examine how desire in the novels are written in demand from their contemporary, and the debate about the effects of desire in novels.

Certain critics of romantic novels, like Susan Quilliam, argues of the negative effects reading depictions of sexual desires has. On the other hand, there are critics, such as Mary Eagleton and Diana Holmes, that argue that romantic novels engage with the reader, and functions as an ‘escape’ from reality, and creates likeminded communities where readers share their reading experiences and the joy of reading.

### *Jane Eyre* and the subjectivity of desire

To understand *Jane Eyre*’s popularity, one must look at how its narrative was a contrast to the contemporary cultural environment. When Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, Europe had a significantly fragile political climate that was on the brink of revolution. People started to become afraid of the masses, and Adam Smith argued in his *Theory of Moral Sentiment* (1759) that even the most rational individual could abandon his self-interest and succumb to these masses due to the “contagion” that is emotions. This view on emotions was in its contemporary shared by many and resulted in the “impartial spectator”<sup>1</sup> role that most readers took when reading fiction (Armstrong 445). Armstrong writes that this began to change during the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as novels began to elicit sympathy from mass readerships with protagonists that mirrored readers’ norms and values (441). One of the pioneers in this change was Jane Austen, with novels such as *Northanger Abbey*. The novel uses a narrator that describes physical excitement with detailed imagery, imbedded with undertones of sexual arousal (Armstrong 446). Brontë’s choice of narrator in *Jane Eyre* makes the story more personal to the reader, with its use of first-person narrative - “I”. It is Jane who speaks to the reader, telling us the story about her life, all her encounters, and her thoughts – her innermost thoughts, directly to *you* the “reader” (*JE* 147). Brontë even writes “[...] this is not to be a regular autobiography”, contributing in the books realism as it sets out to depict a “real” woman’s story (*JE* 99). Combined with the direct addressing of the reader, *us*, the feeling of truth to Jane’s story and recollections becomes more realistic, even though it is fiction. She is telling us about *her* life and *her* thoughts. This contrasts the women whose sexual behaviors we encounter in Austen’s novels. We learn about their behavior only in third-person narrative, distancing them from the narrator who conveys the thoughts, thus not embracing the sexual nature of the characters fully, which contrasts the ownership of emotions and desire in *Jane Eyre* (Armstrong 447).

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<sup>1</sup> Impartial spectator – The approach you take to literary texts when you have achieved mastery if your emotions. Is done by having developed an almost automatic ability to imagine how your own expression of emotion must look to someone not so personally invested (Armstrong 445).

John Maynard, one of the many scholars who have studied Charlotte Brontë, argues that “we cannot and should not want to take the sexual desires and agonies out of Charlotte’s work” (253). He argues that her work contains more heterosexual desire than other Victorian and gothic literature, and presents how it is inflected by both sexual and gender diversity by having queer undertones behind some of Jane’s relationships, i.e., with Helen Burns, (Maynard 252). With this in mind, what Brontë manages to portray so well in *Jane Eyre* is the subjectivity of Jane’s desire, most notably in regards of Mr. Rochester. As Jane becomes more familiar with Mr. Rochester, she regards him as more and more attractive; “[...] gratitude, and many associations, all pleasurable and genial, made his face the object I best liked to see; his presence in a room was more cheering than the brightest fire” (*JE* 172). One can argue that the reason for her feeling this way is the lack of male attention in her life, as most of the men she has conversed with have been deprecating and abusive against her (e.g., Mr. Brocklehurst and John Reed). Jane confirms this while having a self-deprecating speech about her feelings towards Mr. Rochester, after finding out about the beautiful Blanch Ingram; “And you have derived pleasure from occasional tokens of preference – equivocal tokens shown by a gentleman of family and a man of the world [...]” (*JE* 186). To further this, she describes him as “not beautiful, according to rule; but [Mr. Rochester was] more than beautiful to me.” (*JE* 203). He is deemed as not conventionally attractive, but he is attractive to her, and the readers experience Jane’s longing for him. We hear her thoughts as she tries to deny her feelings, and her failing to do so. She even goes as far as to call her denial of her feelings a “blasphemy against nature” (*JE* 204), arguing that her desires regarding Mr. Rochester is God’s will - not something to be disregarded, but rather be embraced.

Jane’s story is not simply a story about her change from an abused child to a married rich woman; but it is also a story of her own desire to find someone who credits her version of life (Kaplan 9). When the novel was published, female authors did not have the same acceptance by society as male authors, thus not having much of their books read by the public, resulting in a very male dominated view on many topics, such as married life (Kaplan 7). Jane herself is aware of this and addresses how her views on emotions and love are affected by something she read by a male author. She explains this while telling Mr. Rochester about her doubts about the perseverance of his feelings for her. “I suppose your love will effervesce in six months, or less. I have observed in books written by men, that period assigned as the furthest to which a husband’s ardour extends” (*JE* 300). Carol Kaplan, when examining *Jane Eyre*’s position in the feminist canon, presents her thoughts of how the novel’s dialogue provokes anxieties about the political and the personal order which are not ultimately allayed by its romantic resolution.



One can argue that this anxiety is rooted in the male dominated views, that Jane's happiness is unattainable because of rank, a view that was imbedded in Victorian society (7).

Brontë's heterosexual writing was far from normal in regard of other contemporary works, as she used diverse themes that one rarely encounters in non-pornographic Victorian literature. Maynard presents themes that are possible to identify throughout Jane's relationship with Mr. Rochester: Abandonment, game-playing, competition, and domination (252). I argue that game-playing is the most important of the themes in their relationship, and the others are simply factors within it. When Mr. Rochester appears to be courting Miss Ingram, he was in fact doing so to make Jane jealous, testing her affection for him – teasing her. He is dominating the situation by abandoning her (when visiting Gateshead). On multiple occasions he tells her that he is to be married, but he never says to whom, leaving Jane questioning what is happening between them. This reaches its climax when Jane and Mr. Rochester are talking about his presumed bride, in which he replies "My bride! What bride? I have no bride!" (*JE* 292). The dialogue between Jane and Mr. Rochester, and their romance, is in many ways "a chronicle of a seductive discourse" (Kaplan 13). The dynamics in the game-playing between the two characters is also rooted in an obstacle to their relationship; their ranks – her being a governess for his ward, Adèle, and him being a nobleman and her employer. The misunderstandings, partings, and, eventually, prohibition of their love, are all obstacles in the course of their love. According to Eagleton, these factors are essential in creating and increasing desire within the relationship (115). This comes to show when Mr. Rochester returns from Gateshead. When reunited, Jane realizes that her desire towards Mr. Rochester goes deeper than she thinks. After being parted for four weeks, Jane recalls her reaction to seeing him again. "I did not think I should tremble in this way when I saw him, or lose my voice or the power of motion in his presence" (*JE* 282).

For Jane, desire is not rooted in bodily attraction, but rather one of the mind. As Mr. Rochester is not a conventionally attractive man, she deems him as her match because of his wit and character. In light of this it becomes apparent why Jane rejected St John, as he was just a handsome face and nothing more. This is also a reflection of her own views on her ability to attract the opposite sex, as she deems herself as "plain", and can therefore only be able to receive affection from people that she regards are of the same character and beliefs as her (Kaplan 17). Another reason behind Jane's unwillingness to marry St John is that there is no love between them – no passion or desire above a marriage of convenience. When asked about her absolute refusal she answers that she does not love him, and "because you did not love me; [...] If I were to marry you, you would kill me. You are killing me now" (*JE* 475). For Jane, love and passion

was of importance and she did not have either of those with St John, other than sisterly affection. When reunited with Mr. Rochester, she explains this when he attempts to make her leave because of his bad health. Even though he is now blind and “a cripple”, she tells him “I love you even better now, when I can really be useful to you” (*JE* 513).

### Desire turned explicit: *It Ends with Us*

Colleen Hoover’s *It Ends with Us*, published in 2016, is a contemporary romance novel that experienced its popularity partly because of social media (Stewart). A reason for this is that in our modern age readers tend to find pleasure in the collective dimensions of reading, through book clubs, online communities, and collective readings of books among friends, sharing their thoughts about the books in like-minded communities (Holmes 32). The reason as to why the novel gained popularity also goes to its realism, as it portrays a side of love that is not much talked about and is inspired by true events<sup>2</sup>. It depicts societal issues such as domestic violence – a problem that is being viewed less as a private family matter and more as an “urgent social crisis” (Stellin). Specifically, *It Ends with Us* depicts the role of love, or desire, in abusive relationships, and how it affects the parties involved. This is relevant as “love” is stated as one of the main reasons as to why victims of domestic violence stay in their abusive relationships. The National Domestic Violence Hotline in the USA explains that “survivors often still have strong, intimate feelings for their abusive partner, [and that] the person abusing them may simply be charming and the survivor may hope that their partner will return to being that person” (NDVH). By circling the plot around a relationship that depicts the turn from blissful happiness to abuse and denial, it serves as a representation of an ongoing social debate in popular romantic fiction, as the realistic, mimetic storytelling offers the pleasure of immersion in a world whose patterns of meaning are recognizable and life affirming (Holmes 36). The way the novel portrays the difficulties surrounding domestic violence both in term of themes and narrative therefore contributes in the novel’s realism.

While dealing with themes as domestic violence, the novel contains reoccurring elements of popular romance, such as the female subjectivity and sexual agency (Holmes 37). Central in the depictions of desire in the novel is the sexual agency within the narrative. During Ryle and Lily’s first encounter, he tells her “I want to fuck you [...] If you were into one-night stands, I would take you downstairs to my bedroom and I would fuck you” (*IEWU* 21). With the first half of the novel being desire connected to lust and longing, we encounter explicit

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<sup>2</sup> The novel is inspired by the experiences of Hoover’s mother, who was abused by her husband during Hoover’s childhood, Hoover writes in “Note from the author” (pp. 368-373).

material that describes their sexual relationship, which also continues in the second half of the novel. The novel is similarly to *Jane Eyre* written with the first-person narrator being the protagonist, Lily Bloom, and we hear her innermost thoughts during the various events of the novel. As the novel is told in first-person it makes the descriptions more up close and personal. Vivid and direct descriptions textualize the intensity of the desire, such as “It becomes an interlude of hands and moans and tongues and sweat. I feel like this is the first time I’ve ever been touched by a man”, and “He presses his lips to my chest, then begins to kiss me slowly as he makes his way down my body” (*IEWU* 122; *IEWU* 170). According to Holmes, the popular romantic fiction novel immerses the reader in a dramatized fictional world that deploys the romantic narrative with other dark themes, to a great extent (34). Having said that, Holmes continues to write that “Contemporary romantic best-sellers do not [...] address explicitly political or social issues” (40). Yet after examining *It Ends with Us*, I argue against this, as the novel, which is an example of a contemporary romantic best-seller, deals with the societal issues that domestic violence and abusive relationships are. It does so while portraying a realistic narrative, inspired by true events, that female, and male, readers can relate to as 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men in America have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner, such as slapping or pushing (NDVH). The shift in the narrative from a blissful romance to dealing with this difficult societal issue becomes apparent upon the first incident of abuse, halfway through the novel, when Lily describes that “[...] Ryle’s arm came out of nowhere and slammed against me, knocking me backward” (*IEWU* 185).

While desire functions as lust and passion in the start of Lily and Ryle’s relationship, after the shift in the narrative the role of desire changes and it functions as a reason behind Lily staying in the relationship, referencing that “love” is one of the main reasons as to why victims of abuse stay with their abusers (NDVH). After incidents of abuse, she lists how Ryle is different from her father, who abused her mother, and the reasons she lists are all rooted in her desire towards him, her love. “I need to feel his sorrow. His regret. I get both of these things in the ways he kisses me.[...] Every time he enters me, he whispers another apology. And by some miracle, every time he pulls out of me, my anger leaves with him” (*IEWU* 189). A painful contradictory is how Lily constantly compares her relationship to the one of her mother and father. This contradiction in the mother-daughter relation is also a reoccurring element in popular romance (Holmes 37). After an incident where Ryle pushed her down the stairs she gets angry and leaves, however, when they meet he tells her about his childhood trauma that is the supposed reason for his lashing out when angry. Upon hearing this she first thinks “I’m

supposed to hate him. I'm supposed to be the woman my mother was never strong enough to be", however, as she goes on she begins to find excuses again; "Humans aren't perfect and I can't let the only example I've ever witnessed of marriage weigh in on my *own* marriage" (*IEWU* 242-243). She contradicts herself in her reasonings, and one can argue that she does this so that she does not have to tell anyone about the abuse. This way of dealing with abuse is widely used, as domestic violence often is perpetuated by secrecy, shame, and silence (Stellin). Thus, desire has turned from something good in Lily's relationship, to something that keeps her from leaving her abusive partner. A turn happens after Lily gets pregnant and decides to finally tell her mother of the abuse, and her mother tells her "Every time you choose to stay, it makes the next time that much harder to leave. [...] I know that you believe he loves you, [but] if Ryle truly loves you, [...] he would make the decision to leave you himself so that he knows for a fact that he can never hurt you again" (*IEWU* 335-336). In the end, Lily decides to break the familiar circle of abuse, and promises her newborn daughter "It ends with us" (*IEWU* 361).

### Why is desire in romantic fiction popular?

While writing this thesis, Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* has been on the New York Times Best Seller list in week 22 on "Combined Print and E-Book Fiction" for 49 weeks and on "Paperback Trade Fiction" for 55 weeks, as well as being on the "Audio Fiction" list, even though it was published in 2016 (Simon & Schuster). Because of online communities, books that were published years ago experience revivals, as readers discover a book they like they share their opinion of them on social media platforms, such as Goodreads and under the hashtag "BookTok"<sup>3</sup> on TikTok. For a substantial portion of readers, the books popular under this hashtag are all tearjerkers, who move the readers (Stewart). In addition, *Jane Eyre* continues to excite readers, with it being stated as one of the best English novels ever written, and has over the nearly last two centuries become a touchstone for passionate love (Blakemore). From its conception, the genre has been deemed as a way for women to escape reality and to indulge in one's imagination. However, the excessive enjoyment of vicarious emotion has been deemed as a *feminine* weakness, facing heavy criticism despite the genre's predominance of male authors in its beginning (Holmes 30).

As female authors begin to have more presence in contemporary fiction and demand access to the cultural sphere, they have been met with doubt from society – facing a lack of support in their capability as authors and of the quality of their works (Eagleton 133-134). This

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<sup>3</sup> A community that exists within the hashtag "BookTok" on the social media app TikTok, where users share their favorite books and authors, often including recordings of their reactions when reading the books (Stewart 2021).

affected Charlotte Brontë more than Colleen Hoover, as the female author was looked so much down upon that *Jane Eyre* was published under the gender-neutral pseudonym Currer Bell. The seductive discourse of *Jane Eyre* was also in its contemporary condemned as immoral and corrupting (Blakemore). Even though decades have passed, the romantic genre is still not unfamiliar with criticism, as 1970s feminists academics said it forced women into patriarchal marriages, and is still the target of accusations of ‘soft core porn’ (Quilliam 179). Susan Quilliam writes that in our contemporary, readers celebrate romantic fiction as a statement of women’s right to have sex, and that it allows women to feel good about their desires (180). However, she continues to argue that readers of romantic fiction, and depictions of desire, will start to believe the story that it offers, and that they forget reality (181). However, Eagleton writes that recently, critics have started to recognize the power of the illicit in romantic fiction – reading romantic fiction as something done in private with a consenting adult (oneself) (117). In other words, one must not look at reading romantic fiction as something negative and a form of reality-distortion, but rather as something that oneself choose to do as a way to escape reality.

Holmes writes of the romance readers’ pleasure of reading resides partly in “an assertion of the subject’s freedom to escape the everyday and strike off independently into a more vital imaginary world [...]” and that it also can “provide an agreeable sense of collectivity, of being part of a like-minded community” (32). Holmes continues to argue that the imaginary world that the readers engage with mobilizes consciousness of real conflicts and inequalities (33). Because of this one can argue that romantic fiction that challenge norms in their society and deals with societal issues, which *Jane Eyre* and *It Ends with Us* does, educate readers about reality more than it distorts it. What the two novels do is contribute in the development of new generations of readers with an emotional repertoire more attuned to the demands of our time (Armstrong 464). This can both be applied to the time of *Jane Eyre* as well as *It Ends with Us*.

## Conclusion

Both Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Hoover’s *It Ends with Us* show female desire depicted in popular romantic novels connected to contemporary political and social debates. In *Jane Eyre*, desire is central to Jane’s character, which affects both the novel’s narrative and the seductive discourse of Jane and Mr. Rochester’s relationship. Scholars argue that Brontë’s work contains more depictions of the subjective female desire than other Victorian and gothic literature, contributing in the novel’s realism that is much of the reason for its popularity. *Jane Eyre* showed new perspectives to the female desire, which was greatly underrepresented in its contemporary as male views dominated literature because of the lack of recognized and

published female authors. In *It Ends with Us*, desire is central within the novel's narrative as it shows the close relation between love and struggles of leaving abusive relationships. The novel contains explicit descriptions of sexual relations, which more critics have started recognizing the power of. As the novels engage readers, it creates the opportunity for the creation of communities that share the love for the novels' imaginary worlds. Both novels' representation of desire are therefore reasons behind their popularity. Some critics have argued that desire in romantic fiction has a negative effect on readers, however, desire in romantic fiction can mobilize readers consciousness of real conflicts and inequalities when combined with depictions of societal problems – i.e. gender equality and domestic violence. In conclusion, *Jane Eyre* and *It Ends with Us* contribute in social debates, as they engage readers with female perspectives of societal problems mixed with a narrative imbedded with subjective female desire.

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