

Sofie Rundmo Bratteng

“If you weren’t a thousand times stronger than me, I would never have let you get away with this.” – The Romanticization of Abusive Relationships in Popular Young Adult Fiction

Master's thesis in English Literature
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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of portrayals of abusive relationships in young adult romance literature on adolescent readers. The genre of young adult literature has become of sociological phenomenon and is consumed on large scale across the globe. As a result, the adolescent reader target group is easily influenced and emotional. Looking at the romantic relationship dynamics in *Twilight*, *After* and *It Ends With Us* while also focusing on the young adult reader's empathy and identity formation, this thesis will seek to unpack what the novels convey to young readers, either deliberately or coincidentally, concerning unhealthy relationships and unbalanced power dynamics in young adult romance fiction, in addition to looking at reader response and the role of the young adult novel in society. The thesis argues that intrinsic motivations such as emotion evocation and the following narrative empathy, along with extrinsic incentives such as social media and film adaptations work together with other influences, such as targeted marketing work together to accept and romanticize the portrayals. This harms the adolescent reader, and the adolescent reader may face consequences such as not being able to recognize harmful relationship dynamics in the real world.

Sammendrag

Denne oppgaven undersøker påvirkningen av skildringer av voldelige forhold i young adult-romantikk-litteratur. Young adult-sjangeren har blitt et sosiologisk fenomen og har store lesertall jorden rundt. Målgruppen, ungdommer og unge voksne, er lettpåvirkelige og emosjonelle. Ved å se på forholdsdynamikkene i *Twilight*, *After* og *It Ends with Us* samtidig som man retter fokuset mot leserempati og identitetsutvikling, vil denne oppgaven diskutere hva romanene kommuniserer til unge lesere angående usunne forhold og ubalanserte maktdynamikker i young adult-romantikk-litteratur, enten ved uhell eller med vilje. Denne oppgaven argumenterer for at indre motivasjoner som følelsestrigging og den påfølgende leserempati sammen med eksterne motivasjoner som sosiale medier og filmatisering jobber sammen med andre innflytelser som målrettet markedsføring jobber sammen for å akseptere og normalisere disse skildringene. Dette fører til en skadelig innvirkning på den unge leseren. For eksempel er det mulig at leseren ikke klarer å gjenkjenne skadelig forholdsdynamikk i det ekte liv.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Social media shows an upsurge of adolescents reading young adult literature (YAL), especially YAL involving romance. Hayn et al. claim that “We know much about what good books are available, but we know little about what actually happens when teens read young adult novels.” (8). The genre of YAL has become a sociological phenomenon, and because of this and its large-scale consumption, it deserves serious analysis. (Unzue 2)

Three popular novels of young adult romance fiction are *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer, *After* by Anna Todd, and *It Ends With Us* by Colleen Hoover. *Twilight* is a story about 17-year-old Bella Swan, who moves from to Forks, Washington to live with her father. Here she meets the mysterious Edward Cullen, who turns out to be a vampire. Edward saves Bella from being hit by a car in the school parking lot, and this event changes how Bella looks at him because of his unnatural strength and speed. Edward later rescues her from an uncomfortable meeting with four men harassing her. The notion of Edward being dangerous to Bella is intriguing to her character; if he loses control, he can kill her or turn her into a vampire. Keeping Edward’s secret while initiating a romantic relationship with him that can end in her death is hard enough as it is, but Bella also has to navigate living with her father for the first time in several years while also trying to make friends and a life in Forks.

In *After*, the reader meets 18-year-old Tessa as she moves into college. She meets Hardin the same day she moves into college, and Hardin is the opposite of her. While Tessa is emotional, overachieving, and a perfectionist, Hardin is cold, does not care for school and is rude. Even though she is not supposed to like him, they initiate a relationship and have sex shortly after. Their relationship is a whirlwind, and neither tolerate the other speaking to a person of the opposite sex. While Tessa is trying to navigate detaching herself from her mother’s lifestyle and living on her own, she is also limited by Hardin and their relationship. The plot twist arrived at the end of the story. Their relationship is based on a lie; Hardin made a bet with his friends before initiating the relationship about who could sleep with Tessa first.

Lily Bloom, the protagonist in *It Ends with Us*, is older than Tessa and Bella. She is trying to start her life after moving to Boston while seeking closure after her father’s death. Here, she meets Ryle, who works as a resident surgeon. They have instant chemistry and initiate a relationship. Lily’s father was abusive toward her mother when she was growing up,

and the readers are provided glimpses into her childhood as she longs for closure. The relationship evolves as Lily and Ryle spend more time together. One night, Ryle hurts Lily and then manipulates her into not leaving him, even though Lily instantly recognizes this and compares it to her parents' relationship. Ryle continues to hurt her on occasion, often while blaming this behavior on his jealousy toward her friend, Atlas, a boy Lily helped when she was younger. Lily needs to navigate being in an abusive and toxic relationship while finding closure from her father and starting up a flower store and a new life in Boston.

The gap between children's and adult literature has been filled by young adult literature. According to Valentina Adami (127), the boundaries between children's, young adult, and adult literature are flexible. In the Western world's 20th and 21st centuries, children have been provided more time to transition into adulthood. Adolescence is no longer about puberty and being thrown into adulthood, but rather more about learning to navigate society and responsibility as an emerging adult.

While children's literature addresses the child protagonist's personal development, YAL focuses on teenage protagonists who must face social and political problems at the same time as they are growing up and experiencing the ups and downs of adolescence. (Adami 128) The main characteristic of YAL is that the story centers around the adolescent protagonist's personal development, as well as the formation of the protagonist's subjectivity. This often happens while the protagonist is going through a conflict that is often metaphorically or directly connected to political or social issues. (Adami 129) This means that the most pressing problems of society in the plot become connected to the protagonist's journey to developing their own identity. This attempts to represent and test teenagers' dilemmas against a given social and political background. (130) The adolescent reader identifies with the adolescent character as they are both navigating personal development.

Because YAL focuses on adolescent characters, it is essential to define adolescence. Robert Petrone et al. (508-11) provide four assumptions about adolescence. The first assumption is that adolescence is a construct based upon social, cultural, and historical contexts that shift across space and over time. The second assumption is that adolescence is not a universal experience, but rather a set of experiences highly contingent on the individual's circumstances. The third assumption concerns how ideas of adolescence lead to consequences for how adults perceive youth and how youth perceive themselves. Nancy Lesko points to how a "normalized construction of adolescence as a time where the young person should come of age into adulthood" (123) places the young person into a passive

waiting mode, which makes the young person in an identity crisis which makes it harder to master one's environment and create one's own identity. The fourth and last assumption concerns how adolescence is used as a "symbolic placeholder" (Petrone et al. 511), for example, how youth is used as a metaphor for adult agendas such as being the hope for the future. Adolescents are stretched to take on a variety of emotional roles and opportunities for shaping responses to a changing world. These assumptions about adolescence make up what Petrone et al. call the Youth Lens, which asks two questions: "How does the text represent adolescence?" And "what role does the text play in reinforcing and/or subverting dominant ideas about adolescence?" (Petrone et al. 511) These two questions form a foundation to scrutinize representations of youth within texts and to analyze "how these representations perform as a part of the cultural discourses of adolescence that carry larger ideological messages" (Petrone et al. 511)

Even though YAL is targeted toward adolescents and youth, there are others regularly reading YAL. The genre's 60 years of development means that many adults read YAL during their adolescence. Thirty years ago, YAL was targeted at readers between 12-18 years old. However, during the last decade, these boundaries have been pushed back, and YAL has now expanded to reach readers as young as 10 and as old as 35. (Hill 3) However, according to Scholastic, adult readers now comprise a third of the market for young adult fiction. (5) Fifty-five percent of YAL buyers are 18 years or older, and the most significant demographic is the 30-44 age group. This group accounts for 28 percent of YAL sales, according to Hill. (5) The wide age span of YAL readers indicates that each individual reader has personal reasons for reading YAL, and that not all of them read YAL to connect with characters close in age to themselves. Some readers choose YAL because they have experienced similar situations to the ones presented in YAL, some use YAL as quick reads, college students may read YAL because they have less free time in their schedules, and some readers have never differentiated between YAL and adult fiction, reading YAL prominently as part of their preferred literature. (5) Thirty-year-olds have grown up reading J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* as they were trying to navigate adolescence in the 2010s. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* has since it was published in 1954, challenged topics such as individualism and the loss of innocence. YAL is read by not only adolescents, but by adults and has become a genre for "everyone"

Regardless of age, YAL's popularity is reflected in more than just book sales. Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram are flooded with book recommendations and

videos idolizing writers and characters from their books. As active users of these platforms are often adolescents or young adults themselves, the most popular books in these communities are young adult novels.

During the time that YAL's target audience has increased, the writer's potential to be creative has expanded. (Hill 3) Hunt argues that children's literature, which YAL often falls under, has lagged behind adult literature in form and content. (in Hill 2) Meanwhile, Cart argues that YAL has caught up with adult literature: "Never before has this field been so creatively risk taking, so artistically rich, so intellectually stimulating or so protean in re-defining its audience as it pushes back the previous boundaries that had limited its readership to young people aged twelve to eighteen." (2) This claim is backed up by Hill, who argues that YAL "has come of age" (2), meaning that as YAL's target audience has expanded, the genre has been allowed to experiment with new, more adult topics. However, it is essential to note that even though YAL's target audience is expanded, the genre is still available for young adolescents. This means that younger people are now reading more mature content because it is marketed toward their age group. Some adolescents are ready for this content, while others may not. As the adolescent reader is at an age between childhood and adulthood, the maturity level of the individual reader is different, and the mature content can be detrimental to a reader who is not emotionally mature enough to handle this.

Adolescents are able to choose between a myriad of literature when they decide to read. The question is how they choose what to read and why they choose it. Christopher J. Ferguson argues that "media is not something *done* to children (or adults) but rather that individuals select media based on preexisting personality traits and motivations." (355) Young adult romance literature may vicariously respond to the reader's needs that are not being met in real life using characters and heroes the reader can identify with. (355) The protagonists of the novels all illustrate traits and mood states that are relatable to young readers. Tessa is trying to break free from her mother, Bella is stuck in Forks until the end of high school, and Lily is on the verge of adulthood after college. Readers choose to read these novels because they can recognize themselves in the characters and their experiences.

One of the theories related to how individuals select media is the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). (Ferguson 355) UGT was proposed by Harold Lasswell in 1948. This theory primarily focuses on how the reader actively selects, shapes, and processes literature that promotes the mood states they wish to achieve. For example, an adolescent who feels their parents do not understand them and who feels frustrated may seek out literature

presenting a protagonist that feels the same way but manages to turn things around. Reading this might make the reader hopeful and enhance their mood. Under UGT, the effects of the literature are not content driven but rather “user driven, subtle, and idiosyncratic” (355). This means that some books or other media may be helpful to one reader, while less useful for another. Because the effects are user driven rather than content driven, the experiences are individual based on the particular reader’s previous experiences and feelings.

The Adolescents’ Media Practice model (AMPM) focuses on the adolescent consumer. Like UGT, AMPM assumes adolescents to be active users and shapers of media, while also looking at the importance of media in the identity development process of adolescents. Young readers select the books they want to read, interpret them, and apply them to their lives as an expression of identity. This expression can be in the form of the display of posters, conversations about the books with peers, posting about the books on social media, going to conventions focused on the books, and so forth. (Ferguson 355)

According to Roberta Trites, “Young adult novels are about power.” (in Adami 130). Adolescents need to learn to negotiate the powers that exist in the various social institutions they must function within. These institutions are “family, school, the church, government, social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class, and cultural mores surrounding death” (Adami 130). In the YAL novel, the protagonists must also learn about these social forces and how these forces have made them what they are. These social powers are everywhere because they come from everywhere and enact the individual into being. Additionally, power exists both in society, externally, and also at the very source that forms the individual.

In YAL, power is expressed through empowered adolescent protagonists who can, or are even required to, take responsibility for their own actions. The protagonists act “proactively rather than solely in terms of taking action to prevent oppression or repression” (Adami 131). This power is important to YAL, as it shows young adults that they have power to do something in the world, and educates them into better, more active citizens. (Adami 131) However, when the literature does not promote a healthy example for young adults, the notion of power becomes negative and can influence readers into making bad decisions. The novels chosen for this thesis fall into the category of negative power.

Navigating power in YAL leads to identity formation. The character’s identity formation is intertwined with the pressing issues of society, as the protagonist’s crisis is connected, either directly or metaphorically, to a political or social issue. (Adami 130) The reader may find it intriguing and empowering to see how social issues and identity are related.

However, the knowledge the reader gains through the protagonist presents transformative possibilities. (Horrell 47)

The adolescent reader is provided an opportunity to develop and investigate their intuitions and consider their actions by living different scenarios vicariously through the characters in YAL. (Heath and Wolf 147) Young adult literature is a powerful tool for projecting ideologies on adolescent readers. The portrayal of adolescent characters in YAL is based on what adult writers want or need adolescent readers to believe about themselves and the world. (Hilton and Nikolajeva 8) This creates a conflict between the young reader and the adult writer. The adult is the writer, so the adult decides how to project the ideology and what to project onto the adolescent reader. Nikolajeva also points to the unique position the adult writer is in where the writer sees themselves as “unequivocally in a position to portray young characters’ mental and emotional states because they have once been children and therefore remember what it was like to be a child.” (90-91). The adult writers see themselves as able to put themselves into the position of a child because they have once been children. However, they cannot relate to all elements of being young as they are no longer young.

The adult author is not able to see the world through a youth lens. The more significant ideological messages from the youth lens point to YAL’s potential to impose ideologies on the reader. According to Renae Franiuk and Samantha Scherr, romance fiction often provides a patriarchal gender ideology by following a clear script for developing heterosexual romantic relationships that places men and women in the positions of dominance and submission while eroticizing aggressive masculine behavior. (16) This script puts the male in the role of the pursuer and the female in the role of the one being pursued, and the female character is typically described as being overcome with passion by the male’s dominant behavior. (16-17) This gender ideology and stereotypes can be seen as a cause of relationship violence, as the male is supposed to be dominant and aggressive. In contrast, the female is supposed to be submissive and nurturing. (18) This ideology can be further applied to young adult romance fiction.

Heath and Wolf identify the emotional bond created by YAL between the reader and the protagonist as “double exposure” (146). Double exposure involves reading about what the character thinks, feels, or does, while simultaneously comparing oneself to and identifying with the character. This doubling happens to all readers who emotionally connect with characters. Still, it is important to YAL readers because the protagonists’ behaviors presented in the literature work as a demonstration of what a person the same age or in the same place in

life as the reader would do. (Heath and Wolf 146) Nikolajeva (in Hill 2) argues that contemporary children's literature is advancing from being plot-oriented to being character-oriented. When the reader identifies and bonds with the narrator or protagonist, the reader becomes susceptible to the ideologies of the text, especially the underarticulated ideologies.

The emotional bond between the reader and the character creates an emotional response in the reader. Literature is a communicative product that depicts and induces emotional response across cultures. Writing character-oriented YAL stories opens the possibilities of teaching the reader more lessons by creating complex characters with which the readers can empathize. Since the beginning of the 21st century, an interest in the representation of emotions in literature has arisen. (Kümmerling-Meibauer 127) Novels that engage narrative empathy do better in the marketplace, meaning these types of novels reach a wider audience. (Unzue 3) The narrative style of the 21st century has implemented the empathetic feeling "with," replacing the sympathetic feeling "for". (Unzue 5) This means that the reader is inclined to feel the emotions as the protagonist feels them. American scholars Hastings, Zahn-Waxler, and McShane define empathy as "the ability to understand another's perspective and to have a visceral or emotional reaction" (Kümmerling-Meibauer 127). The average reader in the United States and Great Britain seeks empathetic reading experiences, and it has long been believed that the empathy evoked by a novel is linked to the quality of the novel. (Unzue 3-4) Narrative empathy is significant in YAL because reading character-oriented stories grants the reader access into a character's thoughts and feelings, making it easier to feel empathy toward characters.

Writers assume that most readers have knowledge about emotional expressions, in what kinds of situations they usually occur, and how they are conveyed, both linguistically and bodily. (Kümmerling-Meibauer 131) For example, if the setting is a funeral, the reader will know that sadness is a feeling that usually occurs among attendees and will look for emotional expressions such as crying or verbal expressions of grief. In a wedding setting, however, the reader will look for characteristics of joy, such as laughing, tears of joy, and heartfelt speeches. However, suppose the bride in the wedding is conveying emotional characteristics such as expressing regret or uncertainty, shaking, or not meeting the groom's eye. In that case, the reader needs to use more in-depth knowledge about emotional expressions. These are unusual emotional expressions, which usually mean that something other than expected is happening. This strategy is characterized in cognitive psychology as "emotional settings" or "emotional scripts" (Kümmerling-Meibauer 132), and these rely on

certain encoded emotions, which is a piece of common knowledge about the representation of emotions, in other words, the ability to comprehend another individual's perspective and emotions and to have an emotional reaction resulting from this. (Unzue 4) Whatever emotions the character is showing, the author tries to present the emotional scenarios so that the reader will recognize the emotional situation while stimulating a certain emotional reaction so that the reader will feel the emotion themselves. (Kümmerling-Meibauer 132) This triggers narrative empathy and drives the reader to continue reading.

Unlike children's literature, YAL usually does not have specifically characterized "good" and "bad" characters. Instead, the character's moral judgment and social assessment is put into perspective, which challenges the reader to understand the character's advancement process. In this process, emotions play a significant role as characters are classified based on their emotional state. This characterization is supplemented by their social status, intellectual ability, outlook, and imaginative power, as well as their emotional state of mind. (Kümmerling-Meibauer) Keith Oatley believes that the reader's personal experience or emotional response patterns provoke sympathy for the characters, especially as the reader identifies with the character's goals and plans. (in Unzue 4) In YAL, this is especially interesting, as the adolescent reader and the adolescent protagonist are experiencing similar ideals and plans as they are in the same period of life. This makes the reader connect with the character.

The three novels *Twilight*, *After*, and *It Ends with Us* all portray problematic relationships, which is not the default for young adult romance. However, one of the more common tropes in YAL romance is the bad boy trope, which can often lead to the female lead being abused. The bad boy YAL romances often spark debate in social media and among scholars because of their glamorization of unhealthy relationship dynamics.

Sara Day states, "young adult novels are among the most popular and powerful cultural representations of teenage relationships" (69). The young adult romance genre appeared quickly after YAL in the 1960s. (Cart 14) This genre builds on the romance genre. During late adolescence and emerging into adulthood, intimate relationships are of significant importance. This is particularly important when it comes to identity exploration. Between the ages of 18 and 25, a critical period of development occurs, and one of the primary tasks of emerging adulthood is identity development. Identity development predominantly occurs through dating and sexual relationships. (Rodenhizer et al 1337) Romantic relationships provide a context to discover aspects of not only having a partner but also aspects of their

selves, such as questions as “who am I, where do I want to go, and who do I want to go there with” (1338).

Many relationships that take form during late adolescence are characterized by instability. During emerging adulthood, many adolescents are very likely to both begin and end intimate relationships that vary in degree of intimacy and commitment. In addition to instability, many relationships during emerging adulthood are characterized by what Rodenhizer et al describe as “churning behaviors” (1338), which are common and include breaking up and getting back together or having sex with previous intimate partners. However, even though churning behaviors are common, these kinds of relationships are often characterized by lower relationship quality due to conflict in the relationship. For example, the relationship quality can be lowered due to a lack of satisfaction, commitment, and passion, which leads to a conflict in the relationship such as communication problems. However, more major forms of conflict are associated with relationship churning, such as physical violence and verbal abuse. (1338)

Abuse or the use of violence in romantic relationships is a noticeable problem in society. In *It Ends With Us*, the reader experiences physical and verbal abuse through Lily’s character, both by being abused by Ryle and by reminiscing about how she and her mother’s lives were affected by her abusive father. Because of the risk of being in a problematic and toxic relationship during late adolescence and early adulthood, it is important to understand how emerging adults cope with ending a relationship and how the end of a relationship affects development. (Rodenhizer et al 1339)

Toxic or abusive relationships are characterized by an imbalanced dynamic between the two partners in a relationship. Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar’s Power and Control Wheel was developed in 1980 for the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project to describe “battering” for victims, abusers, practitioners in the criminal justice system, and the general public. (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs) Battering is characterized by actions utilized by an abuser to control or dominate their romantic partner. The power and control wheel points to a systematic use of threats, intimidation, and coercion to instill fear in his partner, while also pointing to physical and sexual violence as tactics that instill the greatest amounts of fear. The power and control wheel is gender specific because of the power imbalances in relationships in heterosexual relationships that reflect the power imbalances in society. (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs) Using this model to analyze the romantic relationships in *Twilight*, *After*, and *It Ends with Us* will provide a framework of abuse in romantic relationships.

Looking at the romantic relationship dynamics in *Twilight*, *After* and *It Ends With Us* while also focusing on the young adult reader's empathy and identity formation, this thesis will seek to unpack what the novels convey to young readers, either deliberately or coincidentally, concerning unhealthy relationships and unbalanced power dynamics in young adult romance fiction, in addition to looking at reader response and the role of the young adult novel in society.

Chapter 2: The Portrayal of the Relationships

In *Twilight*, *After*, and *It Ends with Us*, the relationships shape the stories and drive the narrative forward. However, the relationships are abusive and romanticized. Therefore, it is essential to examine the portrayals of the relationships to see how they influence character development, plot progression, and the overall thematic framework of the novels.

Twilight's relationship between Bella and Edward is portrayed as an unorthodox romance between a teenage girl and a vampire. The abusive elements of the part are ignored because of the fantastic aspect of vampires. However, five specific problematic behaviors and attitudes complicate the relationship in the novel.

The first problematic behavior is the lack of boundaries in the relationship between Bella and Edward. In conversation with Bella, Edward admits that he enters Bella's room "almost every night" and watches her sleep. (Meyer 256) He tells her that she talks in her sleep and has said his name in her sleep. This happened on the first night Edward watched her sleep, which was the night after Bella's school friend Mike Newton asked her to the school dance. Edward tries to justify watching her sleep that night by saying that he "wrestled all night, while watching you sleep, with the chasm between what I knew was *right*, moral-ethical, and what I *wanted*." (265)

Obsessive behavior is the second problematic behavior in the relationship between Edward and Bella. Edward acts like Bella's personal bodyguard, even in ways she is unaware of at the time. For example, he listens to her private conversations, monitors her movements, and physically contains her. Bella's slight annoyance, which is then overcome by curiosity about why Edward is guarding her, is a common reaction in vampire fiction. However, instead of addressing the disconnect between the guarding behavior and healthily showing affection, Bella interprets Edward's behavior as an act of affection. (Franiuk and Scherr 21)

The third problematic behavior in Bella and Edward's relationship is extreme jealousy. Edward shows signs of being extremely possessive over Bella and is jealous of every male in Bella's proximity. The night Edward breaks into the house to watch Bella sleep is the night after Mike Newton asks Bella to the school dance. "I knew that if I continued to ignore you as I should, or if I left for a few years, till you were gone, that someday you would say yes to Mike, or someone like him. It made me angry." (Meyer 265) Edward is also jealous of Jacob,

and at the dance, he tells Bella that Jacob "irritates" him and frowns at Jacob, telling her she looks pretty. (429-430)

The fourth problematic behavior in Bella and Edward's relationship is physical intimidation. Edward physically intimidates Bella frequently, and the first incident of physical assault happens in chapter five. After helping Bella after an incident in school that has her go to the nurse's office, Edward tells her he is taking her home and overrides Bella's judgment that she is well enough to drive her truck home by herself; Edward grabs hold of her jacket and physically drags her across the school parking lot to his car. Even though Bella asks him to let her go, Edward ignores her and keeps dragging her, while Bella is left powerless and confused. Any escape is impossible as Edward is faster and more robust than her: "I was mentally calculating the chances of reaching the truck before he could catch me. I had to admit, they weren't good." (Meyer 89)

Edward often makes the reader aware of the physical power imbalance between him and Bella. When he and Bella discuss sex, he points out the dangers of them having sex early in the relationship, describing how he could easily "reach out, meaning to touch your face and crush your skull by mistake." (Meyer 271) Bella is in danger of Edward killing her if he loses his temper or is put in any other situation where he could forget about his strength, like in a sexual setting. At the prom, Bella notes that "if you weren't a thousand times stronger than me, I would never have let you get away with this" (431), which indicates that she is aware of her weakness compared to Edward's strength.

The fifth problematic behavior is emotional manipulation. When Edward and Bella meet for the first time in biology class, Bella is confused because Edward seems furious at her and tries to switch classes after. As a result, Bella drives home from school "fighting tears" (Meyer 24). The second time they meet in class. However, he is charming and greets her as soon as she sits down at their desk. (37) This leaves Bella's mind "spinning with confusion," and she questions if she made up the situation from the first biology class in her mind. After Edward saves her from being crushed by an out-of-control car in the school parking lot, Bella doubts herself. After confronting him about it, Edward says, "Nobody will believe that, you know" (55) Gaslighting Bella into thinking he was standing next to her while she is sure he was far away from her; Edward succeeds in making Bella doubt herself and her mind another time. He also mocks her ability to logically reason, asking her, "You think I lifted a van off you?" in a questioning tone, something Bella notes as "like a perfectly delivered line by a

skilled actor" (55) Edward is emotionally manipulating her, making her believe that she is crazy.

Tessa and Hardin's relationship in *After* is abusive both ways and is very toxic. Because the abuse goes both ways and the pair go back and forth several times between wanting to be with each other and not, the relationship's toxicity becomes less noticeable in the reader's search for romance. The relationship in the novel is complicated by five specific problematic behaviors and attitudes:

The first problematic behavior is extreme jealousy. Hardin's jealousy of Zed is noticeable in chapter thirty-nine, where he watches Tessa as she sits next to Zed. "Remembering that he was pretty adamant about me not hanging out with Zed before, I lean into Zed ever so slightly. Hardin's eyes go wide, but he quickly recovers." (Todd 194). This is also when Tessa and Zed start talking about going to the bonfire, and Hardin decides also to attend the bonfire, even though it is not his scene. Tessa illustrates jealousy on the bonfire night when she asks Zed if they can leave when Hardin and his date arrive. (Todd 357) Her reaction to Hardin's date is not to introduce herself because "I can't help to dislike her already" (356). However, this jealousy leaves Tessa feeling guilty when she leaves: "During the drive, I can't help but picture Hardin's face when he returns to find us gone. *He* brought a girl there with him, so he has no right to be upset, but it doesn't really ease the pang in my stomach to justify it like that." (357) The possessiveness illustrated by both Tessa and Hardin is often the reason behind their fighting.

Hardin physically intimidates Tessa, the second problematic behavior in this novel. His issue with uncontrollable rage makes him slam a lamp against the wall, which causes it to shatter. Tessa responds with a "small shriek" (Todd 394). Tessa also signals that she is physically intimidated by Hardin after meeting Hardin's father in the yogurt shop. After Hardin slams a chair into a table and leaves in a fury, Tessa runs after him, and they almost crash into each other when Hardin turns around to face her. "He moves toward me. He is angry – beyond angry." (225) Tessa also notes that Hardin's veins are showing on his neck, indicating that he is straining himself to contain his anger. The physical intimidation demonstrated in the novel is a way for Hardin to express his anger toward Tessa, but the physical intimidation following this anger is threatening to her, and he gains control of her by intimidating her.

The third problematic behavior is the lack of boundaries between Hardin and Tessa. From the beginning, Hardin pushes Tessa's boundaries. The first time they meet, Hardin

refuses to leave the room so that Tessa can get dressed in private. When Tessa gets upset by his persistence to turn around instead of leaving the room, Hardin "bursts into laughter" (Todd 16). Later, Hardin also tries to manipulate Tessa into agreeing to listen to him. He does this while they are having sex, withholding her orgasm. This results in Tessa agreeing, which is an apparent lack of boundaries and a way to use Tessa as she is at her weakest.

The fourth problematic behavior in the relationship is emotional manipulation. Tessa addresses the emotional roller coaster she has been put through since meeting Hardin when they are drinking on Hardin's father's patio. "You hate me, and I don't want to be your punching bag anymore. You confuse me. One minute you're telling me how much you can't stand me or humiliating me after my most intimate experience (...). Then, the next minute, you're kissing me and telling me you need me." (Todd 147-48) From the first time Tessa and Hardin meet, Hardin is being condescending and rude toward Tessa. After giving Tessa her first sexual experience, Hardin tries to brush his feelings for her off when Noah calls Tessa. Tessa tells Hardin that she is planning to break up with Noah, but Hardin reminds her that he does not date, reinforcing Tessa's fear that Hardin is only sexually interested in her. Tessa and Hardin show a lack of healthy communication, which is the fifth problematic behavior in their relationship. The relationship is tainted by many fights, usually because they avoid discussing certain subjects. The fights typically end in sex or kissing before they start having sex. For example, during their argument on Hardin's father's patio, Hardin kisses Tessa to cut her off while she is yelling at him. She tries to resist but realizes that "It's no use; he is stronger than me." (147). The first time Tessa and Hardin have sex happens right after they fight about how Hardin thinks Tessa is a control freak and how Tessa is annoyed by Hardin's constant change in mood. (423)

The relationship between Ryle and Lily in *It Ends with Us* is tainted by physical abuse, and the three incidents where Ryle physically hurts Lily are prevalent in the novel. However, their relationship is dominated by grand romantic gestures before and between these incidents. This means that the mental abuse happening in Ryle and Lily's relationship becomes less recognizable because it is camouflaged under a layer of what presents itself as romance. The relationship between Ryle and Lily is complicated, with five specific problematic behaviors and attitudes.

The first problematic behavior is love bombing. The Cleveland Clinic defines love bombing as "a form of psychological and emotional abuse that involves a person going above and beyond for you in an effort to manipulate you into a relationship with them." (2023). A

form of love bombing is excessive gift-giving that may be unwanted. In *It Ends with Us*, Ryle buys an apartment for himself and Lily without telling her. Lily confesses to the reader that "I don't know why I feel like this should bother me because I really am excited about it." (Hoover 251)

The second problematic behavior or attitude is Ryle's refusal to accept rejection. At the novel's beginning, Ryle tells Lily that he would like to have sex with her, and she rejects him, telling him that she does not make one-night stands. (Hoover 21) After meeting again six months later, Ryle again tells her that he would like to have sex with her, and Lily politely asks him to stop telling her "things that make me dizzy," and they agree to avoid each other because of their conflicting interests. (56-58) However, a few days later, Ryle knocks on twenty-nine doors to find Lily's apartment and begs her to have sex with him. (68-69) The reasoning behind this gesture and request is that "All I can think about is how crazy it feels when I'm near you, and I need you to make it stop" (69)

The third problematic attitude in Ryle and Lily's relationship is the lack of boundaries. This circles back to Ryle's refusal to accept rejection. Lily's boundaries are being pushed every time she meets Ryle, and she ends up going against her view on love and relationships by agreeing to do a trial run before committing to a relationship. This trial run is done to satisfy Ryle's view on relationships, while Lily does not appear satisfied, and she has to remind herself. "I don't have to be modest and look away because he's mine. *Maybe*. This is a trial run. I have to remember that." (121)

The fourth problematic behavior in Ryle and Lily's relationship is Ryle's extreme jealousy. A new and jealous side of Ryle is shown when Lily introduces him to Atlas. After Ryle and Atlas fight in the restaurant, Ryle tells Lily that "If you don't want to be with me ... please tell me right now, Lily. Because when I saw you with him ... that *hurt*. I never want to feel that again. And if it hurts this much now, I'm terrified of what it could do to me a year from now." (202) In saying this, Ryle utilizes the fragile moment between them to ensure Lily does not want to contact Atlas again.

Ryle also utilizes his extreme jealousy to isolate Lily from everyone except his family and mother. At the novel's beginning, Lily lives with a roommate, and she also brings her friend Devin from a previous job to Allysa and Marshall's party. However, Devin is never acknowledged again after the party, and Lucy, the roommate, is only mentioned briefly after she moves out as she starts working at the flower shop. Lily is isolated from these friends without her even noticing, and the attentive reader will only notice because Lily has nobody

to go to after the third incident of violence but Atlas. Even though Lily is not isolated from her mother, she cannot talk to her about the violent incidents between her and Ryle because she is ashamed and does not want her mother to know. In some ways, Lily is also isolated from Allysa as a friend because of her conflicting role as Ryle's sister. After the third incident of violence, Lily has trouble telling her about it, and when she does, she is afraid that Allysa will take Ryle's side. This leaves Lily without any form of a support system as the abuse is ongoing, and leaving Ryle is becoming more challenging because she has no one to talk to or go to.

The fifth problematic behavior in *It Ends with Us* is Ryle's obsessive behavior. Ryle conveys an unhealthy obsession with Lily from the moment they meet. The picture hanging in Allysa's apartment of Lily makes her angry when she recognizes she is in it. Ryle justifies the picture by saying, "It's been in my apartment for months now because you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and I wanted to look at it every single day." (Hoover 93) This is a turning point in their relationship because this makes Ryle admit his feelings about Lily, and they kiss for the first time.

The abusive relationships are portrayed as romantic, which impacts the stories. In *It Ends with Us*, Lily's journey to process her grief over her deceased father is disrupted by Ryle and their relationship. Instead of spending time, possibly seeking professional help, to try to deal with the emotions her father dying evoked, Lily spends most of her time with Ryle. The letters she has written to Ellen DeGeneres may function as a way for the reader to focus on how her past has led her to Ryle rather than serving as a way for her to seek closure from her childhood and how her father acted toward her mother and herself. The perpetuation of her relationship with Ryle affects her choices as she gets back to Boston from the funeral and her actions after she bumps into Atlas. This deviates the story from a more authentic and empowering character arc.

The abuse heavily influences the plot Ryle puts her through. When Lily is not physically abused or thinking about those incidents, she is mentally abused and isolated from her friends and family. The epilogue appears after the novel ends and the plot of abuse is wrapped up. The epilogue is problematic because Lily and Ryle share custody of their daughter. By allowing Ryle shared custody, Lily allows Ryle to be a part of her daughter's life and her life. This differs from the book's last chapter, where Lily decides to divorce Ryle in her daughter's best interest. Before the birth, Lily tells Ryle that "What kind of mother would I be if a small part of me doesn't have concern in regard to your temper?" (Hoover 346) Hoover utilizes the

last two chapters before the epilogue to sow doubts in the reader's mind about Ryle as a father, while Lily contemplates divorce because of his violent tendencies. All of this work is ruined in the epilogue. If the epilogue had not been in the novel, the ending would have functioned better as a way for the author to ensure the reader that abuse is not okay and that breaking the cycle is necessary. By allowing Ryle to be in Emerson's life, Lily allows the cycle to continue. She will not be in control of what happens when Emerson is at her father's house, which is a good enough reason that Ryle should not be able to have her alone without supervision. The reader has been provided several reasons why a parent should end the cycle so that the children cannot see their parent being abused by their other parent through Lily's childhood trauma and her letters to Ellen. There is no mention of Ryle seeking professional help, nor mention of whether or not Lily has any doubts about leaving her daughter with the man who tried to rape her and almost killed her. This raises the question of whether Lily is breaking the cycle of abuse. On the one hand, she is breaking the cycle from her perspective because Emerson will not have to see her father being abusive to her mother as she did. On the other hand, there is no way of being sure that Ryle will not lose his temper on Emerson.

The relationship between Bella and Edward distorts Bella's possible character arc. Bella goes from being independent and maturing to becoming very dependent on Edward after they initiate a relationship. In school, Bella is about to become close to a friend group, but Edward isolates her from these friends because of his jealousy. Bella moving in with her father could have presented a development in her character because she could reconnect with him after he was not present in her life. However, Edward manages to isolate her from her father, and she ends up only seeing her father in passing and not being able to sit down and have a proper conversation with him. Bella could have been an empowered female character but ended up as a codependent girlfriend whose biggest wish is to become a vampire.

The relationship also shapes the plot dynamics and distorts the natural progression of the plot. Edward always keeps close to Bella and saves her from potential danger. Having Edward around all the time means that Bella's choices and actions are influenced by him and his wishes, which means that the story rarely invites conflicts and resolutions that are not connected to Edward.

Tessa's character arc is grand in the story and very different from what it could have been if she had not met Hardin. Despite their flaws, Hardin challenges Tessa, who has been very sheltered by her mother. However, Tessa probably would have broken free from her mother without meeting Hardin. Hardin brings out the worst in Tessa, and she ends up

compromising some of her values to get his attention. The perpetuation of a relationship with Hardin affects all of Tessa's choices and actions, and she takes herself on an emotional journey that takes a significant mental toll on her. Instead of focusing on transitioning into undergrad academics, Tessa's main focus falls on Hardin. Even though Hardin contributes to her getting an internship, she misses out on traditional college experiences as she is either with him or going after him. Tessa's character would develop a great deal without Hardin and without the emotional toll of being in an abusive relationship.

The relationship between Hardin and Tessa serves as a catalyst for conflict and tension throughout the story. All the key plot points in the story revolve around the relationship. This defines the narrative structure and the outcomes of the story. At the same time, the relationship affects the theme of freedom. Instead of being sheltered by her mother, Tessa is now being sheltered and isolated by Hardin. The story could have been a grand story of finding yourself after moving away from home but is instead reduced to a story of being limited by your relationship to become your own person.

The relationships impact the plots of the stories in many ways. However, all of the stories' plots and female protagonists are limited by their partners and the relationship they choose to initiate with them. Since the relationships impact the stories, it is essential to look at why adolescent readers are reading these stories.

Chapter 3: Reader Motivation

Motivation is a prominent reason for adolescents to choose to read YAL romance novels like *Twilight*, *After*, and *It Ends with Us*. John Guthrie and Allan Wigfield (5) define motivation as “beliefs, values, needs, and goals that individuals have”. To be able to be motivated, an individual needs to feel that these values, needs, and goals are matched and expend an effort to sustain interest in them. (Pitcher et al. 378) In general, motivation can be thought of as existing on a continuum that spans extrinsic to intrinsic reasons to perform an action. (Locher et al. 2)

Individuals choose to read to evoke emotions. Reading to evoke emotions is an intrinsic motivation. The relationships in the novels are all back and forth and take the reader on an emotional roller coaster as the characters try to decide if they want to be with each other or not. The back-and-forth nature of the relationship can encourage the reader to see the drama between the characters as a sign of true love. This can lead the impressionable young reader to believe that a healthy relationship involves conflict and tension constantly, rather than encouraging the reader to look for relationships grounded in mutual respect, support, and communication. This is detrimental for a young person because it may mislead the reader to believe that mistreatment and abuse from a partner are acceptable and something you must tolerate to maintain the relationship.

It Ends with Us puts the reader through an emotional roller coaster with intense love, childhood trauma and domestic abuse as the three main themes. The writer provides intense romantic scenes before and after the abuse happens, wrapping the violence up in love and desire. This results in the reader struggling to dislike Ryle, as he is very charming and shows Lily that he does love her, even though he is violent toward her. This is harmful to the reader because Ryle’s inappropriate behavior should be discussed and recognized more by the author, to help the reader understand that Ryle’s less charming traits are something to look for and stay away from in potential romantic partners.

Reading *Twilight* evokes emotions, and young readers are able to recognize themselves in the characters. Bella is depressed and sees Forks as a pit stop that she needs to make in her journey to adulthood. Reading about this promotes the readers’ teenage angst and feelings of being misunderstood in the society they live in. Bella finds a boyfriend and a

family that accepts her and cares for her, which is different from her parents, who do not show their care for her as well. The intrinsic reader motivation makes the reader look for emotions in Bella that they can recognize in their own lives. This means that the adolescent reader may ignore some thoughts or behaviors that are detrimental in order to find thoughts and behaviors that they feel in their own lives. Ignoring the detrimental thoughts and behaviors may internalize or normalize them as the reader does not spend time to think critically about them.

Being able to read experience a topic through reading without physically being there can be seen as a safe space to explore different themes and issues. Reading about domestic abuse grants insight without having to experience it, but the topic and experiencing it through reading about it is heavy and a lot to take in. Before Ryle puts a hand on Lily the reader has experienced Lily's journal entries about her violent father, and she has mentioned her childhood trauma to other characters.

Reading can serve as a safe space for individuals, especially adolescents, who struggle with challenging and frustrating thoughts and experiences as they are to finish their childhood while entering and navigating adulthood. Reading can serve as an emotional refuge, where the adolescent reader is invited to escape from the stress and pressures of everyday life. The reader is allowing themselves to detach from their own worries and immerse themselves into the world in the story and the thoughts and concerns of another character. This escape can provide a sense of relief and a sense of peace and quiet, offering an often much-needed sanctuary.

By stepping into the shoes of a different character, the reader is invited to experience new perspectives. By encountering diverse characters and their stories and adventures, the reader is allowed a place to develop empathy and broaden their understanding of individual human experiences. This understanding can promote a new sense of acceptance for different types of people, tolerance for different viewpoints, and compassion for unique experiences.

The adolescent individual is invited to a safe space to reflect on their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Through the themes and character developments, they are able to witness in literature, the reader can gain insight into their own identity, values, and beliefs, which in turn nurtures self-reflection to evolve personal growth-self-awareness, and a deeper understanding of oneself as a person.

Literature presents different characters that have individual experiences, identities, and struggles and have roots in different cultures and communities. For readers from minorities

and underrepresented communities, reading about characters and narratives that reflect their own experiences from life, identity, and struggles from being marginalized, the literature can create a safe space where the individual can feel understood, seen, and heard. This helps combat feelings of isolation and fosters a sense of belonging.

Reading stimulates one's intellectual interest and fosters critical thinking. It provides a safe space for people to examine complicated ideas, engage with diverse points of view, and broaden their knowledge and perspective of the world. Individuals can broaden their horizons, challenge their assumptions, and build their own informed perspectives through intellectual research. The ideologies imposed by the writers can challenge the fostering of critical thinking.

The chosen novels all portray patriarchal gender ideologies. Silver (122) writes that “[*Twilight*’s] gender ideology is ultimately and unapologetically patriarchal.” According to Franiuk and Scherr, contemporary vampire fiction illustrates particularly strong patriarchic themes. (14) The lead male character is strong, emotionally troubled, and a dangerous vampire. The lead female character takes on the role of the weak, nurturing, vulnerable human. Edward is impenetrable, while Bella is breakable. Despite Meyer’s attempts to empower Bella as a female character, she is the stereotypical “damsel in distress” who needs to be saved by Edward and repeatedly submits to Edward’s authority. (Franiuk and Scherr 18)

The gender ideology presented in *Twilight* is both positively and negatively powerful. Bella tells Edward that “a man and a woman have to be somewhat equal... as in, one of them can’t always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other equally” and “I can’t always be Lois Lane. (...) I want to be Superman, too.” (Meyer 412-13) Attempting to put Bella out of the role as the damsel in distress, Meyer proposes by the end of the novel that Bella does not want to be in the position of having to be saved, empowering her after almost dying because of her relationship with Edward. However, the power dynamic illustrated in the entirety of the novel, with Edward abusing Bella by isolating her and belittling her, is destructive to young, impressionable readers.

Patriarchal ideology is so prevalent in everyday discourse that it passes unnoticed by general audiences and becomes the norm. The patriarchal messages in modern vampire literature are consistent with those in other genres. As a result, ideas in other media, like romance novels, that create a reality that justifies violence against women may be reinforced by vampire fiction (Franiuk and Scherr 15). According to McNeill-Harkins and Polek, romanticizing red flags and praising a man's power are predictors of physical violence in a

dating relationship. (in Franiuk and Scherr 20) Dangerous characteristics may be viewed as attractive by a young reader at first because the characteristics signal powerful masculinity. Edward displays characteristic warning signs of abusive behavior. Since society favors masculine characteristics, it is understandable that a young reader might respond favorably to these behaviors. The reader is attracted to Edward not only because he is supernatural and pretty but also because of his stalking, isolation and belittling of Bella. His mistreatment of her goes unnoticed by the young reader because society has romanticized abusive traits among masculine men in favor of their attractiveness. The burden should not fall on a young reader to recognize warning signs about abusive behavior, but it should rather fall on parents, educators, and media to redefine masculinity without violence. (Franiuk and Scherr 20)

The gender ideology in *After* favors the male love interest. Even though Tessa does not know about the dare until the end of *After*, the dare is the ultimate reason behind why Hardin decides to pursue her, which ultimately leads to Tessa compromising her values. This results in Tessa behaving in a way that she is not comfortable with, which can send a message to young readers that it is okay for partners to pressure each other into compromising values and doing things they do not want to do. This conforms to the uneven power dynamic in the novel, and ultimately in abusive relationships, and can lead young, impressionable readers that it is normal and okay to pressure each other into performing sexual activities. In addition, the fact that Tessa and Hardin fall in love with each other during the dare and continue their relationship after the dare is revealed can be seen as a way for the author to reinforce the idea that women are supposed to be passive and submissive. At the same time, it is acceptable for men to use manipulation and coercion to get what they want. This reinforcement of harmful gender roles and power imbalances in romantic relationships at a young age is detrimental to young readers.

Since Todd portrays sex as a prevalent theme in the *After* and the other two novels discuss sex at major plot points, the ideologies surrounding sex in YAL need to be acknowledged. The issue of sex in YAL is widely discussed. Bryan Gillis and Joanna Simpson claim that sex in YAL should not be used as an information manual about contraception and the dangers of unprotected sex but rather to provide the adolescent reader an insight in the emotional consequences of sex. The realistic portrayals of the emotions connected to sex reflect the complexity of sex in the real world that not only adults experience but maybe especially teenagers having their first experiences. (121) Along with representing emotional aspects of sex realistically, sexual content in YAL advances the plot and develops

characters. (101) Cart argues that “not to include sex in books for contemporary young adults – 48 percent of whom have had sexual intercourse – is to agree to a de facto conspiracy of silence, to imply to young reader that sex is so awful, so traumatic, so dirty that we can’t even write about it”. (144) Sex needs to be included in YAL to set healthy examples about the complexity of sex, and not to include this is to imply to the adolescent reader that sex is taboo and something that is not recommended. However, sex is going to happen to many adolescents, so providing examples that are realistic and that send a message to the reader that sex is fine under comfortable circumstances will be the best option.

Bella and Edward do not engage in sexual intercourse and have not had sex with anybody else prior to their relationship. Edward decides that they need to wait until marriage to have sex, while Bella implies that she wants to do more than kiss. Virginity has typically been portrayed as a female trait in popular culture. Related to this stereotype of the virginal woman is the notion that a woman’s body is a man’s property. By portraying Bella as a virgin, the idea that a man owns a woman's body, especially if he is the only one to "know" it, is further reinforced. (Franiuk and Scherr 17-18)

Premarital sex in the novel is linked to risk and is life-threatening and brutal to anyone involved. Silver (123) claims that *Twilight's* “abstinence-only agenda” is not as surprising since it is situated in the YA genre compared to what it would be if it was targeted explicitly to adults. The novel’s validation of abstinence has been widely discussed. Meyer herself is Mormon and has told *Time* magazine that “I do think that because I’m a very religious person, it does tend to come out somewhat in the books” (Silver 128) Feminist critics have attacked the novel’s abstinence agenda, which is not surprising in the light of the national struggle over abstinence-only education in US schools. As the story implies that the only context in Bella and Edward’s relationship where sex is safe is in marriage, the novel creates a model that abstinence is the model for teenagers and that marriage is the best way to make lust and love last forever.

The novel’s abstinence-only agenda serves to impose an ideology on young readers that waiting until marriage is the safest and best. Young readers are eager to surrender themselves to the novels they read and the point of view the story is presenting. (Silver 136) However, readers can utilize suspension of disbelief and are as a result, not impressionable to these types of ideologies. Some critics present the identification between reader and focalizer as unproblematic because young readers are more actively navigating and evaluating ideologies. (Silver 136) The discourse suggests that Bella and Edward will be safe to have sex

after they are married, which only presents itself as a thinly veiled argument for abstinence. The reason why it will be safe after marriage is not discussed, although one would think that marriage would not solve the issue of Edward being a vampire and Bella not being a vampire.

The abstinence-only agenda presented in *Twilight* presents a negative notion of power. In a review of abstinence-only education in the United States, John Santelli et al. points out that even though abstinence until marriage is the goal for many abstinence programs, most Americans initiate sexual intercourse during their adolescent years. (73) Public opinion surveys reveal substantial support for abstinence as a behavioral goal for children. Still, they also reveal strong support for teaching sexually active teens about contraception and where to get it. (74) Health professionals broadly endorse comprehensive sexuality education. In theory, abstaining from vaginal and anal intercourse is fully protected against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. However, in practice, abstinence-only agendas often fail to prevent these outcomes. (79) In addition to this, Santelli et al. (78) found that abstinence-only sex education may substantially negatively impact LGBTQ+ youth's well-being. Meyer promotes abstinence by correlating sex before marriage with danger, at the same time as she eroticizes waiting until marriage.

Ryle and Lily do not wait until marriage to have sex, as sexual desire is what brings the two together. The consensual sexual content in *It Ends with Us*, i.e., the sexual content that happens before the attempted rape, provides new complexities to the plot, and Lily's inner monologue provides more thoughts about sex from her character to the reader. This is harmful to young readers because it blurs the lines of consent. Ryle convinced her to have sex with him, while Lily has told him on several occasions that she does not do one-night stands. By appearing in her life on several occasions and executing grand romantic gestures, Ryle makes sure that she thinks this is not a one-night stand, and she eventually gives in and sleeps with him. Lily is given almost no choice but to give in, but neither she nor the reader recognize this as anything other than her suddenly making the decision that she wants to sleep with him. Lily's questioning of her own agency and boundaries when it comes to one-night stands and uncommitted sex can transfer to the adolescent reader, and this can create confusion about the importance of personal autonomy and the right to say no.

However, there is one incident of sex in the novel that is especially tricky. During the attack, Ryle attempts to rape Lily under the guise of proving to her that he loves her more than Atlas does. Even though Lily stops him before he penetrates her, the attack is still a

sexual assault, and Lily clearly states to Ryle that she does not consent. 1 out of 6 American women has been victim of an attempted or completed rape. (Rainn) Cart (148) argues that one may see why teenagers might be confused by this issue, given how frequently rape and other sexual violence take place in the context of presumed romantic relationships. The sexual assault is barely mentioned in the time, most likely because of the pregnancy, but also because Lily is staying at Atlas' house and is battling her feelings for him while navigating her feelings toward Ryle. This is problematic because the implications that follow sexual assault are buried beneath a love triangle and a pregnancy. It is very important to talk about sexual assault to help adolescents know that this is not okay, and by not doing this, Hoover sends out a message that this is less important than an old crush and a pregnancy with your abusive partner. The attempted rape is reduced to a plot twist rather than a big theme of the novel.

The ideologies surrounding sex and gender, as well as the emotional responses to reading YAL romance fiction, function as intrinsic motivations to read. Extrinsic motivations to read include venues that prompt adolescents to read and venues that allow adolescents to read. Many of these venues can be found in media, and specifically on social media. Adolescent readers see abusive and unhealthy relationships everywhere in media, derived from media like television and YAL. These portrayals have become so normalized in media that they are portrayed as a perfect example of romance rather than acknowledging the harm that these portrayals can cause. For instance, Ross and Rachel from the TV show *Friends* are portrayed as one of the best TV couples of all time, despite cheating, lying, and sabotage for ten seasons. Chuck emotionally abuses Blair in *Gossip Girl*, treating her like a possession and assaulting her. Romeo and Juliet, the most romanticized couple of them all, ended up dead because of lack of communication. These relationships, along with many more, contribute to the notion that abusive relationships are the norm on TV and in books. This transfers into real life. According to Domestic Violence Services, almost 1.5 million high school students in the United States have been hit or physically harmed by a romantic partner in the last year, and one in three young people will be in an abusive or unhealthy relationship. (Domestic Violence Services Inc.) Abusive relationships among teens are common, and as many as one in three girls experience physical, emotional, or verbal abuse from a romantic partner. (Domestic Violence Services Inc.) At the same time, 81% of parents "believe teen dating violence is not an issue or admit they don't know it's an issue" (Domestic Violence Services Inc.)

The normalization of abusive or unhealthy relationships in media is a concerning phenomenon that can create distorted perceptions about healthy and respectful relationships. When abusive relationships are portrayed without proper context or consequences, it can send misleading messages to an adolescent audience about what is acceptable behavior, boundaries, and power dynamics within relationships. Media can contribute to the desensitization of young readers to warning signs of problematic relationships and what to look for in a partner. It can also make it more challenging to recognize and address abuse or mistreatment when they encounter it in real life.

Another extrinsic motivation to read YAL romance novels is social media. In 2019, 84% of Americans aged 13 to 18 owned a smartphone, and they used screen media for an average of 7 hours and 22 minutes per day. (Chen et al. 1) Social media such as GoodReads and TikTok can contribute to creating an echo chamber where readers are exposed to mainly positive and romanticized depictions of the relationships. Critical voices or alternative perspectives are harder to get by, especially on TikTok's tailored algorithm that shows the viewer content that aligns with the preferences and beliefs that the algorithm thinks the viewer wants to see. Social media may influence readers to strive for similar relationships to the ones in the novels in their real lives by reinforcing these idealized relationship dynamics, making the adolescent reader believe that such an intense and unhealthy dynamic is desirable or expected. Fuller and Sedo (45) argue that social media influencers have become trusted others on the same level as friends, family, or educators. If these social media influencers are not aware of their responsibility to open critical discussion, it furthers the echo chamber of romanticized depictions of the relationships in the novels.

On the other hand, social media platforms can also provide spaces for critical discussion and analysis of the relationship. It may be more challenging to come across alternative perspectives, but by actively seeking out these types of perspectives, one will find a myriad of these types of views. Users who actively seek out diverse viewpoints or engage in critical discussions can gain a broader understanding of the potential harmful aspects of the relationships portrayed in the books. Suppose the reader is exposed to these discussions. In that case, they may become more aware of how the relationship has potential to be harmful and how to recognize and avoid unhealthy relationship dynamics in their own lives. Social media can provide a platform for adolescents to share experiences, insights, and resources related to healthy relationships. This can further empower readers to make informed choices and challenge the romanticized notions and relationship dynamics presented in the literature.

One of the platforms that provide space for discussion about YAL romance novels is TikTok. Even though *It Ends with Us* was published in 2016, the novel's popularity did not take up until November 2020. This is caused by the rise of literature content on TikTok, collected on a corner of the app called "BookTok." The upsurge of BookTok happened during the pandemic, as a result of more young people being confined to their bedrooms with limited options for entertainment. Stewart (2021) claims that *It Ends with Us*'s popularity is one of the best examples of TikTok's impact on book sales. The novel has sold over four million copies, and in 2022 Hoover's books sold more copies than the Bible. (McLoughlin) The impact of BookTok on young readers is unlike anything else, and Jerasa and Boffone claim that in 2021, a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, they saw a noticeable shift where BookTok and other digital literacy communities serve as much purpose as traditional literacy communities. (219) BookTok engages young readers to discuss literature and expand literacy, using their social media app of choice rather than the classroom. Merga (1) concludes that BookTok is used by young readers to "provide recommendations, explore reader experience and emotional response, generate reader community and identity, discuss fictional characters and places, develop and promote writing, and discuss personal library management and being a reader in the family." Because of the experience of discussing literature with peers and the enormous resources to do so, young readers are often easily influenced to read a book as long as the book is talked about enough by others. This can both be seen as healthy and concerning. Healthy because adolescents are being exposed to literature by their peers, which impacts their willingness to read, but concerning because the books chosen by BookTok may contain harmful content to young readers. This harmful content can go under the radar of parents or other caretakers, which can result in issues like normalization of destructive behavior like abusive relationships, or inappropriate romantic relationships like a teacher dating a student.

The rise of BookTok and its impact on young readers' reading choices is a double-edged sword. On one side, a sense of community is fostered, and more people are granted the chance to engage with literature in a way that feels inclusive and accessible. Individuals are given opportunities to expand their reading by being presented with new books and genres. Young readers are allowed and encouraged to connect with a diverse range of voices and perspectives, which can foster critical thinking and challenge their assumptions. Discussions about books and passionate book-related content can promote enthusiasm and love for reading and literature among young readers. On the other side, the potential exposure of young

readers to books that may contain harmful or inappropriate content is concerning. Book recommendations and trends are rapidly spreading, and young readers must adhere to new trusted others and may be encouraged to read certain books based solely on their popularity. These books can contain harmful or inappropriate content that is not discussed on the platform because the platform is user-generated. The responsibility lies with the individual user to discuss books responsibly, which is not always the case on TikTok. Harmful content may go unnoticed or not be addressed at all, leading to normalization or romanization of unhealthy behaviors or relationships.

On TikTok, we can find videos confessing to love Ryle's character even though they know that he is not good. On the second most popular video, when you search "It Ends With Us Ryle", a commenter confesses that "I don't know why but I am so into Ryle" (Loves) The fourth most popular video is captioned, "He's a jerk but he's hot" (@velvets4u) On another video a commenter confesses that they had a toxic urge to forgive Ryle the first ten minutes after finishing the book. (Mor) These ideas may not represent the views of the majority of readers, but these comments indicate that there is a subset of readers who may find themselves attracted to Ryle or other characters who exhibit harmful behavior. Even though these are not ideas shared by the majority of commenters on these TikTok videos, the fact that young readers show these tendencies to overlook warning signs in a relationship is disturbing. These comments raise concerns about the impact of the relationship's portrayals and suggest that some readers may be influenced by the romanticized depiction of characters like Ryle, which blurs the lines between fiction and reality.

The Adolescent's Media Practice Model (AMPM) can be used when looking at using social media as an extrinsic motivation to read. Identity expression is significant in AMPM, and by utilizing BookTok discussions and book recommendations, the adolescent consumer utilizes the identity expression to apply the books to their own lives as an expression of identity.

Another extrinsic motivation to read is being able to read anytime and anywhere. *After* was initially published on Wattpad, an online platform that allows everyone to publish stories and for these stories to be read for free on an app. The accessibility of the story on Wattpad meant that the story was free to read for everyone who had an account. This meant that the only thing you needed to be able to read was a phone, a computer, or a tablet and an email address. Because of this, adolescents without financial means to purchase books were also

invited to read, and the novel's accessibility to a broad audience may have contributed to the novel's popularity and influence on young readers already while it was being written.

The episodic nature of the book and the way it was published serialized means that reader engagement can be high. The episodic nature is still present in the published novel, as chapters are short and concern only a short amount of time in the story. There are 98 chapters in the book. The short chapters make the novel more approachable and less intimidating to young readers who are not used to reading longer stories. The length of the chapters creates a sense of urgency, which keeps the reader engaged, as it is not daunting to start a new chapter, and easy to just read one more chapter. This can also contribute to the plot, as Hardin and Tessa's relationship is filled with drama and intense emotions that happen quickly.

However, the short chapters and the story's fast-paced nature can also harm young readers. Because the events that are happening in the novel are so quick to come and go, the reader is not allowed enough time to process the events that portray Hardin and Tessa's unhealthy relationship. This can make it more difficult for readers to recognize the abuse and analyze how this affects the characters and more importantly, the reader's expectations of romantic relations. The short chapters can therefore contribute to the idea that unhealthy relationships are exciting and desirable because they are fast paced and intense.

Wattpad allows users to comment on each chapter and comment on specific lines or words. Other users can read these comments as they read the chapters. Because of the ability to comment, the readers were able to influence Todd on what direction they wanted the story to go in. This accessibility may have contributed to the novel's widespread popularity at the time, which resulted in a published novel series and film adaptations.

Since Wattpad is a platform used mainly by young readers, this could suggest that *After* has had a significant impact on the perceptions of romance and romantic expectations in young readers. The power of online fan communities and the popularity of fan fiction has a substantial impact on the cultural discourse around romantic relationships among adolescents. 8% of all stories on Wattpad fall into the genre of fan fiction. (Bold 123) *After*'s origins as a One Direction fan fiction works as another extrinsic motivation. The fan fiction community on Wattpad consisted of around 71 000 members in 2018, and the most popular fan fictions were One Direction fan fiction. (124) The published version of *After* is a reverse-engineered fan fiction, which has become increasingly popular in traditional publishing. Reverse-engineered fan fiction removes all identifiers, like character names, from the original work to make the republishing unidentifiable. Sometimes, reverse-engineered fan fiction is published

with a different title as well, like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which was initially published as *Master of the Universe*, a fan fiction based on the *Twilight* series. Anna Todd replaced all first and last names from *After* that were identifiable with One Direction's band members and their family members. For example, Harry Styles became Hardin Scott even though Todd changed the identifiers in the published story, *After* is often identified as the original fan fiction by individuals who read it as it was published on Wattpad. Adolescent readers that were One Direction fans already had a pre-existing attachment to the band members before they started reading the fan fiction. Seeing their favorite band incorporated into a new story adds to the appeal of reading the story. The fan fiction already had a built-in audience as it was written. Being part of a fan fiction community offers a sense of belonging and camaraderie, as Wattpad allowed them a space for discussing and sharing ideas, theories, and emotional experiences related to the stories. Other readers were able to see these comments as they read the stories. This contributes to an ability to express thoughts and find validation in perspectives for an adolescent reader.

Both *After* and *Twilight* have been adapted into films, and a film adaptation of *It Ends with Us* is in the making. Films that are adapted from books generate 53% more revenue than original screenplays. (Rothwell) Film adaptations attract a broader audience to the original book, which can introduce more people to the story and invite them to read the book after watching the adaptation to explore the narrative further. Watching a film adaptation of a book serves as an extrinsic motivation to pick up the book and immerse themselves into the story. However, the books also already have a guaranteed audience that is anticipating seeing their favorite characters and plots played out on screen and re-reading the book after watching the film can serve as an enhanced reading experience. Comparing the book and the film adaptation can be thought-provoking. Doing this invites the reader to consider the impact of interpretations of the story in the adaptation, which again can entice the reader to think about how they interpret their favorite characters and scenes in their minds.

When the *After* movie adaptation came out, readers were annoyed by the casting of Hardin and how the actor interpreted the role. Instead of praising the actor and the producers for how they brought Hardin to life, the film was critiqued by avid fans because Hardin's character was "too soft," arguing that the character has been "sanitized" to fit into Hollywood standards to make the film marketable to a broader audience. This is interesting because it shows how abusive partners are being so romanticized online to the point where young readers are exposed to harmful content without even realizing it. By asking the producers of

the film to portray Hardin as close to possible to how he is portrayed in the book, the readers are once again asking for normalized abuse to appear in media. The reactions reflect a more significant cultural shift in how adolescent consumers critique and consume media and illustrates a need for a more nuanced discussion on how abusive relationships are being presented in media. Young viewers view abusive traits as desirable and want to see this in the media. The reactions to Hardin's film character underscores the influence of social media on young readers today. Social media has the potential to have a powerful impact on setting the standard of how relationships are to be portrayed in media, and to teach young readers the values that constitute a healthy relationship and why it is worth searching for in favor of a romanticized abusive relationship.

We get an in-depth understanding of what motivates adolescents to read young adult romance novels by investigating both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Emotional connection, identification with protagonists, gender and sexual ideology, and social media peer influence all play individually essential roles in determining their motivation and engagement with these novels. This makes the adolescent pick up the book and keep reading until the end, forming the baseline for the story's impact.

Chapter 4: Reader Impact

As readers immerse themselves in the world of fiction, they often form deep connections with the characters and their relationships. We gain insight into the complex ways in which literature impacts readers' comprehension, perceptions, and emotional experiences by investigating the interplay between narrative empathy, suspension of disbelief, and reader responses to romanticized harmful relationship portrayals.

A large part of the reading that responds to emotional maturity is narrative empathy. Stewart (2021) argues that “the resurgence of *It Ends with Us* shows that young readers exist in droves and are hungry for titles that move them.” *It Ends with Us*, *Twilight*, and *After* all portray vulnerable characters, both the female protagonists and the male love interests. In *Twilight*, the vulnerability of Edward and his family, in terms of human feelings, transcends what the average vampire or supernatural being is portrayed as in fiction. (Unzue 6) This adds a new dimension to the argument about narrative empathy. The reader cannot connect with the antagonism of being a vampire, but vulnerability is something the reader can connect with. Feeling the very vulnerable emotions of happiness and sadness related to other beings involves the fundamental idea of help. (Unzue 6) Edward struggles to accept that Bella wants to be with him despite him being a potential danger to her. After confirming to Bella that he is a vampire, he tries to talk her out of being with him: “It’s wrong. It’s not safe. I’m dangerous, Bella – please, grasp that.” (Meyer 166) Edward’s warnings and Bella’s dismissal of the dangers of the relationships recur throughout the novel. “It is unclear if Meyer intends to portray Bella as independent and assertive with her refusal to accept Edward’s warnings or as courageous (and even perceptive) because she is undeterred by his desire to kill her.” (Franiuk and Scherr 18)

YAL often employs present tense first-person narration because of the assumption that young readers live here and now and have an underdeveloped perception of space and time. (Nikolajeva 88) The interior monologue provides the reader a more intimate and authentic voice, making the reader relate better to the other, the protagonist. (92) In *Twilight*, Bella’s filtering consciousness follows the story from beginning to end. Meyer utilizes this as a narrative tool to tune into the reader’s affective and cognitive processes. The filtering consciousness provides the reader with abundant descriptions, monologues, and dialogues that

captivate the reader enough to trigger an empathetic response. (Unzue 4) The young adult reader identifies with Bella and feels her pain, confusion, and affection.

In *It Ends with Us*, Hoover utilizes an internal monologue for Lily. Having the novel written in first person, from Lily's point of view, makes the romanticization of Ryle's character in the novel's beginning more intense. Lily is infatuated by Ryle, and the reader is provided intimate and loving thoughts about him from Lily's point of view, which can assist the reader in romanticizing Ryle's character. This also means that when Ryle violently abuses Lily, the reader experiences this as just as big of a shock as Lily. Lily's internal monologue together with the journal entries from her past, function to trigger the narrative empathy, inviting the reader to feel the Lily's emotions of being betrayed by her partner and the shock of realizing that she has become a victim of abuse that is struggling to leave, just like her mother.

Ryle's childhood trauma from when he accidentally shot and killed his brother functions to excuse his behavior. The leading cause of death for children and teenagers aged 1-19 in the United States is firearms ("Child & Teen Gun Safety). In 2023, there have already been at least 96 unintentional shootings by children, which have resulted in 40 deaths and 58 injuries in the United States (#NotAnAccident Index). Even though Ryle makes a point in telling Lily that he does not tell her this to excuse his behavior from the previous two violent incidents, he follows up by saying, "Allysa wanted me to tell you all of this because since that happened, there are things I can't control. I get angry. I black out. But it is not my excuse. It is my reality" (Hoover 241) This statement makes the reader think that this is not a way to excuse his behavior, even though the novel implies that it is. Ryle expects Lily to take him back after he tells her this. This unresolved childhood trauma triggers narrative empathy as the reader, along with Lily, realizes that this incident is the reason why he has rage issues and struggles to commit to a romantic relationship. This is problematic to the reader because it communicates the message that, despite the abuse being unacceptable, it is understandable.

In addition to communicating a message about abuse, Ryle's back story makes the readers root for him. After finding out why Ryle loses his temper, the reader experiences Ryle and Lily in a fight once and walking away from it before Ryle loses his temper. After this incident, the next time Ryle disagrees with Lily is when he attacks her. After the attack, when Lily regains consciousness, Ryle expresses how sorry he is. "He is Ryle again, and he knows just what he's done to me." (Hoover 266) Hoover signals that when Ryle loses his temper, he is not himself and does not know what he is doing in the moment. This is harmful because it

once again excuses his behavior. Even though Ryle has anger issues, the third incidence of violence was calculated and not an incident where he lost his temper in a fight. Ryle was already aggravated when Lily came home, and his attack started the second she entered the door. There was no chance for him to be able to blame this on losing his temper in the heat of the moment. If Ryle or Lily acknowledged that his rage issues were such a problem in their relationship that it is harmful, which one may say it is, Ryle should be able to get help with his rage instead of blaming it on his back story. This would also communicate to the reader that a partner that is struggling with anger issues should be pointed in a specific direction to seek professional help to be able to handle the problem before something bad happens in the relationship.

Like Ryle, Hardin and Tessa also struggle with Hardin's unresolved childhood trauma in *After*. Hardin's childhood trauma can be detrimental to young readers because it can normalize trying to fix someone with a troubled past rather than acknowledging the issues and seeking help. The childhood trauma can trigger narrative empathy because it can help show readers the impact of childhood trauma on mental health and relationship, and readers who have experienced similar trauma can find a sense of validation in reading about this. Narrative empathy can be triggered to the point where the reader excuses Hardin's behavior. This is harmful because this does not resonate with real life, where it can be dangerous to justify someone's behavior just because they have had a rough life. In addition to this, Hardin's trauma, and the way he copes with the trauma are used to portray him as mysterious and unpredictable. This can create unrealistic and harmful expectations to young readers about what a romantic partner should be like.

After and *It Ends with Us* places disproportionate emphasis on Ryle and Hardin's childhood traumas. This can reinforce stereotypes regarding the link between trauma and abusive behavior, which can oversimplify the complexities of trauma and the subsequent issues and how this relates to the individual's actions. It is essential for the adolescent reader to be able to recognize the complexities of human behavior. This can be done by fostering discussions around this theme, which can help the adolescent develop a more nuanced understanding of trauma and its correlations with abuse.

The reader may choose to root for Hardin because his background story triggers narrative empathy. Focusing solely on the narrative empathy triggered by the unresolved trauma may contribute to disregarding the perspectives and experiences of other characters, especially Tessa, and all the other characters that have been victims of Hardin's rage. The

harm this character inflicts on others in the story may be disregarded or dismissed by rooting for a character based on narrative empathy without acknowledging and critically examining their actions. This may perpetuate the cycle of mistreatment. Readers who root for Hardin may unintentionally internalize the toxic relationship patterns portrayed in the story. This may impact their understanding of the components of a healthy relationship and may influence a normalization of unhealthy behaviors or relationship dynamics.

Both Hardin and Ryle struggle with containing their rage, and both novels point to the issue of their unresolved childhood trauma as the source of these issues. Unfortunately, the portrayals of the characters and their uncontrollable rage may inadvertently normalize unhealthy behaviors and can lead to distorted beliefs about the nature of relationships and acceptable ways to express anger. This is detrimental to adolescent readers because they are led to believe that a romantic partner should be allowed to react to anything with rage if they struggle with traumatic experiences from their childhood.

Some readers may keep reading *After* despite the abusive relationship and Hardin's unlikeable traits because they root for Tessa's character and want everything to work out for her. Tessa is a likable character, and her trying to navigate a new part of her life is engaging to readers who relate to her situation. Young readers are drawn to a happy ending as it gives them a sense of hope and empowerment. If Tessa can make it through this part of her life and maybe work her relationship out with Hardin, they might be able to face and overcome obstacles of their own lives. Happy endings also provide a sense of closure and resolution and can help adolescents develop an understanding of optimism about the future. Being young and looking forward to moving out and potentially starting higher education or a job can be daunting but seeing characters succeed can provide a sense of comfort. The reader can root for a happy ending for Tessa because it offers a sense of hope and comfort, which is essential for an adolescent as they navigate the challenges faced by getting older. The desire for happy endings can be connected to cultural and societal factors in the adolescent's life because of the adolescent's search for stories that reflect their own experiences and emotions. In a culture that values higher education and working after high school, young readers will be drawn to stories where the protagonist achieves these kinds of goals and achieves a happy ending. A society that values deeply romantic, lasting relationships will influence young readers to seek out stories about relationships that overcome obstacles and live happily ever after.

Tessa's journey to break free from her mother and childhood speaks to a young reader and can contribute to why a young reader chooses to read *After*. Tessa struggles to conform to

the pressure and expectations put on her by her mother after she moves away from home because of her desire to become independent and make her own choices. This struggle is something many young readers can relate to, as it is common in adolescence to feel pressure from parents and society to conform to certain expectations. Tessa's struggles are relatable, which creates a sense of identification with the character and leads the adolescent reader to become more invested in the story. The themes of self-discovery and finding your own identity are prevalent in the novel and can serve as an inspiration for young readers who face similar challenges.

When reading *Twilight*, it is easy for young readers to identify with and feel sorry for Bella's circumstances. The identification process that occurs while reading a novel that simulates another person's experience is predictable, natural, and strengthened by the emotional memory triggers that are all a part of the human simulation capacity. (Hogan 248) The scenario they are in sets off the emotional memory triggers in any young adult reader's mind necessary to facilitate an empathetic experience, which makes the reader share emotionally meaningful experiences. A categorical identification based on the reader's own personal notion of self in terms of relating to an in group—supernatural misfits or whatever—is always added to these, which in turn are aided by emotion contagion. (248) Emotion contagion means that the adolescent reader unconsciously adopts the character's emotional state.

Lily's trauma from her childhood and her role as the victim of domestic abuse as an adult triggers sympathy from the readers. The first-person point of view creates double exposure between the reader and Lily; the reader will feel empathy toward the character. This double exposure and narrative empathy makes the reader root for Lily, despite their feelings about Ryle or their relationship. If the reader roots for Lily, they will keep reading to find if everything works out for her in the end.

Narrative empathy functions as a way to enhance the reading experience in search of a consistent and fulfilling reading experience. In searching for the most coherent narrative experience, the reader may choose to utilize suspension of disbelief intentionally or unintentionally when reading. Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes suspension of disbelief as a tendency for the reader to overlook improbabilities that happen in a story temporarily. (Tomko)

One of the ways the adolescent reader can utilize suspension of disbelief is when the reader immerses themselves in the story. To fully immerse in a story, the reader needs to set

aside skepticism and emotionally engage in the characters and the events, which can enhance their emotional connection to the characters. This emotional connection to the story can improve their willingness to accept or overlook certain problematic aspects of the relationships. This means that the reader can choose to look past the fact that Tessa can leave the relationship because of its toxicity in favor of looking for Tessa and Hardin's happy ending. This is also interesting when looking at the bet at the end of the novel, because the rest of the series does not acknowledge this as a grand betrayal that could have made Tessa realize how bad Hardin was treating her and left her to search for her own happy ending. Readers reading past the bet's revelation may either look past the betrayal in search of Tessa and Hardin's happy ending, or they look for Tessa's individual happy ending and keep reading to see if she eventually overcomes this obstacle. By doing this, the user utilizes suspension of disbelief to accept elements that may not be entirely realistic and that they might not adapt to their own lives, to add to the emotional impact of the story.

Another way for the reader to utilize suspension of disbelief is to suspend critical judgment and accept romanticized portrayals of unhealthy relationship dynamics in a desire for escapism. Reading about an idealized version of love and romance may offer a temporary hiatus from the complexities and challenges of a real-life relationship. Suppose the relationship in the novel is sharing struggles with the individual's own romantic relationship. In that case, the reader may choose to look past these struggles and unhealthy tendencies to see if the fictional relationship works itself out in the end. If the fictional relationship has a happy ending, the reader may choose to look past their own personal challenges with unhealthy tendencies and struggles in their romantic relationship. This can be detrimental to an adolescent reader because they can accept being in an unhealthy relationship, which can lead to emotional harm.

The reader can also utilize suspension of disbelief to immerse themselves in peer culture. Their peers and social groups highly influence adolescents, and reading popular novels like *Twilight*, *After*, and *It Ends with Us* often creates a sense of community among readers who share similar interests. For example, on TikTok, the adolescent is offered a community under BookTok, but if the adolescent is not posting videos or commenting on others' videos, they are not able to create and express their individual perception of the relationships portrayed in the novels. If they do express their individual understanding of the relationships and their thoughts are not shared by the majority of the community, their comments and/or videos may not be shown to the majority. As a result, the adolescent reader

may feel more inclined to accept and defend unhealthy and problematic relationship dynamics portrayed in popular novels to align with the opinions and discussions within their peer groups, to be able to fit in with the crowd, and engage in discussions online and in real life.

However, it is important to note that while young readers may suspend belief in certain areas, they are also individuals with their own experiences and expectations of reading and utilize these to critically read portrayals that seem unrealistic or overly simplistic. In addition, adolescent readers may temporarily choose to utilize suspension of disbelief while reading to enhance the reading process, and then use critical thinking after finishing the book. Nonetheless, the detrimental and harmful reader responses to the relationships are of most importance.

The adolescent reader's response to the abusive and unhealthy relationship dynamics in *Twilight*, *After*, and *It Ends with Us* is significant in determining whether the portrayals are unhealthy for the reader. However, the responses are not representative of all adolescent readers. The responses are based on hypothetical adolescent readers that fill the stereotype this thesis has created as easily influenced and a lower emotional maturity—the seven problematic behaviors and attitudes presented in Chapter 2 work as grounds for discussion.

The love bombing in *It Ends with Us* is not recognized as love bombing but rather as grand romantic gestures. Lily's bothered feeling and the acknowledgment from both characters that this is not something they have talked about are the only clear signs that this is more than a grand romantic gesture. Ryle is doing everything in his power to make Lily stay with him. The apartment is a way for him to keep Lily attached to him. If she moves in with him and gives up the lease on her old apartment, she will be tied to living there and will not be able to leave Ryle and end their relationship quickly.

In addition to buying the apartment without Lily's involvement, Ryle has also paid for the apartment. This means that when Lily moves in, and her lease on her old apartment is up, she is dependent on Ryle for a place to live. The novel never acknowledges that Lily has co-signed the apartment or paid for it in any form. Lily is unable to leave Ryle without having a place to stay. Massachusetts is a common-law state, which means that Ryle can only put his name on the title, despite being married to Lily. (Kielar) This is a form of economic abuse that limits Lily's freedom. This limited freedom is shown after the third incident of violence when Lily is staying with Atlas and contemplates on where to go. "there's literally nowhere I can go right now. I need a couple of days to process things, and if I go to a hotel, Ryle could track the credit card charge and find me." (Hoover 286). This economic abuse is not made

clear to the reader until the third incident of violence occurs and Lily has nowhere to go. Reducing Ryle's buying of the apartment to a loving and romantic gesture after he has hit her on two separate occasions already is harmful to the reader, and the consequences of Lily not owning the apartment are never addressed directly to the reader

Adolescent readers who may be unfamiliar with healthy relationship dynamics can be lead to believe that the excessive attention from love bombing is a sign of true love. In reality, extreme attention and gift giving can be warning signs of an unhealthy and potentially abusive relationship. Love bombing can create a euphoric and overwhelming experience, and adolescent readers are susceptible to this experience by reading about love bombing that is not recognized as love bombing in the story. The romanticized portrayal of love bombing in *It Ends with Us* can normalize and perpetuate harmful relationship patterns, leaving young readers susceptible to entering or tolerating abusive relationships in their own lives.

Ryle's love bombing is related to his persistent pursuit of Lily despite her rejection. Ryle also chooses to love bomb Lily when he thinks she is going to leave him. Love bombing is detrimental to the adolescent reader because it presents an unrealistic and exaggerated portrayal of romance. Adolescents who are presented with these ideas may develop unrealistic expectations of unrealistic relationships, believing that excessive gift giving and grand romantic gestures are the norm. These blurred understandings of a healthy, balanced relationship that the novel presents are normalized in media. This can set the adolescent up for disappointment when facing the real world.

Ryle's disregard for Lily's rejection is portrayed as romantic and acceptable, which sends a dangerous message to the adolescent reader, suggesting that persistence in the face of rejection is a good and desirable characteristic in a love relationship, undermining the importance of consent and personal autonomy. This can sustain toxic relationship patterns in which one person feels entitled to pursue another, even if they expressly do not want to. The portrayal of Ryle's refusal to accept rejection can be confusing and harmful to an adolescent reader because it blurs the lines between persistence and harassment, which leads the reader and Lily to question their own agency and boundaries in relationships. This may send the message that the disregarding of someone's rejection is romantic and acceptable, which perpetuates a dangerous narrative that undermines consent and personal autonomy.

By disregarding Lily's rejection and love bombing her, Ryle shows instances of obsessive behavior. Adolescent readers may see the obsessive behavior illustrated by the male love interests as a sign of intense love and passion. This can lead to distorted perceptions of

what a healthy relationship should look like and contribute to a normalization of possessive and controlling relationships. Adolescent readers who are still developing their own identities and navigating romantic relationships can take damage from reading about romanticized obsessive behavior because this behavior can erode personal boundaries and autonomy. This can lead to a loss of individuality and result in a sense of being trapped by the partner's demands and expectations. The male love interests exhibit the possessive and controlling behaviors, while the female characters are depicted as the object of obsession. This can perpetuate gender stereotypes and power imbalances, reinforcing harmful notions of gender roles. Possessiveness is linked to love and protection in these harmful gender roles, and the individuality and agency of the female characters are dismissed.

Edward's obsessive behavior regarding Bella is interpreted by her as an act of affection. This is also something the adolescent reader can interpret as affection and an act of love. This can lead to distorted perceptions about a healthy romantic partner's role in your life. The normalization of Edward's behavior can contribute to a normalization of this type of behavior in real-life relationships, and the adolescent reader may view obsessive behavior as a sign of affection without fully understanding the potential harm and loss of personal freedom that is associated with this type of behavior. Edward's vampire-specific behavior is not directly transferrable to real life, however, women in abusive relationships can find themselves being monitored by the abusive partner tracking their location on their phone or putting up cameras in the home to be able to see them at all times and listen in on their conversations.

Ryle's behavior in *It Ends with Us* is portrayed to the reader as grand romantic acts, but Lily does not appreciate his obsessive behavior in the beginning. His obsession with Lily foreshadows the relationship. Ryle does something to Lily that makes her angry, but then he does another romantic act, and they kiss and make up. This behavior is normalized in the story, and nobody comments on the detrimental effects this can have on a relationship. Normalizing these types of warning signs in the early stages of the relationship is detrimental to an adolescent reader because the reader can be led to believe that this type of behavior is normal or even desirable in the early stages of a relationship. A healthy partner will respect the other partner's personal boundaries and take their limits seriously from the beginning. Continuously pushing boundaries from the beginning of the relationship can mean that the person may not be the one for you.

Jealousy is a way of showing that your partner does not respect your boundaries. The repeated depiction of jealousy in all three novels can contribute to a normalization of possessive and controlling behaviors. This can lead adolescent readers to believe that jealousy is an inherent and acceptable part of romantic relationships. The extreme jealousy portrayed by all three male love interests is romanticized and displayed as a sign of intense love and passion. This can lead the adolescent reader to view jealousy as an expression of care and devotion, which blurs the lines between healthy concern for your partner and controlling behavior. This can construct an unrealistic expectation of relationships and reinforce the notion that love should be characterized by possessiveness and jealousy. Murphy and Smith discovered that teenage girls believed that possessiveness and jealousy were the least concerning relationship warning signs. Laner found that high-school students found relationship violence a normal response to jealousy. (in Franiuk and Scherr 21) Media messages that promote male jealousy patterns of behavior and depict it as normal may help to normalize jealousy and its associated aggression in romantic relationships. (Franiuk and Scherr 21) Edward's jealousy of every person in Bella's proximity is a warning sign in the context of relationship abuse. However, jealousy has become so normalized in society that young readers will brush this off as a way of Edward showing his love for Bella and not see how potentially dangerous he can become to her. Meyer uses Edward's romantic traits in connection with his jealousy and other dangerous features to brush the abuse off and blame it on love. As soon as the young reader starts questioning Edward's behavior, Meyer adds a touch of vulnerability or a way for Edward to say he loves Bella, and the behavior is excused. The normalization of jealousy can distort the adolescent readers' understanding of healthy relationships and contribute to the perpetuation of toxic relationship patterns.

In *After*, both Tessa and Hardin show signs of being extremely jealous. This leads to a further normalization of jealousy in relationships. Tessa and Hardin's relationship is characterized by jealousy and fighting, and jealousy is their way of communicating to each other that they do not want any other romantic partners but each other. This is detrimental to the adolescent reader because the relationship is portrayed as desirable, and the extreme jealousy is normalized to the point to being a regular part of their week.

In *It Ends with Us*, Ryle's jealousy of Atlas is physically dangerous to Lily, as this is one of his reasonings for the third violent incident and Ryle's attempted rape. However, the way Ryle communicates his jealousy right after he finds out that Lily is still in contact with Atlas is by being vulnerable and threatening Lily that he will be hurt to the point where he

does not know what he will do. Ryle's jealousy also functions as a way to isolate Lily, which is detrimental to the adolescent reader because this is not addressed in the novel or by the author at all. The normalization of this extreme jealousy and isolation as a result of a partner that is upset is detrimental to the adolescent reader as this is not something that should be lightly discussed. If an adolescent reader normalizes this in real life, they are at risk of falling into abusive relationships that can harm them in the long term.

The jealousy in the novels may be a result of a lack of communication in the relationship. A lack of healthy communication in a fictional relationship can lead to the adolescent reader misunderstanding what conflict resolution is supposed to look like. Hardin and Tessa's lack of communication makes their relationship very difficult for each of them to handle, as they rarely get to talk to the other about their feelings instead of fighting or having sex. The adolescent reader can be given the impression that avoiding or suppressing communication is standard and an effective way to deal with issues in a relationship and hinder the ability to express their own needs, listen to their partner's needs, and work together to resolve a conflict in a healthy and constructive manner. As Hardin and Tessa's relationship unfolds, they communicate less about their needs.

Unhealthy communication can also lead to the reinforcement of unhealthy relationship patterns because a lack of communication can lead to bottled up emotions, resorting to passive-aggressive behavior, and an avoidance of difficult conversations with your partner. This can perpetuate a cycle of miscommunication, frustration, and escalating tension, which leads to further harm and emotional distress in the relationship. Normalizing this behavior may lead to the adolescent reader struggling to establish healthy emotional connections in their own relationships because they do not have the tools or examples to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and needs effectively.

The novels' normalized view of a lack of boundaries can give the adolescent reader a skewed perception of what is acceptable or normal behavior in a healthy romantic relationship. Reading about characters that invade privacy, cross personal boundaries, and engage in possessive or controlling behaviors without being acknowledged as unhealthy can result in an adolescent reader that struggles to recognize and establish healthy boundaries in real-life romantic relationships. All three of the male romantic interests push the female's limits in the novels in different ways. Hardin does not respect Tessa's boundaries from the moment they meet, and his refusal to leave the room while she is changing foreshadows their

relationship, where he continues to push Tessa's boundaries further. This undermines Tessa's personal autonomy, and she compromises her values to be able to be with Hardin.

Edward disrespects a boundary that is engrained into society by entering Bella's house and watching her sleep at night. In real life, this would be classified as stalking and Edward might have been reported to the police for this. Here, the adolescent may use suspension of disbelief because Edward's actions may not have been accepted in real life. However, the way Edward justifies this by being vulnerable makes the reader sympathize with him and create a sense of understanding and romanticize his actions.

Ryle's test run with Lily is pushing her personal boundaries as she repeatedly tells him that she wants a relationship while he signals that he wants a one-night stand or a shorter fling. However, the trial run is romanticized in the novel, and because the characters end up in a very committed relationship, the problematic parts of compromising on important values are undermined. This normalization of pushing boundaries shown in all three of the novels may internalize the idea that setting boundaries is unnecessary and a sign of being unloving or uncommitted, as the most intense relationships in the novels push each other's boundaries often. This can lead to a reluctance for the adolescent reader to communicate needs, preferences, and limits to a potential partner, which can ultimately compromise their emotional well-being and autonomy. Ultimately, a normalization of a lack of boundaries in a romantic relationship can lead to a higher tolerance for unhealthy relationship dynamics in the adolescent readers' own lives.

A way to disregard someone's personal boundaries is to be unclear about your intentions with the person. Edward and Hardin play mind games on Bella and Tessa in similar ways by sending confusing signals to the female about whether or not they want to be with them. The novels portray emotionally manipulative behaviors as a form of love and passion, romanticizing the partners and their behavior. This blurs the line between healthy and unhealthy relationship dynamics, making the adolescent reader believe that this behavior is acceptable or even desirable in a romantic partner, which can have detrimental consequences for their future romantic relationships, leading them to accept or engage in manipulative tactics themselves, or to tolerate this type of behavior from their partners. The adolescent reader may struggle to distinguish between genuine affection and manipulative tactics and other healthy relationship dynamics.

All three novels take on the bad boy trope and the "I can fix him"-mindset. Hardin, Ryle, and Edward are mysterious and brooding, and all possess qualities that are initially seen

as attractive or intriguing. Adolescent readers may be drawn to these characters due to their perceived confidence, independence, and depth. Tessa, Lily, and Bella all fall into the mindset of fixing their partners. This mindset is often associated with the bad boy trope, as the bad boy often possesses qualities that are not wanted in a healthy relationship, such as extreme jealousy, and the bad boys need to be fixed by the female love interest. Adolescent readers may idealize the idea of being the one to save or change the bad boy. This can lead to a normalization of toxic relationship dynamics and perpetuates the belief that love and perseverance can change an abusive partner. This is detrimental to adolescent readers because adolescent readers who internalize the bad boy trope and the “I can fix him”-mindset may be more likely to excuse or tolerate unhealthy behaviors in real-life relationships. The adolescent reader may come to the belief that they can change an abusive partner through their love or sacrifice, which can lead to a cycle of enabling and accepting abusive behavior.

Understanding the various aspects of reader impact provides a valuable insight into how literature can influence adolescent readers. By critically engaging with the concepts discussed in this chapter, adolescents may develop a more selective approach in choosing what stories to consume. This fosters empathy and personal growth.

Chapter 5: Other Influences on Reader Impact

While all the examples stated in the previous chapter are problematic, the problems the portrayals of the relationships are exacerbated when we take other influences into consideration. These influences are the power imbalance between the adult writer and the adolescent reader, the marketing of the novels as romances, and the emotions and thoughts expressed by readers who read the novels when they were younger and re-read the stories after entering adulthood.

Even though YAL is written to and for adolescents, the writer holds an inevitable power over the adolescent. Children's literature and YAL are unique in their power imbalance between the adult author and the young reader. (Nikolajeva 90) This is based on the belief that adult author is clearly capable of portraying the mental and emotional states of the young character because they have also been children once and can recall what it was like to be a child, which allegedly enables them to express the experience of being a child artistically. (90) However, Maria Nikolajeva argues that: "The so-called childhood memories described by authors, whether idyllic or traumatic, are complete confabulations. They may remember - which is also contestable - superficial events, but not the exact mental states they experienced." (91) Even though the authors remember their childhood, the complexities of the mental states of a child are forgotten as the individual reaches adulthood and creates new memories, worries, and mental states.

Authors have a significant responsibility to be aware of the potential impact of their writing on their target audience, and the readers' age, maturity, and emotional vulnerability must be considered when portraying complex themes such as relationships, love, and abuse. Approaching these topics with sensitivity, accuracy, and a commitment to promoting healthy and respectful dynamics is essential in YAL. Anna Todd, Stephenie Meyer, and Colleen Hoover have not considered the power imbalance between them as adult writers and an impressionable adolescent readers when writing their books.

Anna Todd started writing the *After* fan fiction when she was 24 years old. In an interview with Refinery29, Todd claimed that:

"I'm not writing books to be a good example. People can think that Hardin's a bad example - but he's not *supposed* to be a good example for a boyfriend. If you read the book, you know

that. Anna and Hardin talk about how their relationship is bad. It's very clear that they're both unhappy most of the time. It's not like Tessa's like, 'This is the best relationship I've ever had! I'm writing books to tell stories. I know a lot more people like Hardin and Tessa than I do perfect people who don't make any mistakes. I don't really write to send any kind of messages. It's just the story that I'm telling. There's a big difference between having a book that has a messy relationship and writing a dating guide that says, 'This is exactly how your life should be.'" (Nicolaou)

This claim illustrates that Todd did not take the power imbalance between her as an adult and younger readers into consideration when writing. Todd acknowledges that the relationship between Hardin and Tessa is not healthy or an ideal example, but she needs to recognize that she holds significant power and influence through her storytelling over adolescent, impressionable readers. Even if she did not intend to shape readers' perceptions and beliefs about relationships, this could happen. Todd places the responsibility on the adolescent reader to differentiate between fiction and reality and to recognize that the relationship is unhealthy. This requires a reader that is able to engage critically with the text and develop a nuanced understanding of relationships. However, many adolescent readers do not have the tools to do this.

Todd has turned the tables on the traditional relationship between the author and the reader because of the novel's origin as fan fiction written on Wattpad. Since the story was written chapter by chapter, Todd and the readers had a dialogue where the readers were invited to contribute to the story's progression as it was written. This dialogue made the power imbalance less noticeable to the reader, because the reader felt as though they had influence over the story. However, the power imbalance was clearly there, as Todd had the final say in every decision made while writing. This means that even with a different and skewed power imbalance as the story was written, Todd still writes the story, and as she was an adult at the time, her views and meaning were possibly different than the adolescent readers that commented on the story.

Colleen Hoover and Stephenie Meyer have not made statement similar to Todd's, but the power imbalance between reader and writer is prevalent in both books. Both books are popular among adolescent readers and are still heavily discussed in media. The media discussion is part of the indirect marketing of the novels, which can make the stories reach more and unexpected readers. The direct marketing of the books highlight the idealized and exaggerated romantic narratives. This is done by utilizing the taglines and the back-cover

blurbs to emphasize passion, intensity, and sweeping emotions. *It Ends With Us* is marketed as “an unforgettable tale of love that comes at the ultimate price” (Hoover) This marketing of the novel as an unforgettable love story is harmful to young readers. Instead of looking for signs of abuse and recognizing domestic violence's impact on romance, the reader is invited to look for romance and typical romance tropes throughout the novel's progression. Domestic violence and abuse is reduced to plot devices rather than acknowledging them as complex issues.

Twilight uses the quote “I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him” (Meyer) on the back of the book, signaling to the reader that Bella's unconditional love for Edward is the story's focal point. The use of the word “unconditional” may make the reader overlook or downplay Edward's inappropriate behavior toward Bella, as Bella will love him no matter what. Bella loves Edward despite him being a vampire, and the word “unconditional” makes the marketing of the novel focus on the forbidden love between them.

The back-cover blurb of *After* starts with “There was a time before Tessa met Hardin, and then there's everything AFTER. Life will never be the same.” (Todd) Hardin changed Tessa's life, and it is up to the reader to determine whether her life was changed for the better or for, the worse. The relationship between Tessa and Hardin is tumultuous, and meeting Hardin became a turning point in Tessa's carefree love life. This marketing runs the risk of reinforcing the harmful behaviors depicted in the novel because it makes the reader look for passion and intensity in the relationship rather than acknowledging the problematic elements of the novel and the relationship.

It is important to note that readers who choose to read YAL romance novels with bad-boy tropes are only sometimes young and inexperienced. However, young readers who have limited experience with romantic relationships are easily impressionable when reading. Since the younger adolescent readers have limited experience with romance and life in general, they see the relationships they read about as part of being an adult and internalize a need for a relationship like that because that is part of becoming an adult. A review of the *It Ends with Us* made by “elle's review” on the social media platform GoodReads discusses the reader's opinions about the novel after reading it for the first time in 2016 and then re-reading it in 2021. GoodReads reviews have star ratings where one star is the lowest and five stars is the highest rating. elle's review's rating in 2016 was, as claimed by the reviewer, “a six star book (right below my god tier; it may have actually been on my god tier)” (elle's review's). The reviewer further writes that “i first read this book when i was sixteen. think of the edited

review as a new insight from me as a twenty one year old.” (elle’s review’s). When the reviewer wrote about Ryle’s character in 2016 they wrote that they fell hard “so hard” for him, and that “he was my type of guy”. In the review from 2021, the reviewer writes that “ryle’s behavior is controlling and manipulative to begin with. he does NOT begin to become abusive after he hits lily” and “do not romanticize his early behavior like 16 year old elle did. (...) his ‘good behavior is dangerous and nothing to want in real life.” (elle’s review’s). A commenter under the nickname “shreya” comments that “i had the same experience” and seven out of ten remaining comments also agree about the review from 2021 without mentioning the review from 2016. This review is not representative to every reader. Still, it raises the question on whether or not the readers of the novel interpret the novel, and especially Ryle’s character, differently based on their emotional maturity.

We find the same type of reviews on Goodreads for *Twilight*. A Goodreads user named “Steph Sinclair” writes in her one-star review of the novel that “I have actually read *Twilight* 4 times. I used to hail from Shelfari.com and the first rating I ever gave *Twilight* was 5 stars. After I made the switch to GoodReads, I decided to give it 4 stars instead. So, recently I was browsing my GoodReads shelf (I often do that to clean up ratings), I noticed *Twilight* was sitting pretty at 4 stars and was on my ‘favorites’ shelf. At the time I thought, ‘Wow, that’s not accurate at all. Maybe it deserves 3 stars?’ But I quickly decided, no, no, no...I’ll just do a fun little project and re-read the series and give them all better ratings.” (Sinclair) Later in the review, the user writes that “This is not love. But how could it be, with Edward torn between eating her and making out with her? Edward is a controlling creepy creeper. He had been watching her sleep for weeks before they started talking! Meyer are you condoning stalkish behavior?!” (Sinclair)

In a review on Goodreads for *After*, one user under the nickname “shush” writes:

my god what was my 13 [year old] self thinking. [Because] tessa, damn girl. ur another level of some tstl [too stupid to live] heroine. still tho this was my first romance on wattpad days and brought many emotions in me that time so the series as a whole, will have a place in my heart (maybe) (we’ll see) (shush).

The reviewer has not rated the book with any stars, but signals in her review that they liked the story the first time they read it. Another reviewer under the nickname khushi comments on this review that “i can never read this again, I’ll start judging every page and then give up at near end” (source) shush responds to this comment along with other comments with the same type of message and writes “This was literally my first romance [...] and [obviously] my

innocent ass, havent seen any better though this was the best romance ever, best couple ever” (shush) A commenter under the nickname Candy writes that “This is why I never re-read my favorite books from when I was a tween/teen lol. Better to keep the memories and ignore reality!” (shush)

These reviews and comments all illustrate that emotional maturity has much to say when young readers read books with heavy topics. For example, if the reader is yet to experience a romantic relationship, Ryle’s grand romantic gestures and charming personality may be the defining factor in their interpretation of his character before he is violent against Lily. A reader that has experienced an abusive relationship either directly or been exposed to a relationship might find it easier to identify the warning signs. However, readers are not stupid. Younger readers who are less emotionally mature may choose to look past Ryle’s violence and anger issues so that they are able to enjoy his charming and romantic gestures, as well as the love triangle. Older readers, who are more experienced with reading, and maybe also experiencing, romance, may choose to look for signs that the relationship is unhealthy or look for red flags in Ryle’s character. For example, a reader that picks up on Ryle kicking the chair at the very beginning of the novel may choose to either ignore this or interpret this as a sign that he is having issues with controlling his anger. It is all about choosing what one wants to read.

Chapter 6: Closing Remarks and Conclusion

Literature holds a profound influence on adolescents who are in the process of navigating and understanding their understanding of relationships and romance and forming expectations for future romantic relationships. Because of this influence, the author holds a responsibility to promote healthy and realistic relationship dynamics. This can be done by incorporating relationships with partners that communicate correctly and have realistically healthy relationship, altogether avoiding the romanticization or normalization of abusive relationships, or by challenging harmful stereotypes of romanticized abusive relationships.

Responsible storytelling involves portraying how a romantic relationship is complex, with difficult conversations, sacrifices that must be made, and the happy and easy parts of a healthy relationship. Acknowledging the impact of abusive behavior on individuals and their well-being is a crucial part of responsible storytelling. The author can do this by portraying the emotional and psychological toll that abuse takes on victims. This can include depicting feelings of fear, anxiety, and powerlessness that are experienced by the victims that endure abuse. Literature can provide a chance for the reader to empathize with the victims and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the extensive harm inflicted by abuse by delving into the internal struggles and emotional trauma caused by abuse.

Being abused can cause ripple effects on the victim's well-being, and the author needs to be aware of the responsibility of depicting these accurately. By depicting consequences such as the inability to trust others, the mental health issues, and the deterioration of self-esteem and self-worth, the author can utilize the literature to shed light on how abusive behavior can inflict profound damage on the individual, both while the abuse is happening, but also the lasting effects after the relationship has ended.

It is essential for the author to not reduce abuse to a plot device or a fleeting event to take part in responsible storytelling properly. Authors have a unique opportunity to utilize their platform to help adolescent readers realize the importance of healthy relationship dynamics. The author is given a chance to raise awareness and educate the adolescent reader about the realities and harms of abusive relationships, encouraging them to seek healthier alternatives.

Studying the adolescent reader response to the portrayal of abusive relationships offers valuable insights into the influence of literature on young minds. Therefore, this thesis has sought out to explore how the romantic relationships in *Twilight*, *After*, and *It Ends with Us* are portrayed to the adolescent reader and how the adolescent reader responds to these portrayals. The romanticization of abusive relationships in YAL romance poses detrimental consequences for the adolescent reader.

Romantic relationships shape the stories and drive the narrative in YAL romance. The romantic relationships in the novels are characterized by seven different problematic behaviors or attitudes: love bombing, refusal to accept rejection, obsessive behavior, extreme jealousy, lack of healthy communication, and lack of boundaries.

In *Twilight*, the problematic behaviors and attitudes are romanticized to a point to where they can go by unnoticed and are not recognized as abuse but rather as expressions of unconditional love. The relationship in *After* is more visibly toxic to the reader, as Hardin and Tessa's relationship is characterized by undisguised jealousy and a lack of healthy communication. The relationship portrayal in *It Ends with Us* is more complex, as Ryle is very clearly physically abusing Lily to the point where she leaves him because she fears for her own safety. However, the relationship is abusive from the very beginning, and Ryle is showing clear warning signs of being overly obsessive and possessive. The hidden forms of abuse go by unnoticed by the adolescent reader because the clearer incidents of physical abuse are discussed more in the novel.

To be able to read an entire story, the reader must be driven by motivation. The intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of the adolescent reader are utilized to form the impact of the story. Intrinsic motivations are driven by the search for emotion and a sense of identity formation. Reading about relationships that go back and forth in their decision to be together triggers emotions that will be the most satisfied by reaching the end of the story and seeing whether the pair end up happily ever after or not. The adolescent is searching for confirmation of their emotions and thoughts as they navigate the beginning stages of adulthood and seek to stories and characters in which they are able to recognize themselves. Utilizing reading as a safe space allows the reader to reflect on thoughts, feelings, and experiences while being in the comfort of one's own mind. This fosters critical thinking, and the reader may begin to recognize ideologies that are imposed in the stories by the author. Utilizing the ideologies to impose opinions like waiting until marriage or a power imbalance based on gender in the

relationship, the authors fail to use their unique positions to invite readers to reflect on healthy relationships during adolescence and its impact.

Romanticizing abusive relationships is not new. In fact, this discourse is so common in media today that one does not recognize the normalization. Because of social media, adolescents are exposed to the opportunity to read books and discuss books whenever and wherever they want. The endless influx of opinions and new material means that the adolescent's extrinsic motivations are always being influenced.

Narrative empathy and suspension of disbelief have proven to be largely influential on how the reader comprehends and responds to the portrayals of abusive relationships, and the portrayal is proven to be detrimental to the adolescent reader. Other influences, such as the power imbalance between the adult writer and the young reader, enrich the argument of the damaging consequences, as the writers do not take their role seriously enough to be able to recognize that they do not have the capacity to portray the mental and emotional states of the adolescent accurately and are therefore not able to see how their portrayals of romance can be detrimental to a young reader because they may not be capable to recognize the messages the readers try to send. The novels' marketing as romances makes the issue more complex, as the reader will look for romance in the story because they are under the belief that the story is going to portray a healthy romance. Young adults who look back on reading these novels in their early teens recognize that the books are not portraying healthy relationships, which points back to the argument of the power imbalance between the adult author and the young reader.

This thesis' conclusions underline the significance of critically engaging with young adult literature and contemplating its potential impacts on readers' lives. We can teach young readers to acquire a critical approach to evaluating and understanding fictional tales by noticing the prevalence of dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics in these novels. This thesis emphasizes the importance of fostering healthy relationship models in young adult fiction, as well as the need for more knowledge and conversation about how relationships are portrayed in this genre.

Finally, this study offers a thorough evaluation of the romantic relationship dynamics in *Twilight*, *After*, and *It Ends With Us*, emphasizing the potential influence of these works on young adult readers' empathy and identity construction. The thesis seeks to spark conversation and foster critical examination of young adult romance novels by analyzing the messages communicated by these books about unhealthy relationships and uneven power

dynamics. Finally, this study adds to our understanding of the significance of the young adult novel in creating society standards and the relevance of encouraging healthy relationship models for young readers.

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