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# A portrait of Grooming and Educator Sexual Abuse in *My Dark Vanessa* and *Boy Toy*

Master's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education

Supervisor: Rhonna Robbins-Sponaas

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the grooming processes in *My Dark Vanessa* and *Boy Toy*, and to chart which consequences arise after educator sexual abuse. Building on the #metoo movement and other media coverage on educator sexual abuse, the first chapter introduces a theoretical foundation on grooming and provides a historical context to the issue. The next chapters examine the grooming processes in both novels, and the consequences that arise because of the sexual abuse. Since the novels portray very distinctive differences in both grooming processes and consequences due to different gender dyads, the influence of gender is included throughout the analysis to showcase how gender scripts and sexual scripts affect the victims and the offenders. The final chapter explains what the findings of the analysis can tell us about the contemporary understanding of educator sexual abuse based on gender scripts that shape how readers interpret the novels. By holding educational institutions and society itself accountable for their responses to grooming and educator sexual abuse, I conclude the thesis by proposing a shift in the presently taboo attitude toward educator sexual abuse. Lastly, I present solutions to ensure that educators who sexually abuse students become such a rarity that, when it does occur, each case is handled with the care and regard it deserves to ensure it will not happen again.



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This thesis is my first contribution of value where I'm able to shine a light on educator sexual abuse, though certainly not the last. To all the Vanessas and Joshs in the world who are either hesitant to speak up, or who perhaps never got the chance, this is for you.





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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2017, actress and producer Alyssa Milano wrote, "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted [sic] write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" (Sayej). The overwhelming response from Milano's tweet caused an avalanche of stories to be shared where victims of sexual assault raised their voices and sometimes even named their assaulters. The most famous case from this "#metoo" movement is the countless rape and sexual assault accusations against film producer Harvey Weinstein, which ultimately led to him being found guilty of rape and sexual assault of two women and thereby sentenced to jail for 23 years<sup>i</sup>. The #metoo movement can be seen as a continuation of the 'me too' support movement from 2006, started by African-American community activist Tarana Burke (Nicholls 21). Both movements are still ongoing, and they continue to bring forth problematic social behavior from individuals and larger groups in the public sphere. Though it may be difficult to notice effects of these movements without the benefit of time and hindsight, there has already been a noticeable change in public attitude towards gender disparity and rape. In the literary field, authors are creating more works that explore the #metoo movement. In early 2020, Kate Elizabeth Russell's first novel *My Dark Vanessa* hit the shelves; her novel about the experience and consequences of educator sexual assault was created as a by-product of #metoo, with the movement being used in the narrative as a catalyst for change. Barry Lyga's novel *Boy Toy* has been available on bookshelves since 2007, yet his story about 7<sup>th</sup>-grader Josh who is groomed and sexually abused by his female teacher holds perhaps even more significance today than it did thirteen years ago. Mainstream media and news networks have also been presenting more real-life cases of teacher-student sexual assault to the public, which makes it easier to ensure that educator sexual assault will be dealt with rather than disregarded as trivial or insignificant. In 2015, The American organization Stop Educator Sexual Abuse Misconduct & Exploitation (SESAME) gathered statistics of sexually abused children, and for students between 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade, 3.5 million of those surveyed reported having had physical sexual contact with an adult from their school (The Children's Center for Psychiatry). When other types of sexual misconduct were included, such as being shown pornography, the statistic increased to about 4.5 million students. In the same year, just under 500 educators were arrested for sexual abuse. The Children's Center for Psychiatry, Psychology & Related Services stated in 2018 that it has become more and more common to see news stories where teachers are arrested for sexually abusing their students, which insinuates that educator sexual misconduct is on the rise, and they link this increase to children's accessibility through cell phones and social media (The Children's Center for Psychiatry). It is important to note that this is only an insinuation because we do not know whether the activity is indeed increasing, or if the ways in which it is discovered is increasing, or whether reporting such misconduct is becoming more commonplace.

By analyzing the novels *My Dark Vanessa* and *Boy Toy*, this thesis will examine how male and female teachers groom and sexually abuse their students, and which long-term consequences arise because of this educator sexual abuse. The grooming process is very important to scrutinize, because by doing so we may learn more about how abusive teachers select their victims. Once we become more familiar with how they manage to isolate and manipulate students into unhealthy, sexual, and co-dependent relationships,

we will be better equipped to stop it from happening. Another important question is that of how gender affects these relationships, and once revealed to the public, how the relationships are judged and dealt with by the institutions. This thesis will therefore be divided into two parts, where the first part focuses on the preliminary stages of the sexual abuse with specific attention to the teachers' grooming processes. The second part will focus on how these sexual relationships are dealt with, and which consequences arise for the parties involved. Knowledge about the victims' abilities and willingness to process what they have been through, not to mention how they are treated by close networks and local communities, is instrumental to help these students understand this traumatic experience. *My Dark Vanessa* and *Boy Toy* showcase how the consequences of sexual abuse at the hands of teachers can be different for boys and girls, both in terms of psychological trauma responses and societal judgement. The two novels' portrayals of grooming and its consequences aid in further examining the problem of educator sexual assault in the hopes of shedding a light on this uncomfortable truth that has been swept under the rug for far too long.

The perception of educator sexual abuse is influenced by the age of the student involved. Smith et al. explored this age perception and other gender dyads in their study, and found that scenarios with female teachers and male students were considered less damaging than the male teacher/female student dyad (60)<sup>ii</sup>. This may stem from the concept of an underage boy being "lucky" enough to sleep with an older (attractive) female teacher, and that it is something to take pride in. Not only can this narrative cause irreparable harm to male victims suffering from PTSD after sexual abuse, but it also creates opportunities for female teachers to abuse students unnoticed. If female teachers are regarded as less likely to be sexual predators compared to male teachers, they are likely to score more opportunities to continue their abuse either elsewhere or with the same student. Another myth that has previously been used to soften the image of a female predator is the argument of genuine love, where the female teacher develops true feelings for her student, and that the consensual relationship therefore should not be seen as abusive – a narrative that is dangerous for the well-being of the boy, whose understanding and experience of love and intimacy can be damaged, which may cause problems for him forming future relationships.

Although the research from Smith et al. claims that the male teacher/female student dyad is considered to be more serious and negative than its counterpart, there are still other historical factors we must include to broaden the context and perception of this gender dyad, especially seeing as how their results were solely based on university students' opinions. If we look at media representation and institutional responses to alleged educator sexual misconduct concerning male teachers and female students, there has usually been a pattern of protecting the decent man from the lies and tricks of a 'sexually deviant' teenage girl. From a historical perspective, this issue can be traced to the 'female seductress' trope and all the issues that come with it. Regardless of age, sexual misconduct has often been blamed on the female in the equation, such as the misogynistic idea of the girl "asking for trouble" by dressing and acting in a particular manner. This implies that the male is innocent and helpless in the face of the female's evil wiles. Bringing this context into the classroom, the female student is seen as a manipulator who tempts the male teacher into sexually assaulting her, and she is subsequently at fault for the resulting damage. In cases without any proof to her claims of sexual assault, the odds of the student being believed are even more doubtful. Because of institutions' desire to avoid scandals connected to their schools, and due to the loyalty between colleagues to protect one

another, the female student is usually deemed untrustworthy and dangerous by both the administration and other teachers, especially if the teacher in question is a highly respected man with connections to the local community. Instead of being met with compassion, the student becomes the persecuted, often resulting in either a forced change of schools or other forms of punishment.

Although many fields have studied different types of teacher-student relationships from pedagogical, psychological, and not to mention legal points of view, very few people have focused on this topic in a literary setting. It is reasonable to believe that this may stem from a more urgent need to examine the statistics of real-life cases of educator sexual misconduct to minimize the damage they cause, research that Professor Carol Shakeshaft has been diligently working on for decades. As previously mentioned, there is an increase in cases surrounding sexual relationships between teachers and students. This rise in attention is reflected in different types of media such as movies and television series. Perhaps one of the most famous 21<sup>st</sup> century examples is the teacher-student relationship depicted in the television show *Pretty Little Liars*, which has already been critically analyzed by Shara Crookston in her work "'Hot for Teacher': Statutory Rape or Postfeminism in *Pretty Little Liars*". Her critique focused heavily on the romanticized portrayal of a teacher-student relationship intended for an underage audience (Crookston). The show, which ended in 2017, is based on Sara Shepard's YA series that consists of 16 books. In late 2020, the mini-series *A Teacher* was released, based on Hannah Fidell's movie of the same name, and it received an overall positive reception. Compared to *Pretty Little Liars*, this television series depicted a female teacher grooming the male student into a sexual relationship that ended with the teacher being incarcerated for her crimes. However, reviewer John Anderson from *The Wall Street Journal* pointed to the lack of grooming depicted in the show, claiming that no grooming took place since the student was "close-to-mature" and the teacher initially recoiled at his advances towards her (Anderson). I highlight this review because it exemplifies the issues surrounding the perceptions of grooming and blame. Anderson's comments prove that there are misinterpretations concerning grooming and just how manipulative and complicated it is, which further illustrates how important it is to speak out about it to educate others. An increasing number of studies relating to educator sexual abuse focus on the influence of gender on perceptions of culpability and victim status, such as the study by Muniz et al. Their study found that respondents were "pro-victim" in general, but male respondents viewed female students as "responsible" and not necessarily victims (Muniz et al. 545). Furthermore, Dollar et al. discovered that male respondents were more likely to not see a problem with female teacher/male student relationships, whereas female respondents did not distinguish any difference between the teacher's gender (96)<sup>iii</sup>. These opinions concerning perceptions on culpability, blame, and consent are still found in society today, which is one of the reasons why movements such as #metoo are necessary for us to learn and evolve.

The research I have access to as a student at NTNU is limited, which is an important factor to keep in mind when considering the secondary sources represented in this thesis. Though there certainly has been more research on grooming and educator sexual assault in literature than this thesis is able to showcase, the fact remains that scholars who have studied sexually abusive teacher-student relationships have usually focused either on real cases and statistics, or hypotheses tested on college students, or they have chosen to

analyze portrayals from film and television instead of literature. However, Denisa Novotná published her master's thesis "Literary Depictions of Affairs between Female Teachers and Male Secondary School Students" in 2015, and it would be remiss to not include her work. Although she presents relevant theories of female educator sexual assault, some of which are featured in this thesis, Novotná's analysis of the novels lacks substance, and she does not take full advantage of the theories in her discussion, instead focusing on the primary novels in a summary type of fashion. Furthermore, her decision to focus solely on female teachers presented a one-sided gender dyad perspective, which hindered her from comparing gender dyads and as such broaden her discussion.

Based on the limited store of materials and sources available, the only sources that represent or mention *Boy Toy* and *My Dark Vanessa* are book reviews, not academically published or peer-reviewed articles. Hence, the analysis of the novels in this thesis is independent and original, based on my own interpretation of the books, and supported with theories about grooming and consequences of educator sexual abuse. As evidenced by the small amount of research on grooming available within fictional literature, there is a lack of attention given to sexually abusive teacher-student relationships in novels and how they contribute to the discourse surrounding educator sexual abuse. The goal is that this thesis will add to the contribution of literary research and thereby aid others to explore the topic further in the future.

Putting forth *My Dark Vanessa* and *Boy Toy* for analysis sheds a light on how novels are a part of the discourse surrounding grooming and educator sexual abuse, not to mention the consequences that arise because of this abuse. In Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*, the #metoo-movement takes center stage as it follows Vanessa, now in her thirties, as she reflects on her decades long romantic and sexual relationship with her private school English teacher. After Professor Strane is accused of sexual harassment in a #metoo post on Facebook by another female student, Vanessa questions their own history and begins dredging up long-forgotten incidences from her past. The narrative switches between her teenage years and "present day" 2017, a clever change of pace that provides the reader with great insight as to how 15-year-old Vanessa experiences the advances made by her 44-year-old teacher, and how Mr. Strane manages to groom and control her – which she considers genuine love. As Vanessa's trauma about their relationship continues to take form, and five more allegations arise against him, Strane ultimately takes his own life. His death causes progress in Vanessa's therapy as she allows herself to be both vulnerable and critical of her past relationship.

Barry Lyga's *Boy Toy* from 2007 centers around Josh Mendel's troubled perspective on his sexual relationship with Evelyn Sherman, the 7<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher who groomed and sexually abused him. Like *My Dark Vanessa*, the novel is divided into different sections that shift between past and present. Whereas the past exemplifies the grooming phase and the cumulation of their sexual relationship, the present delves into how 18-year-old Josh suffers from the social and psychological consequences that arose because of the relationship. As opposed to *My Dark Vanessa*, *Boy Toy* includes a trial process where Josh is forced to witness against Eve for sexually abusing him. The novel manages to portray how confusing and intense such a trial can be for those involved, especially considering Josh's young age and the lack of emotional support he receives from his parents and lawyer. An important factor to consider, though not given much focus in this thesis, is the role of the law in cases concerning sexual abuse, which Nicholls touches upon in her book. Referring to Alcott's main points in *Rape and Resistane*, Nicholls notes that

the cultural assumption that law is *the* instrument we should use when harm happens to us is undercut by ... statutes of limitation that disadvantage the survivor of child sexual abuse, prosecutorial discretion that mitigates in favour of 'winnable' cases, and legal emphasis on individual culpability over cultural or institutional accountability (10).

Connecting this argument to victims' stories not being believed, it is easier to understand why there is a presumed large number of hidden figures when researching child sexual abuse. While *Boy Toy* is great at portraying the confusing legal process from a child's point of view, *My Dark Vanessa* instead tackles Nicholl's issue with the law as the main institution in charge from another angle. Russell shows a cultural reset where the power lies with #metoo, and social media functions as judge, jury, and executioner in a digital age. Because social media is advancing at such a rapid pace, the significance of its presence today cannot be fully understood at present. Considering how the press and news media are often referred to as the Fourth Estate due to their explicit ability to steer public discourse and implicit capacity to frame political issues, perhaps social media can be seen as an extension of such power. *My Dark Vanessa* gives an example of this by showing how much influence individuals can attain through a movement such as #metoo with a social media platform like Facebook to share their experiences and require either social or legal justice.

Another common factor between the two primary sources is that they both represent the grey areas between grooming, love, and sexual abuse. In this context, a 'grey area' describes ambiguous factors that often make it difficult to separate consensual sex from sexual coercion and rape (Gavey 9). These factors can be confusing emotions concerning culpability and blame after the act, or conflicting feelings of persuasion and expectations before the act. Nicola Gavey somewhat agrees with Ann Cahill's claim that most women can generally distinguish rape from consensual, mutually desired sex, but Gavey points to critical factors that are typically overlooked in heterosexual sex (2). She examines the grey areas of sexual relations in heterosexual relationships, and she insists the danger lies in "the ambiguity of distinctions between rape and what is *just sex*" (2). Building on Gavey's focus on grey area sex, I examine how this ambiguity affects the perception of culpability for victims of grooming and educator sexual abuse. Several of the book reviews of *My Dark Vanessa* highlight Russell's success in portraying the complexities of consent, participation, and the forced victimization of Vanessa as a victim of grooming and sexual assault. Her dismissal regarding other women's accusations may be an instinct to preserve what she believes to be a special relationship<sup>iv</sup> between herself and Strane. At the same time, this dismissal may also be a defense mechanism for her to avoid the reality of herself being a victim of grooming and sexual abuse. Gavey connects women's unwillingness to use the word 'rape' about personal experiences of coercive sex to a resistance to being identified (or self-identified) as a 'victim' (147-53). We can apply Gavey's connection to better understand Vanessa's attitude, because she cannot risk the consequences that may arise from entertaining different possibilities other than the version of the truth with which she has found peace. Reading Russell's novel in a post #metoo environment, women as feminists are expected to believe and support one another against any perpetrator. Russell succeeds in presenting a narrative where the woman (Vanessa) is criticized for taking a morally grey stance, supporting the alleged abuser rather than those who are abused, a stance which is fueled by her own trauma. This further illuminates the strong hold abusers have on their victims, even years after the physical abuse has ended.

In *Boy Toy*, the grey areas between love and grooming are easier to navigate, considering that the abuse was stopped relatively early. Additionally, Eve is incarcerated for having sex with a minor and serving him alcohol (Lyga 149), which leaves no chance to view their relationship as anything but the grooming and sexual abuse that it was. Nevertheless, Josh's love for Eve remains evident throughout her trial, which is where we first discover his misplaced blame for their relationship and Eve's arrest. As such, the 'grey area' concerning their sexual relationship is more focused on Josh's feelings of culpability and blame, viewing himself as an abuser and not the one who was abused. When 18-year-old Josh confronts Eve after her prison release, his affection for Eve is still evident. He believes himself to be the instigator of their relationship and therefore responsible for Eve ending up incarcerated. James Knoll states that the repercussions of silencing key aspects of abuse can lead to an internalization of blame and self-loathing (377), and Josh's feelings of guilt showcases the importance of transparency and openness toward victims of abuse and their view of the experience.

An important question to raise about these novels is who their intended audience is. Both novels skirt the line between Young Adult fiction (YA) and Adult fiction, albeit in different ways. The line becomes blurry because both novels have (at times) a young adult protagonist, and the storylines can be seen as coming-of-age stories, which may lead the audience to believe the novels are suitable for young adults. However, that is where the argument for the YA category ends. *My Dark Vanessa* should not be considered YA, despite the novel being divided into different parts to narrate Vanessa's young and adult life. The parts written from Vanessa's adult perspective use quite mature language, and they portray damaging and frightening behaviors that may be deemed inappropriate for a young adult audience. Because the narration is quite grotesque at times, I argue that the novel is more appropriate for an 18+ age audience. Following this argument, the parts of the novel that focus on young Vanessa are also too mature for young people aged 12-16 to read. For instance, rape scenes are written from Vanessa's present perspective when she is 14-16 years old, and the detailed descriptions are too explicit for such a young audience. *Boy Toy* fits the YA genre because Lyga's writing style has Josh's voice and narration reflects his age, which is between 12-18 throughout the novel. While some scenes are descriptive and borderline explicit, they never reach the level of maturity and ugliness illustrated in *My Dark Vanessa*. Nevertheless, categorizing *Boy Toy* as a YA novel is also problematic because the sexual assault is not given enough attention as such. Because the storyline is told from Josh's lovestruck point of view, the grooming and sexual assault he is victim to is not adequately viewed as such. Instead, the relationship is packaged as loving and consensual for most of the novel. This raises some issues if the intended audience is meant to be children as young as 12-years old, because some may claim that the novel's critique of grooming and teacher-student relationships is overshadowed by the glorification of the supposed benefits from teacher-student relationships. Although the purpose and audience of the novels is not included in the coming literary analysis, it is important to keep in mind, as it is brought up again for the question of teacher relevance, and it paints a bigger picture of the relevance that fictional literature has on issues in our society.

The analysis of both novels is based on a solid theoretical foundation on grooming and consequences of educator sexual assault. "Grooming" is a term used to identify the



process where sex offenders carefully instigate and uphold sexually abusive relationships with children (Knoll 374). This process includes a variety of methods to prepare the child for a sexual relationship, where secrecy and discretion is essential, both to ensure that the abuse can last over a longer period, and to avoid persecution. Based on the research done by Elliot et al., sexual perpetrators usually plan how they can lure children into these relationships, and the methods are different tips, tricks, and strategies that help them groom victims. This thesis presents the methods most used by educators who sexually abuse their students. As presented by Elliot et al., the methods are divided into the three categories of targeting, strategies, and maintenance in order to demonstrate the grooming process step by step.

Targeting, as the category implies, is the first phase where the offender attempts to locate a victim who may be suitable for their needs. The offender is usually dependent on a few factors to be able to isolate the child as efficiently as possible. These factors are characteristics that describe the child and their current familial state. The offender would benefit from a child who is vulnerable, which can present as low self-confidence or low self-esteem (Elliott et al. 584). Another factor is that the child's home situation should be fractured, meaning that the child should experience less parental supervision because of difficulties at home. This will make it easier for the offender to isolate the child without worrying about protective or inquisitive parents. The last characteristic that would benefit the offender is a child who shows signs of being emotionally needy or socially isolated. Offenders are more likely to be capable of filling the child's emotional needs by being a dependable and caring person the child can lean on. Social isolation will be beneficial as well, because with fewer people looking out for the child's well-being, the higher the chances of the relationship staying a secret (Elliott et al. 584).

The second category includes multiple examples of strategies that an offender can use. Caretaking is one of the more common ways to ensure alone time with a child, and it can take the form of babysitting, tutoring, or teaching. It is very effective if adults use their privileged position as caretaker to form a "special relationship" (Elliott et al. 585). This can develop through teaching if the student experiences favoritism such as praise or leniency concerning school rules and deadlines. The favoritism is most likely hidden from other students to avoid transparency. A more cunning strategy, but important if the child has a stable home environment, is the offender's ability to gain the trust of the child's parents and perhaps even be welcomed in their home. The third relevant strategy is to provide the child with gifts, games and other activities that can give them a "special time" together (Elliott et al. 585). Isolating the child is also noted as a strategy, but it takes place in several of these other methods as well. Emotional bonding and building trust are perhaps some of the most important strategies to ensure that the child becomes comfortable enough in the offender's presence for a relationship of a sexual nature to take place. This bonding can then ensure that the offender is able to desensitize the child toward sex. Desensitizing can happen through activities such as watching pornographic videos, talking about sex, showing explicit pictures, or teaching about sex in an educational setting (Elliott et al. 585). It can also be connected to the strategy where the offender takes advantage of the child's natural sexual curiosity or lack of experience to further manipulate him or her.

The third category – maintenance – examines the methods that offenders use to ensure that the sexual relationship can continue. Most of these methods are rooted in threats. The offender may threaten the child with dire consequences for either one of them should their relationship be revealed (Elliott et al. 586). Another manipulative twist here

can also be to threaten the loss of what they have together, as they would be forced to stay apart should the child reveal their relationship (Elliott et al. 586). Additionally, the offender may threaten to put all blame on the child should they tell anyone of their relationship, which, for a child unaware of laws and consent, may be considered a viable threat. However, these threats may be unnecessary if the offender bribes the child with gifts to ensure their compliance and devotion. These gifts can be material, such as video games and books, or related to schoolwork, such as allowing the child to receive good grades or benefits other students won't receive.

Although many helpful sources are used to support my ideas and analysis in this thesis, a recurring issue that made analyzing the novels difficult is that the accessible material on educator sexual abuse either focuses on elementary school students, or high school students above the age of 15. Hence, Josh and Vanessa fall in between the focus groups, which is a prime example of just why these novels are important to include in the discourse of educator sexual abuse, since they highlight an age group (12–15-year-olds) mostly overlooked by researchers. It remains unclear whether this exclusion is because researchers' hypotheses do not include that age, or whether there are fewer victims in that age range, and/or whether children in that age range are less likely to report their abuse. While 12- to 15-year-old victims are often excluded from the target groups presented by researchers, which is a representational problem itself, it is still possible to use the findings from other target groups to analyze the novels. By using the findings as hypotheses and applying them to the books, my analysis shows that the results from other age groups are suitable to Josh and Vanessa. Although age does not change much in terms of the illegality of statutory rape, societal perceptions concerning victim age and how it intertwines with culpability is a bigger issue. Fromuth and Holt's study on the perception students' age in relation to teacher sexual misconduct showed 15-year-old students were associated with less "psychological and physical harm" compared to 12- and 9-year-old students (169). Their research suggests that the older the student is, the less damage is done to them because with age comes an insinuation of sexual desires, and consequently the student is seen as partly culpable for what may transpire.

No matter their age, students who fall victim to educator sexual abuse suffer several different consequences, and these consequences vary based on the type of abuse, the gender of the victim, when and where the abuse took place, and their personal history. Extensive research has already been done on children who suffer from child sexual abuse, but there is significantly less research on adolescent students who suffer sexual abuse at the hands of their teachers, which may be a reason why adolescent victims are more likely to be viewed as responsible for the abuse taking place (Kalichman in Fromuth and Holt 173). The next chapters examine the grooming processes in both novels, and the consequences that arise because of the grooming and sexual abuse. Since the novels portray very distinctive differences in both grooming processes and consequences due to different gender dyads, I include the influence of gender throughout the analysis to showcase how gender scripts and sexual scripts affect the victims and the offenders. In this context, scripts are normative historical and societal expectations attributed to gender, sexuality, and sexual activity. The final chapter explains what the findings of the analysis can tell us about the contemporary understanding of educator sexual abuse based on gender scripts that shape how readers interpret the novels. By holding educational institutions and society itself accountable for their responses to grooming and educator sexual abuse, I conclude the thesis by proposing a shift in the presently taboo attitude

## Introduction

toward the issues, and I present other solutions to ensure that educator sexual abuse becomes such a rarity that, when cases occur, victims are treated with care and respect.



## CHAPTER 2: GROOMING PROCESS

The relationship between teacher and students comes in many different forms, usually depending on the teacher's eagerness and ability to connect with them, and the students' willingness to partake in this relationship. In the United States, teacher-student relationships tend to be heavily dependent on professionalism due to the authoritative role of the teacher, and the clear boundaries in the hierarchy between teachers and students. Carol Shakeshaft coined the phrase "educator sexual misconduct" in the early 1990s, and by applying her work in researching and mapping out this type of sexual misconduct, we can better understand how the teachers in these novels manage to groom and sexually abuse the students. Shakeshaft presents two types of educator predators in her work, the "fixated abuser" and the "opportunistic abusers" (9-10). The fixated abuser is most often a male teacher whose reputation is spotless, and who is usually highly respected by parents, other teachers, and the administration. In *My Dark Vanessa*, Mr. Strane is a respected teacher whose professional reputation among colleagues and the local community precedes him.

Shakeshaft states that fixated abusers are most common in elementary or middle school (9), but we can apply the working theory of Strane being a fixated abuser to the environment at Browick despite it being a private high school. Building on the fixated abuser's strategies, he may choose a female student to serve as class helper, or in other ways accentuate how she is more capable than her peers (Shakeshaft 10). By bonding through flattery and creating a special relationship, the predatory teacher will then begin with small touches that increase in sexual nature over time. Because of their special relationship, the teacher can exploit the student's trust, ultimately leading to the student being sexually abused. If an accusation arises, the student victim will usually protect her teacher out of fear of losing his devotion, and due to the teacher's spotless reputation and likeability, the school and community will normally disregard the accusation and support the teacher instead (Shakeshaft 10). Fixated abusers can therefore appear in classes above elementary school, though it may be more unlikely based on the change of environment and typical school schedules. This thesis makes an example of Mr. Strane as a fixated abuser by scrutinizing his grooming techniques in selected excerpts from the novel, supported by Elliott et al.'s three categories of grooming.

Vanessa attends a private school, which means that she resides on campus and only lives at home with her parents during school breaks (Russell 11). Her mother wants Vanessa to seek out new friendships and avoid spending so much time alone on campus, but Vanessa's personality is slightly antisocial and standoffish which insinuates that she may prefer to be alone. The interactions between mother and daughter during their road trip to the school creates an impression that their relationship is strained, since Vanessa would have preferred her father to drive her there instead (Russell 12). Elliott et al.'s list of characteristics for typical victims show clear similarities between Vanessa and the traits that victims of grooming usually have, such as a lack of friends, spending time alone and infrequent or strained contact with family members. Additionally, Vanessa does not have any extracurricular activities or social hobbies that would make her socialize with others, which means that she spends more time by herself. This information is important to notice, since it sheds a light on her vulnerability, which makes her a potential victim from a perpetrator's point of view.

Jaffe et al. points out how teacher perpetrators of sexual misconduct will seek out students in other settings to gain more access to them, usually by arranging extracurricular activities such as coaching and music (26). Mr. Strane is the leader of the school's creative writing club, which piques Vanessa's interest as she decides to join. This increased access to Vanessa is what makes Strane realize that she does not have "a ton of friends" (Russell 26). Upon discovering that Vanessa writes poetry, he shows interest in her talent and wishes to read more of "her work" (27), which makes Vanessa feel grown-up and important. During this conversation, he reminds her that she is "special" and has "something these dime-a-dozen overachievers can only dream of" (41), which further strengthens Vanessa's connection to him. By using Elliot et al.'s strategy of favoritism to create a 'special relationship', this interaction shows us how flattery is used to separate and elevate Vanessa and her potential from other students, thus making her feel as if she is a special student to Strane.

Mr. Strane voices concern over what people think of her spending so much time with him, but Vanessa points out that he shouldn't worry about it, because "no one ever notices anything" (41) she does. This is an important distinction to take notice of because Vanessa admits she is aware that their relationship is evolving into something that would be regarded as inappropriate by peers and staff. Her reassurance about being perceived as mostly invisible by others, though considered a positive thing from her point of view, is another trait that makes her even less protected and more vulnerable, which Strane may use to his advantage when grooming her. He replies "that isn't true [...]. I notice you all the time" and her body **goes cold** from the tender look he gives her (41, my emphasis). Referring to Shakeshaft's argument about fixated abusers and their tendency to select a class helper, the similarities between Strane and Vanessa are significant, but there is one important distinction. Whereas Shakeshaft's fixated abuser will appoint a class helper *publicly* to avoid suspicion, Strane is careful not to devote too much attention toward Vanessa in public, and instead focuses on creating private moments between them to strengthen their special relationship. As evidenced by Vanessa's physical reaction, Strane's behavior is starting to influence her. Her mind and body are producing contrasting reactions to her teacher's affection because she is constantly thinking about ways to acquire Strane's attention, but her instincts are producing warning signs such as feeling cold instead of feeling warm, the more common descriptor for intimate, *consensual* emotions. Strane initiates the first physical touch between them by touching her bare thigh, and Vanessa describes how she "freezes, possum-dead" (45). Vanessa's narrative language here reflects a non-consensual reaction to Strane's advances through vivid imagery such as coldness (freezes) and death (possum-dead). Though she tries to "be polite and inch away" (45), which is a common reaction for girls who are afraid of making a scene or who want to avoid a reprimand for reacting undesirably, Strane ignores the cues Vanessa's body language is providing.

Simone de Beauvoir put it succinctly when she said that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283), because Vanessa's reactions are influenced not just by her unwillingness and perhaps inexperience, but also her gender. Girls and women alike have traditionally been taught to cower and remain silent as opposed to standing up for themselves and speaking out, a response that has been drilled into the female conscious for centuries to appease gender norms that insist women be subordinate (Liao and Wang 2). De Beauvoir presented the idea that femininity is not defined by biology, intellect, or psychology, but rather civilization, and the woman is shaped by experiences and situations growing up. Forces in civilization conspire to make her passive as opposed to man, making

woman see herself as the “inessential Other” to the male subject (Beauvoir 283). This passivity that characterizes the “feminine” woman is indoctrinated from birth (Beauvoir 294), and further scaffolded by society throughout life from circumstance and survival. The same argument is made for men, as male gender norms are placed upon them both consciously and subconsciously from the time of birth throughout adulthood. Historically, the male gender norms have taught men to be dominant, and to pursue their desires until they achieve what they want (Beauvoir 294). While some may argue that these gender norms are antiquated, especially considering the power of movements such as ‘me too’ and #metoo that challenge how societies view and abuse gender norms, it is nevertheless crucial to highlight their lasting historical impact that still reverberates in patriarchal attitudes and the collective subconscious today<sup>v</sup>. Considering Vanessa’s response to Strane’s advances, and his persistent touch, one could say that their actions and reactions are responses influenced by taught gender behaviors, as understood by their respective upbringings. Elliott et al. found that when child sex offenders made their first move, 61% of the participants would use “passive methods stopping the abuse and then coercing and persuading once again” (585). These passive methods function as psychological conditioning as they train the victim to get familiar with physical touches, because if the victim is accustomed to physical contact, chances are he or she will not react with suspicion to further advances. Strane’s touch is the first of many and they only grow in sexual nature over time, which indicates a strong likeness between his method of persuasion and those of the child sex offenders in Elliott et al.’s research.

Another one of Strane’s strategies to have control over the grooming is to gaslight Vanessa, a form of emotional abuse where the victim is tricked into questioning her thoughts and the events occurring around her. Strane confesses that he wants to tuck Vanessa in and kiss her goodnight (63), but after this intimate confession, he becomes distant and uncaring. His cold attitude makes Vanessa desperate to show how frightened she is of losing their relationship, and her actions can be read as confirmation to Strane that she is emotionally needy and desires attention from him. Whilst a victim’s experience of having a “special relationship” with her teacher is beneficial for the offender in terms of victim compliance, the “special relationship” is equally imperative for the offender’s motivation to initiate the sexual abuse. As Elliott et al. note in their research, an offender needs to feel as if he is “important and special to the child, and giving the child the love she needs and isn’t getting” (579). As such, Strane’s hot-and-cold attitude gaslights Vanessa into questioning her own initiative in their relationship as she fears he may be losing interest, which serves him well since he gains the attention and confirmation he needs from Vanessa afterwards.

Strane presents Vanessa with literature outside their school curriculum, and their personal relationship grows closer when they discuss books and poetry. Russell’s clever use of intertextuality, which appears several times throughout the novel, adds a cultural context and creates a deeper level of understanding of the severity of Strane’s actions for the reader. Sharing literature of a sexual nature to test the victim’s reaction to sex is one of the methods presented in Elliott et al.’s research. The most significant example of sexual literature in *My Dark Vanessa* is the recurring intertextual use of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Strane gives Vanessa a copy of the novel which in and of itself can be considered literary child pornography from the male gaze. The novel was originally published in 1955, and it is considered a classic by many today. However, it has a long history of censorship due to its love story, written from the point of view of Humbert, a male English teacher who

becomes obsessed and falls in love with a 12-year-old girl. It is important to note the similarities between these couples. Humbert is 37, only a few years younger than Strane, and Lolita is three years younger than Vanessa. Vanessa's sympathy for Humbert's obsession makes her realize that she must show more initiative to reassure Strane of their relationship (Russell 75), which can be seen as an extension of Strane's gaslighting strategy mentioned earlier.

When Vanessa takes initiative and admits her feelings for him, he responds by kissing her head and holding her in a tight embrace that evokes a violent reaction within her as she forces down a desire to "*grab him by the throat*" (79, my emphasis). This fight-flight response is natural, especially given her apprehension, but this is one of few instances where her response, though never physically acted out, is to fight back from Strane's advances. Her fight response is important to note because the desire to grab him by the throat proves that she truly does not want him to touch her. It should be noted as a difference in response compared to the many instances where Vanessa's psychological reaction was to remove herself from it through dissociation. Dissociation is a mental process that takes place when a person experiences fear, discomfort, or a need to escape a situation (Schauer and Elbert). It is also a common reaction to trauma, or to events like a traumatic episode. Her previous response has been to flee from the situation mentally by dissociation, which some may argue was a nervous response due to lack of experience or momentary self-doubt. Previously when Strane touches her without consent she "freezes, possum-dead", and her "mind slips out of [her]", looking on from above (Russell 45-46). Vanessa's reaction or lack thereof clearly states that she does not want the embrace with Strane to escalate, but Strane does not acknowledge her silence nor her immobility. Instead, his fingertips "slide up [her] leg and keep sliding until they brush the crotch of [her] tights. Reflexively, [her] legs clamp together, trapping his hand" (Russell 80). The instance of wanting to grab him by the throat and fight back proves that a conscious part of Vanessa does not consent to Strane's advances, despite what she herself may want to believe, and is further corroborated by Vanessa trapping his hands between her thighs to stop him. Elliott et al.'s research showed that "the majority of offenders coerced children by carefully testing the child's reaction to sex, by bringing up sexual matters or having sexual materials around, and by subtly increasing sexual touching" (585). When looking at Strane's behavior toward Vanessa and the sexually explicit material they have shared, both by giving her *Lolita* and by her writing sexual poems for him to read, it further proves that Strane's actions fit the grooming strategies of child sex offenders. When he does acknowledge her restraint, Strane changes tactics by removing his hand, sliding down to the floor, and laying his head on her lap, telling her

I want to be a positive presence in your life ... Someone you can look back on and remember fondly, the funny old teacher who was pathetically in love with you but kept his hands to himself and was a good boy in the end ... What the fuck is the matter with me? I can't tell you this. I'm going to give you nightmares (Russell 80).

The validity of his confession deserves some attention, because even though he is grooming her, it is important to consider the complexities of Strane's character and what it may tell us. Understanding the psyche of an abuser, especially one whose job is to educate children, is crucial to gain more knowledge on how to deal with educators who sexually abuse students. Strane's behavior deviates from other sexual predators because he admits to having feelings for Vanessa, but these feelings are harmful and cannot be seen as validation for his actions. Another factor that differentiates Strane from the stereotypical sexual predator is that he does not hide from the criminal aspects of their



relationship. Strane reminds Vanessa that their relationship is inappropriate several times, a tactic that would usually be avoided by other perpetrators since it alerts the child to the wrongness of their situation. However, this change in perpetrator pattern can be related to Vanessa's more advanced age, since she is less gullible than younger children who are easier to manipulate. Strane would undoubtedly benefit from a change of tactics and instead let her *believe* she is aware of every aspect of their relationship, a grooming strategy that allows him to remain in charge of the situation, whilst still manipulating Vanessa to believe she has power in their relationship. Additionally, by voicing out loud that he wishes to keep his hands to himself, he can absolve himself of any guilt that may arise after he sexually abuses her by repeating that he previously warned her of his wish to *not* touch her inappropriately.

*My Dark Vanessa* is a complex example of grooming that becomes increasingly difficult to dissect as the novel progresses and as Vanessa grows older, especially since she at 32-years-old still considers their relationship to be built on love and lust instead of an abuse of power and sexual abuse. This is what makes *Boy Toy* such an important and refreshing novel, because it juxtaposes *My Dark Vanessa* through its small but very significant, differing details on the grooming process. These details shed light on the remarkably difficult terrain defining and exposing grooming through examples, in particular examples that prove grooming is not always a black-and-white case of victim/perpetrator. In all fairness, these two novels would not be as strong in their portrayals of grooming if they showcased it through stereotypical grooming examples without any of the grey area, or complicated, conflicts of character that Josh and Vanessa have.

Given the differences in the strategies and maintenance of the grooming processes in *Boy Toy* and *My Dark Vanessa*, it is fruitful to compare the two examples to examine how these differences affect those involved in the grooming process. In *Boy Toy*, Eve starts with small gestures and longing stares in class to initiate a connection with Josh, just as Strane did with Vanessa. However, that is mostly where their similarities end. Unlike Vanessa, 12-year-old Josh has many friends, does well in school and lives at home with loving parents, which makes him an *unlikely* victim prospect from a perpetrator's point of view. Another different but important factor is that Josh is abused by a female teacher, a gender dyad that is riddled with stereotypes and attitudes that benefit female teachers who are sexual predators. Sahl and Keene found that, based on several research cases, most respondents who are asked about gender dyads concerning sexual abuse tend to "label male offenders as more harmful and deserving of longer prison sentences than female offenders" (3705). It is fair to assume that those respondents were influenced by gender scripts that perceive women as less capable or willing to do harm because of stereotypes that perceive women as temperate and intrinsically kind-hearted. Historically, female teachers portrayed in film and literature have usually emitted gentle caretaking abilities, such as Miss Honey in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* or Maria Rainer in *The Sound of Music*. These stereotypes provide female teachers with more opportunities to get away with physical touches or sexual behaviors compared to men because female teachers are not expected to have any disreputable or inappropriate intentions toward students.

Eve's grooming strategies must be analyzed with this biased attitude toward female teachers in mind. Whereas Strane can be seen as a fixated abuser, Eve's grooming pattern

suggests she is more of an opportunistic abuser. Shakeshaft explains how an opportunistic abuser's mindset is "emotionally arrested and operate[s] at a teenage level" (10), whose boundaries and judgment are lacking. However, this does not mean that her actions are spontaneous or excusable. Unlike Strane in *My Dark Vanessa*, Eve admits to grooming and abusing Josh, telling him that she decided to have sex with him "the first time [she] laid eyes on [him]" (Lyga 398), meaning that everything she did after their first meeting was premeditated. Just as Shakeshaft describes opportunistic abusers, Eve too flatters her student and makes herself sexually available to him, which social and cultural norms have taught young men to appreciate and accept with gratitude (10). There is also a similarity between male opportunistic abusers and Strane that must be mentioned, which is that he courts Vanessa and makes her believe they are in love. Shakeshaft's definitions of different types of abusers should therefore not be seen as boxes perpetrators must fit into, but rather an overview of warning signs and emerging trends concerning abusers that may overlap.

Eve's grooming strategy differs from Strane's since he avoided Vanessa's parents to stay under their radar. The new strategy, reported by Carla van Dam (96) and supported by James Knoll (376), sees Eve grooming Josh's parents to gain their trust and, with their explicit blessing, secure alone time with him. By taking advantage of the caring and supportive stereotype attributed to her, Eve asks if Josh "can stay after school with her so that she could interview [him] and do questionnaires and stuff" for her grad project (Lyga 136). Her interest in Josh's impressive intellect ensures that they can be alone in her home, which, according to Knoll, is the type of "extra attention" parents appreciate, and makes them view her as a "positive authority figure" (Knoll 376). Jaffe et al. noted that a part of the grooming process is to make the victim feel "special or unique" (27), which, by singling Josh out for her project, Eve succeeds at. Based on the respondents' results concerning female teacher-male student relationships in Jaffe et al, it is a rare occurrence that Josh's father questions the amount of time Eve's project is taking. Despite this concern, Josh's mother rejects these worries because of Eve's due diligence grooming them, exclaiming "[f]or God's sake, Bill, stop worrying. *I talk to the woman every week. Everything's fine*" (Lyga 212, my emphasis). Evidently, Eve is meticulous in her grooming of both Josh and his parents, which creates more private space for her to take advantage of Josh, and less concern about prying eyes in public because she has an excuse ready at hand.

To make Josh feel comfortable in her home, Eve uses another common grooming strategy reported by Leclerc et al., which is "playing with them and doing things they like to do" (191). By allowing Josh to use her husband's Xbox on a regular basis, she provides an incentive for Josh to visit her house more often, which allows her to slowly make him accustomed to her private life. Playing the Xbox serves as a safe space that builds trust between them, but at the same time, Eve uses this safe space to slowly introduce Josh to sexual content as she "accidentally" leaves a pornographic DVD for him to watch alone (Lyga 158). We can apply Jaffe et al.'s discussion on how convicted sexual offenders use grooming strategies that slowly desensitizes the victim to sex, which also builds on Leclerc et al.'s results, in order to understand how Eve manages gradually make Josh accustomed to, and interested in, sex (27). Using their discussion about the DVD as a gateway to gauge his reaction to sex, she initiates sexual contact by kissing him (Lyga 174). As Eve gradually increases their sexual contact, and they watch the DVD together at a later date, the porn acts as a guide for Josh to learn how penetrative sex works, and they end up having intercourse (Lyga 207). "From then on, we moved our sessions from the sofa to the

bedroom. My Xbox time dropped almost to nil" (Lyga 208). Similarly, Strane's use of *Lolita* helped him gauge Vanessa's reaction to sex and forbidden relationships, and *Boy Toy* shows how Eve uses digital tools to influence and gauge her student. Both novels prove how complex and inconspicuous grooming can be, because both teachers manage to use the students' hobbies to expose them to pornography (either written or visual), and then further bond with them about it to initiate a relationship where sex takes place regularly.

In the final grooming stage – maintenance – Eve and Strane's grooming strategies differ somewhat, but they also have a few similarities. As previously mentioned, Vanessa's ambivalent feelings toward Strane often arise when she feels forced to give him sexual pleasure as opposed to receiving it. This is where Strane's more harsh and forceful grooming behavior comes out since Vanessa's sexual hesitance causes his loving façade to crack. Whereas Eve uses mutual trust and sexual curiosity to rape Josh (which results in him not feeling forced), Strane must occasionally use bodily force, emotional manipulation, and sometimes alcohol to rape Vanessa. The grooming strategies presented by Leclerc et al. and Jaffe et al. showcase how abusers can take advantage of stereotypes that play in the abuser's favor, which we notice through Eve's soft grooming that is void of threats or explicit harm, as opposed to Strane whose stereotypes work against his favor<sup>vi</sup>. In this context, male teacher stereotypes that may work against Strane are traits such as strictness, use of strength and/or force, and the cold, professional detachment that, judging by the student, can be considered either respectful, hurtful, or manipulative. Keeping this in mind, both Eve and Strane used threats of dire consequences to maintain their grooming of the children. This maintenance strategy is one of the most common strategies mentioned by Elliott et al, with 24% of their participants admitting to using it (586). In *My Dark Vanessa*, Strane and Vanessa discuss the consequences that would most likely happen should she ever tell anyone. He intimidates her silent with threats about expulsion, being forced into foster care, or never graduating and losing her life as she knows it, whereas he would go to jail branded "a so-called sex offender" (Russell 118-19) if law enforcement found out. The discussion in *Boy Toy* is less tense as Eve warns Josh that she could lose her job and go to jail if he tells anyone, making her illegal actions his responsibility (Lyga 176). An interesting contrast between these discussions is that although Eve uses dire consequences for herself as motivation to keep Josh silent, his thoughts reveal that his true motivation to keep silent is that if he told anyone, "They would know what [he] had thought and seen. They would know [he'd] lusted after Eve, know that [he'd] spied on her while she slept..." (Lyga 176). Josh's fear of being judged by the people around him for his sexual desires is so strong that it is not surprising that his lack of self-worth is one of the bigger consequences he struggles with after the abuse becomes official to the public.

## Grooming process

### CHAPTER 3: CONSEQUENCES FROM EDUCATOR SEXUAL ABUSE

Whilst the research on different effects of childhood sexual abuse has been extensive, there is a lack of attention devoted to the psychological and social consequences of educator sexual abuse (Knoll 377). Whenever the media report on cases of educator sexual misconduct, the focus is usually on the teacher's consequences, and what type of punishment they will receive. Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the legal processes of sexual abuse cases have become increasingly publicized in mainstream media, especially after the #metoo movement in 2017. The attention has mostly been on the severity of the punishment, such as the length of prison sentences and how much the perpetrator must pay in damages to the victim(s). When educator sexual misconduct is revealed and receives media attention, another factor that has been emphasized is the comparison of male versus female educators and the punishment they receive. Due to legal reasons, the student victim will usually be protected from the scrutiny of the media. Questions concerning the well-being of the victim are usually left unanswered unless a statement is made on behalf of the entire family. This chapter draws on examples of consequences that stem from educator sexual abuse and attempts to highlight the significance that gender dyads in teacher-student relationships have for the consequences that arise.

Both *My Dark Vanessa* and *Boy Toy* contain several rape scenes that happen because the teachers used effective grooming strategies, and these scenes are important to analyze due to their questions of consent, responsibility, and culpability. The term 'rape' is used to discuss to all sexual encounters in the novels, even though the characters' narrations during the scenes may indicate that they were consensual acts from the victims' points of view. At their young ages, Vanessa and Josh have neither the life experience nor the social education needed to comprehend the complexities of consent and desire, or how both may influence their perception on personal culpability in the aftermath of sexual abuse. For instance, the language of Vanessa's narration is affected whenever she believes herself to be a willing participant in the sexual encounters they have, which disguises the act as consensual even though she cannot legally consent to sex when she's underage. Her narration is more romantic during sexual encounters where she is at the receiving end of pleasure, but when she is forced to participate in sexual acts for Strane's pleasure, her narration clearly shows that she questions whether it is rape. "A thought shoots through me – is this rape? Is he raping me?" (Russell 252). Vanessa's language aside, the fact remains that she is underage and/or intoxicated and therefore unable to consent to many of their sexual encounters, which makes it rape<sup>vii</sup>. These narrative choices made it difficult to decide whether to change the term for each sexual act depending on the victim's impression of the scene, or to use one blanket term to strengthen the message that everything is rape despite their notion of consent. In Josh's case, his internal monologue shows that he considers himself a sexual predator who seduces his teacher and who is in charge of their relationship, because he feels "guilty for making her do what [he] wanted ... Guilty for making her cheat on her husband" (Lyga 210). His impression that Eve should not be held responsible for their relationship makes Josh carry the guilt of their actions and his own sexual desire, further clouding his views on consent and culpability. Given both Vanessa and Josh's young, uneducated viewpoints on relationships and sex, I have chosen

to use the term 'rape' to ensure that there is no possible way to interpret these student-teacher relationships as anything but sexual abuse.

During experiences of overwhelming threats, the human body takes certain preemptive measures to ensure protection of the body and the mind. The first time Vanessa is raped, Strane "starts asking permission after he's already done the thing he's asking about" (Russell 99). He performs cunnilingus on her without her consent, and once she has an orgasm, he assures her they "won't go further than that for now" (Russell 100). When she is awoken to the sight of an erect penis in the middle of the night, she begins "pumping away, dutifully as a robot, disconnected from [her] brain" (Russell 101). Keeping in mind that Vanessa does not feel safe in her current environment, applying Schauer and Elbert's explanation of dissociation from an evolutionary perspective can further explain how Vanessa's response is dissociative. Schauer and Elbert show how dissociation is "an adaptive, and when strike is close, final remaining survival response to specific types of life-threats, that include nearness of a superior perpetrator or other situations dominated by helplessness" (110). Not only is Vanessa in a physically vulnerable place as she is naked in Strane's bed, but she is also mentally vulnerable after waking up in a dark room. Strane asks if she wants him to fuck her, but he "isn't really asking" (Russell 101), as he positions himself between her legs, thrusts into her and ignores her cries. He tells her she is doing great and "it's okay if it hurts. It won't hurt forever" (Russell 102). Situations that enable dissociation can be when there is skin contact between victim and perpetrator, and when one's body integrity is already injured by penetration or other types of invasions (Schauer and Elbert 110). After the rape, Vanessa describes how her mind feels "like the lake on a calm day, glassy and still. [She] is nothing, no one, nowhere" (Russell 103). Schauer and Elbert explains how, in evolutionary terms, the animal (in our context Vanessa) may resort to immobility if there is no chance to flee or escape the situation (111). To maximize the defensive strategy by being immobile "as if dead" (Schauer and Elbert 113), the animal ceases fighting and moving altogether, whilst emotions and perceptions must be deactivated or completely shut down to protect the mind (113). To ensure motionlessness in such a stressful and possibly perilous situation, the animal should be "unable and unwilling to use voluntary muscles" (113), in addition to being emotionally numb, as if anesthetized. Vanessa's response to Strane's rape clearly shows how her fight-flight response is to dissociate from the terrifying experience, as evidenced by her descriptions of being "nothing, no one, nowhere" (Russell 103), which can be compared to the emotional numbness Schauer and Elbert refers to.

People who have experienced shocking, traumatic, or dangerous events may often suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (NIMH). Signs and symptoms of PTSD can occur in various ways, such as avoidance, mood and cognition changes, and a re-experiencing of the trauma through flashbacks. Vanessa's behavior after Strane rapes her is similar to Schauer and Elbert's definition for survivors of traumatic events who have experienced a "peritraumatic dissociative shut-down" (114), which means that the victim has been in contact with the offender's body or bodily fluids, and/or been bodily penetrated. These victims often do not report their abuse immediately after their assault because the brain takes measures to protect the body from too much sensory input at once. If, at a later time in life, traumatic script-driven imagery is used as a treatment for the victim's PTSD, more details about the assault may rise to the surface years or even decades after the abuse took place (Schauer and Elbert 114). Script-driven imagery is a "widely used symptom provocation method in PTSD research" (Hopper et al. 249), where the patient recalls a traumatic episode whilst being audiotaped, and must then listen to

the tape and remember the episode as vividly as possible. This was shown in a study done by Lanius et al., where victims with late PTSD related to childhood abuse reported that “I was emotionless” or “I was looking down at myself from above” during the script-driven procedures (Lanius et al., qtd in Schauer and Elbert 114)<sup>viii</sup>. Vanessa ends up dissociating several times as a defense mechanism whenever she is raped by Strane, or when she thinks back on other instances of rape or coercion from other men later in life. Applying Lanius et al.’s research to Vanessa, we can see that her dissociative thoughts and her PTSD are similar to those of victims of childhood sexual abuse who also tend to dissociate after the abuse has stopped.

PTSD is not the only consequence that victims may experience after a dissociative episode. Other psychiatric disorders, including mood disorders, panic disorder and psychoses, are reported to perhaps occur if there is significant trauma related to a dissociative episode (Lanius et al. 305). Referring to Kessler et al. 1995, Lanius et al. states that PTSD and dissociative disorders are often referred to as “umbrella disorders” because a wide variety of symptoms may be understood as part of a traumatically based syndrome” (310). For anyone interested to build on this analysis of Vanessa, analyzing Vanessa’s mood swings and her drug use problems in the context of other disorders may be fruitful. Vanessa’s hostile behavior as an adult further proves this point, because it is obvious that though she may not be aware of it, her adult behavior is almost textbook to that of a sexual abuse survivor. At 32 years old, she tries to convince herself that her life experiences have been normal, so that she does not have to face the reality of her own abuse, claiming that “[i]t’s fine. The drinking, the pot, the Ativan, even Strane – it’s perfectly fine. It’s nothing. It’s normal” (Russell 192). Finkelhor and Hashima’s study found that victims of sexual abuse are more likely to develop substance abuse issues (67), which we notice Vanessa suffers through on a daily basis in her adult life. Finkelhor and Hashima also found that survivors may have difficulty forming stable, healthy relationships. Vanessa’s struggle to form healthy relationships should not be taken lightly, because the issue is directly related to Strane and the sexual abuse; when her new boyfriend is made aware of Vanessa’s previous relationship with her teacher, he eventually leaves her because she refuses to admit it was abuse, and instead protects Strane’s behavior. Vanessa’s strained relationship with her parents also stems from this protectiveness since Vanessa never allows them to confront her about her teacher-student relationship with Strane.

Sahl and Keene have highlighted an important detail concerning sexual scripts about boys and their consequences of sexual abuse, which is that teenage boys who are abused by women are perceived to suffer less emotional damage compared to teenage girls abused by men (3705). Although Barry Lyga has stated that *Boy Toy* is fiction, it is still able to represent the consequences of a young, abused boy whose response to sexual abuse is muddled by social and sexual scripts that deny him a natural, emotional reaction. Josh’s conflicted feelings about Eve’s arrest, their relationship, and society’s reaction to it show why male victims struggle to identify and acknowledge their emotions. Older gender scripts have taught men that they are expected to be powerful, especially in relation to women. With this patriarchal stereotype in mind, male victims of sexual abuse must not only face the fact that they have endured something horrible, but they must also acknowledge themselves in a role where they have not only been manipulated but also as lacking power in the abuse. This may be one of the reasons why Josh does not consider

himself a victim. Furthermore, his lust for Eve and the belief that he was the one who seduced her reinforce his reluctance to consider victimhood, but it also stems from the reactions by other authority figures in his life (Lyga 30). Josh admits that female teachers look as if they are afraid of him, as if “they have to avoid touching [him], or else they’ll get the molester virus” (30). This not only shows how Josh feels judged by the staff at school, but it also lets the reader know how he views himself. Although Josh is the victim of educator sexual abuse, he considers himself the molester. He is not willing to listen to his therapist when Dr. Kennedy argues that he is the *victim*, “the target of molestation” (30), because he cannot comprehend why his female teachers would be afraid of him if he really was a victim. Furthermore, if victimhood and a lack of power implies innocence, then it should not come as a surprise that Josh struggles to identify as a victim since he believes his behavior with Eve to be the opposite of innocent. Josh does not understand that the teachers’ disgust is directed toward the sexual abuse he suffered, and he instead recognizes their reaction as disgust toward what he did and is still capable of doing.

Knoll refers to Finkelhor and Hashima’s 2001 overview of the victimization of children and youth when he states that “educator sexual abuse has dynamics similar to incest, and the abuse results in a loss of trust in adults and authority figures” (377). Josh shows not only a lack of trust in these authority figures, especially toward the administration and teachers at his school, but also a complete disregard of their authority. It should not come as a surprise that Josh struggles to trust them, seeing as how he was temporarily suspended after physically assaulting his baseball coach for saying, “[y]ou never slept with me, so I ain’t about to take it easy on you!” (Lyga 29), which only strengthens Josh’s decision to distrust the authority figures in his life. The school faculty is also aware of Josh’s disregard of authority, as even the principal asserts that Josh needs to “show proper respect” (17) and not call him by his first name.

Josh’s lack of trust in authority figures is one of many consequences of educator sexual abuse, but Knoll also refers to other outcomes such as low self-esteem (Knoll; Griffing et al.). Josh’s self-esteem is most definitely affected by Eve’s grooming and the sexual abuse, but the emotional turmoil he experienced at the hands of the school and the local community is a big contributor to his low self-esteem. Whereas teenagers around Josh’s age usually get low self-esteem from comparing their physical appearance, academic abilities, or athletic abilities to other peers’, Josh does not have any self-doubt concerning those attributes in himself. He is an extraordinarily bright student, and he does not shy away from his brilliance on the baseball field, a combination that can be perceived as arrogant to others. Without direct access to Josh’s thoughts, people would not believe he has low self-esteem based on how he acts. The reasons for his low self-esteem cannot be considered ‘normal teenage problems’ either, but rather a consequence from being poorly treated by other adults in his life. His attitude at school is akin to confident tough guys you do not want to mess with, so it is only through his inner monologue that this low self-esteem is evident. Josh’s thoughts reflect the gravity of his self-regard that stems from anxieties concerning how he believes other people view him *after* the sexual abuse is exposed. Convinced he is a “molester” (Lyga 30) and an “almost-pariah” (235) who will “never be normal” (71), Josh’s thoughts of himself clearly show that he suffers from dangerously low self-esteem that must be properly treated.

Victims of educator sexual abuse may also suffer from feelings of betrayal and shame, and they can struggle to form intimate relationships (Knoll 377). Studies presented



in Knoll's research revealed that some students found the abuse particularly harmful "because their trust was betrayed by someone whom they admired, saw as an authority figure, and felt comfortable confiding in" (377). In *Boy Toy*, most of the indications of Josh's psychological trauma is brought to the fore through pseudo-chapters labeled "session transcripts" (Lyga 28, 48, 68, 262), his recorded therapy sessions in written form. During one of these sessions, Josh voices concern over his reluctance to form relationships. He struggles to go on dates and act like a normal teenager. He also considers himself disconnected from his peers and teachers after the sexual abuse is revealed in the local community. Josh's reaction is even more understandable when we apply the knowledge that victims of educator sexual abuse may experience an "interruption of peer relationships" and "interruption of dating patterns in high school" (Burgess et al. 393). As evidenced by Josh's session transcripts, poor social efficacy and a struggle to form intimate relationships are consequences Josh experienced. Ligezinska et al. reported that these social and psychological consequences are most likely corroborated by the victim's self-blame and guilt (Ligezinska in Knoll 377). If we apply this hypothesis to Josh's behavior, we can see the same effect in him as he struggles to reconnect with Rachel because of his guilt. An interesting factor to consider here is that most victims of sexual abuse usually show signs of guilt and self-blame for ending up as a *victim* of abuse, not for being the abuser. It is also one of the main reasons this novel was chosen for the thesis, because Josh's experience provides a narrative rarely voiced from victims of sexual abuse. Male victims of sexual abuse can struggle to view themselves as victims, which should not come as a surprise since traditionally, gender scripts have told society that rape is something men do to women, not the other way around (Nicholls 17). Just as women have subconsciously internalized their passivity through social norms and historical circumstance, generations of men have grown up internalizing their emotions, often met with the phrases "big boys don't cry", "don't be a sissy", and other misogynistic attitudes to the same effect (Majumdar). Mithu Sanyal's more gender-inclusive outlook on rape shows how the patriarchal mindset we find in rape culture usually seems to benefit men, but there are aspects of "cultural and structural violence ... [that] damages us all, and damages us unevenly, producing effects in marginalized populations that are not suffered by more privileged individuals" (Nicholls 17). In Josh's case, his warped view of culpability may stem from his young age and lack of knowledge about consent, but growing up in a patriarchal, sports-driven community and being surrounded by authority figures such as his misogynistic coach most likely influenced his perceptions on gender scripts and rape culture.

There are other consequences that may arise after experiencing educator sexual abuse, consequences that affect people other than the victim or offender. In *My Dark Vanessa*, Vanessa questions whether her sexual experiences have led her to become a predator because she "get[s] excited around teenage girls" and "think[s] about how abusive people are always abused as kids" (Russell 192). She never acts on her intrusive thoughts about mistreating girls, but she also doesn't intervene when seventeen-year-old Inez is sexually harassed either, because Vanessa believes "it's nothing" and that Inez "should know how to handle this" (Russell 143). Vanessa's past sexual abuse has affected her opinion concerning which degrees of sexism and abuse she believes women should be able to accept. This way, Vanessa's abuse can be seen as a cause for why she dismisses Inez's plea for help, which Inez then suffers the consequences of. If the victim of sexual abuse believes that the sexual treatment they receive by the teacher is normative or

acceptable, they may start treating other people with the same type of attention (Knoll 377). This can be seen as a different type of first-hand abuse that is demonstrated in *Boy Toy* when 13-year-old Josh is playing with his friends and is pushed to make-out with Rachel. Having been groomed and sexually abused by Eve for months at that point, Josh proceeded to escalate the make out session just like Eve taught him, as he “crushed [his] face to [Rachel’s], let [his] hands move the way they wanted, the way they knew” (Lyga 10). Josh, who experiences a “flicker” during this event, does not understand that what he is doing is not consensual, because he is simply acting the way he knows is usually expected of him. Whereas Vanessa’s lack of empathy may have indirectly hurt Inez since she did not interfere, which could be a result of her past abuse or something else, Josh directly hurt Rachel *because of* the sexual abuse he himself had experienced. He would most likely not have acted on autopilot and sexually harassed Rachel if Eve had not taught him how to behave in sexual situations, but this is another consequence of experiencing abuse at such a young age. Josh was only taught the physical sexual behavior with Eve, and he had no knowledge about how being sexually active would change his mental and emotional frame of mind. He was also woefully underinformed about the responsibilities and repercussions connected to sexual activity, such as responses to non-consensual touches, or pregnancy.

There is also a void to be filled concerning the consequences for families with children who have suffered sexual abuse, because the clinical and research focus has been primarily on the child, as opposed to the family as a whole (Manion et al. 1285). Both *My Dark Vanessa* and *Boy Toy* show the familial consequences of child sexual abuse. Vanessa’s relationship with her parents becomes quite strained as the implication of her relationship with Strane is never directly addressed, even despite the photo evidence of their relationship that surfaces. Dr. Rita Shackel’s research on children’s disclosure of sexual abuse found that children between the ages 14-17 are more likely to disclose their abuse to a friend or a peer, whereas the percentage of children who disclose abuse to their parents is higher in 7-10-year-olds (387). I theorize that Vanessa’s vehement denial of any relationship with Strane to her mother stems from firstly, a fear that she may lose Strane and Brovick, and secondly, the deep-rooted embarrassment and guilt she feels would make her unable to face her parents, should they see her for who she believes she truly is. This likens her to Josh who also feels as if his parents have no idea who he really is, because they do not seem to notice any changes in him after he starts being sexually active with Eve. Knoll states that parents whose child has suffered educator sexual abuse may carry intense guilt and emotional distress, which in turn may impair their ability to properly attend to the child’s post-abuse needs (377). Because Vanessa’s relationship to her parents is strained from before she met Strane, it is difficult to analyze how Vanessa’s sexual abuse affected her familial relationships. Based on the dynamic between them, it is fair to argue that her parents suffered guilt and emotional distress without explicit confirmation of Vanessa’s abuse. Her parents observed how she changed between her first year at Browick, dealing with normal teenage drama, to becoming more erratic, secretive, and overly protective of herself during her second year. In *Boy Toy*, Josh’s parents take full advantage of having Eve as a glorified babysitter, spending less time at home and more time at work. However, when the sexual abuse is discovered, the parents’ guilt and anger come out in full force, and their marriage is not able to withstand the damage that comes with the truth of Josh’s experience. The parents’ communicative abilities, which were quite damaged even before the abuse is exposed, comes to a boiling point after the truth is

revealed. Because it can be difficult for parents to admit they have failed in their roles as guardians, it is easier for them to direct the guilt and blame they feel at each other. Knoll further corroborates this scenario, emphasizing how the parents' emotional distress also can "impair their ability to effectively respond to their child's post abuse needs" (377). Considering that Josh believed himself to be guilty of grooming and taking sexual advantage of Eve, even five years after the abuse was discovered, it is obvious that Knoll's statement is not only relevant, but crucial for the situation with Josh and his parents.



## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to chart the grooming processes in *My Dark Vanessa* and *Boy Toy*, and to explore which consequences arise after educator sexual abuse. Both books demonstrate the importance of facing the psychological and social repercussions that may develop from teacher-student relationships. *My Dark Vanessa* portrays the psychological trauma that can happen from being groomed and manipulated for years by a teacher to whom you feel a strong sense of loyalty. *Boy Toy* illustrates which social and psychological consequences male victims suffer from after educator sexual abuse, and how the victims are affected by gender scripts embedded in toxic masculinity. Each novel approached the topic of grooming with plots heavily embedded in “grey area” discourse such as questions of culpability, consent, and desire, which helped explain why the children viewed the sexual abuse as loving relationships instead of mistreatment. Vanessa’s thoughts showcase this dichotomy well when she thinks about the #metoo article exposing that Strane groomed five students. She “repeat[s] the word over and over, try to understand what it means, but all [she] can think of is the lovely warm feeling [she]’d get when he stroked [her] hair” (Russell 148). In *Boy Toy*, the strong sense of guilt and responsibility that resides in Josh after the abuse ends is perhaps the most important lesson to learn from the novel, because it proves just how complicated the grooming experience can be for the child’s perception of culpability. Young, male victims of educator sexual abuse are often faced with sexist responses that aim to lessen the gravity of their experience, such as calling them lucky for “sleeping with a teacher”, which effectively clouds the victim’s perception of the abuse, and may make them question their responsibility in the abuse that took place. *Boy Toy* can be a great tool for teachers and other adults to broaden their knowledge on grooming and educator sexual abuse, especially because of the sexist gender scripts that many adults carry with them subconsciously.

However, there are some factors that made it difficult to analyze Vanessa’s character as a victim of grooming and sexual abuse; her pressing need to establish a relationship with Strane is chief amongst them. As opposed to the more traditional view of a victim who is unaware of the manipulation taking place to groom her, Vanessa is clear-headed and intuitive when she analyses Strane’s behavior towards her.

“You’re in charge here, Vanessa. You decide what we do.”

I wonder if he really believes that. He touched me first, said he wanted to kiss me, told me he loved me. Every first step was taken by him. I don’t feel forced, and I know I have the power to say no, but that isn’t the same as being in charge. But maybe he has to believe that. Maybe there’s a whole list of things he has to believe (Russell 91).

Vanessa does not fit the stereotypical description of a victim who was manipulated and groomed into a sexual relationship, because she has been wanting a relationship with Strane since they met. This ambivalence in attitude is exactly why Vanessa is so important to showcase as a victim of sexual abuse. As previously mentioned, the societal understanding of what a victim of sexual assault looks like is changing, but it has usually been either an innocent girl attacked by a stranger in the dark, or a promiscuous woman

who was “asking for it”. These outdated and damaging virgin/whore gender scripts have had a strong hold on rape discourse, and they are harmful to so many victims who do not necessarily fit the mold (not to mention the “whore” victim cliché, which is problematic in and of itself by insinuating that the rape was deserved).

Both the ‘me too’/#metoo movements were instrumental in shining a light on toxic rape culture<sup>ix</sup> and the problems that arise from it. Because the movements made room for victims to speak about the otherwise taboo and personal issue that rape is, they also paved the way for a much-needed discussion about victim blaming and the damage it causes. Victim blaming is usually understood as the belief that the victim is either wholly or somewhat responsible for their own victimization, meaning that the blame for the abuse suffered is shifted from the perpetrator to themselves (Stubbs-Richardson et al. 91). This victim-blaming ideology is heavily influenced by the “just world hypothesis” (92), which is the understanding that you reap what you sow based on your moral behavior. In the context of victim blaming, just world beliefs insinuate that the victim of sexual assault must have done something to cause the abuse she suffered (92). Some of the most common arguments used for victim blaming are rape myths that claim the victim was dressed inappropriately, walked alone, got drunk, flirted, or even instigated a sexual activity that the perpetrator felt justified in finishing. In Vanessa’s case, it becomes very easy to argue that she is not a victim of grooming nor sexual assault, because she had been consistently willing and eager to start a relationship with Strane. Rape myths are used as shields to defend the actions of the perpetrator, coincidentally absolving him of blame and putting the responsibility of the attack on the victim. Even though Vanessa was underage at the time of the grooming, some readers may believe that Strane’s actions were understandable because of her persistence to establish a relationship with him. There are different definitions and individual interpretations concerning what consent, persistence, and grey area flirting are, and each interpretation of these terms affect how grooming and sexual abuse are viewed and judged by the reader. A reading of *My Dark Vanessa* that bends in favor of justifying Strane’s actions could cause more damage for the typical treatment of victims we are familiar with today. Prejudice toward sexual abuse survivors is already a big problem because of rape culture, which includes the just world beliefs and rape myths described above. This rape culture makes victims of sexual assault, especially those who do not fit the description of “appropriate victims” (93), more likely to stay silent about their abuse.

As touched upon in the analysis, victims of educator sexual abuse can lose trust in authority figures because of lacking post-abuse support. The role of institutions and their responses to educator sexual assault may be crucial to the child’s social and psychological response, as evidenced by Josh and Vanessa’s confrontation with staff at their schools. Vanessa’s confrontation with her principal showcases the danger of institutions taking the teacher’s side in fear of attracting a scandal. The repercussions Vanessa suffered are exemplary of how hurtful institutional sexism and misogyny can be. Hinkelman and Bruno highlight the importance of school personnel being able to “develop rapport with students, provide opportunities for students to share sensitive information, and *respond with care and compassion* to validate student concerns” (386, my emphasis). An important distinction here is that Hinkelman and Bruno’s argument is about the disclosure of sexual abuse of elementary school children, whereas in Vanessa’s situation, she admits to creating a false rumor about having a relationship with Strane, even though that is not true. The school’s failure to investigate her teacher, and instead punish Vanessa through public

humiliation, shows the institution's complicity in using the female seductress trope as a scapegoat to protect their own staff. Vanessa's therapy session as an adult proves just how traumatic the school's response was for her, since the therapist validates that the school's slut-shaming behavior toward her caused more than enough damage to trigger her PTSD (Russell 261).

*My Dark Vanessa* also shows the lingering effect of the school's misogynistic response when the other woman who accuses Strane of sexual misconduct at Browick explains how the legacy of Vanessa's case initially intimidated her into silence from fear of retribution by the school. Hinkelman and Bruno explain this better by highlighting that "some children reported being afraid that their disclosures would result in negative consequences and thus chose not to tell anyone of the abuse" (386). Another possible and perhaps more likely outcome is that the disclosure of abuse would not surmount to anything in the end. Dr. Shackel highlights how research has consistently proven that when child sexual abuse is disclosed, official reports are rarely made to police or other authorities (390), which usually causes the victim even more trauma because their experience is not taken seriously.

The most important question to ask next is how teachers, children, parents, institutions, and society itself can collectively work together to stop grooming and educator sexual abuse. Elliott et al. provides a list of recommendations and tips for stopping child sexual abuse, made by men incarcerated for the crime (590). The list includes preventative measures they believe teachers and schools should implement. A recurring issue with preventative measures based on social norms, particularly measures to avoid sexual abuse or rape, is that they often put the responsibility on the potential victim. From a young age, girls especially are taught to speak up if they feel uncomfortable around adults, to not talk to strangers, and to avoid being alone outside after dark. To enact real change, preventative measures must flip the narrative and put the responsibility on the potential perpetrators and the institutions that are upheld by law to keep children safe. Looking at school as an institution, a problem that often occurs when there is suspicion of teacher sexual abuse is the conflict of interest between collegial loyalty and giving attention to potentially career-ruining rumors of abuse – as depicted in *My Dark Vanessa*. In their comparison between male and female teachers who sexually abuse children, Christensen and Darling registered that the availability and use of technology has made grooming children easier for teachers (32), though it could also be considered a riskier strategy because of the digital evidence it produces. The novels did not portray extensive use of technology in the grooming strategies they portrayed, but this is most likely because Josh and Vanessa went to school in the early to mid-2000's when children had less direct access to technology compared to what we see in today's digital age. As a preventative measure, Christensen and Darling propose that organizations "should pay close regard in the development of their safeguarding policies and procedures", as well as "good supervision and monitoring of educational staff" and "provision of adequate support systems for staff ... experiencing personal or professional difficulties" (32). The hope is that with proper procedures in place regarding suspicion of abuse, the threshold for investigating rumors may shorten.

The lack of preventative measures proves how important it is for teachers to be vigilant in their workspace. Vigilance is imperative because of how easy it can be to cross certain professional lines. It can be difficult to balance the instinct to be compassionate

and caring toward students whilst upholding a certain emotional distance, especially in face of the professional teacher etiquette that US teachers are expected to follow. Teachers must be vigilant of their own behavior because dire consequences may follow if they behave recklessly or inappropriately; they can also end up in similar situations to those the novels portray. Tara Star Johnson's work concerning sexual tensions in secondary school classrooms brings this concern to the fore, explaining that it is "pointless to deny that that dynamic is there" (21), though she also stresses the importance of never crossing a physical line.

Again, the issue with taboo workplace concerns may create problems that are more dangerous than necessary if teachers could instead be encouraged to speak out about their struggles. Darling's 2018 study found that, contrary to public perceptions, female teachers who sexually abused students were neither naïve, inexperienced, or coerced by men to offend against children, but rather decided to abuse because the opportunity presented itself, and their motivation to abuse were "to meet emotional needs and for sexual gratification" (25). Johnson's belief that sexual tension may appear between teachers and students is therefore important to discuss and to solve accordingly. By metaphorically shoving the subject underneath the carpet, educators are doing themselves and their students a disservice that creates a vicious circle of uncertainty for the teachers who may be experiencing such dangerous urges, subsequently putting students in danger of abuse as well. A suggestion is therefore to aid the conversation further by supporting Christensen and Darling's suggestion above, implementing a safe support system for educators who are facing these questionable urges. By removing or lessening the taboo restrictions currently in place, the hope is that institutions can aid their teachers with support and tools to process these abusive urges without acting on them. In August 2020, Norwegian television started running ads from the Norwegian Directorate of Health to reach out to adults with sexual attraction towards children (Kringstad). Their message, as stated, is to let these adults know that health care professionals are eager to help them, without prejudice or anger, but with compassion (Kringstad). If the health sector can apply a positive and supportive attitude to provide aid for these individuals, perhaps the educating institutions can cooperate by adapting the same attitude toward this issue in their workplace.

Nevertheless, there is a need for teachers to check themselves in their teaching profession, and to check their colleagues. Part of the problem in preventing educator sexual abuse is the belief that it will never happen to or around oneself, because the alternative is too frightening to even entertain as a possibility. Once educating institutions are ready to admit that educator sexual abuse may happen everywhere, only then can we begin to actively prevent abuse in the workplace. Literature can be seen as a reflection of society, and the growing work of literature and television adaptations that focus on grooming and educator sexual abuse proves that it is time to treat it with the attention and seriousness it deserves. By using such literature as tools to further educate students and school staff about educator sexual abuse and its consequences, perhaps victims can receive help and support in their community rather than be faced with judgement. Ultimately, the hope is that one day teachers and students alike are scaffolded with a support system and with information about the topic to the extent that grooming and educator sexual abuse will be a rarity, a relic of past injustices.



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## Endnotes

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Though Nicholls credits Tarana Burke for her early 21<sup>st</sup> century work with ‘me too’, she also highlights Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey’s reporting for breaking the Harvey Weinstein scandal, which subsequently started the American ‘me too’ calls for accountability through tweets such as Alyssa Milano’s.

<sup>ii</sup> Because the relationships in *BT* and *MDV* only represent cross-gender dyads (man/girl and woman/boy), this thesis focuses on those dyads exclusively. It is nevertheless crucial to mention that same gender dyads should not be overlooked in the discourse on educator sexual abuse. For more information on cross gender versus same gender dyads, see Dollar et al. and Muniz et al.

<sup>iii</sup> This is an important detail to include as context, because a lot of research on educator sexual abuse is based on sexual scripts and respondents’ reactions to them which, in turn, is shaped by the respondents’ views on gender, sex, age, and culpability. The respondents’ attitudes toward sexual abuse cases may not necessarily directly translate to real life statistics on educator sexual abuse, an important distinction to keep in mind whilst trying to navigate this difficult subject.

<sup>iv</sup> A “special relationship” is a grooming tactic referred to in Stephen Knoll’s overview of grooming strategies, and it will be explained later in this chapter.

<sup>v</sup> As will be discussed later in this thesis, male gender norms affect Strane and Josh Mendel in very different ways due to their respective ages, not to mention how the discourse is affected by one being seen as a rapist and the other a victim of rape.

<sup>vi</sup> I choose to phrase it like this because Eve admits to consciously grooming Josh, which makes her actions less circumstantial and more prone to meticulous planning. As such, I believe it can be said that Eve took advantage of the stereotypes and privileges attached to her gender to succeed in her plans.

<sup>vii</sup> There are scenes in *My Dark Vanessa* that depict consensual sex between Vanessa and Strane after she is of age, but they won’t be discussed in this thesis since she is not his student at that time. I would argue that she is still under Strane’s control during their adult, unhealthy relationship, which again begs the question of consent.

<sup>viii</sup> I’m assuming that Schauer and Elbert obtained the patient responses from Lanius et al.’s 2002 article, though they were not published with that report. I could not locate the patient responses myself, only Lanius et al.’s article without appendixes.

<sup>ix</sup> Stubbs-Richardson et al. defines rape culture as “ideologies or behaviors that condone or normalize sexual violence” (91). The term was coined by American feminists in the 1970s, and the meaning of the term is continually adapting to become more inclusive for other minorities who suffer from these ideologies and behaviors as well.



## TEACHER RELEVANCE

When I first applied to the English teaching program at NTNU, I did so with the hope and desire to one day be able to inspire and motivate teenagers in the English classroom with lessons on different cultures, the English language, and last, but not least, the joy of literature. Everything I have learnt during my specialization in English literature will undoubtedly follow me into the many English classes I will teach in the future. Literature reflects society, and teenagers look outward to find stories that can help shape them as people in the often tumultuous and drama-filled years in Middle School and High School. Not only will literary analyses help students understand more about the world and how experiences shape us as people, but they may also guide the students toward a deeper appreciation of their own lives and futures.

Although both friends, family, and professors have questioned my choice to focus on such heavy topics as grooming and educator sexual assault, I have never doubted the potential behind the knowledge I would gain. Working on this thesis has taught about and prepared me for what most people would assume to be a highly unlikely scenario, but I respectfully disagree. Although the thesis is a literary analysis of fictional novels, they have been analyzed based on a theoretical foundation of very real statistics and research that does reflect how big of an issue grooming and consequences of educator sexual assault is. I look forward to using my knowledge about warning signs of grooming, abuse, and which alarming behaviors to be aware of throughout the rest of my career, and I wish to further share my knowledge with colleagues and staff wherever I go. And whilst the thesis primarily focused on educator sexual abuse, the same knowledge can be applied to other types of sexual abuse experienced by children. I am glad to know I feel better equipped to deal with these horrifying scenarios should I ever be unfortunate enough to face them as a teacher myself.

Lastly, I want to highlight the importance of engaging students in discussions about grooming and sexual abuse, not to mention the consequences of them, because the students are one of the biggest demographics to end up as victims. In the core curriculum of LK20, the principles for education and all-round development includes the interdisciplinary topic 'health and life skills'. It focuses on physical and mental health, sexuality and gender, the importance of drawing boundaries and to respect others' boundaries, and it emphasizes how to deal with thoughts, feelings, and relationships. By informing students about grooming and sexual abuse within this interdisciplinary topic, through examples such as #metoo or media depictions of grooming, I hope to scaffold the students through both their educational journey and their emotional journey as they mature into adults.

## Teacher Relevance



