Toxic Relationships in New Adult Literature

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Završni rad

Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

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Bachelor's Thesis

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Abstract

The New Adult genre is, along with Young Adult, one of the fastest growing genres in literature right now and, because of its huge audience, it is important that the works of this genre portray healthy and positive romantic relationships. Looking from a feminist perspective, these novels often portray relationships in a negative way, leading to problematic messages being spread, which romanticize and glamorize the wrongful treatment of women in these novels. This paper will discuss different tropes in New Adult literature that are either direct or indirect cause of various toxic behaviours in romantic relationships. The paper will focus on examples from two New Adult novels, *November 9* by Collen Hoover and *Beautiful Disaster* by Jamie McGuire.

Key words: toxic relationships, *Beautiful Disaster, November 9*, feminism, literary tropes, New Adult literature.

Contents

Introduction

Young Adult literature has been flourishing for quite some time now. Book series like *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Twilight* made the genre well liked and sought-after and since then it has only been growing. As it grew popular, Young Adult genre has become a source young people rely on in order to learn about social and personal issues, which is why the representation of variety of relationships should be well portrayed. Just like every genre, this one is full of brilliant and thought-provoking novels but this genre is also famous for its weak links, which shows how imperfect the other novels in the genre are. Most of the problematic novels are in Young Adult's subgenre of New Adult literature.

Young Adult literature was a foundation for a similar genre of New Adult literature, which is a more grown-up version of YA. This genre in particular often has difficulty portraying relationships in a healthy way, making it hard for teenagers to be able to relate to something true and honest. With everything that has been happening in the world and in the media recently, the rise of the “Me Too” and “Time's up” movements being two examples, it is necessary to push for healthy and equal romances in all these novels. New Adult novels often seem very anti-feminist in their portrayal of women as extremely dependent and so subordinate to men that they are willing to stay with them even if they are malicious. These novels romanticize those characteristics to the point where readers think that that is actually romantic.

This paper will discuss different tropes in New Adult literature that are either direct or indirect cause of various toxic behaviours in romantic relationships. The paper will focus on examples from two New Adult novels, *November 9* by Collen Hoover and *Beautiful Disaster* by Jamie McGuire. Structurally, the paper will start with the introduction and differentiation of Young Adult and New Adult genres and an explanation of the feminist approach to the

thesis. Finally, the paper will focus on some of the most commonly used tropes in the New Adult genre and will directly connect them to the ways they cause toxic behaviour and show how those behaviours are romanticized.

1. Young and New Adult Fiction

The Young Adult genre has existed since the 1960s, but it has recently become one of the most popular genres of literature. For many years, a bias has existed against Young Adult literature: "The writing was considered simple and the plots of little real substance" (Jacobs 19), but it is important to notice that while the substance of those novels might not be real for literary critics used to reading literary fiction, it is very real for teenagers who find themselves in very similar situations facing almost identical issues. The Young Adult genre is the genre that was created for the young audience so they could participate in literature, the average age of its readers being from twelve to eighteen years. The Young Adult genre deals with typical teenage problems like school, first love, family and friendship issues. Maybe the most relevant topic to teens is sexuality, a subject that has been "a major part of YA fiction since its beginning, and has often garnered the wrath of censors" (Campbell 14). Because the genre often focuses on "sexuality and sexual development and depicts a wide variety of characters who represent common ideas about female sexuality" (Younger xi), it plays a big deal in the lives of teenagers. Campbell states that well-written YA novels "can be excellent avenues for teens to learn about sex and thus make informed decisions about their own behaviours" (qtd. in Seifert 8), which further explains the importance of Young Adult literature. Teenagers search for knowledge in everything, so it is expected of them to see these novels as something educational, as well as fun.

Critics sometimes fear that YA literature also has "the potential to harm readers" (Kokkola qtd. in Seifert 15), and they have good reasons for it. "YA lit often functions, implicitly or explicitly, as a model for what constitutes romance and what doesn't" (Seifert 15), which can be very dangerous considering that these novels have an impact on still developing teenagers who are easily influenced. Christian-Smith argues that "teen romance

fiction reading involves the shaping of consciousness and provides the occasion for young women to reflect on their fears, hopes and dreams" (qtd. in Younger 73). Teen romance novels follow the same structure as adult ones do, and those are: "a main plotline that revolves around characters who fall in love and struggle to be together and a satisfying ending where deserving characters end up together against all odds" (Seifert 15). Because YA romance novels "help young women understand the experiences that can come with adolescence and romantic relationships" (Younger 75) and some feminist ones "warn young women of potential physical and emotional abuse from male partners" (Younger 75), it is important to portray healthy relationships as opposed to toxic ones, which is often a big problem in the YA's subgenre of New Adult literature.

New Adult literature is not that much different from Young Adult literature. It is a fast-growing subgenre that "features slightly older characters who engage in more explicit sex than what a reader would find in a traditional young adult novel" (Seifert 94). The storylines are adapted for the audience of eighteen and up who are interested in characters that "are in college or are newly minted grads heading into the world" (Silag). New Adult literature is aimed at the audience who wants to move on from YA to something new but is not "quite ready to read about divorce, re-marriages, or children" (Silag). This genre, however, is where the wrongful portrayal of relationships is most prominent. New Adult is much more focused on romance than YA is, so authors use certain literary tropes to emphasize romance and show the differences between YA and New Adult. Unfortunately, those tropes are often used and shown in a toxic way, which will be further discussed in this paper.

2. Feminist Theory and New Adult Literature

Relationships consist of two people but most of the time in New Adult novels there is one gender that dominates over the other, and that is men. This paper will take a feminist approach to this topic because the novels chosen very obviously show that the men in both novels have the upper hand simply because the novels are portraying men and women very stereotypically. This approach will demonstrate that these New Adult novels labelled as swoon-worthy romances are actually very anti-feminist and misogynist.

According to Lynn in Appleman's study "Through Rose-Colored Glasses," feminist literary criticism "applies the philosophies and perspectives of feminism to the literature we read." Lynn also states that "many feminist critics look at how the characters, especially the female characters, are portrayed and ask us to consider how the portrayal of female characters reinforces or undermines sexual stereotypes." This is strongly connected to the two novels that are going to be discussed in this paper. Both Hoover and McGuire use stereotypes as major personality traits and plot points. Their overall portrayal of women, as well as their behaviour toward each other, only adds to the already toxic relationships shown in the novels.

Feminist literary theory, following the feminist movement, puts the focus on the relationships between men and women and on their roles in society. Much of feminist literary theory "reminds us that the relationship between men and women in society is often unequal and reflects a particular patriarchal ideology" (Lynn qtd. in Appleman) and that patriarchal ideology makes men always the dominant gender while women are subordinated. Not only do messages like these shape and sometimes distort the way men view women in our society, but also they can shape the way women define themselves (Jacobs 20). Feminist theorists thus urge the readers "to pay particular attention to the patterns of thought, behaviour, values, and power in those relationships" (Lynn qtd. in Appleman).

This is the key point why this paper is written through a feminist lens. Every action by any of the male characters in these novels seems toxic because the power imbalance between the genders is huge. The fact that both of these anti-feminist novels are written by women makes is necessary to analyse the thoughts and behaviours of both men and women in these novels and draw attention to the stereotypical and toxic portrayal of the characters and their relationships.

3. Literary Tropes in New Adult Literature

As the genres of Young Adult and New Adult literature spread, more and more authors started using the same or similar plot points, which then became tropes. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, tropes are defined as being "a common or overused theme or device." Tropes can be found in all genres of literature, but New Adult literature has many specific ones, which are quite infamous for being overused and not always executed well. One of the biggest flaws of New Adult literature is the way the genre treats women: the heroine as well as all the women around her. The New Adult genre is also criticized for its portrayal of men as "gods" who can do anything they want and all of it is supposed to be seen as romantic and the right thing to do. As already mentioned, this paper will go through some of the most common tropes and, by exemplifying these tropes with quotes from *Beautiful Disaster* and *November 9*, it will show why these novels seem to portray and romanticize toxic romantic relationships.

3.1. "NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS"

This particular trope focuses on many different features like physical appearance of the heroine, her self-esteem and the way she views herself, as well as her sexuality or more precisely the thing that is connected to it – her morality. When it comes to heroine's physical appearance, the majority of New Adult novels go along and support society's standards of ideal beauty because "in teen literature, it seems to have become important that girls are beautiful or sexy" (Jacobs 21). Therefore, the heroines are mostly skinny and exceptionally beautiful but they do not see themselves as such. To the heroines, other popular girls are always more beautiful so they do not think of themselves comparable to them. Often the heroines are portrayed as so special that they are above every other woman in the novel,

which then gives the heroine the privilege to say that she is "not like other girls." That phrase is "a way to describe a character as not having traditional feminine characteristics" (Austin), especially when those feminine characteristics are negative, like being possessive, mean, and clingy. Yet, using that phrase also implies that if women want to be seen as worthy, they "must reject traditionally feminine characteristics and be more like a man" (Austin). This is why girls in New Adult (as well as in YA) literature often hate makeup and dresses, have messy hair, and are not interested in anything too girly. Although these are the ways the heroine differentiates herself from other girls, the heroine still dresses in a more conservative way, wears very feminine colours and items to accentuate her soft and gentle personality, as opposed to all the other women. The "not like other girls" trope also condones slut-shaming and hatred toward other women – a plot point visible in *Beautiful Disaster*. Not only does the author try to make the heroine more special but also puts down all other girls who are different from her. The male hero obviously joins in on that hatred, degrading women whenever he and his friends have the opportunity to do so, with the exception of the heroine who seems to be perfect.

The heroine of *Beautiful Disaster*, Abby Abernathy, is a typical goodie-two-shoes who just wants a quiet college life without any trouble. She spends her days with her best friend America and her roommate. In the first chapter, she is wearing "a pink cashmere cardigan and pearl earrings" (McGuire 2), and since that is her outfit to an illegal underground fight, that outfit is already separating her from all other women who wore dresses and heels to the fight. Later, she shows up at Travis' apartment "sporting a ratty T-shirt and sweatpants" (McGuire 14), hoping that Travis will be unimpressed, but of course the exact opposite happens, with Travis being super impressed because other women would never dare come to his apartment dressed like that. Abby also thinks her personality seems to be better than the personalities of other women, simply because she does not like casual sex so she did not want to sleep with

Travis, unlike all other women. Because of that mind-set, Abby herself often refers to other women as "sluts" (McGuire 117) or "STD-infested imbeciles" (McGuire 50). Later in the novel when everybody finds out she is not really a goodie-two-shoes, having an almost flawless fake ID and being able to drink 19 shots of tequila on her 19th birthday, she is still better than all the other girls and no one dares to compare her to any of them.

Jacobs points out another characteristics of the "not like other girls" trope: "if the characters in these novels are not particularly beautiful, they are miserable and self-deprecating" (21). Girls in New Adult novels are often portrayed as women with absolutely no self-esteem who do not see themselves as beautiful, therefore they do not think of themselves as worthy until a guy comes along and finds a way to prove her worth to her. When creating a character like that, authors give their female audience the proof that they cannot live without men's validation, which is extremely toxic for the seventeen-to-twenty-three-years-old, or even younger, audience reading New Adult/YA fiction. This way of writing is toxic because it portrays the heroine as dependent, weak, with no self-respect, and very easy to manipulate, which are the characteristics that cannot lead her to a healthy relationship. Characteristics like these are anti-feminist and romanticize men subordinating women.

The main character of *November 9*, Fallon O'Neill, had an accident when she was sixteen, in which most of her body got burned. Now, eighteen and healed, she is deeply insecure about her looks. Early in the novel, while describing what happened to her, Fallon says how the scars are a "permanent reminder of the night that destroyed all the best parts of me" (Hoover 7). Because of her scars, she is definitely "not like other girls." She has never had a boyfriend and her insecurities force her to think that because of her scars she never will have one. Yet once she meets Ben, an enormously imperfect and manipulative man but the first man who gave her some kind of positive affection, it was really not hard for her to fall

under his spell. The lack of affection in her life (having a broken family and a really small circle of friends) and all her insecurities make her practically live only for his complements, so at one point she even says that not sleeping for a week would be worth a compliment from him. He often plays on her insecurities saying that it is her own fault other people stare at her and make her uncomfortable and she is so insecure that she just cannot stand up for herself. She is, for instance, so insecure about her body that she does not want to show him how much of her body had been burned; yet he forcefully undresses her and she lets him do it, in the end claiming that this forceful act has "given [her] a bit of confidence" (Hoover 51). A character gaining confidence after a borderline non-consensual act against her is not a picture authors should show.

This trope is extremely toxic toward the female audience reading novels like these as young women are being taught that they are supposed to bring down either themselves or each other. The "not like other girls" trope condones uncalled hatred between women and slut-shaming, which is already a big problem today. On the other hand, the books also portray women as dependent and submissive, basically taking them all the way back to being "the Angel in the House" when they should be straying away from that and doing their best to empower women. With this kind of portrayal, women are told that they are more desirable as insecure and submissive when, in reality, there is no way to form a healthy relationship if both genders are not equal. This trope also gives men the power to treat women with disrespect and a man who treats other women with no respect will not treat his woman any differently.

3.2. "DAMSEL IN DISTRESS"

This trope is the foundation of almost every romance novel and it has always been present in literature. It can be found in stories written as early as fairy tales as well as in

novels written this very year. This trope usually focuses on the assumption that a woman needs man's help at all times and he has the responsibility to save her from all the troubles she might be facing because he is supposed to be her "knight in shining armour." They usually meet when the hero saves the heroine from an unfortunate event, or the saving is left to be the climax of the story. In both *Beautiful Disaster* and *November 9*, there is a "damsel in distress" meeting, as well as numerous other situations in which the hero thought the heroine needed saving.

In *Beautiful Disaster*, Abby Abernathy and Travis Maddox meet after one of Travis' illegal underground fights. After the fight, Abby tries to find a way out but since that was her first time watching a fight, she is having a hard time. She gets in the way of someone who ends up pushing her around and, at that moment, Travis comes and saves her by pushing the guy away and threatening him. Similarly, in *November 9*, Fallon and Ben meet after Ben eavesdrops on Fallon's conversation with her father and decides, by himself, without asking her, that he is going to pretend to be her boyfriend just so her dad would leave her alone. After sitting in Fallon and her dad's booth, Ben continues to throw his arms around her and kiss her head without her consent. Both meetings are huge clichés and both are inappropriate. Travis showed how aggressive he is after a mere push within the first minute of their relationship while Ben stalked her and decided for her what is right and what is wrong instead of just asking.

Furthemore, the male protagonists in New Adult novels often go to lengths to defend their girlfriend and her honour. Travis assaults a guy who tries to flirt with Abby at the club and he says that Abby is lucky he was with her, who knows what could have happened if he had not been there. Travis beats up a guy in their college cafeteria after he said something nasty about Abby. Moreover, at the end of the novel when she is running for her life from a burning building, Abby decides she will not go with Travis' brother but that she has to find

Travis and when she is not able to get out, Travis appears and saves them both. In *November 9,* Ben hears Fallon's current date saying she is "not even that pretty" (Hoover 211) and punches him with his fist, causing a fight so big bouncers have to separate them and send them home.

The trope of "damsel in distress" is toxic because it again plays with women's dependence, weakness, and incapability. Men in these novels are behaving in an incredibly patronizing way, often using their physical superiority to claim ownership over women who are seen as fragile and in need of men's assistance just to live their lives. The way the authors write these scenes is extremely problematic because it seems as though these fights should be seen as something endearing and romantic – a grand love gesture – yet, it only shows men's aggressiveness and possessiveness. Society has been depicting the "knight in shining armour" and men fighting over women as something girls should strive for so long that it has become a norm, as a way of men showing their affection to women. That is not what it is. It is completely unnecessary.

3.3. INSTALOVE

In his blog post, Peter Monn delivers this definition of instalove:

> Instalove is when two characters fall in love immediately, often without knowing each other beyond physical appearances or a single conversation. An important feature of instalove is that this moment seals the deal for long-term (often forever) love between the two characters. Sometimes the bond is created by a supernatural element (e.g. fate or destiny), but that is not always the case.

This type of love is unrealistic and it is often lust or obsessive infatuation rather than actual, real love. Instalove is present in both novels and it can be toxic in many ways.

In *Beautiful Disaster*, Travis Maddox and Abby Abernathy develop their relationship over a couple of months, which might not seem as fast as some other instalove relationships, but they do some drastic things over a very short amount of time. “I had a thing for you since the night of that first fight” (McGuire 224) was a sentence Travis said to Abby, and he showed that through many reckless acts. A few weeks into their relationship he got a tattoo of her nickname – “Pidgeon,” and when she got mad because it is permanent, he said that it is not a problem because they are permanent as well. When showing the tattoo to his friends, they all commented that he is crazy because he barely knows her. Over a short amount of time, Travis becomes obsessed with Abby, calling her his “home,” wanting to move in with her and, by the end, proposing with a ring he bought within the first few weeks of knowing her. It is visible that the instalove is mutual when Abby accepts his proposal to get married in Vegas and after that gets a “Mrs. Maddox” tattoo on her hip, all during their first year at college.

The whole concept of *November 9* is pointing towards instalove as well. After their initial meeting, Fallon and Ben decide to meet every year only on November 9, and they did that for four years. Throughout those four years, they do not have any other contact, not even through social media, they do not have each other’s phone numbers or even addresses, yet somehow, they end up crazy in love. They even joke in the novel that, technically, they have “only spent 28 hours together” (Hoover 219) since they met. That should not be qualified as love because they barely even know each other. The real reason he is obsessed with her is his guilt, as he was the one who caused the accident that scarred her. His affection is simply a weird way of trying to make it up to her and she just fell in love with the first guy who

showed her some of that affection. Similar to Travis, Ben also got a tattoo related to Fallon on their third November 9th together.

This trope is toxic because instalove is always based more on obsession than on actual real feelings. This infatuation makes the characters willing to do anything for their partner, which often results in brash decisions made with absolutely no forethought. The characters in these novels are so young, yet so influenced by instalove that they make unnecessary rash decisions, which they could spend years and years thinking about. Another problem arises when the young audience reading these novels starts thinking that this is going to be their future and instalove is not even a real thing. This can make teenagers stay in unhealthy relationships just because these novels portray the first love, the instalove, as the only kind of love that they should hold on to.

3.4. THE VIRGIN AND THE PLAYER

In New Adult novels (often YA as well), girls are seen as way more special if they are virgins because "female characters who are virginal embody qualities of innocence and naïveté" (Seifert 97). The heroines seem to be more interesting and more desirable to the male characters because they are inexperienced, which can be connected to the term "abstinence porn," explained by Seifert as "virginity fetishizing that reduces female characters to objects whose sexual acts, or lack thereof, are the sole expression of their identities" (9). Seifert further asserts that "virginity fetishes remind readers that protagonists are sexy and thus valuable because of their purity. Once that purity is lost, the girls can never again return to that lauded identity" (9), which is actually the biggest representation of toxicity within this trope. Connected again to the "not like other girls" trope, this one tells the readers how non-virginal girls are not as worthy as the ones who still are virgins. The double standards of this

trope are extremely highlighted: “A girl is supposed to be so desirable that she makes grown men salivate, but she can’t express her sexual desires until the right male partner shows her the way” (Seifert 22). She can look sexy for a man but she cannot embrace her sexuality unless she wants to be slut-shamed. In a scene of *Beautiful Disaster,* Abby asks Travis what he would do if someone treated his daughter the way he treats other women and Travis responds: “My daughter better not drop her panties for some jackass she just met, let’s put it that way” (McGuire 38). Seifert also argues that these female characters feel desire but only in the presence of one special man to whom they commit very early in their life. On the other hand, none of the male love interests are virgins; they actually had sex with many women but have never experienced love. The men are portrayed as players who just use other girls for sex until the moment they meet their “significant other.”

Travis seems so obsessed with Abby’s virginity that he takes on a role of the guardian of her virginity. Even before she tells him she is a virgin, he strictly monitors with whom she is spending her time in order to “protect” her reputation. After Abby tells Travis she is a virgin, he seems way more interested in sleeping with her than he was before because he tells her: “since the word virgin came out of those beautiful lips of yours… I have a sudden urge to help you out of that dress” (McGuire 118). Virginity is shown as something that makes Abby more desirable to the main character, since he seems to be bored with women who enjoy casual sex. Later, when Abby starts dating Parker again, Travis demands to know if she slept with Parker because it will give him peace of mind. He was keeping her from doing certain things she wanted before they slept together but he basically claims ownership over her after he takes her virginity. None of those rules, of course, apply to Travis. While he is monitoring Abby’s whereabouts, he is still sleeping around with different girls. He even brings two of them home while Abby is staying with him in his apartment. It is interesting that casual sex

actually created Travis' reputation, yet that same act of having casual sex ruins girls' reputations.

In *November 9*, Ben turns very possessive when it comes to Fallon's virginity. He often says that he is praying every night that she is sleeping alone in her bed and when they end up together he tells her: "I don't want to be your first Fallon, I want to be your last" (Hoover 157) and "I want to be your only, Fallon. I want it more than anything" (Hoover 157), making it seem as if he only cares about the fact that nobody else will be able to have her if he gets her first, as opposed to actually caring about her feelings. The most radical portrayal of his possessiveness is when he tells her that he never before wanted to tell a girl he owns her but he wanted to tell that to Fallon while they were having sex (Hoover 160) and she is fine with it, she is not even bothered.

The double standards are what is most toxic in this literary trope. Both of these novels praise the main heroines for being virgins and at the same time belittle the girls who are not. Novels like these condone shaming of sexually active women; making them feel less worthy over something that men are completely free to do; they are even cheered on. Relationships which are founded on girl's virginity being something extremely valuable are toxic because if a man thinks that virginity is woman's best quality than that relationship is full of misogyny and sexual objectification, not love.

3.5. THE TROUBLED PAST

The troubled past is one of the most famous and also quite inevitable tropes in New Adult genre. It adds mystery and depth to the characters and raises the stakes because readers know that the past will be revealed at some point in the novel. Usually one or both main characters have some kind of troubled or dark past, "some tragic event in their past that

shaped a fundamental level of their personality. Long after the event is over, it still has a powerful influence in the character's life" (TV Tropes), which they never talk about, causing miscommunication, a lack of trust or other potential problems in their already rocky and unhealthy relationship.

Abby Abernathy came to college in order to escape her dark past. Her dad was a professional poker player and, by spending so much time with him, she became insanely good at poker as well. Her dad always called Abby his lucky charm, but on the night of her 13th birthday he started losing huge amounts of money and from then on he practically disowned her. She spent some of her high school days playing and scamming with her fake ID but decided to leave that behind and come to college. There she meets Travis, a mysterious guy whose mother died but he never talks about it, has a father who was an abusive alcoholic and three brothers with whom he has an alright relationship. Abby's past causes a lot of problems for them when her father comes and asks for money that he owes to a local gangster. Abby goes back into a casino after many years in order to scam them and get the necessary money. When Abby does not meet the goal in time, Travis fights a few fights for the guy involved with mafia and the easy money he gets makes him think he is doing the right thing, which makes Abby furious because all she wanted was to leave that life behind. Travis wanting to pull her back into that life worries her that he is not actually that different from her father. Both Travis' and Abby's past makes them show their true colours to each other, which then ends in fights and loss of trust. Travis is seeing this whole new, unfamiliar Abby and Abby is facing even more of Travis' negative traits, which is complicating their relationship. On a positive side, through the revealing of their pasts, they get to know each other completely but the readers have to be well aware that the troubled dark past is only there to cause drama between couples and nothing else.

Fallon's and Ben's pasts are entwined in the most disturbing way. Fallon got terribly injured in a fire when she was 16 while staying at her father's house and she hates talking about it because it is the cause of all her insecurities. The accident ruined her chances of being a big movie star, which is something she really wanted. Ben's past is that he was the one who started that fire. His mother committed suicide and when he found out that Fallon's father and his mother were seeing each other, he came to the conclusion that she killed himself because of him and decided to have his revenge. He set the O'Neill's house alight and because Fallon did not manage to make it out, she ended up with scars over most of her body. In the following years, out of guilt, Ben often followed her to see how life was treating her, which is how he ended up in that restaurant listening to Fallon and her father's conversation. Ben's past makes their whole relationship disturbing because, although he claims to love her, he is probably just feeling guilty and thinking that whatever he feels toward her is actually love.

3.6. BAD BOY

This is the most common trope of New Adult genre. Whether it is his dangerous looks or the way he acts around and treats other people, the bad boy persona is always present in New Adult literature. Heroes like these are always trying to be portrayed as romantic and as someone girls should strive to have in their lives but in reality, once their behaviour gets analysed, they are very manipulative, possessive, bossy, jealous, and sometimes even physically violent towards both other people and the heroine. This is the most problematic trope in both *Beautiful Disaster* and *November 9.*

Travis is the epitome of a New Adult bad boy. He is tall, oozes "sex and rebelliousness with his buzzed brown hair and tattooed forearms" (McGuire 8), and he earns money through illegal fighting. He drives a motorcycle and, being as handsome as he is, he is the biggest

womanizer on campus. Every girl is losing her mind over him and he goes through women like crazy. Along with all those physical traits, he is extremely smart having all A's in all his classes, which altogether make girls think he is the perfect catch.

His personality, on the other hand, is unhinged. Travis' personality is the main reason why his and Abby's relationship is so toxic. First and foremost, Travis is extremely possessive. At the beginning of the novel, when they are still just acquaintances, he tells Abby he will not take no for an answer to them being friends. In the club, Abby herself said he treats her like property, not letting anyone come close to her unless he is present. His possessiveness is often combined with aggression. "Travis is so jealous—and so concerned that somebody else might claim Abby—that he's constantly fighting with anyone that he deems competition" (Seifert 113), which is visible in the way he threatens many of Abby's friends or dates with sentences like: "if you even look at her, you piece of shit, I'll break your fuckin' jaw" (McGuire 206), "if you so much as breathe in her direction, I'll make sure you'll be limping through med school" (McGuire 210), "If you don't back away from my girl, I'll rip out your fucking throat" (McGuire 363), and many more.

He shows his aggressive side every time she does something that is not according to his wishes. After they sleep together and she leaves without saying goodbye, America tells her Travis "demanded to know where you were" (McGuire 175) and continues to tell her how he called her "over and over" (McGuire 175), "shattered his mirror with his fist (…) kicked his door… broke it from the hinges!" (McGuire 176). America even goes to length to say that that was "the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life!" (McGuire 176). His aggression is visible even outside of their friendship group when America tells Abby: "He was kicked out of history today. When you didn't show, he kicked over both of your desks" (McGuire 293).

Manipulation and control make a great part of Travis' personality as well. Bossing Abby around seems to be his favourite past time. Seifert claims that "from the moment that he determines that she is his—before they even start dating—he controls who can talk to her, touch her, or even look at her" (104). His control goes from "why did you let him buy your drink?" (McGuire 213) to "oh hell no … You've gotta change" (McGuire 69). Quite a few times he tries to have his say in what she is supposed to wear and as one of his explanations he says he will not be able to concentrate on the fight because he will be "more worried about who's looking at her tits in that shirt" (McGuire 69). He even manipulates her and tries to make her stay with him by guilt tripping her; Travis tells her that he knows "they're fucked up" (McGuire 193), yet he cannot live without her because when he is with her he does not need "booze or money or the fighting or the one-night stands" (McGuire 193).

Ben himself also says that he "can't even pretend without starting a fight" (Hoover 23). Ben's worst trait is the amount of sexual objectification he puts Fallon through. Bratky defines sexual objectification as woman's body or body parts being "singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire" (qtd. in Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr 8). That definition can be closely linked to Ben's behaviour towards Fallon. The first time he sees her, his actual thoughts are "if we're just going to sit here, it'd be nice if she were showing a little cleavage" (Hoover 24). Then he tells her to her face that the whole time in the restaurant he tried to find out what kind of panties she was wearing because he could not see the outline of her underwear. At one point, he begins "to mentally undress her, and not in a sexual way" (Hoover 25) and then he says that his mother failed to teach him that "there would be girls like this one who would test those manners by merely existing" (Hoover 25), which is just predatory. Fallon, or any other woman, is not there to satisfy his cravings of seeing some cleavage.

Similarly to Travis, Ben is also extremely controlling and that control is closely connected to sexual objectification because he usually determines what she has to wear by saying: “I’m paying for dinner, so I get to choose what to stare at while we eat” (Hoover 45) and then when she does it, he is happy because “there’s just enough showing at her neckline to keep me good and happy” (Hoover 56). After a shower she is wearing his shirt and he demands that before she turns off the lamp, she takes off his shirt because he wants it back. Obviously that is not the reason, and she knows that so she tries to laugh it off and reaches for the lamp, but he jumps off the bed and yanks the shirt off her without her consent, making her very uncomfortable.

Ben is also abusive and manipulative. When Fallon says again how insecure she is, he presses his hand to her mouth, tells her that she is not allowed to resent the scars but embrace them and then he tells her she deserved to be treated like that. He manages to manipulate her into thanking him for it. He keeps touching her scars and after he sees her on the verge of tears he thinks to himself that he understands it makes her uncomfortable but for some reason he feels “more comfortable with her now than I had all day” (Hoover 61). He also states that: “I never wanted to use physical force on a girl before, but I want to push her to the ground and hold her there until the cab drives away” (Hoover 167) just because she wanted to leave. The worst scene in the novel is a sex scene that can be seen as non-consensual. Ben and Fallon end up in a storage room and when Ben goes to Fallon’s pants, she tells him to stop and the author emphasizes that her voice is “louder than it’s been all night” (Hoover 205) and yet Ben does not stop but he tells her: “I’m trying… ask me again” (Hoover 205). Fallon goes to say it again but does not manage to do so because he kisses her before she has the chance. Later it seems that this is exactly what Fallon wanted, which actually makes this a prime example of rape culture. The non-consensual act here is normalized and many readers just go over it without too much thought because people are unintentionally taught their whole lives that

men are entitled to whatever they want from women and this is just one of those things. Sexual assault needs to be taken seriously and scenes like these in novels for young women (and men) are inexcusable and extremely problematic because novels like these normalize sexual assault even more.

3.7. FIX HIM

Romance novels often contain the trope of the heroine trying her best to fix the man she is with because apparently she is the only one who can do that. Seifert argues that the heroine knows "that the man whom she loves is sometimes violent, dangerous, or just plain wrong for her, but she recognizes that her purity and her essential goodness can change him" (15). This way of thinking is highly toxic because it encourages women to think that their love can change someone's personality, often making them stay in abusive relationships because they do not want to give up on their partner. This trope is more prominent in *Beautiful Disaster* but hints of it can be found in *November 9* as well.

In *Beautiful Distaster*, Abby Abernathy often comments how she turns into this "angry, confused, frustrated person" (McGuire 129) when she is around Travis. She is not a stupid girl, but she is a girl who cannot say no to him. Abby asks her friend America: "how could you possibly think I should be with him? You are supposed to be keeping me away from people like him" (McGuire 146), referring to the troubled past she was trying to escape, and after one of many of Travis' temper tantrums, she refuses to go and visit him because "sense of self-preservation is outweighing my curiosity at this point" (McGuire 154). She is obviously well aware that their relationship is far from ideal. Abby tells Travis to his face she thinks they are "dysfunctional" (McGuire 295) and how "red flags are going up all over the

place" (McGuire 217) but she does not leave him for good, only for a short while in order for him to realize what he does not have when she is gone.

Abby also often gets told that if she is planning on staying with Travis, she should learn how to deal with him. Travis' cousin Shepley tells her that she has to "overlook his demons" (McGuire 62) and Travis' father tells her he knows "it's hard not to blame him, but you have to love him anyway" (McGuire 308) because they all "don't know what it will do to him" (McGuire 308) if she leaves him. They are all guilt-tripping her into staying in a toxic relationship for the sake of Travis and his future; they think she can turn his life around. Travis himself says: "I'm gonna fuck up. I'm gonna fuck up a lot, Pidge, but you have to forgive me" (McGuire 217), expecting her to deal with all of his crazy antics. Abby even gets told: "you don't have to keep saving him," but Abby will not hear of it because she is so sure that saving Travis is "the right thing to do" (McGuire 303).

In *November 9*, this trope is not as explicit as it is in *Beautiful Disaster*, but Fallon's willingness to save Ben is apparent in the fact that she forgives him in the end. He ruined her life by burning down the house she was staying in; causing her inexplicable pain and insecurities, yet in the end she decides that he deserves to be forgiven. This ending is toxic because it tells the readers that women are supposed to get over everything and forgive even the worst things in order to deserve love. By ending the novel in this way, the author romanticizes the disgusting behaviour that Ben displayed and basically says that men are allowed to do anything as long as that is their way of showing love. Women need to be taught to stand their ground and think of themselves, do what is good for their own well-being, and not to forgive atrocious behaviour just to keep a man.

Conclusion

Although not all New Adult novels are like these two examples, most of them portray toxic relationships in one way or another. The reason I chose this thesis is the fact that I read these books when I was sixteen or seventeen and loved them, because they were portraying something I had not experienced in large amounts and I thought that way to be the right way to do it. Then I reread the books and was actually appalled by the messages they send to their readers. Young Adult genre can sometimes be problematic but it is nowhere near as problematic as New Adult. New Adult is mainly read by young women and it is troubling that the messages of fetishizing virginity, slut-shaming and staying in abusive relationships with manipulative, possessive, and aggressive men are portrayed as something they should strive toward. Young fans of YA and New Adult are still prone to conformism and they could easily risk their own well-being because of messages like these, which advise them to try and fix something that cannot be repaired. Authors need to understand that when they are creating characters they are also creating role-models so they need to take this task of providing content for teenagers more seriously. That especially applies to female authors. Men authors can be a little deficient in the area of writing female characters because most of them do not know how to write from a woman's point of view but women have no excuse. The fact that both of these anti-feminist novels, one even containing a non-consensual sex act, were written by women is baffling. Authors need to stop portraying both genders stereotypically. Most women are neither weak and fragile nor dependent and they do not deserve to be represented in that negative light. Men do not have to be cold, aggressive, and knights in shining armour to be good men. Stereotyping is the foundation for all toxicity portrayed in these novels. On a more positive note, these novels could spark a conversation about many issues our society is still facing today like misogyny, anti-feminism, toxic relationships, as well as toxic masculinity.

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