

Dangerous Romance:
Abusive Dating Dynamics in Novels and Films for Teens

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Origin and Background History

In the 2001 documentary *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*, Harvard psychologist Dr. Carolyn Newberger examines Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, a film which she has found to depict a dangerously abusive relationship. Dr. Newberger explains that Belle and the Beast do not have a healthy, loving dynamic. The Beast is a classic batterer. He uses "intimidating, terrifying, rule-making...harassing and injurious behaviors to control and manipulate the actions of" his partner, Belle (Matthews 6). Yet this film is provided to children as an example of ideal romance. According to Newberger's analysis, this ideal "is saying to our children: 'Overlook the abuse, overlook the violence. There is a tender prince lurking within and it's your job to...kiss that beast and bring the prince out'" (*Mickey Mouse Monopoly*).

To prove that this message is in fact absorbed by young girls who see the film, two nine-year-olds were interviewed for *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*. They were both asked what they would tell Belle to do about her situation if she were their friend. One girl, Abigail, said that she would "be happy for her because she found someone who she liked, and I would be happy for her that she likes the Beast and that she should stay with him, but I'd also feel bad for her because she gets yelled at a lot". Similarly, Melina, the other girl, would "probably just say 'Keep on being nice and sweet like you are and that would probably change him.' And in the movie it does". It can be extrapolated that, if Abigail and Melina were being abused by a husband or boyfriend, or even father, they would not go to the authorities or look for help, they would view the violence as less than significant and simply try to be nice enough to change their abuser's ways. Newberger refers to this as "reinterpreting". By doing this, Belle mentally changes the Beast's actions from aggression to temper, a much less difficult problem to overcome. Through her reinterpretation of his actions, his very personality, she is able to ignore

his behavior and fall in love. Newberger argues that this is what children are learning from Disney's film.

When I saw this documentary in my First Year Seminar on fairy tales this past fall, I was shocked. I had loved *Beauty and the Beast* as a child and never thought that the relationship depicted was an unhealthy one. Indeed, like most young girls, I wished to find my own Beast to change with kindness. Looking back, through the lens of Dr. Newberger's work, I know that there is serious social significance to the words of Abigail and Melina. When given the opportunity at the end of the semester to research in depth anything we had discussed in class, I knew that this was the topic in which I was most interested. The work I did on that paper, however, far from answered all of my questions. I knew for a fact that girls were absorbing Disney's message but I was unsure of how that likelihood was being expressed in today's culture. Then I did the math. Those two nine-year-old girls are now eighteen and most likely in their first year of college. I then realized that, being eighteen myself, I was the nine-year-old girl in 2001 who loved *Beauty and the Beast*. That insight forced me to begin questioning all of my assumptions about romance. If I am Abigail and Melina, how have I been affected by Disney's glorification of abuse? In what way has my generation of girls expressed its desire for "Beasts"? In answer, I found a vampire.

Stephanie Meyer's vampire romance series *Twilight* has been described as "a pandemic of unholy proportions" (Dodai). It seems, in fact, that "every girl in the world is obsessed with the Twilight books" (Nation). While they may not appear directly related to any Disney film, many of the same characteristics that Disney presents in its version of *Beauty and the Beast* reoccur in the work of Stephanie Meyer. Bella and Edward are a modern adaptation of Belle and the Beast. In both cases, the woman is victim to psychological or physical violence, yet

continues to believe she is part of a loving relationship. The acceptance of abuse that young girls absorb through Disney is being reiterated in the *Twilight* series, reinforcing the idea that if a woman stays in an abusive relationship she will ultimately be able to change her abuser and find the perfect love. Women are falling in love with the *Twilight* story, just as they did with *Beauty and the Beast*, even though when critically examining these two stories they present dangerously abusive relationships.

Once I began to enter myself into a dialogue and analysis of abusive relationships, academically referred to as Intimate Partner Violence or IPV, I remembered another book I had read and loved. Sarah Dessen a #1 New York Times Best Selling Author also discusses these themes. In her book *Dreamland* she discusses the story of a young couple stuck in a cycle of abuse. The beast-like boyfriend in this story, however, is not glorified. While the reader comes to understand the complexity of being in an abusive relationship, he or she is not left with a desire to be in one. It seems, therefore, as if the trend of glorifying abuse is not present in all depictions of IPV for young adults.

Description of Project Goals

After discovering this phenomenon of glorified abuse, I knew I wanted to apply Newberger's analysis of *Beauty and the Beast* to *Twilight* and *Dreamland* in order to understand why the idea of abuse is so attractive to young people. Why is there such a radical difference in the depiction of abuse between *Twilight* and *Dreamland*? Why is the more realistic depiction less popular? Why is IPV overlooked within these stories given its importance to the story line? How can teens become more aware of the cycle of abuse in books and movies? Are teens as likely to ignore abuse in real life as they are in media? Why is Newberger's "reinterpretation"

my demographic's approach to romance? How can a more realistic, healthy view of abusive relationships be promoted?

Over the summer of 2010 I will perform a content-analysis of these primary texts in order to compare *Dreamland* and *Twilight*. Both are written by popular authors within the teen fiction genre, yet the one that depicts abuse in a dangerous way has been much more phenomenalized. By understanding the difference between these two texts, I will try to put together the puzzle of the attraction of IPV with the goal of finding ways to counteract this pop culture trend through the education of young adults. The second half of the ten weeks will be devoted to developing a community based educational media literacy workshop that I hope to take to local schools, perhaps through the service learning program here at Denison.

Schedule of Summer Work and Methodology

*Note: Each week will include three meetings between Dr. Gillespie and myself. Two will be formal tutorials covering my focus for that week and one will be an informal discussion of my progress.

Week One

Analyze primary texts and films. This includes the five works of Stephanie Meyer and Sarah Dessen's *Dreamland*. My familiarity with these texts will be of great assistance in discovering the scenes of abuse in these works. I will use the "Domestic Violence: Relationship Quiz" provided by the Campus Advocacy Network at the University of Illinois at Chicago to determine what is and is not abusive.

Week Two

Analyze various blogs and discussion boards. *Twilight* has become such a phenomenon that many websites are devoted to its discussion. An analysis of entries into these internet sites

will give me insight into the opinions of other readers of these books, allowing me to see the average reader's analysis of these novels and films.

Week Three

Analyze secondary research. While there is not much work on *Twilight* and *Dreamland* to be found in scholarly journals (mostly due to the slow nature of the peer review process), there is much to find in online journals such as Salon.com and Feministing.com. This week will, therefore, focus on the works of cultural critics in combination with more general academic works on IPV.

Week Four

Combine analysis of primary and secondary research, begin developing thesis and outline. Once I have compiled the instances of abuse within the primary texts as well as critical responses to that abuse, I will be able to identify and analyze trends between the two. This will be used to develop a thesis and outline.

Week Five

Write working thesis, outline, and introductory paragraph. This week begins the start of the writing process as well as the research into current educational programs for media literacy and IPV and their pros and cons. I will develop a concise plan for my paper as well as my research for the program proposal.

Week Six

Write body paragraphs and work on innovative program ideas. I will work closely with Dr. Gillespie this week in order to develop solutions to the cons of current programs as well as ways to incorporate their pros. I will also continue writing my paper.

Week Seven

Finalize paper and continue developing ideas for program. This week will be the last that I will work on my research paper. I will also look into Denison's options for implementing my program.

Week Eight

Finalize program ideas. I will combine the ideas that I researched and discussed with Dr. Gillespie with the program options I found available at Denison in order to fully develop a program for local schools to propose to the University.

Week Nine

Write program proposal. This week I will write a formal proposal for the University that will present my program idea. Hopefully the John W. Alford Center for Service Learning will have an opportunity for this program, whether as a subsection of DCA, America Reads, or Curricular Service Learning.

Week Ten

During my final week of summer research I will finalize and submit my program proposal as well as begin preparing my poster for the fall presentation. I will also begin the program experience assessment.

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