THIS BOOK WILL DESTROY YOU:
A CRITICAL COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF YA HEROINES

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Abstract

Despite the progress the Young Adult (YA) literary genre has made to diversify their characters and stories, the representation of a female protagonist has remained formulaic and predictable. YA commonly centres heroines who embody characteristics associated with female likability, resulting in the loss of authentic representations of teenage girls. Characters who do not personify these archetypes are often regarded as foils to the loveable protagonist, leaving readers with the impression that only idealized girls deserve to have their narratives told. This thesis analyzes quintessential YA heroines – Bella Swan (*Twilight*) and Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games)* – and compares them to Canadian YA author Courtney Summer's protagonists, Parker (*Cracked Up to Be)*, and Sadie (*Sadie)*. This work challenges the makings of a YA protagonist and explores the representation of an "unlikeable" female character in order to provoke a broader understanding of their behaviour and actions, and still embrace them for it.

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When they call you a 'bitch,' say,
"Thank you. Thank you very much."

-Ode to the Women on Long Island, Olivia Gatwood

Chapter 1: Introduction

Young Adult (YA) literature has significantly transformed over the course of the last few decades (Peterson). The tremendous success of popular YA novels such as the *Harry Potter Series*, the *Hunger Games* series, the *Twilight* series and more have turned this genre into a phenomenon, with record-breaking sales and multimillion-dollar movie franchises achieved. Within the last decade, YA has evolved and begun to cover a more diverse array of stories, thus challenging the widespread view of this genre as vapid and something not to be taken seriously (Ellis and Meehan 3:10-3:15).With a target audience of teenagers from the ages of twelve to eighteen (Peterson) Young Adult novels cover "a manor of worlds and topics – contemporary, dystopian, romance, paranormal, drugs, sex, gender issues, parental divorce, terminal cancer, bullying. Most topics are fair game, so long as it's somewhat relevant to teenagers" (Peterson).

Despite this progression, YA female protagonists are predominantly written within the confines of female likeability. They are often described as beautiful, kind, sympathetic, selfless, and strong. Since these characters tend to begin their stories already possessing such qualities, there is seldom any significant personal growth written in, regardless of the challenges they are made to face. This appeal to likeability results in the loss of authentic representations of teenagers and the period of personal growth that is adolescence, given its unique positioning between childhood and adulthood.

For example, Katniss Everdeen from the acclaimed and widely popular *Hunger Games* series is depicted as beautiful, strong, selfless, and incredibly brave. She is beloved and admired for her actions and constant fight for survival and justice. However, throughout the series,

Katniss's personal growth is minimal. Her acts of selflessness never waiver, and she grows stronger and more powerful throughout the series. While Katniss is forced to fight for her life in a dystopian future plagued by starvation and war, her personality and demeanour do not change, leaving readers with the notion that Katniss, despite all she endures, is an essentially flawless character with unmatched moral and physical strength. Characters who do not personify the archetypes of YA heroines are often portrayed as foils to the likeable protagonist. These girls are written as rude, crass, catty, jealous, and spiteful; they embody everything the typical protagonist is not. These girls are villainized and depicted as one-dimensional "mean girls," whose sole purpose is to antagonize the loveable protagonist. These characters do not normally have their voices shared, leaving readers with the message that only the idealized girl deserves to have her story told.

Courtney Summers is one of the few authors who gives voice to the conventionally "unlikeable" female protagonist. Her protagonists all reject the makings of the idealized Young Adult girl, which is often written in a misogynistic light, reflective of the male gaze. Her characters are considered "mean," as they are presented as cynical, angry, rude, assertive, and distant. Summers is unafraid of writing about girls who do not fit the mould of an idealized girl in YA, despite the repercussions she faced to become a published author. I focused on Summers' characters from her books *Cracked Up to Be* and *Sadie*. These two protagonists are either direct victims or witnesses to sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse, and respond by developing characteristics generally associated with unlikability. They are viewed in their stories as troubled teenagers, difficult to understand, and are not believed when disclosing their abuse. Summers' characters are some of the first protagonists ever written in this genre that embody these traits.

Stories of survival told from the lens of the unlikeable female protagonist function to challenge the harmful and unattainable image that has dominated the genre for much of its history. Summers uses gender-based violence in each of her novels in order to dismantle the misogynistic stereotypes of mean girls by placing the blame on the system, rather than the girls themselves. This is also a way for readers to understand, empathize, and even relate to these girls, and see them as more than one-dimensional characters. This approach to the unlikeable girl defies the idea that unlikeable girls do not have stories worth being told.

This thesis analyzes and compares Summers' protagonists to quintessential YA heroines known as Katniss Everdeen from the *Hunger Games* series, and Bella Swan from the *Twilight* series. I examine the formula of what makes a conventional and loveable YA heroine and highlight its harmful and unrealistic expectations imposed upon young readers. Summers' protagonists – Parker and Sadie – represent the antithesis of Katniss and Bella, as they behave in ways that would normally position them as the "mean girl".

In this thesis, I address three questions:

1. How can Young Adult narratives provoke an understanding of women as actors rather than the passive victim?
2. How impactful is the conventional representation of Young Adult heroines on young readers? Is it in any way damaging or impressionable?
3. Is the portrayal of the unlikeable female protagonist effective in terms of breaking the mould of conventional female characters, and bringing forth important conversations surrounding teenage gender-based violence?

By comparing Katniss and Bella to Summers' protagonists, I was able to deconstruct the makings of an unlikeable female character and provoke a better understanding of their behaviour and actions. This thesis, like Summers' works, ultimately challenges the normalized makings of YA protagonists, and works towards not just deconstructing the "mean girl", but embracing her.

Chapter 2: Critical Literature Review
In Defence of Young Adult Literature

Over the last several decades, Young Adult literature has continued to rise in popularity and scalability, with countless titles becoming *New York Times* bestsellers, and numerous successful adaptations of books to film or television series. Despite these accomplishments in contributing to and impacting popular culture, negative stigmas are associated with the genre. What should be considered not just a form of entertainment, but a way to peer into a teenagers' mind and understand their struggles, is instead considered immature and frivolous ("The Stigma Surrounding Young Adult Literature"). YA authors and educators alike continue to challenge this perception of the genre by writing about and/or discussing topical themes that continue to impact teenagers today. This is not just to connect with teenagers and help them identify themselves within these texts and/or relish in escapism, but this also allows others outside the YA demographic to get a glimpse into a teenager's often elusive mind.

Guest editor of the National Council of Teachers of English's *English Journal*, Chris Crowe, delves into the stigmas and misconceptions that surround Young Adult literature, and defends it as medium vital not just for teenagers, but for adults to understand them better. In the article "Defending YA Literature: Voices of Students", Crowe questioned his high school pupils regarding their thoughts on YA literature and concluded that YA novels are essential reading that should be utilized in high school English curriculums. Crowe argues that YA literature:

> …provides meaning for teens. These books aren't just stories about secret crushes and high school sports; they deal with much larger issues that almost all the teens have to do with in some way or another. I think that teens should read books that provide meaning for their lives right then at the moment. ("Defending YA" 114)

Crowe stresses the importance of YA literature as it is a gateway to understanding their viewpoints of life, and their innermost feelings. These books speak for teenagers, and address issues they might be afraid or embarrassed to express themselves. Crowe states:

> Some adults don't agree with a lot of the YA lit that's out there, but I think it gives teens a chance to see how other people are coping with similar problems they are dealing with themselves. You have to admit that bringing up sensitive issues to your parents or teachers was sometimes hard and embarrassing. Why not give teens a book that deals with the issue and then talk about it? ("Defending YA" 114)

Overall, Crowe fights against the negative stigmas attached to YA novels and argues how classic novels should not be the only genre of books taught to students. Rather, YA books that center on diverse storytelling, with prevalent, hard-hitting topics, such as in *Monster* (1999), *Speak* (1999), *Stargirl* (2000) and more, will help bridge the gap between teenager and adult.

Chris Crowe also addresses the criticism aimed at the YA genre in his article, "The Problem with YA Literature." He notes the double standards applied to YA in an educational context, as it is often considered juvenile and not to be taken seriously or critically. Crowe praises how "YA books can knock the reluctance out of the reluctant readers, can provoke critical thinking in sophisticated readers, and can provide hours of pleasure for most all readers" (146). Crowe also notices the shift in criticism for YA, pointing out that while it is predominantly seen as immature, it can on the other hand also be seen as too bleak, exploring the themes of "drug addiction…rape, mental illness, and murder" (Mosle qtd. in Crowe "The Problem with YA" 148). Crowe argues against this generalization, stating that plenty of classic literature taught to students is just as -if not more- bleak, and these stories should still be taught to the proper audience. Additionally, Crowe rebuts that:

Some kids…are mature enough, smart enough, and thoughtful enough to read these classic

and YA dark tales and benefit from the experience. It's up to parents, librarians, and

English teachers to know books and to steer young readers to literature – YA or classic –

for which they're best suited. ("The Problem With YA" 149)

Crowe ultimately argues for the merit in teaching YA in schools, as its subject matters do not

rival or compare to classic literature, but can help students identify themselves within texts,

connect with the messages and morals, and help educators understand their students on a deeper

level.

Professors Susan P. Santoli and Mary Elaine Wagner support Crowe's claims arguing the

benefits of implementing Young Adult literature into classrooms. Their work, "Promoting

Young Adult Literature: The Other 'Real' Literature" explores the immeasurable value of YA

literature, and fights against the preconceived notions associated with the genre. The authors

argue that while classic literature is essential reading for students, they also observed students'

disinterest in the genre. In support of YA, Santoli and Wagner claim:

Young Adul literature can be a vehicle that allows teachers to present the same literary

elements found in the classics while engaging adolescent students in stimulating classroom

discussions and assignments. Unlike classic literature, it can foster a desire to read because

it: a) employs the literary elements of the classics, b) engages adolescent students in

analyzing literature along with themselves and their principles, and c) promotes and

encourages lifelong reading habits. Young Adult literature deserves a valued and respected

position in secondary language arts classrooms. (66)

Santoli and Wagner fervently argue in favour of the normalization and implementation of Young

Adult novels in high school classrooms. Giving students an array of diverse texts ranging from

classics, to Shakespeare, to YA, helps students to broaden their understanding of common themes expressed within all genres, identify and learn more about themselves, and overall have a better chance of genuine enjoyment in their English class. Therefore, the benefits of teaching YA to students prove a worthwhile endeavour.

Barry Gilmore conducted a study which examined the role of implicit bias in adolescents' perspectives as they read. The article "Saying What We Don't Mean" shows how Gilmore worked with a dozen girls from seventh to eighth grade to determine their perspectives towards literature in school, intending to uncover implicit biases from both students and teachers. This was also to glean what was trending in books from a teenager's perspective, and to see if they desired more from the YA genre. The students expressed frustration at the fact that most of the books they read in school do not pass the Bechdel Test. Originally meant for analyzing films, the Bechdel Test evaluates gender biases in works of fiction by using three criteria: "(1) It has to have at least two women in it, who (2) talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man" ("The Bechdel Test"). The test retained its popularity and is often used to "show how Hollywood [and publishing companies, in this regard] has an ingrained habit of portraying women in stereotypical and sexist ways" ("What is The Bechdel Test"). This demonstrates that "adolescent readers of genre fiction are, in fact, critical observers of the worlds authors create" (Santoli and Wagner 20).

Based on the responses from these teenagers, Gilmore emphasized the importance of pushing for diverse narratives to teach students as it has a large and lasting impact on them. They especially noted the problem with teaching novels that do not offer diverse narratives and/or issues that teenagers endure. Gilmore highlights how problematic this approach to teaching is, especially since students are perceptive of what they consume, and "Literature is

important…because it opens for us areas of human experience we might not access otherwise" (24). Thus, Gilmore stresses the need for a shift in approach to the choices of literature taught in schools, and for a new focus on more diverse texts to reflect the students and their prevalent issues.

The Formula of a Popular YA Heroine

With YA fiction continuously contributing and impacting popular culture and, subsequently, teenage girls, it is alarming that the image and role of female heroines remain rather stagnant and formulaic. Since protagonists like Bella Swan (*Twilight*) and Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games*) have led to such vastly successful book and film series, other YA authors have followed suit and created their female heroines in the same fashion. These girls are almost always depicted as strong, brave, unbeknownst of their remarkable beauty, kind, altruistic, and incredibly beloved. In the attempts to make these protagonists extraordinary, they ultimately become unremarkable, as these girls begin to resemble one another, creating a pattern of familiarity within each character.

Though Bella Swan is often considered inferior to Katniss Everdeen – and those alike that lead popular YA series – professor and scholar Rhonda V. Wilcox argues that there are "significant similarities" (194) between the two. Her work titled "Forced Glory: Katniss Everdeen, Bella Swan and Varieties of Virginity" explores the characteristics, appearance, and story arch of both girls, and found that there are only slight differences between the characters. Wilcox notes how on a rudimentary level, "Both stories feature self-sacrificing young female protagonists who must choose between two young men" (193). On a deeper level, she notices how both girls' lives follow similar trajectories, as they selflessly fight for the people they love

in the face of danger and lead happy lives with the boy of their choice, now with a child/children.

Though these characters are often pitted against each other, Wilcox argues how they share similar personality traits as well. They both reject conventional femininity – mostly shown through their lack of care for fashion and their appearance –, they are unaware of the tremendous effect they have on the opposite sex, are forced to act as parents in lieu of their own, and sacrifice everything to preserve the wellbeing of their future. Wilcox states that the only notable difference between the two is that Katniss' bravery has reached a far larger scale than Bella's, since Bella's conflict focuses on saving her family rather than the world. She notes, "By the end of the stories, [they] have both become mothers. But Katniss has changed the world, while Bella has become beautiful but unchanging stone" (207). Thus, Wilcox ultimately challenges the perception that Bella is the antithesis of the strong-willed and well-loved Katniss, by proving that they are far more similar than people initially believe.

For a collection of essays covering multiple topics centred around *The Hunger Games* series titled "Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games", University of Tampa's Professor Amanda Firestone weighs in on the comparisons between Katniss Everdeen and Bella Swan. Her chapter, "Apples to Oranges: The Heroines in *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*" argues how it is unfair that Bella is consistently compared to Katniss, as Bella's situation and setting of the story in Forks, Washington pales in comparison to the dystopian world of Panem, dictated by a corrupt government. She notes how Bella consistently attempts to assert her agency throughout the series but is limited due to the confines of gender roles in teen romance novels. She states that Katniss, while strong, selfless, resilient, and self-sufficient, is this way because she purely has no choice; her world and living situation demands this from her, otherwise, she and her family will die.

Firestone examines how each heroine is limited in their actions and ability within their genre and setting. For example, she writes that:

Bella's actions are consistently minimalized by the fact that Edward's agency exceeds her own. His ability to enact and realize his decisions hampers Bella's ability to get the things she wants when she wants them. In stark contrast, Katniss rarely, if ever, uses her agency, although she appears to have the ability to do so. While Bella is a struggling agent quelled by her specific genre's conventions, Katniss is an agent who seems to refuse her agency, instead allowing her actions to be dictated by her reactions to what is happening around her. Point in case, both women choose to sacrifice themselves for someone they love. (3239-3240)

This is just one example of Firestone's point which argues that comparisons between the two heroines are difficult to make, almost "implausible and impractical because the characters' respective genres require vastly different things from them as protagonists" (3244).

Anna Silver writes about the issues within the depiction of Bella Swan for John Hopkins University Press. In her article, "*Twilight* is Not Good for Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Series", Silver highlights how Bella's actions and trajectory of life offer a didactic narrative of a "virtuous family and woman… [with an] abstinence-only agenda (123). Silver notes how Bella exudes maternal traits well before she becomes a teenaged mother and lacks agency in her relationship with Edward. Silver also shares a major concern regarding Meyer's morals and messages surrounding teenage abstinence, noting that "marriage is the only moral arena for sexual desire" (127). She argues that Bella is not a protagonist for young girls to look up to as "Meyer depicts motherhood as a means of personal fulfilment and, more generally, underscores the series' persistent theme that identity comes from

affiliation rather than individual accomplishment" (130). Silver's main issue with Bella is that her story sends the message of "Only within marriage and motherhood…can women find true equality with men and, more largely, truly become themselves" (132).

The Need for Diverse Narratives: the "Unlikable" and/or "Mean Girl"

New York Times bestselling author and journalist Hayley Krischer writes about her desire and the need for a more diverse representation of teenage girls – particularly the "unlikeable" ones. Her article "Where Are the Unlikeable Female Characters in Young Adult Fiction?" delves into the reluctance of YA publishers to center on characters that do not fit the mould of a conventional female protagonist. She expresses how while characters like Katniss Everdeen are admirable and likeable, they are also entirely unrelatable. She ardently questions why the depiction of YA girls is all too familiar and formulaic, stating:

> The young adult contemporary world has a love/hate relationship with unlikeable female protagonists. Female YA characters are expected to be good role models, heroines. They're allowed to be upset or insecure or enraged, but not too upset, insecure and enraged. They're expected to make so-so choices, but certainly not terrible choices. And if they do, they should be apologetic for them. Unsure is okay. Being messy is not. They're supposed to have empathy and understanding for others. Research tells us this is what society wants from girls too: they're expected to be cheerful, to look feminine, to be wholesome and not be bossy or express other domineering qualities. Which should come as no surprise. (Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters")

It is, therefore, no wonder that YA novels focus on making their protagonists fit this mould in response to misogynistic understandings and expectations of young girls. Krischer highlights and applauds Courtney Summers' aplomb in pushing for narratives from the perspective of an

"unlikeable" and/or "mean" girl, especially since Summers was faced with countless rejections due to the sheer unlikability of her character Parker in her debut, *Cracked Up to Be*. Krischer ultimately fights against the pattern of conventional female characters – not by dismissing their character altogether, but by stating that room should be made for the mean girls, to give them a voice as well. She concludes with the idea that "…the damaged, unlikeable girls matter too. And we shouldn't be ashamed of their stories" (Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters").

Krischer analyzes the mean girl – and the importance of telling her story – in her article titled "In Defense of Mean Girls in YA Literature." She dissects the meaning and role of a "mean girl" and argues that "mean":

> …is just code for rebellion, it's code for girls who step outside the box. These are angry girls. Frustrated girls. They're flawed girls. They're misunderstood girls. They're all girls who aren't behaving in the way society expects them to. (Krischer, "In Defense of Mean Girls")

Krischer exposes the complexities of the mean girl and proves that they are never one-dimensional or cruel for the sake of being cruel. She reveals that these characters tap into the raw emotions and feelings that teen girls are often told not to embrace, as they are hardly demonstrated in popular YA novels. She states, "That's the key to the mean girl: she invites desire and disgust… [They are sometimes] filled with anger and ready to destroy" (Krischer, "In Defense of Mean Girls"). In revealing these nuanced aspects of the mean girl, Krischer offers a more empathetic view of these characters, and implores readers to do the same.

In an op-ed for *HuffPost*, teenage writer Vivian DeRosa comments on her frustrations with the lack of diversity in YA novels. She writes about how these novels and characters often follow the same formula, making each story inauthentic, trite, and predictable. Additionally, a

major issue DeRosa expressed was the questionable level of relatability of popular YA heroines – especially concerning their incredible appearances. She states:

> YA fiction only gives us one type of beauty. Being a teenager is sort of awkward. Say hello to braces, pimples, weird fashion trends, poorly died hair, and too much eyeliner. When YA novels describe their main character as someone who could win a Gigi Hadid look-a-like competition, I cringe, because they're missing a major chance to connect with their audience. Writers put a lot of effort into voice to make sure their narrator sounds like a teenager. Maybe they could try making them look like actual teens too. Give your main character diverse body types, different styles, and create a new definition of perfect.
>
> (DeRosa)

DeRosa is contributing to the discussions and published works that fight for diverse texts in the YA genre. Her opinion as a teenager is especially important since she is the demographic for these particular novels.

Kelly Jenson's article for the *School Library Journal* titled "Do We Honour Girls' Stories? The Double Standard of YA Lit" delves into the sexism that exists within the YA publishing world and within the novels themselves. For instance, Jenson points out how the *National Book Award* list was rife with male authors and male-driven stories, despite being written by women. She infers that stories centred around girls are not taken as seriously or subject to that much acclaim. Jenson refers to the fact that novels about girls that do not fit the mould of a likeable protagonist, such as in Courtney Summer's *All The Rage*, may get critical acclaim, but lack recognition with accolades and awards.

Jenson argues how rigid the credentials are to be considered a typical "strong" female protagonist. She notes how these characters are described carrying the same traits: "They do not

bend to a male-gaze, and they are unabashedly about being girls in today's male-friendly world"
(Jenson). She also questions why these traits are considered strong, but female characters who do
not embody them are not lauded or considered as such. Jenson states:

> When women write and create with empathy, it's taken for granted. It's expected of them
> because those are the social norms pressed upon them. When men do these same things,
> though, it is seen as special… When women take risks in their writing, when they choose
> to write female-driven narratives with take-no-bull girls who may not care at all whether
> you like them or not, they're not seen as brave. They're not seen as doing something new
> or inventive or award-worthy. They are instead dinged because they portray girls who
> aren't "likeable." Because these stories are not always "nice." Because those girls aren't
> "realistic." … We wouldn't have the rich tapestry of stories we do without authors like
> Laurie Halse Anderson…Stephenie Meyer, Angela Johnson, and other knockouts who
> choose to tell girls' stories. Who don't shy away from writing about the ups and downs of
> being female in a world where it's better to be anything but.

Jenson highlights the reluctance in acknowledging that girls who live outside fantastical or
dystopian narratives should also be revered and considered "strong." Girls who are unafraid of
defying what is expected of their gender are still not embraced, but are unliked, vilified, and
considered unworthy of praise despite the difficulties that exist when girls stray from the
confines of gender roles. Jenson pushes for the term "strong female heroine" to apply to all girls
presented in YA – not just in the fantastical settings, but in the realistic ones too.

Adolescent Gender-Based Violence

Professor Roxanne Harde explores the topical subject of rape culture amongst
adolescents and stresses the importance of spreading awareness through the use of Young Adult

novels. Harde analyzes several YA novels centred around gender-based violence in her work,

"'No Accident, No Mistake': Acquaintance Rape in Recent YA Novels." Harde comments on

how the actual act of rape is hardly central to the narratives of YA novels, and this is deliberately

done in order to showcase the aftermath of such an atrocity – to focus on "…coping with the

trauma, learning how to live with a drastically changed worldview, rebuilding the ability to trust,

and testing the connections with family and friends" (172).

     Harde delves into the topic of acquaintance rape and refers to Princeton Professor Susan

Brison's comments on the implications and trauma resulting from acquaintance sexual violence,

stating it:

> …not only shatters one's fundamental assumptions about the world and one's safety in
>
> it…it also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity…one
>
> can no longer be oneself even to oneself, since the self exists fundamentally in relation to
>
> others. Survivors of acquittance rape in these novels…begin to cope with, if not work
>
> through, the trauma, trying to recover from this shattering immediately after the rape; their
>
> very survival depends on it. (qtd. in Harde 172)

This raises concern for young adults regarding the psychological ramifications of sexual violence

that overwhelmingly affect the victim, especially since they are still in stages of development.

While Harde applauds several YA authors (e.g., Laurie Halse Anderson, Louise O'Neill, E.K.

Johnston, and Amber Smith) for exploring the topic of rape culture within their novels, she also

emphasizes the need for more. Harde ultimately implores that YA authors "should also engage

more explicitly with issues of consent, a theme [several authors] introduce but don't develop.

Instead, these authors have, as do their characters and all survivors of rape, difficulty looking

past the rape…I would like to see stories that engage more fully with the issue of rape denial and

consent" (183-184). This fact helps bring forward a new perspective and approach to sexual violence, broadening the view from solely the victim and their plight, but to also investigate the root cause, the perpetrator.

Valery Walkerdine discusses how girls grapple with femininity in her article "Femininity as Performance." She observes how "As girls at school, as women at work, [girls] are used to performing" (Walkerdine 267). She explores how girls are conditioned since childhood to act a certain way to be accepted in society. She states how "Girls are conditioned into passivity…femininity is seen as a series of roles imposed by agents of socialization" (Walkerdine 267), and those who branch out of the confines of conventional femininity are ridiculed, ostracized, and ultimately unaccepted. She questions:

> How come, for many women, the powerful part of themselves has been so split off as to feel that it belongs to someone else? It is not the case that here is simple passive wimp femininity, but a power which is both desired, strived after, yet almost too dangerous to be acknowledged as belonging to the woman herself. (267)

Walkerdine exposes how the normalization and enforcement of gender roles and expectations ultimately set women up for failure when they defy the norm in any way – particularly involving their social status and/or success in the workplace. These teachings to young women attribute to their mistreatment and abuse by men who take advantage of these gender constructs. This further proves that "femininity is read as a constellation of sign which mark it off as antithetical to 'proper' performance to an incredible degree (268). Walkerdine criticizes how society forces women to constantly prove themselves and their capabilities amongst men and suggests a reform in educational approaches and practises. If not, people will continue to "resort to essentialist

arguments" (277), and girls and women will still be limited in their abilities to be seen and taken seriously.

Educator Stacy Miller presented and documented student responses to a unit about violence in the YA genre for the English Journal. Her work titled "Shattering Images of Violence in Young Adult Literature: Strategies for the Classroom" delved into the subject of violence and its origins by use of reading the YA novel, *Shattering Glass*, accompanied by classroom discussions on the subject matters and themes. When questioning her students on why they believe violence to be a topic of interest for them, most agreed that they gravitate towards the subject because they are "desensitized to it, and it surrounds their lives" (Miller 90). Violence was revealed to be something not just prevalently shown in all forms of media, but in their lives at school via bullying.

Miller constructed several activities for her students to engage in to garner a better understanding of violence. For example, she showed her students a sketch of "The Cycle of Oppression and Prejudice", which illustrated the origins of violence and its systemic insipidness. The sketch explained:

…the cycle of violence begins with myths or misinformation, stereotypes or a biased history… the cycle continues as myths are validated and reinforced by institutions, culture, media, family, religion, and friends and then become socialized into the cycle. This awareness helped us to see that once myths are socialized…the cycle can be internalized, causing misinformation and myths to later become truths…[This] may lead to behaviour that is prejudiced, oppressive, and even violent, thus completing the cycle. (Miller 88-89)

This explanation of the cycle of violence provides a deeper exploration into how gender-based violence occurs, since most aspects of society are governed through a patriarchal lens, rendering

women as the weaker sex that can be controlled. Miller spoke about the dangerous repercussions that occur when prejudice goes unchecked, and how it is "a form of oppression and violence" (92). Miller's students supported the idea of teaching YA texts like *Shattering Glass* (2002) in high school as it invites discussion of real-life issues such as prejudice that leads to violence, and it can be a means to work towards dismantling the cycle of violence.

Professor Susan J. Brison of Dartmouth College writes about rape victims and their reluctance with coming forward and reporting it. Her article, "Why I Spoke About One Rape but Stayed Silent About Another", discusses Brison's own experience with sexual violence and her fear of coming forward, along with the reasoning behind it. She reasons that:

> No one wants to accept that we live in a world where *even though you did nothing wrong* you can be brutally violated, whether by a trusted friend or total stranger. Blaming yourself is far easier than letting go of the belief that nothing terrible, undeserved, and utterly unavoidable will happen to you. For, if you *weren't* to blame, then it could happen again there's nothing you can do to prevent it. That's the scariest thought of all. (Brison)

Even worse, Brison highlights the issues and harm that comes with women who do report, as they are aware of how futile it is to pursue a criminal case due to the lack of support from institutions that are meant to support victims. Brison notes how once she began to speak about her experience in college seminars, so did students reveal they too are survivors of sexual violence. Brison aims to dismantle the shameful and accusatory approach that is inflicted upon women who choose whether to report. She boldly states, "It's time to stop asking rape survivors why they stayed silent and to start asking why some men rape and what we can do stop enabling them" (Brison).

An article in *Girlhood Studies*, an online journals division of Berghahn Books, examines the role of rape culture through a post-feminist lens in response to the infamous 2013 Saint Mary's Rape Chant in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Authors Lyndsay Anderson and Marnina Gonick wrote "The Saint Mary's Rape Chant: A Discourse Analysis of Media Coverage" to expose how the media "reiterates harmful discourses of youth, gender and sexuality while undermining deeper understanding of rape culture" (52). The authors state that "Rape culture is entrenched in everyday media, actions, and news, in the jokes that trivialize rape, music that normalizes gendered violence, in the lenient treatment towards perpetrators, and in the prevalent belief that women and girls, as the saying goes, 'ask for it'" (55). They note the danger in the media's response to the rape chant – and countless other incidents alike – and observe how news outlets "often draw on a discourse of young people as stupid and irresponsible, rather than one anti-feminist climate that renders the chant an intelligible part of contemporary culture" (Anderson and Gonick 57).

Anderson and Gonick also emphasize how media, university professors and other academics, rely on the idea that incidents like this, while harmful, are ultimately a reflection of the inexperienced youth, and not truly malicious intent. This rhetoric and approach are dangerous as it removes the blame on the perpetrator and reduces the severity of the situation. The authors ultimately argue that "The media has an important role to play in generating deeper understanding of the phenomenon and in disrupting the serial forgetting that allows these kinds of events to be covered as unusual anomalies rather than as being indicative patterns of a cultural tolerance of rape" (65).

The article, "Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment", moves beyond the reasonings of why victims of sexual violence do not report, and studies "how

violence is produced, maintained and normalized among youth" (Hlavka 337). Author Heather R. Hlavka addresses how "Young people are socialized into a patriarchal culture that nor and often encourages male power and aggression, particularly within the context of heterosexual relationships" (339). Thus, she conducted a study by interviewing 23 racially diverse female survivors of sexual assault between the ages 11-16 in order to "illuminate the heteronormative cultures within which girls accounted for sexual violence and negotiated what happened, how it happened, and why (Hlavka 343).

Hlavka reiterates through her studies that violence, harassment, abuse, and objectification is an unignorable part of young women's lives (344). Furthermore, a heteronormative society has encouraged boys to behave with aggression, since they are unable to control their sexual desires. Hlavka explains how "Male power and privilege and female acquiescence reified in descriptions of 'routine' and 'normal' sexualized interactions…Assaulted behaviours were often justified" (344). Based on the interviews, it became clear that "Sexual harassment is an instrument that maintains a gendered hierarchy (MacKinnon qtd. in Hlavka 344). Hlavka also determined that:

> Girls' characterizations of everyday violence paralleled both their assessments that "boys will be boys" and their understanding of harassment as a normal adolescent rite of passage… girls described the many ways they protected themselves against expected sexual aggression at the expense of their own feelings. (344-345)

Due to the normalization of aggressive, assertive male behaviour, and the lack of support women receive if they do report, "Girls in this study said they did not want to make a 'big deal out of experiences and rarely reported these incidents to persons in authority (Hlavka 346).

Hlavka emphasizes how there must be a shift in education to counter such approaches. She proposes:

By drawing attention to youth's voices, structures of violence, power, and privilege

become apparent in their gendered experiences that do not easily translate to law and

policy and reforms. Sexual education must be gender equity education, resistant to

troubled, heteronormative binaries and cultural constraints that omit discourses of desire,

gender, and sexuality. By treating young people as agents and decision makers, we could

create spaces where they can work together with adults to appraise experiences of sex,

assault, power, coercion, and consent prevalent in their lives. (355)

Hlavka ultimately offers a chance to better understand the dynamics of sexual violence

committed against young girls by proposing a proper, reformed education that aims to dismantle

the rigid and harmful gender binaries that affect and instruct young teenagers.

Bristol University Professor, Vanita Sundaram, aims to understand gender-based violence

from the perspective of young adults. Her article, "A Continuum of Acceptability: Understanding

Young People's View on Gender-Based Violence" "…discusses research on secondary school

pupils' views and experiences of gender-based harassment and violence… [and focusses] on how

young people talk about the acceptability of violence in different situations" (Sundaram 23-24).

Sundaram highlights the issue with teens' perception of violence, stating that it is often excused,

or downplayed in terms of severity. This is due to the fundamental understanding of "normal and

appropriate gender behaviour" (24). Sundaram observes how:

Sexual violence becomes recast as 'relationship practices' that signify seriousness,

possession, love and are accepted, even if not uniformly seen as 'good'. Young men adopt

these practices as signifiers of 'proper' masculine behaviour… demonstrating control,

dominance and manliness to their peers and partners in doing so. (25)

This perspective develops into a cyclical pattern of gender-based violence which is not taken as seriously and hinders proper awareness and accountability for this issue.

Sundaram notes that the concept of consent is not understood well amongst teens, which is a major contribution to the lack of awareness of sexual violence. She states:

> Studies…have shown that young people justify and rationalise violence against women and girls in a range of situations. Violence against women is viewed as sometimes justified and women are varyingly viewed as having provoked violence towards them. Coy et al (2016) found that consent is a poorly understood concept among teenagers and numerous instances of sexual harassment or coercion were seen either as a 'normal' part of relationships or as something that the woman in the scenario had brought upon herself. The perpetration of relationship violence/s by young men is narrated as 'normal', if not desirable, and is therefore widely tolerated by young men and women. This produces a 'truth' about gendered interactions in which violence does not need to be automatically challenged or rejected. (26)

This reluctance to place the onus on the perpetrator – and worse, to excuse the deed –informs sexual violence victims that they are not safe before or after the assault, and that perpetrators are exempt from facing the repercussions. This normalization of gender-based violence contributes to a society which endangers women and empowers men to commit such acts. Furthermore, Sundaram emphasizes the danger in imposing and enforcing such rigid and harmful gender roles, as it results in blaming female victims, and excuses the boys who commit the act. She proposes to make "…explicit the ways in which heteronormativity shapes and limits young people's lives and experiences in violence prevention work and giving young people the skills to begin to

recognize and differentiate gender norms from biological realities and then to challenge sexist expectation and practises" (33).

Chapter 3: Methodology and Theoretical Framework

I completed a comparative literary analysis of 21st-century female survivors in two of Courtney Summers' novels and compared them to popular YA protagonists/ survivors from *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight* series. I used multiple sources that analyze teenage representation in YA novels, ranging from the critical reviews, peer-reviewed articles, and commentaries and critiques of YA. The subject of gender-based violence is explored through sources from psychologists, university professors, and feminist scholars, and organizations that study and advocate for women's safety.

I applied Carole Gilligan's Theory of Moral Development as the framework of my analysis. In the 1980s, the renowned psychologist and feminist scholar, Carol Gilligan, put forth a theory of moral development that functioned as the first major theory to account for and center the socialization of girls and women. Gilligan argued that women are socialized differently from men, and often feel responsible for the wellbeing of the women in their lives. Under the tutelage of moral psychologists Lawrence Kohlberg and Erik Erikson, Gilligan observed that "Against the backdrop of the psychological descriptions of identity and moral development… the women's voices sounded distinct" (1) and noticed the absence of women's perspectives in these studies as a whole. Gilligan argued that theorists such as Kohlberg were biased towards men, and often did not take women's perspectives into account. In response, Gilligan worked to:

…offer [women] a representation of their thought that enables them to see better its integrity and validity, to recognize the experience of their thinking refracts, and to understand the line of its development. [Her] goal is to expand the understanding of human

development by using the group left out in the construction of theory to call attention to what is missing in its account. Seen in this light, the discrepant data on women's experience provide a basis upon which to generate a new theory, potentially yielding a more encompassing view of the lives of both of the sexes. (4)

Gilligan conducted her own research studying girls and their responses to moral development in order "…to bring women's voices into psychological theory and to reframe the conversation between women and men" (xxvi). She wrote:

From Erik Erikson, I learned you cannot take a life out of history, that life-history and history, psychology and politics, are deeply entwined. Listening to women, I heard a difference and discovered that brining in women's lives changes both psychology and history. It literally changes the voice: how the human story is told, and who tells it. (xi)

Gilligan concluded that women have different moral and psychological tendencies than men. Men think in terms of rules and justice while women think in terms of caring and relationships. Gilligan argued that females are more apt than males to stress interpersonal relationships and take responsibility for the wellbeing of others. Gilligan suggested that this difference is a result of females traditionally being instilled with moral perspectives that focus on community and the maintenance of personal relationships.

   Despite her theory having been introduced in 1982, Gilligan's observations remain applicable in many ways to a modern-day context, including in the YA novels that I study. For example, each protagonist in Courtney Summers' novels takes responsibility for the abuse they are either victims of or witnesses to. Rather than seeing the perpetrator as the sole recipient of blame, they question themselves, their actions, and ultimately hold themselves primarily accountable. Gilligan's theory of development is reflected through Summers' protagonists as

they take responsibility for the well-being of the other girls in their lives. Therefore, Gilligan's theory provided the framework within which I conducted my analysis.

Chapter Four: Popular YA Heroines

Bella Swan, *Twilight*

Since 2005, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series has positioned itself as one of the most popular Young Adult novels of the 21st century. With four vastly successful books and a multimillion-dollar film franchise, *Twilight* has garnered tremendous success. Despite the passing of time, the series has yet to lose its popularity or cultural impact. Within its first few years of publication, *Twilight* had surpassed all expectations, debuting at number five on the *New York Times Bestsellers* list within the first month, eventually making it to number one, along with the rest of the books in the series in the following years. The series has sold more than 250 million copies and has been translated into 37 languages. Known by the *New York Times* as "a literary phenomenon" (Bosman), and with *Entertainment Weekly* deeming Meyer as "the most popular vampire novelist since Anne Rice" (Kirschling), the *Twilight* series was overwhelmed with both worldwide acclaim and criticism – particularly when it came to Meyer's depiction of teenage love and especially her protagonist, Bella Swan.

Bella, though widely popular, is often referenced and critiqued in an unfavourable light. Stephenie Meyer purposefully omitted several descriptive features of Bella throughout the series as a means to help her readers "more easily step into her shoes" (Meyer, "FAQ: *Twilight*"). Despite this intention, Meyer was constantly questioned by fans to clarify exactly Bella's exact features. On her website, Meyer describes Bella in detail, stating:

Bella is very fair-skinned, with long, straight, dark brown hair and chocolate brown eyes. Her face is heart-shaped—a wide forehead with a widow's peak, large, wide-spaced eyes,

prominent cheekbones, and then a thin nose and a narrow jaw with a pointed chin. Her

lips are a little out of proportion, a bit too full for her jaw line. Her eyebrows are darker

than her hair and more straight than they are arched. She's five foot four inches tall,

slender but not at all muscular, and weighs about 115 pounds. She has stubby fingernails

because she has a nervous habit of biting them. ("FAQ: *Twilight*)

While this description attempts to paint Bella as a typical, "normal" teenager, she is seen and

treated as anything but, despite her mortal status amongst supernatural beings. For instance,

Twilight begins with Bella moving to the city of Forks, Washington. It is presumable that Bella

would be considered an interloper in this small town and would face ostracism in a new school in

the middle of the semester. However, "we never experience Bella…being normal in

attractiveness…as the story begins, she is pursued by one male after another" (Wilcox 194).

Classmates like Mike Newton, Tyler, and Eric grow an attachment and infatuation with her,

automatically clinging to her throughout the halls and eventually pester her to go out with them.

Bella fails to notice the attention she gains as a new, female student, nor does she realize the

physical attraction she holds over boys in school. Bella's lack of awareness of her surroundings

and natural beauty only heightens her irresistibility to boys.

  In Meyer's attempts to make Bella relatable, she happens to achieve the opposite. Bella,

so aptly meaning "beautiful," proves to be rather unrelatable. Though utterly lacking in

confidence, Bella still acts and appears to be academically superior, excluding the Cullens - the

affluent, tight-knit family, whom Bella soon discovers are vampires. Bella is far more

academically advanced than the rest of her classmates, and Meyer continuously shows readers

how Bella is an old soul of sorts. Despite being new, Bella easily excels in all of her classes. For

instance, in her first English lesson, Bella thinks, "I kept my eyes down on the reading list the

teacher had given me. It was fairly basic: Bronte, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Faulkner. I'd already read everything. That was comforting… and boring" (Meyer, *Twilight* 15). Additionally, Bella's maternal traits are presented from the start of the series, since she acts more like a parent than child to her mother and father. For instance, Bella sacrifices her comfortable life in Phoenix so her "erratic, hairbrained mother" (Meyer, *Twilight* 4) can travel with her boyfriend. It is Bella who immediately assumes the role of pseudo-mother and caregiver of her father Charlie by cooking for him and tending to the house without being asked. These amalgamated traits characterize Bella as unique and deviates from what most teenage girls like and participate in.

Bella's depiction is arguably problematic since relatability is particularly important in YA. The Young Adult Literary Association (YALSA) comments about how YA is unique since it is catered to "…beings in evolution, in search of self and identity; beings who are constantly growing and changing, morphing from the condition of childhood to that of adulthood. That period of passage called "young adulthood" is a unique part of life, distinguished by unique needs that are – at minimum — physical, intellectual, emotional, and societal in nature" (Cart). Thus, YA authors have are tasked with a challenge to engage with teenage readers, but also understand the weight of their words, and what kind of messages they are conveying to adolescents, in such an important, transitional point in their lives. YA narratives offer an opportunity for teenagers "to see themselves reflected in its pages. Young adulthood is, intrinsically, a period of tension…young adults have an all-consuming need to belong" (Cart), thus, Bella's overall flawless character detracts from her ability to relate or connect with readers.

Furthering Bella's "relatable uniqueness", Bella's interests vastly differ from her female peers. Bella scoffs at the idea of prom and opts to skip it, and whilst on a shopping trip with girlfriends, abandons them to go to a bookstore. Bella's rejection of conventional femininity is an

attempt at making her the "other" from her friend group, the wallflower, or as some critics view

as an archetypical "Mary Sue". Since *Twilight*'s release, criticism of Bella as a protagonist and

heroine has heavily relied on characterizing Bella as a modern Mary Sue in the realm of Young

Adult literature. Author and scholar, Camille Bacon-Smith, describes the Mary Sue as "a term

for a character that appears as the idealized literary representation of the author" (94). She is the

embodiment of an unattainable perfection and is well-equipped to handle any obstacle the author

throws her way (Kench). Bella certainly embodies these traits. She is well-read, unbeknownst of

her beauty and appeal, beloved by all, kind, and fiercely selfless. Imminent threats become

vanquished rather swiftly, as Bella is always rescued from other vampires who wish to kill her,

and by the series finale, *Breaking Dawn*, vampire can cast a protective shield around herself and

others, vastly lessening the threats of danger from their remaining enemies. Feminist scholar,

Amanda Firestone, also sees this correlation, noting:

> The negative connotations associated with Mary Sue and her uber-perfection transfer to
>
> Bella, making possible the charge that she may be Meyer's idealized representation of
>
> herself. Bella simultaneously is independent and strong…while also totally dependent
>
> and weak (e.g., her suffocating relationship with Edward and physical awkwardness).
>
> (3198)

Though Bella defines herself as an "average" girl (Meyer, *Twilight* 524), she appears to

struggle with her identity and autonomy. Her dependency rests on the two men in her life:

Edward and Jacob - a childhood friend who shapeshifts into a werewolf and also vies for her

affection. Bella's insatiable obsession with Edward is constantly reiterated throughout the series,

with Bella stating how she instantly feels better when in his presence (Meyer, *Twilight* 277), and

states, "There was nothing more terrifying to me, more excruciating, than the thought of turning

away from him. It was an impossibility" (Meyer, *Twilight* 248). Bella goes so far as to admit that her life is now *about* Edward himself (Meyer, *Twilight* 251). It is evident that Edward is all-consuming to Bella in a toxic way since the prospect of Edward leaving her turns detrimental when he eventually does in *New Moon*. To Bella, a life without her boyfriend is no life at all, she feels "Love, life, meaning… [is all] over" (Meyer, *New Moon* 73), and she suffers from severe depression. When Edward is gone, it is Bella's other love interest, Jacob, who keeps her functioning, further demonstrating how Bella is incapable of true independence. Academic Rebecca Anderson studies Meyer's implementation of traditional gender roles, finding:

> Bella's traditional femininity transcribe an idealized romantic notion within Stephenie Meyer's books; a young woman falls madly and irrevocably in love with a 'charming' young man and spends the rest of her life in marital bliss. But when Bella never demonstrates independence and refuses to live a life void of Edward, young women may be encouraged to believe that dependency of a male counterpart is the ultimate goal, the fairy-tale ending... In turn, younger generations synthesize these binary images and begin to develop their own performances of gender. The impact fiction has on young readers, especially girls, becomes problematic when considering how rigid the gender politics in the *Twilight* series is. (10-11)

In Bella's extreme case, this reliance on others for simple functionality is alarming for teenagers to read and be influenced by, as these intense reactions from Bella continuously perpetuate and enforce these antiquated gender roles.

Bella's character is also consistent with two archetypes commonly seen in literature and pop culture and normally assigned to female characters, known as "The Kid" and "The Waif". In her book, *Gender and Literacy*, Professor Karen Krasny describes how these archetypes

"provoke expectations and emotional responses in the minds of readers and lend coherence to the plot structure" (165). "The Kid" is "A young woman, loyal and likeable and at times a bit vulnerable, she is the kid you always want to root for"; while "The Waif" is "A damsel in distress who possesses the strength to endure, she can compel an urge to protect in even the toughest or least likely of heroes, but her victory ultimately owes a greater debt to her sheer will to survive" (165-166). Bella is liked by almost every person she encounters and remains the target of enemy vampires throughout the entire *Twilight* series, demonstrating how easily she fits into these formulaic character archetypes. Therefore, Bella supports Krasny's argument which states that no matter how well disguised as unique or different, female protagonists in YA books and popular culture tend to correspond to a typography of archetypes that function to move the plot along and that often, it is this predictability that contributes to the work's popularity.

Traits that are meant to demonstrate how Bella has flaws, such as her excessive clumsiness, are seen as endearing and charming. Anna Silver explains how:

> Moments such as these are behind the feminist concern about gender roles that the novel raises, as Edward is exaggeratedly more active and confident than the generally passive, insecure Bella. Bella's clumsiness of course, is not simply a sign of incompetence. Rather, she embodies, in her physical klutziness the adolescent girl ill at ease in her new woman's body and with her first emotions of first love and lust. Nevertheless, in the context of Edward and Bella's relationship, her gracelessness provides numerous opportunities, particularly in *Twilight*, for Meyer to demonstrate the dynamic in their relationship of perpetual rescuer and rescued. (125)

There is a consistent discord between Edward and Bella in terms of who is dominant in the relationship and regularly results in Edward overwhelming assuming his patriarchal role. Edward

is the decision maker, constantly saves Bella from danger, and belittles her by flippantly referring to her as "little coward" and "Silly Bella" (Meyer qtd. in Silver 125). Though meant to be thoughtful and charming, the underlying message that Bella is inferior in this relationship prevails.

Bella reinforces this narrative of an imbalanced relationship by repetitively describing Edward as "'breathing-takingly perfect', [her] 'perpetual savior' (Meyer, *Twilight* 166), 'a Greek god' (Meyer, *Twilight* 206), a 'godlike creature' (Meyer, *Twilight* 256), 'a carving of Adonis' (Meyer, *Twilight* 299), and 'terrible and glorious as a young god' (Meyer, *Twilight* 343)" (Silver 125-126). Bella views herself as inferior and unworthy of Edward, and always questions how such a perfect creature could have chosen her. For example, despite Edward professing his obsession with Bella, she states:

"Well, look at me," I said… "I'm absolutely ordinary – well, except for bad things like all the near-death experiences and being so clumsy that I'm almost disabled. And look at you." I waved my hand toward him and all his bewildering perfection.

His brow creased angrily for a moment, then smoothed as his eyes took on a knowing look. "You don't see yourself very clearly, you know. I'll admit you're dead-on about the bad things," he chuckled blackly, "but you didn't hear what every human male in this school was thinking on your first day."

I blinked, astonished. "I don't believe it…," I mumbled to myself.

"Trust me just this once – you are the opposite of ordinary". (Meyer, *Twilight* 210)

Furthermore, upon discovering she is pregnant, one of Bella's first thoughts is, "I hoped he would have Edward's face exactly, with no interference from mine" (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 132). This is one of the countless exchanges where Bella's insecurities shine through, despite the

relentless praise she receives. Edward's assurance of Bella's astounding beauty and effect on men contributes to her lack of relatability, placing her, like Katniss Everdeen, as the standout "chosen one", always unaware of their beauty. Bella's consistent placement of Edward on such a high pedestal exemplifies the power dynamic between the two, with Bella remaining inferior, and leaves readers with the misogynistic notion that men are always the dominant figures in relationships.

Bella's proclivity for self-sacrifice is prominent throughout the series as well. She risks her life by facing the deadly vampire, James, in order to save her mother; she travels to Italy to face the largest vampire coven to save Edward; and ultimately chooses to give up her life for her vampire-human child, despite the severe risks of carrying through with the pregnancy. This conveys that a female protagonist's role and purpose is to constantly and blindly give up themselves for those they love. Bella's impulsive and instinctual acts to save others suggest that "Female power in the series is linked not to aggression…but rather to self-sacrifice and the defense of others (Silver 131). As a human, Bella was perceived and treated as weak and helpless and wished to prove her worth through these acts of martyrdom. As a vampire, she is treated with far more respect, and viewed as strong and capable. Bella is never able to prove her strength or "save the day" as a human, valiantly though she tries. This leaves young women with the impression that they, like human Bella, may appear and be treated as weak and incapable, always in need of saving.

While Bella's knack for self-sacrifice to save others would normally be considered foolish, in the series it is perceived as admirable and even heroic. Bella's "flaws" contribute to the character's lack of relatability for young readers, and perhaps that is the point. Her otherness and uniqueness exclude her from her mortal friends at school, as Bella hardly gets along with

them or shares their interests – they are more of a nuisance to her. This is to show that Bella is destined for greater things: for immortality; to become a vampire. This is demonstrated in *Breaking Dawn* when Bella, now transformed into a beautiful vampire, thinks, "It was like I had been born to be a vampire… I had found my true place in the world, the place I fit, the place I shined" (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 524). Additionally, Bella's journey as a newly born vampire also reemphasizes her flawlessness. Before turning, Bella is constantly warned that she will suffer through an insatiable, ravenous thirst for human blood, and will be unable to control it. Each member of the Cullen clan goes through this experience immediately upon turning, yet Bella is exempt from the experience. Bella has an instinctual shield which allows her to harness and control her thirst. This attributes to Bella's flawlessly human image – and even support her role as a Mary Sue once more – as even at a time where her willpower is put to the ultimate test, she is able to breeze by. With this transformation, Bella also falls into another popular archetype titled "The Free Spirit", who is "Eternally optimistic and committed to following her heart" (Krasny 165). Despite the risks, trials and tribulations, Bella is unrelenting in achieving her goal to become a vampire alongside Edward for eternity. This demonstrates how Bella, no matter how well developed or disguised, ultimately fulfills the function of these archetypes, no matter where she is positioned in life. Thus, while she may not represent young readers, Belle may be a reflection of readers' idealized desires of finding a soulmate, and achieving safety, prosperity and bliss.

When researching Bella's character, Firestone found that "Perhaps the largest criticism of Bella is that she is perceived as a helpless victim and, potentially worse, as an example of Mary Sue fiction gone wrong" (192). When Bella attempts to assert her agency and take charge of her relationship with Edward, she is pressured to compromise. This occurs when Bella insists on

having sex with Edward. Since Edward is over 100 years old, he refuses to abandon his traditional values, and therefore will not engage in intercourse unless they are married. Despite Bella's pleas and modern approach toward teenage intimacy, Edward does not concede, and the two get married shortly after graduating high school. On their honeymoon, Edward refuses to continue having sex with Bella after their first encounter due to his fear of losing control and endangering her with his supernatural strength. Though justifiable since Bella wakes up with bruises all over her body, Bella is still distraught and, in turn, must beg Edward until he relents and sleeps with her once more. This demonstrates how no matter how hard Bella attempts to assert her agency with her partner, she is always undermined – until she becomes pregnant.

Throughout the *Twilight* series, Bella has remained altruistic, focused on preserving the lives of loved ones – even if it comes at the expense of herself. The sole time Bella does fight and wins her case against her partner's protestations is when she insists on carrying through with her pregnancy despite the life-threatening risks. However, one can also discern Bella's maternal instincts drive pro-life messages in *Breaking Dawn.* It should be emphasized that Meyer herself has never spoken on this interpretation, nor made an official statement of her stance on abortion and women's reproductive rights. Upon discovering she is pregnant, with the fetus growing at a rapid rate, Bella's priority completely crystalizes on her child. She thinks, "From that first little touch, the whole world shifted. Where before there was just one thing I could not live without, now there were two… I wanted him like I wanted air to breathe. Not a choice – a necessity" (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 132). It is only when Bella becomes impregnated that she gains courage and oversees her decisions and agency. When Edward immediately urges toward aborting their child, due to the detrimental risks of carrying through with the pregnancy, Bella's will toughens, and she becomes fervent in her choice to keep the child. She states, "'No,' I whispered again, my

voice stronger. That could *not* be. I would not allow it" (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 134). Bella's

strength finally comes into fruition in order to override any decision Edward and the rest of the

Cullens attempt to make for her regarding terminating the pregnancy.

While Bella's newfound might and determination can be considered heartwarming and

venerable, it can also be construed as a method to spread stereotypical messages regarding

women's roles in life, as well as leave young readers with morals consistent with pro-life

arguments. Anna Silver argues how problematic it is to have Bella's unwavering courage and

valour arise once she is married and pregnant. She argues:

> Once Bella becomes a vampire, Meyer repeatedly emphasizes that Bella and Edward are
>
> equals: sexually, in physical strength, as hunters, and in their psychic gifts. Only within
>
> marriage and motherhood, Meyer suggests, can women find true equality with men and,
>
> more largely, truly become themselves. (Silver 132)

Bella's newfound sense of autonomy ironically appears when it is to her risk her life for her

child, later named Renesmee. Bella's insistence to refer to the baby as "him" instead of "it", and

her repulsion towards anyone who beseeches her to terminate the pregnancy for the sake of her

health are overruled almost immediately, further emphasizing common pro-life arguments. Thus,

it is discernable how Bella's identity is found with her role as wife and mother. Since "YA

literature has a tendency to moralize and instruct adults" (Silver 123), young readers are left with

messages that reiterate rigid gender roles for women. Firestone contributes to this idea, stating:

> At the end of many romance novels, the heroine must '[deny] her independent goal-
>
> oriented action outside of love and marriage' (Regis qtd. in Firestone 3155). This
>
> reinforces traditional, rigid gender roles and potentially subtextual advises female readers

to accept their fate as eventual lovers, wives, and mothers (Radway qtd. in Firestone

3155). (Firestone 3155)

Silver's views also align with Firestone, stating:

While she is not the heroine that I would choose as a model for my female students -

marriage and motherhood at age nineteen and the curtailing of her education are

irresponsible advice for today's girls - the book demands a detailed analysis of how

Meyer depicts motherhood as a means of personal fulfillment and, more generally,

underscores the series' persistent theme that identity comes from affiliation rather than

individual accomplishment. (130)

To further this sentiment, Silver also argues how Bella's actions can be viewed in conjunction

with pro-life arguments. Bella's staunch determination to keep her vampire-human baby is

proven to be the right decision, as shown by Edward – the leading opposer of keeping the child –

who begins to hear the baby's thoughts about how she adores Bella, thus finally relents. Despite

the terminal fate Bella almost meets during her gruesome birth, she proudly thinks, "She was

worth the fight" (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 447), informing readers that a woman's unborn child

must always precede their own. Silver argues:

Bella's use of anti-abortion language here – "Not a choice" – could come directly from

an anti-abortion bumper sticker. Meyer gives these ideas additional authoritative weight

by putting them in the mouth of the heroine and narrator-focalizer...Unequivocally, the

good mother in Meyer's novels is willing to sacrifice herself for her family…Meyer's

diction is so clearly drawn from contemporary rhetoric about abortion that one would

have to be obtuse not to draw those symbolic connections… Meyer's position in the

novel is well within Mormon orthodoxy. (130)

Silver states that through Bella's actions, young readers are left with the impression that one's autonomy is only achieved through marriage and motherhood, and said child comes before oneself, despite detrimental risks (133). Ultimately, Bella's entire "sense of identity is not through individual achievement… but through a relationship… The self does not exist in isolation, but in attachment" (133).

Despite being the protagonist of this popular series, Bella does not exhibit the qualities of a "strong" heroine for teens to admire or connect with. Her characteristics and actions exemplify how she is "an old-fashioned heroine: bookish, smart, brave, considerate of others' emotions, and naturally competent in the domestic arts" (Flanagan 112). This demonstrates how the prospect of relatability remains questionable. As much as Meyer attempts to make Bella like any other average girl, she has shown to be far from it. From the way she draws attention from the opposite sex due to her striking looks, her alarming dependency on Edward, affinity for self-sacrifice, and lack of agency and identity until married and pregnant, all mark Bella as someone entirely unrelatable. The qualities that attempt to humanize her are always met with adoration and contribute to her immense appeal. Throughout the *Twilight* series, it is clear that Bella's character and journey is entirely unique, and her questionable choices suggest that she is not a character that most young female readers could relate to – and perhaps that is a good thing.

Bella Swan, Rosalie Hale, and Gender-Based Violence

Edward's "stepsister", Rosalie Hale, is depicted as the conventional "mean girl" throughout the *Twilight* series. Bella is immediately infatuated and intimidated by Rosalie and her extraordinary beauty. Rosalie appears to be the polar opposite of Bella – ranging from looks to personality. Bella is brunette, shy, and clumsy, whereas Rosalie is blonde, statuesque, and graceful. Where Bella is kind, patient, and selfless, Rosalie is cynical, vain, and selfish. She is

one of the only characters – and the only member of the Cullen clan – who does not immediately

adore nor embrace Bella, but openly criticizes and loathes her at times. On the surface, Rosalie's

reasoning for disliking Bella is due to the risk of the Cullens' exposure as vampires in their small

town. However, Meyer gives readers more insight into the character in the third book of the

series, *Eclipse*. Rosalie attempts to convince Bella against turning into a vampire herself, as it

will strip Bella of her ability to have children, which was Rosalie's dream when she was human.

When delving deeper into Rosalie's character, her feelings and sometimes vitriolic

attitude towards Bella is understandable. It is revealed that as a human, Rosalie was

overwhelmingly favoured for her beauty as well, and was born believing her value solely

depended on her attractiveness alone. She states:

> I was eighteen, and I was beautiful…My beauty was like a gift... [My parents] saw so
>
> much more potential in it than I did…I was thrilled to be me, to be Rosalie Hale. Pleased
>
> that men's eyes watched me everywhere I went, from the year I turned twelve. Delighted
>
> that my girlfriends sighed with envy when they touched my hair… I wanted to be loved,
>
> to be adored… Admiration was like air to me… I was silly and shallow, but I was
>
> content. (Meyer, *Eclipse*154-155)

This indicates that Rosalie has been raised with the idea that her worth is determined by her

physical appearance, and this has affected her so much that she believed it as truth and relished

the attention. She is also blind to the disturbing fact that she was ogled and objectified as a young

teenager from the age of twelve, used by her family as a pawn to climb the social ladder in their

town, regardless of the cost to their child. Thus, for her entire life, Rosalie was raised to believe

the only way to achieve love and adoration is through her extraordinary beauty.

Rosalie's life is decided by her parents, as they use her looks to attract Royce King, the son of an influential, affluent banker in the hopes of cementing a higher social position in town. Royce immediately falls for Rosalie, and they are instantly engaged. It is emphasized that this "relationship" was based purely on physical attraction, as Royce never knew Rosalie intimately due to work remaining his priority. Rosalie recalls the relationship:

> Royce seemed to be everything *I'd* dreamed of. The fairy tale prince, come to make me a princess… We were engaged before I'd known him for two months. We didn't spend a great deal of time alone with each other. Royce had told me he had responsibilities at work, and, when we were together, he liked people to look at us, to see me on his arm. I liked that, too". (Meyer, *Eclipse* 157)

This reveals that Rosalie's understanding of love is surface level, with a reliance on her physical attractiveness to sustain what little connection there is. Rosalie's life takes a drastic and tragic turn as she is approached by a drunk Royce and his friends, which proceeds into a gang rape, resulting in Rosalie being left for dead on the street. Thus, the Cullen patriarch, Carlisle, finds her and saves her by turning her into a vampire. It is only until Rosalie reveals her story that readers may begin to see her as more just than a one-dimensional antithesis to Bella, but as a fully-fledged, nuanced individual with a tragic backstory.

Rosalie's past gives insight into her behaviour towards Bella, and it becomes clear that Bella's life mirrors Rosalie's – only Bella's ends victoriously. In *Twilight*, Bella is cornered by a gang of men who attempt to attack her until she is rescued by Edward. Bella was fortunate to be saved before any physical damage was afflicted. Bella even acknowledges this, stating to Rosalie, "[Edward] said it was close to what happened to me that time in Port Angeles, only no one was there to save *you*" (Meyer, *Eclipse* 153). From this, one can discern that to Rosalie,

Bella is the embodiment of the life she could have had but was taken from her. Bella was saved; Rosalie was not. Rosalie may be taunted by the presence of a girl who seemingly has everything that was violently stolen from her: life, love, adoration for the person she is, and ultimately the feeling of safety around the men in her life. Despite Rosalie's crass attitude, she still risks her life throughout the series to protect Bella. Additionally, she bares herself by divulging her traumatic past to Bella in order to persuade her into remaining human, so as to live a long, fulfilling life – as Rosalie had always dreamed. Despite her resentment of Bella, Rosalie advocates for her life and fights for her.

Even with the passage of decades, Rosalie is still affected by her painful experience, which signifies the immense, long-lasting damage that survivors of domestic abuse endure ("Stop the Victim Blaming"). Rosalie is haunted by her past, as demonstrated when she states, "I remember every detail about that night" (Meyer, *Eclipse*158). Her view of her life and the world is bleak, as she tells Bella, "Would you like to hear my story, Bella? It doesn't have a happy ending – but which of ours does? If we had happy endings, we'd all be under gravestones now (Meyer, *Eclipse* 154). This statement showcases Rosalie as more than vain, but as someone whose view of the world is tainted by her experience with gender-based violence. This also highlights the long-term post-traumatic effects that survivors of gender-based violence live with ("Effects of Violence Against Women"). Rosalie's yearning for death instead of immortality suggests that she is trapped within a body and life she never desired, as she is never fully satisfied with the life she leads. Her desire to have lived a fulfilling life with an adoring husband and children has been stripped from her, hence her resentment towards Bella grows, since Bella would be throwing this opportunity away. What makes her increasingly tragic is the fact that she places blame on herself for her abuse. She states, "It took some time before I began to blame the

beauty for what happened to me – for me to see the curse of it" (Meyer, *Eclipse*162). Despite the

progression of time, Rosalie still harbours feelings of guilt for her abuse and murder, blaming

herself for what happened to her, rather than the actual perpetrators. This presents a larger,

prevalent conversation about survivors and victim blaming ("Effects of Violence Against

Women").

The revelation of Rosalie's life offers a deeper understanding of her behaviour towards

Bella. It is evident that Rosalie's attitude is impacted by the cruel loss of her virtue and life, and

her once naïve perception of herself and the world has since hardened. One may question who

could fault Rosalie for resenting a girl who resembles everything that was taken away from her;

someone who takes mortality for granted, is adored for their inner and outer beauty, and is

viciously protected by all who meet her. Despite this knowledge, Rosalie is villainized

throughout the series, always viewed as an antagonist to Bella, and someone who is shallow,

vain, and irritating. There is no room for empathy or understanding for Rosalie throughout the

series, as Bella never considers Rosalie's actions and feelings towards her, even with the

newfound knowledge of her past. Bella merely ponders, "I wondered if this was why she had so

much more bitterness in her than the rest of [the Cullens] – because she'd been within reach of

everything she'd wanted when her life was cut short" (Meyer, *Eclipse* 158). This is the only

moment where Bella has a semblance of an understanding of Rosalie's acrimonious attitude.

After Rosalie allows herself to become vulnerable around Bella by sharing her past, all Bella

replies with is, "It's nice to understand… to know you better" (Meyer, *Eclipse*168). There is no

true reflection upon the horrors Rosalie faced, and that she is clearly still affected by. There is no

moment where the two bond over shared trauma from the men who attacked them. There is no

open empathy for her, or comments of support, and the subject is dismissed afterward and never discussed again throughout the series.

Rosalie's life story presents the topic of gender-based violence within a Young Adult teenage romance novel. It challenges and shatters the extraordinarily perfect image of Rosalie Hale and portrays her in a humanistic light. For a brief moment, readers get to know the darker aspects of this seemingly perfect "mean girl" and learn of the abuse she has endured. Rosalie gets her moment to share her narrative, yet there is no support from Bella upon discovering this, no reflection, or ponderings as to why Rosalie is the way she is. This leaves readers with the notion that even when the "mean girl" gets a voice and a chance to share her story, it is still not enough to garner anything other than some sympathy or see that character as more than she appears. Bella has no drastic change of heart towards Rosalie; thus, one cannot fault readers for feeling the same way.

Katniss Everdeen, *The Hunger Games*

Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games* has cemented itself amongst the ranks of classic "must read" Young Adult novels. Within two years of its publication in 2008, 80 thousand copies were sold, and the rights to the novel had been sold in 38 territories worldwide. With successful sequels, and a multimillion-dollar movie franchise, the face of the series, Katniss Everdeen, had become a phenomenon of her own. Katniss was seen as a revival of female empowerment within the YA genre, as she was one of the first young women to be at the forefront of an action/dystopic setting (Autar). Katniss was at the peak of popularity and inspiration that her name become popular among new parents who opted to name their children after her (Child).

Katniss has been revered as a character that every teenage girl should admire and look up to. She is astonishingly brave, selfless, strong, sharp, and resilient. Born into the dystopian society of Panem, Katniss is forced to become a survivor as she lives under an oppressive, totalitarian regime that impoverishes its people. Upon the death of her father, Katniss learns to rely on herself alone to care for her mother and sister in District 12, as it is one of the poorest Districts. She becomes the symbol of rebellion after committing an act of defiance against President Snow whilst in the Hunger Games, thus becoming a beacon of hope and resistance. In numerous ways, Katniss Everdeen appears to be the antithesis of Bella Swan and is significantly more favoured. However, when further examining Katniss's character, it becomes clear that she also represents a teenage heroine, like Bella, that is predominantly flawless and unrelatable.

When readers are first introduced to Katniss, she is already well established in her life of relative isolation. Her primary focus rests on hunting illegally in the woods as she is the sole provider of the family. Katniss's character is shaped and hardened by her intense grief for her father, and the state of squalor she lives in. She is trapped within a District run by a corrupt government that asserts its power by sacrificing the lives of 23 children each year in the Hunger Games. She is untrustful, blunt, and has a practical, rather bleak perception of the world. These aspects would normally position Katniss as an "unlikeable" or unconventional character; however, she is far from it. Despite these traits, she is one of the most beloved heroines in the Young Adult literature pantheon (Deliee).

Readers instantly feel and root for Katniss, as her first courageous act occurs at the start of the novel, when she volunteers to take her younger sister's place in the 74th annual Hunger Games – a competition which places 24 children from each district of Panem into an arena to

fight to the death until one emerges victorious. When her little sister Prim's name is randomly selected to be the female Tribute for District 12, Katniss thinks:

> One time, when I was in a bind in a tree, waiting motionless for game to wander by, I dozed off and fell ten feet to the ground, landing on my back. It was as if the impact had knocked every whisp of air from my lungs, and I lay there struggling to inhale, to exhale, to do anything.
>
> That's how I feel now, trying to remember how to breathe, unable to speak, totally stunned as the name bounces around the inside of my skull…With one sweep of my arm, I push her behind me.
>
> "I volunteer!" I gasp. "I volunteer as tribute." (Collins, *Hunger Games* 21-22)

From this tremendous act, readers are introduced to Katniss's essence of character: She is entirely selfless and brave, regardless of the consequences.

Katniss knows that volunteering means an almost guarantee of dying, as she states, "But in District 12, where the word *tribute* is pretty much synonymous with the word *corpse*, volunteers are all but extinct" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 22). There is a profound respect Katniss has earned from characters within the series, and readers alike. For example, upon volunteering, the entirety of District 12 remains in awe of her courage and choose to demonstrate their respect. Katniss witnesses:

> To the everlasting credit of the people of District 12, not one person claps…So instead of acknowledging applause, I stand there unmoving while they take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone. All of this is wrong.

Then something unexpected happens. I don't expect it because I don't think of District 12

as a place that cares about me. But a shift has occurred since I stepped up to take Prim's

place, and now it seems I have become someone precious. At first one, then another, then

almost every member of the crowd touches the three middle fingers of their left hand to

their lips and holds it out to me. It is an old and rarely used gesture of our district,

occasionally seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means good-bye to

someone you love. (Collins, *Hunger Games* 24)

Before even entering the competition, Katniss has already sparked a small but effective act of

rebellion. Just from the start of her story, she appears to be remarkable, extraordinary, and will

create an impact both within her series and in the YA world.

When delving into Katniss's character, at first glance she appears to be the antithesis of

Bella Swan. While Bella is clumsy, feeble (until turned), and amenable, Katniss is anything but.

Katniss is introverted, taciturn, resourceful, and independent. Due to her astonishing journey and

unfaltering determination throughout the series, readers surely wish to find themselves

identifying with this protagonist. However, it should be stressed that readers might actually only

aspire to *be* like Katniss, but not necessarily relate to her. Most importantly, Katniss and Bella

ultimately do share many traits, making them more similar than typically presumed.

In numerous ways, Katniss resembles and embodies a flawless character – one that young

girls admire and attempt to emulate. Katniss also happens to fit into the general description of a

Mary Sue, though more covertly than Bella. For one, from the start of the series, Katniss is

already exceptionally skilled in hunting, and her survival instincts come naturally to her. While

Katniss certainly struggles throughout the series, particularly within the Games, her

extraordinary abilities and tenacity for sheer luck set her apart from the other characters.

Amanda Firestone analyzes and compares Katniss to Bella and observes how Katniss exhibits traits of a Mary Sue just as much. To support this, Firestone writes:

> Katniss, no matter the circumstances, seems to have acquired the necessary skills to be successful. Her father teaches her to hunt, and when he dies unexpectedly, she has the knowledge that ensures her family's survival. When she discovers that Peeta's been infected with tracker jacker venom, she's learned the trick to draw the poison from his system. Repeatedly, Katniss finds a way to manage any given situation because she's learned a particular skill or lesson. She has all of the necessary tools that allow her to continue on her journey… Her skill set, familiarity with the land, and cool emotional state makes Katniss the ideal competitor and winner in the Hunger Games. This certainly compiles with standard definition of Mary Sue characters, making her an excellent candidate for the title. (225)

Firestone emphasizes how Katniss's struggles are minimal due to her affinity with the esential skills required to survive in each Game. The first Game is set in a forest, where Katniss thrives in, as she is an excellent hunter and spent most of her days in the woods outside her District. In *Catching Fire*, Katniss is meant to be tested and bested in the Games, thus the Tributes are placed on a deadly, tropical island. However, despite being dropped on a platform surrounded by water, Katniss is, naturally, an excellent swimmer –a rarity for residents of District 12, as attested by a struggling Peeta, who almost drowns. Collins eliminates real challenges and threats of imminent danger for the protagonist, thus the opportunity to grow and learn as a character diminishes. Katniss truly eludes each obstacle that comes her way, and while she does struggle to survive, she is consistently praised and viewed in awe due to her exceptional survival skills and instincts.

Despite her rebellious acts, Katniss is the ever-reluctant heroine throughout the series. Her objective in life is simply to survive and wants no part of the revolution to overthrow the tyrannical government. However, similarly to Bella, Katniss is driven by emotion, and unwavering love and devotion for the people in her life – particularly, the young and vulnerable, being sister Prim and another Tribute, Rue. It is Katniss's actions driven by passion that implicate her in the revolution, even more so after she volunteers in place of her sister. It is Katniss who chooses to refrain from killing other Tributes in the games unless absolutely necessary. It is Katniss who allies with and guides Rue, a young Tribute from District 11, and defies the Gamemakers by laying flowers around Rue's corpse. This is a monumental moment as it sends the message not just to President Snow, but to citizens across Panem, that the Tributes in these Games are merely children whose lives are dispensable, used as pawns for their government's political agenda. From the goodness of her heart, and her rage at the fact that her innocent, young friend has been murdered, Katniss rebels by honouring Rue's death, and reminds the world of their humanity, asking for them to be enraged with her. This act inspires another unexpected response from the residents of District 11, who band together and send Katniss a loaf of bread in thanks for her deed of respect and care for their Tribute. In awe, Katniss ponders:

> What must it have cost the people of District 11 who can't even feed themselves? How many would've had to do without to scrape up a coin to put in the collection for this one loaf? It had been meant for Rue, surely. But instead of pulling the gift when she died, they'd authorized…to give it to me. But as a thank-you? Or because, like me, they don't like to let debts go unpaid? For whatever reason, this is a first. A district gift to a tribute who's not your own. (Collins, *Hunger Games* 238-239)

This moment holds significance since it is the first time Districts have unified and expressed their solidarity against their government, all due to Katniss. It is Katniss's instinctual actions driven by empathy and kindness that make her remarkable and turn her into a heroine.

Katniss's rebellious streak continues when she is faced between killing Peeta, or letting him kill her, for one of them to become the victor of the Games. Instead, Katniss suggests, and almost succeeds, in a double suicide with Peeta, as to defy their government, and prove they are not mere pawns in this deadly game. This final act is what puts the revolution in motion, and Katniss is thrust into becoming the spokesperson and symbol of hope for all oppressed people of Panem to admire.

Although Katniss appears to tap into traits that would classify her as "unlikeable", she is never seen as such. Her bluntness, affinity for isolation, and impertinence are all seen as strengths, and set her apart from other YA heroines. Readers are consistently told that Katniss is unlikeable due to her cynical attitude, yet never encounters characters that do not adore her, unless they are villains such as President Snow. This is supported when Katniss is in disbelief that anyone would like her since she is "sullen and hostile" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 121). Her stylist, Cinna, immediately assures her, "The prep team adores you. You even won over the Gamemakers. And as for the citizens of the Capital, well, they can't stop talking about you. No one can help but admire your spirit" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 121). Therefore, as much as Collins tends to make Katniss seem different, she remains "cold, calculating and still likeable" (Whalen Turner), which most characters within the series, and readers, never struggle to love.

Katniss's rejection of conventional femininity also contributes to her overall likeability since she prioritizes familial obligations over vanity. Katniss has never cared or tended to her physical appearance, as her priorities remain focused on caring for her family. In taking upon the

role of her father in the household, her interests in things like clothing and her looks are non-existent. For instance, when told by her younger sister Prim that she looks beautiful, Katniss immediately responds "And nothing like myself" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 15). This leaves readers with the idea that caring for your looks should not be concerning, and all compliments should be dismissed. As a Tribute, Katniss is remade and refined into someone "as radiant as the sun" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 121); someone to be ogled and desired in order to gain the affections of audiences and sponsors. Like Bella, Katniss is unaware of her natural beauty and status of desirability. Firestone notes the similarities between the two heroines as well, stating, "[Bella] is not only beautiful, but modest, almost ferociously modest; insistently, blindly so… Katniss Everdeen seems to underestimate her attractiveness" (194). This incessant apathy towards tapping into anything remotely feminine raises an important question pertaining to young female readers. Wilcox begs:

> But again and again, Katniss rejects the idea of her own beauty, just as Bella does. Is it a danger for young women to see herself as beautiful? Would friends reject her? Would readers reject her? (194-195)

This persistent rejection of conventional femininity poses ideas to readers, particularly girls, that in order to be liked and desired, to be the protagonist, they too must deny themselves of any interest that is associated with femininity. Katniss takes this further since she feels "largely ambivalent" (Wilcox 3171) about choosing between the affections of Gale and Peeta. Despite this, Katniss does explore her feelings with each boy, feeling a possessiveness over each of them, and a right to claim. With Gale, she thinks, "Gale is mine" (Collins, *Catching Fire* 117). She is also fiercely protective of Peeta from the Games onward, and her goals remain fixed on keeping him safe more so than herself throughout the series. This perspective towards the men in

her life resembles a stereotypical male's position in a relationship, such as how Edward treats Bella. This displays how Katniss, even when engaged in romantic endeavours, poses as the "man" in the relationship: rather apathetic, yet possessive. This again perpetuates the message that to be desired, one must abandon and reject anything remotely considered feminine.

Katniss's predicament forces her to rely on her looks to gain sponsors' and audiences' attention, while overall upholding stereotypical masculine traits contribute to the complexity of her character. To Katniss, exhibiting feminine traits, such as crying or dressing up, is absurd. When Peeta professes his love for her, Katniss is infuriated as it makes her look weak (Collins, *Hunger Games* 135). Ironically, her artificial, star-crossed love with Peeta, is what helps save her in the Games. This internal conflict within Katniss and defining her identity demonstrates how:

> Katniss is carrying the burden of multiple symbolic identities. She's an athlete, a media celebrity, and a warrior as well as a sister, a daughter, a loyal friend and (potential) girlfriend. In genre terms she is a western hero, an action hero, a romantic heroine and a tween idol…[She is] also the synthesis of Harry Potter and Bella Swan – the Boy Who Lived and the Girl Who Must Choose…Katniss is such a sensational character that she fires up your imagination…That she embodies these different roles at the same time makes her feel new, particularly because in contemporary American cinema, female characters are (still!) often reducible to type (mother, girlfriend, victim). That's worth looking at, as are the ways she differs from other heroines… (Dargis and Scott)

While Katniss has paved the way for a newer type of teenage heroine - one that is headstrong, brave, and takes on "male" characteristics, her relatability lacks throughout. By being both the "Chosen One" and the "Girl Who Must Choose", Katniss is elevated as a character that is loved, admired, and respected, while her relatability is dually weakened, since

most teenagers are not "chosen" or forced to pick between the affections of two individuals. Teenagers may not necessarily fathom mustering such tremendous courage as Katniss or have such a strong sense of self-sufficiency. Regardless of the dystopic setting, Katniss has it all: beauty, brains, independence, survival skills, and likeability. It is difficult to picture young teenagers placing themselves in the mind of Katniss and relating to her. Ultimately, Katniss is revered for her exceptionality, for being the catalyst of a newer age of remarkably strong YA protagonists, because "She isn't passive, she's strong and she's the girl who motivates the story" (Dargis and Scott).

Katniss and Bella are both unaware of their beauty, which naturally contributes to their appeal. Like Bella, Katniss is entirely blind to the effect she has on men, as besides her main two love interests, she hears that "…a lot of boys like her" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 130). Both girls must choose between the affections of two boys and are seemingly flawless characters who possess the traits of a Mary Sue. Despite this, Katniss has garnered immense attention and earned her place as one of the most beloved female Young Adult protagonists. Arguably, Katniss stands out more since she is "the girl-next-door who could also shoot you in the face with a bow and arrow and not miss" (Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters"). She is never deemed or seen as unlikeable, but as someone to aspire to be. Her ordinariness, lack of supernatural powers, prowess in archery, and unwavering devotion to her family make her remarkable, noteworthy, and "The Heroine the World Needs Right Now" (Watercutter). *New York Times* bestselling author Sabaa Tahir writes about the impact Katniss had on her as both a reader and author. She comments:

> That is a hard truth, and it made me wonder: If Katniss knew what she would endure, would she still have fought? To me, the answer is an unequivocal yes. Her courage is

sewn into her very bones. When the violence of the world knocks at her door,

she *must* fight. Because of that, her character, one who will forever burn bright in the

pantheon of beloved children's book heroes, also serves as a timely reminder to all who

care to heed it: Teenage girls are powerful and courageous and capable of great rage.

And they should never, ever be underestimated. (Tahir)

Describing Katniss as one of the most prominent YA heroines, and praising her for her

resilience, bravery, and tenacity further emphasizes that she is not inherently relatable to teenage

girls, but rather someone girls only dream of being like. After all, Tahir entitles her article as

"Katniss Everdeen is My Hero", which supports how Katniss's image and status are of

superiority, since heroes are traditionally considered as beings we look up to, not relate with.

Katniss exhibits incredibly admirable qualities and attributes, and her journey throughout

the series is both remarkable and tragic. Katniss becomes the symbol of hope and rebellion

against Panem's corrupt government, survives two Hunger Games and a full-scale civil war. She

endures incredible losses – most notably and impactfully being her little sister –, suffers from

severe physical injuries to the extent where her body is burned and then polished into someone

fresh and new. Despite all she endures, and the momentous impact she has made, Katniss herself

has minimal growth as a character. Her detached demeanour remains, and her perception of life

is still damaged and relatively bleak. Her mental state has deteriorated, and she suffers from

post-traumatic stress for the rest of her life. At the end of the series "…all Katniss does is

survive; which is a sad triumph as it is the only choice that she succeeded in and had control

over, but it is also the only thing she does. She does not grow as a character, and in fact, weakens

over the course of the trilogy" (Marquez). Katniss is a girl marked and plagued by war, and the

post-traumatic stress she suffers from is both realistic and heartbreaking, making her more of a

character readers can sympathize with more than connect to. Though Katniss is incredibly mature for her age – and forced to be due to the dystopian reality she lives in – Katniss's essence of character remains unchanged.

Katniss's stagnant personal growth is ultimately problematic, as Young Adult novels are unique due to their target demographic, who read these books to connect to the protagonist, share with them their pain and struggles, and perhaps see themselves within the hero or heroine. YA literature is incredibly impactful to teenagers, as it "functions to help young readers 'survive' that tumultuous period" (Ramsdell qtd. in Firestone 3132). Thus, if Katniss does not grow or transform beyond a physical sense, neither do readers as they go along this journey with her. Where Katniss is living through a shift both in age and environment, she stays true to who she is: strong, resilient, independent, and brave. Katniss is evidently a character that has been flawless from the start, thus there was no need to show rapid growth or change in her throughout the trilogy. Therefore, while Katniss Everdeen has certainly earned her way into being honoured as one of YA's most iconic heroines, she is ultimately placed on a bar too high for young girls to reach.

Chapter 5: Courtney Summers' "Unlikeable" Protagonists

Parker Fadley, *Cracked Up to Be*

Canadian author Courtney Summers' debut novel, *Cracked Up to Be*, was published in 2008 by Wednesday Books. The novel depicts the life of "Perfect Parker Fadley" ("Courtney Summers: The Books"), a popular girl whose life completely changes after a party she attends. The synopsis describes how:

> A terrible thing has happened and only Parker knows it's her fault. If being a perfect
>
> daughter, student, friend, and girlfriend couldn't keep her from making an unforgivable

mistake, Parker hopes becoming a perfect mess will at least keep her loved ones from

discovering the truth…Parker will do anything to keep her secret from surfacing… but

this time the cost might be more than she can afford. ("Courtney Summers: The Books")

Parker is the first of Summers' rather controversial type of protagonists. Parker was introduced

to the YA genre at a time when dystopian and fantasy novels were rampant with popularity,

meaning that readers were accustomed to seeing the formulaic "strong" and "brave" heroines

such as Katniss Everdeen, Rose Hathaway (*Vampire Academy*), Clary Fray (*The Mortal

Instruments*), and more. While these characters face tyrannical governments, supernatural beings,

and forbidden romance, Parker Fadley deals with the politics of high school, the pressures of

enforced gendered expectations, and the implications and effects of rape culture. While the YA

contemporary genre predominantly focused on themes revolving around summer romance and

high school drama in 2008, such as in popular novels from Sarah Dessen and Meg Cabot,

Summers pushed forward a narrative that centred a formerly typical YA heroine and revealed

someone far more broken, thus challenging and subverting the image and representation of the

idealized, "perfect" YA protagonist.

Journalist and author Hayley Krischer explores the character of Parker in her article

"Where Are All the Unlikeable Characters in Young Adult Fiction?" She documents the arduous

process and reception Summers received with her portrayal of Parker, stating, "Her manuscripts

had been rejected multiple times. The rejections felt deeply personal and the feedback, Summers

said, was consistent: Editors complained that her female characters weren't likeable" (Krischer,

"Where Are Unlikeable Characters"). Readers were used to reading about "a lot of great female

characters floating in the young adult sphere, with Katniss Everdeen…standing out most...She,

and the rest of her peers in YA, were very likeable" (Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable

Characters"). Therefore, Parker Fadley was written out of spite (Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters").

Summers was adamant about writing about a character "who was hardened. Someone already jaded and poisoned. Someone who wouldn't cut you with a weapon, but with her words" (Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters"). Prior to the party, Parker embodied a conventional YA heroine that readers typically adore. She was "teen royalty: cheerleading team captain, academic all-star, pretty, perfect" (Skelton). Parker is marked and changed by a traumatic encounter at a party, and "Since that night, teetotaling Parker suddenly quit the cheerleading squad, broke up with [her boyfriend], started drinking heavily and attempted suicide" ("Kirkus Review: *Cracked Up to Be*). The sudden and drastic shift in Parker's character, which is the state readers are first introduced to, suggests Summer's own method of defiance against the cliched methods in which teenage girls are described. Summers is displaying a female protagonist finally unmasked, the façade vanished, and is begging readers to see the different aspects of girls often repressed, and to still embrace her for all that she is.

Courtney Summers reflects upon her journey with Parker on the 10th anniversary of *Cracked Up to Be*. She writes:

> *Cracked Up to Be* hit shelves December 23, 2008. It was a quiet release; a contemporary story at the height of the paranormal – then dystopian – craze. Back then, the YA section of my local chain was no more than two shelves... I was officially an author and I already had another story I wanted to tell the world, and another after that. But *that* seemed entirely dependent on whether or not the world would buy, and hopefully love, my very first book. This was somewhat complicated by the fact its protagonist, Parker Fadley, was determined to make sure everyone hated her…

Some books are a labour of love; *Cracked Up to Be* was a labor of spite. It was my fourth

written novel, arriving after three other manuscripts were rejected by literary agents who

felt my female main characters were too 'unlikeable' to sell. I never saw them that way.

Complex? Of course. Difficult? Absolutely. The girls I wrote did not always react

likeably or do likeable things, but who does? Doesn't that just mean we're human? The

girls I wrote about – and still write about- were often coping with trauma. If they didn't

have permission to navigate that space honestly and imperfectly, and yes, even,

unlikably, then who did?

Oh, right: my male characters. (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* x)

Here Summers is exposing the double standards and rigid expectations imposed upon girls in

reality that are adhered to in literary fiction. Even in fictional works, whether in fantastical,

dystopian, or contemporary settings, society's demands of women remain patriarchal and

absolute. With Parker, Summers is demanding attention to characters who do not easily fit the

mould of girls that readers are accustomed to seeing, while also embedding hard-hitting and

direct themes that are often unexplored in popular YA fiction.

Readers come to understand Parker's predicament and reasoning for her acrimonious

attitude through a series of flashbacks that recur throughout her narrative. Though Parker

attempts to suppress her trauma, the flashbacks crystalize towards the end of the novel, since

Parker can no longer ignore what has occurred, as she is surrounded by multiple triggers to her

trauma. It is revealed that "Parker witnessed the rape of her friend but was too drunk to do

anything about it. When [Jessie] goes missing and is later found dead, Parker is consumed with

guilt, and systematically goes about ruining her perfect life in attempt to make amends" ("Kirkus

Review: *Cracked Up to Be*"). This horrifying revelation brings clarity to Parker's cynical

attitude, her lack of trust in people, and her disregard for self-care. Summer's struggle to publish her debut predominantly due to Parker's unlikability raises the question of how society expects women to react to gender-based violence and abuse. By criticizing Parker's overall character, publishers indicate the notion that victims or witnesses of abuse are expected to harbour their feelings, remain unchanged and unaffected, and uphold characteristics associated with likeability all in order to maintain the status quo. Summers explores this very idea, commenting:

> I shouldn't have been surprised the impossible standards we hold real-life girls to also applied to their fictional counterparts, but I was. And I was angry about it, too. I spent most of my teenage years trying and failing to live up to certain ideals of girlhood at the expense of myself – "sugar and spice and everything nice" – and being able to express that pressure through my work was a lifeline. So when I was told that expression was a little too off-putting to be widely read, well… it sounded like a challenge to me…
> Parker Fadley is a girl who doesn't quite know how to live up to those ideals, either, and her solution is perfection. 'I get caught up in the outcomes,' she confesses at one point. 'I convince myself they're truths. No one will notice how wrong you are if everything wrong you do ends up right.' When she fails to be the perfect girl, she throws everything she's got into being the perfect mess and her spectacular unravelling is many things – least of all likeable. (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* x)

New York Times bestselling YA author, Kathleen Glasgow, was also inspired by Parker and Summer's other female protagonists. Her novels center around similar issues that Summers explores, such as gender-based violence, self-harm, and the difficulties of navigating life as a teenage girl. She also supports the notion that YA novels with "unlikeable" female protagonists need to be embraced by readers and criticizes the double standards that women face even in

fiction. She provides her perspective on the obstacles authors have in terms of writing about "unlovable girls" (Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters"):

> We want girls to conform to be safe and protected and nice because we don't want anything bad to happen to them. If they don't conform, then bad things are going to happen to them. And so we call these characters 'unlikable' because they don't fit in to what we want girls specifically to be. Which is nice and compliant even when they've been traumatized. (Glasgow qtd. in Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters")

Glasgow criticizes the general hesitation publishers and readers have when it comes to hearing from voices that behave unfavourably and also critiques a larger, prevalent issue which highlights how people simply do not want to read about the harrowing aspects of teenage life. To read about these issues is daunting, as this art reflects darker aspects of life, and focusing on issues represented, such as teenaged gender-based violence, may be a topic that many may wish to avoid.

Though many wish to deflect from the topic of violence amongst teenagers, its prevalence within this space cannot be ignored. Author and researcher, Heather R. Hlavka, analyzes how violence functions amongst the youth and finds it to be normalized due to the enforced expectations that exist in this heteronormative and patriarchal society (339). She emphasizes that "Objectification, sexual harassment, and abuse appear to be part of the fabric of young women's lives" (Orenstein qtd. in Hlavka 344). In her research, Hlavka finds that society often dictates and reinforces that:

> …men's heterosexual violence is viewed as customary as women's endurance of it…men have a special and overwhelming 'urge' or 'drive' to heterosexual intercourse. Women come to be justifiable objects of exploitation. These discourses shape embodied

experiences, normalizing the assumption that men's sexual aggression is simply 'boys being boys'. [Thus], women learn, often at a very early age, that their self is not their own and that maleness can at any point intrude into it. Thus they are expected to endure aggression by men because that is *part* of man. (339)

This solidifies how imperative it is to address and recognize the perils that teenage girls face, and voices like Parker, though fictional, can still convey these messages on a personal, yet grand scale. Additionally, Hlavka's study of interviewing 23 racially diverse female survivors of sexual assault, between the ages of 11-16, found that for each case, "The reported offenders were known to the girls, either as acquaintances or known intimately" (343). Furthermore, the girls disclosed that they had "few available safe spaces; girls were harassed and assaulted at parties, in school, on the playground, on buses, and in cars" (344). Parker's case mirrors these claims and exemplifies how unsafe young girls feel, and ultimately are, throughout their days. In Parker, Summers makes readers face these reflections of life and asks readers to listen to the struggles of young girls that often go ignored, and also shares to girls who identify with Parker's struggles that they are not alone.

The concept of concealing and suppressing one's emotions is not new to YA novels that center on female characters who have faced gender-based violence. In "No Accident, No Mistake", Roxanne Harde examines "several [YA] novels about acquaintance rape" and its lasting implications. She argues that Laurie Halse Anderson's popular novel, *Speak*:

…laid the thematic foundations on which these texts build. Melinda, Anderson's protagonist, can barely bring herself to tell the reader about her rape; silent to the point of muteness, she hides in her closet screaming herself hoarse and chews her lips into a bloody mess…Anderson thus outlines issues concerning when, how, and whom to tell

about the rape; the ways in which the survivors react to the rape, including self-harm; the

ways in which the survivor is both shamed and blamed; and ways to understand the

rapist. (Harde 171-172)

In *Speak*, Melinda's central conflict is, as presumed from the title, confiding in someone about

being raped. The novel concludes on an optimistic note, with Melinda feeling more comfortable

sharing her traumatic experience. Melinda is mostly silent and demure and suffers in silence in

her own privacy. Parker, on the other hand, spirals by overindulging in illegal substances –

choosing to numb the pain rather than face it. Her state of shock, and overwhelming guilt over

not reporting or intervening to save her friend, results in her reaching her lowest point, as she

attempts to take her life. After this, Parker places her efforts on distancing herself from those she

loves, becoming rancorous, cynical, and insolent. She also continuously hurts the people in her

life. This stark contrast in the behavioural response to gender-based violence attests to Parker's

"unlikability". Anderson was praised for her work, and her depiction of Melinda was met with

awe and empathy. Summers had to fight for Parker's voice to be heard in the YA sphere and was

met with apprehension and numerous rejections. This response to both authors' approaches

exposes the misogynistic view of women when they branch out of the confines of conventional

femininity and likeability, even when it is a response to sexual abuse and trauma.

Parker's narrative begins after her close encounter with death; thus, she is monitored

closely by parents, teachers, and classmates each day. Parker, at this point, is seemingly apathetic

about any positive prospect in her life, and she removes herself from her former "perfect" life.

This signifies how Parker's discernment of her seemingly perfect life is now shattered and

warped, and her affinity for self-sabotage is her method of punishment over her irredeemable sin.

Parker reflects on her current state at the beginning of the novel, thinking:

Back then, I drank to be caught. It was the start of my great campaign to distance myself

from everyone. I even had a checklist and everything. First item: indulge in alienating,

self-destructive behaviour". (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 31).

Parker is far removed from her former self. She is overwhelmed with grief and guilt that her

thoughts of suicide, her penchant for penance, and rejection of companionship or support,

suggest "a greater vulnerability…*Love me in spite of me*, Parker is constantly unconsciously

begging the people in her life" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* xi).

Parker's feelings of the onus for Jessica's assault – and at this point in the novel, possible

murder as Jessica has hence been missing – implies a deep sense of responsibility that women

feel towards one another. This is a subject Summers explores throughout almost all her novels,

especially in *Sadie*. This concept is introduced and supported by renowned psychologist Carol

Gilligan's adaptation of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Through extensive

study, Gilligan found that "The question of responsibility followed a dilemma posed by a

woman's conflict between her commitments to work and family relationships" (Gilligan 35).

Meaning, that "the conception of morality reflects the understanding of social relationships"

(Gilligan 38), as "women placed a stronger emphasis on caring in moral decision making…

[since] a woman's morality is influenced by relationships and how women form their moral and

ethical foundation based on how their decisions will affect others" ("Carol Gilligan"). Parker

certainly supports Gilligan's theory, as she looks to herself to blame far more than the perpetrator

for the rape and, eventually discovered, murder of her friend.

In an attempt to rectify the situation and her misdoings, Parker routinely visits the woods

behind where the infamous party took place, as it was where she saw Jessica last. Parker is

incessant in finding proof that her friend was indeed there and states:

There's nothing here. I know that.

I *know* that.

But there was something here.

I rub my wrist and left my fingers drift over the bracelet. This was here. Delicate, thin and gold. It should have been impossible for me to find, but I found it. Weeks and weeks after the fact. I did a terrible thing and I get to wear it on my wrist. And I guess I sort of hope there will be more of these kind of things here, waiting for me to find them even though I know, logically, there won't be. Still, I have to come out and look because the feeling that there *might* be won't go away until I do.

And then it goes away.

Until it comes again. (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 53)

This routine to find any sort of proof of her friend in these woods indicates Parker's immense guilt over the harm inflicted on Jessica, and her lack of action. By constantly returning to the scene, Parker is engaging in a harmful coping mechanism of sorts, as she is tormenting herself by reliving that horrific night and attempts to compensate for her lack of action by returning and proving that she is now present to save her friend. The bracelet serves as a constant reminder of her guilt and indicates Parker's understanding that she is predominantly to blame and must forever suffer the consequences. This moment also demonstrates Gilligan's observations of how deep a woman's sense of responsibility is over one another, as she claims a woman's world is "a world of relationships and psychological truths where an awareness of the connection between people give rise to a recognition of responsibility for one another, a perception of the need for response" (Gilligan 29-30), and Parker's guilt and shame prove the lasting effects of the failure to protect her friend.

Parker's guilt instigates her self-destructive behaviour as a means of penance. She chooses to abandon the former aspects of her "perfect" life and creates contentious barriers between her inner circle. She arrives drunk at school, stole money from her boyfriend, quits being cheerleading captain, "And that's not even the worst thing I've done" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 66). Parker's newfound understanding of her former life brings clarity to the façade she was upholding. She reflects, "I didn't want to be popular because it was easier; I wanted to be popular because in high school that's the best thing you can be: perfect. Everything else is shit" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 72). Cliques and popularity are staples in YA novels and films, and Parker's sentiment demonstrates the pressures of cementing a place – and maintaining your status –within a social hierarchy. There is an understanding of protection and pride once accepted and regarded as perfect and popular, but Parker's narrative dismantles this perception. Social status proved irrelevant when Jessie was assaulted and murdered, and Parker realizes the life she led was meaningless and dishonest. In a conversation with her ex-boyfriend, Chris, she states:

> I'm a different person now… I am so, *so* far away from all that…It's all totally behind me… I didn't want anyone else's mistakes jeopardizing my track record. And god forbid *I* made a mistake. Because if it ever turned out wrong, what would they say about me? … what would happen?... I'm not Perfect Parker Fadley anymore. I never was. (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 131-132)

Parker's enlightened outlook on the life she used to uphold supports Valery Walkerdine's claim that women are conditioned into becoming versions of themselves they might not believe they truly are in order to be accepted in a patriarchal society (267). She notes the façade women put on, arguing, "As girls at school, as women at work, we are used to performing" (Walkerdine

267), noting that these harmful expectations of women follow them into adulthood, governing their lives. She highlights the danger in proceeding with this façade, such as Parker does, stating:

> …life is a performance in which we do nothing but act out a series of roles…or indeed that these roles can be peeled away like layers of an onion to reveal a repressed core, a true self, which has been inhibited, clouded by the layers of social conditioning which obscure it. (270)

This notion is also observed by Gilligan, who emphasizes the harm in maintaining images that are not our true selves, all to maintain the status quo in life, questioning, "…what happens to our nature as human beings when we come up against the way society tells us that we, as men and women, are supposed to be What happens to us and to the world when we… tell a false story?" (Gilligan qtd. in Prince-Gibson). Parker's old life reflects Gilligan's claim which states, "To maintain this patriarchy, girls [are told] that they should be 'real girls' – that they should stifle their ambitions, what they know about themselves and the world. And boys are taught to be 'real boys,' so they can be at the head of the patriarchy" (Gilligan, qtd. in Prince-Gibson). This reiterates a cycle which harms women for not being able to behave as they wish, and men as well for having to maintain an appearance they might not feel or believe to be true to themselves. Therefore, in her debut, Summers presents readers with a character they presume to already know - someone popular, perfect, beautiful, powerful, often mean – and offers them an alternative narrative that provides nuance, dismantles, and challenges these stereotypical perceptions of girls people believe they know before even giving them a chance to speak.

Parker's characterization makes readers see the "mean", popular girl as more than one-dimensional, but as someone with challenges, hardships, and traumas, proving it is ultimately unfair and nearsighted to categorize such characters as "mean" or villainous. In Parker, Summers

immediately makes readers uncomfortable with her narrative, as she is blunt in her approach to exploring the themes of gender-based violence in the lives of young girls. The novel even opens with:

> Imagine four years. Four years, two suicides, one death, one rape, two pregnancies (one abortion), three overdoses, countless drunken antics, pantsings, spilled food, theft, fights, broken limbs, turf wars – every day, a turf war – six months until graduation and no one gets a medal when they get out. But everything you do here counts. High school.
>
> (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 1)

Summers immediately lays the groundwork for what high school can be like for teenagers, as it is often viewed as a carefree, purgatory time between childhood and adulthood. Parker removes this façade and describes all the horrifying aspects of living through it and conveys the pressures and demands that she upheld in order to be accepted.

Since Parker believes she is mostly to blame for Jessie's attack, Parker justifies that she is simply not a good person and must remain secluded. She is harsh and insensitive in her treatment of others as a means to keep them away from her and is unafraid to express her frustrations in the crassest of ways. For example, Parker's first line of dialogue is to her ex-boyfriend, stating, "Fuck off, Chris" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 1), as a response to misogynistic comments he was making in class. She is relentlessly impertinent to her former cheer mates – particularly Becky, whom Parker detests in many ways for resembling her former self and upholds everything she used to be. She taunts and mocks Becky throughout the novel as a means to distance herself from the girl she used to be. One particularly fraught altercation occurs when Becky, as comeuppance for a kiss Parker shares with her boyfriend, informs the school's

guidance counsellor and principal that she is afraid of Parker since she is "volatile" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 85). Parker's response is emotional and visceral, and is described:

> I hate her. I hate her. I *hate* her…I'm going to *end* Becky Halprin…
>
> When I'm close enough and she's close enough, I reach out and shove her.
>
> Hard.
>
> … "I just realized it must really suck to be you," I say. "And it's all my fault… I was a better cheerleading captain; I was a better student; Jessie liked me better; Chris liked me better; hell, Chris *likes* me better. How must that feel? How does it feel to know that even at my worst, you're still not enough? … Becky, you're only standing there because I decided I didn't want to." (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 86)

Summers does not shy from having Parker channel her anger, and even turns vicious. This is a response expected, and often excused, from boys when provoked, but is seen as unseemly when girls exercise the same actions. This is shocking to witness at first, since Parker resembled someone extremely apathetic throughout the novel, and did not allow her former friends to stir her. This bares to question readers for their reasoning of astonishment. This instance may agitate readers, as it challenges them to recognize implicit biases regarding how girls should behave in any given situation. While this in no way justifies Parker's single act of violence, it offers nuance to a broken character. As a protagonist, Parker is rife with flaws, and her rise in anger only humanizes her more. Summers is unafraid to show not just the ugly aspects of the world, but of young girls as well. She puts this thought into action by demonstrating how women are multifaceted and exposes the firm expectations imposed on girls, even when provoked and mentally strained. She supports this by stating:

I just wanted to write a book where I could see those parts of myself reflected back at me.
Because I was so sure that other people had the same feelings. That they weren't always
happy. That they were angry. And I knew it was okay to be all these ugly emotions…So
instead of writing someone less rough-edged, I thought I could write the most brittle and
angry female protagonist that I can." (Summers qtd. in Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable
Characters)

Parker's newfound attitude results in her classmates ridiculing her regularly. She is
constantly referred to as a "bitch" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 164), "cold" (Summers, *Cracked
Up to Be* 34), and "fucked up" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 91). Her decision to come to school
inebriated, along her isolation, are all signs that Parker is in desperate need of help. Yet, her
friends hardly offer support despite knowing that Parker has been spiraling since Jessie's
disappearance, and the severity of her state only increases. Additionally, the school's
administration infantilizes and belittles Parker, making her feel unheard. The guidance
counsellor trivializes Parker's struggles and is evidently unequipped with helping her, as
exemplified when Parker muses on how she's often reprimanded with:

> *Why were you late, Parker? What did you think that would accomplish, Parker?* And
> then the tough question. *What destructive behaviours were you engaging in for the five
> minutes you weren't in class, Parker?* (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 8)

There is no sincere attempt at truly helping Parker, and she is seen as a troublesome nuisance by
all. Even the new student, Jake, who is infatuated with Parker, speaks to her directly by asking,
"Were you raped?... I've been trying to figure out why you're as fucked up as you claim you are.
Is that what it is?" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 91). Asking such a forward question about the
prospect of being raped trivializes the real issue of gender-based violence, and rape culture as a

whole is rather normalized, proving yet again that Parker has no support, which attests to her

newfound realization that "…there's no such thing as a decent human being. It's just an illusion"

(Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 49).

Parker's experience mirrors Anderson and Gonick's observations in "The Saint Mary's

Rape Chant: A Discourse Analysis of Media Coverage", as they argue how:

> Rape culture is entrenched in everyday media, actions, and news, in the jokes that
>
> trivialize rape, music that normalizes gendered violence, in the lenient treatment towards
>
> perpetrators, and in the prevalent belief that women and girls, as the saying goes, 'ask for
>
> it.' (55)

These authors note that even in university settings, where girls are subjected and rape is

common, the blame remains focused on girls, and diminishes the severity of the situation both

during these incidents and long after. When examining the responses by faculty and authorities

to the infamous event at Saint Mary's University in 2013, where student leaders chanted about

raping underage girls, the authors found:

> The media coverage of the rape chant responses demonstrates this. The potent mixture of
>
> discourses of stupidity, deviance, the dangers of youth groupthink, "boys will be boys"
>
> and girls should know better, reinforces fear of, and anxiety about, youth, and specifically
>
> so-called bad girl femininity. The conclusion is that young people, and particularly young
>
> women, need further regulation and need to be controlled. Thus, we suggest that the news
>
> coverage that may have intended to challenge the problematic behavior of the chanters,
>
> ultimately gives power to discourses that perpetuate and promote rape culture. (Anderson
>
> and Gonick 64)

Parker feels like she has no support, just as Anderson and Gonick observe in their study, demonstrating how this subject is still not taken seriously, as life remains governed by patriarchal and misogynistic approaches to such topics. Thus, women cannot be faulted for choosing not to report, and suffer in silence. Summer's ability in conveying this message through Parker spreads this message further to teenagers who may be suffering in silence and show them that they are not alone in their pain; and reminds adults and critics of the real issues and perils women face that must be properly addressed.

The concept of perfection that Parker previously struggled to uphold correlates to Gilligan's theory as well, as her "moral judgement comes to rely on shared norms and expectations. [She] validates her claim to social membership through the adoption of societal values… survival is now seen to depend on acceptance by others" (Gilligan 79). Maintaining a façade of perfection crumbles for Parker and is what leads to the disastrous events at the infamous party. Flashbacks throughout *Cracked Up to Be* reveal that Parker engaged in a heated argument with Jessie at the party. An intoxicated Parker is confronted by Jessie, who implores her to quit as cheerleading captain due to the intense pressure Parker places on herself and the squad. She also exposed Parker's alarmingly anal attitude in order to appear perfect in every way. Jessie argues:

> *…the sooner you make a mistake and learn to live with it or let them make a mistake and learn to live with it, the better. Until that actually happens, I really think you're going to give yourself a stroke. You're not responsible for everything, Parker. You can't control the way things end up. Stop trying.* (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 114-115).

To deflect from the subject, Parker discloses to Jessie of her boyfriend's infidelity. This action, done out of hurt, to spite her best friend, is what causes a chain reaction that leads to a fatal

disaster. Jessie tearfully leaves the party and treks into the woods. Parker, still incredibly

inebriated, goes to find Jessie since "*it's my mission to fix what I did, because it's wrong and I*

don't do things that are wrong…I'm supposed to be better than this and what if everyone finds

out I'm not" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 169-176). This demonstrates how Parker's incessant

need to appear perfect is what drives her sense of protection for Jessie, thus showing Gilligan's

theory in action, since Parker forgoes caring for herself and focuses solely on helping and

amending the situation with Jessie.

Parker's feeling of the onus for Jessie's wellbeing is explained further when the

flashbacks reveal what Parker witnessed. She recounts:

> *…she's crying and it's not sex; it's a rape. He forces her to her feet and drags her away*
> *and I'm alone and then Chris is taking me back inside. And the next night I'm sick and*
> *Mrs. Wellington calls and asks us if we've seen Jessie, if she's with us, and I don't say*
> *anything and when she becomes a missing person and the police start asking questions I*
> *tell them I don't know anything and everyone vouches for me because I was drunk and*
> *stupid and I when I find her bracelet in the woods two weeks later I think it's there for me*
> *because I killed her and I take it and I wear it so I never forget even though I'll never*
> *forget and I never say a word to anyone because if I hadn't said anything in the first*
> *place none of this would have –.* (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 202)

This revelation illustrates how deeply rooted Parker's guilt is. She is ashamed of the person she

was and believes it to be the main reason for the abuse and death of her friend, rather than the

perpetrator. This perspective towards her own implications into gender-based violence brings

forth a larger issue revolving around the victim – or in this case, the witness – taking blame over

the offender. Bestselling author of *Asking For It*, Louise O'Neill also explores this concept, and

comments on the incredible harm in blaming oneself for their own abuse. In her own research

speaking to sexual assault survivors, she discovered that:

> Some expressed their regret that they hadn't reported it to the police, others wished that
> they had never told anyone about it. Some were angry, some were paralysed with fear
> and grief, unable to maintain the semblance of a normal life. Some felt repulsed by the
> idea of having sex again, others spoke of voracious sexual appetites as if determined to
> prove that the rape would not affect them. The only similarity between all of the women
> that I spoke with was a sense of shame, a sense that they should have and could have
> done something to prevent this from happening to them. And it is that sense of shame that
> I tried to bring to life with Emma, that darkness that crawls beneath your skin and
> embeds itself in your bones, calling to you day after day. *Your fault. Your fault. Your*
> *fault*. (O'Neill)

This myriad of responses indicates an overlying issue that perpetuates rape culture and protects

the assailant far more than the victim. O'Neill prudently responds to this notion, stating:

> That is what our society has done to women. It has created a situation where we are held
> up to such a more rigorous standard of moral behaviour than men are, that it is we that
> are somehow to blame when our bodies have been violated without our consent. This is
> why women blame themselves…Women think that we should have known better, we
> should have protected ourselves, we should have screamed and shouted and flailed. We
> should have been good girls. We should have been better. (O'Neill)

The strains placed on women – both when they report and when they do not – is a

complex one, often misconstrued by outsiders as a simple decision in order to seek proper justice

against a victim's assailant. Professor Susan J. Brison writes about her own experience both

when she chose to report, and when she chose not to, in her article, "Why I Spoke About One Rape but Stayed Silent About Another." She writes:

> As more women come forward to accuse Bill Cosby of raping them, they are being asked: "Why did you stay silent so long?" And as more college students are speaking out about having been raped on campuses across the country, they are being asked: "Why didn't you report it right away? Why didn't you go to the police? … [This] betrays a lack of empathy with rape victims and ignorance of the numerous, and frequently insurmountable, obstacles that keep them from speaking out. (Brison)

Brison is highlighting that by immediately judging victims for their decision whether or not to report dehumanizes them and their traumatic encounter.

With this lack of support and accountability for the perpetrator, women feel trapped in a system that does little to truly help them seek justice and work through their emotions. This leads to women blaming themselves, as seen with Parker – and Sadie – as both girls do not immediately blame the perpetrator or the system, but rather foremost themselves for failing to protect their friend or sister. Brison expands on this, stating:

> After an acquaintance raped me when I was 20, I didn't blame him or think he was bad. I thought I was bad—so bad I didn't even deserve to live. This may have been an extreme reaction, but when someone treats you as worthless, as a usable, disposable thing, an "it," you can come to view yourself that way… No one wants to accept that we live in a world where *even though you did nothing wrong* you can be brutally violated, whether by a trusted friend or a total stranger. Blaming yourself is far easier than letting go of the belief that nothing terrible, undeserved, and utterly unavoidable will happen to you. For, if you *weren't* to blame, then it

could happen again and there's nothing you can do to prevent it. That's the

scariest thought of all.

This insight into the thought process of blaming oneself for their abuse is both heart-wrenching

and thought-provoking. Parker reflects this complexity, as not only is she broken from the assault

of her friend, but her entire understanding and view of her world are shattered and changed. This

newfound grasp of a brutal, violent world is even more frightening at such a young age, where

teenagers are still developing, as it is "a crucial time of self-definition" (Petitt 616).

Parker's narrative brings forth the topical subject of gender-based violence throughout

the entire novel. Parker's reaction to witnessing her friend's sexual assault demonstrates her

lingering post-traumatic stress which severely affects her. Her perception of her life and the

world has been completely warped, and her zest or even desire for life has diminished. Her

trauma and overwhelming guilt for not protecting Jessica are so deeply ingrained in her that she

thinks, "I'd give anything to be her right now" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 32). Thus, Parker's

wish to have been in place of Jessica during her assault and murder furthers Gilligan's theory as

well, since Gilligan claims that while men "prioritize an 'ethics of justice' where morality is

centred on abstract principles and rules that can be applied equally to everyone…women

prioritize an 'ethics of care,' where morality is centred on interpersonal relationships and moral

judgement is based on the context of an issue" (Vinney).

Parker takes responsibility for the abuse of her friend, and believes she is unworthy of

compassion and help, and thus isolates herself from her friends and parents. She also believes

that her complacency in Jessie's assault is because she is a toxic person to all. In a heartbreaking

moment where Parker's dog –gifted from her parents as a means to aid her mental health – gets

hit by a car, she ruminates:

I knew this would happen…Because that's what I do to people… I just fuck them up.

And it's always spectacular how I do it, too… I wouldn't have predicted it *before*. But

now I can…Before I thought I was above letting these kinds of things happen, but now I

know that's not the truth. Now it's just a matter of time before they do. (Summers,

Cracked Up to Be 179)

This harmful insight into herself and the effect she has on people she loves again alludes to a

larger issue regarding victim blaming, and the reluctance to place accountability on the actual

perpetrators of gender-based violence.

Throughout *Cracked Up to Be*, Parker exemplifies someone in the first Transition of

Gilligan's theory, which expounds:

… a new understanding of the connection between self and others which I articulated by

the concept of responsibility. The elaboration of this concept of responsibility and its

fusion with a maternal morality that seeks to ensure care for the dependent…At this

point, the good is equated with caring for others…the exclusion of herself gives rise to

problems in relationships, creating a disequilibrium. (74)

Parker's life becomes secondary in thought, as she wishes to have suffered instead of Jessica,

and disregards caring for herself as a punishment since to her, "I'm supposed to be paying for

this for the rest of my life" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 196). Parker eventually breaks down

when her fears are confirmed, and Jessica's body is found. Parker, consumed by grief and guilt,

overdoses on Jack Daniel's because "I don't know how to live with myself" (Summers, *Cracked

Up to Be* 209) and is rescued by her ex-boyfriend who pleads with her to get help. Parker, unable

to suppress her guilt any longer finally divulges what she knows: that Jessie was raped in the

woods, and her disappearance and murder are due to the unknown student who assaulted her. Parker thinks:

> I can't remember what was running through me when I saw her face pressed into the ground with that guy on top of her, I was so out of it, but I can't convince myself it wasn't bad. All I know I went to a party and I was the catalyst for every horrible thing that happened there and after and I don't know why I didn't say anything when I saw her and I don't know why I didn't say anything later and I don't know how to fix it and I'm afraid of what happens next, so I have to keep doing it this way until it's right again, but I don't know how to make it right again because I'm always wrong.
>
> I'm a bad person. (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 216)

This moment offers context into the responsibility women feel for one another, and the pressures that arise with the act of reporting. It is also another moment of sheer hopelessness and raw vulnerability from Parker, who is now broken down, and in desperate need of support.

Parker's journey paints the long-lasting effects of gender-based violence, and Summers does not offer readers the "happy ending" often seen and expected in YA novels. Bella concludes her story with her "happily ever after" with Edward and their child; Katniss too gets to live in peace with Peeta and their children. Parker's story ends rather abruptly, leaving readers to speculate what should happen to her. Parker, unable to keep herself together after the news of Jessica's body was found, breaks down and confesses all she knows to her school counsellor, principal, and parents. She is judged and condemned by many classmates who believe she is mostly to blame for not immediately reporting but is also sympathized by her former close friends.

This response to Parker mirrors one of the girls in Heather R. Hlavka's study titled "Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment." Rachel is among the 23 young, racially diverse female survivors of sexual assault that Hlavka interviewed. In Rachel's case, her friends did not hold the perpetrator, Trevor, "accountable for his actions, at least partly because he was characterized as incompetent when it came to communication and consent. Instead, Rachel carried the responsibility and suffered the consequences for failing to clearly and effectively establish boundaries" (Hlavka 351). Both fictional Parker and real-life Rachel's experiences reiterate an alarming issue that persists in holding women on a much higher pedestal than men when it comes to sexual violence and harassment, further reinforcing a biased, patriarchal view of violence against women as a whole. These cases, and countless others, attest to the standard and misogynistic reality which supports the notion that "guys get away with everything and they can do anything and not get in trouble" (Hlavka 351).

Cracked Up to Be concludes on a bittersweet note, since Parker will be going into recovery to heal and move forward from this traumatic experience. She contemplates:

> …I'm alone, like I've wanted forever, except it's not really true because mom's waiting for me outside and there's a shrink waiting for me in the city and there's nothing I can do about the past.
>
> "Recovery" is going to be boring and painful and painfully boring, I can already tell. Which is good, I guess.
>
> I hope it works. (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 224)

Summers takes a realistic approach to Parker's journey. She manages to leave readers with a semblance of hope with Parker entering recovery, and conveys that while Parker is not particularly enthusiastic, she is willing to go and finally take care of herself. With this

conclusion, Summers also emphasizes the pernicious impact of witnessing gender-based violence when Parker mulls, "Ask me if I think it's my fault, if I think this heaviness will ever go away" (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 223), implying her trauma and feeling of onus might heal but never fade.

Parker's character forged a newfound approach to a teenage heroine. One that has numerous faults, is cynical, uncouth, and insolent. *Cracked Up to Be* is the first of Summers' career "…built around 'mean' female characters…Summers…embraces her flawed characters, and isn't afraid to shy from their ugly emotional side. She dutifully gives her characters permission to be as messy as mean as they need to be – no apologies" (Krischer, "In Defense of Mean Girls"). She is also a character that is introduced as broken and traumatized, and grapples with it through isolation, intoxication, and attempted suicide. She never apologizes for her behaviour, even after her harboured trauma is revealed, which conveys how girls should not always feel the need to apologize for acting in ways which consider them "mean" or "unlikeable". Krischer emphasizes the issues within YA that reinforce stereotypical depictions of teenage girls, arguing:

> Female YA characters are expected to be good role models, heroines. They're allowed to be upset or insecure or enraged, but not too upset, insecure and enraged. They're expected to make so-so choices, but certainly not terrible choices. And if they do, they be apologetic for them. Unsure is okay. Being messy is not. They're supposed to have empathy and understanding for other… this is what society wants from girls too: they're expected to be cheerful, to look feminine, to be wholesome and not be bossy or express other domineering qualities. (Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters")

Parker's sense of agency and strength comes from the fact that she eventually musters the courage to speak up about the party, but also in the fact that she remains unapologetic about her attitude and actions. She does not give in to shame for her previous behaviour, and she does not vow to make amends with those she distanced herself from. Rather, her decision to speak and to go to therapy emphasizes her choice in finally putting herself first, rather than Jessica, and seek the help she desperately needs. This alone resembles ways in which YA expects male characters to act, while condemning the girls who exemplify these traits.

Krischer also notes this double standard that persists today, stating:

Boys in YA novels…tend to have free rein. You're supposed to like the guy with the chip on his shoulder. There's Dallas Winston in *The Outsiders*, who is described as "tougher than the rest of us – tougher, colder, meaner.' There's Holden Caulfield from *Catcher in the Rye*, who was kicked out of multiple schools, who's apathetic, depressed and disconnected. More recently, there's Nate Macauley in Karen McManus's uber bestseller *One of Us is Lying*, a handsome drug dealer who's been 'in trouble since the fifth grade.' Those are the boys everyone falls in love with. We expect our male characters, particularly teenage male characters, to be somewhat difficult. We like them *because* they're hard to like.

"When we apply these gender roles to girls, it tends to make them bossy or rude, but when we apply them to boys it makes them assertive, strong and brave," said Susen Shi, senior librarian for young adult services at the New York Public Library. "Sometimes we give boys a lot more leeway in terms of flaws than we do girls. I don't know if when people are talking about unlikeable characters, they're talking about unlikeable male

characters," she said. But she was pretty sure they weren't. (Susen Shi qtd. in Krischer

and Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters")

Summers allows Parker the flexibility to act out and defy the expectations girls subliminally feel

they must embody and uphold, implying how unfair it would be to expect girls to behave

demurely or subdued in situations such as Parker's. She defends this decision, arguing:

Parker went through hell, so when people ask, couldn't she have been a little nicer, it's

like: no, she couldn't. She doesn't care what you think of her and her priority shouldn't

be your opinion, she's just trying to survive. Girls who are trying to survive are at the

heart of my books. They're going through intense trauma, so why should their focus be

outward? There's a complete lack of grace that we extend to girls who are going through

difficult times, girls who can only focus on what's in front of them and not what's around

them because they're just trying to get through the next minute. (Summers qtd. in

Grochowski)

There is also a profound sense of vulnerability in Parker that is expressed whenever she is

attempting to suppress her emotions, which results in her suffering from numerous panic attacks.

These moments provoke sympathy with Parker, for, despite her cold and apathetic exterior, she

is aching and consumed with remorse. Summers thereby subverts everything readers believe they

know about characters like Parker, and offers someone nuanced, broken, grieving, and angry at

everything that has occurred, and is asking readers to see all of this, and still embrace her for it.

Everything about Parker starkly contrasts with the girl she used to be, being the

conventional popular girl, and/or likeable teenage girl. Her subversion of common YA

characteristics implores readers to see this person as more than she appears. In Parker's

revelations throughout *Cracked Up to Be*, Summers implores readers to see Parker for all she is

and understand she is worthy of a story, too. Parker also gives assurance to girls who may feel as she does – angry, overwhelmed, depressed, etc. – and finally see aspects of themselves within a YA protagonist. Summers comments:

> Throughout the years, the countless emails and messages I've received have helped me better understand *why* Parker's story means so much to them. I've realized that loving and forgiving Parker has become a way for them to love and forgive themselves… It's been more than ten years, and Parker Fadley is still the backbone of all my characters who have followed. Without her, there would be no Regina, no Eddie, no Sloane, no Romy and no Sadie – or the girl after that, or the girl after that… which is fitting, really. I don't think Parker would have had it any other way. (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* xii)

Parker is one of the first protagonists to steer a rougher and tougher narrative to a teenage girl, and her story does not shy from addressing such daunting topics. Summers' works continuously explore the pressures placed on young girls to act and react in particular ways that are acceptable to society and expose how girls are treated and viewed when they defy these expectations. Throughout her career, Summers pushes the boundaries of what teenage readers can expect from girls in her novels, and see how her messages, particularly about gender and violence, translate to reality. Bestselling author Tiffany D. Jackson is influenced by Summer's representation of teenage girls and remarks how, "Adults want us to write idealistic views of what teenagers are like. And teens are looking for the real scoop… we shouldn't have to present ourselves as perfect human beings for people to respect our stories" (Jackson qtd. in Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters"). Therefore, amidst the paranormal, dystopian, and fantasy craze that overwhelmed the YA genre, Parker Fadley fought her way to be heard, challenged the perception of the perfect, idealized protagonist, and bared herself to show readers an

understanding of all the aspects and traits of a teenage girl, and because of this, girls may begin to see that they do not have to be perfect to be worthy of a narrative.

Sadie Hunter, *Sadie*

Courtney Summer's *Sadie* is one of the latest, and arguably most popular, of her collection of novels. It is the first of hers to become a *New York Times* bestseller and is also the first to be told from two perspectives: teenage female protagonist, Sadie; and radio personality West McCray, a man who dedicates his time documenting his search for the now missing Sadie in his podcast entitled *The Girls*. Categorized as a Young Adult Thriller, Summers "explores what happens when a devastating crime reveals a deeply unsettling mystery. It's…about family, about sisters, and the untold lives lived in small-town America. It's about the lengths we go to protect the ones we love… and the high price we pay when we can't" (Summers, *Sadie* 1).

Summers unabashedly begins her novel on an extremely grim and indelicate note, as the first page concludes with "And it begins, as so many stories do, with a dead girl" (Summers, *Sadie* 1). Readers first hear from McCray, who describes the small town of Cold Creek, Colorado, "Population: eight-hundred" (Summers, *Sadie* 2), as a place most inhabitants feel trapped. Within this introduction, McCray states:

> The body of Mattie Southern was discovered between the burning schoolhouse and the
> apple orchard, just out of sight. She'd been reported missing three days earlier and here
> she was, found.
>
> Dead.
>
> I've decided the gruesome details of what was uncovered in that orchard will not be a
> part of this show. While the murder, the crime, might have captured your initial interest,
> its violence and brutality do not exist for your entertainment – so please don't ask us. The

details of this case are easy enough to find online. In my opinion, you only really need to

know two things.

The first is the cause of her death was blunt force trauma to the head.

The second is this: …She was only thirteen years old. (Summers, *Sadie* 6)

This choice of introduction demonstrates how Summers is continuously pushing the boundaries

of the content consisting in her YA novels. She makes readers uncomfortable with this approach,

rather than easing into the horrors revealed through flashbacks like in *Cracked Up to Be*. There is

an immediate shock at this tragic depiction of Sadie's sister's murder, and McCray's choice of

omitting the gruesome details is Summer's way of commenting on the fascination society has

with true crime. Summers remarks:

> *Sadie* was part inspired by the way society consumes violence against women and girls as
>
> a form of entertainment. When we do that, we reduce its victims to objects, which
>
> suggests a level of disposability – that a girl's pain is only valuable to us if we're being
>
> entertained by it. But it's not her responsibility to entertain us… I really wanted to
>
> explore that and the way we dismiss missing girls and what the cost of that ultimately is.
>
> (Summers qtd. in Harrison)

This is explored throughout Sadie's experience throughout the novel as well, as she is viewed

and treated as less than and disposable by many people she encounters on her journey to find

Mattie's killer.

West McCray's understanding, and interest, in this case becomes more passionate as

well, as he progresses from a person interested in the commodification of girls in true crime

cases, to someone who is passionate and genuinely invested in finding Sadie for her safety, more

so than profit. At the start of the novel, McCray admits:

Girls go missing all the time.

Restless teenage girls, reckless teenage girls. Teenage girls and their inevitable drama.

Sadie had survived a terrible loss, and with very little effort on my part, I dismissed it.

Her. I wanted a story that felt fresh, new and exciting and what about a missing teenage

girl was that?

We've heard this story before. (Summers, *Sadie* 15)

Summers is directly critiquing the enormous captivation society has with true crime, which

results in the desensitization to the real, tragic issue at hand concerning girls who face imminent

danger. This creates a serious issue, as the severity of these cases depletes, and becomes so

normalized that the victims themselves do not appear concerning or even real to outsiders who

are simply consuming their tragedy for entertainment purposes.

Despite her speech impairment that results in excessive stuttering, Sadie is ironically the

most outspoken of Summers' protagonists thus far. Additionally, Sadie properly embodies Carol

Gilligan's theory of moral development, more so than any of Summers' protagonists, aside from

Lo from her recent novel, *The Project* (2021). In that novel, Lo is determined to save her sister

Bea from the clutches of a cult, no matter the risks or cost. Summers evidently fixates on the

strong bonds within female relationships – whether through sisterhood or friendships – as it is

often what impacts and drives her protagonists throughout their journeys. When it comes to her

younger sister, Sadie is fearless, and literally stops at nothing to avenge Mattie's murder. As a

result, Sadie's well-being is devalued, as her focus remains on caring for Mattie, stressing

Gilligan's theory. It is repeatedly highlighted throughout the novel by Sadie herself, and all who

knew her, that Sadie's love and devotion for Mattie was boundless. May Beth, the pseudo-

grandmother and caretaker after their mother, Claire, abandons the girls in their youth,

comments, "The way Sadie gazed at her newborn sister is almost impossible to describe. It's unbearably tender… Sadie loved Mattie with her whole heart and that love for Mattie gave her a purpose. Sadie made it her life's work looking after her sister" (Summers, *Sadie* 40). This indicates how Sadie wholeheartedly reinforces Gilligan's theory, as she embodies and practises an "ethics of care" (30), dedicating her life to her sister while forgoing caring for herself. Her care transcends Mattie's death, as Sadie chooses to embark on a dangerous journey to find and murder her sister's killer, regardless of the emotional and physical toll.

Like Parker, Sadie has been hardened by life, and her perception of the world, and people in general, is bleak and cynical. However, unlike Parker, Sadie grew up precociously, as her mother proved distant and inattentive, resulting in Sadie taking on the maternal role for Mattie. May Beth observed, "Mattie loved her big sister. Mattie *adored* Sadie but Sadie might as well have been Mattie's mother and that's a certain kind of dynamic. Throw in a six-year age gap, that's gonna add to it too. Looking after Mattie brought Sadie out of her shell and forced her to use her voice, no matter the stutter" (Summers, *Sadie* 41). Knowledge of Sadie's innate and ferocious sense of protection and altruism for her sister would consider her the most "likeable" of Summers' protagonists. Summers comments:

> Sadie is determined to find the man she believes murdered her little sister, Mattie, and she's occupying a deeply unsettling emotional space, but what's driven her to it—and what continues to drive her throughout the novel—is unconditional love. Sadie's reason for being has always been looking after Mattie; she loves Mattie more than anything in the world. With Mattie dead, the only thing Sadie can do is avenge her. It's a reckless and grim journey, but I think the foundation it's built upon is really powerful and pure. ("Interview with Courtney Summers")

With this approach, Sadie at first resembles a conventional YA heroine following in the footsteps of Katniss and Bella, due to her unrelenting loyalty and bravery in honour of her sister. However, Sadie's demeanour is far from approachable. She is sullen, blunt, unruly, and impertinent. Her guard is always up, and she is skeptical of all the people she meets, due to her traumatizing childhood experience. Mimi Koehler, for "The Nerd Daily", comments that:

> Not everyone will like Sadie…A young girl who had to grow up too fast to look after her younger sister, who tried her best to make Mattie's life great, was so relatable. Someone who's never had the opportunity to be or do more, who worked relentless hours while going to school just to put a roof over her sister's head. Someone who had to deal with others thinking she's stupid just because she has a stutter. A girl who put her sister above all else, even when that sister resented her for it.

This attests to the complexity in Summer's characters, as she proves that there are nuances to girls, even those that do not behave as likeably as accustomed to seeing in YA.

> Sadie is self-aware of her attitude and uncompromising demeanour, stating:
>
> May Beth said I can be off-putting sometimes, the way I cut straight through the bullshit and right to the bone when I've got my sights set on something – that I don't spend enough time on the lead-in to make things comfortable, I guess. I've decided the only thing someone can do about that is either love it or hate because I'm not changing it.
>
> (Summers, *Cracked Up to Be* 64)

Like Parker, Sadie is assertive in her personality which is considered a fault, and is unapologetic about it, nor intends to change to appease anyone's approval. She is overall, "not an easy or traditionally 'likeable' character… but she is real" (Stepniuk). This is precisely what authors should strive for in YA, as authenticity is what engages and speaks to teenage readers and helps

them feel understood (Santoli and Wagner 70). Thus, it is essential that Summers' protagonists ultimately fight against misogynistic expectations of them, behave as they truly feel, and never apologize for it.

It is revealed that Sadie was molested throughout her childhood by her mother's boyfriend, Keith. To protect Mattie from suffering the same horrors, Sadie would sacrifice herself to Keith, keeping the attention on her instead. Sadie vividly remembers, "When I was eleven, and Mattie was five, I didn't sleep for a year. Keith and mom would come home so late from the bar – him sober, her wasted…I knew what would happen next and I knew what would happen if I refused. If it wasn't me, he'd go to Mattie unless I said, *W-wait*" (Summers, *Sadie* 235). This disturbing aspect of Sadie's childhood gives insight into her character, helps readers empathize with her, and grasp how and why she is mostly cold and sharp. This is also another example of how Sadie fully exemplifies Gilligan's theory, as her sense of purpose is "defined through attachment… threatened by separation… [She is] driven by personal relationships" (Gilligan 8-9). Sadie has offered not just her care, but sacrificed her body for her sister's wellbeing, and suffered in silence while her mental and physical state was abused. This makes Sadie all the more tragic, as her life was always and afterthought, and is now meaningless without Mattie to care for.

Sadie's narrative repeatedly reminds readers of her grittiness in character, and how she does not possess the conventional and anticipated qualities seen in YA heroines. She becomes proactive as a response to Mattie's death since her life is now of little value without the one person she cared about. This is solidified early on when Sadie considers the ramifications and life-threatening consequences of going after Mattie's murderer, whom she presumes is Keith. She contemplates:

"You could die," I say to myself, just to see if the clean weight of those words off my

tongue will somehow shock their reality into me.

It doesn't.

I could die. (Summers, *Sadie* 10-11)

This instance demonstrates the severity of Sadie's depleting mental state. She is broken, enraged,

and fueled by vengeance. Like Parker, her feelings of responsibility cause her to abandon taking

care of herself and focus on ways to atone for her failure in protecting Mattie. While protagonists

like Katniss and Bella are also motivated to protect their loved ones and the vulnerable, they

always act with a clear conscience. Katniss never kills to gain an advantage in the Games, but

always for self-defence; Bella chooses to sacrifice herself throughout the *Twilight* series to keep

her loved ones safe. Sadie actively hunts her sister's killer and stops at nothing until she finds

him. She does not consider alerting authorities and/or turning him in, but endeavours to take

justice into her own hands. She has no moral qualms with the act of killing, as she states:

I'm going to kill a man.

I'm going to steal the light from his eyes. I want to watch it go out. You aren't supposed

to answer violence with more violence but sometimes I think violence is the only answer.

It's no less than he did to Mattie, so it's no less than he deserves don't expect to bring her

back. It won't bring her back. It's not about finding peace. There will never be peace.

I'm not under any illusion about how little of me will be left after I do this one thing. But

imagine having to live every day knowing the person who killed your sister is breathing

the air she can't, filling his lungs with it, tasting its sweetness. Imagine him knowing the

feeling of the ground beneath his feet while her body is buried below it.

This is the furthest I've been from anything that I know. (Summers, *Sadie* 43)

Readers would presume that when finally confronted with Keith that she would reconsider murdering him, since this irreversible act is damaging both physically and mentally. Summers subverts this expectation and establishes Sadie's unwavering motivations. Without Mattie, Sadie has nothing left to lose; her life is dispensable. This makes Sadie incredibly tragic and dangerous in her unhinged state. This is a side to this protagonist that once again challenges what readers believe YA heroines are capable of and motivated by. Sadie's efforts are objectively justified, but her choice to take action and commit the act of murder suggests the darkest traits of this character; something that audiences may be uncomfortable reading about. Sadie's life story invokes sympathy from the reader, but she never softens herself to earn it.

Roxanne Harde also delves into the ramifications of sexual violence against young women and emphasizes the need for the normalization of these narratives in order to bring awareness to this topical subject. She states:

> …a frightening proportion of women, particularly young women, will be raped by an acquaintance… Every sexual assault begins with the dehumanization of the victim. And sometimes, after the violation, after the pain and fear, comes the institutional dehumanization visited upon the victim who seeks medical or legal help. (Harde 1)

Summers explores this with both Parker and Sadie, as they are marked and shaped by their personal experience with sexual violence. Their reluctance to alert authorities reflects how often "the promising future of the perpetrators was prioritized over the humanity of the girls by many institutions, including the judiciary and the press…[Thus] rape culture has become only more entrenched" (Harde 2). The fact that Parker is so deeply affected also attests to the overlooked fact that "rape culture affects girls, even those who are not sexually assaulted or harassed" (Harde 3). Thus, Parker and Sadie do not just bring awareness to this prevalent subject, but

perhaps inspire a call to action in showing support to young women, even those that express themselves in "unlikeable" ways. Summers works are vital, as she utilizers her voice as an author by constantly writing about these dark subject matters, making readers unconformable with what her protagonists face, and demonstrates the "…value of young adult literature [in] its capacity for telling its readers the truth, however disagreeable that may sometimes be" (Cart).

There is also a profound sense of vulnerability and helplessness that materializes throughout *Sadie*, as the eponymous character develops an even grimmer understanding of the cruellest aspects of the world, and the costs of being a young girl living in it. Sadie is hardened by her upbringing, the absence of childhood, and forced to become self-reliant instead. Her newfound state of isolation without having Mattie to care for evokes a tonally depressive and extremely cynical perspective coming from a YA heroine. In becoming misanthropic, Sadie solemnly reflects:

> "She's dead," I whisper and I don't know why this is the thing I choose to say out loud because it hurts to say it, to feel the truth of those words pass my lips, to have them be real in this world. But *She's dead* is the reason I'm still alive.
>
> *She's dead* is the reason I'm going to kill a man. (Summers, *Sadie* 101)

In a moment of earnest grief, Sadie still steadies and comforts herself with her fury and thirst for vengeance. This perspective is what sets her apart from the typical YA heroine, as the darkness of this character starkly differs from characters like Bella and Katniss who, despite the grimmest of circumstances, manage to remain optimistic or inspire hope, and work codependently to achieve their goals and/or survive. Sadie is a survivor, but her understanding and approach to it is by resembling "A girl who bulldozes a person by being ten times herself in front of them" (Summers, *Sadie* 158). She has a contemptuous, pessimistic view of the world, so much so that

she is affronted by rare moments of benevolence, stating, "I don't know if it's the relief that kindness can exist in this world or the guilt of kindness existing in a world that doesn't deserve it" (Summers, *Sadie* 117).

Sadie is a particularly nuanced and layered character, making her narrative vital for teenagers, critics, and adults to read. Her thoughts are dark, and her actions ruthless, yet there is a deep sense of melancholy, loss, and immense pain that she is constantly feeling. She is both unbridled and broken, representing not just how personally complex she is, but teenage girls in general. Adults, teachers, etc. always attempt to understand teenagers, as they can be enigmas even to themselves, living in a time between childhood and adulthood. Literature is an outlet that aids in this understanding, and in a classroom, it "broaden[s]the exposure of students to a variety of voices and perspectives" (Gilmore 20). Sadie showcases to readers her darkest thoughts, her overwhelming pain, and suffers through what too many girls face. Karen Rought, for the pop culture website, *Hypable*, commends Summers for writing *Sadie*, stating:

> *Sadie* is not for everyone. It's a dark and terrible tale that's more reality than we'd care to admit. Stories like this happen all the time in our towns, our cities, our states, our countries. Reading this book is brutal and heart-wrenching, but it's necessary. How many times do we scroll past a news story about another girl who has been murdered or has gone missing? How often do we feel empathetic toward her and her family until we've moved on to the next tweet, the next post, the next bit of breaking news?
>
> *Sadie* is a book that will stay with you. And it should. It reminds us, as it does West McCray, that people like Sadie are real. They've got friends and family. They have a past, even if they don't have a future. They've got a story that needs to be told.

The lesson in Sadie is not that good guys are heroes and bad guys are evil. Those lines are often blurry and confusing, both in the book and in real life. What it teaches us is compassion. It shows us that we need to care, even when it's too late. Because maybe that will be enough to save the next person.

And if it's not, then we just keep on caring until it is.

This directly correlates with Summer's intention of highlighting how real tragedies and dangers girls face become belittled, as it is predominantly used for entertainment and consumption. In reading from Sadie's perspective, readers may recognize the commodification of stories like Sadie's, and start to see this as a true issue, and begin to care. It also brings forth a different understanding of what a YA heroine can be, and perhaps readers will still root for Sadie – especially when she is at her worst.

The subject of violence is often met with contention from those who judge the YA genre, believing it to be too dark a subject for teenage readers. However, educator Stacey Miller argues from her observations in the classroom that violence is unfortunately something students know all too well. Her work titled "Shattering Images of Violence in Young Adult Literature: Strategies for the Classroom" documents how students expressed that "Violence [itself] is difficult to escape, and…it inevitably seeps into our lives… [So much so that students are] desensitized to it because it surrounds their lives" (87-90). Miller noted that students are surrounded by violence in the media but are also directly affected by it via bullying (90). This knowledge further supports the importance for novels like Summers', who presents these topics at the forefront, as literature has a profound effect to "inspire social and cultural change" (Harde 2).

Similarly with Parker – and with the majority of Summer's female leads – these narratives inspire a newfound understanding of "unlikeable" YA characters. These girls provoke new meanings to the mechanisms of their character traits and actions. *New York Times* bestselling YA author, Tiffany D. Jackson, follows in the path of Summers with her own character depictions and supports this approach by stating:

> It's really hard for people to wrap their heads around a writer who would create a character you wouldn't like, because at the end of the day we all want to be liked…. When we dare to do the opposite of that, there are questions: 'Why doesn't your character have redeeming characteristics? Why doesn't your story reflect hope?' I always kind of say to myself, well, why don't you want to see the real world? Why are *you* trying to escape that you're not facing about yourself? (Jackson qtd. in Krischer "Where Are Unlikeable Characters")

Following in the footsteps of Summers, Jackson takes on a direct approach to those who are apprehensive to read about troubled teenagers, and those that do not easily fit the mould of an adoring, strong heroine, and highlights the safety which people often feel reading about these characters. Summer's and Jackson's protagonists request readers to branch outside their comfort zone and confront difficult topics that teenagers face which go unaddressed or brushed aside. Krischer also states the benefits of reading from these characters, as she reasons, "I want to read about women and girls who turn me on my head, who make me uncomfortable, who make the wrong choices. Who can be shallow and careless. Who remind me of myself" (Krischer "Where Are Unlikeable Characters"). Therefore, these authors stress that diverse narratives should be embraced, since "Young women need this sort of representation in the books they read, to show that they are complex and important and worthy of a story" (McEvoy). Normalizing "unlikable"

or as Summers puts it, "complex" (*Cracked Up to Be*, x), girls as leaders of YA novels shows them that their voices matter, too.

Sadie is shaped by her relationship with her mother and sister. Her mother's lack of parental care is what toughens her, and her care for Mattie is what motivates her. Sadie is starved for love and affection and overcompensates for Mattie to ensure she never feels unloved as she did. Her trauma from their mother, Claire, being absent and eventually abandoning them haunts Sadie, and forms her pessimist, cynical attitude toward the world and people in general. Clair is also the reason for Sadie's trauma with Keith, as she was never believed when she voiced her fear and opposition towards him. At a bar, Sadie notices a woman dancing with a man and is immediately reminded of how Claire met Keith, and the irreparable damage it caused in her life henceforth. She thinks:

> I picture it sometimes, their meeting, her telling him, in her muddled voice, soured by
>
> drugs and booze, how hard she had it raising two little girls on her own. Keith, suddenly
>
> interested, asking her their names. In my mind, she has to think about it, her glassy eyes
>
> fixed on nothing.
>
> Then she offers us up. (Summers, *Sadie* 79)

This illustrates Sadie's lingering damage and festered resentment she has for her mother. This supports the immense effects Gilligan's theory of moral development has on girls, since "Female identity formation takes place in a context of ongoing relationship…girls…experience themselves as like their mothers, thus fusing the experience of attachment with the process of identity formation" (7-8). It is evident that Claire's actions and eventual abandonment completely alter Sadie, and influence her to assume a maternal role, dedicating her life to caring

for Mattie. One can discern that Sadie may hold resentment for being forced into this role, as well as an overwhelming pain at the fact that a mother's love is foreign to her.

Claire is also the catalyst for Mattie's disastrous end, since, when Claire leaves, Mattie is heartbroken and becomes depressed. Claire had a tense and bitter relationship with Sadie but had a tender relationship with Mattie since she was "so much easier" (Summers, *Sadie* 266). What transpires is that Mattie receives a postcard from L.A. plaintively inscribed with, *Be my good girl* (Summers, *Sadie* 264), thus leading to "Mattie, clinging to those words until they pushed her into the passenger's side of a truck driven by the stranger who would go on to kill her" (Summers, *Sadie* 265). It is revealed that Claire never sent this postcard but was fabricated by Sadie in a desperate attempt to appease Mattie with the reassurance that their mother was safe and motivate her to get well. It becomes clear that Sadie, like Parker, takes ownership of Mattie's demise. McCray states:

> Sadie's circumstances often forced her to compensate. When Claire left, Sadie saw Mattie sink into a deep, unreachable depression and threw out one desperate lifeline – a postcard in her mother's handwriting – and it worked. But it also become the crack between them, something their relationship would never get the chance to recover from. Because of that postcard – and though it's by no means Sadie's fault – Mattie ran away and was murdered… and Sadie has moved through every moment since her little sister's death knowing that.
>
> Does any part of her believe she's responsible
>
> The weight of that guilt.
>
> I can't imagine. (Summers, *Sadie* 265)

This overwhelming feeling of the onus for Mattie's murder again supports Gilligan's theory, proving that "… the conventions that shape women's moral judgement differ from those that apply to men" (Gilligan 73). This also presents a larger issue, mirroring *Cracked Up to Be*, where victims of gender-based violence place the blame mostly on themselves rather than the assailant.

The absence of Mattie amplifies Sadie's most "unlikeable" qualities. She has a penchant for isolation, and is impertinent, sullen, and aggrieved. She is resolutely tenacious, for "Mattie used to say it was my stubbornness, not my stutter, that was my worst quality, but one wouldn't exist without the other" (Summers, *Sadie* 13), and is quick to "say something ugly" (Summers, *Sadie* 30). This is supported multiple times throughout the novel, such as when Sadie responds to an insult by a hitchhiker, stating, "N-no offence, b-but you look like a bitch" (Summers, *Sadie* 128). Her primary response to moments of tension or conflict is always violence. For example, while at a bar with new acquaintances, Sadie witnesses one of the boys covering a girl's mouth when she begins to weigh in on the conversation. Sadie immediately thinks, "…I think if any boy did that to me…I'd rip his arm out of his socket" (Summers, *Sadie* 87). She always carries Keith's stolen switchblade and vows that she will "…. carve my name into his soul" (Summers, *Sadie* 45). Sadie morosely realizes:

> Sometimes, I feel made of Mattie's absence, this complete emptiness inside me and the only thing that makes it bearable, that quiets it, is moving, is putting distance between her murder and pushing myself closer to the promise of taking Keith's life. It still hurts, though. It always hurts. Other times, I can only feel the weight of it, all of it, of every Sadie I've been, every choice that she's made, and everything that she could have

possibly gotten so wrong that'd she end up here. Now. Like this. Alone. (Summers, *Sadie*

119)

Sadie's dependence on Mattie to care for is apparent throughout the novel, highlighting how

irreparable she is without her sister. Though she is driven by heartbreak and overwhelmed with

sorrow, her penchant for violence, inability to find any semblance of hope throughout her

journey, and unapologetically hostile attitude defy the standard example of how a beloved YA

protagonist acts. Sadie's life is encompassed by her motto of sorts, which she describes, "What's

that saying: *better to ask forgiveness than permission?* But I've never been good at saying *sorry*

either" (Summers, *Sadie* 34). Krischer supports this portrayal of characters like Parker and Sadie,

stating:

> Isn't that what we want from a book, especially a book when you're a teenager? For
>
> someone to put your thoughts down on the page, thoughts you didn't even know you
>
> were having until you saw their words? Isn't it our job as authors to explore those
>
> characters, the ones we want to reject? The mean ones. The bullies and the cruel kids.
>
> The *unlikeable* kids. Then that way we can better understand them and maybe, in turn,
>
> understand ourselves? (Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters)

Sadie and Parker both take on "unlikeable" traits as a response to gender-based violence.

This is the most direct reaction to a society that upholds patriarchal ideals and expectations of

women. Professor Vanita Sundaram studies how teenagers view and react to the topic of gender-

based violence and states that "there is an increasing evidence to suggest that young people

tolerate, justify and even normalize a range of forms of violence, and that women themselves are

sometimes blamed for having provoked violence towards them" (26). The state in which female

victims are particularly perceived is largely concerning, as it ultimately dehumanizes them and

their trauma. With this understanding, it is even more understandable why Parker and Sadie

blame themselves and do not put their faith in their peers and a system that overall does not

support them.

Sundaram also notes that:

Expectations of women were a particular hinge-point around which narratives of violence

as acceptable or not were centered. The expectations were not explicitly used to justify

violence a priori but emerged through discussions about violence, in which young people

revealed that their position towards violence was influenced by their understandings of

how women should behave in different situations. They thus positioned themselves on a

continuum of acceptability, where their understandings of violence were shown to be

complex, nuanced and not-binary. Crucially, their positions on the continuum were

influenced by their gendered expectations of behaviour within a given situation. (27)

This idea that violence against women has the possibility of being acceptable depending on how

women present themselves and behave reinforces misogynistic expectations for women to

uphold, and if they do not, their status of victimhood is questioned. This is precisely why

characters like Parker and Sadie exist, as they are a means of fighting against this regressive

perception of girls and emphasize how sexual violence is never to be accepted, regardless of how

amenable the victim appears. Parker and Sadie are consistently let down by the people in their

lives – parents, authoritative figures, classmates – which reflects how society is "accepting of

violence against women and cultural norms and expectations for gender are key to their

acceptance and justification of violence. [Thus], a fundamental aspect of prevention work must

be to challenge these entrenched gender expectations (Sundaram 32).

Sadie's mission becomes larger than personal revenge for Mattie, as she discovers that Keith had sexually abused numerous young girls. Keith undertook multiple personas and identities, "has known so many different names" (Summers, *Sadie* 215), moving from town to town and "targeted single mothers of young girls, women who were alone and hard to look for after more than their fair share. He preyed on them as much as their children" (Summers, *Sadie* 292). To make matters worse, Sadie's endeavour uncovers a larger, sinister aspect of Keith, revealing that he works with an affluent, powerful man, Silas Baker – his childhood friend, as they "…recognized themselves in each other" (Summers, *Sadie* 295). Sadie discovers that Baker has also been sexually abusing young girls for years and has kept promiscuous photographs of them in an abandoned house. In response, Sadie risks her life to expose this truth, which results in her getting brutally beaten by Baker before she can flee. Despite this, Sadie entrusts this information with a boy she meets on her journey, instructs him to alert the authorities, and provides him with the evidence needed to prove these crimes. Thus, "He was arrested because of Sadie…without Sadie, it's safe to assume he'd still be preying on children" (Summers, *Sadie* 274). Sadie's mission becomes exponentially larger, presenting to readers that Sadie and Mattie's case is not an anomaly. It grounds readers and makes them face a harsh reality that persists in its subjugation of women and makes it all the more heart-wrenching in this context with a female teenager as a protagonist.

Sadie's maternal instincts for Mattie become grander, as her discovery of Keith and his companion's grotesque and depraved crimes emboldens her to seek justice on all fronts to avenge the past victims and ensure the wellbeing of all young girls these men will target next. When she finally tracks down Keith, she is first confronted by his latest victim: a 10-year-old girl

named Nell. Sadie has a visceral response to facing another victim, as she is too aware of the

horrors she has already endured. Sadie states:

> I want so badly to have arrived in time but if he's already here, that means I'm too
>
> late…[She] makes me want to burn the world down. The sudden, fearful light in her eyes
>
> tells me all I need to know. I watch her hands tremor…
>
> She's ten years old and she's already fighting for her own cries for help.
>
> I wish I could tell her that soon she won't have to worry about it. That *I know what's*
>
> *happening, it's going to be okay*. (Summers 254-255)

Sadie manages to get Nell far away from the house so she can finally confront Keith. As she

surreptitiously lurks through Nell's house:

> …an unbearable wave of grief follows. *I'm going to save you, Nell. I'm going to save*
>
> *you*, but everything after that, I think, is beyond saving. I can stop Keith but I can't undo
>
> everything that's already been done. How do you forgive the people who are supposed to
>
> protect you? Sometimes I don't know what I miss more: everything I've lost or
>
> everything I never had. (Summers, *Sadie* 259)

This is yet another moment that begs readers to contemplate these themes that transcend *Sadie*.

Sadie's irreversible stripping of childhood and innocence, her frustration and sense of

hopelessness at the enormity of what Keith represents, presents a daunting message about the

reality young women face. Furthermore, correlating to Gilligan's theory once more, Sadie feels a

magnanimous sense of responsibility for those affected, and those that will be targeted next, by

Keith. This demonstrates an overarching message and concern regarding gender-based violence

that particularly effects young adult girls. Sadie has never been supported or even believed when

she first voiced her hatred of Keith as a child, and she never feels comfortable asking for

assistance from any adult figure that she knows or encounters. This informs readers, especially adults, of the repercussions when girls are not believed.

Sadie's only solution is to break this cycle of violence by murdering Keith herself, and when finally faced with him, she does not cower. Though it has been "eight years since I saw him in the flesh" (Summers, *Sadie* 259), Sadie steadies herself, reminding herself, "*I am not small…*" (Summers, *Sadie* 260). What proceeds is Sadie chasing after Keith and suffers a severe blow from him. The last thing written from Sadie's perspective is, "I'm on the ground, my head firing thought after thought that can't seem to complete themselves and they all begin with *Mattie*…And they never seem to end" (Summers, *Sadie* 260). The rest of the novel is narrated by West McCray, who eventually catches up to Sadie's last location. He discovers that Keith suffered a stab wound and succumbs to an infection from it. Keith's crimes are exposed on *The Girls,* but Sadie remains missing. McCray states:

> I don't know what happened after that. They must have left the house at some point. Jack [whom Sadie knows as Keith] returned. Sadie didn't. Her car was found on a dirt road. He died. She's still missing. (Summers, *Sadie* 299)

The sole thing McCray can say with certainty is that Sadie "… was almost a secondary player in her own life. She lived for Mattie, lived to love, care for, and protect her little sister, with every breath" (Summers, *Sadie* 301). Her fierce passion to risk everything in order to bring Keith to justice becomes significantly more impactful, as she has fought for past victims, and ensures the safety of his next potential targets. In exposing both Keith and Silas Baker, Sadie's mission affirms her as more than a passive victim, but as someone proactive, who took on the "…loneliness and pain…just to find her little sister's murderer and make the world right again, even, possibly, at the expense of herself" (Summers, *Sadie* 307).

The decision to leave Sadie's state unanswered is a method in which positions readers into Sadie's mind at the beginning of the novel: starved for the truth, and infuriated at the horrific possibilities of what has occurred. It is a way for readers to feel how Sadie felt, and in turn, reflects how people should feel each time cases emerge of missing or abused girls surfaces. It is a clever, albeit cruel, attempt to connect what McCray first perceives cases like this at the beginning of the novel: desensitized to yet another case of a missing girl. This conclusion may spark a newfound understanding to this grim reality and invoke readers of all ages to grasp the severity of gender-based violence and rage alongside Sadie. In this fictional journey throughout *Sadie*, McCray's final, chilling plea for Sadie to reach out if she is alive, "Because I can't take another dead girl" (Summers, *Sadie* 308), becomes all the more alarming, poignant, and real.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Despite the imperative and impressive progression the Young Adult genre has achieved in terms of centring more diverse narratives, nuanced representations of "unlikeable girls" still sorely lack. Rather than offering a multidimensional lens to these, predominantly female, characters, these girls are sequestered into stereotypical depictions where readers have no choice but to vehemently and automatically dislike them. They are regularly described as conceited, confrontational, arrogant, and rude. These girls are essentially the designated "mean girl", normally used and seen as foils to the loveable protagonist, who overall embodies everything her counterpart is not. This reluctance towards diversifying the makings of a female protagonist worth rooting for and hearing from presents a larger issue in accepting the "unacceptable" traits women possess and are instructed to suppress.

The popular, female-led entertainment platform known as The Take weighs in on the double standards imposed and expected of girls both within media and reality. They comment:

Today, it's the default to embrace male characters who exist all across the spectrum of

morality. But it remains incredibly common for critics and some viewers to fault female

characters for being "unlikeable" and declare that their movies or shows are, therefore,

unwatchable. (The Take 00:10-00:25)

This observation is prevalent throughout all mediums and is especially found in YA literature.

Though Summers has earned praise for her female leads and exploration of themes revolving

around gender-based violence and the daily pressures teenage girls face, her works still do not

perform the way that YA fantasy has and continues to do. While *Sadie* has reached the most

acclaim and accomplishments, making it to the *New York Times* bestsellers list, Summers' other

seven novels do not receive the attention that is duly deserved. This suggests that publishers and

consumers would still rather read from perspectives they are accustomed to, such as Katniss

Everdeen and Bella Swan.

While YA has become increasingly popular, the formula for YA heroines has remained

rather stagnant. There is no shortage of female protagonists that follow in the footsteps of

Katniss and Bella, such as the headstrong and fearless Celaena Sardothien from Sarah J. Maas's

massively successful *Throne of Glass* (2012) series, or the "ultimate badass" ("28 Badass

Heroines in YA"), Lou, from Shelby Mahurin's *Serpent & Dove* (2019) trilogy, and the list

continues. This adherence to the makings of a YA heroine becomes predictable and shows that

"…heroes and fighters [are] no longer an oddity in fiction, [thus] it is hard to care about them

when they are so lacking in any real personality and development (May). Female representation

in YA covers an array of girls to root for and like, aside from the likes of Katniss and Bella.

Readers sympathize with and root for Hazel Grace Lancaster, who is diagnosed with cancer in

the widely adored *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012); readers gain inspiration from the body-positive

and sassy Willowdean Dickson in Julie Murphy's popular novel, *Dumplin'* (2015)*;* and readers are emboldened by the valiant Starr Carter in Angie Thomas's enormously successful novel, *The Hate U Give* (2017). It is no surprise these characters reach a wider scale in audience, as they have all been adapted into successful films. This continues to perpetuate the rhetoric that girls who act within the margins of likeability, despite their struggles and adversities, should be represented in not just literature, but cinema as well. This is not to suggest that these narratives are not needed; bold and fearless protagonists have a remarkable way of inspiring young girls, proving their worth and place within realms like fantasy, which is rife with strong, fearless male protagonists. This is to argue that there must be room implemented for different perspectives to be heard as well, particularly the "unlikeable girls".

While all the novels mentioned above have been adored and adapted into successful films, there has yet to be a film or TV adaptation made of Summers', and other works similar to hers. Therefore, it appears that the desire to automatically like and connect with the protagonist in films supersedes any other approach to female protagonists as well. This reluctance in centring an unconventional female protagonist suggests that these voices are unworthy to be heard from or seen as anything more than a caricature used solely as a stereotypical antagonist to the adoring protagonist. The qualities that are forgiving and rather expected of boys – cynicism, brashness, assertiveness, crassness, and acts of violence – are shamed when girls express and practise these traits as well, suggesting an apprehension in displaying all the "unfavourable" facets of girls. Essentially, girls in YA are limited in how they are to appear and act, and characters that defy these standards do not receive the attention that conventional female protagonists often achieve.

The Take delves into this hesitancy in displaying the "ugly" aspects of women, remarking how:

…when it comes to female characters…there tends to be a conflation between likeability and relatability, as if the only way we would ever be able to relate to women… is if we'd like to hang out with them. In reality, people are messy, flawed, and sometimes can be…unlikable and the best characters illuminate this, with all the nuances of the human condition. (The Take 01:20-01:38)

Journalist Kelly Jenson also voices her concerns over female representation in YA. She notes the hypocrisy in what is considered a "strong YA heroine", as it appears the characters that are applauded are protagonists that face tyrannical governments, mythical creatures, and others within a fantastical or dystopic setting; yet the girls that deal with misogyny and abuse in contemporary settings often go unrecognized (Jenson). She states, "These are girls' voices that we don't hear—ones of love and victimhood, of friendship and social change—and they're voices we won't hear lauded as unique, powerful, memorable, or life-changing" (Jenson). This further emphasizes how these perspectives are taken for granted despite the impact they can make on readers. Jenson also acknowledges the double standards imposed on authors, like Summers, who write about characters that tap into unseemly traits, stating:

When women take risks in their writing, when they choose to write female-driven narratives with take-no-bull girls who may not care at all whether you like them or not, they're not seen as brave. They're not seen as doing something new or inventive or award worthy. They are instead dinged because they portray girls who aren't "likable." Because the stories are not always "nice." Because those girls aren't "realistic.

In exposing this hypocrisy, Jenson stresses the importance of narratives like Summers, who continuously dismantles this viewpoint of unconventional girls to broaden readers'

understanding of teenage girls and informs those that see themselves within Parker and Sadie that their voices are worthy of a story.

This shame in presenting girls for everything that they are capable of possessing and expressing persists today, hence why narratives from Courtney Summers are imperative in order to expand the knowledge of teenage girls and their experiences. Just as Carol Gilligan argued and studied how women "think differently, particularly when it comes to moral problems" ("Carol Gilligan"), readers and critics must come to grasp that women are multifaceted, and respond to trauma and life experiences differently, and should not be shamed nor ignored for expressing themselves in "unbecoming" ways. In subverting the assumed perspective of an "unlikeable" girl, Summers challenges her readers to consider them as more than one-dimensional tools. In her experience writing and honing in on these narratives, Summers notes:

> I think people are quick to label complex, difficult, challenging female protagonists as unlikeable. So far, I think I've had success with readers liking my unlikeable female protagonists and, if they like them, are they actually unlikeable? On the one hand, they don't make likeable choices, but I don't think they're inherently unlikeable. They're pushing against expectations and standards we have for girls. We often encourage girls to be nice, to defer to others at the expense of themselves, to not hurt anyone's feelings even if it means hurting their own. As soon as a girl resists that, she's considered wrong or bad, but it's just human. I'm always going to write girls like that because girls are complex, difficult, challenging, rewarding, *and* amazing. (Summers qtd. in Grochowski)

Summers' efforts emphasize how vital it is to write about these voices that go unnoticed, that is often judged and mocked. She dismantles the preconceived notions associated with these girls and their stories, provides much-needed nuance, and asks readers and critics to listen and

understand. Most importantly, Summer's protagonist support Gilligan's argument, which firmly states that the way to dismantle and challenge this patriarchal lifestyle is by "Resisting this falseness, resisting the demand to betray ourselves, is crucial" (Gilligan qtd. in Prince-Gibson).

Summers expertly uses Parker and Sadie – and other protagonists in her works – to express her anger at the mistreatment and perception of girls, particularly focusing on gender-based violence. While violence against women has been introduced in multiple YA staples, such as Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999), Louise O'Neill's *Asking For It* (2015), and E.K. Johnson's *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* (2016), Summers' protagonist confront their conflict by channelling their most "unlikeable" traits, behaving brashly, acrimoniously and are sometimes violent. This approach to these characters' responses to gender-based violence starkly contrasts with the aforementioned novels. Roxanne Harde observes how "…these plotlines seem to work exceptionally hard at showing how young women can lose, but never regain, power" (181). Harde also criticizes how bleak these novels appear, as they "position these rapes as a 'fate worse than death' (Henderson qtd. in Harde 180), and counters this idea by arguing, "Rape… does not, and should not necessarily destroy" (181). Harde instead advocates for different approaches to the subject matter by introducing topics like recovery, resilience, and consent (Harde 182).

The fact that Summers' novels do not receive as much acclaim and attention as other YA novels demonstrates a larger issue in the response to how female victims are represented in YA. Summers takes Harde's argument above and defies this approach by having her protagonists channel their rage and become proactive rather than passive. Through Parker's courage in dismantling the toxic image she used to uphold and exposing the truth of the sexual assault she witnessed; and through Sadie's astonishing courage in avenging her sister's death, these girls

become more than they appear, and remain unapologetic about their unsuitable behaviour and demeanour. Thus, though they are deemed as traditionally "unlikeable", they wear it with pride.

Summer's efforts have not gone completely unnoticed, as she has become an effective proponent in paving the way for future authors to write stories through the lens of an unconventional, "unlikeable" girl. For example, Edgar Award-winning YA author, Mindy McGinnis, writes about gender-based violence in her novel, *The Female of the Species* (2016). Her protagonist, Alex Craft, mirrors Sadie, as she also seeks to avenger her sister's assaulter and murder, views the world through a cynical lens, and has a tough, often unapproachable exterior. McGinnis is bold with her prose or her depiction of Alex, writing with "feminine rage" (Darling) as the first chapter opens with, "This is how I kill someone" (McGinnis 1), and concludes with, "This is how I kill someone. And I don't feel bad about it" (McGinnis 4). This novel is an extremely "dark, unflinching look at rape culture, slut-shaming, and the long-lasting effects of sexual assault" (May) and is a "merciless examination of the way violence begets violence (Darling). It also mirrors Summers' novels, as it, too, "doesn't try to provide answers, but forces you to think about the things we excuse legally and socially" (Darling).

Most recently, YA author Michelle Quach debuted her novel, *Not Here to Be Liked* (2021), about a prickly and unapologetic Eliza, who decides to run for the position of editor in chief for the school newspaper, whilst dually aiming to fight for gender equality within clubs at her school. With a title as blatant as this, it would be remiss to believe the progress in opportunities authors now have to write about "unlikeable" teenage girls, as well as difficult but timely topics, is not a testament to Summer's initial efforts during her tribulations getting published. Ironically, the novel is promoted with claims such as "Eliza…says she's not here to be liked, but we guarantee you'll love her!" ("28 Badass Heroines in YA"), which downplays

Eliza's character, and insinuates that readers must be assured they will love this character in order to first want to read it. This indicates that though there has been progress in terms of pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a YA heroine, there is still trials to overcome. While books with these unique narratives are slowly continuing to emerge, readers and critics can begin to see that "When it comes to interesting storytelling, it's undoubtably far less important for a character to be agreeable than to be real" (The Take 03:23-03:26).

Summers delves into the theme of gender-based violence in all her novels as it is the most direct method in terms of exploring and confronting patriarchal systems that persist today – which also continue to govern and negatively impact young women. Summers clarifies why she is always writing about unlikeable girls who face violence in a multitude of ways, stating:

> Something that I'm consistently exploring in my work is violence against women and the way we fall short with victims and survivors. I wouldn't say I'm inspired by that, but I'm really outraged. And my books are a response to the anger I feel about certain issues — I want them to serve as a confrontation of those issues. So, I really want readers to finish my books feeling similarly outraged and going, "OK, if this is how the world is, how do I change it?" (Summers qtd. in Ehrlich)

Summers also understands the power of literature, referring to it as a "lifeline" (Summers "#ToTheGirls2016"), and utilizes her platform as an author to inflict change for young girls who see themselves within her novels. For example, her novel, *All the Rage* (2015), tells the story of Romy, who is raped by the town sheriff's son, is disbelieved, ridiculed, and ostracized by her community, thus forced to grapple with the trauma on her own. Summer's objective was to reach girls who have struggled with violence or assault and help them "…feel less alone. It's my hope

that girls who pick up the book will read it and know they are seen, heard and loved" (Summers "#ToTheGirls2016").

       To promote *All the Rage*, Summers launched:

> …a hashtag campaign dedicated to letting girls know they were seen, heard, and loved. We encouraged people to use the #ToTheGirls to send messages of support, advice, positivity and empowerment to girls across social media. The hashtag trended worldwide and inspired countless hopeful, beautiful, wonderful, fun and moving notes to young girls. (Summers "#ToTheGirls2016")

This campaign resonated with women across the globe, as they felt encouraged to share their experiences and provide tidbits of advice they have learned over time. Some tweets wrote: "There's no such thing as 'boys will be boys.' It's just an excuse they use to deny responsibility for actions. Don't believe it" (Sarah La Polla qtd. in Biggs); "You deserve to be seen. Your voice deserves to be heard. Your feelings deserve to be recognized" (Marieke Nijkamp qtd. in Biggs); and *New York Times* bestselling author Kody Keplinger chimed in with, "Ignore the movies. You don't have to be 'different from other girls.' Other girls are awesome too" (Keplinger qtd. in Biggs). This remarkable and inspiring response to Summer's initiative verifies the influence of authors and their platform, the incredible impact social media can have in terms of spreading awareness of social issues, and above all, the enormous and moving support that emerges when women speak up and work together. This movement and large response also demonstrate how vital it is to recognize teenage girls' struggles, particularly with gender-based violence, and continue to show support both within the YA genre and in reality.

       Throughout each of her novels, Summers aims to reiterate and emphasize "the underlying message – the heart of the story – is always the same: *whatever you're going through and*

however you feel, you're not alone (Summers "#ToTheGirls2016"). While Summers uses her characters to project her outrage and frustrations regarding gender-based violence and the pressures young women face and feel they need to uphold, it should be noted that the representation of an "unlikeable" protagonist can, and should, be utilized in multiple ways. Summers' tactic is simply one approach to introduce "unlikeable" characters, and there are other opportunities that can highlight these voices without using violence as catalyst or cause of a girl's attitude, as "unlikability is fluid and situational rather than a permanent state" (The Take 16:37-16:40). YA literature has the unparalleled ability to "show teenagers that their experiences have value" (Crowe, "Defending YA"115), thus it is vital to recognize the merit in promoting and highlighting *all* narratives that "reflect pieces of ourselves [that we] recognize – even when we'd rather not (The Take 20:38-20:41). Summer's earnest, raw, and unapologetic approach is essential in the YA sphere, as it reminds readers and critics of all the facets of women, pushing against what others may not wish to acknowledge, and comfort girls for seeing aspects of themselves they may be repressing. After all:

> One of fiction's greatest powers is its ability to reveal the parts of ourselves we're most afraid to show; both the ugly and the beautiful. When a reader sees their secrets on the page, there's a chance it can make a world of difference for them. It can lessen the weight of those secrets to the point the reader can breathe just a little bit easier and to the point, even, the reader might be able to say their secrets out loud. (Summers "#ToTheGirls2016")

In strictly lauding characters such as Bella Swan and Katniss Everdeen, teenage readers are left with the notion that their voices and perspectives do no matter if they do not reflect the traits of a conventional, strong, loveable YA protagonist. The protagonists such as Parker and

Sadie in Courtney Summers' works overall illuminate the aspects of young girls that is often ignored, judged, or scrutinized. Summers offers a newfound, multidimensional understanding of "unlikeable" girls, ultimately challenging the preconceived expectations and understanding readers normally have of these girls. In centring these stories, Summers cements their place in Young Adult fiction, reminds girls that they do matter, and implores readers to not just see these girls in all their "unlikeable" glory, but to understand them, rage with them, and embrace them.

Limitations

The limitations that arise when researching and writing about Courtney Summers' works is the lack of recognition in terms of ethnic diversity throughout her novels. Each one of her protagonists is white, and therefore representations of other cultures and ethnicities is lacking throughout. This perpetuates the narrative gap that arises when people of colour are not represented, and suggests that their voices and experiences do no matter as much. This is especially important since so many cases of young women of colour experiencing violence and assault do not even garner media coverage.

In Canada, cases of Indigenous women enduring domestic abuse do not get proper media attention. For example:

Indigenous women and girls make up about 4 percent of the total female population of Canada but 16 percent of all female homicides, according to government statistics. Some 1,181 Indigenous women were killed or went missing across the country between 1980 and 2012, according to a 2014 report by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Despite these numbers, awareness of these issues, and proper implementations to help these women are minimal, and every promise sworn by the Canadian government prove to be just empty words. (Bilefsky)

This is just one example of violence against women of colour that is unnoticed by society. Therefore, while Courtney Summers continuously brings recognition to gender-based violence to the forefront of her novels, this lack of representation leaves readers with the message women of colour's experiences do not matter as much.

Krischer comments on this issue as well, noting, "For Black female characters, this is an even more difficult feat. The publishing industry is notoriously white. Authors of color have to work even harder to get their foot in the door, let alone get someone to accept or *like* their characters" (Krischer "Where Are Unlikeable Characters"). To support Krischer's claim, YA author Tiffany Jackson comments:

> "Diverse authors have the pressure of representing people of color in a certain way that makes us seem human and that humanizes us when we're already faced with a bazillion stereotypes," Jackson said. "So all of the stories that come out *have* to be humanizing and full of hope and with redeeming qualities so that white people will see us as human and feel that our stories are worth being told. My take on it is that we shouldn't have to present ourselves as perfect human beings for people to respect our stories." (Jackson qtd. in Krischer, "Where Are Unlikeable Characters")

Therefore, though Summers has made tremendous strides and continues to impact the YA genre and its readers, there are still ways to strengthen and diversify the representations of "unlikeable" female protagonists.

Another issue to note is the apparent lack of representation for the LGBTQ+ community throughout these novels. Representation for this community has grown exponentially in the YA genre, with queer, non-binary, transgender protagonists and more. However, it is still necessary to address and centre not just the discrimination, but stories of sexual harassment and assault,

due to its alarming prevalence within this minority community. For example, statistics in 2020 found that:

> Gay, lesbian, bisexual and other minority people in Canada were almost three times more likely than heterosexual Canadians to report that they had been physically or sexually assaulted…and more than twice as likely to report having been violently victimized since the age of 15. Sexual minority Canadians were also more than twice as likely as heterosexual Canadians to experience inappropriate sexual behaviours in public, online or at work in the previous 12 months. ("Sexual Minority")

These alarming statistics indicate that more recognition of this issue needs to be addressed, and focussing on this in YA literature is an effective way to introduce and normalize conversations surrounding these topics.

Summers is currently working towards broadening and expanding on her protagonists in terms of sexual orientation and identity. Sadie has a brief moment within her novel where she connects with a teenage hitchhiker. Sadie recognizes herself within this girl, who has also run away, is taking a risk, and is unafraid to speak her mind brashly. When Sadie meets her, she thinks, "This is survival, what she's doing right now. I recognize it. A girl who bulldozes a person by being ten times herself in front of them" (Summers, *Sadie* 158). In a rare moment, Sadie is vulnerable with someone, shares information about herself, her life, and Mattie. Sadie becomes comfortable and is grateful that someone is listening to her, which leads to them sharing a kiss. While Sadie does not ponder or question her sexuality from this moment, she does realize "That anybody who listens to me, I end up loving them just a little" (Summers, *Sadie* 165). This offers an earnest exploration into Sadie's feelings and desires, as she is someone who has never

prioritized them, or even thought about the possibilities of romance - let alone with the same gender.

Summers' is showing an interest into showcasing LGBTQ+ narratives, as her protagonist in her upcoming novel is lesbian. *I'm The Girl* (2022) delves deeper into the subject matters always explored in Summers' novels, and is described as:

> …an emotionally charged, coming-of-age thriller about the machinations and manipulations of a power structure determined to maintain its hold at the expense of everything and everyone, told through the deeply intimate and unfiltered perspective of a sixteen-year-old lesbian. It's a bold and unflinching account of how one girl feels in her body and how she experiences the world. It breaks new ground in the questions it's not afraid to ask about a culture that doesn't care whether or not young women live or die (Summers, "Meet the Girl").

Summers' analysis into these topics and issues through the lens of someone in the LGBTQ+ community offers the opportunity for queer teenagers to feel represented, seen, and heard in the context of sexual and gender-based violence.

Summers is taking the measuring steps to ensure her work continues to grow in terms of diverse representation. She addresses her decision to make her newest protagonist, Georgia, queer by stating:

> The lesbian romance in *I'm the Girl* is not only respite from its greater devastation, but I suspect it will be largely and exclusively read that way. If I could encourage readers to consider anything about this story—especially if they themselves are not queer—it would be the ways in which lesbianism conflicts with the patriarchy, how that defines Georgia's experiences throughout the book, and what the book's final image might mean to her as

a lesbian. I've said before *I'm the Girl* is an unsparing, brutal account of a dark world that

victimizes and abuses girls, but more importantly, it's about two girls holding each other

in that darkness. (Summers, "I'm the Girl Preorder Campaign")

This statement indicates Summers' commitment to expanding upon her newest work by centring

her stories from a queer perspective. This is a positive step forward in terms of broadening the

understanding of sexual and gender-based violence afflicted upon members of the LGBTQ+

community.

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