

Why are abusive relationships romanticized in pop culture? I am interested in how abusive relationships are portrayed in the media and how these depictions could potentially affect future generations. Abusive relationships are commonly accepted in the literary works that I personally enjoy, but I have never analyzed them. I used this project as an opportunity to explore the evolution of my own values.

I used pens and pencils to illustrate my thoughts about abuse. I like designing characters very much, so I experimented with different materials to develop these characters. The main characters from *Phantom of the Opera* fascinate me; I created an animation to summarize the abusive relationship between Christine and the Phantom.

I would like my viewer to not take everything in the media at face-value. To, instead, analyze the messages that are so popular in today's world and demand better. It is not healthy if we consider abuse to be normal and, even worse, romanticize it.

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At the beginning of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I found myself to be a fan of Twilight, thanks to my older sister. I became quickly obsessed with the love triangle, and would often end up in ridiculous arguments over whether Edward or Jacob deserved Bella more. However, by the end of the year my love for this saga was waning as I became more interested in reading Harry Potter. My loyalties changed and I began hating Twilight with more passion than when I had liked it. I trashed it every moment I could to the point where people were tired of conversing with me. I eventually became neutral about it after a year or so. Looking back now, I still don't like Twilight, but for different reasons. When I was younger, my hate for it was aimed to raise Harry Potter up as the superior series. Now, I see the troubling themes within the books. I've tried to look beyond the idea of it as an epic love story, when really, the relationships are quite abusive. Not always physically, but emotionally as well. Seeing how I used to fawn over this abuse, I'm glad I can see now that it wasn't healthy. But for many others, these abusive relationships have become expectations for love. These works of popular entertainment promote the idea of abusive relationships as desirable, and this can have negatively-lasting effects on women.

So, what is abuse? Its literal definition is, "wrong or improper use." From this come its two branches: physical and emotional. Physical abuse is defined as, "any intentional and unwanted contact with you or something close to your body" (*loveisrespect*). Emotional abuse, "includes non-physical behaviors such as threats, insults, constant monitoring or 'checking in,' excessive texting, humiliation, intimidation, isolation or stalking" (*loveisrespect*). Both of these are commonly found in pop culture, and will be noted within the examples. But basically any actions that attempt to control or hurt someone are abuse.

These forms of abuse can be found in many popular forms of media today. In the story, *The Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux, published in 1909, the relationship between Christine and the masked Phantom is very unhealthy. He manipulates her through deception, intimidation, and physical violence, all components of abuse. The first time the readers perceive the relationship between the Phantom and Christine first hand, he is talking in her dressing room, pretending to be the "Angel of Music" that her father sent to her after his death. Their conversation follows,

"Christine, you must love me!"

And Christine's voice, infinitely sad and trembling, as though accompanied by tears, replied:

'How can you talk like that? *When I sing only for you!*'" (Leroux 18)

After further reading, it is revealed that the Phantom has deceived Christine, all the while earning her trust and worship, and with his power over her he has forced her to focus her life solely on him and her singing. She has become isolated from a majority of the Paris Opera, her caretaker, and at one point the Phantom forbids her from marrying anyone, lest he should leave her. The more he isolated her, the more dependent she became on his company, and in turn gave him more power. This is a tactic of emotional abuse known in psychology as "isolation," where the abuser, "will cut you off from the outside world. He or she may keep you from seeing family or friends, or even prevent you from going to work or school. You may have to ask permission to do anything, go anywhere, or see anyone" (Segal and Smith). Not only does The Phantom emotionally manipulate Christine, he physically kidnaps her and keeps her for two weeks in his

underground lair against her will. During this time Christine learns of his deception by removing his mask, and in retaliation he grabs her by the hair, forcing her to look at his face, and digs her nails into his skin, drawing blood. Eventually he lets her go, but only if she will return. In addition to this, the Phantom has: dropped a chandelier on an audience, killing one and injuring many others, blackmailed the managers for money, and killed Joseph Buquet, the chief stagehand for the Opera. And during Christine's last performance before she plans to leave with Raoul, which the Phantom overheard by way of stalking, he kidnaps her with the use of chloroform. He tells her to be his bride, but she opposes this so much that she attempts to commit suicide rather than marry him. Christine is given an ultimatum: marry the Phantom, or he will kill himself along with the rest of the opera house. She agrees to marry him. He then kisses Christine on the forehead, and she does so in return. Overcome with emotion at being shown compassion for the first time in his life, he lets Christine leave.

Leroux's version displays the relationship as what it is: abusive. He doesn't give in to unhealthy perceptions of what love should be. He does not force the heroine to fall in love with the "tortured soul" that so many novels highlight today. He illustrates a platonic relationship on Christine's side in relationship to the Phantom, which is rare in most forms. A reason many people tend to like a romantic relationship between Christine and the Phantom is pity. They feel he deserves Christine's love because he has been denied it his whole life. But the Phantom's actions cannot be excused. They can be understood and pitied, of course, but he caused Christine a great deal of fear, pain, and loneliness. He did not listen to her on many occasions, and became possessive of her. To an extent, he loved the idea of her more than the whole of her.

In Joel Schumacher's 2004 film version, the relationship between Christine and the Phantom is obviously more romantic. Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation, which this movie is based on, strives to enforce that. The most obvious example of this is actually at the end of the movie. Raoul has rescued Christine and they are leaving via boat. But before they are out of view, Christine looks back at the Phantom with longing, implying to the viewer that she does indeed love him romantically and always will. The film underplays many actions done by the Phantom from the novel. This is most likely to make him a better candidate for romance. However, enough wrong-doings were featured to absolve him of any romantic options. The Phantom kills Buquet, kidnaps Christine, and after she takes off his mask, he throws her to the ground and begins yelling at her for her inevitable curiosity. He also manipulates her time and again through the trust he built when he was deceiving her. He still drops the chandelier on the opera audience, and still kidnaps Christine, forcing her to marry him, but this time Raoul will be the only one to die. And in the end, Christine gives him a kiss. But she supposedly fell in love with him because of it. This is a pattern that it very common, where people compare the relationship to the likes of *Beauty and the Beast*. This, in some ways, is true. Christine does see the horror that must have happened to the Phantom to make him this way and forgives him for it. But this version, so determined to produce a romance based on abuse, takes away the platonic feelings from Christine and instead replaces them with romantic ones that undermine the true essence of what made the original story different and appealing. And this is received well with audiences because they are willing to look past violence in favor of the mystery of the Phantom. This is harmful to many people, because if this is their ideal in fiction, it's most likely that it applies to their reality as well. More people will consider abuse to be romantic rather than understanding that being possessive is not healthy, nor should it be desired. This romantic take on the story also goes to show that our culture, through years of gender bias, has become so

normalized to male-dominant relationships that they are accepted in main media today, no matter the abuse delivered. We are seeing no progress to this problem when movies like this occur.

And from Andrew Lloyd Webber came a sequel to his staged *Phantom* called *Love Never Dies*, which premiered in 2010. Many of Christine's original actions are criticized by the whole production – her leaving the Phantom behind is defined by the characters as betrayal. Instead, she “should” have accepted the manipulation she had been through and stayed with the cause of it. And as if blaming Christine, the victim of these violent actions, wasn't enough, her choice of being with Raoul is choosing, “beauty and youth over genius and art” (*Love Never Dies*). This attempts to invalidate her love for Raoul and the reason she chose to be with him. It tells the viewer that Christine is simply superficial and removes any depth of her original decisions. The writers use her as a means to change the story rather than a character who decides her own fate. It also is saying it's okay to be manipulated and threatened as long as the abuser is extraordinary in their field. Under no circumstances is that acceptable - it's not even a relevant comparison. Raoul's character suffers many changes as well. His personality is transformed by, “vilifying the hero” (*Musical Hell*). This is a common method used when a writer takes a couple and turns one of them “evil” in order to justify pairing the other with the person they want them to be with. In this case, Raoul is made to be an arrogant drunk who has wasted away all of his money by gambling. And by “vilifying” him, the writer can now pair Christine with the Phantom. This is basically admitting that Christine and the Phantom would not work as a couple on their own – they require the story and the characters to be changed drastically. Most of the Phantom's actions have not changed, though. He has moped about for ten years, wishing to hold Christine and hear her sing once more. Whereas with the novel, the Phantom lets Christine go because he understands she would be happy with Raoul and he is able to move on because of it, in this musical it's the complete opposite. His obsession has grown, and he is doing everything in his power to bring her to him. And in the beginning of the play, after Christine refuses to sing for him, he threatens to harm her own son. Later on, the Phantom and Raoul make a bet – if Christine does not sing for the Phantom, she, Raoul, and their son can leave; however, if she sings, Raoul must leave, alone. Apparently it's alright for the men in her life to decide how she's going to live her life, and what's worse is she never finds out about it – she doesn't get an opinion on any of this. When the bet's outcome is about to be revealed, Raoul makes his case to Christine – and while his agreement to the bet is not acceptable, Raoul's points are valid. He wants to leave because the Phantom has from the start been manipulating them – which is true. He has coerced Christine by threatening to physically harm her loved ones. After Raoul's exit, the Phantom enters. He tells her that Raoul's love is not enough for her. Instead, she should sing for him, as it is her destiny – to finally let music overtake her. First off, the Phantom is still too focused on her voice. If you take away Christine's singing ability, there isn't much else the Phantom has ever focused on or loved about Christine. Perhaps her kindness – it's a strong quality she's always had. However, this is still just one part of her. He does not love the whole of her, and he expects her to be more of what he wants than who she really is. His case relies on the part of Christine he controlled and manipulated all those years ago. But, unsurprisingly, she sings for him. In a twist of fate, Christine is shot and dies in the Phantom's arms. This gives nearly everyone an unhappy ending: Christine is dead, Raoul has lost his whole family, and her son will now live with the Phantom, a manipulative recluse. The only person to benefit from this whole story is the Phantom. He received Christine's vow of love, got rid of Raoul, and now has a son. In the end, the abuser got everything he wanted, with little sacrifice or consequence on his part. This mess of attempted “star-crossed” lovers tries to blame a victim of abuse and force her to

become romantically involved with her abuser. It also takes away any personality she had in favor of fulfilling this unhealthy relationship, while enforcing the bias women face by popularizing it.

Stephanie Meyer's book *Twilight*, published in 2005, is considered by many to be one of the greatest modern love stories. However, the relationships found within the books are anything but great. We first find Bella, a seventeen-year-old high school student, who becomes fascinated by a boy in her grade – Edward. Through various events that involve him saving her life twice, they become a couple. The only twist is he's a vampire attracted to her blood. This is one of the several signs that their relationship isn't for the best. One of the qualities found in victims of abuse is that she's, "attracted to men who are forbidden" (Goodfriend). Bella's life is constantly in danger – if Edward loses his willpower, he could harm or even kill her. This doesn't seem to concern Bella; instead, she finds it exciting. And she doesn't see the obvious abuse she endures with Edward – it's so normal to her and she accepts it. One of the most common examples is isolation. Once they are together, he uses any means he can to get her alone – he isolates her from her father and her friends. He is "constantly forbidding her from seeing Jacob (a potential rival)" (Goodfriend). Jacob also happens to be one of her closest friends. At one point Edward even sabotaged her car so she couldn't leave her home. In addition to this, he stalks Bella. The second time, he was only able to save her from being assaulted because he followed her. And for several months he would sneak into her room and watch her sleep, without her knowledge. She later discovers this, finding nothing wrong with it, and still pursues a relationship with him. It should be mentioned that Bella has low self-esteem as well. She sees him as "out of her league" (Goodfriend), which gives Edward a good amount of power to treat her any way he wants to. This is most often why she doesn't put up much resistance to his unhealthy behavior. This enables him to succeed in becoming the main subject in her life. Edward also attempts to fully convert Bella to his lifestyle, taking away any traces of herself. He lavishes her with luxuries she continuously refuses, and in the final book, *Breaking Dawn*, published in 2008, her old, rusty car is replaced with a fancy new one that Edward buys for her. This symbolizes her full transition from her old self and into what Edward wants her to be. Overall, it is important to dissect the series and reveal its messages and how they affect its readers. What with the importance our society puts on beauty, an interesting thought is to imagine what the series would be like if we removed Edward's beauty. Would Bella have been interested him at all? Throughout the story, Edward is described as very attractive on multiple accounts by Bella. If we take that away, what changes? Most people are willing to ignore bad qualities because of beauty. Is it that we immediately assume the outside must be as good as the inside of a person? Are we too scared to look deeper because we might be wrong? How far are we willing to let ourselves be controlled by ignorance?

Not all abusive elements in relationships are ignored, however. In the case of Harley Quinn and the Joker from *DC Comics*, abuse is the main focus of their relationship. In the collection book, *Harley Quinn*, published in 2015, it is stated that Harleen Quinzel, an intern at Arkham Asylum, fell in love with the Joker, and she would often let him out of his cell when asked, even though he's a psychopath who has murdered countless people. She herself became admitted to the asylum after it was discovered what she had been doing. Eventually she escaped, and her only focus was to find the Joker and be with him. She then took on the alias Harley Quinn upon finding him. He accepts her as she proves useful in aiding him with his plans. However, he later traps her in rocket and sends her to her death, accusing her of, "distracting me from getting my

share of Gotham now that the getting's good!"(Dini 29) However, Harley survives this and is revived by Poison Ivy, who understands the pain of being used by a man. And so she gives Harley better agility and strength in order to get revenge on the Joker. Harley proceeds to do so, and is about to finally defeat him when he apologizes to her. She forgives him immediately and embraces him. The situation continues like this: Harley will go to great lengths to please the Joker, but he will find her actions annoying, though helpful, and attempt to kill her. She vows revenge, and once he apologizes, she forgives and forgets. Even though her enemies and close friends warn her against going back to him, Harley always does. She believes that they are meant to be together, simply because he charmed her while deceiving and using her. Having a focus and obsession of one thing is unhealthy, and in Harley's case leads to destruction. She puts herself in danger, often taking the fall for the Joker, and suffers psychological and physical abuse from him. However, there are still people who find this acceptable. It's just "how their relationship works". But that's the point – it shouldn't be a relationship at all. People find amusement from Harley's never-ending charade with the Joker. But what does it say about us as a society when we are okay with being entertained by abuse? What effect will it have on future generations who only understand what is being popularized, such as abusive couples like this?

Our culture has seen enough abuse that it has become normal for us to see it as endearing. Due to sexism, women are seen as weaker and more accepting of the actions of men. But at what cost are we willing to let these actions be encouraged? I was able to get away from the ideas that were ingrained into my head at a young age by studying other subjects and finally seeing that those "daring actions," were actually abusive. But we need more people to understand what it is they're taking in without question. In order to see progress in media, our mediums of entertainment should not be glossed over – instead, they should be analyzed critically. Things need to change – people need to see that they can be loved while still being their own selves, rather than loved for what they've changed. There are dominant/submissive relationships that are consensual, however, and this is not in opposition to them. They are usually based off of trust and listening to what the other partner wants. This is opposition to relationships that are controlling against one's wishes and attempt to lower the value someone sees in themselves. And if we do not fight against this, we are doomed to become victims of our own actions.

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