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**Is Everything Poisoned?:
Representations of Romantic Relationships
in Anna Todd's *After***

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12/06/2023

Statement of Intellectual Honesty

Your name: Ariadna Cota López

Title of assignment: “Is Everything Poisoned?: The Representation of Romantic Relationships in *After*”

I declare that this is a totally original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ariadna', with a large, stylized loop at the end.

12/06/2023

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Abstract: *After*, written by Anna Todd, is part of the fanfiction genre, the genre of YA romance novels and chick lit. This book was created on an online platform called Wattpad. *After* was the first novel from this platform to be published by an editorial house due to its success on the platform.

The main characters of this novel are Hardin and Tessa, a young man and woman who are opposites of one another. Nevertheless, they end up entangled in a 'toxic' relationship. I intend to determine what kinds of romantic relationships are found in *After*, how they are portrayed, and if all are toxic or abusive. Besides Hardin and Tessa, there are other characters in the book in normal romantic relationships that are overshadowed by the protagonists' conflicts. Hardin and Tessa's relationship is based on codependency and insecurities. They struggle creating healthy relationships because they are products of their parents' broken marriages, as supported by the study led by Ming Cui and Frank D. Fincham. To conduct this analysis, I will be employing the methods of close reading and literary analysis to confirm or refute my thesis.

Despite *After* being a literary success, there is almost no research conducted about it. Hence, I will focus on previous research on the genre of romance literature, like the one led by Catherine Roach about the idea of true love. These secondary sources consist of literary analysis, social studies, and psychological studies conducted by experts in their field such as Jayne Ann Stark.

Keywords: *After*, fanfiction, romantic literature, gaslighting, parenting.

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0. Introduction

0.1. An Introduction to Fanfiction

Fanfiction is a literary genre that comprises fiction written by fans of a work of fiction that take said work as a source of inspiration for an original story. Sometimes, said source of inspiration can be non-fictional. The most common subjects to write a fanfiction are: books, films, musicians (boy bands), anime, cartoons and video games. Its origin is found in the 1960's with the appearance of the *Star Trek* movies and the fanzines that were distributed with fanfictions of the *Star Trek* universe. This being said, there are works published in the nineteenth century that have a similar basis as fanfiction, such as *Old Friends and New Fancies*, a novel written in 1913 by Sybil G. Brinton, who was inspired by the work of Jane Austen, or *A New Alice in the Old Wonderland*, written by Anna M. Richards in 1895, that is inspired by the classic *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. In the case of Brinton's work, the novel takes place in the world created by Jane Austen incorporating some of the characters from her novels, like Elizabeth from *Pride and Prejudice* or Elinor from *Sense and Sensibility*, continuing some of their stories while also adding new characters and plotlines. Meanwhile, the work of Richards is a direct continuation of the original novel, although adding new characters and scenarios. Fanfiction must be understood as a labor of love for the original source of inspiration.

0.2. The Reading Platform Wattpad

After is the first novel by Anna Todd (1989), a young woman who began writing this fanfiction in an unconventional place, the online platform Wattpad. Wattpad is a platform that was created in 2006 originally for reading on a phone the books published on Project Gutenberg, an online library that contains, as of 2023, over 70.000¹ ebooks. The peak of the

¹ Information extracted from Project Gutenberg's home page <https://www.gutenberg.org/> Accessed 5 May 2023.

platform came with the boom of the iPhone and Blackberry in 2009, where both brands included stores where their users could download apps such as Wattpad. Four years later, Anna Todd, with her username Imaginator1D, began writing *After*, a fanfiction based on the boyband One Direction with Harry Styles as the novel's main character. The story quickly became popular and a year later she was offered a deal by Simon & Schuster to publish the novel, selling over 15 million copies. Additionally, in 2019, the book was adapted to film and was a huge success with over 57 million dollars² of net income. The success of the film assured the adaptation of the five book series to the big screen. There are other novels that started on Wattpad that have achieved similar success as *After*, like, for example, *The Kissing Booth* by Beth Reekles or *Through My Window (A Través de mi Ventana*, original title in Spanish) by Ariana Godoy, which were both adapted into films by Netflix. Nowadays, Wattpad has over 85 million monthly readers worldwide and over 600 million stories published in it. The figures show that, in a time where people read less and less, especially young people, Wattpad is a story of success since 90% of its readers belong to Gen Z³.

0.3. A Brief Outlook on *After*

After is not only a fanfiction, but it is also classified as a chick lit, a subgenre of romance literature. The chick lit genre features female protagonists and follows their stories in regards to their job, social relationships, romantic relationships and personal growth. Romance literature, as we know it today, has its origins in the romance novels written in the 18th and 19th centuries by authors such as the renowned Jane Austen. It is since then that the romance genre has been a source of expression, liberation and representation for women. Especially because it is a genre mostly written by women for women. According to a survey commissioned in 2017 by the RWA, the Romance Writers of America, 82% of the readers of

² Information extracted from [https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/After-\(2019\)#tab=summary](https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/After-(2019)#tab=summary) Accessed 5 May 2023.

³ Information extracted from Wattpad's Company page <https://company.wattpad.com/> Accessed 5 May 2023

romance literature define themselves as female (RWA, 2017). The romance genre is a literary genre so deeply rooted in femininity and the female gender that even some of its few male authors decide, or are advised, to publish under a female pseudonym. An example of this phenomenon is Leigh Greenwood, whose real name is Harold Lowry, and is the author of the romance series *Seven Brides*. Critics of chick lit and romance literature have argued that it perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces gender roles and the patriarchal expectations of women's behavior and interests. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the genre can provide a space for the voices of women to be expressed and celebrated with a feminist perspective embedded in these stories. The previously mentioned gender roles are an important aspect of this study because it affects how both the protagonists interact with one another. Gender roles are constructed by a set of expectations in regards to behaviors and responsibilities that men and women have to follow based on their gender identity. Patriarchal gender roles reinforce a system where men hold privileged positions in society.

I choose to conduct this research because there is not enough focus by scholars and proper research on the literature that interests young adults. Fanfiction is a phenomenon that has been overlooked and regarded as less than, just as it happens with romance literature and what is classified as chick lit. Conducting proper research can help to challenge these assumptions and demonstrate the complex and nuanced ways in which these genres engage with important themes and issues, like female empowerment, the search for identity or social and class disparities. It is necessary to conduct studies on these genres because they are important cultural phenomena and because they can help us understand contemporary popular culture and its significance in our society.

0.4. State of the Art

Since there is not much research done on *After*, I turned to previous research conducted on similar themes, but not specifically about this specific novel. *The Routledge Companion to*

Romantic Love (2021) and *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance* (1992) are both a collection of essays that explores romantic love, its historical and cultural contexts, and its impact on society. The two of them engage with issues related to love, power and identity. With a similar topic, the book written by Catherine M. Roach, *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* (2016) provides an insightful exploration of the romance genre and its significance within popular culture, and the article “The Portrayal of Women in Romance Novels” by Hellen Leedy, which deals with the way in which women have been portrayed in romance novels, as the title mentions.

Psychology research is as important for this essay as literature research to obtain a more complete understanding of all the aspects involved in the portrayal of toxic relationships. An important aspect that this essay discusses is gaslighting, which is the theme of “Gaslight, Misogyny, and Psychological Oppression” (2019), by Cynthia A. Stark, “Loving on the Edge” (2023), by Mary C. Lamia, and “Understanding Abuse: Types of Gaslighting” (2023), by Durham and Young. Moreover, I encountered research leaning towards a more scientific aspect of psychology that deals with the issues of parent-child relationship in regards to how parents affect their children’s view of love and romantic relationships (Cui and Fincham, 2010; Del Toro, 2012).

0.5. TFG Outline

Taking into account all the information presented, this study aims to understand if *After*’s characters are all involved in toxic relationships, what constitutes said relationships and what are the causes of them. I begin with the notion that Hardin and Tessa, the books’ main characters, are in a toxic relationship that is caused by the effect that their parents’ relationships, which are also toxic, have had on both of them. There is barely any research conducted by scholars on the novel *After*, which is surprising since it was published almost ten years ago and it has had tremendous success. The little research that has been published

does not relate to the theme that this analysis focuses on, except for the article written by Azzahra and Suhadi titled “Toxic Relationship in Anna Todd’s Wattpad Story *After*” (2021). Although this article deals with the same issues as this essay, it lacks a more profound analysis in regards to what are the sources of the toxic traits in their relationships.

Some of the limitations that have appeared during this analysis were that there is not enough information in the first book of the *After* saga about the other couples in the novel or their backgrounds, making it difficult to conduct a proper analysis on them. Other issues that have made it difficult to conduct this essay are the lack of scholarly work on Wattpad, fanfiction, chick lit and, especially, *After*.

Consequently, I chose to divide the research into two main aspects. The first chapter deals with the understanding of Tessa and Hardin’s relationship. This chapter covers how the traditional gender roles of romance literature affect the main characters, what is considered a toxic relationship and what aspects of said relationships are portrayed in the book. Lastly, it also discusses what is the contrary, a healthy relationship, and if Hardin and Tessa’s relationship shows any signs of being one. Chapter two focuses on answering the question of the origin and causes of abusive relationships, more specifically of the main character’s toxic relationship, and if it is actually their parents' relationship's impression on them as children.

1.Hardin and Tessa’s Relationship

1.1. Gender Roles and The Portrayal of the Main Characters

Gender roles are especially important in romance literature, since it is the most similar aspect in many romance novels, such as other best-selling fanfics like *City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare or *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James. While the writer’s stance on politics and class may vary, the manner in which men and women are portrayed has been consistent in the genre practically since its origins. According to Jayne Ann Krentz, the patriarchal roles of men and women are somewhat inverted, seeing as “the woman always wins. With courage, intelligence, and gentleness she brings the most dangerous creature on earth, the human male, to his knees. (...) she forces him to acknowledge her power as a woman.” (Krentz, 1992: 5). Krentz talks of the role of women as the heroine with whom the hero falls in love. This description lacks the acknowledgement of the power that men, or more specifically, the patriarchy have over women in real life and in these stories.

The gender power gap between men and women is still alarming nowadays despite all the milestones achieved, such as women being able to vote, entering the workspace and even becoming politicians, who ultimately have the power to change the system, amongst many more improvements. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that men still have more privileges than women, and even more so if we take into account aspects like ethnicity, age or disability. In many countries, like, for example, India, where we find many gruesome cases like the rape of Jyoti Singh in 2012⁴, there is a seeming impunity when abusing women. Sometimes, they are even the ones who are blamed and accused with questions like: What was she wearing? Did she drink alcohol? Why did she go with him? Why didn’t she fight back? Questions that were asked, for example, in the infamous case of “La Manada” where a young woman was raped

⁴ Information extracted from an article published in *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/world/asia/india-gang-rape-chennai.html> Accessed 2 May 2023

by a group of men in the celebrations of San Fermin in 2016 in Pamplona, Spain⁵. Helen Leedy, in an article published in the Michigan Sociological Review journal, summarized the plot for romance novels in a more critical manner:

The basic plot for most romantic novels is of a single, independently-wealthy woman (her money usually gained through inheritance), who becomes involved with an aggressive, self-centered man. She usually is minding her own business and he "spies" her, rapes her, and then, can't remove her from his mind. She resists him, at first, but is later carried away by the passion of the moment. She feels intense guilt over "giving in to the man" without the sanction of marriage. She longs to see him again, and looks for excuses to be near him. This love-hate relationship continues throughout the book, until the man finally "realises" his weakness and irrationality, and tells the beautiful "virgin" he loves her and can not continue without her. She, overwhelmed by him in general, thanks God he has made her an honest woman, and is joyous that she now has him to herself. The books end with the lovers in each other's arms, protesting undying love and life-long commitment. (Leedy, 1985: 62)

Many books, like the ones mentioned at the beginning of this section, have been written following the plot structure described in the previous example. Amongst those books there is *After*, Anna Todd's first book and the object of this analysis.

1.1.1. Hardin as the Romance Male Stereotype

Hardin, the male main character of *After*, is characterized in a similar fashion as the man Leedy describes as a stereotypical male character in a romance novel. He is aggressive and has issues controlling his emotions and his anger, as seen in chapter twenty-nine where, after Hardin's father tells him he is remarrying, he decides to go to Ken's house and starts breaking things like a little kid throwing a temper-tantrum. Hardin becomes progressively obsessed with Tessa, the female main character, but does not tell her he loves her until he thinks he is about to actually lose her in chapter sixty, after he refuses to acknowledge their relationship in front of everyone. Regardless, this obsession, which may at first seem like love or mere infatuation, is not healthy nor beneficial in any sense for our two characters, as we will dig into more in the next segment.

⁵ Information extracted from an article published in *The Huffington Post*.
https://www.huffingtonpost.es/entry/el-caso-de-la-manada-cuando-se-juzga-a-la-victima-y-no-al-agresor_es_5c8aca9be4b066940329693c.html Accessed 1 June 2023

Returning to Leedy's description of romance male characters, she says they rape their female counterparts and then they fall in love. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, to rape someone is to "force someone to have sex when they are unwilling, using violence or threatening behaviour" (Rape, 2023). Although Hardin does not rape Tessa at any point in the book, he has attitudes that are questionable, like, in chapter twenty two, where he pins Tessa to the wall by grabbing her wrists. This scene could be interpreted as abusive if it were not for the fact that Tessa, as the narrator, tells us that she wants him to kiss her again. She wants to feel his touch again because Hardin makes her feel something, she makes her feel alive. Doctor Mary C. Lamia explains how humans are attracted to the unknown, to what is exotic. She summarizes these kinds of relationships, like the one between Hardin and Tessa, with the sentence: "Drama can be mistaken for the excitement of love." (Lamia, 2023). Tessa has been confined within herself and quartered because of her mom's expectations of her. The moment she is able to be herself and starts to feel any kind of strong emotion, she confuses her own feelings. She then is not able to think rationally about what she is experiencing until she is outside these situations, like the one mentioned before with Hardin. Tessa tries to resist these urges, but ultimately lets her instincts take over, just like Leedy predicts.

1.1.2. Tessa as the Female Romance Stereotype

Tessa is also very similar to the stereotype for female characters in romance novels. She is a virgin, as is revealed in chapter fifteen during a game of truth or dare. Virginity was a typical attribute that writers chose for their female protagonists in the origins of the romance genre because, historically, women remained virgin until marriage. Women's main virtue was chastity and it reflected on their family's honor as much as on their worth. If a woman had sexual relations outside of wedlock, she would be cast aside by society and marked as damaged goods. Women were supposed to be chaste and pure, like the Virgin Mary, just as the name itself describes. Some branches of Christianity, such as Catholicism, have had a big

role in the conception of virginity in the Western World. Although Jesus Christ and his disciples were also virgins, it is the Virgin Mary alone who is a symbol of virginity. In these concepts formed around the era of the Romans and perpetuated through the middle ages, where Christianity was at its peak, it is where we find some of the basis of the patriarchal system where men were the central figure of society and family, while women had the duty to stay virgin until marriage. It is ultimately an aspect that is destined to please, yet again, a man, since homosexual relations were punished and regarded as sinful. Christianity did not only require people to be chaste until marriage but to only act on sexual desires for reproductive purposes. Nowadays, this has changed and women tend to lose their virginity at around 16 years old (Carpenter, 2001: 130). Nonetheless, there is still a stigma around women being sexual or even women who remain virgin for longer than is expected. Additionally, it is important to understand that virginity is a social construct based on heteropatriarchy and phallocentrism. The concept of virginity entails that a woman is no longer considered a virgin when her hymen is broken by a phallus. This explanation does not take into consideration the fact that the hymen may break by performing non-sexual activities.

Before Hardin enters her life, Tessa wears demure clothes, she is polite, a highly achieving student and wants to be married before having sex with anyone. Despite this, she gets hooked on Hardin's charms really quickly, even though he is everything she despises and the opposite of her with his tattoos, piercings and rudeness. Tessa tries to resist him but her efforts are in vain and she is even the one who starts their first kiss. Unconsciously, women are naturally predisposed to be attracted to bad boys. But that is not the only reason why. Different media bombard society with images idealizing stereotypical gender roles which end up being embedded into people's brains. Thus, later, when women search for a partner, they unconsciously feel more attracted to those stereotypes of strong, confident, rebellious men.

An example of these images are the perfume commercials. A more specific example of those commercials is the one for the perfume Pure XS⁶, by Paco Rabanne. In it, a young man, semi-naked, is behind in a room being spied on by a group of young women. He starts to fully undress and puts on the perfume, then the women start to yell and appear excited. The ad ends with him naked and putting perfume near his pubic area and the group of women collectively faint. These kinds of ads perpetuate the idea that women are at the mercy of these men, instead of being their own individuals with their own thoughts, capable of critical thinking.

Dr. Madeleine Fugère, an expert psychologist, claims that “Men with very masculine traits may have better quality genes, so it could be attractive to women on an unconscious evolutionary level” (qtd. in Cheney, 2020). Nevertheless, she makes a counterargument as well that “on a conscious level, I think most women recognize that bad boys don’t make good long-term partners.” (qtd. in Cheney, 2020) Although, her last statement is mostly speculative, it would then make sense then to assert that most women would not want someone with characteristics like that of Hardin for a long-term relationship.

1.1.3. Differences Between the Original Romance Plot and *After*’s Plot

An aspect that is different in this plot is that Tessa does not make excuses for seeing Hardin, but rather the other way around. Hardin appears in her room several times unannounced and fate brings them together in different situations, like them sharing the same literature class or Tessa becoming friends with Landon, Hardin’s stepbrother. She even tries to get him out of her life every time he hurts her emotionally, although she forgives him every time. Finally, this enemies-to-lovers does not end with the typical ‘Happily Ever After’ but rather with a cruel ending where Tessa finds out about the bet Hardin made with her friends to take her virginity. The term enemies-to-lovers is rather new, but what it entices is not.

⁶ The complete ad is available in the following link: <https://youtu.be/J9Y7CLmHhJc>

A story widely known in romance literature that could be part of the trope of enemies-to-lovers is *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. The plot of the enemies-to-lovers trope consists of an initial animosity or hatred between two people who, throughout the book, go back and forth about their feelings for each other until they end up together in the end. A plot that both *Pride and Prejudice* and *After* follow, which is a comparison that Anna Todd does a couple of times in the book itself, like, for example, on page 47 where Hardin and Tessa talk about Jane Austen's book and Hardin says: "A man who is rude and intolerable being made into a romantic hero? It's ridiculous. If Elizabeth had any sense, she would have told him to fuck off from the beginning." (Todd, 2013: 47)⁷. It is with the intent of irony that Todd makes Hardin say that, because not only does it create a bond between Mr. Darcy and Hardin, but it also gives the novel a shade of comedy, seeing that, without him knowing, he is cursing himself.

Between *After* and *Pamela*⁸, the first romance novel, almost three centuries have passed and, still, their plot is similar in some ways. Furthermore, their characters abide by the same gender roles and stereotypes. Pamela, after the first advances by Mr. B, tries to return to her parents to preserve her purity. In a sense, Tessa does the same, although not explicitly. After she and Hardin kiss a few times, she decides she wants to refocus on Noah because she does not want to "be anyone's friends with benefits. Ever." (Todd, 90). Noah has been Tessa's boyfriend through highschool and they are together when she moves to university and meets Hardin. They have known each other since they were kids and lived next to each other. Noah fits the prototype of boy-next-door, the perfect son-in-law who is an overall good guy, but also very mild and boring. Tessa and Noah have a connection more similar to that of a brother and sister than boyfriend and girlfriend.

⁷ From this point onwards, when quoting from *After*, I will only refer to the page and surname of the author.

⁸ *Pamela* or *Virtue Rewarded* is a novel published in 1740 and written by Samuel Richardson. It is considered the first romance novel ever written.

Another aspect in common between the two novels is the fact that both women try to escape their situation with these men time and time again, unable to do so. In addition to these plot similarities, both women are virgins who wish to remain virgin until marriage, which is a rather odd thing to find nowadays but not in the times of *Pamela*. Although the genre has evolved along with society in regards to gender roles, it is curious how these two novels three hundred years apart still have so many things in common. What this entails is that, in fact, traditional gender roles such as the ones portrayed in *Pamela* are still part of our society. Hence, in contemporary romance literature too.

1.2. The Toxic Behavior Between Hardin and Tessa

Hardin and Tessa's relationship is not a healthy relationship. A toxic relationship is described as "one where your well-being is threatened in some way, whether emotionally, psychologically or physically" (Evans, 2023). On a similar note, EIGE, the European Institute for Gender Equality, defines Intimate Partner Violence as "physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence between current or former spouses as well as current or former partners." (EIGE, 2023). Consequently, a toxic relationship is a relationship with IPV. The CDC⁹ recognizes four types of IPV: physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (CDC, 2023).

In the relationship between Tessa and Hardin, the most present of the four types, and the only one, is psychological aggression, which is the most common of the four in real life. Stalking and sexual violence are nowhere present in their relationship. Hardin is, surprisingly, especially careful when they have sex, moving at Tessa's pace in that area. Since she is a virgin, he asks her questions like "is that something you want?" (Todd, 261) or "do you want me to stop?" (Todd, 430) to make sure she is comfortable at all times. Hardin acting this way is most likely because of his mom being raped in front of him when he was younger, which is

⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is the United States organization that protects public health.

an event that will be discussed further in chapter two. In regards to physical violence, Hardin is a very explosive and irascible person. He quickly jumps to break things and fight people, as in the incident previously mentioned in his father's house. These destructive behaviors are connected to the notion of toxic masculinity. It is a set of harmful behaviors that are based on the patriarchal idea of men having to be strong, thus aggressive, dominant and impassive. Still, none of that physical anger is directed towards Tessa at any point in the novel. There is even a moment where Hardin is arguing with Landon, almost hitting him, "but once he realizes it's me [Tessa], he drops his hands and curses under his breath" (Todd, 129). Hardin never hit Tessa because, to him, that would be crossing a line. Psychological bruises do not show, but physical ones do. In a sense, because he does not leave a physical mark on Tessa, he does not see himself hurting her or think of himself as being abusive. As if not hitting her atones him for the other kinds of abuse.

1.2.1. Gaslighting and its Types in *After*

Hardin may not hurt Tessa physically, but he does hurt her emotionally and psychologically. One of the ways in which Hardin psychologically hurts Tessa is through gaslighting. Cynthia Stark describes gaslighting in three ways that together form a complete definition of this phenomenon:

Gaslighting occurs when someone denies, on the basis of another's social identity, her testimony about a harm or wrong done to her [...], a form of wrongful manipulation and, indeed, a form of emotional abuse [...], the aim of gaslighting is to get another to see her own plausible perceptions, beliefs, or memories as groundless. (Stark, 2019: 221).

According to the South African College of Applied Psychology, gaslighting can occur in four different forms which are not mutually exclusive and that are all based on dishonesty: lying, manipulating reality, scapegoating and coercion (Durham and Young, 2023).

1.2.1.1. Gaslighting: Lying

The main reason for which Hardin gaslights Tessa is to hide the bet he made with his friends about her virginity. Hardin lies to hide that from Tessa, but he also lies to his friends about his relationship with Tessa. Like, for example, when Tessa realizes Hardin has not told anyone they are living together at the end of the novel when Steph tells her “Hardin said you changed dorms, that your mom flipped out on you or something” (Todd, 570). Although Hardin begins to actively lie at the end of the novel, he prefers to avoid explaining himself and telling the truth while hiding behind a facade of mystery. Like, for example, even at the beginning of their relationship, he is weary of opening up to any question Tessa asks him about himself. When they are at the lake on their first date, Hardin tells Tessa “If you come in the water, I will answer one of your intrusive questions. Any question you want, but only one” (Todd, 109), playing the role of enigmatic person to maintain Tessa's interest as well as controlling what she gets to know about him. Meanwhile, Tessa opens fully to him early on when she tells him “My alcoholic dad left us when I was ten, and my mother worked her ass off to make sure I could go to college” (Todd, 60), but he does not reciprocate that until almost at the very end of the novel where he tells Tessa the origins of his nightmares (Todd, 523), which is him witnessing his mother being raped.

However, Hardin is not the only liar of the two. Tessa does lie and hides her relationship with Hardin from Noah too, when they start to hookup. Infidelity is something cheaters want to lie about and hide from their significant other. Lying would be the lesser evil of the four aspects that constitute gaslighting, since it is an act that practically all humans have committed at some point in their lives, to different degrees, depending on what is lied about. In Tessa and Hardin's case, lying about manipulating someone into having sex with someone else could even be considered a crime of sexual abuse. According to RAINN¹⁰

¹⁰ It is a non-profit organization from the United States of America that works for the eradication of sexual assault and provides different kinds of aid and support for victims of sexual assault.

(Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network), forcing someone to engage in any kind of sexual activity, even if there is no penetration, is considered sexual assault¹¹. Sex without direct consent is penalized by law in many countries, like Spain, Finland or Ireland¹². Nonetheless, it is still legal in other countries where Sharia Law is enforced, like Afghanistan or Iran, but also in other European countries, like Romania, Austria or Bulgaria.

1.2.1.2. Gaslighting: Manipulation of Reality

Manipulation of reality, according to Stark, “consists in getting someone to doubt her¹³ testimony by challenging its credibility using two tactics: “sidestepping” (dodging evidence that supports her testimony) and “displacing” (attributing to her cognitive or characterological defects).” (Stark, 2019: 221). This aspect of gaslighting leads to the victim losing their self-esteem and confidence. They start to believe that they are to blame and that they are less than their partner. This is sometimes intertwined with moments where the perpetrator does acknowledge the victim’s reality when they are about to leave the relationship to reintroduce the idea that it is ‘not as bad as it seems’.

Hardin uses this method of gaslighting to hide his true intentions with Tessa and to make her doubt herself so that she does not leave him when he begins to have actual feelings for her. An example of that kind of manipulation is the fight they have in chapter sixty, where Hardin almost kisses Molly in front of Tessa and he tells her “You’re overreacting” (Todd, 324) and “Girlfriend? You thought you were my girlfriend?” (Todd, 325). He completely disregards Tessa’s feelings and makes her think she is not viewing reality as it is, which makes her feel like “I’m [Tessa] already humiliated” (Todd, 345) because, previously, he told

¹¹ Information extracted from RAINN’s website:

<https://www.rainn.org/articles/sexual-assault#:~:text=The%20term%20sexual%20assault%20refers,Fo ndling%20or%20unwanted%20sexual%20touching>

¹² Information extracted from the website of International Amnesty:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/12/consent-based-rape-laws-in-europe/>

¹³ I would argue that gaslighting, although women being typically more affected by it, can occur to anyone regardless of gender.

her “You [Tessa] make me want to date, you make me want to be better” (Todd, 269) and she believed his words to be true. In this fragment, as Stark describes, Hardin commits displacing to manipulate Tessa into thinking she is delusional and that she had imagined things between them that were not truly happening, which, as discussed before, is not the truth. Moreover, it is also noticeable how, at that same moment, Hardin also sidestepped by overlooking all the facts that Tessa kept yelling at him about all the things he said that made her think he wanted a relationship with her.

Even so, Stark also warns that manipulation “is, by definition, intentional in the following sense: the manipulator always has an aim. He is attempting to get someone to do or to feel something. Nevertheless, he may be unaware that he is doing so.” (Stark, 2019: 223). Therefore, it is not always certain that gaslighting is done intentionally with full awareness of the consequences of the perpetrator’s actions, but that can never take away the fact that it affects and hurts the victim.

1.2.1.3. Gaslighting: Scapegoating

The third way by which gaslighting can occur is by scapegoating. The term refers to blame shifting. The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as “the act of blaming a person or group for something bad that has happened or that someone else has done” (Scapegoating, 2023). In regards to gaslighting, it would occur by not accepting the blame when doing something wrong, blaming other people outside the relationship or their partner and it tends to be accompanied by the abuser turning themselves into a victim. By doing so, they deflect their blame by defending themselves and act as if they are the ones being attacked. Although Hardin, when he is finally confronted with the truth of his actions, does not deflect blame and accepts the consequences, he does sometimes, during their tumultuous relationship, play the victim. Like, for example, in chapter sixty-seven. After yet another fight between Hardin and Tessa, he tells Tessa he does not love her and mocks her by saying she likes being rejected, to

which she responds by trying to leave, but he starts acting as the victim and says “You always leave me; you left me on the porch earlier when I begged you for another chance. I told you I love you, and you rejected me.” (Todd, 369). One of the key aspects of gaslighting is making the other person feel as if they are the ones at fault for everything wrong with their relationship, which Hardin is an expert at. The fact that Tessa is under Hardin's illusion becomes noticeable in his fight with Dan. At that moment she thinks “I can’t even be angry with him because all of this is my fault” (Todd, 477). Here Tessa has already been subjected to plenty of Hardin’s tactics and is very representative of the way victims think when they are in an abusive relationship.

1.2.1.4. Gaslighting: Coercion

The last aspect of gaslighting that we will discuss is coercion. It is the aspect of gaslighting that summarizes all the toxic behavior discussed previously. Coercion, in regards to abusive relationships, occurs when one of the partners forces the other to do something that they are not willing to do, either by force, threats or psychological manipulation. As we discussed earlier in the introduction of IPV, the most common is psychological manipulation. It is also more detrimental to the victims since “women report that the psychological victimization they endure has a more negative impact on them than the physical victimization they experience, reporting increased feelings of shame, depression and loss of self-esteem.” (Lawrence et al, 2009: 20). Hardin coerces Tessa into being together and staying with him, thus becoming the basis of their whole relationship. We see Hardin manipulating Tessa almost constantly in their relationship, like, for example, when he appears in Tessa’s room and forces her to let him stay the night, telling her “Besides, you wouldn’t want me to drive back drunk , would you?” (Todd, 207), despite Tessa telling him several times he can not stay in her room.

Another way by which Hardin controls Tessa's life and coerces her into doing what he wants is through money. He holds power over her by buying her a car and paying for the house where they live together after Carol, Tessa's mother, threatens to stop paying for her accommodation at university. He also holds over her the fact that Ken, Hardin's father, got her a job at Vance, as if she owed him that and did not get it because of her own abilities. This kind of abuse is known as financial abuse and it is one of the most common reasons for women to not leave an abusive relationship, since they depend on their partner economically. According to the NNEDV, it occurs in 99% of domestic violence cases¹⁴.

As their relationship progresses, Tessa and Hardin become very attached to each other, reaching the point of codependency. We see signs of this when Hardin threatens Tessa not to leave him in chapter ninety, when he yells "Don't you dare try and leave me" (Todd, 520) quickly followed by "Tell me you aren't going to leave me, he pleads" (Todd, 520). This shows us how scared Hardin is about losing her. But just as he is scared, so is Tessa. Even early in the novel, Tessa admits that "Hardin is like a drug; each time I take the tiniest bit of him, I crave more and more. He consumes my thoughts and invades my dreams." (Todd, 147). They become obsessed with one another and enter a loop of fighting and sex that only ends when the truth of the bet is revealed. Their codependency is formed through a phenomenon called trauma bonding. The scientific definition of trauma bonding is "the notion that strong emotional attachments are formed by intermittent abuse" (Dutton and Painter, 1993: 105). As we have seen through the different ways Hardin gaslights Tessa, this kind of traumatic bonding does occur in *After*, and it is a phenomenon that the scientific community and scholars have studied profoundly. Nevertheless, the trauma by which Tessa and Hardin become extremely attached to one another is the notion that these bonds are created through their shared trauma. In their case, it is the trauma of their parents having

¹⁴ Information extracted from NNEDV (National Network to End Domestic Violence) website *About Financial Abuse* <https://nnedv.org/content/about-financial-abuse/> Accessed 7 May 2023

turbulent relationships and them being stranded by at least one of the two parents. In chapter two it will be explained further.

1.2.2. What is a Healthy Romantic Relationship Then?

Having established what a toxic relationship is, it should also be noted what a healthy romantic relationship entails. Although there is not a clear manual of what a healthy relationship should look like, there are some characteristics which are key: open communication, trust and mutual intimacy. Within open communication, both partners have to listen to what their partner tells them and feel heard by their significant other. Without communication, feelings are kept hidden and start to accumulate. It is then that conflicts arise. When there is open communication, it is possible to work through disagreements. Hardin and Tessa seem to want to try to fix things to stay together, but instead of talking, they recur to sexual intimacy. In chapter eighty-four, when they stop fighting and their anger turns to lust, Tessa narrates “I know there are more things to be said, more problems to be solved, but right now all I want is to get lost in Hardin and forget about tonight” (Todd, 481). At the beginning of the next chapter, Tessa also describes how she “can sense all of his anger and frustration being transferred into lust and affection” (Todd, 482), which is not a healthy way to love someone.

Another big issue in their relationship that serves as proof that theirs is not a healthy relationship is the lack of trust. In this case, both of them have outbursts of jealousy. Hardin is jealous at first of Noah and then later of Zed. Meanwhile, Tessa is jealous of, mainly, Holly, but also any girl that she sees near Hardin. These kinds of reactions show that they do not trust each other and that they have issues with their own self-esteem, especially Hardin, who time and time again expresses “I [Hardin] don’t deserve you [Tessa]” (Todd, 446). He does not feel he is worthy of being with Tessa, who he has on a pedestal as perfect. This does not take away from the fact that he diminishes her and her feelings regularly. It is no surprise they

do not trust each other since their relationship began with Tessa cheating on her boyfriend and Hardin lying about his intentions at first and keeping the truth from her.

When it comes to other couples in the book, like Landon and Dakota, Steph and Tristan or Vance and Kimberly, there does not seem to be enough information about any of them to truly analyze if theirs is a toxic or healthy relationship. At first glance, and in contrast with the relationship between Hardin and Tessa, all the other romantic relationships of the secondary characters in *After* seem less turbulent and healthier. But as Anna Todd mentioned in an interview, “People can think that Hardin’s a bad example – but he’s not *supposed* to be a good example for a boyfriend. (...) I’m writing books to tell stories. (...) I don’t really write to send any kind of messages. It’s just the story that I’m telling.” (Nicolau, 2019). At the end of the day, *After* is a fiction book with characters that make poor choices that reflect situations that happen in real life, but in any case, it is not a guide about how to date.

2. The Causes Behind the Toxicity

Toxic or abusive relationships are detrimental to the victims of said relationships as they affect them physically and/or psychologically. There is always a cause behind those toxic attitudes, whether the person is conscious or not. It is important to understand that these causes are mere risk factors. As a consequence, each of the aspects that will be mentioned is not an assurance that every person who suffers from them will be involved in an abusive relationship. Nevertheless, they are more likely to eventually become involved in one if they experience any of the aspects that will be discussed. The risk factors for an abusive relationship can be divided into two main groups: external factors and personal factors. The external factors are those factors that are external to the individual but that can have an impact on their behavior or decisions. Meanwhile, personal factors refer to personal characteristics, traits, or behaviors that increase a tendency to certain negative outcomes or experiences.

2.1. The Influence of Parents in Romantic Relationships

External risk factors shape the social and psychological environment in which the relationship develops, which then may foster abuse. The belief and acceptance of traditional gender norms is an ERF¹⁵ that affects the way in which men and women interact. A patriarchal outlook on life tends to go hand in hand with misogyny since, as discussed earlier in this essay, patriarchy reinforces a world where men are the leaders and the ones who hold power and not women. The patriarchy also expects that women must fulfill roles related to traditional gender stereotypes, such as nursing or teaching. These are jobs that entail taking care of others, a task that is bestowed on women since they are the ones who are supposed to, according to patriarchal values, tend to the household and children. A relationship formed with these values is already an abusive one because one of the two partners has and seeks to

¹⁵ I will be using the abbreviation ERF to refer to External Risk Factors from this point onward.

hold power over the other partner. In a heterosexual relationship, the role of abuser tends to be fulfilled by the male partner, for this ERF to be considered a risk factor based on traditional gender norms. Although women can be abusive in a romantic relationship, it only accounts for 1 in 4 cases of reported domestic violence and only 1 in 9 males¹⁶ have experienced it, in contrast to the 1 in 4 females who express the same¹⁷. A related ERF is the weak sanctions against IPV. Many victims feel unprotected by the justice system because of the length of judicial processes, because of the difficulty of finding tangible proof and because of the tendency of society to blame victims instead of providing resources and support. As a consequence, abusers feel entitled to act as they please and are unafraid of the consequences they may face. An example of this response of abusers is the tendency to violate restraining orders, which fluctuates at around 30%¹⁸ of every civil protection order.

An aspect that may influence who a person is going to become is where and how they grow up. This entails education, family environment, neighborhood and economy. All of these factors tend to be related in the sense that with a low income there is not much choice about where to reside or what kind of education children receive. This tends to lead to living in working-class neighborhoods, where criminality is higher, and children attending schools with low funding and where teachers are stretched thin. Low income also creates tension in a family environment as it creates anxiety when taking care of a household with few resources, like in the case of Tessa's family. This combination of ERFs leaves few chances for children who grow up in those conditions to break that cycle and improve their life, although not impossible.

¹⁶ Not specified if these men were in a heterosexual or homosexual relationship.

¹⁷ Statistics extracted from the "Nonfatal Domestic Violence 2003-2012" report conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, part of the U.S. Department of Justice. <https://ncadv.org/STATISTICS> Accessed 10 May 2023

¹⁸ Information extracted from the "Civil Protection Orders: Victim's Views on Effectiveness" report conducted by the National Institute of Justice, part of the U.S. Department of Justice. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles/fs000191.pdf> Accessed 10 May 2023

In the case of *After* and its characters, they are somewhat affected by this lastly mentioned ERF. It is more significant in the character of Tessa because, when her father leaves her and her mother, he leaves them without the main source of income. This has affected the way Tessa views money and relationships, as is shown in chapter seventy-nine, where she is reluctant to move in with Hardin because she fears having to rely on somebody else and being left stranded like her mother was. On the other hand, Hardin is more comfortable with money, because even though his mother does not have an abundance of it back in London, his father has a lot of it and tries to buy Hardin's love with it. Although it does not work, Hardin takes advantage of that and, similarly, tries to make Tessa stay with him by paying for her car and the house that they live in together, as we previously discussed.

Traditional gender norms do affect the way they behave and see themselves, as discussed in chapter one as well. Hardin tends to act as a strong man who seeks to protect Tessa and control her. He uses sex as a tool to dominate her, since he is more experienced than her. In chapter eighty-five he demands "You are going to listen to me from now on. Am I right? (...) Tell me you will listen to me or I won't let you come" (Todd, 484), withholding sex as a way to manipulate her into doing what he wants. Not only that, but he takes advantage that Tessa is in a vulnerable position to get his way. It is not just Hardin who has internalized traditional gender roles, but Tessa as well. She tends to demonstrate that with every interaction she has with Molly, especially when she narrates her thoughts of her with comments like "She is wearing a tank top and a leather skirt. It's only Tuesday and she's already almost used her skank quota for the week. She should save that stuff for the weekends." (Todd, 309). The way Tessa describes Molly exhibits her internalized patriarchal values in regards to the idea that women should be demure and maidenly instead of openly sexual and bold. It also reinforces the idea that women have to compete if they like the same man. Although Tessa acts shy and coy most of the time, when she feels threatened by Molly,

she acts out of character saying things like “I’m not as adept as you at getting drunk and hanging all over every guy in the place” (Todd, 327), thus, slut-shaming Molly.

The fact that both Hardin and Tessa have ongoing relationships, him with Molly and her with Noah, when they begin their own relationship, can be considered an ERF. It is considered a risk factor because it is an external aspect that creates problems within their relationship, as it connects to personal risk factors that will be discussed in the following part of this essay. Even though both Hardin and Tessa end up cutting off their relationships with both of them, it continues to be a problem throughout the novel, as jealousy and mistrust remains to be one of the biggest problems they have to overcome but never truly accomplish. In their jealousy there is the combination of many of their toxic traits as a couple: lack of trust and possessiveness, which stems from low self-esteem, and, in the case of Hardin, psychological manipulation that leads to isolating the victim, Tessa. In chapter ninety-six, it is when Tessa’s isolation is most clear, since Hardin has managed to not only separate Tessa from her mother and tried to do the same with Noah, but he also has managed to distance her from Steph and his friends so that neither Tessa nor them know what is actually going on. In the sense that Tessa does not discover the bet and his friends do not know he is actually in love with her.

Jealousy is connected as well with the matter that Tessa is more predisposed for a committed relationship. Chapter one already discussed that Hardin is also reluctant to open up to Tessa, but that is because he is afraid of being vulnerable in any kind of way. To achieve that, he puts on a facade of ‘bad boy’ to present himself as a tough guy who does not care about anyone or anything, but in reality, and as Tessa peels his layers throughout the novel, Hardin is merely scared of being hurt. He avoids emotional attachment as he fears rejection and thinks he is not worthy of Tessa’s love. Again, this all relates to one of the main causes of their toxicity, Hardin’s low self-esteem as a result of his father abandoning him as a child. At

the same time, he and his environment acknowledge that “Hardin doesn’t date. He fucks with a lot of girls, but he doesn’t date anyone. Ever.” (Todd, 51), as Steph mentions to Tessa. A healthy relationship depends on trust, as discussed in the previous chapter, and without it, there is only room for hostility.

2.2. Personal Risk Factors For Abusive Relationships

Just as there are External Risk Factors, there are also Personal Risk Factors. PRF¹⁹ are the characteristics of an individual that can increase the possibility of becoming a victim or perpetrator of an abusive relationship. Since these factors are one person’s behavior and psychology, they tend to be connected. The aspects which can lead to a person entering a toxic relationship are linked to a general poor mental health and can present in a variety of forms. Although diagnosed mental diseases can be a PRF, this study will focus on specific derivative symptoms of these diseases.

The origin of poor mental health can be past trauma. Traumatic experiences vary widely in their sources; from physical or sexual abuse, to accidents, to loss of loved ones or any life-threatening situations. But they can also be distressing experiences that leave an impression on an individual’s emotional well-being. These experiences can be, for instance, bullying, psychological abuse, neglect or betrayal. These kinds of incidents tend to continue to affect people who go through them for a long time after they occur, some even acquiring a disorder called post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD for short. Symptoms of PTSD include flashbacks, recurring nightmares, avoidance of triggering situations, emotional numbness, blurred memories, irritability and outbursts of anger, and difficulty concentrating (Shalev, 2001: 5). All of these symptoms can be considered PRF individually, since they affect how a person will interact with other people.

¹⁹ I will be using the abbreviation PRF to refer to Personal Risk Factors from this point onward.

What can even exacerbate trauma and the symptoms just mentioned, are unhealthy coping mechanisms. A survey conducted by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, found that “in those with lifetime MDD²⁰, 40% had an alcohol use disorder and 17% had a drug use disorder” (qtd. in Davis, 2008: 14-15). It is even higher in adolescents with “over 60 percent of adolescents in community-based substance use disorder treatment programs also meet diagnostic criteria for another mental illness.” (NIDA, 2022: 2). Relying on alcohol and drugs when one is suffering mentally, only leads to further damaging oneself and adding more problems to an already existing one. Although many try to escape their thoughts and feelings with these substances, reality remains there and so do their issues when the high ends. This is what Hardin tends to do on many occasions in *After*. He only drinks when he wants to avoid his feelings and the memories that surface from his trauma, which only leads to him becoming more aggressive and impulsive.

Low self-esteem is another PRF that can lead to being entangled in a toxic relationship, either as the victim or the abuser. It is the idea of being less or unworthy of the respective partner and then results in unhealthy behavior. In the abuser, it causes fear of rejection, fear of abandonment and lack of trust in their significant other. Low self-esteem in the perpetrator of an abusive relationship poses as physical and/or psychological abuse similar to the types described in chapter one. In the victim, it can result in emotional dependence on their partner and insecurity, which gives the abuser free rein to manipulate that person and control them as they please for their own benefit, as analyzed in the character of Hardin.

Tessa and him fit perfectly in the PRF descriptions of victim and abuser. The end of chapter one explains how Hardin feels he is not worthy of Tessa, which is why he is also so scared that she is going to leave him at some point. This is a clear example of low self-esteem

²⁰MDD stands for Major Depression Disorder.

as PRF for an abusive partner. On the other hand, there is Tessa, the victim. She also has a low self-esteem, she seeks validation from others and thinks she is not as physically attractive as other girls, as she shows in the first sexual interaction they have by the lake. Tessa expresses her feelings towards herself and her body when she narrates “No one has ever seen me this exposed before, and Hardin has seen so many girls, girls much better looking than me. My hands move to cover my body” (Todd, 115). It is only after Hardin positively reinforces her that she is beautiful that she is able to believe that, giving him full control of the way she views herself.

Hardin also possesses a characteristic common in abusive partners, substance abuse. But he is not the only character that engages in this behavior. Although it does not happen during the timeline of the novel, both Tessa’s father, Richard, and Hardin’s father, Ken, were alcoholics when they were still married and both characters were children. It is not until later in the saga that it is revealed why both men decided to start to drink, which in both cases is due to marital and financial problems. Although Hardin, at first, tells Tessa he does not drink, later in the novel she realizes that “every time he drinks there is a reason behind it. He doesn’t just drink for fun.” (Todd, 423). Hardin drinks to avoid situations that trigger him, with confrontations with his father and the fear of losing Tessa being the main triggers.

The anger that Hardin feels towards his father is very intense because he blames him for his mother’s rape. Trish, Hardin’s mother, was raped in front of him when he was seven years old because his father got drunk and fought a group of soldiers at a bar. To get back at him, they went to his house to get revenge, but they found Trish instead and, although it is not explained explicitly²¹, it is understood that they raped her. Meanwhile, Hardin was trying to get them off of her and took care of her after that (Todd, 523). This trauma has never left Hardin as it is the source of his nightmares, a symptom of his PTSD. Hardin also has

²¹ Hardin narrates to Tessa the incident of her mother’s rape in chapter ninety, when he explains to her what is the origin of his nightmares.

difficulty controlling his outbursts of anger and tends to use violence as a problem-solving tool. He especially gets physically aggressive when he gets triggered, like in the scene discussed in chapter one that takes place in Ken's house or when he fights Zed at a party for taking Tessa for a date to the bonfire. These are all clear signs of a person that is not mentally stable and that, although he says he would never physically hurt Tessa, is very likely to become an abuser, as violence is the only way he knows to fix a problem.

2.3. The Influence of Parents in Romantic Relationships

Mothers and fathers play a critical role in the formation of their children's development, including their attitude and behavior in regards to romantic relationships. The kind of relationship parents and children have, their levels of attachment as well as the parenting styles, will also affect them as adults in regards to the manner in which they approach romantic relationships and form emotional connections. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the family environment is an ERF that influences whether a person can come to be involved in an abusive relationship.

2.3.1. Parenting Styles and Their Different Effects on Children

There are four types of parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and uninvolved. The three first styles of parenting were defined by the renowned developmental psychologist, Diana Baumrind²². The fourth, uninvolved or neglectful parenting, was added by Maccoby and Martin²³ when they expanded the previous research by Dr. Baumrind. These styles of parenting differ in the kind of emotional affection the parent provides, the level of control, rules and punishments they enforce, and the level of expectations for their children. Authoritarian parenting is the most restrictive and controlling of these styles of parenting and,

²² Baumrind, Diana. "Child care practices anteceding three patterns of preschool behavior". *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, no. 75, vol. 1, 1967, pp.43-88.

²³ Maccoby, Eleanor E. and John A. Martin. "Socialization in the context of the family: parent-child interaction". *Handbook of Child Psychology*, vol. 4, pp. 1-101.

at the other end of the spectrum, is permissive parenting. Uninvolved parenting is not even in the spectrum because there is no active involvement in the children's life and development.

A study conducted by Monica del Toro illustrates how studies have found that “authoritative parents tend to have a high quality relationship with their child with equal amounts of warmth and demandingness, while authoritarian parents do not” (Del Toro, 2012: 1). The combination of both emotional affection, open communication and boundaries of authoritative parenting, creates the perfect balance that children need to grow up with freedom to become their own persons and be self-reliant but with the support and guidance of their parents. The manner in which parents and children form bonds is important because, as Del Toro mentions in her research, “children who experience a secure relationship with their parents will develop a ‘mold’ for future close relationships that includes sensitive and responsive attachment. Children who experience an insecure relationship with their parents will develop an anxious attachment due to inconsistent responsiveness” (Del Toro, 2012: 2). This statement is based on attachment theory which was developed by John Bowlby, a renowned psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. It suggests that the quality of early relationships with one's parents sets the foundation for that person's expectations, beliefs, and behaviors in future relationships.

In that sense, authoritarian parenting is not beneficial for a child's education in regards to emotional intelligence and communicative skills. Authoritarian parenting can be adequate to raise a child who respects authoritative figures (teachers, parents, and/or other adult figures) and who achieve great success academically and in their future careers. Nevertheless, that child will grow up with decreased creativity, difficulties making decisions, reduced autonomy and a tense or an unaffectionate relationship with their parents. Children who grow up with affective deficiencies grow up to be adults who struggle with meaningful relationships, who have a negative perception of themselves, who have trouble identifying

their emotions and who can even develop depression and/or anxiety. All of these repercussions of growing up with authoritarian parents have to be considered both as ERFs, because they are the result of the family environment, and PRFs, as they affect how that person will behave in society as well. Therefore, their chances of having poor romantic relationships are higher than those who grow up with authoritative parents.

In *After*, the parents of our main characters engage in three of these four parenting styles. First, there is Carol with authoritarian parenting. Carol controls, or wants to control, every aspect of Tessa's life, which only leads to hostility from Tessa towards her mother. This response is very typical in authoritarian parenting as it was explored previously. Opposite to Carol's parenting, there is Trish, Hardin's mother. Although she does not appear in the novel as a present character, by the way Hardin talks about her, their relationship and the way he grew up, it is understood that Trish chose the permissive style of parenting to give Hardin the love he lacks from his father and to give herself space to deal with her trauma. Trish is trying to deal with her own emotions about that incident, which is hard enough, but does not know how to tackle that issue with Hardin and how it has affected him. Instead, she gives him the freedom of permissive parenting so that he deals with it on his own. Lastly, both male parents' type of parenting would fall into the category of uninvolved, since they choose to abandon their respective families. This combination of parenting is detrimental for Hardin and Tessa because it creates an imbalance in the way they are being raised. Hardin needed more rules and structure and Tessa needed more love and affection.

2.3.2. The Bond Between Mothers and Fathers Individually With Their Children

The specific bonds that create mothers and fathers with their sons and daughters tend to be quite different. The relationship between fathers and daughters is very important since several studies have found that "fathers have a profound impact on their daughters' body image, clinical depression, eating disorders, self-esteem, and life satisfaction" (Rarick, 2019: 2). The

aspect of a woman's development that is most affected by fathers is sexual development. When a father is not involved in his daughter's life, she will most likely resort to filling that vacancy of love with harmful substitutes. Commonly, this phenomenon is known as 'daddy issues'. Women who have 'daddy issues' tend to acquire unhealthy relationship patterns and be very emotionally extreme, either through emotional detachment or clinginess. Timothy Rarick mentions in an article that "there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that high levels of father involvement (regardless of dad's marital status) are predictive of high levels of intimacy, commitment, and trust in young female adults' romantic relationships; whereas low levels of father involvement are predictive of the opposite" (Rarick, 2019: 3). Hence, it is crucial for fathers to remain in their daughter's life, regardless if they divorce their spouses, because it will help in their development.

Tessa is a clear example of how a father abandoning their child can lead them to seek the love they are missing in someone who is harmful to them. This is where Tessa's lack of self-esteem is rooted, and where the origin of her attraction to Hardin is found. She is attracted to Hardin because he at first is not interested in her and when he is actually interested in her, he sends her mixed signals of being attracted to her as well as of insulting and rejecting her. In chapter sixty-two, after their fight at a party which ended with Hardin yelling he loves Tessa, Hardin takes back what he said by saying "'You're right, I don't. I don't love you, I was just adding to the drama of the whole thing.' He laughs lightly. I know he didn't mean it, but that doesn't make it hurt any less." (Todd, 335). This reinforces her view of herself of not being worthy of love, created on the basis of her father 'rejecting' her.

Nonetheless, it is not only the father who affects a child's view of themselves. The mother-daughter relationship is also very important. Same-gender parent-child relationships, meaning mother-daughter and father-son, play an important role in who the children will grow up to be, as their same-gender parent serves as a role model for themselves. When a

parent is loving, nurturing and has open communication with their child, they will have a positive self-image of themselves and will develop strong social skills. On the other hand, if the parent-child relationship is strained and with unhealthy communication, the child will have self-doubt, low self-esteem, inability to express themselves and will have difficulty maintaining healthy relationships.

Hardin does not think he is good enough because his father did not give him love when he was young and, after remaking his life, Hardin does not fit in his life with his angry outbursts. Hardin is a reminder of who Ken used to be, something he does not want to be reminded of. Because of this, he makes comments to Tessa about how Hardin used to be an angry child and how she is a good influence on him. Carol has the same effect on Tessa. She will never live up to the expectations her mother has for her and that affects their relationship. Tessa narrates early in the novel the way her mother treats her: “she isn’t shy when it comes to pointing out my mistakes (...) She always puts so much pressure on me to be perfect all the time, it’s exhausting” (Todd, 75). Tessa and Carol’s relationship is a ticking-bomb about to explode. It is when Tessa sees what the world has to offer that she decides to confront her mother about the way she treats her.

Just as it affects their children, mothers also feel the social pressure of raising their children properly to be successful people as they are a reflection of themselves. Wilborn explains it best in his article “The Myth of the Perfect Mother” when he said “She may feel personally responsible for everything they do and believe her child’s misbehavior or lack of success is a reflection on her abilities as a mother and her worth as a person.” (Wilborn, 1976: 43). These expectations that mothers are supposed to accomplish only put more pressure on both mother and child as “The mother’s need for personal prestige prevents her from letting the child fail or make mistakes and thereby robs the child of opportunities for experiencing personal strength and self-sufficiency.” (Wilborn, 1976: 43), creating tense relationships

between mothers and their children as they grow up suffocated by their control. In *After*, Carol, Tessa's mother, tries to prevent her daughter from living and making her own mistakes because she feels it would represent that she is a bad mother. The tension between Carol and Tessa explodes when Tessa moves in with Hardin and Carol appears there to confront her by saying things like "I have done everything for you and here you are... throwing it all away!" (Todd, 531). The tension reaches its peak when Tessa mentions how her father abandoned her mother and Carol hits her, which makes Hardin intervene and kicks her out of the apartment. After that scene, Tessa does acknowledge she was wrong to say that, but she also reflects on her relationship with her mother, narrating that their relationship is like that because "she's (Carol) has dedicated all of her time to me, grooming me into the woman she wanted me to be. She wants me to be just like her, and that just isn't going to work for me." (Todd, 535). Tessa wants and needs to break free from her mother's chains and influence to establish her own identity and individuality.

2.3.3. Parent's Romantic Relationship and How It Affects Their Children

Not only is it important to understand what kind of connections parents have with their children, but also what kind of relationship the parents have between them, as it sets an example for their children. As Cui and Fincham explain in their study, "when parents have problems in their behavioral interactions, such as problems in communicating, restraining criticism, and resolving conflict, it likely increases offspring risk for displaying similar problems in their own romantic relationships." (Cui and Fincham, 2010: 333). In that sense, it is important to have healthy relationships as parents to be good role models for their children. Breaking patterns that are passed through generations is important to stop toxic behaviors from being learnt by future generations. Cui and Fincham also mention that "When young adults (...) believe divorce is an easier alternative than working on the marriage, it is possible that they would not devote much time and energy to their own romantic relationship with the

idea that they could choose to simply leave the relationship if it did not work out.” (Cui and Fincham, 2010: 333). Supporting the idea just mentioned about how breaking patterns is key to stopping them from being perpetuated through history.

According to the study by Cui and Fincham, both Hardin and Tessa should have positive views of divorce and negative towards marriage. Nevertheless, Tessa had always thought that marriage was part of her journey. This is because of the expectations her mother had for her life. Carol wants Tessa to have the life she thought she would have. She sees her as a chance to re-do her own life. Because she and her mother were abandoned by her father, she feels she can not let her mother down and has the obligation to be perfect for her. For this reason, Tessa feels pressured to stay with Noah, her high-school boyfriend and the boy-next-door who her mom adores, and believes she has to marry to have the perfect life her mom envisions for her. Tessa mentions her views on that matter in chapter seventy-nine where she and Hardin discuss getting married. While he says that marriage is not for him, Tessa gets worried as she thinks “I would like the option eventually, and want to be married by the time I’m twenty-five and then have at least two children.” (Todd, 436). In that sense, her parents’ divorce has not affected her as much as her mother’s criticism and high expectations.

On the other hand, Hardin acts along the lines of the study by Cui and Fincham. He does not want to be married, he does not even want to have a committed relationship at the beginning. Another aspect of his parents’ relationship that has influenced the way he acts in his own relationship is explained in chapter fifty-six, when Hardin tells Tessa that “as he grew older, his dad drank more and more and his parents fought more and more.” (Todd, 301). Just like his parents, Hardin and Tessa fight all the time because it is what he has seen in his parents; people who, supposedly, love each other fight constantly. Since neither of them have had role models who have had healthy romantic relationships, and also taking into

account all the other factors that affect who a person grows up to be, it is almost impossible for them to escape their fate to be involved in a toxic relationship.

3. Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to determine whether the romantic relationships portrayed in the novel *After* written by Anna Todd were toxic or healthy relationships and what were the causes behind them. The thesis proposed argued that both main characters, Tessa and Hardin, were in an abusive relationship but that there were other characters in the novel that had healthy romantic relationships. Nevertheless, because of lack of information in the novel, this aspect has ultimately not been explored. Another argument to debate was that the poor relationship of both Hardin and Tessa's parents had affected them in a way that steered them into becoming easy targets for poor romantic relationships as well.

It has been successfully claimed that Richard, Carol, Ken and Trish play a crucial role in who Hardin and Tessa become and their toxicity. Nevertheless, there are many factors that come into play for an abusive relationship to take place, such as external risk factors and personal risk factors. Regardless of these explanations, it is not a motive or an excuse for Hardin to psychologically manipulate and gaslight Tessa into being with him. Further findings of this analysis are that the romance genre has not changed that much in its history in regards to the plot and gender roles that it depicts. Literature tends to be a reflection of the historical, social and cultural moment that is occurring when it is written. Hence, the slight evolution in the romance genre, especially in the portrayal of gender roles, is indicative that society has not evolved as much as it may seem in that area. Along those lines, we can also affirm that the gender roles established by the patriarchal values of society are another cause for the way Hardin and Tessa behave and interact.

In conclusion, *After* is a fanfiction that depicts a very realistic aspect of romantic relationships: abuse and its relation to past trauma. Despite its success in sales and as part of the chick lit genre, there is still a lot of feminist work within this kind of literature in the sense that books within this genre have to be written with a feminist perspective. Especially

in books that are commercialized and publicized as suitable for young adults who are still forming their views on the world. In addition, there is room as well for more feminist studies to be conducted on the romance and chick lit genres to understand and analyze them further with new perspectives.

3.1. Future Research

There is room for further research as the *After* saga is composed of five books that would give more insight into the development of the main characters and of their relationships, and could also provide more information about secondary characters. More investigation can also be conducted into the specific relation of western culture and society with the gender roles that are portrayed in *After*. Furthermore, this same research has room for more in depth analysis with the same theoretical questions in mind, adding as well a study about how the novel has been received by the public who read it in their teenage years, a formative stage in a person's life. A research that involves surveys and interviews would be an interesting way to continue this research to understand the consequences a book like this, where people may romanticize abuse, may have on its readers.

Some of the limitations that have appeared during this analysis were that there is not enough information in the first book of the *After* saga about the other couples in the novel or their backgrounds, making it difficult to conduct a proper analysis on them. Other issues that have made it difficult to conduct this essay are the lack of scholarly work on Wattpad, fanfiction, chick lit and, especially, *After*.

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