

New Adult Romance: An Emerging Genre

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Abstract

This study explores the emergence of New Adult as a subgenre of romance novels. New Adult has only existed since 2009, and has, therefore, not attracted extensive critical discussion. New Adult romance is significant because it provides the unique chance to explore an emerging literary development because of its provenance to Young Adult fiction and Adult romance novels. This study addresses concerns of gender representation, sexuality and New Adult's place in the broader spectrum of media for women of ages eighteen to late twenties. Using close reading of three New Adult novels, this study sets the genre against the background of Young Adult literature and the sexual politics of Adult romance novels, and compares them on sexual agency and the male gaze with two TV shows for the same demographic. The findings from this research illustrate that New Adult is strongly influenced by the provenance of Young Adult literature in not only the type of stories that are told but also the subjects explored. New Adult mirrors the sexual content of Adult romance novels in the representation of virginity, sex and sexual content. The comparison between New Adult romance novels and TV shows signifies the postfeminist content of both mediums, although New Adult romance novels are explicitly more feminist in their representation of female agency and the male gaze, the TV shows have more problematic heteronormative elements. The findings offer insights into this emerging subgenre and the role of genre conventions when new subgenres are created.

Introduction

The romance genre constantly reinvents itself, merging with other genres to create sub-genres that are uniquely romance based. The most recent change is the creation of a new category, New Adult romance, which happened in 2009 (Nakayama), being able to date the creation of it like this is unique on its own. New Adult romance provides literary critics with the unique chance to explore this new development regarding its provenance to Young Adult fiction and Adult romance¹ novels regarding gender representation, sexuality and its place in the broader spectrum of media for women of ages eighteen to late twenties. Constructing how New Adult romance developed will also give a better insight into how genres and categories interact with and are related to each other. The first step to understanding New Adult is to understand its connection to Young Adult fiction and sexual politics in modern romance novels; the next step is to compare the stories to other media (TV in this case) to see the similarities and differences. The main focus will be on how the rise in female sexual politics and sexual agency led to the creation of the New Adult romance category.

The term New Adult comes from a call to action from publisher St. Martin's Press in 2009 for "cutting-edge fiction... similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult— a sort of an older YA or New Adult"(Nakayama). This connection of storylines between Young Adult and Adult romance novels that St. Martin's Press originally stated in their request has been a part of the movement ever since. Young Adult novels are for teens of the ages fourteen to eighteen (Cart 64), New Adult starts at eighteen and ends at around twenty-five (Wetta). Where Young Adult focuses on high school experiences, or high school aged teens, New Adult focuses on college/university life or first jobs (Wetta).

¹ Adult in this context means an older public than Young Adult and New Adult, it has no implications for the sexual content of the books. The choice has been made to capitalise these categories to set them apart from possible other uses of these words.

New Adult books are generally more focused on the physical sides of the relationships, with strong attraction established early on in the book and multiple sex scenes, in line with modern romance novels (Vivanco 1065). Modern romance novels are romance novels published since the late 1980s; these novels are more openly sexual as a result of the sexual revolution of second-wave feminism and the advent of the pill (Rodale 95). Classic romance novels, novels published between the early 1970s and the late 1980s (Wendell and Tan 13), rely more on the tropes of the virgin heroine and the brutal hero, where modern romance novels explore sexual attraction earlier on in the novel and feature more nuanced roles for the hero and the heroine (Wendell and Tan 13-25; Vivanco 1062-1079).

Young Adult novels and the romance genre have been studied separately before (Cart; Rodale; Radway; Regis), but New Adult romance allows exploration of both conventions together in a way that has not been available until this point. New Adult romance fills a position between the wholesome but emotional Young Adult stories and the sexual Adult romance novels (Deahl). Classic romance novels have had very confining representations of gender and sexuality for both heroes and heroines while modern romance has more nuanced representations (Wendell and Tan 10-37). These new representations combine in a unique way with Young Adult's focus on more issue-driven novels (Deahl). New Adult, then, is particularly well positioned to discuss issues of sexual politics and agency in contemporary romance fiction. To give a better understanding of the influences that contemporary teens are exposed to, this thesis also applies the reasoning to TV series for this same demographic.

The history of New Adult starts with the history of Young Adult, as the two are intrinsically connected. This history is needed to follow the progression from readers reading female agency in Young Adult novels, to these readers then creating fanfiction² of these

² *Merriam-Webster* defines fanfiction as: stories involving popular fictional characters that are written by fans and often posted on the Internet. *Dictionary.com* also adds: to explore themes and ideas that will not or cannot be explored via the originating medium.

novels, often by aging up the characters to college-age, which then leads to these readers becoming readers and authors of New Adult fiction. This sexualisation of characters did not happen in a vacuum. The influence of second-wave feminism on modern Adult romance novels can be traced back until the late 1980s through the modern romance novels, and then forward into the consciousness of adolescent women, who, having grown up with more sexual agency themselves, create these same types of stories when they cannot find them in mainstream publishing (Tosenberger 186). Female sexual politics and sexual agency are important parts of the modern romance tradition (Vivanco 1066). By broadening the spectrum also to include TV series for this same demographic, a clearer picture emerges of how New Adult romance fits into the broader spectrum of media for adolescent women.

The first chapter explores the history and progression of Young Adult novels and how the resurgence of the category after the publication of Stephenie Meyer's Young Adult romance novel series *Twilight*, and the subsequent fanfiction of this and other Young Adult book series like J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, ultimately lead to the creation of the New Adult category. The chapter will also explain how modern romance novels differ from classic romance novels on the issue of sexual agency and the role of the romantic hero, and how this ties in to create a gender dynamic that is uniquely New Adult.

The second chapter applies the history set out in the first chapter to three New Adult novels, *Asher* by Jo Raven (2014), *Draw* by Cora Brent (2014) and *One Week Girlfriend* by Monica Murphy (2013). It will focus on how these stories are similar to and at the same time different from Young Adult novels, and also how these stories interact with the sexual politics of modern romance novels.

The third chapter broadens the spectrum of New Adult romances also to include TV series made for the same demographic, *Gossip Girl* (2007) and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009).

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It compares how sexual agency and the male gaze interacts with both New Adult books and TV series.

1. New Adult romance: the point where two literary branches intertwine

New Adult romance emerged when Young Adult fiction and Adult romance novels came together in a unique way, borrowing storylines from Young Adult stories while combining it with the sexual content of modern romance novels. To understand how these literary branches combined, it is important first to examine the history of Young Adult fiction and also to study the history of sexual agency in modern romance novels. The 1980s and 1990s are significant decades for these literary traditions. Firstly, because of the sexual revolution in the 1960s, which became visible in romance fiction in the 1980s (Rodale 95). This is the point in time where classic romance turns into modern romance, the second half of this chapter discusses how these changes influenced the genre. Secondly, in the 1990s, Young Adult fiction became more popular and established as a category, this led to more novels being published as Young Adult (Cart 91) and ultimately to the New Adult category for readers who were outgrowing the demographic but did not want to move away from these types of stories (Wetta), as examined in the first half of this chapter.

The two branches of fiction worked in different spheres for a long time. Young Adult fiction barely dealt with sex, unless it was in a puritanical and judgemental way, and romance novels had many sub-genres, but none of the sub-genres touched upon the juvenile stories that Young Adult novels told. It was not until adolescent readers of Young Adult aged out of the age range and wanted stories that were similar to Young Adult stories, but more sexual so that it would fit into their world, that New Adult became popular (Nakayama). These two different branches of fiction are explored separately to piece together how they shaped New Adult romance novels. The first half of the chapter focuses on the history of Young Adult, its evolution and then its transformation into New Adult and the second half of the chapter

concentrates on the differences between classic romance novels and modern romance novels and how they deal with virginity, seduction, and the alpha hero.

1.1 Young Adult Romance, Fanfiction, and New Adult Romance

In the early 1990s, the Young Adult novel came to the brink of extinction (Cart 49). The category, largely regarded as “children’s” and “didactic” literature (Daniels 78) and thus not very interesting to a larger reading public, mainly consisted of “realistic problem novels” (Nilsen, qtd. in Cart 49), problem novels are described by Roger Sutton as “[i]nstead of a character being the focus of a novel, a condition (or social concern) [is] the subject of examination” (qtd. in Cart 32), and became the topic of many discussions on if and how to revive it (Cart 53-56). The publication of the first *Harry Potter* (J.K. Rowling) books in 1997 and *His Dark Materials* (Philip Pullman) books in 1995, both crossover novel series, brought back the interest in the category and allowed it to get away from its ‘problem novel’ roots and take on different forms and genres (Cart 114). This blurring of the line between children’s, teen and adult fiction allowed Meyer’s *Twilight* to become a bestseller with both teens and adults alike. This new generation, grown up with the internet all around them, showed their love for their favourite books by writing and sharing fanfiction online, allowing them to explore more mature topics within the worlds of for example *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* (Day “Pure Passion” 29). These young new authors used the advent of ebook publishing to publish the books they wanted to read, instead of the ones that publishers felt safe to publish (Deahl). A new category came to be, New Adult, it allowed the complexity of Young Adult to be combined with the more sexual content of Adult romance novels, positioning it in a place between the two that was previously unoccupied.

Until the late 1990s, crossover novels were books that were marketed to adults but also became popular with children or teens, the crossing over from one demographic into another (Cart 111). The most famous crossover novels are *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D.

Salinger and *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (Cart 111). Crossing over was uncommon but within publishing there was an expectation that young readers were willing to 'read up' (read books with older protagonists) but that adult readers would not 'read down' (Lodge, qtd. in Cart 114). Philip Pullman (*His Dark Materials*) and J.K. Rowling (*Harry Potter*) changed this assumption when their children's books became instant bestsellers for adults too (Cart 114). Their books revived the Young Adult category as the interest in Young Adult books grew from both teen and adult readers alike (Cart 98).

Young Adult, Fanfiction, and Sex

Harry Potter and *Twilight* are two of the most influential young adult book series. Meyer's *Twilight* belongs to the second revival of young adult fiction in 2005; it brought popular romance tropes to the young adult fans and set the tone for many Young Adult paranormal romance that came after it (Cart 99-101). The fan bases for these Young Adult series are vast and keen to interact with the core texts, and each other, through the writing of fanfiction (Tosenberger 185). Fanfiction can be found on many fan websites, but the largest collection is located at *FanFiction.net*. There, *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* occupy, respectively, the first (735K stories) and third (218K stories) place of the largest collections of fanfiction stories (number two is *Naruto*, a Japanese shounen manga and anime, with 398K stories).

Fanfiction can be a vital part of interacting with texts, especially for teens, as it gives them a safe place to explore not only the fictional world that it takes place in but also sexuality and sex in the contemporary world. Catherine Tosenberger, Children's Literature professor, argues that:

First and foremost, [fanfiction] operates outside of the institutional paradigms that control children's and YA literature; . . . it is not bound by publishing conventions that obligate it to contain sexuality within parameters of age (of both characters and

readers) or of pedagogy. What makes Potter fanfic different [from published stories] is that teens have unprecedented license not only to read stories that might not meet with adult approval, but also to write and distribute them (188).

This is no surprise as sex is an oft-disputed topic in Young Adult novels. *Twilight* is known for its promotion of abstinence (Seltzer) while other Young Adult texts such as Non Pratt's *Trouble* (2014) only discuss how having sex leads to other bad choices and pregnancy. Although these are only two examples, they are part of a bigger movement that portrays sex in Young Adult novels as something bad (Cart 141-143; Day, "He couldn't" 64-70). According to Roberta Seelinger Trites, "adolescent literature is as often an ideological tool used to curb teenagers' libido as it is some sort of depiction of what adolescents' sexuality actually is" (qtd. in Tosenberger 188). The reality is that by the age of seventeen, nearly half of all adolescents in the US have had sexual experiences (Gutmacher Institute). This puts fanfiction, and not published fiction, more in line with real experiences of adolescents.

From Fanfiction to New Adult

Fanfiction is a way to explore themes that are outside the scope of the original text but are of interest to the readers (Tosenberger 186). Sex is a touchy subject in media for teens under the age of eighteen (Cart 161-164), so one way for some fanfiction authors to get around this is by making the characters slightly older and have them attend college. E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), arguably the most popular and well-known case of *Twilight* fanfiction, did exactly that. James has Bella (now Anastasia)³ attend college, and she falls in love with Edward (now Christian) who is both rich and a few years older than she is (the same as in the source text).

³ *Fifty Shades of Grey* was first written as fanfiction, but when James wanted to publish it she had to change the names, since it is not legally allowed to publish fanfiction (Tosenberger 185).

Fifty Shades of Grey is not the only published *Twilight* fanfiction that uses this pattern. *Gabriel's Inferno* by Sylvain Reynard (2011), *Wallbanger* by Alice Clayton (2012) and *Beautiful Bastard* by Christina Lauren (2013) all use the same mechanism. The aging of the characters by just a few years allows the author to use the same types of Young Adult stories while including explicit sex scenes, all without angering anyone about age-appropriateness.

Julie Naughton argues that there to be a second reason that New Adult is so popular: “The [category’s] focus on coming-of-age issues appealed to . . . teen and 20-something readers who relate to the themes, such as first love and taking on new responsibilities. Because the stories are mostly penned by their peers, readers identify with the tone and the immediacy of the storytelling.” *Twilight* came out in 2005 and the main character, Bella, is seventeen, right at the end of the Young Adult spectrum. Many of the adolescent readers of the books would probably be around fifteen to eighteen years of age. *Fifty Shades of Grey* was published in 2011, and its original story *Master of the Universe* was written between 2009 and 2011.⁴ This means that Bella, aging her up as the years pass, would be twenty-one for *Master* and twenty-three for *Fifty Shades*. The same goes for the young readers, who, unlike the characters, grew up after the story, they became older, started college, had sex and relationships. These readers are now the age that Anastasia is in *Fifty Shades* and many of the other published fanfiction novels.

These adolescents grew up during the revival of Young Adult fiction; they met many characters that were around their age who were going through the same things as they were. When *Fifty Shades* was written and published, these readers were at exactly the right age to appreciate the books.

⁴ The Dear Author website dedicated a post on how the two versions differ: <http://dearauthor.com/features/industry-news/master-of-the-universe-versus-fifty-shades-by-e-l-james-comparison/>

New Adult and going back to Young Adult roots

New Adult is sometimes called the “older-YA” or “YA’s big sister” (Nakayama) by its fans. Critics have called New Adult “YA novels with extra sex” or even “simply-written soft porn” (Temple), insinuating that having sex scenes in a story somehow makes it lesser.

New Adult as a term came into being in 2009 when St. Martin’s Press held a writing competition for “cutting-edge fiction... similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult— a sort of an older YA or New Adult” (Nakayama). New Adult, as a term to describe ‘grown-up’ Young Adult took hold immediately, the popularity of the books lagged behind (Deahl). Many romance authors, tired of hearing from publishers that their romance book with eighteen to twenty-five-year-old characters was too adult for Young Adult readers but too juvenile for adult readers, decided to self-publish their novels, which, had become easier and more popular than ever (Deahl; Naughton).

The age boundaries of the category fall from eighteen to twenty-five, starting right at the top of the Young Adult age boundary (Nakayama). The category holds many of Young Adult’s most popular conventions: first-person narration, dramatic plots, and characters with issues (Wetta). Many popular Young Adult fiction deals with outside problems, of society and the place that they take in it. New Adult novels go back to where Young Adult started, issues are closer to the characters. For example parental abuse, rape, bullying, and stalkers are common themes in the category (Wetta). The issues also do not just surround the female main character; the male main character often struggles with his own problems, too (a feature further explored in the second half of this chapter).

Books such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* differ from bestseller New Adult novels such as *Asher* by Jo Raven, in that *Fifty Shades* is erotic romance, and the main character is dealing with an adult relationship, while *Asher* deals with problems from their teen years and is about

learning to let go of the family unit and to take their place in society (Nakayama). This difference in focus is significant in differentiating between New Adult and Adult books. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is classified as Adult, while *Asher* is classified as New Adult. New Adult is about growing up, just a step on from the high school situation of Young Adult. People between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five are not seen as adults by society while they are seen as adults by the law and this ‘in between part’ of life is apart from Young Adult or Adult novels.

New Adult is still a very new category and the conventions of it are still in flux, this does not mean, however, that it cannot be analysed. Its commonalities with Young Adult helps with examining the new category from a stable foundation.

1.2 Classic and Modern Romances: Changes in Sexual Agency

The female main character’s agency is one of the main characteristics of romance, but until the 1980s, her sexual agency was not part of that (Rodale 95). With second-wave feminism not only did the world change, but the world of romance novels did, too. This caused some upheaval with older romance authors; Jayne Ann Krentz was one of the classic romance authors who did not like the new changes. In her 1992 article “Trying to Tame the Romance: Critics and Correctness”, Krentz attributes these changes to “a wave of young editors fresh out of East Coast colleges who arrived in New York to take up their first positions in publishing. . . . These young women . . . didn’t read romances themselves and so didn’t understand why they appealed to readers” (107). She accuses these young women of “trying to make romances respectable” (107). Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, founders of the largest website on romance novels *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*, offer a different point of view: “the market changed drastically when a new generation of readers grew into [their] own and had enough money to make [their] preferences known” (21). The new generation of romance readers expected more from the heroines, and heroes, and this soon reflected in the books

being sold (Wendell and Tan 21). This same reader turned writer change happened when New Adult came to be, new readers wanted heroines they could relate to, in sexual content and story content (Naughton). Modern romances have significantly influenced New Adult romances (Lipschultz qtd. in Naughton), to understand how the difference between classic and modern romances is explored first.

In her article Krentz criticises modern romances for trying to undermine the pillars of the established romance genre (107). She identifies three main areas that are under attack, and she even calls these three subjects “targets” (107), demonstrating her belief that these ideas are unfairly attacked. The three targets are the “heroine’s virginity” (111), “aggressive seduction of the heroine by the hero” (109) and the “alpha male” (107), she argues these topics to be staples of romance fiction and not to be altered. Modern romances, as discussed by Maya Rodale and Wendell and Tan, are built on more sexually liberated and feminist views and storylines. This difference between the two types of romance novels is important because firstly, it shows how much feminism has influenced society and romance novels, secondly, as will be shown in the third chapter, not all media for adolescent women complies with these new standards, visual media is much less feminist and still more patriarchal. This half of the chapter sets up the discussion on how much feminism has influenced romance novels, but also gives the foundation on which the TV series in the third chapter are examined.

The Heroine’s Virginity

For most of recent history, a woman’s virginity was about value. Women who lost their virginity also lost their value as a wife-to-be (Rodale 101). Women who were unmarried and were not virgins could not be married off to anyone anymore; they lost their marriage-value. This meant that with poor income choices for women and no way to sufficiently support

themselves, they were forever dependent on the goodness of their family (Rodale 101). The invention of the pill in the 1960s and the right of women to work outside of the home has changed all of this (Rodale 103).

Krentz calls the heroine's virginity "a metaphor for the qualities of female power" (111), these three qualities are "honor, generosity and courage" (111). She then goes on and explains "[t]here is a heroic quality about a woman's virginity that is truly powerful when used to its fullest potential" (111). It is quite troubling the way in which Krentz explains the significance of virginity using language that appears empowering, such as "female power" and "truly powerful", while at the same time enforcing very rigid gender stereotypes by establishing a woman's virginity primary as the woman's "honor" and linking words such as "generosity" and "courage" to her virginity and her honour. As Jessica Valenti, author of *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women*, writes, "[t]he lie of virginity . . . is ensuring that young women's perception of themselves is inextricable from their bodies, and that their ability to be moral actors is absolutely dependent on their sexuality" (qtd. in Rodale 107). Virginity is not a power a woman holds but is a way for society to hold power over women (Rodale 108). The reality is that in the US the number of virgins in the age group of 20-24 is about 13 percent (12.3 for women and 14.3 for men) and in the 25-29 age group this quickly drops to under 5 percent (Fortenbury). According to this data, it would be very unlikely for New Adult or Adult romance heroines to be virgins, luckily, this trope is no longer popular (Wendell and Tan 23-24; Rodale 106).

Rodale found in her study of romance readers that these days only one percent of modern romance readers think heroines should be virgins (106). Tessa Woodward, Avon (romance publisher) editor, explains that in contemporary romance there are very few virgin heroines and "if they are, it's because they had some sort of block that the hero is going to help them through" (qtd. in Rodale 104). Virginity is no longer the standard in modern

society, no longer the be-all and end-all of a woman's marriageability. If the heroine is still a virgin, she often has other issues with relationships, or men, that the hero will help her work through before they have sex at the end of the story (Rodale 105).

Not only are virgin heroines uncommon in modern romances, most stories even go as far as having the heroine orgasm multiple times within the story (Rodale 110). According to Carol Queen, sexologist and researcher at *Good Vibrations*, "roughly 70 percent of women rarely or never have orgasms with intercourse" (qtd. in Rudolph), that is a significant number, which is why the new trope "I had *no idea*" (Rodale 106) has replaced the role of the virgin heroine. The heroines are sexually active women, but they lack something in their sex lives. Modern romance novels often have both the hero and the heroine climax in every sex scene in the book (Rodale 106). This trope uses a different type of sexual awakening from virgin-sex, up until that point they had lacklustre and mediocre sex, but with the hero/heroine, it suddenly becomes extraordinary, something they never experienced before. Which is why it is called the "I had *no idea*" trope.

This new trope where both the sexually experienced partners find their perfect match in each other has levelled the playing field of heroes and heroines in novels (Rodale 110). They are both allowed to feel new things, to experience new things, while at the same time, their first time together, in a way, is their first time having 'really good sex'. The "I had *no idea*" trope is quite common in New Adult romance novels, and sexual relationships are the norm, not the exception, as will be explored further in the next two chapters.

The Role of "Aggressive Seduction", or, Rape

Krentz specifies the "aggressive seduction of the heroine by the hero" (109) as one of the main characteristics of romance novels, while both Wendell and Tan and Rodale call it rape, what they are all discussing is the representation of the sex scenes in classic romance novels

(Wendell and Tan 137; Rodale 94). Rape, for many centuries, was not about a woman's consent, but about her loss of value, she could not be raped if she was not a virgin, for example, marital rape and rape of experienced women was not considered rape because they had already lost their virginity (Wendell and Tan 139). This change from rape as a loss of value, often to a male overseer (father or another male relative), to a crime against the woman that depends on her consent happened gradually, but was put into law in most of the US states in the late seventies (Wendell and Tan 139-140).

Romance novels do not have the best reputation when it comes to sex scenes, especially classic romance and so-called "bodice rippers" (Rodale 93-99; Wendell and Tan 136-147). While society was getting used to the idea of rape as violence against a woman and consent, romance novels also struggled with how to portray this (Radway 18). It was the stage between a woman denying herself as a sexual being, and society expecting this of her, and women learning to accept themselves as sexual beings and being allowed sexual freedom (Rodale 95). In this between stage much dubious consent goes on in the form of 'dominant seduction', unlike Krentz' "aggressive seduction" in which heroines are not consenting, dominant seduction is about the hero making the heroine confront her own sexuality through sexual acts (Rodale 95). So, while "aggressive seduction" is about the hero taking his pleasure from the heroine, in contrast, 'dominant seduction' is about the hero giving pleasure to the heroine, pushing his release to the background. If the heroine was apprehensive at the start, she will be fully consenting and enjoying herself by the end of the sex scene (Rodale 95).

One defining feature of romance is that they have happy endings. So while the hero might be a brute and violate the heroine, there is always the promise that it will all turn out well. This safety of the happy ending is critical for romance readers as they will overlook many faults of the hero, as long as the heroine ends up happy with him at the end of the book

(Wendell and Tan 142). Twenty-first-century romance readers are much less likely to overlook a hero raping a heroine, even if they do end up together (Wendell and Tan 143). This is a huge change from Janice A. Radway's readers in 1984 who felt that the hero was justified in raping a woman if he thought she was no longer a virgin (142). This shift from romance heroes taking their pleasure to becoming someone who pleases the heroine also influenced New Adult novels. The heroes in New Adult novels are no more or less experienced than the heroines in New Adult novels; this also gives them the edge to try out more experimental sexual fantasies, like BDSM. There can still be a moving of power between the hero and heroine, but these days, it is voluntary (Rodale 96).

The Character of the Alpha Hero

“[S]trong, brave, mentally and physically tough, intelligent, tall and dark” this is how Alan Boon, of famous romance publisher Mills & Boon, describes alpha males (qtd. in Rodale 119). Which sounds a lot like the “tall, dark and handsome”, a common trope for a romantic love interest in movies and books (Tv Tropes). Boon also argued that “all women gravitate towards this type of man, and wimpish heroes are not successful” (qtd. in Rodale 119).

Krentz agrees with this description and accuses modern romance novels of turning heroes into “a neurotic wimp or a good-natured gentleman-saint” (109). She states that a true alpha hero has to present a genuine threat to the heroine and has to put her at physical risk when she is with him (Krentz 108). Rodale and Wendell and Tan have a different name for this type of hero an AlphHole (Rodale 120; Wendell and Tan 77), a combination of the words ‘alpha’ and ‘asshole’, playing with the idea that there are heroes who are respectable and heroes who are depraved. There is, of course, an element of fantasy in these types of men. They are dangerous, potentially also to the heroine, but they can be tamed, and the heroine is the only one who can tame them (Krentz 113).

This concept of the alpha hero changed around the late 1980s, after the second-wave feminism, which might explain why Krentz, having written her article in 1992, has very different ideas about romance alpha heroes than Wendell and Tan (2009) and Rodale (2015). One thing to keep in mind is that the women who went into publishing in the late 1980s (authors, editors, publishers) were children of the sexual revolutions and the feminist movements. Krentz and the readers that Radway used for her research belong to an older generation, one who grew up with classic romances and have more emotional attachments to that type of story.

New Adult romance heroes are often physically strong, but they are not what Krentz would expect in an Alpha hero from classic romances. They often deal with traumas from their childhood and to overcome them, they have to learn to deal with their emotions, another thing Krentz is not fond of. They are not as Krentz puts it “good-natured gentleman-saint[s]” (109), nor do they pose a physical risk to the heroine. They have a bit of both, they are physically strong, but able to suppress their aggression when they are around the heroine, and in many cases, they are also good men who are tainted by their own trauma and do not know how to deal with it in a healthy way.

Conclusion

New Adult romance has roots in both Young Adult fiction and modern romance novels, each bringing unique elements to the new category. The storylines that readers of Young Adult books were used to, combined with the sexual agency that modern romances afford, that is what makes New Adult romances unique. The interaction between the two distinct branches of fiction is what makes it different from ‘just’ aged-up Young Adult or dramatic Adult romance novels.

Young Adult fiction grew from a category that was nearly extinct being read by adolescents and adults alike. Along the way, Young Adult fiction inspired many adolescents to try their hand at writing fiction, through fanfiction, and to explore their own lives and the world around them through this safe medium. When adolescent readers grew up, they wanted their fiction to change with them, not just by writing fanfiction, but also by publishing these stories that inspired so many people. Self-publishing allowed these authors to publish the stories they wanted, without conservative publishers putting constraints on it. This new movement became New Adult romance.

In classic romance novels, female agency was accepted, though female sexual agency was not. There are three areas where this is most evident (identified by Krentz 107-111): virginity, “forced seduction” and the character of the alpha hero. In classic romance novels, the heroine is always a virgin; her virginity is her main characteristic, the sex scenes in these books are often “forced seduction” or rape, where the heroine has no choice but to comply, refusing to have sex is not an option. Classic romance heroes were often brutal, had no consideration for the heroine’s sexual agency and regularly harmed the heroines. Modern romances changed all this. The change from classic to modern romance took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s; this was right after second-wave feminism, a time where a woman’s right to her own body and her own choice in life was an important part of the movement. As a result, modern romance novels rarely have virgin heroines (though they do often have lacking sex lives until they meet the hero), rape or “forced seduction” is nearly non-existent (unless used as a plot device, and never by the romantic hero), and even heroes have become less brutal and more caring. New Adult has taken many of these modern romance tropes and combined them with Young Adult type issue stories, there is a focus on both the problems the characters go through, but at the same time also a strong focus on the romantic arc.

2. New Adult, Young Adult, and Modern Romance: Three New Adult Novels Explored

The history of New Adult comes from two different literary branches; Young Adult provides the provenance, and Adult romance provides the contemporary genre stain of the new category, as shown in the previous chapter. This chapter focuses on three novels to explore how these literary branches work inside of these books; *Asher* by Jo Raven (2014), *Draw* by Cora Brent (2014) and *One Week Girlfriend* by Monica Murphy (2012). The first section discusses the criteria used to select the books, the second section discusses New Adult in conversation with Young Adult, how New Adult relates to Young Adult. The last section explores sexual relationships, rape, and characterisation in New Adult; this follows the same general outline as chapter one. This chapter positions the New Adult novels within the scope set out in chapter one.

Criteria

The New Adult category has only been around since 2009; this means that there is no canon of New Adult novels yet. The three books in this chapter conform to three main criteria: they are all full-length novels, they are categorised as “Romance > New Adult & College” on Amazon, and they have been on the *New York Times* and the *USA Today* bestseller lists. Because there has been very little critical research on New Adult, and because there are few ways to truly explore the diverse publishing landscape, as will be talked about below, these, albeit arbitrary, criteria give a solid foundation.

The scope of this study is limited to full-length novels. A full-length novel is commonly given at 50.000 words, which translates to roughly 200 pages (Masterson). This criterion is necessary as all the books considered were ebooks, so there are no upper or lower word count or page limits for publication. Books in “Romance > New Adult & College” were

the only ones considered, the reason for this is twofold. Firstly, this is to make sure that all the books are intended for this categorisation. Amazon allows authors and publishers to set their own categories; this means that if a book is categorised as New Adult, it is intended to be there (Kindle Direct Publishing). Secondly, many websites and bestseller lists do not allow New Adult as a proper categorisation (such as the *New York Times* or *USA Today*), they list the books under the broad “romance” umbrella. Reader-based websites such as *Goodreads* only muddy the field as not all readers accept New Adult as a category yet (quite a few New Adult novels ends up in ‘Young Adult’ or in ‘chick-lit’).⁵ This leaves Amazon categorisation as the only cohesive source of New Adult titles.

Only books from bestseller lists comprised this research. Out of all the books that are published every day, only a handful ever reach the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists. This allows for a measure of importance of the books, the books that hit these lists are the ones that influence the category the most as the most people read them. The *New York Times* and *USA Today* are the biggest bestselling lists in the US, which in turn is the largest English speaking market.

The scope of this study is not limited to only novels published by publishers but also includes self-published novels. As addressed in the previous chapter, New Adult has largely been a movement dictated by readers and writers, not publishers (Naughton), so excluding self-published novels would misrepresent the category.

Three secondary criteria narrow the scope further: the books have to be contemporary romance, they have to be about a straight couple, and they have to be published in the last five years. The first two criteria are to define the specific sub-genre of romance. The genre expectations of for example historical or paranormal romance and lesbian or gay romance are different from contemporary straight romance. This goes for the story expectations as well as

⁵ For example *One Week Girlfriend* by Cora Brent:
<http://www.goodreads.com/work/shelves/23678657>

for characterisation. The five-year time constraint serves to exclude books that are retroactively added to the category (as *Catcher in the Rye* was to Young Adult novels, Cart 111) and to make sure that the books come from similar writing traditions. These criteria allow for a comparison of specific details and tropes.

Asher by Jo Raven, *Draw* by Cora Brent, and *One Week Girlfriend* by Monica Murphy, fit all the criteria and are the focus of this study. They are all full-length novels, are categorised in "Romance > New Adult & College", take place in contemporary settings, have straight couples, and were published in the last five years (12th of March 2014, 29th of July 2014, and 12th of January 2013, respectively). They all reached the *New York Times* bestseller list (#23 for *Asher*, #23 for *Draw* and #17 for *One Week Girlfriend*). Both *Asher* and *Draw* have been self-published but *One Week Girlfriend* is published by Penguin Random House. A notable fact about all these books is that they are all series starters, series are quite popular in New Adult romances (Naughton).

New Adult in conversation with Young Adult

The previous chapter explored the idea of New Adult as a more mature Young Adult story. It also discussed the history of 'problem novels' as being a defining feature of early Young Adult novels (Nilsen, qtd. in Cart 49). As with Young Adult, 'problem novels' make up a significant amount of the early New Adult novels (Naughton).

All three of the books are about characters being forced to deal with issues or to confront problems that they experienced as adolescents. Cora Carmack, bestselling New Adult author, describes New Adult as "New adult is about how to live your life after [surviving adolescence and coming-of-age]. New adult is the 'I'm officially an adult, now what?' phase" (qtd. in Naughton). Where Young Adult novels usually deal with the problems of adolescents, creating the urgency that is so typical of the category (Wetta), New Adult

novels deal with the problems from the scope and also experiences of a slightly older protagonist, who usually hid from or evaded a trauma when they were younger. This creates a duality between their teen-self and their college-age-self, they often have not dealt with the trauma of their past but now also need to deal with the fallout of this continued trauma in a more grown-up setting. New Adult exists mostly in conversation with Young Adult because of the multi-layering of teen and college-aged storylines.

For example, in *Asher*, the two main characters, Asher and Audrey, have a history together. This confusion and hurt sets up the main New Adult struggle of the book; a ‘second chance’ story, guided by rejection and pain from the past. The main part of the back story that takes place is that Audrey leaves their hometown after Audrey’s father is killed in an accident. The grieving process is somewhat dealt with, but not fully by the time that the novel starts. If this were a Young Adult novel rather than a New Adult novel, the story would center around the grieving process Audrey goes through, as is the case with Young Adult novel *After* by Kirstin Harmel (2010) and *The Sharp Time* by Mary O’Connel (2011). It would deal with the grief of losing a parent, learning to trust the world again and finding love. Instead, the story takes place three years after the accident, after Asher and Audrey have matured somewhat and their lives have moved on. Some of the hurt has lessened, but at the same time, the trauma still influences their actions in the present.

Asher, Cord from *Draw* and Fable from *One Week Girlfriend*, all deal with parents who are abusive and have problems with substance abuse. The way the characters deal with their parents is different, for example, Asher and Fable still live at home, but Cord has moved out, though their pasts still strongly influence the story lines at present. Because of his abuse, Asher does not trust anyone who offers help, which at one point in the story leaves him severely beaten up and homeless in the middle of winter, nearly freezing to death before his friends find him. Cord feels like the only thing he is good at is fighting, he had to protect

himself and his brothers from their father. After leaving home, they fight in underground clubs because they do not see another way to live, fighting for their lives, quite literally, has been the only way for them to survive. Fable also does everything to protect her younger brother, instead of going to college she has a job to make sure that there is food on the table and that they have a roof over their heads. She also takes over the role of mother for her younger brother, doing everything so that he can go to college, something she could not do because of a lack of money. These are three very different ways of dealing with abuse, both from a story and a characterisation point of view. Young Adult novels have also not shied away from dealing with this difficult topic, in *Junk* by Melvin Burgess (1996) the main character leaves home because of his abusive and alcoholic father, and in *Unwind* by Neil Shusterman (2007) the main character also runs away from home because of parental abuse. The stories in Young Adult and New Adult have similarities in how characters deal with abuse and show that even after characters leave their home (as in *Draw*), their actions are still influenced by their past.

In *Draw*, the heroine Saylor was bullied in high school because of her sexual involvement with Cord, similar to Sara Zarr's *Story of a Girl* (2007). This made her leave her hometown as soon as she could and as far away as she could. In the book, Saylor's reluctance to start a relationship with Cord is a direct result of her feeling cheated when she found out that he only had sex with her because of a bet. She is older but still does not trust him to take a relationship with her seriously.

These connections between the Young Adult background story line and a more recent New Adult storyline (sometimes in the form of 'second chance' stories, as with *Asher* and *Draw*) is something that sets New Adult apart from most Adult romance novels. New Adult is in many ways 'grown-up' Young Adult, but at the same time, there is a new storyline

within these stories that make it New Adult instead of Young Adult. Without the Young Adult stories, these multiple layers in New Adult would not be possible.

Sexual relationships

Sexual relationships are often an important part of New Adult romances, while the loss of virginity can be a crucial plot point in a Young Adult story (Day, “He couldn’t” 72), in most New Adult romances sex is part of a normal romantic relationship (Naughton). This becomes evident when looking at the three books, as they all deal with sex in slightly different ways, they do not shy away from topics such as virginity and sexual violence.

In *One Week Girlfriend*, there is only one moment where virginity comes up, not as something serious, but as a joke.

“Are you um, saving yourself?” I force my voice to sound casual, while inside everything has turned to chaos. I’m twenty. He’s at least twenty-one. Is there really a possibility he’s a virgin? I know they’re out there, but I never figured Drew Callahan for one. His dark chuckle tells me I’m off base and the relief that sweeps through me is near overwhelming.

“I am definitely not a virgin. But it’s ... been a while.” (*One Week Girlfriend* 597)

Here, not being sexual active is seen as a problem and out of the ordinary, being sexually active is the norm. While having a virgin hero would be out of sorts even with classic romance novels, the story never questions Fable’s sexual activity, and she is very open about it. Drew even inwardly jokes that Fable has probably had sex with half the football team he is part of (373), and Fable mentions this later to him (408). To Fable, sex is just part of satisfying her needs, though Drew does have problems with her having a reputation of being “easy” (427), even though it is the reason he hires her to be his girlfriend for one week

(127). There is a duality in the narrative, where on the one hand Drew hires Fable because she is known for only wanting sex, no relationships, with men, on the other hand, he has issues with her having had many sexual partners before, though him knowing those sexual partners does not seem to be an issue (415).

In *Draw*, the main character, Saylor, only thinks about her virginity when it comes to how it connects Cord and her to their shared past.

[S]tarting with the high school scumbag who'd sweet talked his way into my pants and through my virginity. There was a reason for it, a reason far worse than sixteen year old hormones. Cord Gentry had made a bet. And then what did that son of a bitch do? He laughed about it uproariously and all the people I'd known my whole life bent themselves in half trying to be first to sit on the gossip train. (181)

Her first time having sex was with Cord, there have been other men after, but to her, it still connects them in a way. The word virginity is used three times in the book, all three times when she is talking about Cord. There is a matter-of-fact connection about it. She does not dwell on it; it happened, and she moved on. Her issue is not with having had sex with Cord, but rather that she was cast away after.

Both these books have a measure of “slut” shaming (Bay-Cheng 280) going on. Sexual activity is assumed, but only in very narrowly defined constraints of “heterosexual, monogamous, long-term relationships” (Bay-Cheng 281). In *One Week Girlfriend* the issue is not that Fable has been sexually active, but instead, she is judged because she has sex with men “wantonly and indiscriminately” (Bay-Cheng 284). Bay-Cheng explains that “[a]gency has not erased or eclipsed the Virgin-Slut continuum or the sexism that results in [the] shaming of young women. Girls must still ward off accusations of promiscuity, but they now do so while also compelled to play the parts of sexual libertines” (286). This duality of female sexuality is also visible in *Draw*. Saylor was not the victim of bullying because she

had sex, but because she had sex with the wrong person (with Cord). Her sexual agency is taken away from her because instead of Saylor choosing Cord, Cord made a bet that he would be the first man to sleep with her (672). Even in these New Adult romance novels, female sexuality is defined quite narrowly, although sexual activity in and of itself is normal, there are constraints put on how the sexual activity is expressed.

The only character in these books who is a virgin is Audrey from *Asher*. While this may seem to conform to more classic romance novels, it actually falls more into modern romance novel tropes, as Woodward mentioned, when modern heroines are virgins, there is usually a reason (qtd. in Rodale 104).

I don't have much experience with this. All this. A little known fact, even to Tessa, is that although I've had two boyfriends since I moved to Chicago, I've barely gone past first base.

Which is probably also the reason they didn't last long. That, and the fact my boyfriends were bastards, as Tessa often likes to point out.

But deep in my heart, I know the real reason those relationships didn't last: it's Ash I've always wanted. Surrogates just can't cut it. (1407)

Audrey is in many ways not a virgin by choice, her heartache of losing her boyfriend, her father and becoming physically scarred in quick succession has left her unable to mature sexually. One thing to point out is that this book does not use the word virgin at all, Audrey uses "past first base" (1407) to connote that she has not gone further than kissing, and there are a few references to "first time", but never to being a virgin or not. The language used is in many ways the same as a young teen would, not a grown woman. The above quote comes from the middle of the book and takes place in the middle of a sex scene. It is never made into a major issue. Asher is surprised at first (as is the reader when Audrey admits this), but it is never made into something important. It connotes their first real reconnection as lovers

and their first important plot point in the story, but the information is more a side note than a life changing experience.

Sexual experience in New Adult, unlike Young Adult, is expected as a norm, though slut shaming women who do have sex is still an issue. As with other modern romances, a woman's worth is not dependent on her sexual activity, though her social status is, it is not about having sex, but about having had sex with the right person (Bay-Cheng 281). New Adult straddles a line between 'sex is bad' Young Adult and sexually free modern romances, where emotionally the characters might still react in a way that is more reminiscent of teens, but physically and mentally they are adults. This is not an easy line, as issues with slut shaming persist, but at the same time, being sexually active is a given for the heroes and heroines.

Sexual Violence in New Adult

Draw opens with a very uncomfortable scene of Saylor's abusive relationship; she recounts how the abuse started and how it escalates to the point where she finally leaves him (115-262). Devin, the boyfriend, would physically abuse her and then try to placate her with sex. There is a line of constant dominance from Devin over Saylor running through the recounting.

The recounting is strongly reminiscent of how Wendell and Tan describe rape in classic romances:

The heroine often explicitly says no, and in the vast majority of instances, they're not feeling ambivalent about allowing the hero to seduce them—they're actively fighting him off. . . . During the act, the heroines feel considerable pain; screaming and crying from distress is not uncommon. (137)

This description matches the rape of Saylor by Devin (222-231) though Saylor successfully fights Devin off, breaking away from the classic heroine characterisation. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 4 adolescents reported being a victim of abuse by a dating partner in 2007 (qtd. in Cart 148), that makes experiences like Saylor's not rare but instead something that nearly all adolescents directly or indirectly experience.

Laina Y. Bay-Cheng finds a problematic discourse where abuse or violence against young women is concerned (286). She notes that with the inclusion of agency as one of the defining features of female sexual experiences, there has been a tendency to convert violence against a woman from trauma experienced in a learning experience, putting part of the blame on the woman herself (286). This same thing happens in *Draw*, Saylor blames herself for being abused: "How the hell could I allow this and still look myself in the eye every day?" (167), "I worried more about what those bruises said about me than what they said about Devin." (172). Saylor blames herself for being abused, not the perpetrator, at least, not fully.

Another popular New Adult romance, *Easy* by Tamara Webber, also deals with a female character who is afraid of sexual contact and sexual relationships after being raped. These, and other similar, books deal with difficult topics in ways that can explore them safely. It allows a form of 'problem novel' to exist at the same time as a story of sexual awakening. Abuse and rape are life-defining experiences, topics that these books try to breach in ways that potentially makes people think about their own lives. There is no excusing of the horrible trauma that happened to these women, the sexual violence perpetrated against them is vilified, but the strain of self-blame that these women use is still problematic.

Characterisation

A significant change also has taken place in the type of male characters that can be expressed in modern romance novels, and thus New Adult novels. Wendell and Tan argue that, in classic romance novels, the hero was either a catalyst for the story or the standard to which the heroine had to conform (81), in modern romance novels, this is no longer the case.

Because of stronger and more independent roles for heroines, the hero now has his own arch of redemption and a happy ending. They argue that these arcs often come in two types, the hero that has to be tamed and the hero that has trauma to overcome (Wendell and Tan 82).

While the tamed hero is a hero type that was already visible in classic romances, often in the guise of a reformed rake or a prince who always gets his way. *Asher*, *Draw* and *One Week Girlfriend* all conform to the second hero type, the traumatised hero. This type was not as common in classic romance because it implied that the hero was not perfect and somehow having feelings made him less of an alpha male, or as Krentz put it if they had feelings they were “neurotic wimps” (119). In Young Adult, there have always been opportunities for all types of characterisation, as these novels were more focused on the problems on the novel and not as much on the male character as a romantic hero.

As shown earlier in the chapter, in many New Adult novels there is a construction of past trauma growing into something bigger and making problems in the present. This trauma often has something to do with the Young Adult background of the story, but is also influenced by new problems that they face within the New Adult storyline. In *Asher*, the main character, Asher, was physically abused by his father, which also alienated him from his friends, saw him kicked out of the house and he ends up homeless. This past trauma has left him distrusting of others in the present. He does not dare to depend on anyone, which he thinks could be seen as a sign of weakness, and he feels like he has to fight all his battles

alone. His redemption only comes when he accepts Audrey's help, and they work together on getting him a place to live and a proper job.

This construction of past trauma and present problems is also very strongly visible in *Draw*. The hero, Cord (one out of a set of triplets), comes from an impoverished family and used to live in a trailer camp at the edge of town. Their family was known for being criminals, and Cord and his brothers had to endure abuse from both their family and the people in town. In the present, the triplets try to make the best of their lives by fighting at an underground club to make enough money to not have to return to their hometown. They only depend on each other, because that is how they survived as children when they were abused by their parents. Cord has to choose to become a better man by himself when his brother is put in the hospital by some college guys, he is furious, his redemption happens when he chooses not to take matters into his own hands. His choice to let the police do their job allows him to finally form a stable relationship with Saylor. These heroes, Asher and Cord, are both MMA (mixed martial arts) fighters, this is not by choice but because they think that fighting is the only skill they have. Previous abuse has heavily damaged them, and this is still visible, physically and mentally. Their lives away from this abuse also means away from the fighting. They need to choose non-violence before they can form stable relationships with their girlfriends.

These heroes are not entirely rational and grown-up as Adult romance heroes would be. Instead, their personal journey is one where they are mentally still stuck in the same state as they were when they were teens and where they have to mature to become an adult that can have a stable relationship. New Adult provides the environment where heroes can be both mature and immature at the same time, in a way that is age-appropriate.

In *One Week Girlfriend*, the trauma is constantly on the edges of the story. For the hero, Drew, the main trauma, at first, appears to be a fear to face his parents (father and

stepmother) but as the story progresses it becomes obvious that he fears his parents because he feels he let them down when his younger sister drowned when he was supposed to look after her for a few minutes. His trauma is one of guilt. Drew has not been in a relationship with a girl since the death of his little sister. For most of the story, he tries to hide his past affair with his stepmother from Fable, though when she finds out, instead of rejecting him she comforts him. Drew has always felt guilty about the affair, but when Fable makes him see how instead of an affair it was emotional and physical abuse by an adult to a young boy, he changes. He learns to let some of his grief go, allowing him to move on and form a real emotional connection with Fable.

These men may in many ways conform to the romantic hero tropes from classic romances, but their brutality and anger are their weaknesses and only results in pushing the girl they want away. Their strength is that they overcome problems from their past, together with the heroine. They do not need to save the heroine, but in many ways, the heroine saves the hero. These are not stories about weak men, but about forming relationships with women who make them better men.

Conclusion

The three New Adult novels that are chosen for this chapter are *Asher* by Jo Raven, *Draw* by Cora Brent and *One Week Girlfriend* by Monica Murphy. They have been chosen because they are full-length novels, they have been listed in “*Romance > New Adult & College*” on *Amazon*, and they have made it onto the *New York Times* and the *USA Today* bestseller lists. They also take place in contemporary settings, are about straight couples and have been published in the last five years. These criteria allowed for comparisons between the books and to apply the history of chapter one to these novels.

New Adult is in conversation with Young Adult because of the multi-layering of story lines. Throughout each book, there is a Young Adult background story line for the hero and the heroine (the personal obstacle to overcome) and a New Adult storyline for the couple to overcome that puts pressure on their relationship in the present. This dynamic between the different story lines is unique to the New Adult category.

In New Adult novels, sexual relationships and having a sexual history are the norm. If one of the characters is a virgin, it is often because they have trauma. A common type of trauma is sexual violence, which is then explored and the hero and heroine will overcome it together. It is explored not just from the trauma of the experience, but also how a character can overcome it.

Heroes in New Adult novels often appear stronger than they are, instead of being forced to pretend to be strong, the novels allow these men to show their vulnerability, but only to the heroine. With the expanded roles of romance heroines, the heroines are now also partial saviours, instead of that role being mainly that of the hero. New Adult novels show an equalised relationship where both the heroine and the hero are allowed to be both weak and strong.

3. New Adult literature and TV, differences in sexual agency

The New Adult category not only exists in literature but also on TV. This chapter focuses on comparing New Adult literature and TV series on the topics of female sexual agency and the male gaze. The New Adult romance novels comprise of *Asher* by Jo Raven, *Draw* by Cora Brent and *One Week Girlfriend* by Monica Murphy, and the TV series comprise of *Gossip Girl* (2007) and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009).

In previous chapters the focus was first on the provenance of Young Adult to New Adult, then on the changes to female sexuality in romance novels and finally on how *Asher*, *Draw*, and *One Week Girlfriend* fit within the New Adult boundaries. In this chapter, the focus is on the similarities and differences in the portrayal of sexuality for significant female characters and the effects of the male gaze. This thesis concentrates on *Gossip Girl* and *The Vampire Diaries* because they target the same demographic as the New Adult novels, and they became popular around the same time as New Adult developed. They are a significant part of modern TV culture for older Young Adult and New Adult audiences.

One thing that comes up when researching modern ideas of female sexual agency is the term “postfeminist sensibility” (Burkett and Hamilton 817). Rosalind Gill explains postfeminist sensibility as “a blend of feminist and anti-feminist elements: ‘notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side by side with surveillance, discipline and vilification of those who make the “wrong” “choices”’” (qtd. in Burkett and Hamilton 817). Angela McRobbie explains this same phenomenon differently and calls it the “post-feminist masquerade” (qtd. in Jarvis 104) in which “achievement in education, career or economic terms does not replace the need to be successful as a visual object” (qtd. in Jarvis 104). This tension between agency and conformity threatens the place of sexual agency in media for adolescent women (Bay-Cheng 283; Murnen and Smolak 728). This tension between how a woman is ‘supposed’ to act according to society and a woman’s agency to make her own

choices is the focus of the first half of this chapter. The second half of the chapter analyses the troubling existence of the male gaze and how the language of looking at women influences the way people talk about women. Many of the issues that analysed in the first half of the chapter also have connections to the second half of the chapter, as the male gaze and heteronormative standards persist even in media focused on women.

The TV series

Gossip Girl is a TV series loosely based on a popular book series by the same name. The series ran for six seasons, from September 2007 to December 2012, the book series ran from April 2002 to November 2009, publishing a total of thirteen books. The third season introduces the characters as going to university or choosing not to attend university at all. The story follows a handful of people, dubbed the “Manhattan Elite”, as they deal with social occasions, relationships and the pressure of conforming to what is expected of them.

The Vampire Diaries is also a TV series based on a popular book series by the same name. It is now in its seventh season, it has been running since September 2009, the first four books in the series were published in 1991 and 1992, but the later nine books were published between 2009 and 2014 (after the popularity of the *Twilight* books and movies). The characters move on from high school to college in season five, though the college already strongly features in season four. Most of the story follows Elena, Stefan and Damon in a town called Mystic Falls, Virginia, US, the town has a history of paranormal problems. The focus of the series is how the main characters fight paranormal creatures while attending school/college, and upholding appearances that they are ‘normal’ people. Even though the series is paranormal, the interpersonal relationships still strongly conform to contemporary standards.

Sexual Agency and Violence Against Women

Sexual agency works twofold, on the one hand, it is about how a woman can express herself, if she is the actor in her own story (Lamb and Peterson 704), on the other hand, it is about how people perceive her (Bay-Cheng 285). This second part is of particular importance in media representation of female sexual agency as perceptions are not only about how a character is portrayed but also how other characters react to her, and thus influence the viewer (Murnen and Smolak 726). As previously explored in chapter one, Krentz insisted that a woman should be a virgin to be of any interest to a romance audience, to her, sexual agency of the female characters started and ended with having to be perceived as pure (111). Chapter two explored how more sexually open characters are now the norm in bestselling New Adult romance novels. Elke Van Damme and Sofie Van Bauwel in their article ‘Sex as Spectacle’, explain the modern sexual freedom thus: “Sex(uality) has become part of the spectacle, and the tendency to ‘casualise’ sexuality is apparent. This pinpoints the possibility that it may be time to reconsider sexual licence in the twenty-first century as part of youth-as-fun instead of youth-as-trouble” (170). This is similar to what Trites said about adults portraying teens in ways that they want teens to act (qtd. in Tosenberger 188), but also with the early portrayals of sex as leading to heartbreaks or pregnancy in Young Adult novels (Day, “He couldn’t” 64-70). Fanfiction written by teens, as shown in chapter one, but also New Adult novels, as shown in chapter two, both break from this mould. Sex and sexual agency have become part of a regular romantic arc. In line with Laina Y. Bay-Cheng’s results, sex has become normalised though the expression of it is still under scrutiny (283-286).

The most obvious difference between the TV series and the books is that the characters in the books are more sexually liberated. In both of the TV series, the first episodes already set up very problematic ideas about sexuality and “good” and “bad” girls (MacKinnon, qtd. in Rana 35), according to Catherine MacKinnon “good girls are

‘attractive’, bad girls are ‘provocative’” (qtd. in Rana 35). In *The Vampire Diaries*, Vicky, a sexually active girl, is nearly raped by her boyfriend in the woods at a party and then killed by a vampire. A second girl, Caroline, who also seems interested and actively tries to initiate sex, gets seduced by this same vampire and in later episodes is raped and fed from against her will. The connection between rape and being fed from by a vampire becomes clear when taking into consideration that feeding from a human is (at least within *The Vampire Diaries* universe) a sexual experience for the vampire (Tiffany). This makes feeding on a non-consenting human another form of sexual violence, not to mention the similarities of bodily intrusion when vampires bite and break through the skin of their victims (Tiffany). None of the other female characters are in any danger. In *Gossip Girl*, the only openly sexual girl, Serena, nearly gets raped in the first episode, and when she manages to fight her attacker off he calls her a slut, shaming her for previous sexual exploits (Van Damme and Van Bauwel 180). These series are more in the trend of youth-as-trouble, young adolescent women who are sexually active are the subject of aggression and the aggression pointed at them to them is somehow seen as a direct result of them being sexually active (Bay-Cheng 285). Their sexually active past becomes an invitation for some men to insist on sex with them at any time they please, because the young women were sexually active in the past, so they should be interested in being sexually available at any time (Bay-Cheng 286). This same issue does not seem to exist in the New Adult novels, someone’s sexual past does not influence either their personal safety or their sexual future.

McRobbie calls this type of woman “phallic girls”, women who behave like males by aggressively looking for and willing to initiate sex: “In coming forward and showing herself to be, in common parlance, ‘up for it’ the phallic girl also allows herself to be the target of old-fashioned sexist insults and hostility from the men she seeks to emulate” (qtd. in Jarvis 105). This hostility goes beyond simply name-calling, as mentioned before. All three

characters are sexually violated and subjected to verbal abuse from their friends and/or family. Vicky is first victimised for being too sexually active as a human and then killed for having issues controlling her lust for blood when she is a vampire. Caroline is kidnapped and tortured by her own father, who tries to cure her of vampirism by using aversion therapy, the undercurrent here is that her father is gay, so it can even be read as a form of self-hatred on his part too (Sarah). When Serena's mother finds out she is in a sexual relationship with her tutor, she is sent away to boarding school, directly censoring her sexuality. These are signs of systemic violence against female characters who show interest in sex as entertainment, instead of insisting on a lasting relationship before having sex with a man (Murnen and Smolak 729).

In *Asher*, Audrey is still a virgin, but this is never showcased or even mentioned, until she finally admits it to Asher, asking him to be careful because it is her first time (1794). The story shows this as something sweet, but there is no extra charge to it. The same goes for friends of Audrey and Asher, who are all sexually active or have been sexually active. Their sexual activity is seen as the norm, as it has been in *Draw* and *One Week Girlfriend*. This is a significant difference between the books and the TV series. Where the books normalise sexual freedom and sexual agency, in the TV series sexual agency is portrayed as bad and girls who are sexually active are abused, tortured and violated.

One possible reason for this difference is that Hollywood is by and large run by men (Buckley) while the romance industry is largely run by women (Rodale 16). Even going back as far as the 1910s, many romance novels endorsed feminist agendas (Vivanco 1061), and publishers actively searched these books out (Vivanco 1063-1066). It is no surprise then that New Adult romance novels conform to modern issues of postfeminism while the TV series adhere to more heteronormative stereotypes.

Sexual Agency of Women Who Choose the ‘Right’ Man

Focusing solely on sexual violence against characters that are openly sexual only shows half of the story. Both *Gossip Girl* and *The Vampire Diaries* become much more tolerant of female sexual agency halfway through the first season, but only in very narrow constraints and only for a select few. Bay-Cheng describes the type of acceptable sexual behaviour as “occurring in heterosexual, monogamous, long-term relationships with conventionally gendered roles” (281). This is exactly what also goes on in *Gossip Girl* and *The Vampire Diaries*. In *Gossip Girl*, Blair, a character whose main identity is that of virginity and purity, has sex with Chuck, the man who will be her boyfriend for most of the series and they ultimately get married. In *The Vampire Diaries*, Elena, mainly portrayed as of good standing, has sex with Stefan, whom she dates for significant parts of the series. Even when she is conflicted between Stefan and his brother Damon in later seasons, her sexuality is never treated as threatening, and she is never punished for it.

These characters are allowed more active roles in intimate moments, often initiating sexual contact (Van Damme and Van Bauwel 179), but are never branded a ‘slut’. Their ‘slutty’ title is deferred by them having sex with the person who they ‘belong with’, in the grand scheme of the series, and not just anyone. Unlike the characters branded ‘sluts’, who usually have sex with men that they are physically interested in, but not romantically per se. Blair and Elena are allowed to be sexually active because their conduct fits within the narrow constraints of accepted ways to express female sexuality (Bay-Cheng 281).

Sexually Violent Leading Men

In both *Gossip Girl* and *The Vampire Diaries*, men who are sexually active, and in some cases even rapists, do not get punished at all for behaving this way. Jessica Wakeman mentions this issue as one of the things that stand out most in the *Gossip Girl* series, and

Tiffany notes the same thing about *The Vampire Diaries*. The issue is that the most sexually adventurous men in the series (Chuck in *Gossip Girl* and Damon in *The Vampire Diaries*), are also rapists who are never confronted about their actions and never apologise to the women they violate. Damon feeds from Vicky and rapes and feeds from Caroline and Andie Star (whose sole role in the series is to be violated physically and sexually by Damon) (Tiffany). Damon's character is sexually aggressive, a stereotype commonly found in visual media (Murnen and Smolak 726), and seen as desirable (Van Damme and Van Bauwel 173), so much so that he also dates leading lady Elena for large parts of the series. The same problematic storyline surrounds Chuck in *Gossip Girl*, in the first episode, he tries to rape two girls (Serena and Jenny), though his sexual aggression is often laughed off within the series and treated as a character quirk. The characters explain this away so much that when Blair finds out that Chuck tried to rape Jenny, she blames Jenny instead of Chuck, even though Chuck has raped Blair himself in the past.

These two men are portrayed as womanisers but still acceptable love interests to significant female characters in the show. Their rapist behaviour is ignored or glossed over, and only functions as character building for the victims, and as a demonstration of how 'bad' the men are. Their sexually aggressive behaviour is to give them an 'edge', that is until the story needs them to reform and become suitable boyfriends. In some ways, for example, the lack of consideration for female characters and their need to show off their sexual dominance, these characters are very similar to classic novel *AlphHoles* (Rodale 120; Wendell and Tan 77), but somehow this troubling trope is acceptable in modern TV shows, where it has become frowned upon in romance novels.

In contrast, Saylor's boyfriend in *Draw*, Devin, is never given such leniency. There are never excuses for what Devin has done, and it is set in a broader dimension of Devin being abusive and controlling and a horrible person. He is never portrayed as a suitable love

interest. In *Dylan* by Jo Raven, the fourth book in the *Inked Brotherhood* series, Tessa is being pressured by her parents to get involved with a boy whom they know has raped her in the past, only because the rape does not weigh up against the status the boy has in society and the potential business gain her father can make out of a potential marriage. In this book, not only is the boy vilified, but also Tessa's parents, they are shown as calculating and abusive, and Tessa turns away from them at every turn.

Heteronormative behaviour is acceptable, or even rewarded, in the TV series, while similar behaviour is rejected in the novels. As with questions of female sexuality, New Adult novels function in a feminist sphere, where heteronormative stereotypes are broken and where AlphHole behaviour is not the norm.

Male Gaze

The male gaze is a term that comes from visual media studies, the first person to coin this term was Laura Mulvey in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in 1975.

According to Mulvey, the male gaze means that men are assumed as the active role of viewer, that heterosexual men are the default target of a movie (63), and that women are the viewed party, their worth in a movie is to be looked at, not to actively participate (62). An example of this is how in advertising the advertisements for men are about looking at a woman and getting the woman while advertisements for women are about how women are looked at and how by making herself more attractive she can get a man. Both these advertisements assume that the man is the active party (watcher and getter) while the woman is the passive party (object to be looked at and to be had). Mulvey asserts "[g]oing far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at in the spectacle itself" (67). The male gaze works in three parts that together form the male gaze itself, the first one is the creator, the second one is the actor/narrator, and the third one is the spectator

(Mulvey 68). According to Mulvey, in the 1970s and earlier, all these three were focused on men, they were the creators, the active actors and the intended spectators (57). New Adult romances and TV series for women should, at least, have women as the intended spectator role. However, this is not always true in the TV series; there are problematic moments where men, not women, appear to be the intended audience. This is firstly because of ingrained patriarchal norms in visual media (Mulvey 57), and secondly because even in contemporary Hollywood, it is still largely run by men (Buckley).

Gossip Girl straddles a fine line between who is watching who. Elke Van Damme and Sofie Van Bauwel conclude that “The impression of a self-policing, narcissistic gaze is present in the series: the female characters are aware of having all (male) eyes upon them, maybe even exploiting it and enjoying it” (175). The show portrays much fashion, the girls in the show are constantly comparing the newest items they have acquired, and they are the fashion icons of the local high school they attend (Van Damme and Van Bauwel 177). Much of the show is about women expressing themselves with their fashion, not for the eyes of men, but for the eyes of other women; it reinforces their place in the social hierarchy at the school (Van Damme and Van Bauwel 178). At the same time, the actresses are good-looking, they dress in clothes that look even better on them (Van Damme and Van Bauwel 177), the camera regularly lingers on parts of the body that are sexual, and occasionally one of the characters will be dressed in provocative underwear for the pleasure of the viewer. There is a voyeuristic element that conforms to Mulvey’s observation of the “male phantasy” (63) and does not seem to target women.

The question becomes if this dressing sexily is a form of empowerment (wanting to be sexy) or if this is part of a male gaze (being objectified and dressed sexy to entice the viewer). Courtney A. Fiske asks, in her article on the portrayal of the main actresses from *Gossip Girl* is the marketing for the show, “[w]ho has the power to define which

representations are to be condemned for affirming the instrumentality of women as mere means to male satisfaction, and which are to be lauded for enhancing female autonomy?" Murnen and Smolak assert that the question has no easy answer, what is empowerment for some is oppression to others (731-732). Although it can not be ignored that nearly all visual media is patriarchal and supports heteronormative views (Buckley; Murnen and Smolak 727).

Because of our patriarchal society, many women have accepted, internalised, and applied the male gaze when they view or create media (Murnen and Smolak 731). This means that even romance novels are not exempt from the damaging construction of the male gaze. The authors of all the New Adult novels discussed in this thesis are female, so they come from a female creator (first part of the gaze), and the audience is also female (third part of the gaze). The actors or narrators (second part) in this case are male and female as all three of the books have dual narration (where both the heroine and hero have chapters where they are narrators), also, both the male and female characters have active roles and story lines. An important part of Mulvey's argument on the male gaze is that the objectification of the female character, her primary role is to be an "erotic object" (62), she is not a fully formed human but instead only there to visually satisfy men (63).

A good example is in *One Week Girlfriend* where Drew takes a close look at Fable for the first time and immediately objectifies her: "Drinking in her features, my gaze settles on her mouth. She has a great one. Full, sexy lips, she could probably give a most excellent blowjob if I'm being honest with myself" (124). She is not a human being, Drew reduces her to a sexual object, this sentiment is expressed in the sentence following too "Makes me wonder exactly how many of my fellow teammates have got with her" (125). Again, she is not an active human being; she is an item that his teammates have used. Drew conforms to the heteronormative stereotype of how a man should behave and approves of other men who

have done the same. He sees Fable not as a person but as a fantasy. This clashes with the postfeminist character of Fable, who does not conform to heteronormative stereotypes.

The Vampire Diaries takes the objectification and the male gaze a step further. As mentioned before, Caroline is tortured multiple times in the series, but it is the way in which the torture is filmed and played out that calls into question the intended audience of the series. As Sarah explains “The camera emphasizes Caroline’s physical suffering, focusing on the bloody wounds on her hands and on her skin as it sizzles and burns. It also highlights her helplessness.” Mulvey explains this sexualisation of torture thus: “voyeurism . . . has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control, and subjecting the guilty person through punishment” (64). Sarah then argues that “the torture functions as a metaphor for the rage and cruelty that a powerful woman can evoke in people”. Caroline is punished for being a powerful woman; her femaleness is a reminder of her lack of a penis, and this has a threat of castration (Mulvey 64). She is the embodiment of the rage of men who find female sexual agency threatening to their masculinity. This is a TV series whose biggest audience is women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four (Sarah), but does not have these women in mind as an audience when they create these torture scenes. If they do, the implications of showing men torturing a woman for having agency, are beyond horrifying, though fitting within the enforcement of heteronormative norms. A series targeted at women sends the message that they will be subjected to violence for being perceived too sexual or too powerful, blaming the victims for the abuse that they receive, is set deeply into the patriarchal society.

While the New Adult novels are not free of the male gaze, they do offer a comforting conclusion where the gaze is no longer normative and instead draws from feminist views. New Adult romance novels comfort female readers with the knowledge that there are more

ways of viewing the world and others around her, that the heteronormative displays of the male gaze in visual media are not the only portrayals of male and female behaviour.

Conclusion

Fortunately, books and TV series are not the only source of representation of female agency and the male gaze that a teen will see. Van Damme and Van Bauwel insist that “young media consumers do not simply adopt the reality represented on screen. . . . [V]iewers are media literate and critical consumers” (170). Something that the significant number of blogs and other online sources created by (adolescent) men and women on the subject of sexual politics, gender and sexuality in media, both video and literature supports.

The comparisons in this chapter of the TV series and the novels falls in line with the conclusion Burkett and Hamilton came to in their research ‘Postfeminist Sexual Agency’: “we suggest that contemporary sexual agency underscores an awkward blend of feminist and anti-feminist elements in which women view themselves as empowered yet continue to reproduce the terms of sexuality set by heteronormative discourses” (817). The TV series portray very damaging stereotypes of “bad” sexually expressive girls, while girls who only have eyes for their romantic partner are dubbed “good” girls (MacKinnon qtd. in Rana 35), this is not just the narration of the stories themselves but also in the portrayal of these women in the broader spectrum of the series.

The male gaze is pervasive, both in the TV series and, to a certain extent, the books. Women are regularly reduced to the status of “erotic object” (Mulvey 62), problematizing their agency. This is even to the point where torture becomes “torture porn” (Sarah), in which a female character’s torture is eroticized, written in a way to elicit sexual urges in male viewers. This erotization of torture sends female viewers the message that if they take on a more sexual role, they will be subjected to violence.

The portrayal of sexual agency in New Adult literature and TV series sends mixed messages. Some portrayals are empowering, but the same novels and series also show problematic portrayals at other times. The TV series portray more problematic heteronormative elements than the books do. This is especially obvious when it comes to the portrayal of sexually active women; they are more likely to be punished for their sexual interest in the TV series, a trait perceived as masculine, not feminine. While the books are more progressive and sexually liberated, the TV series are more conservative and adhere to outdated heteronormative gender roles.

Conclusion

This thesis positions New Adult romance in relation to its closest predecessor, Young Adult fiction, in relation to the sexual revolution in romance novels, and the larger context of media for adolescent females. The three books used for this comparison are *Asher* by Jo Raven, *Draw* by Cora Brent and *One Week Girlfriend* by Monica Murphy; these are New Adult romance novels that have reached the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists. These books use a continuation of Young Adult themes to show a maturity of character, this in combination with a more modern romance novel view on sex and gender stereotypes. When comparing them to visual media focused on this demographic (*Gossip Girl* and *The Vampire Diaries*), the novels are more feminist in their portrayal of female agency and the male gaze.

New Adult romance is part of a bigger movement of writing for specific adolescent age groups. Where before the 1990s there was mostly children's and adult fiction, in the late 1990s this changed. Young Adult came out of a tradition of crossover novels; its most important early titles were the *Harry Potter* and the *His Dark Materials* series. Young Adult had a second revival when the *Twilight* series was published, interesting readers from the Adult romance genre in the younger category. Teens, not satisfied with the lack of exploration of sexual themes, which did not connect their experienced lives, took to fanfiction to explore the worlds that they loved in ways that the books did not. These stories were often set slightly outside the stories in the books themselves, allowing for more creative freedom. This ageing of Young Adult characters to college-aged characters spilled over into publishing. With the invention of ebook publishing, a growing number of authors started publishing Young Adult stories that had slightly older protagonists and took place in college, in these stories sexuality was not hidden but part of the larger experience of relationships. This aged-up Young Adult was named New Adult.

New Adult romance novels use layered story elements to tell a complex story. In *Asher*, there is a back story of a problematic young relationship, set in a contemporary story of two lovers who are at different places in their lives but still want to reconnect after being apart for three years. The background story in New Adult novels is often a problematic Young Adult storyline, one that is not resolved, so there is a lingering trauma that the hero and the heroine need to confront, while at the same time, there is a New Adult storyline, revolving around work or college, that creates contemporary obstacles for the couple to overcome, too. This dynamic of double-layered story lines sets New Adult stories apart from Young Adult stories.

New Adult sexual relationships follow the same path as modern romance novels. In modern romance novels, the heroine is often not a virgin (Wendell and Tan 23-24; Rodale 106), unlike in classic romance novels, where being a virgin was one of the heroine's most important values (Krentz 111). The sexually experienced heroines are usually not shamed for her sexual experience though this does depend on how they expressed their sexuality (Bay-Cheng 280-281). In some cases, 'slut' shaming is an issue though having sexual experience in and of itself is considered normal (Naughton). "Aggressive seduction" (Krentz 109), or rape of the heroine by the hero, is no longer a popular theme to include in romance novels (Wendell and Tan 137). Heroes have also changed, they are no longer brutish but instead have to follow their own path of redemption and change before they can finalise their relationship with the heroine.

All the books in his thesis have multiple sex scenes, they all take place on the page and every one of them has the heroine climaxing, something that did not happen to heroines in classic romance novels. There is one account of rape; this happens in *Draw* but this is never shrugged off, it is carefully treated. In all the books the heroes are caring and, although in some cases dangerous, never a danger to the heroine. They follow their own story line of

redemption, for example, Asher has to learn to accept help from his friends and Cord (*Draw*) has to learn that not everything can be solved with violence, before they can be in a relationship with the heroine.

Sexual agency is a trait that has become more important in modern romance novels, though, placing it within the wider scope of TV series (in this case *Gossip Girl* and *The Vampire Diaries*), this seems to be unique. For example, in *The Vampire Diaries*, women with sexual agency are often violently treated (tortured, raped, fed from and killed), while sexually more demure women are not. This is quite different from New Adult novels where sexual experience does not influence the way that other characters interact with women. This is a significant difference between the two forms of media, even though both target women in their late teens until the early thirties as their audience.

The male gaze is pervasive in both the TV series and the novels. While it is more problematic in the TV series, it still exists in the romance novels too. The most important ways that it is employed in the TV series is by objectifying and sexualising women, even in situations where this is inappropriate (Tiffany).

New Adult romance is very new, it has very little academic writing on it, and it shows quite progressive views on female agency and sexuality. Romance novels take up a particularly important part in the discussion on female sexuality because it is a genre focused on women, written by women and barely influenced by men (Rodale 16). This gives romance novels a unique position in that they can tell stories that might otherwise not be told. New Adult also has the advantage of belonging to a history of very issue-driven Young Adult novels, allowing New Adult to explore issues on sexuality and agency that fall outside of the scope of Young Adult novels and Adult romance.

New Adult romance has only been around since 2009, although the roots of the movement towards New Adult romance go back to the early 1990s. New Adult is a unique combination of Young Adult story lines with mature content and a focus of female agency that is lacking in other media for this demographic. New Adult is only in its early stages, but it has the promise to, like Young Adult, explore parts of life and themes that would be difficult to explore otherwise.

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