

**THE COST OF ADOLESCENCE: MENTAL HEALTH, GENDER
PERFORMANCE, AND THE HETEROSEXUAL MARKETPLACE IN
CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT FICTION**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the Impact of the Heterosexual Marketplace on Mental Health in Contemporary
Young Adult Novels

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Literature Review

It is important to begin by looking at gender theory texts. The part of gender theory focused on specifically within this thesis is performativity. Gender performativity is defined in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” by Judith Butler. She argues that gender is not something that is inherent to the body, like biological sex, but rather something that is performed. She discusses how gender is continuously being performed and constructed by those performing it.

Looking next at the feminist theory texts, the parts of feminism important to this thesis are the heterosexual marketplace and the idea of value. In Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet’s *Language and Gender*, they introduce the idea of the heterosexual marketplace. The heterosexual marketplace is a social market where men and women pair up together and therefore find their value within each other and within society. This directly relates to the idea of value, which is seen presented in “The Traffic in Women” by Gayle Rubin. She examines how within the heterosexual marketplace, women are treated as commodities that can be traded

between men and have value to men. This idea is reinforced in “Women on the Market” by Luce Irigaray. Irigaray also emphasizes that women also treat themselves as commodities and that their relationships with men give them different social values with other women.

The selected novels are all contemporary young adult fiction works. Each of these works has a protagonist and side characters dealing with issues of mental health. The first novel to examine is *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky. Within this novel, the characters that are important are Charlie, his parents, Patrick, Sam, and Mary Elizabeth. The second novel is *Keeping the Moon* by Sarah Dessen, and the characters of Colie, her mother Kiki, her Aunt Mira, Norman, Morgan, and Isabel are of importance. The third novel is *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell, and the significant characters are Cath, Wren, their mother, Reagan, and Levi. The last book is *Turtles All the Way Down* by John Green, and the significant characters are Aza, Davis, and Daisy. All of these books are relatively recent works, and the authors mentioned are all well-known young adult authors who have little, if anything, written about them or their works. This reinforces that there is a place within academia to examine what they have to say about the role of gender, sexuality, and mental health within their novels.

Thesis Statement

Expectations of gender performance and the heterosexual marketplace negatively affect the way young characters within these contemporary young adult novels ultimately deal with mental health concerns.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for research is feminist and gender theories. This includes critical works that explore different ideas of gender, gender performativity, sexuality, and language that add to the feminist and gender lenses of literary theory.

Project Description

This paper looks at the portrayal of mental health in protagonists within selected contemporary fiction young adult novels. In these selected texts, the protagonists are all dealing with mental health in various ways that are not always healthy, which can be argued to be linked to issues regarding gender performativity and the heterosexual marketplace. We see many instances of the heterosexual marketplace in play, with characters in these novels finding their value by being in heterosexual relationships, enforcing the marketplace. In addition, they also have pressure by peers to participate in romantic, heterosexual relationships, which hinders their ability to concentrate on their growth.

These characters learn how to perform their gender through their interactions with older characters, as well as through print media. They are primarily struggling with issues related to mental health, ranging from OCD to eating disorders, and the added pressure of the heterosexual marketplace and gender performativity doesn't necessarily lead to much positive growth in handling their mental health. Using lenses of feminist and gender theories, I explore how these issues are important in determining the way the characters deal with their mental health and have a lack of growth.

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INTRODUCTION

What makes the subgenre of contemporary young adult literature enticing is its willingness to address important topics, such as mental health, sexuality, and family issues, while still being accessible for a younger audience. Mental health issues within select young adult novels are shown to be affected by ideas such as the heterosexual marketplace and gender performance when examined through the lenses of feminist and gender theories.

The four selected novels addressed here are *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky (1999), *Keeping the Moon* by Sarah Dessen (1999), *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell (2013), and *Turtles All the Way Down* by John Green (2017). Throughout these novels, various mental health struggles within the characters are present but not the sole focus of the works. Rather, mental health is just one aspect that happens to be found within these texts. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie begins high school and has many challenges making friends and exploring things like drugs, alcohol, and sex for the first time. In *Keeping the Moon*, Colie has recently moved to a new town, has lost a significant amount of weight and faces challenges trying to fit in, work at a local diner, and adjust to life with her eccentric aunt. *Fangirl* follows Cath throughout her first year of college, as she learns to adjust to a new major, a new roommate, and finding her own identity without her twin. Lastly, Aza in *Turtles All the Way Down* begins a new relationship, investigates a missing person case, and faces friendship struggles, all while dealing with OCD.

These specific books were chosen due to their impact within the field of contemporary, realistic young adult fiction. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was released twenty years ago, has sold over 5.5 million copies worldwide (Publishers Weekly), and was adapted into a

movie. Sarah Dessen just published her 14th novel and won the Margaret A. Edwards award in 2017 “honoring her significant and lasting contribution to writing for teens” (American Library Association). John Green also has been well known in this subgenre for a while, winning the Michael L. Printz award in 2006 for his debut novel *Looking for Alaska* (American Library Association). Rainbow Rowell’s debut young adult novel, *Eleanor and Park*, was a Michael L. Printz Honor Book (American Library Association) as well, showing her prominence in this field. The selected books are not a complete look at the entirety of all contemporary, realistic young adult fiction, but they are representative of what could be a possible trend within the subgenre.

In these works, all of the characters are dealing with pre-existing mental health concerns; most of them are failing to deal with these concerns in beneficial ways. Examining these works through the lenses of feminist and gender theories provides possible factors as to why these characters struggle and fail to grow healthily. Expectations of gender performance and the heterosexual marketplace negatively affect the way young characters within these contemporary young adult novels ultimately deal with mental health concerns.

CHAPTER I

MENTAL HEALTH

The protagonists in these novels deal with a range of mental health issues including depression, trauma, eating disorders, OCD, and generalized anxiety disorder. The works do not represent these issues in beneficial ways. The protagonists may grow slightly, but there is a lack of healthy mental growth throughout the novels.

Kia Richmond references the American Psychiatric Associations to define mental illness within her work, *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature*:

The American Psychiatric Associations (APA) defines mental illnesses as “health conditions involving changes in thinking, emotion, or behavior (or a combination of these)”; typically they are connected to “distress and/or problems functioning in social, work, or family activities.” (3)

This definition is applicable to each of the protagonists in the novels. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Fangirl*, and *Turtles All the Way Down* all look specifically at anxiety. *Perks* also looks at depression and trauma, while *Turtles* also looks at OCD and *Keeping the Moon* looks at eating disorders.

Beginning of Novels

As each book progresses, the way the mental illnesses are portrayed within the characters changes. At the start of the novels, mental illnesses are not portrayed in a healthy manner. A “healthy manner” is mental illness being properly addressed/diagnosed, the character acknowledging they are struggling, seeking help, and then receiving help that is beneficial and working to lead the character to growth. Charlie’s struggles in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

are abundant; the novel begins with him dealing with a friend's suicide. Richmond defines depression as:

According to the DSM-5, to be diagnosed with major depressive disorder (MDD), an individual must have five or more of the following symptoms during the same two weeks: depressed mood most of the day each day, reduced interest in most activities...lack of energy, feelings of worthlessness or extreme guilt...or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for such an attempt. (59)

Charlie shows signs of being depressed and having extreme guilt near the beginning of the novel: "Then, I started screaming at the guidance counselor that Michael could have talked to me. And I started crying even harder" (4). His symptoms are sparked by this event, and it leads to his mental health becoming worse as the book progresses because he does not receive proper treatment at this time.

Symptoms of trauma are defined in "Freak Out or Melt Down: Teen Responses to Trauma and Depression" by Jami Jones as:

Whatever the situation that leads to trauma, the symptoms are expressed physically, emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally.... Emotional responses include feelings of...anxiety, anger and resentment, survivor's guilt, shock...Cognitive symptoms are decreased attention span, impaired thinking and decision making, problems with memory ...flashbacks. (31)

Several of these symptoms are seen within Charlie through the previous example. Charlie experiences anger, shock, and survivor's guilt after his friend's suicide, but he also experiences repressed trauma from a separate event that is brought to light towards the end of the novel.

Colie in *Keeping the Moon* is not formally diagnosed with a specific eating disorder at any point in the book, but she exhibits signs of having one. Richmond defines eating disorders as:

According to the DSM-5, the following are classified as feeding and eating disorders:

...avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. Each of these includes some type of persistent problem with eating or eating-related behaviors that results in changed ingestion or absorption of food and that negatively affects physical health or psychosocial functioning in a significant way. (132)

Colie's actions seem closest to avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder. The book expresses from the beginning pages that she and her mother both used to be overweight, and when her mom lost the weight and became a fitness instructor, she made Colie lose weight too. Colie says:

She loved her new, strong body, but for me it was harder. Even though I'd been teased all my life, I'd always taken a small, strange comfort in my folds of fat, the fact I could grab myself at the waist...food being my only comfort through the long afternoons while my mother was working. Now, almost fifty pounds lighter, I had nothing left to hide behind. (Dessen 5-6)

Although Colie is now skinnier, she does not gain self-confidence, as her mother does. Instead, she develops an eating disorder to keep her weight off.

Turtles All the Way Down is different from the other novels because Aza's OCD is professionally diagnosed. OCD is defined by Richmond:

According to the DSM-5, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) includes the presence of obsessions (described as reoccurring and persisting thoughts, impulses, or images that one experiences as invasive or unwanted) and/or compulsions (behaviors or mental acts

that one feels obliged to do in response to an obsession or a set of rules that must be strictly followed). Obsessions commonly cause stress or anxiety. (97)

Aza's OCD is recognized from the start of the novel; she is the only character out of the four protagonists discussed that is formally diagnosed with her mental illness and is receiving treatment throughout. While she is receiving professional help, the help is not sufficient.

Fangirl does not see a specific portrayal or discussion of Cath's anxiety at the beginning of the book, but the symptoms discussed later are still present. Richmond defines generalized anxiety disorder as:

Of the following symptoms, at least three, which are present on most days for more than six months, are listed in the DSM-5 for diagnosis: restlessness or feeling keyed up, being easily tired, attentiveness problems, irritability.... Adolescents who have generalized-anxiety disorder can be excessively self-critical and might avoid attempting tasks that they might be unable to complete flawlessly. (81)

Cath exhibits signs of being self-critical and feeling keyed up. The novel says, "Cath didn't feel like her real self was buried under eight layers of fear and diagnosable anxiety" (Rowell 57), but this does not mean that her anxiety is not present. She doesn't necessarily know how to best manage her anxiety on her own and tends to rely on her sister. Starting college forces her to take her own path away from her sister, which leads to her anxiety becoming worse in the beginning months of their separation.

Middle of the Novels

The protagonists' mental illnesses continue to worsen as each of the novels progresses. In *Perks*, Charlie's mental health deteriorates through the middle of the book. He mentions receiving therapy at one point, but the book spans the course of several months without him

getting better or people noticing that he is getting worse, showing that the treatment he is receiving might not be the best possible care for him. He begins crying more frequently and exhibiting greater signs of anxiety: “When Patrick left me outside, I started to cry. It was real and panicky, and I couldn’t stop it” (136). His emotions start to overtake him to the point where he is unable to control them even with the help he is receiving. As Charlie is struggling throughout, he is not receiving other types of beneficial treatment, such as medication.

Colie in *Keeping the Moon* does not receive or accept beneficial help throughout the novel either. Colie makes comments like “After I ate two doughnuts, I realized those forty-five-and-a-half pounds could creep back easily over a whole summer of what my mother termed ‘Stuffin’ for Nothin’.’ I ran on the beach for an hour” (35). She struggles with this disordered eating throughout the entire novel, and she is encouraged by those around her in subtle ways to continue her behavior. In a scene about halfway through the novel, one of her older friends decides to give Colie a makeover. Colie observes,

All around it [the mirror] were hundreds of faces cut from magazines...all staring out hollow-cheeked and seductive.... girls with drastic makeup, girls with no makeup, all of them skinny, some of them smiling.... Here and there, mixed in, you could see pictures of real people.... Next to the models they seemed smaller, and you noticed every imperfection...I looked at myself in the mirror, surrounded by all those beautiful girls, and wondered what I was doing there. (84-85)

Colie equates “skinniness” with “beauty,” and these standards are upheld by other women in the novel, causing her mindset about herself and her disorder to continue to worsen.

Throughout *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza refuses to take her prescribed medication because she isn’t convinced that it will help her: “Can’t bear the thought of Dr. Singh calling

back, voice tinged with sympathy, asking whether I'm taking the medication every day. Doesn't work anyway. Nothing does" (Green 213). Her intrusive thoughts begin to multiply and become more severe during the middle of the book due to her not taking her medication. Even though she is receiving professional treatment, she is not participating in all of the steps of treatment, which leads to her mental illness spiraling out of her control.

Discussion of anxiety in *Fangirl* reaches its peak by the middle of the novel as well. As Cath's anxiety worsens about her sister and social events happening, the book reveals that her dad also struggles with anxiety. It is implied that he has not taken proper care of his mental health, and discussion is raised about when Cath first started experiencing her own anxiety:

That first night they'd spent in Wren's bed, Wren holding Cath's wrists, Cath crying.

"I'm like him," she'd whispered.

"You're not," Wren said.

"I am. I'm crazy like him." She was already having panic attacks. She was already hiding at parties. "It's probably going to get worse in a few years. That's when it usually kicks in." (Rowell 226-227)

When Cath's symptoms first start she refers to herself as "crazy," showing that her dad most likely wasn't receiving beneficial treatment if that is the picture she had of someone dealing with poor mental health. Seeing him not receive treatment could be the reason that Cath does not ever seek proper treatment for herself throughout the novel.

End of the Novels

By the ends of the novels, most of the characters do not exhibit any sort of mental growth that is healthy moving forward. Mental growth that would be healthy for the characters is acknowledging their illnesses and positively accepting help, whether through professional

treatment or through support networks, while realizing they are not solely defined by their mental illnesses and can lead lives beyond them.

At the end of *Perks*, Charlie is hospitalized and seems to be receiving the help he needs, but it took him suffering alone for many months and repressed trauma coming to light before he got the help he needed. Although the book does end on a more positive note, Charlie hasn't grown much in a mentally beneficial way throughout. He concludes, "But even if we don't have the power to choose where we come from, we can still choose where we go from there. We can still do things. And we can try to feel okay about them" (Chbosky 211). He has accepted what happened to him and is looking towards moving forward, but he hasn't grown positively yet. Rather, he is still processing what happened to him and how it affects his mental health, which he must do before he can grow.

By the end of *Keeping the Moon*, Colie does not have a beneficial mindset either. None of the people surrounding Colie express concern over her eating or exercising behaviors. Without outside intervention, she would not seek help because she cannot tell for herself that her actions are beyond the point of healthy. At the end of the novel, she says, "The strangest thing was that I felt different. As if something pulled taut for so long had eased back, everything that had been strained settling into place: those forty-five-and-a-half pounds finally gone for good" (202). She is content with who she is finally but only once she lost the weight, strived hard to keep it off, put on makeup, and dyed her hair. Her actions do not show healthy growth because she will continue to have disordered eating to keep the weight off, showing pressure to align with specific beauty standards instead of overall beneficial mental and physical health.

Turtles All the Way Down ends with Aza receiving more professional help after being hospitalized. In this case, her hospitalization was not specifically for her mental illness, but it

turned into treatment for that once her therapist and mom figured out that she was having severe intrusive thoughts due to not taking her medication. Although Aza is at fault for not taking her prescribed medication and letting those around her know how bad her mental health had gotten, it isn't beneficial for Aza that no one around her, including her therapist, recognized other signs that she wasn't doing well. By the end, Aza seems to be on a better path to recovery and is communicating more with her mother and therapist, but she is still not hopeful:

I know the secret that the me lying beneath the sky could not imagine: I know that girl would go on, that she would grow up, have children and love them, that despite loving them she would get too sick to care for them, be hospitalized, get better, and then get sick again. (285)

She recognizes that she is getting better, but she does not recognize that she might possibly maintain her mental stability. This mindset will not help her continue to grow and shows the limitations of her growth so far.

The one exception to this pattern of lack of growth is Cath in *Fangirl*. It could be argued that she is the only character out of the four that are being examined that shows growth. By the end of the novel, she is working towards managing her anxiety. Although she does not receive professional help, she is encouraged by people surrounding her to take care of herself, and she begins to rely on them instead of allowing her problems to fester. She has a large support system compared to some of the other protagonists, including her sister, dad, friends, and a boyfriend. She chooses to address her trauma and anxiety in her own terms, and by facing them, she is allowing herself to grow. She ends the book in a much healthier place than where she began, as she is hopeful to continue college and begins writing things other than her fanfiction, which she used as an escape from her mental illness. Her growth could be because she is willingly facing

her mental illness with a positive mindset or because of the support system that she has. She is also the oldest character out of the four, which might make an impact as well.

Each of the four novels follows very different characters dealing with mental illnesses in different ways. Having representation in young adult novels where mental health is just one aspect of the character's lives is positive, but it must be done in a careful manner, and it is not within these works. Representation of mental health can sometimes be accurate within the works, but it is not a beneficial portrayal of mental health overall because of the lack of growth seen within the characters. Each of the characters continues to struggle from beginning to end with their mental illnesses, and in most of the cases, they do not end up growing positively overall.

CHAPTER II

EXPECTATIONS OF GENDER PERFORMANCE

In the novels, expectations of how gender is supposed to be performed negatively impact mental health. The characters' existing mental health is affected by learning to perform their gender based off of examples by older adults in their lives or through print media, such as fanfiction.

There are many varying opinions on what exactly gender is and how it is constituted. For the purpose of this argument, the article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" by Judith Butler is used to define gender. Butler states, "One is not simply a body, but in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well" (902). In this definition, gender is something that is performed, not something that is inherent to the body, like biological sex. Gender most often lines up with biological sex, but it can also be performed differently because gender is something that can be unique to the person who is performing their gender. However, gender performance is influenced by certain societal expectations and standards. People learn as they grow that certain ways of performance are more widely "accepted" by society, which then influences the way they observe and perform gender overall.

The ideology of gender performance is supported by scholars Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, as they discuss in *Language and Gender*:

As we age, we continue to learn new ways of being men and women: what's expected from the teenaged girl is rather different from expectations for a woman in her mid-forties and those expectations differ from those for a woman approaching eighty.... As

we've seen from above, learning to be male or female involves learning to look and act in particular ways, learning to participate in particular ways in relationships and communities, and learning to see the world from a particular perspective. (30)

Each of the protagonists within the novels are learning how best to perform their gender for themselves based off of the examples of adults or media around them. These examples impact them greatly, even if it is not always the most beneficial way of performance for the characters.

In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, adults heavily influence the way teenagers within the novel perform their gender. Charlie has his dad and older brother to observe as examples, who are both performing very traditionally masculine, as well as his older friend Patrick, who is gay and performs differently than traditional masculinity. "Traditional" for how it is used within this paper can be defined as aligning with 1950s US television stereotypes, such as men not showing emotion, men working in the public sphere while women stay in the domestic sphere, etc.

Charlie observes the traditional example through his parents: "My dad never left to make a sandwich except during commercial breaks, and then he usually just sent my mom" (17). In this situation, Charlie's mom is performing domestic duties to serve his dad, who is sitting at the TV after working, which sets an example for Charlie as he watches them perform in such a way.

Charlie throughout the novel falls somewhere in between both examples in performing his own gender, but he still feels as though he has to perform a certain way to fit in. Observing his dad, he learns how to react with violence: "That's when my dad slapped me...Aunt Helen told my father not to hit me in front of her ever again and my father said this was his house and he would do what he wanted and my mom was quiet" (6). Charlie exhibits this learned behavior when he gets into a physical fight after he sees people bullying Patrick: "The fight was hard...that's when I got involved. I just couldn't watch them hurt Patrick...Brad and two of his

buddies stopped fighting and just stared at me” (151). Fighting is not Charlie’s typical response to a situation like this, but he is trying to defend his friend in a very masculine way. However, observing Patrick, he sees an alternative example. Patrick has a lot of relationship struggles throughout the novel. Charlie does not fully understand what Patrick needs from him as a friend, so in one scene, Charlie lets Patrick kiss him: “So, he said ‘thanks’ and hugged me again. And moved in to kiss me again. And I just let him. I don’t know why” (160). Charlie is not gay, but because he has been observing Patrick kiss men throughout the novel, he lets Patrick kiss him because he wants to be there for Patrick as his friend. Charlie recognizes that this is one possible way for him to perform his gender, so he mimics Patrick’s behavior in this scene, even if he does not feel the most comfortable performing his own gender in this way.

In *Keeping the Moon*, Colie’s situation is a bit different. She has many older women in her life to observe as role models, including her two older friends, Morgan and Isabel, and her Aunt Mira. The way each of these women performs their gender is different, based on age, location, and motivation, but they are all still influenced by the same societal standards and examples. As slightly older girls, Morgan and Isabel do not provide the healthiest examples for Colie. Isabel does not have a healthy body image and also strongly reinforces societal standards of beauty. Isabel and Colie have a conversation during a makeover:

“Who’s that girl?” ...I said, pointing to the chubby girl in the turtleneck...

“My cousin,” she said distractedly. “She’s a real looker, huh.”

“Well, she’s,” I said, “I mean, she’s very...”

“She’s a dog,” she said, settling in to start on my other brow. “It’s no secret.”

It was always so easy for beautiful girls. They could never understand how lucky they were. But I knew her cousin, knew what she was going through. And I couldn't take my eyes off her, even as Isabel worked to transform me. (87)

Later, it is revealed that the girl is not Isabel's cousin, but rather Isabel herself. Colie already struggles with an eating disorder and negative body image throughout; as she learns from older women around her that in order to be pretty or feminine, she has to be skinny or be ashamed of who she once was, she continues to foster her eating disorder and relies on negative examples of how to perform gender.

Morgan is also in a toxic relationship that other women around her can see is harmful. She chooses to stay with her fiancé throughout the novel because of her desire to perform her gender in a way that fits societal expectations. Isabel and Colie discuss Morgan's relationship:

"She loves him," I pointed out.

"She doesn't know any better.... He's the only one who's ever told her she was beautiful," Isabel said. "And she's afraid that she'll never hear it from anyone else."

(108)

Isabel and Colie's discussion emphasizes how Morgan also relies on physical beauty as the basis of her self-worth. She thinks that without traditional beauty, she won't be loved; she has to stay in a toxic relationship to believe that she is beautiful. The behavior and mindset Morgan exhibits are negative examples to set for Colie because it reinforces the idea that her happiness as a woman is based off of other people's perception of her beauty.

The one exception to the examples that have a negative impact on Colie's mental health is Colie's Aunt Mira. Although Mira is a bit eccentric and faces bullying from other people in town based off of her weight or interests, she keeps performing her gender in whatever way she

sees fit. She still performs her gender as a woman that is in the range of societal expectations of women, just not in the most “valued” range that includes expectations of skinniness, certain style, etc: “The thing is...Mira has always been different...Mira’s an artist and this is a small town...Mira came up one day on her bike, wearing some bright orange parka...Mira never understood what all the fuss was about” (66). Mira shows that it is not important to conform to certain expectations, which has the potential to have a positive impact on Colie’s mental health. However, Colie does not choose to see this viewpoint and does not view Mira as a positive role model; instead, she spends most of the novel embarrassed by and for Mira. They have a discussion at the end:

“Mira,” I asked her suddenly, as a car blew past, “how do you stand it?...The things they say, about your bite, or your clothes. The way they look at you and laugh....

“They don’t hurt me, Colie,” she said. “They never have...it’s not about anyone. I’m a lucky person, Colie. I’m an artist, I have my health, and I have friends who fill my life and make me happy. I have no complaints.”

“But it has to hurt you,” I said. “You just hide it so well.”

“Look at me, Colie,” she said.... “I’ve always known who I am. I might not work perfectly or be like them, but that’s okay. I know I work in my own way.” All this time I’d thought we had everything in common, but I’d been wrong. (171)

Colie starts to understand Mira’s perspective a bit more by the end, but she still chooses to focus on her current habits. If Colie embraced what Mira said about individuality and loving who you are regardless, then Colie would realize that her eating habits are not healthy and she needs to change. However, she lets Morgan and Isabel continue to give her makeovers and focuses on

their praise of her being skinny, which fuels her eating disorder, and further negatively impacts her mental health.

In *Fangirl* and *Turtles All the Way Down*, expectations of gender performance are construed a bit differently throughout. These novels examine how outside sources, like print media, influence gender performance in teenagers. Cath and Aza are still both influenced by older/other women in their lives, but they are not influenced as strongly by them. Instead, both books examine how things like fanfiction can impact gender performance.

Fangirl follows Cath's fanfiction writing throughout the entire novel, even including excerpts of her writing. Because her mother left when she was young, she has not had any close older women to observe and learn how to perform her gender. Her mother leaving greatly affects her throughout: "I'm probably going to be crazy for the rest of my life, thanks to her. I'm going to keep making fucked up decisions and doing weird things that I don't even realize are weird" (Rowell 234). In turn, she begins to rely on her twin Wren instead and eventually gets to the point where she cannot adequately perform her gender on her own without relation to Wren (80). Because of this, she has to learn through other examples, such as fanfiction.

In her fanfiction, Cath chooses to write about two teenage male protagonists who are gay. She is not male nor gay, yet this is what she feels most comfortable writing. The book says, "To not hear any voices in her head but Simon's and Baz's. Not even her own. This was why Cath wrote fic. For these hours when their world supplanted the real world" (96). By writing about males in a homosexual relationship, she can start to understand herself better as a heterosexual female; she is able to explore and learn more about men in a "safe" way. It is "safe" because there is a separation of herself and her characters within her writing. Her mindset is not an uncommon one in female writers of this specific type of fanfiction called "slash;" Henry Jenkins

addresses this idea in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*: “Both fans and academic writers characterize slash as a projection of female...desires and experiences onto the male bodies of the series characters” (197). There is a level of separation which allows her to feel comfortable writing about and exploring her own desire and gender performance through these characters; she doesn’t write about a character that looks like her that she could project herself onto. Her fanfiction is an outlet where she ultimately learns more about herself and feels able to perform in certain ways even though her characters are different from her.

Once she is in college, she has her older roommate Reagan to observe, and by the end of the novel, the way she performs as a female does start to change:

“Guys like Levi don’t date girls like me”

“Again—the girl kind?”

“Guys like Levi date girls like you.... Normal,” Cath said. “Pretty.”

Reagan rolled her eyes.

“No,” Cath said, “seriously. Look at you. You’ve got your shit together, you’re not scared of anything. I’m scared of everything. And I’m crazy. Like maybe you think I’m a little crazy, but I only ever let people see the tip of my crazy iceberg. Underneath this veneer of slightly crazy and socially inept, I’m a complete disaster.” (184)

However, Cath’s change in performance also comes through making a conscious choice to start writing other sorts of fiction besides her fanfiction. Before, she is unable to write about women because it is threatening. It is “safer” to write about men and explore gender through that avenue. By the end, though, she has learned how to perform her gender as a woman more thoroughly, so she is able to grow and write about women at the end. On the very last page of the novel, there is a final excerpt of Cath’s writing, but instead of fanfiction, this time it is realistic fiction:

The problem with playing hide-and-seek with your sister is that sometimes she gets bored and stops looking for you...when you break from behind the tree, it's because you want to...*Ready or not, here I come.* —from “Left” by Cather Avery, winner of the Underclassmen Prize, Prairie Schooner, Fall 2012. (435)

By being able to face both her gender performance and mental health through her writing now, Cath shows positive growth and better understanding about herself.

In *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza has a best friend Daisy who she tends to rely on, like Cath relies on her twin Wren. Throughout the novel, Aza lets Daisy take charge as the “leading female” and dictate many aspects of their friendship and her life. At the beginning of the novel when they are going to investigate a property, they almost get caught and Daisy takes the lead:

“Whoever that guy is, he definitely saw you,” she said, “so I’m making an excuse for you.... We’ve got no choice but to damsel-in-distress this situation, Holmsey,” she said, and then brought the rock down with all her force onto the hull of the canoe...it immediately started taking on water. (28)

Not only is Daisy taking over for Aza, she is performing her gender in a traditional way by acting as a “weak” female that needs saving to get out of trouble. Acting in such a way is not a healthy example overall for Aza who is already relying on Daisy.

Aza also has the older examples of her mom and her therapist to observe. Aza’s mom is a single mother after Aza’s dad died, but she doesn’t quite understand Aza: “When I was little, I used to tell Mom about my invasives, and she would always say, ‘Just don’t think about that stuff, Aza’” (59). They do not have a super close relationship, and this negatively impacts Aza’s mental health; her mom does not see how bad her OCD is getting, and Aza does not feel comfortable telling her mom because her mom does not fully understand.

With Aza's therapist, Dr. Singh, it is good that Aza is receiving treatment and has someone professional to talk to. However, Aza lies to her therapist about not taking her medicine, but Dr. Singh does not seem to notice anything is amiss until Aza ends up hospitalized. The example here is not beneficial for Aza because she greatly needs help, yet an older professional woman cannot tell that anything is more amiss than it usually is. She believes Aza's lies about taking her medicine throughout, but then she doesn't believe Aza when Aza is finally trying to get better at the end:

“Did you consume hand sanitizer yesterday?”

“No.”

“I'm not here to judge you, Aza. But I can only help if you're being honest.”

“I am being honest. I haven't.” (234-235)

In this scene, Aza is being truthful about not drinking hand sanitizer for the first time, but she is doubted by her therapist. The lack of healthy, positive treatment only causes Aza's mental health to worsen and is not a positive example for Aza to observe.

Throughout the novel, both Aza and Daisy utilize fanfiction to better understand mental illness and gender performance. Through writing Star Wars fanfiction, Daisy invents a new female character based off of Aza: “A blue-hair girl named Ayala, whom Rey describes as, ‘my best friend and greatest burden....’ Ayala couldn't get anything right. And the more she worried, the worse she made everything” (194). “Ayala” is a way for Daisy to cope with and better understand Aza's mental illness, just like Cath's fanfiction was a way for her to better understand her own gender performance. Aza is upset by the portrayal of “herself” within the stories: “I stayed up too late reading, and then later still thinking about what I'd say to Daisy the next

morning, my thoughts careening between furious and scared...I now saw myself as Daisy saw me—clueless, helpless, useless. Less” (196).

The fanfiction does lead to Aza’s mental health getting worse for a bit, but it is ultimately a beneficial avenue. Because the fanfiction provided an opportunity for discussion about their friendship, by the end, Aza is learning how to perform her gender more to her abilities and not Daisy’s: “I wondered whether maybe I should change, but she just grabbed me and said, ‘Holmsey, you look radiant. You look like...like yourself’” (257). Without the portrayal of Aza within the fanfiction, neither she nor Daisy would be able to adequately understand themselves and their gender performances.

Throughout all of these novels, expectations of gender performance do serve to negatively impact the mental health of all the protagonists. There is not a single, “right” or “wrong” way to perform gender because it can be different for every individual. However, everyone is still influenced by the same societal standards and expectations. Societal pressures can cause people to feel that they have to perform gender within a specific range based off of what is “acceptable.” If developing teenagers only have one type of “acceptable” gender performance to see as an example, their mental health can be impacted negatively as they feel pressure to fit into a certain mold that might not be the most applicable for them. As discussed in the previous section, some of the characters do grow in ways towards the end of the novels, but the pressure to perform gender in certain ways that align with societal expectations have negative impact on all of the protagonists.

CHAPTER III

THE HETEROSEXUAL MARKETPLACE

Throughout all the novels, the protagonists struggle to balance romantic relationships, friendships, and the way they are perceived by the people surrounding them. The heterosexual marketplace forms the basis of the social hierarchy and serves to negatively impact the characters' mental health in these novels.

The heterosexual marketplace is a concept that was discussed first within *Gender Play: Boys and Girls in School* by Barrie Thorne and expanded upon within *Language and Gender* by Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet:

Heterosexuality is the metaphor around which the peer social order organizes itself, and a heterosexual market (Thorne 1993) becomes the center of the emerging peer social order. While up until now, boys and girls may have seen themselves as simply different...in the context of the heterosexual market, boys and girls emerge as complementary and cooperating factions. (26).

Essentially, the marketplace is a system where men and women have different amounts of “value” determined by their relationships with each other, which affects how they are viewed by peers socially.

Homosocial bonds are established through the presence of the heterosexual marketplace discussed by Thorne, Eckert, and McConnell-Ginet. Although it establishes how men and women have “value” in relation to each other, women are also established to have “value” in relation to other women, as well as the same for men. A bond is created between people who are performing their gender within similar ranges, as they observe and learn from examples around

them. If a teenage girl sees an older girl gain popularity by dating a specific boy, she might then be influenced to date someone that could also give her popularity in order to have “value” from the boy and create a homosocial bond with the older girl. This behavior is not exclusive to adolescents and is seen through adult men and women as well.

The idea of the heterosexual marketplace is discussed further in “Women on the Market” by Luce Irigaray. Irigaray does not refer to the exact same marketplace that Thorne, Eckert, and McConnell-Ginet discuss, but there are comparable ideas in both concepts. Irigaray states:

The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men (when a man buys a girl, he “pays” the father or the brother, not the mother), and they always pass from one man to another, from one group of men to another. . . . In this new matrix of History, in which man begets man as his own likeness, wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men. (800)

She makes the claim that within the marketplace, women are viewed more as “commodities” that are meant to be exchanged between men to give men value, but women’s value also socially lies within their exchange on the marketplace. Gayle Rubin further discusses this marketplace in “The Traffic in Women”:

The “exchange of women” is neither a definition of culture nor a system in and of itself. The concept is an acute, but condensed, apprehension of certain aspects of the social relations of sex and gender. . . Kinship systems do not merely exchange women. They exchange sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights and people - men, women, and children - in concrete systems of social relationships. (780)

Irigaray and Rubin's marketplace is not a beneficial concept for women because it gives them essentially no autonomy; however, women are still required to participate in the marketplace because by not participating (such as being in a homosexual relationship or remaining single), there is a chance they will be "punished" and excluded from the social order.

Irigaray and Rubin's marketplace is very different from the marketplace Thorne, Eckert, and McConnell-Ginet discuss, which explores the idea that women, in fact do have autonomy on the marketplace as they elect to participate in it as equals to men. Thorne, Eckert, and McConnell-Ginet's marketplace serves to emphasize the way society works, as it influences both genders equally. Their marketplace is also seen as a tool for learning gender performance. In contrast, Irigaray and Rubin's marketplace emphasizes rather the way historic and economic systems work, which mainly hurts just women. In this definition, men gain the economic benefit from women and their actions, while women are viewed as commodities, don't gain anything, or have a say in this system. However, both definitions of the marketplace explore how women hold and receive value through their participation in heterosexual relationships, and both still establish a specific social order, working together to create a nuanced picture of the way society works.

The heterosexual marketplace equally affects adolescents as well. As young boys and girls develop, they observe the adults around them as they participate within this social order, so they begin to mimic the adults as well. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet observe:

In this way, the social order is - fundamentally - heterosexual, dramatically changing the terms of the cohort's gender arrangements. What was appropriate for boys and girls simply as male and female individuals now defines them with respect to a social order.

Their value as human beings and their relations to others are based in their adherence to gender norms. (26)

Young boys and girls see older examples around them constantly and therefore try to act older. This pattern intensifies aspects of gender performance and the impact of the heterosexual marketplace as younger and younger children begin to repeat this pattern. Oftentimes, they are simply mimicking something they do not fully understand yet, which can greatly affect developmental growth (25). They might not personally align as heterosexual or might not want to date, but they still want to participate within the heterosexual marketplace because they understand, by observing the older examples, that it is almost necessary to participate in order to gain any sort of social status and value.

The marketplace works differently for adolescent girls than it does for boys. Sarah Day points out in “Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary Young Adult Literature”:

Whereas adolescent men may find greater social acceptance and popularity as the result of pursuing and engaging in (hetero)sexual activity, adolescent women face the possibility of censure and rejection. As a result, the dangers of sex in the lives of adolescent women move beyond the physical risks of pregnancy and disease; young women must also confront the threat of being labeled “slut” and excluded from peer groups as the result of sexual activity. (67)

There are similar pressures between boys and girls, but in opposite directions. Boys are pressured to be sexually active, as are girls to an extent. However, girls cannot be seen as too sexually active, or it can negatively impact their social position, just as boys not being seen as sexually active can negatively impact their position. On top of this already existing pressure, there is also

the pressure of how they are being perceived, as Day discusses. All of this can be extremely stressful on a developing teenager, which can lead to mental illnesses either developing or becoming worse, as they strive to successfully participate in a market they might not fully understand.

Within these novels, the protagonists face pressure to line up with the social order put in place by the marketplace. By having to align their behavior to gain value in the marketplace, the characters struggle with their mental health because they are not able to solely focus on getting better.

In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the heterosexual marketplace influences Charlie's mental health negatively. For Charlie, there is a large emphasis on relationships within his friend group. Nearly everyone is paired up; therefore, Charlie feels pressured to participate in a heterosexual relationship as well, even if he might not be socially or mentally ready for that. He ends up dating a friend of his, Mary Elizabeth, not because he wants to or is attracted to her, but simply because he observes everyone else dating and feels the need to as well: "Then she asked me if I wanted to go out again sometime, which Sam and I hadn't discussed, so I wasn't prepared to answer it. I said yes because I didn't want to do anything wrong, but...I don't think I will ever be ready for Mary Elizabeth" (114). Charlie has never had a romantic relationship before and does not know how to navigate it, so he turns to his peers for advice. Because most are also participating in romantic relationships, they advise him the best they can, but their advice is not beneficial for Charlie. He is not ready for certain aspects of a romantic relationship that are valued by his friends, such as sex, which is seen in the opening line of the novel: "I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand and didn't try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have" (2). The novel is in epistolary format, as Charlie writes letters

to an unnamed person to process everything that is happening to him. Sex is highly valued by his peers and is the focus of many of their relationships, so they advise Charlie based off of their experience, which only serves to negatively affect his own romantic experiences.

Towards the end of the novel, Charlie has a legitimate mental breakdown when Sam tries to have sex with him. He likes Sam as more than a friend, but he doesn't want to have sex with her. He still attempts to because she wants to, and he realizes he would gain "value" in part because he is a freshman and she is a senior. However, through this attempt, he has a mental breakdown, which leads to him realizing that he was sexually abused by his Aunt Helen as a child:

It was like everything made sense. Until...she touched me. That's when I stopped her.... I didn't know what was wrong...I was starting to get really upset...And I wanted to kick myself for being such a baby. Because I loved Sam. And we were together. And I was ruining it...I felt so terrible. (202)

The pressure of aligning to the marketplace causes Charlie to attempt having sex when he wasn't ready, causing him to remember repressed trauma, which he wasn't ready to handle yet, leading to a breakdown. Ultimately, his mental health is negatively impacted, and he is unable to healthily address what happened to him without being hospitalized.

The pressure by peers that occurs in *Perks* is also apparent in *Keeping the Moon*. Growing up, Colie was bullied because she was overweight. In an example from her childhood, she remembers:

Then I heard it. Someone laughing...I looked up, still dancing to see a boy across the cafeteria with his cheeks puffed out, moving like a hippopotamus...Everyone was

standing around watching him, giggling. The more they laughed, the more pronounced he became...It took me a few seconds to realize that he was imitating me. (Dessen 127-128)

Although Colie is just in middle school, she very clearly realizes that there is a social order. A boy chooses to make fun of her in order to have more “value” with his peers. This sticks with Colie growing up, and she has lost the weight by high school. Colie sees her mother’s change in weight; once her mother became skinny, she was successful, made money, and was no longer homeless or jobless. She receives the message that in order to be successful and fit in with her peers’ social order, she must maintain her weight loss.

Colie’s mindset is detrimental to herself because in her quest to gain value in the marketplace, her eating disorder worsens. There is so much pressure on her to fit in that she continues to lose weight, even when it is not healthy for her:

I went back to scanning the menu, all of it standard beach food: fried seafood, burgers, onion rings, the kind of stuff that had been banned from our house since my mother was born again as Kiki Sparks. It had been months since I’d had a French fry, much less a burger. (22)

A teenager not eating fried food for months is not normal behavior, showing how Colie constantly struggles to keep her weight off. However, during the time she exhibits this behavior, she has two separate potential romantic relationships, one with a boy, Josh, from her hometown and one with a boy, Norman, for the summer. She has plans for a date with Josh when she returns back home at the end of summer, but she also gets Norman during the summer as well: “And then he reached forward, as he had in my mind so many times...I thought of so many things as he leaned in to kiss me” (221). She has success in the heterosexual marketplace once she is skinny, which only serves to fuel her eating disorder. Colie sees her success in the

marketplace as legitimization for her weight loss and eating disorder, and her behavior will continue due to her success.

In Colie's case, it is not only her relationship with boys that is pressuring her to fit in, but it is also her relationship with girls. As discussed earlier, homosocial bonds are created between women in the marketplace as well, as they observe who has more social value than others and either try to surpass them or become friends with them. Colie is bullied by other girls who try to diminish her value by spreading false rumors about her. The rumors have to do with Colie's sexual activity:

"Who was that?" her friend asked as she got closer.

"Colie Sparks," Caroline said. "She's this girl, from my school. She is like, the biggest loser..." "She will sleep with anyone, I swear to God. They call her Hole in One." She laughed again.

"That's awful," her friend said, but I could tell she was smiling by her voice.

"She totally deserves it," Caroline said. "She's the biggest slut in our school." (81)

Although none of this is true about Colie, her sexual activity is used against her, which is significant. Her value on the marketplace diminishes because people view her as a "slut", which leads to her eating disorder getting worse in her quest to fit in and increase her value.

Turtles All the Way Down sees this same pressure to change to receive value from the marketplace. When Daisy concocts a plan to investigate the disappearance of a billionaire for a reward, the plan involves telling the billionaire's son, Davis, that Aza has a crush on him. This is the first excuse used when they are caught snooping on his property, which is significant. On the marketplace, everyone has value in relation to each other; by establishing the existence romantic feelings, Aza receives more social value herself because she is romantically interested in a rich

boy who returns her feelings, Davis gets more social value because he is a teenage boy with a girlfriend, and Daisy gets more social value from being their matchmaker.

Their social order and value are further emphasized when Davis literally pays Aza \$100,000:

“A hundred thousand dollars,” he said, and offered it to me...

“I’m not trying—”

“But I can’t know that,” he said. “Please, just—if you still call or text or whatever, I’ll know it’s not about the reward. And you will, too. That would be a nice thing to know—even if you don’t call.” (110)

He is paying her to essentially date him. By her taking the money, there is an exchange of goods and value that impacts the relationship; Aza ultimately has more value on the marketplace because she is both involved with Davis romantically and she now has a higher economic value through taking his reward.

Aza and Davis pursue a romantic relationship after this interaction that continues throughout the novel, even when Aza’s mental health progressively gets worse. There is an internal pressure within her to continue dating Davis because of the social value he gives her, even when she addresses early on that she is not interested in dating due to the state of her mental health:

I definitely felt attracted to some people, and I liked the idea of being with someone, but the actual mechanics of it didn’t much suit my talents. Like, parts of typical romantic relationships that made me anxious included 1. Kissing.... 5. The part where they say, “What are you thinking about?” And they want you to be like “I’m thinking about you, darling,” but you’re actually thinking about how cows literally could not survive if it

weren't for the bacteria in their guts, and how that sort of means that cows do not exist as independent life-forms, but that's not something you can say out loud. (42)

Aza realizes that she is not in any state to date someone, yet she continues to date Davis and receive value from participating in the relationship. Ultimately, this internal pressure from herself and the external pressure from Daisy/her peers leads to her OCD spiraling every time she tries to kiss him: "You're fine he's not even the first boy you've kissed *eighty million organisms in me forever calm down permanently altering the microbiome* this is not rational *you need to do something please there is a fix here please get to a bathroom*" (153). These are Aza's spiraling thoughts the first time she kisses him, and they only get worse as the novel progresses until she becomes dangerous to herself by drinking hand sanitizer to try to kill the germs from kissing him. Drinking hand sanitizer is extremely unhealthy behavior that emphasizes how the heterosexual marketplace negatively collides with her existing mental health issues. Because Aza feels pressured to date Davis and increase her value, she is unable to control her mental illness and thoughts regarding "normal" things in relationships that she may no longer be ready for, like kissing, leading to her being hospitalized and much worse off than she was before the romantic relationship.

All three of the novels previously discussed here focus on how pressure to gain value in the marketplace leads to a lack of healthy mental growth in the protagonists. Cath in *Fangirl* serves as a foil to the other three protagonists previously discussed. Cath still chooses to participate in heterosexual relationships, first with a high school boyfriend, Abel, at the beginning of the novel and then with a college boyfriend, Levi, at the end. With Abel, pressures from the heterosexual marketplace have her stay with him, even though he is not beneficial to her:

“He wasn’t a real boyfriend! You never liked him like that!” Wren pushed Cath so hard, she fell over.

Cath laughed and sat back up, drawing her legs up into her arms. “I really thought I did though.”

“How could you think that?” Wren was laughing too...

“I’m embarrassed that I held on for so long. That I really thought we could go on like we were.... But I remember thinking...that he made me feel safe.” (Rowell 77-78)

Cath stayed with Abel because he was a “safe” choice, not because she genuinely liked him. Because she observed her sister being popular and having boyfriends, Cath felt like she had to have a boyfriend as well, so she settled for anyone who could give her value. As Cath goes throughout her first year of college, she chooses to date Levi based on her interest in him as an individual person, not based on what sort of value he could give her. Her mindset towards her relationship with him shows positive growth and a departure from deciding who to date based solely off of value.

As discussed earlier, a way for Cath to work through and manage her anxiety is through her fanfiction. Through writing about the relationship in her fanfiction, she is able to explore her own desire towards men by writing about two men in a way where she does not have to try to compete with her peers in the marketplace and where she does not have to face social pressures or expectations in a relationship of her own: “*Why do I write?* Cath tried to come up with a profound answer...*To be somewhere else...To get free of ourselves...To stop*, Cath thought. *To stop being anywhere or anything at all...To disappear*” (22-23). Writing fanfiction gives her a safe space to try to manage her anxiety and explore how best to participate within the marketplace based off of her own feelings.

Cath's relationship with Levi is the foil to the relationships between characters in the other novels. She is in a healthy, romantic relationship with him by the end of the novel that positively impacts her mental health. Her relationship is not the only focus within her life, as she is pursuing school, friendships, and writing as well. One difference within this relationship and why it is a positive one has to do with the lack of pressure. In this case, Cath is not being pressured to date Levi by her peers; she does not feel like she has to date him in order to gain value; rather she dates him simply because she wants to. When she finally realizes her feelings for him, she has a conversation with Reagan:

“Wear your hair down,” Reagan said...“You have good hair...But you're so helpless sometimes....”

Cath rolled her eyes. “I don't want to feel like I have to look different for him all of a sudden. It'll seem lame.... He already knows what I look like. There's no point in being tricky about it now.” (290)

Cath does not feel like she has to do anything other than be her authentic self in order to win over Levi. She is not succumbing to expectations of how she is supposed to perform her gender, as a girl trying to attract a boy's attention. The lack of motivations based off the marketplace makes Cath's relationship with Levi a beneficial one where Cath can explore growing and managing her anxiety rather than simply focusing on value and social position. Jocelyn Van Tuyl points out in “Somebody Else's Universe: Female Kunstler Narratives in Alcott's *Little Women* and Rowell's *Fangirl*”:

Fangirl ends with Cath's shelving *Carry On*—a decision that alters the value and status of her “life's work so far” (Rowell 400). Yet Cath is ultimately rewarded for her choice.

In addition to hanging out with her boyfriend, as we learn belatedly, Cath uses the time she has gained to complete that long-overdue story for Professor Piper. (210)

Cath shelving her fanfiction and starting to write new types of fiction show that Cath has figured out her romantic feelings and does not feel the need to use fanfiction to understand her desire anymore. Levi encourages her to finish her final assignment before finishing her fanfiction, and she heeds his advice, with him supporting her as an equal every step of the way. Through this, she has a beneficial relationship that is supportive and mutual, and she is choosing to ignore social pressures, which leads to her growing emotionally and psychologically.

Within all of these novels, the heterosexual marketplace is a present ideal that affects each of the protagonists and their mental health in various ways. The pressure, both internally and externally, put on the characters to align in a certain way in order to gain social value by participating in heterosexual, romantic relationships serves as a detriment, leading to complicated struggles of identity and mental health.

CONCLUSION

Throughout all of these novels, expectations of gender performance and the heterosexual marketplace negatively affect the way young characters within these contemporary young adult novels ultimately deal with mental health concerns. The protagonists all struggle with a range of existing mental illnesses, including depression, trauma, eating disorders, OCD, and generalized anxiety disorder. They are influenced by older adults, older teenagers, and print media on how they are expected to perform their genders as developing teenagers, leading to added pressure that affects their mental health. Additional pressure from the heterosexual marketplace further affects the characters' mental health, as they strive to fit in and participate in relationships which might not be best for their overall health. Most of the characters are unable to foster healthy mental growth; they are too focused on aligning to expectations of how to act or fit in rather than seeking beneficial treatment, reaching out to others for help, or trying different medications. Therefore, most of the characters do not grow healthily and end each novel in a place that is not any better off than where they started, with the exception of Cath in *Fangirl*.

Overall, Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* has a lack of healthy growth because he does not get adequate professional treatment throughout the course of the novel, and he is surrounded by examples of gender performance that are not healthy for him. He is pressured to participate in a heterosexual, romantic relationship even when he is not ready, leading to a mental breakdown. He ends the novel receiving help and starting a path towards potential positive growth, but he has not grown healthily by the conclusion due to these factors. Colie in *Keeping the Moon* also does not see healthy growth because of whose examples she chooses to follow. Her Aunt Mira provides an example of what healthy gender performance looks like that

could positively impact Colie, but instead, she chooses to follow examples that promote skinniness and societal standards of beauty. By her maintaining this mindset, her eating disorder continues, and she is still repeating harmful behavior at the conclusion of the novel, showing a lack of growth. Aza in *Turtles All the Way Down* continues to repeat her harmful behaviors as well. She is receiving professional treatment throughout the novel, but by lying to her therapist, not taking her medication, and her therapist not realizing that Aza is increasingly getting worse, she ends up hospitalized. Her behavior is affected by pressures of gender performance and the heterosexual marketplace influencing her to continue a relationship she is not ready for, which leads to her hospitalization. Although Aza is taking her medication by the end, she still has the mindset she will never be able to maintain her mental health, which emphasizes a lack of growth.

The one foil to these examples is Cath in *Fangirl*. Cath still has pressures of gender performance and the heterosexual marketplace surrounding her throughout the novel, but she has a beneficial support system that helps her manage her anxiety. She makes a conscious choice to participate in certain relationships based off of healthy motivations and finish an assignment that helps lead her to healthy growth. She is in a better place mentally by the end and overall is the only protagonist to exhibit positive psychological and emotional growth.

Teenagers reading these novels may be potentially influenced as they learn how to perform their gender and manage their mental health through reading these texts and others like them. The heterosexual marketplace and expectations of gender performance are presented in ways that are harmful to mental health; the fact that this is prevalent in most of these texts shows that it is important to watch out for this type of representation in other texts within the same subgenre. Just as Cath and Aza are influenced by print media as they navigate their

relationships, gender performance, and mental health, these texts may serve the same purpose for readers. Teenagers are experiencing a transformative period, so it is important to discuss with young readers why these might not be the most positive examples overall and promote more positive examples, such as *Fangirl*. Young adult literature is an important tool that allows young readers to explore real-world issues in a way that is more approachable, so readers and authors alike must be mindful of the way topics are represented within novels.

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