

TOXIC LOVE

Jodine Samuels

True love is something that we all chase as it has become synonymous with happiness. Whether this love is a platonic or romantic type of love, everyone wants to be loved, to be happy. However, this idealised view of love has toxic roots that have been planted in the media that we consume. The concept that love equates to personal happiness can be deemed as toxic as we should be able to find happiness in ourselves before someone else enters our life. Regardless of its negative implications, this is still a strong idea that has been consciously and subconsciously held due to our media consumption. We can see this same concept take place in old classic literature, showing that this is not a new thing.

We can see how love has been shaped when we look at Disney movies; this is a foundation to many people's use of media as it is something we've engaged with from a young age. The way that true love has been portrayed in Disney movies however is a toxic representation of love. We can see this through the plethora of stories that have been told. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel chooses to sacrifice her voice to be with the prince. There is also a recurrence of kissing princesses in their sleep, which is known as the 'true loves kiss'. This is also apparent when Belle chooses to stay with a kidnapper, holding her hostage and falls in love with him. Similarly, Aladdin lies to Jasmine throughout most of the film.



This is what we have watched first hand as children, therefore this is our first representation of true love. Catherine M. Roach claims that 'to define and live the good life, how to achieve happiness and fulfilment, American pop culture's resounding answer is through the narrative of romance, sex, and love.'



So, from this, we can see that we need what could be said to be a toxic representation of love to achieve happiness and fulfilment, and this leads to many dangers.

What then defines a healthy relationship?

Having a healthy relationship should be the route to true love. So, it is important that we can understand what traits a healthy relationship objectively has. These would be things such as respect, equality, compassion, trust, and consent. It is said that 'Healthy relationships should make you feel good about yourself and your partner.' These things are unfortunately not present in our Disney representations. But this is not just apparent in Disney films and fairy-tale stories. We can also see this in classic literature, such as *Wuthering Heights*.

'I am Heathcliff!'

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* presents us with an interesting dynamic between Heathcliff and Cathy. Cathy displays differing ideas towards both Linton and Heathcliff through the way she speaks about them. Linton is spoken of as though she doesn't see a future with him. She refers to him as 'foliage in the woods,' that 'time will change it'. We can see from this that her feelings are inevitable to change when it comes to Linton. However, when we look at how she speaks about Heathcliff, there is an undercurrent of toxicity. This is shown where Cathy says, 'Nelly, I am Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being.' Cathy has lost her individuality and feels as though she is Heathcliff. This possessive

perception of love does not have the traits of respect, consent or equality. This is because Cathy truly sees Heathcliff as her 'own being'. Whilst Cathy shows ideas of permanence through linking her love for Heathcliff to 'eternal rocks beneath' and explains the naturalness of love through the comparisons to 'rocks', 'foliage', 'woods', 'trees' and 'lights,' we cannot disguise the toxicity with the passion and intense love dynamics as this relationship is not a healthy one. In the wider text, we can also see this apparent toxicity through Heathcliff's need for revenge and Cathy's selfishness. This shows the common recurring ideas of how toxic love has been promoted under the idea of it being passionate and true love.

This toxic nature has been picked up from readers without realising and they too see it as an example of love, this can lead to dangers.



We can see this through interpretations of the texts such as Kate Bush's song 'Wuthering Heights.' In the song, which is written from the point of view of Cathy, we can see these same toxic possessive traits such as, 'you had a temper like my jealousy,' 'How could you leave me when I needed to possess you,' 'My only master'. These lyrics, whilst displaying passion are also displaying toxic possessive traits. They lack consent, respect, and equality which we have already established are objective to make a relationship healthy.

Romanticizing toxic love

These same unhealthy representations of true love are displayed across modern media we grasp to this day. The people we look at as true lovers and what we idolise as a relationship we want ourselves to find happiness are inherently unhealthy and show such toxic traits. Films such as Twilight where we have Bella and Edward; we can see how Bella gives herself up completely for Edward showing this lack of equality for each other as she places Edward above herself. It is also shown in Grease where Danny shows how he has little respect for Sandy. For example, there is a lack of consent. This shows the coercive behaviour towards sex and his misogynistic traits. She also must change herself to become appealing to Danny showing a lack of equality, once again.

The Notebook also has the same obsessive traits and verbal abuse between the protagonists Noah and Allie. Noah also uses suicide as a threat, demonstrating his lack of respect and compassion. These love stories that most of us who take in media has seen, all show the same examples of toxic love that we romanticise. This is dangerous because we may stay in abusive situations for happiness because that is what true love looks like to us.

Whilst stories frequently have something go wrong to create an engaging plot, there is a clear direction of a narrative surrounding true love. It is inherently toxic and can be a cause for people who aspire to have a 'Wuthering Heights' type of passionate love, that consumes themselves and their lover. This can lead to many dangers like staying in abusive, toxic relationships because that is what love is... from what we have seen. However, love is meant to be an enjoyable experience – an idea that is unfortunately, rarely promoted and understood.

