Romantic Relationships in Mental Illness Young Adult (YA) Literature

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What is Mental Illness YA?

Content Warning
Novels Studied

- Young Adult novel
- after 1998
- mental illness
- romantic relationship or romantic interest
- Is in first-person
Thesis

- Mental illness as controlling the narrative; romantic relationship as disruption
- Mental illness and relationships as teenage life

![Diagram]

- Romantic Relationship → Mental Illness
- Mental Illness → Romantic Relationship

“saves” from

“instead of” or “just ruining”
Novels that suggest that teenagers in love can save each other from mental illness perhaps ascribe too much importance to love, but they do ultimately suggest that empathy is the important factor.

Similarly, novels in which mental illness hinders relationships ascribe a lot of power to mental illness, but ultimately these novels try to show that characters can reach out and find love and healing.

*Thirteen Reasons Why* is not a mental illness narrative, even though reviews proclaim it as such, and it is patronizing in its depiction of teenagers.
Thesis

• Love as Savior
  • My Heart and Other Black Holes
  • It’s Kind of a Funny Story

• My Pain Makes Me Unlovable
  • The Perks of Being a Wallflower
  • Wintergirls
  • Turtles All the Way Down

• Thirteen Reasons Why: A Category of its Own
Love as Savior

The man-saves-woman trope
Relationships can “save” you, but only relationships with another teen who also has a mental illness
Love as Savior

Yes, I’m broken. And yes, he’s broken. But the more we talk about it, the more we share our stories, the more I start to believe that there could be a chance to fix us, a chance that we could save each other. (Warga 228)
Love as Savior

This is a girl who can save me, I thought. The therapists told you that you needed to find happiness within yourself before you got it from another person, but I had a feeling that if... I was the one holding Nia at night and breathing on her, I’d be pretty happy. We both would be. (Vizzini 121, emphasis original)
My Pain Makes me Unlovable

Mental illnesses and romantic relationships cannot coexist
Mental illnesses complicate (but do not render impossible) romantic relationships
I’m angry that I starved my brain and that I sat shivering in my bed at night instead of dancing or reading poetry or eating ice cream or kissing a boy or maybe a girl with gentle lips and strong hands. (Anderson 276)
“You’re not ready?” she asked.

I nodded. But that wasn’t it. I didn’t know what it was…

And I wanted to kick myself for being such a baby. Because I loved Sam. And we were together. And I was ruining it. Just ruining it. Just terrible. I felt so terrible. (Chbosky 203)
“I’m not gonna un-have this is what I mean. I’ve had it since I can remember and it’s not getting better and I can’t have a normal life if I can’t kiss someone without freaking out.”

“It’s okay, Aza. Really.”

“You might think that now, but you won’t think that forever.”

“But it’s not forever,” he said. “It’s now.” (Green 155-156)
Boy Hurts Girl... and Boy Saves Girl

*Thirteen Reasons Why* contains two narratives:

- that love can “save” teenagers from mental illness
- that [unkind] people can cause/enact symptoms of mental illness in someone
Boy Hurts Girl... and Boy Saves Girl

Bryce, you had to see my jaw clench. You had to see my tears. Does that kind of shit turn you on?

Bryce? Yes. It does. (Asher 264)

The most shocking, heart-wrenching, controversial, and necessary scene in *Thirteen Reasons Why* is so well known to lovers and critics of the book that it is simply referred to as “the hot tub scene.” (Gillis and Simpson 134)
You started to talk, but I made you stop. I asked you to leave. You started to talk again and I screamed. I screamed into the pillow.

And then you stopped talking. You heard me…

Why did I listen? Why did I leave her there? She needed me and I knew that. (Asher 216)
Conclusions

- Many mental illness YA novels attempt to have a positive impact on readers
  - Doing so requires an empathetic portrayal of teenage life

- These novels achieve varying levels of success

- Examining romantic relationships provides insight into how novels portray teenage life

- Some novels “walk a fine line” quite well
Thank You

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