



Romanticizing Bad Guys: A Psychological Analysis of Ryle in Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us*

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Received 08/10/2024
Published 15/02/2025

Keywords:

Hoover,
It Ends with Us,
Bad guy,
Romanticizing,
Psychological

Abstract

Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* became a New York Times bestseller due to its sensitive topic. Most of the available literature explores domestic violence in the novel, with some articles focusing on the character of the protagonist Lily. However, there are no studies on Ryle, the abuser who despite his toxicity was oddly romanticized by many readers. Therefore, this paper addresses this gap by examining the appeal of Ryle's character. Drawing insights from Richard Keen, Monica L. McCoy, and Elizabeth Powell's study *Rooting for the Bad Guy: Psychological Perspective* (2012) as it offers useful observations into analyzing the reasons behind the attraction towards bad guys like Ryle. It has been concluded that Hoover's characterization method leads readers to romanticize Ryle. That is due to many factors such as fundamental attribution error, mere exposure affect, schemas, and fulfilling hidden aggressive tendencies which make readers externalize Ryle's bad behavior.

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1. Introduction

The traditional good hero is not very attractive nowadays. If one has a look at the most popular TV shows and popular culture, it can be noticed that there is a surge of bad guys or morally ambiguous characters taking all the attention of the audience. What is so attractive about these bad boys? Why do people fall for them? Many people find that villains or the occasionally bad characters have more appeal than regular good characters. Since, they are unpredictable which makes them far more interesting, in addition to this, they are usually charming, dangerous, and hard to resist which makes the audience root for them and identify with the bad character instead of the good one.

According to Aristotle, for a character to elicit the audience's engagement, it must be neither too good nor too bad but somewhere 'in the middle' (Aristotle, 1953). When a character is neither purely good nor purely evil, such character leaves room for mystery, i.e. it can keep the audience interested and wondering, and it can initiate discussions about what's morally right and what's not, thereby such morally ambiguous characters eliminate the boredom of the predictable good characters. The bad boy is a widely spread stereotype that is glamorized by mainstream media. In her book *Addicted* Kristina Grish describes this stereotype as "the irresistible rogue who has the dizzying ability to drive women wild" with a "laissez-faire attitude about life and love" (Grish, 2007, p. xiii). The mysterious and nonchalant attitude toward life is largely attributed to the allure of villains. This attitude strongly contrasts the careful and calculated traditional good hero which can be perceived as boring and predictable. Especially if we add physical attractiveness to the equation, many readers empathize and even romanticize such bad guys. Salgaro, Wagner, and Menninghaus (2021) conducted a study to support the view that the charisma of aesthetically appealing characters is not equal for good and bad characters and concluded that the bad ones "indeed had an enhancing effect on scales for "suspenseful," "captivating," and "entertaining," (1) Although it can be viewed as an overgeneralization, however, it can be argued that it is propagating such patterns is a dangerous pattern because it leads to romanticize toxic people, abuse and harmful relationships, especially among young people. Thus, such an issue must be addressed in a very keen and sensitive matter.

Moreover, from a scientific viewpoint, a psychiatric study done by Richard A. Friedman suggests that the attraction towards unpredicted characters is like gambling, the main key is that the reward is not anticipated which makes it more pleasurable. Based on an experience done by The psychiatrist Gregory Berns, he discovered that when individuals were given a present in unpredicted patterns, the pleasure center in their brains became more activated than when the pattern was known. (Friedman, 2012). In this vein, when a character's behavioral pattern remains unpredictable, the anticipation of what comes next becomes addictive, providing a pleasurable sensation. Moreover, when a character exhibits vicious qualities, even the smallest act of kindness appears significant and satisfying. If a character is good and kind all the time, kind actions become predictable and may lose their charm over time.

One book that achieved popularity and features a similar character is *It Ends with Us* by the American Writer Colleen Hoover. While the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic had devastating consequences for most people, others managed to utilize these difficult times to flourish. Colleen Hoover, an American writer who became a publishing sensation, especially after she offered some of her e-books free of charge during the pandemic. Along with her widespread popularity on social media due to the themes, she explores in her writing. All of that contributed to attracting many readers to her novels. Just like the protagonist of her most popular novel, *It Ends with Us*, Hoover grew up in a toxic household, her father was abusive and during her childhood, she witnessed him abuse her mother many times. As a result, they got a divorce while she was a child. She used a borrowed laptop to write her first book

Slammed in 2011, and after gaining fame she became a full-time writer. The majority of her books navigate themes of romance with many surprising plot twists. Hoover's most famous book is probably the 2016 novel *It Ends with Us*. (Tikkanen,2023)

2. Literature Review

The majority of the available literature focuses on Lily, the protagonist of the novel, many articles point out the abuse and domestic violence that she went through in her marriage. Marvin Pragkita employs a psychological approach to discuss the types of domestic violence and the different cycles of violence experienced by Lily. (Pragkita, 2023) In a similar vein, Lestari discusses gender-based violence and the efforts of Lily to overcome all the hardships. (Lestari, 2019) Whereas, Jennie Young goes far and beyond to argue that this book is dangerous because “It romanticizes red flags and glorifies a charismatic-but-dangerous man” (Young, 2022). thereby delivering an anti-feminist message to the readers by feeding into the very structure of toxic masculinity.

Other research sheds light on the traumatic consequences experienced by Lilly the protagonist of the novel due to her abusive husband. Such as Sarungu’s article which employs Cathy Caruth’s, Judith Herman’s, and James Pennebake’s theories of trauma to explore Lilly’s trauma and her coping mechanism with her circumstances. Besides Dwiastuti and Yamin in their article entitled *The Simplification Domestic Violence in Colleen*

Hoover’s It Ends with Us concludes that the majority of the characters in the novel have a simplified understanding of violence and regard it as a normal aspect of personal relations (Dwiastuti& Yamin, 2020). While Xavier examines domestic violence in the novel under the feminist perspective of gender domination to scrutinize forms of abuse against Lily and put forward the Insight that not only the classics, but even contemporary literary works, can shed light on various social patterns, such as gender domination thereby functioning as cultural instruments (Xavier, 2023). As can be noted, an extensive body of research examined Lily’s character while highlighting the domestic violence and abuse she endured from her husband Ryle. Thereby, researchers have identified the abusive qualities in Ryle’s character. Although, not necessarily a villain, Ryle from *It Ends with Us* has many bad features, and paradoxically he managed to captivate the hearts of readers, as Xavier confirms in his paper “We are presented to him right at the beginning of the story, when he appears to be an attractive, confident, educated and ambitious man” (Xavier, 2023, p. 234). So the question remains unanswered, why do some people still like bad guys like Ryle?

3. Theoretical framework: Rooting for the bad guy: Psychological perspective

This paper makes use of the article entitled *Rooting for the bad guy: Psychological Perspective* by Richard Keen, Monica L. McCoy, and Elizabeth Powell (2012) to explain the reasons behind the appeal of Ryle in Hoover’s *It Ends with Us*. The writers explore the various reasons behind the romanticization of bad guys from a psychological perspective. This paper provides important insights into this increasing phenomenon and attempts to answer the above-mentioned question, why do so many composed people with normal good judgment find themselves rooting for the bad guy? This article is a qualitative study that provides a psychological analysis of Ryle's character by applying the previously mentioned theoretical framework, by understanding the reasons for rooting for the bad guys, this paper Promotes awareness of the dangers of romanticizing bad guys and encourages healthier relationship patterns. Firstly, one must understand what is meant by a bad guy. Apparently, it is not that easy to determine specifically what deems a person to be a bad guy, “the construct of the bad guy is complex and multi-dimensional” (Keen et al, 2012, P.130). Bad guys are usually linked with breaking the conventions of society, however, not all lawbreakers are bad guys because some break the law for the greater good or if the law itself was unjust.

The writers suggest that one of the main reasons behind the attraction of the bad guy is the fundamental attribution error. “The fundamental attribution error is the tendency to attribute another person's behavior to their internal characteristics, as opposed to the situation they are in the time” (Kassin et al, 2011, P.118). If a complete stranger acts aggressively or does something bad, we can easily judge him/her and it is unlikely for us to sympathize with that person because all we know about that person is that specific bad behavior, whereas our favorite bad guy from books or movies is a familiar person we know almost everything about that guy hence we do not judge that person based on a specific action, i.e we do not attribute the bad behavior as a personality marker, we do the opposite, we externalize the bad behavior and attribute it to external reasons. As we internalize the world view of the character and find excuses for their behavior.

Subsequently, the mere exposure effect can also be added to the list of reasons behind the appeal of the bad guy. “the more often you are exposed to a stimulus, the more you like it” (Zajonc, 1968, P.2). Especially, if we are exposed to physically attractive people, since research has stated that humans tend to associate good looks with good people, i.e. “ what is beautiful is good”. The writers add that schemas can also be considered a part of the equation. Many studies in psychology have shown that schemas can affect the way we perceive a certain situation, it means that our minds are accustomed to root for the protagonist since they are exposed to this pattern all the time. we end up rooting for the protagonist regardless of his moral stand even if the protagonist is aggressive. Furthermore, aggressive protagonists can fulfill our aggressive tendencies by identifying with the aggressive bad guy, we provide an outlet for our buried aggressive tendencies. Lastly, the writers add that psychological reactance can be easily applied to rooting for the bad guy. If the societal norms, forbids us from rooting for the bad guy, then our freedom is limited by others to choose whom we desire to root for. As a result, we root for the bad guy to free ourselves from the constraints of society.

4. A Synopsis of It Ends with Us

The book centers around Lily Bloom, a light-spirited and passionate entrepreneur as she makes her way through life after graduating from college. In Boston, she meets a mysterious and successful neurosurgeon named Ryle. Lily has a tragic history of witnessing an abusive man ‘her father’ and the way he mistreats her mother. Although Lily often blames her mother for not standing up against her father, she ignores all the early obvious red flags in Ryle and After a series of highs and lows, the two get married.

Their story is not a conventional love story, Hoover deals with a very touchy subject that is of domestic violence, she clarifies that the story is based on her parents to whom she dedicates her book “For my father, who tried his very best not to be his worst. And my mother, who made sure we never saw him at his worst” (Hoover,2016). Lily first meets Ryle on a rooftop in Boston kicking a chair in a fit of rage. After playing their game of ‘Naked Truth’. He admits to her that he is only attracted to her physically and he made it very clear from the first meeting that he is not looking for a committed relationship. He literally told her in a very vulgar way

He shoots me a look of innocence. “You asked for the most recent thought, so I gave it to you. You’re beautiful. I’m a guy. If you were into one-night stands, I would take you downstairs to my bedroom and I would fuck you. (Hoover,21)

After a series of highs and lows, Lily is thrilled because she finally manages to open her own business. However, she is destined to encounter Ryle again through his sister Alyssa who helps Lily with her business and becomes her best friend. Alyssa warns Lily not to get involved with her brother “I just know my brother. And I love him. I really do. But . . .”

(Hoover,98). She knows about his reckless and aggressive behavior and she loved her friend Lily. However, Lily ignores all of this and pursues her relationship with Ryle. Even after the sudden appearance of her childhood sweetheart Atlas, she remained resolute. After many encounters between the two and many mixed signals from Ryle, The couple finally decide to get married. Lily finds herself facing her worst fears, little by little her husband's abuse becomes undeniable and she finds herself trapped in the same situation as her mother. Throughout the novel, we find that Lily finds comfort in reading her diary in which she addresses her favorite TV star, Ellen DeGeneres. This diary was Lily's coping mechanism to her abusive household as a child and reading it gave her comfort and a safe space as an adult.

Lily meets a darker and much scarier side of her husband, when he tries to rape her after he finds out about her relationship with Atlas. This was the turning point for Lily, she finally decided to stop trying and take charge of her own life. Especially after discovering that she was pregnant, she didn't want her baby to experience her tragic childhood. Thereby, the cycle of abuse will end with her and her daughter Emersyn. Ryle agrees to divorce and both of them share custody of their child.

5. Romanticizing Ryle from a Psychological perspective

Hoover's book received a lot of backlash, due to the characterization of Ryle. Many saw that the book employs an exhausted bad boy trope and by doing so, Hoover was romanticizing domestic abuse, and thereby her book was problematic for many reasons. After all, Ryle is the epitome of a likable bad boy. Harper asserts that after searching online, she was shocked to find the number of Ryle fans who were hoping that Lily would get back to him, ignoring all his manipulative tactics and abuse. she adds that Ryle is written as a sympathetic person with anger issues due to childhood trauma which is often used by his online fan base to excuse his abusive tantrums. His fans not only find excuses for his behavior, they victimize him believing that he suffers from trauma and needs help (Harper, 2023). Romanticizing abuse is a big issue that needs to be addressed. This paper is an effort to dig deeper into the actual reasons behind the appeal of bad characters such as Ryle. According to Richard Keen, Monica L. McCoy, and Elizabeth Powell, this phenomenon can be attributed to a variety of reasons:

5.1 The fundamental attribution error: This concept can partially explain the obsession over bad characters like Ryle. If one reads a news article about a man who abuses his wife, the reader can never have any kind of empathy with the abuser, because he/she will attribute that bad action to the internal characteristics of the abuser who is a total stranger. However, the case is very different when it comes to Ryle, for he is not a stranger, the reader knows him and he is a familiar character. Ryle can never be judged easily based on a fit of rage, so the readers of the book do not internalize his bad behavior. As a matter of fact, they do the exact opposite, they externalize his bad behavior. Ryle cannot control his temper due to his childhood trauma when he accidentally shot his brother. In addition to this, he goes to therapy and it is not his fault that sometimes he loses his temper. Ironically Ryle tells Lilly literally that there are no bad people in reality.

Ryle looks over at me with a thoughtful expression. "Lily," he says pointedly. There is no such thing as bad people. We're all just people who sometimes do bad things. (Hoover,17) So, he gives a reasonable explanation because it is true that all of us just tend to sometimes make bad choices.

5.2 Mere exposure effect: this concept can also be applied to Ryle from *It End with Us*. When the reader first meets Ryle, he is kicking a chair on a rooftop.

“He appears to be on the verge of a breakdown. I contemplate speaking up to let him know he has company, or clearing my throat, but between thinking it and actually doing it, he spins around and kicks one of the patio chairs behind him” (Hoover, 5).

Furthermore, he appears to be rude from the first interaction he had with Lilly. When they started playing their game of naked truth, he literally told a woman he just met that he only wanted to sleep with her. However, later in the book we see him buying her flowers, supporting her career and genuinely wanting to commit to her.

5.3 what is beautiful is good: According to this concept, psychological studies prove that people tend to view those who are attractive as good people. Hoover asserts on many occasions in the book how incredibly attractive Ryle is. She even describes him as “the male version of the Mona Lisa”(Hoover,7). In addition to his good looks, he is a very successful neurosurgeon with an ambition to further advance in his career. When Lilly first met him she described him as “This guy is beautiful. Well-manicured, smells like money, looks to be several years older than me. His eyes crinkle in the corners as they follow me, and his lips seem to frown, even when they aren’t” (Hoover,8)

5.4 schemas: based on this concept, our brains are programmed to root for the protagonist because we are used to this pattern. This can illustrate why many readers have hoped for the relationship between Ryle and Lilly to work.

5.5 Aggressive tendencies: One of the basic assumptions of Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory is that humans have instinctive sexual and aggressive drives, controlled by our id. Since the aggressive drive is repressed, the reader can experience catharsis by identifying with the aggressive tendencies of bad guys like Ryle. Additionally, Ryle’s aggression was not only physical, there was an incident in the book where Ryle was aggressive sexually to Lily when he tried to rape her. After he reads her diary and discovers her previous relationship with Atlas. In a pre-planned assault, Ryle tries to force himself on her. Thereby, his violence can satisfy both drives. Following Freud’s theory, Lorenzo proposes that humans have an innate tendency to aggression, however, he believes that this tendency is a side effect of evolution and is essential for humans' survival.

5.6 Psychological reactance: In line with this concept, psychological studies confirm that people tend to favor an object/ person that is forbidden to them by societal norms. Thus, rooting for the bad character offers a space of freedom that is normally constrained by judgmental societies. As has been previously mentioned, many articles have pointed out the fact that Ryle is in fact abusive, manipulative, and aggressive. As a result, societal norms condemn empathizing with such character, however, due to the need to break the shackles of societal standards. Many readers identified and had empathy with Ryle.

6. Conclusion

This research supports the viewpoint that we must have a keen eye and a critical mind to be careful about the stereotypes that we promote and show support. It is an effort to delve deep into the psychological reasons behind the appeal of bad guys. What is the secret behind the appeal of the bad guy? Ryle from the well-known novel *It Ends with Us* is taken as an example of a likable bad guy. Based on the remarks of *Rooting for the Bad Guy: A Psychological Perspective*. The study concludes that Hoover’s method of characterization made Ryle irresistible for many readers regardless of the many red flags he showed during many episodes in the book. For instance, readers did not attribute his bad qualities to his personality due to the familiarity of Ryle, additionally the writer gave him an attractive personality and looks and heart-breaking tragic childhood trauma. These reasons and others

made many readers root for him regardless of his toxicity, this showcases the complexity of the human psyche and the danger of overlooking toxic behavior which can lead to promoting unhealthy relationships in real life.

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رۆمانسیکردنی كهسه خراپهكان: شیکارییهکی دهروونی بۆ راپیل له رۆمانی *It Ends with Us* ی کۆلین هوفەر

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پوخته

رۆمانی *It Ends with Us* له نووسینی کۆلین هوفەر بههۆی بابەتیک ههستیارهوه بووه پرفرۆشتترین کتیبی نیویۆرک تایمز. زۆربهی ئەو ئەدهبیاتانە که لهبهردهستدان بهدواداچوون بۆ توندوتیژی خیزانی له رۆمانهکهدا دهکهن، ههندیک بابەت تیشک دهخاته سهر کارهکتهری پالنهوانهکهی لیلی. بهلام ههچ لیکۆلینهوهیهک لهسهر راپیل نییه، ئەو دهستدریژیکارهکی که سهرهراي ژههراویوونی به شیوهیهکی سهیر لهلایهن زۆریک له خۆینهراوهوه رۆمانسی کراوه. بۆیه ئەم توێژینهوهیه به لیکۆلینهوه له سهرنجراکیشی کارهکتهری راپیل ئەم بۆشاییه دهخاته پروو. وهگرتهی تیروانینهکان له توێژینهوهی رپچارد کین، مۆنیکا ئیل مهککۆی و ئەلیزابییس پاول پهگدان بۆ کهسه خراپهکه: روانگهی دهروونی (۲۰۱۲) چونکه تیبینی بهسوود پیشکەش دهکات بۆ شیکردنهوهی هۆکارهکانی پشت سهرنجراکیشان بهرهوه کهسه خراپهکانی وهک راپیل. بهو ئەنجامه گهیشتوووه که شیوازی کارهکتهری هوفەر خۆینهران بهرهوه رۆمانسیکردنی راپیل دهبات. ئەمهش بههۆی زۆر هۆکاری وهک ههلهی بنهزتهی ئیسباتکردن، تهنها کاریگهری بهرکهوتن، شیما و بهدیتهناتی مهیله شهپانگیزییه شاراوهکان که وا له خۆینهران دهکهن پهفتاره خراپهکانی راپیل دهریکهن

ووشه سهرهکییهکان: هوفەر، ئەنجام لهگهڵ ما، پالنهوانی بهد، رۆمانس کردن، نفسیاتی

تقدیس الشخصیات الشریره: تحلیل نفسي لشخصیه راپیل فی روایه انها تنتهي بنا لکولین هوفر

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ملخص

تصدرت روايه "نها تنتهي بنا" للكاتبه كولين هوفر قائمه أفضل الكتب مبيعاً حسب صحيفة نيويورك تايمز وذلك بسبب تناولها لموضوع حساس وهو العنف الأسري. تتناول معظم الدراسات المتاحة العنف المنزلي في الرواية، مع تركيز بعض المقالات على شخصية البطلة ليلي. ومع ذلك، لا توجد دراسات حول راپيل، المعتدي الذي تم تجميل صورته بشكل غريب من قبل العديد من القراء على الرغم من سلوكه السام. وبالتالي، تعالج هذه الورقة هذه الفجوة من خلال دراسة جاذبية شخصية راپيل.. بناءً على دراسة ريتشارد كين ومونیکا إل ماكوي وإليزابيث باول بعنوان "التشجيع للأشعار: منظور نفسي" (2012) والتي تقدم ملاحظات مفيدة لتحليل أسباب الانجذاب إلى الأشرار مثل راپيل. استنتجت الدراسة أن أسلوب كولين هوفر في رسم الشخصية يقود القراء إلى تجميل صورة راپيل. ويعزى ذلك إلى عوامل عديدة مثل خطأ الإسناد الأساسي وتأثير التعرض البسيط والمخططات النفسية وتحقيق الميول العدوانية الخفية التي تجعل القراء يبرئون سلوك راپيل السيء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: هوفر، إنها تنتهي بنا، الشخص السيء، رومانسية، نفسي