Toxic Relationships in the Media: The Bad & the Ugly

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As the entertainment industry flourishes and expands, tightening its unfaltering grip on our attention-deficient society, we find ourselves depending more and more on doses of cheap distraction to push through our days. In order to maintain this influence, the media is in constant pursuit of more outlandish and enthralling concepts to incorporate — and relationships have quickly become among the most prominent. It is difficult to sustain the attention of an audience through content devoid of conflict, because after all, the real reason TV is so popular is because we adore watching other people’s problems. Thus, the “toxic relationship” trope is introduced; we’re simply infatuated with the ugliness, rawness, dysfunctionality, and intensity of a grossly incompatible couple, and cannot seem to peel our eyes away when they somehow manage to overcome their seemingly inescapable faults. Although the portrayal of toxic relationships in the media may be harmless upon first glance and even become thoroughly entertaining to us, to what extent can we trust those concepts to stay inside the screen? Inevitably, these notions of toxic love will begin to seep into our subconscious, and it is not unreasonable to assume their gradual manifestation into our own lives and relationships. It is for this reason that the portrayal of toxic relationships in the media is indeed harmful, and it is crucial that we recognize this truth and work to educate ourselves and each other of the dangers of upholding toxic love tropes.

Toxic relationships are portrayed across all kinds of media, ranging from innocent kids’ shows like *Victorious* to full-fledged psychological thrillers like *You*. The most staggering truth to consider is the fact that children are essentially growing up with these toxic relationships, and their constant exposure to this type of media embeds a sense of normalcy about it. In the case of *Victorious*, a kids’ series that spanned from 2010-2013, the most prominent couple, characters Beck and Jade, display a number of toxic traits. With Beck’s naturally flirtatious personality in combination with Jade’s extreme jealousy and control, the couple inevitably bring out the worst in one another – but it seems that these significant obstacles have no effect on their relationship, as they unfailingly overcome them with their love unscathed. In one particular episode, Jade is consumed with jealousy as a result of her usual suspicions of Beck, prompting her to “break down his door due to the speculation that he was cheating on her with a cheerleader” (Vega). It becomes increasingly evident, upon our analysis, that the writing of Beck and Jade’s relationshipincorporated segments of emotional abuse for the sake of entertainment – but this is, of course, less evident and possibly indetectable to the children that the series is targeted towards. This is especially dangerous once we consider the way many such children view the couple, as many deem them “the couple that everyone wanted to be half of” (Vega). Once we begin to develop an understanding of the existence of toxic love in media targeted at children, we can then dissect the causes of its prominence and manifestation into our lives as adults.

One of the most significant issues to consider regarding toxic relationships in television and film is the sheer amount of entertainment it provides and the interest it truly draws out of us. In a series like *You*, for instance, we are presented with a central protagonist (Joe) who enjoys stalking and obsessing over his love interests, and even finds himself killing those around her who he deems are unsuitable. While we may (or may not) be fully aware of Joe’s insanely ridiculous and warped perception of love in *You*, we cannot help but watch as he reels in and obsesses over his fifth girl of the series. The reason for this infatuation is that what we are presented with is fundamentally *different*; instead of watching the same cliche rom-com over and over again, we are more drawn to the gruesome, explicit, and disastrous nature of toxic relationships and what they entail for both partners. For instance, in the finale of the first season of *You*, Guinevere Beck (Joe's first love interest) finally discovers the truth about Joe’s psychotic habits, which prompts him to lock her inside of a sound-proof glass cage in hopes of coming to some sort of understanding. While we can recognize that Joe’s endeavors are completely ridiculous and incomprehensible, we silently entertain the idea of their relationship *somehow* working out; this interest becomes even more prevalent for viewers who fancy Joe’s character, or even the average viewer who would like to see if he could ever be accepted by one of his lovers. When Joe’s love style was finally accepted by subsequent partner Love Quinn, fans were extremely receptive and even exhilarated by the new concept. Their acceptance of this concept is not the issue, however. Frankly, there is nothing inherently wrong with enjoying *You* or similar shows, but the central issue is introduced once we begin to *romanticize* the toxic couples displayed, and it is quite easy to do so when they are so incredibly interesting and chaotically interlinked.

In the case of *You*, we’re generally drawn in by the show’s ability to “get away with a protagonist who stalks and kills women, and who views his motivations for doing so as fundamentally decent” (Nicholson). While interest alone is innocent, Joe’s irrevocable infatuation with his love interests has started to *attract* viewers – so much so that they wouldn’t find it too regrettable to have a partner like him. It has been found that “ some viewers perceive Goldberg’s master manipulative plans and intricate attention-to-detail as “romantic,” while others “see a person that is broken, and that failed to be loved at some point in their lives” (Monaghan). This demonstrates that viewers, especially younger viewers, tend to empathize with Joe and blame his psychopathic tendencies on his environment and the way his life played out. This is a scary thing to consider, especially because viewers may subsequently begin to act erratically and obsessively in order to accommodate those who are attracted to that kind of behavior, or individuals who have fantasized about committing those acts may come to feel a sense of normalcy and acceptance. The largest issue surrounding this, however, is the fact that there are rarely any clear distinctions made to prove Joe’s behavior is unacceptable; he never faces any legal consequences for his actions and he even finds similar traits within Love Quinn, who indulges in even more intense behavior later in the series. When we consider what kind of impression this leaves on the minds of audience members, we can quickly begin to understand why the failure to expose the truth of toxic relationships is incredibly dangerous to their perception of healthy, functional love.

When these toxic love tropes impose their unfortunate manifestation into the real relationships of individuals, victims commonly fail to recognize that they are being abused or simply tolerate it on account of their love for and connection to their abuser. Just as women are frequently the victims of toxic love in TV and film, they are also the dominant sufferers of abusive or toxic relationships in real life. Women harbor the societal weight of being care-takers and nurturers, and so there is an innate sense of obligation towards mending what cannot be fixed. This is especially true when it comes to romantic relationships, as women are expected to accommodate their partners’ needs and tolerate the harmful characteristics that accompany their “natural” personalities. Delusions that abusive relationships are worth saving are fundamentally harmful, as it has been found that “ there are too many situations where one person in the relationship stays with an abuser, or a toxic person, based on the fact that they think they can change them” (Bruce). Women not only accept false hope to cope with toxic relationships, but they also begin to *broaden* their tolerance for abusive behaviors, abandoning their mental health as a result. Studies report that “Women in abusive relationships had significantly more depression, and women in this group with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) had significantly more personality disorders” (Coolidge). While these realities may at times be depicted in TV and film, it almost never marks the end of the relationship in question. The couple will almost always manage to “bounce back” from their hardships, ultimately rekindling their love and stabilizing their relationship in spite of the abuse. If and when women find themselves in similar situations within their own relationships, it is not unreasonable to assume that they will comfort themselves with a similar sense of false hope, fueling their tolerance for abuse and strengthening their fruitless resolve towards fixing an abusive relationship.

Upon thorough analysis of the portrayal of toxic relationships in the media, it becomes increasingly evident that the toxic love displayed is likely to breach the screen and enter our actual lives and relationships. While there is no inherent harm in watching or even enjoying the shows that depict these tropes, we simply cannot afford to ignore the subsequent risk of romanticizing or normalizing the notion of toxic relationships. It becomes increasingly difficult to reject toxic love because we are almost never shown the real impact of partaking in and tolerating such a relationship; the media continuously fails us in this, feeding us more delusions and warped perceptions of love in the place of reality. It is for this reason that we must make an effort to actively recognize toxic love tropes and ground ourselves in our understanding of what is and is not an acceptable means of expressing love.

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