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### Too Taboo For School:

#### Teacher-Student Relationship Fiction Pre & Post #MeToo

The inappropriate teacher-student relationship is a longstanding trope in fiction stories. Commonly, stories of this nature have romanticized and sexualized this trope instead of showing the situations for what they truly are—manipulation and abuse. These stories, especially from the 1990s to late 2010s, typically follow the same set up: The student pursues the teacher. The teacher resists, but gives in. Sometimes the teacher is portrayed as the victim and the student as the predator. News and fictional stories about teacher-student relationships tend to sensationalize and diminish real life harm. However, around 2017 there is a noticeable shift in portrayal. This is likely due to the #MeToo movement as it gained light in the mainstream that year. The portrayal of inappropriate teacher-student relationship stories, both in the romanticized and realistic portrayal, affect young audiences.

The romanticized/sexualist teacher-student relationship is set up by a cultural landscape influenced by many factors. The story of Abélard and Héloïse is considered by many as the greatest romance of all time—yet Héloïse was Abélard’s student. Her age is also up for debate, but historians agree she met Abélard at about 15 to 17. It is a footnote in their long story but does not seem to bother those who consider them historical lovers. Plenty of highly regarded “love stories,” historical and fictional, are given this treatment. The misinterpretation of *Lolita* as a

romance exists on a mass scale. Vladimir Nabokov's intent was a cautionary tale exhibiting abuse from a delusional pedophile likely based on a real kidnapping (Waldman). Unfortunately for Nabokov, *Lolita* images such as book covers, promotional material, and film adaptations since publication have been curated by publishing companies with interests in romanticizing the story ("8: Dolores Logs In" 8:49-9:03). *Lolita* has a great influence on culture; impacting real life and fiction. News stories about modern real cases tend to be sensationalized. Words such as include "relationship," "liaison," "sex," "rendevous," "dating," and "affair" are common while the word "pedophile" is rarely used. News stories will even portray the teachers as victims of the students (Lancaster 65-67). This cultural landscape is reflected in fiction about the same subject. The inappropriate teacher-student relationship trope is a facet of this "so-called so wrong it's right," "dark romance," and "forbidden love" areas in storytelling. Reflecting the cultural landscape, fictional students are usually shown as the pursuers and the aggressors; while fictional teachers are shown to resist until they give in. Also, the teachers may often be painted as personally victimized by their own desire. There are outliers from that time period that did not romanticize its story; nor did it blame the student. *Blue Car* (2002) is an early example of a story that depicted the teacher's behavior as grooming and assault. In regards to romanticized portrayals, stories from the 1990s to 2010s with adolescent target audiences are *Degrassi the Next Generation*, *Dawson's Creek*, *Riverdale*, and *One Tree Hill*.

The most prominent example of one targeting adolescent audiences is the ABC Family teen drama thriller, *Pretty Little Liars*. Sarah Crookston's "'Hot-for-Teacher': Statutory Rape or Postfeminism in *Pretty Little Liars*?" analyzes the show's teacher-student plot in depth. *Pretty Little Liars* had consistent viewership for all 7 seasons, amounting to about 2.5 million. One point two million of those viewers were females aged 12-34. The teacher-student relationship in

*Pretty Little Liars* is presented as forbidden love. It follows a typical story set up for teacher-student “romances”: Aria, the 16 year old student, initiates the relationship at a bar, lying about her age. Crookston remarks “With this omission regarding her age, Ezra can remain ignorant of Aria’s underage status” (104). They are shown to be on the same “maturity level;” They share interests in literature, the arts, traveling, and other activities deemed mature. It is also important to note the actors were both in their earlier 20s when the show began. Aria faces the brunt of the backlash instead of the teacher, Ezra; and Ezra is shown as Aria’s victim in some cases. Even after revealing Ezra has repeatedly pursued underage girls, in the end the couple win the parents and friends’ approval. They end the show happily married. The showrunner supported the relationship. Fans loved it, of course, so they “shipped” it. Shipping is “a term in fandom that is derived from the word ‘relationship’. A ship refers to a romantic relationship between two or more characters” (Bothe 5). They coined their “ship” name: “Ezria.” During its first season a company withdrew its advertising for *Pretty Little Liars* in opposition (Orenstein), but overall the brunt of the backlash the show faced from parents was against the age appropriate lesbian relationship (Crookston 108).

The #MeToo movement started in 2006 on MySpace with Tarana Burke. However, in 2017 it reached the mainstream when actress, Alyssa Milano, tweeted about it (Hsu 272-273). With the movement began to be a rise in abuse victims coming forward with their stories. Many even publicly outed their abusers/assaulters. Public discourse on sexual assault and abuse became prevalent. This included recent analysis of inappropriate teacher-student relationships in fiction. With this discourse there have been different approaches to the subject. Some stories romanticize the situation, but the teacher is punished. In 2017 the predatory teacher in *Riverdale* was murdered by a serial killer who’s aim was to purge the town of sin. Limited series, *A*

*Teacher* (2020), focused heavily on the illicit nature of the teacher-student “relationship.” Also, the student is still the pursuer of the teacher. The student's trauma is not addressed until the final scene. On the other hand many stories fully showcased grooming, like *Blue Car* (2002), and focus on the students’ trauma. *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell was a 20 year project that started off as a “dark romance.” The novel evolved into a story exploring abuse and trauma. In that time Russell read about Critical Trauma Theory, hence its influence on the story’s evolution (Sweeney). It was released March 10, 2020. In 2016 ABC Family rebranded as Freeform. After the mainstream #MeToo movement kicked off Freeform released their 2021 teen drama thriller, *Cruel Summer*. This show took the opposite approach to *Pretty Little Liars*, showing the vice principal and student for the abusive situation it was. The word “grooming” is used to describe the events multiple times (“As the Carny Gods Intended” 35:02 and “Happy Birthday, Kate Wallis” 34:35) The premiere of *Cruel Summer* had 0.513 millions viewers (Berman), kept growing viewership, and the finale had 0.766 viewers (Berman).

Large companies and public figures have pushed the romanticized narratives of teacher-student stories for years now. Adolescent audiences are especially targeted; as this trope shows up frequently in teen dramas. Jamie Loftus calls this “parasocial grooming”—A cross between the phenomenon of parasocial relationships and the practice of grooming. In her own words, “The implication of parasocial grooming is basically that a public figure that many kids looked up to and felt like they knew made them feel like and made money off of convincing underaged fans that the dynamic between Humbert Humbert and Lolita was romantic and and something to aspire to” (“8: Dolores Logs In” 16:57-17:12). Loftus is referring to musician artists such as Lana Del Rey’s romanticized use of Lolita imagery and its effect on her young audience at the time. This is not to say the media companies as a whole are grooming adolescent

audiences, but the public figures involved do. Like the images of Lolita, the inappropriate teacher-student relationship images in fictional stories were curated by adults. When asked about “Ezria,” *Pretty Little Liars* showrunner, I. Marlene King said in a now deleted New York Times article “...I wanted to be true to the characters that Sara created, and it was the biggest part of Aria’s story. It is what it is. I think they’re meant to be, and that’s that” (Crookston 106). People who have been parasocially groomed put these images together online for various reasons: To “ship” them, to fantasize about being in said “relationship,” or to apply to their real lives where this may be happening. Post #MeToo portrayals of teacher-student stories reflecting grooming, assault, and abuse have also left an impact on audiences. Young audiences learn the signs of grooming through these stories. Those who were raised with the romanticized portrayal can reflect on the harmful reality of these relationships. However, some audiences take these cautionary tales out of context still to romanticize it. For those who actually have or are currently going through what is portrayed in these stories may feel represented. Some may even finally understand what happened to them.

From the 1990s to the late 2010s fictional stories about inappropriate teacher-student “relationships” mainly reflected dominant views on the topic. This relied on romanticization, victim blaming, and sensationalism. Since the #MeToo movement gained mainstream recognition in 2017. These fictional stories have shifted to reflect trauma-informed grooming, assault, and abuse teachers inflict on students. Both portrayals and ones in between have affected their young audiences. Some audiences were parasocially groomed by the romanticized view; thinking the situations were romantic and something to strive for. While audiences who consumed the post #MeToo stories saw the signs of grooming. They did not always interpret it as romantic; and those who were in that situation felt seen.

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