



UNIVERSIDAD DE JAÉN
Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación

Trabajo Fin de Grado

A feminist approach to young adult literature in the XXI century: The portrayal of the female hero

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Índice

0.	Abstract	
		3
1.	Introduction	
		3
2.	Theoretical framework	
		4
3.	Analysis of themes and characters:	
3.1.	Mental health through the character of Nesta Archeron from <i>A Court of Silver Flames</i>	
		16
3.2.	Sexual and women abuse through the character of Feyre Archeron from <i>A Court of Thorns and Roses</i>	
		22
3.3.	The concept of the femme fatale through the character of Penellaphe Balfour from <i>From Blood and Ash</i>	
		27
3.4.	Representation of the LGBTQ+ community through the character of Evelyn Hugo from <i>The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo</i>	
		33
4.	Conclusion	
		38
5.	References	
		39

0. Abstract:

In this Final Degree Thesis, the role of the female hero in present day young adult literature will be analyzed. In order to do this, there will be a first theoretical part of the Project which will be devoted to provide a look at the evolution of literary feminism throughout its different waves and also a second theoretical part devoted to take a look at the origin of the young adult genre and how this genre is treated by critics and the general public as well as its main features and peculiarities. After this, the role of female characters in this genre will be analyzed in a literary corpus taking as an example four different characters through which four different themes will be analyzed. Last but not least, a conclusion about this research will be provided.

0. Abstract:

En esta tesis de fin de grado, el papel de la heroína en la literatura juvenil contemporánea será analizado. Para realizar este análisis, habrá una primera parte teórica del proyecto dedicada a hacer un recorrido por la evolución del feminismo literario a través de sus diferentes olas y una segunda parte teórica dedicada a hablar del origen de la literatura juvenil y de cómo este género es percibido por la crítica y por el público en general, así como sus principales características y peculiaridades. Tras esto, el rol de los personajes femeninos en este género será analizado en un corpus literario que tendrá como ejemplo a cuatro personajes a través de los cuales se analizarán cuatro temas diferentes. Por último, una conclusión sobre la investigación realizada será proporcionada al final del proyecto.

1. Introduction:

The main purpose of this Final Degree Thesis is to provide a thorough analysis of the figure of women in a representative corpus from young adult literature from the XXI century and explain in further detail how the female hero is portrayed nowadays.

In order to fulfill this goal, first of all a brief summary of the history of feminism in the field of literature will be provided, with the objective of creating a mindmap of how this issue has been developing throughout the course of the centuries. Moreover, the genre of young adult literature will be defined and it will be explained in connection with the role of literary feminism. It will explain how this genre originated and the evolution it has had over the course of the last decades, more specifically in the last few years. To

end this section of the theoretical mark, it will also be highlighted the importance of this genre in relation to the feminist movement.

Later on, the gist of this research will be presented. This central part of the Final Degree Thesis will be devoted to analyze different topics or aspects that are frequent regarding female characters in the genre of young adult literature, especially in the genre of fantasy. To explain these topics, specific female characters will be taken as an example and they will be analyzed, providing quotes taken from their respective books that capture the essence of the different issues trying to be dealt with. Four characters will be the central engine of this literary corpus and each of them will represent a topic or issue of high importance nowadays. The main objective of this corpus is to prove that young adult literature handles relevant and controversial issues of importance for our society, and especially, how big of a role these novels and characters play in the movement of literary feminism.

The four main themes that will be analyzed in this corpus are the following ones: mental health through Nesta Archeron's character in *A Court of Silver Flames*, sexism and women abuse in Feyre Archeron's character in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, the concept of the femme fatale in Penellaphe Balfour's character in *From Blood and Ash* and LGBTQ+ representation in Evelyn Hugo's character in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*.

Last but not least, a conclusion will be given as a result of the analysis of each section of the Project. This conclusion will highlight the main aspects of this work and will give emphasis to how the role of the female hero is portrayed in contemporary young adult literature.

2. Theoretical framework:

In this initial section of the theoretical mark, the role of literary feminism will be analyzed. To do this, the origins of the movement will be dealt with as well as the characteristics and main aspects of each feminist wave and the significance each of them had for women in our society.

Each wave will be analyzed taking into account the importance of certain authors of each wave and novels that supposed a revolution for the movement of feminism and which had quite an impact in the society of that time.

The purpose of this section is to have a brief look at the evolution of feminism in literature throughout the centuries and how much it has changed up until present day in

order to understand the importance of our corpus and why its main objective is the portrayal of the female hero in present day young adult literature.

According to professor Sumita Parmar, the suffragist movement played a key role in the origin of the so-called first wave of feminism. She states the following:

First wave feminism emerged in the backdrop of Women's Rights and Women's Suffrage movements in America and Europe which played a major role in shaping its key liberal concerns. The right to vote is integral to feminist demands as it is not only a symbolic recognition of women's rights to citizenship, but is also an important step in ensuring their empowerment. The Suffragist in America and Europe challenged the marginal status of women in society and claimed that men and women should be treated as equals, thereby setting the liberalist tone for first wave feminism. They claimed that women should have access to the same social, legal and economic rights and opportunities that men enjoy. (Parmita, n.s)

After this movement promoting women's equal rights emerged, some of the most worldwide known feminist writers came into play and published some works that were going to play a pivotal role in the feminist movement.

A first work that became crucial in this movement was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792. This work was seen as something odd and of revolutionary nature, and even though at first was received in a favorable manner by the general public, eventually it was severely criticized. Partially, because those who were against the emancipation of women and feminist worldview witnessed this literary work with horror, fear and rejection as it questioned all their beliefs and their authoritarian sexist control.

Later in the decade, Wollstonecraft was vilified by the press, and for much of the nineteenth century hers was a name to brandish at feminists as evidence of the horrific consequences of female emancipation. The furious clamorings of 1798 quite overwhelmed the calm approbation of 1792 in both intensity and duration. Since most writers on Wollstonecraft and *The Rights of Woman* are concerned primarily with the tardy progress of female emancipation, they expect a negative response to her and her work and have less than an active interest in the peculiarities of late eighteenth-century social thought. But the reception of Wollstonecraft's work and that of her followers, Mary Robinson and Mary Hays, illuminates an interesting moment in the historical transformation of women's status. (Janes, 1978: 293)

In the previous quotation, it is clearly seen how even though this work had quite mixed receptions in the audience it was directed at, it became a trigger for the movement of feminist literary approaches.

Wollstonecraft also brought into play the concept of gender and how this plays a role in texts, a role that had been ignored for centuries up until this moment. As Gill Plains states in his book *A History of Feminist Literary criticism*:

Wollstonecraft's argument for the constructed nature of gender was a strategic one: if writing and thinking could demonstrably be seen to transcend the body, then there would be no argument for excluding women from the public sphere. Yet her eloquent exposure of gendered textuality makes more than a transient political point: it also makes explicit the extent to which textual constructions shape subjectivities. (Plain, 2007: 8)

He explains how this author was able to introduce gender and its sphere not only in her literary work but also it was spread through politics and the social sphere, bringing much more attention to it.

The first wave of feminism was started in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It originated in the UK and in the United States as an attempt to achieve equality and protect the rights of millions of women all over the world, whose lives and most simple rights were being constantly threatened at the time.

There is one text belonging to this first literary wave that needs to be mentioned in this section. This is no other than Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

The importance of this work is exemplified in this article:

It is hard to overstate the importance of *A Room of One's Own* in the history of feminism. When Woolf wrote the essay in 1929, women in Britain were at a turning point. For the first time, they had full voting rights, and were breaking other legal barriers to equality. But much of the early feminist movement was focused on winning legal rights alone. Woolf's essay was a crucial reminder that inequality had deeper causes than unjust laws. In her view, women's lower status in society affected every area of their lives, and came from the smallest everyday conditions. *A Room* shifted the emphasis of feminism from legal battles to altering everyday life too. (Smith-Laing, & Robinson, 2017: 12)

In this excerpt above, the authors analyze the pivotal role that Woolf plays in bringing up the role of women in aspects of daily life. She was a pioneer in introducing the concept of 'feminism' into the area of the household and how the lives of millions of

women were shaped by men who tried to manipulate them and control them as they saw fit.

Another important work from the first wave of feminism which is worth mentioning is *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, which was published in 1899. The novel focuses on the life of Edna Pontellier, and sees her reflecting on the concept of femininity and motherhood and how these two issues are perceived in the eyes of the society of America at the end of the nineteenth century. In this novel, a woman who is looking for sexual and personal emancipation first appeared, and it marked a key moment in the history of feminism, as this issue was considered to be taboo just years earlier, and this book put the spotlight into it.

According to Sarah M. Corse:

Late-twentieth-century feminist interpretive strategies, however, constructed *The Awakening* as a compelling and socially resonant narrative of the search for the female self and patriarchal limits to women's lives that resonated powerfully with contemporary social concerns and provided rich material for critical and pedagogical investigation. (M. Corse, 2002: 141)

This quote gives us an idea of how much of an impact this work by Chopin had in American society back then as it brought about an issue that had been silent for many decades.

By the late 1960s and 1970s praise for *The Awakening* was increasingly wide-spread. *The Awakening* appealed to readers and critics during this period both because of its resonant thematic appeal created through feminist rereadings and because of its congruence with more traditional critical approaches, for example, as an instance of the transition from romanticism to realism. (M. Corse, 2002: 148)

Here it can also be seen that this work was not only influential and important at the moment of its publication, but that it also has been important in the past few decades. Many feminist researchers have found this novel as a source of inspiration and *The Awakening* has been analyzed by many of them.

In the following section of this theoretical background, we move now towards The Second Wave of Feminism. It originated in the US during the early 1960s. This wave lasted for almost two decades and one of its main objectives was to gain equality for women having as a basis the theories that had already been established by many feminists during the first wave of the movement. It also put the spotlight on the fact that

millions of women had been roughly discriminated against in every field of life and made emphasis on how this situation had to change.

This wave accomplished many things to be proud of, as it opened many possibilities for a thousand women in the area of education and employment.

Another important feature of this part of the movement was the inclusion of women of color in this fight. Before this, many women had been discriminated against by their race or social class inside of the very movement. This originated a breach that had to be solved in order to show bigger strength and unity. One of the biggest accomplishments, hence, of this wave was understanding the importance of sorority and all women fighting together for a common purpose. As Martha Rampton claims:

Whereas the first wave of feminism was generally propelled by middle class, Western, cisgender, white women, the second phase drew in women of color and developing nations, seeking sisterhood and solidarity, claiming "Women's struggle is class struggle." Feminists spoke of women as a social class and coined phrases such as "the personal is political" and "identity politics" in an effort to demonstrate that race, class, and gender oppression are all related. They initiated a concentrated effort to rid society top-to-bottom of sexism, from children's cartoons to the highest levels of government. (Rampton, 2019: 4)

In this extract, it can be clearly seen that there was an important 'step forward' for feminists and that union between women proved to be extremely necessary, as they all had been suffering the same sexist conditions and been discriminated against just because of their gender.

The most important literary work that was published in the midst of the second wave was undoubtedly *The Feminine Mystique* by feminist Betty Friedan, which was published in 1963. This novel gave voice to an issue that had been unspoken of earlier, which was the uneasiness women suffered in the mainstream of America after the Second World War and how this affected directly their position in society.

To acknowledge this social issue, she coined a new term, that of the feminine mystique, which was used to describe the belief from part of society that women could only achieve pleasure or feel fulfilled by doing housework or daily chores, by getting married, being sexually passive and dedicating their lives to satisfy their husbands and to bear and raise children alone. Related to this concept, there was the misleading and unfair assumption that the real 'feminine' women were those who had no desire to be

instructed or get access to a higher education or to speak their voice, and who only felt good by doing this in a domestic area.

In an introduction of her book written by Anne Quindlen, she claims the following:

And it changed the lives of millions upon millions of other women who jettisoned empty hours of endless housework and found work, and meaning, outside of raising their children and feeding their husbands. Out of Friedan's argument that women had been coaxed into selling out their intellect and their ambitions for the paltry price of a new washing machine [...] came a great wave of change in which women demanded equality and parity under the law and in the workplace.

(Quindlen, 2001: 13)

In this part of the introduction, Quindlen makes reference to how huge of an impact Friedan's work had in millions of women who up until the moment that book was published were subjugated to the will of their husbands and imprisoned inside the walls of their own homes. *The Feminine Mystique* opened up a door for them, a door who offered them an infinite number of possibilities they could have never dreamed of before and showed these women how a life outside marriage and motherhood was possible and accessible for them.

When talking about the development of the third wave of feminism, there is a new concept that comes into play and that brought quite some controversy at the time in which it was introduced. This concept is the concept of postfeminism, or the perception that all the achievements pursued by feminism have already been fulfilled, hence silencing the movement in itself.

Postfeminism puts emphasis on the individual and that individual's achievements. McRobbie calls this the process of female individualization. The empowered and liberated individual, who is aware of the ideologies surrounding her (and including feminism), is able and expected to make decisions. As the strength of the social structures a woman is expected to fill (marriage, childbearing, etc.) decreases, the capacity for personal agency increases. Postfeminism presents collective agency as a thing of the past, once necessary as a political strategy, but now obsolete and certainly inferior to the strength of personal agency which one can exercise in the postfeminist world. (Włodarczyk, 2010: 9)

In the extract above, it is mentioned how in this particular wave the perception or need to work as a collective group in search of the same goals is left behind in favour of the personal struggle to achieve these goals in each woman's personal life.

An important literary work published during this third literary wave is, for instance, *Fire with Fire* published in 1993 by Naomi Wolf. This book makes quite a harsh criticism of previous waves of feminism and to the reaction of women during the rising of the movement. It states that women should stop feeling like victims and go out there to fight for what they deserve and to preserve their most basic human rights. Even though this criticism can be seen as quite controversial, it is undoubtedly a 'wake up call' for many women who saw themselves in the need to start acting and to start fighting for everything they had started to accomplish for themselves in the previous decades.

In the introduction of the book itself, the following statement is made about its content:

In her bestselling book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf sought to change the way in which women see themselves in relation to their bodies. Now she focuses on how they see themselves in relation to power. She argues that the feminist movement has to change if it is to speak to a new generation of women, and that, even as women are gaining more ground than ever before, a wariness of feminist orthodoxies keeps them away from the only movement capable of putting political clout behind their personal success. The book represents a call to women to throw off centuries of conditioning about the relationship between power and femininity. (Wolf, 1994: 1)

It is said how the book attempted to bring out the inner power inside each woman and to encourage them to make use of it. It is a strong statement about the fact that femininity and power can be worked hand in hand and that one has not to be exclusive of the other. In the following lines, the fourth and present wave of feminism will be introduced. Many scholars believe that a fourth wave of feminism began just a few years ago during the 2010s and this current part of the movement has put all of the spotlight into many issues that women still endure all over the world, such as sexual harassment, rape, bodyshaming and many other issues that affect in many of the spheres of their daily lives.

An important campaign originated in the midst of this present wave: the MeToo Movement. This movement has proved to have a bigger impact in our society. This has also been possible due to the increasing role of social media in our lives and the role they have presented in voicing some truths that many women had been silencing for fear of the consequences they could have on their lives.

A key factor differentiating the #MeToo movement from its predecessors-and amplifying its impact-is activists' extensive use of social media tools. Since Milano's tweet first popularized the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter, supporters have

used online platforms to share information, plan and organize protest actions, propagate political messages, and debate feminist ideas. Some activists have also used social media to expose sexual harassment by individuals and within institutions. (Hillstrom, 2019: 3)

In these lines above taken from a book which includes research on the rising and impact of this social movement, the author clearly makes an emphasis on the role that social platforms play nowadays. Social media, as Twitter or Instagram, have been proved to be of great use in the past few years, as women can see that they are not facing these issues alone and that there are millions of them suffering the same problems, which makes them feel connected and empowered them to speak their truths and break their silence. However, there is a downside to the role of the Internet in regards to the feminist movement. Many critics and scholars argue that the rise of Internet culture is not something strong enough to give birth to a new era or wave of feminism, and that a line cannot be drawn between the previously established third wave and a new one.

The existence of a feminist 'fourth wave' has been challenged by those who maintain that increased usage of the internet is not enough to delineate a new era. But it is increasingly clear that the internet has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism. (Munro, 2013: 23)

Nevertheless, as the author of this article states, it cannot be denied that there has been a turning point related to the impact of this movement thanks to the Internet, as it has somehow created a safe space for women to call out on misogyny and sexism and to share their personal experiences with each other creating a tighter bond between them in the process.

After having provided a brief summary of the different waves of feminism, it is important to introduce the concept of young adult literature, a genre which has been mistreated for many years but it is actually has become crucial for the movement of literary feminism, as books of this genre have great female representation and examples of incredible female heroes who need more recognition in the field of literature.

In this second part of the theoretical section, it becomes crucial to talk about the specific genre which is going to be dealt with in the literary corpus. Young adult literature is now to be discussed, describing its main features, its origin and how underrated and mistreated this genre is by literary scholars and by the audience. When defining this

particular genre, many authors agree on some elements that become crucial in this literary genre and that all books share, although with some slight differences.

A definition provided by Mallika Vasugi in her research article titled *Elements Of Young Adult Literature in Prescribed Novels for Malaysian Schools* would be the following:

Young Adult Literature (YAL) which also goes by other names such as adolescent fiction or teen fiction can be considered as fiction that is written for the young adult (Nilsen and Donelson, 2005). Elements of Young Adult Literature include: a young adult protagonist, the point of view of a young adult, coming-of-age issues that are relevant to young adults, the story being marketed specifically to young adults, and the story being one that young adults willingly choose to read (Herz and Gallo, 1996). These elements, or characteristics, are important markers for a novel to belong to the genre of Young Adult Literature. (Vasugi, 2021: 1)

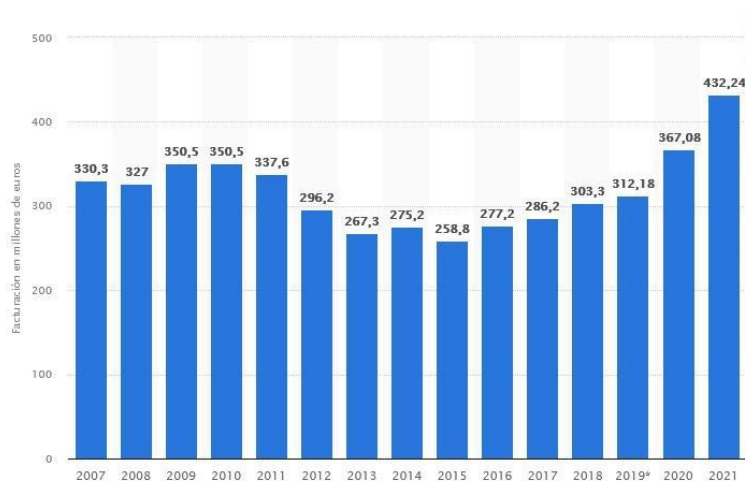
This particular genre is of common preference between young readers but it does not limit to that particular age gap, as also, many adult readers enjoy these novels.

Young adult literature is sometimes overlooked by scholars and experts of the literary canon, as they believe this kind of novels to be unworthy of study and lacking prestige. There is an excuse which is commonly used to mistreat this genre over others and it is the fact that young adult novels do not include any themes of current importance or worth of analysis, but this is far from the truth.

Even though the genre originated in the late twentieth century it was not until the current twenty first century when it has gained its rightful place in the field of literature. Over the past few decades, young adult novels have become quite popular in the general public and they have turned into one of the most profitable genres in the market. Many successful novels or book series like *Harry Potter*, written by J. K. Rowling, the trilogy of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins or *the Shadowhunter Chronicles* written by Cassandra Clare are just some examples of young adult books that have been extremely popular over the last few years.

What is more, these kinds of books usually tend to be adapted into a TV series or films, which makes it easier for these stories to reach not only to an adolescent public but to a more general one. Moreover, the fact that movies or series adapting these novels are being constantly produced also boost the selling numbers of this genre, as fans of the audiovisual product normally tend to buy those books to get to know more of the stories and characters they have loved.

Even though the genre is said to be mistreated by scholars and literary critics, there is a key factor that proves how popular this genre is and the power it holds nowadays in the field of literature. This is no other than the huge amount of selling and benefits coming from young adult novels.



Graphic extracted from Statista (2023) in Evolución anual de los ingresos procedentes de las ventas de libros infantiles y juveniles en España de 2007 a 2021

In the chart found above, it is exemplified the number of millions of euros received by Spanish publishing companies from the selling of these books. As can be seen, the number is more or less maintained until it reaches a new peak in the year 2021. According to this chart, the incomes in Spain for that year generated approximately 432.2 millions of euros, which marked an increase of 65.2 millions of euros in contrast with the previous year.

In relation to this enters a new factor that deserves to be analyzed and this is the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the whole world was forced to go on a lockdown to protect ourselves from a terrible virus that affected the lives of millions and millions of people all over the world. We were banned from leaving our houses and spent whole days without access to many of the things to which we were used to or which we enjoyed doing. As it happens with all of the bad situations, it is needed to look at the brighter side of this, as the lockdown had a positive effect for literature and for the selling of books.

People were bored and tired of not going out of their homes and looked for new activities to entertain themselves and distract their minds from all the horrible things going on in the world. And literature was a lifesaver for many people. People who were

not attracted to reading before found books a comfort activity and readers who already loved this activity found themselves with plenty more time to consume books.

Bookshoppers are able to confirm this, as they claim there was a rising in the numbers of books sold after the pandemic and also a particular interest in this genre, as these books with their fantasy elements and unimaginable stories served as a gateway for many people who were starting to lose hold of reality.

Another important role that this genre has played is related with the movement of feminist literature. Young adult novels, especially in the genre of fantasy, have strong and powerful female characters as protagonists, characters who are flawed like everyone else but who possess many features to be praised. Representation of these female characters prove to be essential for young girls who will find in books women whom they can look up to and who they can identify with, role models to follow.

Girls from previous generations were not able to find women whom they could identify with in literature or many female characters who were protagonists of their own stories. This has changed and now there are many female protagonists who have become literary icons in the genre of young adult literature, such as Katniss Everdeen from *the Hunger Games*, Alexandra Andrios from *The Covenant series*, Emma Carstairs from *The Dark Artifices* or Ivy Morgan from *the Wicked trilogy*, to name only a few examples of many present in our current world. Female readers find comfort in these characters and are able to identify with them in a way that they could never identify with male characters. These characters also encourage millions of women about the fact that they are the owners of their lives and to live the adventures they want to.

Last but not least, it is highly important to talk about the current role that social media have in promoting literature and, more importantly, in giving young adult literature and their authors the representation which they deserve. The communities of bookstagram, booktok or booktube come into play now, which are communities inside the platforms of Instagram, Tik Tok or Youtube dedicated to post and talk about books, and especially, about young adult books. They are in charge of doing reviews, book recommendations and doing book talks about their favorite books. Even publishing companies, given the huge success of these communities in the general public and their influence, send their books to these people so they can promote them online and boost the selling of these books.



Example of a bookstagram profile in Instagram with a huge amount of followers (@booksbymelu)

It cannot be denied the positive impact these kinds of communities have had in the literary field and for young adult novels. Some of these bookstagrammers or booktokers have millions of followers and they help bring readers closer to each other and promote the appeal and love for reading books. What is more, they analyze young adult books and help people understand that they are not just books meant for adolescents to have fun for a brief period of time, but instead, some of them are great works of art. There are many amazing books belonging to this genre that deserve way more praise from scholars and critics as they discuss social issues of importance nowadays, they talk about themes which need to be brought into the general conversation and do a great job at representing social diversity, different races or different sexualities within the LGBTQ+ community.

All of these mentioned aspects above are enough proof of the bad treatment young adult literature have received for many years without any reason in particular and how wrong people are about these novels, as they are jewels waiting to get the recognition they well deserve in the field of literature, and most of them carry out a great attempt at empowering female heroes and also at talking about things, such as women abuse or homophobia, that other genres are quite afraid to mention or deal with.

3. Analysis of characters:

The purpose of this literary corpus is to define in depth the female hero present nowadays in young adult literature novels and how female characters have evolved over the course of the years. In order to do this, four topics or concepts of high importance in feminist literature will be analyzed in depth through the stories of four current female characters belonging to this genre. By doing this, young adult literature will be studied from a more optimistic perspective and it will be proved that this genre deserves more prestige in the literary canon as it reflects themes which are crucial in our present society and that it is also crucial in the movement of feminist literature.

3.1. The depiction of mental health through *A Court of Silver Flames*' Nesta Archeron

In this section of the analysis of characters, an issue which is extremely relevant and of high importance nowadays will be explored. This is no other than mental health, which is something that millions of people all over the world are suffering from in the present and needs to be talked about more and more, as it is crucial to understand the consequences that suffering from a mental disease can have.

To explore this concept, a current young adult character who has become extremely popular in the communities of booktok and bookstagram and her journey will be analyzed. This character is Nesta Archeron from the ACOTAR book series written by Sarah J. Maas, and more specifically, from *A Court of Silver Flames*, fifth book in the series in which she went from being a secondary character to the main protagonist, which allowed to explore deeper into her story and her inner thoughts.

Nesta Archeron is a fantasy female character who first appeared in the book *A Court of Thorns and Roses* written by Sarah J. Maas. Nesta is the oldest sister of the Archeron family and sister of Feyre Archeron, a character that will be analyzed in the next section of the literary corpus.

Even though Nesta Archeron is a recurrent character and an important one since the beginning of the series, it wasn't until the publication of the fifth book in the series, *A Court of Silver Flames*, back in February 2021, that she gained the popularity she has nowadays in the readers' community. In this book, Feyre stops narrating the story in first person, and Nesta takes her place, becoming the main character and allowing the readers to discover the story from her perspective.

This change of narration perspective has marked a game-changing moment for fans of the series due to the fact that there was huge part of the fandom who hated this characters and it wasn't until this book was released that Nesta was redeemed to the eyes of thousands of readers who finally go to understand the core of this character's personality.

A Court of Silver Flames follows the story of Nesta after the tragic events ongoing in the previous books of the series. It tells the story of how Nesta struggles with her trauma and how it all derives in her suffering mental health, more specifically how she suffers from depression, social anxiety and recurrent panic attacks. The book tells her journey of healing and thriving from a dark place.



Image of Nesta Archeron from illustrator Anabel Kay

To put Nesta Archeron in context before starting with the development of her analysis, it must be said that from the very beginning of the series, the author depicts her character as one with grey morality and with a huge complex personality. The reason for this is that Nesta bears the burden of a big trauma she has not been able to overcome. When the sisters were just little children, they had to get through the death of their mother, who died at a young age and left the three of them alone in the world. To make matters worse, her father made a bad decision after the death of his wife, a decision which ended up in them losing their home and their whole fortune, forcing them to move to a little house out in the woods. They repeatedly struggled to make ends meet and they barely could afford any food, only the little pieces that Feyre managed to hunt to feed her sisters. But this is just the tip of the iceberg in Nesta's trauma. In the extract found in the following lines, it can be seen that Nesta also bears the trauma that since

her mother died, her father did not make any effort into finding food for them, that it seemed as he didn't love them, and if wasn't for their sister, they would have starved to death many years ago:

There are days,' Nesta said as she paused in front of the door to her room across from mine, 'when I want to ask him if he remembers the years he almost let us starve to death.'

'You spent every copper I could get, too,' I reminded her.

'I knew you could always get more. And if you couldn't, then I wanted to see if he would ever try to do it himself, instead of carving those bits of wood. If he would actually go out and fight for us. I couldn't take care of us, not the way you did. I hated you for that. But I hated him more. I still do. (Maas, 2015: 266)

As reflected in an essay about the characters of the fourth wave of feminism, the author says the following about this issue in Nesta's journey:

Nesta therefore views her relationship with her father as a failed connection because he failed to fulfill Nesta's internal concept of a father associated with his maleness. He does not take care of her basic emotional or physical needs. She did not receive emotional guidance from her mother, as previously discussed, and the effect is compounded by a complimentary emotional distance from her father. Physically, the family did not have safe shelter, food, or clothing for a period of time due to his risky investing. Nesta was therefore unable to rely on her father as a daughter and within the framework of ownership that her mother instilled in her. (Blakeman, 2022: 60)

To make matters worse, there is a key point in the series which makes Nesta go into a downhill she cannot easily recover from. In the third book of the series, *A Court of Wings and Ruin*, the King of Hybern and main enemy of the first trilogy of the series, kills the Archeron sisters' father. This is a moment that would mark Nesta's life forever, as she was witnessing her father's killing by the hands of the enemy and could do nothing to stop him.

The death of her father clearly affects Nesta's mental health, as he died without them having a chance to solve the issues that had been fixed like a wall between them, without no chance for Nesta to express her true feelings to her father and how she really felt about his behaviour with her and her sisters since her mother died. This causes a harsh reaction in Nesta, as she hides herself in an armor built to protect herself, and she acts out on everyone who loves her and goes into a dark phase of her life in which she

does not let anyone in, not even her sisters or Cassian, the man who she is secretly in love with since they first met in *A Court of Mist and Fury*, the second book in the series.

Amren put a hand above Nesta's heart. "That's the key, isn't it? To know the darkness will always remain, but how you choose to face it, handle it... that's the most important part. To not let it consume. To focus upon the good, the things that fill you with wonder." She gestured to the stars zooming past. "The struggle with that darkness is worth it, just to see such things. (Maas, 2021: 633)

This is an important and crucial moment in Nesta's journey. This extract is taken from a conversation between her and her friend Amren who is constantly trying to help her but failing to do so. Nesta does some despicable and cruel things to the people she loves. She does so in an attempt to push everyone she loves away from her and she believes herself to be not worthy of love. She believes that how she has faced her inner trauma since she was a little child: hating on her sisters, insulting her father, etc... makes her unworthy and a bad person as she feels there is a darkness in her that no one of her friends and family have inside them.

Her friend tells her in that scene that the darkness, darkness which also symbolizes her trauma, issues and the bad things she has done accidentally to those she loves most, will always be there and will always form a part of her life. But she encourages her friend to not let that darkness consume her, to let herself be loved and open up to those who care about her and who just want to help her.

For a heartbeat, she wondered what she might have done with Ataraxia in her hand. What she might do with this body, these skills trained into her bones. If she was worthy of the sword at last. She'd opted for a name in the Old Language, a tongue no one had spoken in fifteen thousand years. A name Lanthys had laughed to hear... Ataraxia, she had named that magic sword. Inner Peace. (Maas, 2021: 708-709)

Towards the end of the book, there is an iconic moment that fans of the series have been praising since the book was published. This is the moment in which Nesta is fighting with her enemy and puts a name to her personal blade before going deep into battle. 'Ataraxia' is the name she gives to this sword. This word comes from Classic Latin and it means to be in a state of impassiveness or calm, without disturbance. By naming her sword with this ancient term, Nesta marks a milestone in her mental journey as it is a signal that she is willing to fight for her inner peace, that she is willing to overcome all her trauma and look up to the future with a brighter and more positive mind. She is looking for peace and fighting fiercely to get it.

Again, Amanda Blake already discusses the importance of the name of the sword in the novel and in the character's personal background and says the following about it:

Giving a sword a name immediately personifies it, bringing it closer to a person than an inanimate object. Nesta certainly treats the sword like a person, missing it in battle and wanting its approval. Coupled with Ataraxia's unique gifts, it is plain that the sword feeds off of Nesta both in its animation and the extension of her power. She both crafted and Made the sword, putting a piece of what makes Nesta "Nesta" in there, as previously defined. Further, Nesta names the sword Ataraxia, meaning "Inner Peace", giving the sword entirely new meaning. On her fighting journey, Nesta struggles deeply to find her inner peace amongst her numerous childhood wounds, but with this sword, she gives Inner Peace to herself. Not only that, but she fights with Inner Peace, not violence or revenge or something equally disquieting. Ataraxia is instead righteous redemption, in use against a system that is already unjust in nature. (Blakeman, 2022: 80-81)

Another important quote taking place at the same moment in the book is the following one:

Never again.

Never again would she be weak.

Never again would she be at someone's mercy.

Never again would she fail.

Never again, never again, never again. (Maas, 2021: 402)

This marks a pivotal moment in Nesta's personal journey and in her struggle with mental health and the burden that all her past trauma has been inflicting on her. This is the moment when Nesta decides to let go of her emotions and to let the walls she had built for herself crumble. This is the moment in which Nesta decides to be strong and fight for her life and to keep her mental health at bay, the moment in which she realizes that she can be weak and rely on the people who love her, and that by doing this, she is no less than others.

In healing from her childhood wounds, Nesta's fight is partly against herself and all of the behavior rooted in her past wounds that hinders her growth. She has to fight against it to stay alive, even, stressing the weight of her struggle. Due to her former lack of ownership over her being, Nesta previously never had to solely bear that weight, always able to give it to someone else, along with her autonomy and choice. In taking ownership of herself, she also takes ownership of her struggle, a necessary but not-so-glamorous step in learning to be her own weapon. She is uncomfortable having to hold onto that responsibility in her own hands, so she

struggles mentally, but overcomes it. In terms of messaging, the model of overcoming a struggle –acknowledging that the process of fighting for equality is one with many fronts, many of them difficult– makes the eventual accomplishment of dismantling patriarchal systems much more significant. With Nesta, then, mental fights constitute an important detail of her training into a radical feminist fighter. (Blake, 2022: 62)

In a research done by the organization Children's HopeChest, it is stated that 1 out of 4 will suffer from a mental illness at least once at one point of their lives. If this data is examined carefully, it can be concluded that this is a huge number of people and that mental health should be taken more seriously as any other disease is taken care of.

To make matters more serious, this research also states that 14.3% of deaths worldwide, or approximately 8 million deaths each year, are attributable to mental disorders. This is extremely alarming, as it is left crystal clear that many deaths in our present day are given as a consequence of not being able to overcome or deal on a daily basis with a certain or particular mental disease and many people commit suicide to stop their personal suffering against these illnesses.

In an oral interview done to the author of the book months after the publication, she confesses that she also struggled with anxiety and mental health at the time of writing the novel and that she somehow poured out all of her feelings, fears and emotions into Nesta's character and that this felt like a therapy to her but also a huge challenge. She stated the following:

Like, it was easy because I knew exactly how Nesta felt, and even though a lot of the details between us are very, very different, like, I have been there, and I, you know, I'm still going through that. And it was hard because putting myself through that journey with Nesta, like, going on that emotional, like, walking that path with her, literally, like, as I was going through it, you know, as I was facing my anxiety, my depression, like, my trauma, like, all of that, like, doing that in real life, but then also every day showing up to my computer and going on that journey with Nesta, like, it just, it was hard and it was draining, but it was so, like, healing for me in a way? And that's why, like, when I talk about this book and, you know, the ending of this book being, you know, a happy ending, like, I don't see it as an ending. It is more like Nesta getting to a place where she can start fully embracing her life and enjoying her life and, you know, becoming the person that she wants to be, but she struggled with how, like, how to become that person, and struggled with the weight of, like, the past. (Maas. 2022: 3)

Having discussed all of these real life and threatening numbers, it is so important to highlight the fact that a character like Nesta Archeron is out there for millions of people to rely on and see their personal struggles and personal experiences with mental health reflected in her story. By having these types of characters, readers who have battled endlessly with these issues will find some kind of comfort and relief by realizing they are not alone and that they can reach out to someone for help. It could actually save their lives and give them the hope they so desperately need and this is the reason why this book and this character are so important. Because Nesta Archeron is not just a fictional character but an advocate for mental health and a lifesaver for millions of readers all around the world.

3.2. Sexism and women abuse through Feyre Archeron's eyes in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*

In this subsection of the analysis of characters, another crucial theme will be introduced, that of sexism and women abuse within a 'romantic' relationship. To better illustrate this issue, a widely popular character from young adult fantasy literature will be analyzed. This character is no other than Feyre Archeron, the main character in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* book series by author Sarah J. Maas.

Feyre Archeron is a literary character that has become quite popular in the last few years since the series started being published back in the year 2015 and it is nowadays one of the biggest icons in the young adult readers community. There are many aspects about this character that make readers feel so attracted to her, as for instance, the huge character development that she goes through along the books in which the series is composed of, from being a mere huntress with just an instinct for survival to becoming High Lady of the Night Court, and hence, one of the most powerful beings in what concerns the lore and worldbuilding of the series.

The book follows Feyre, who comes from the human world, accidentally falling into the mysteries of the Faerie world. Feyre is taken prisoner to the Spring Court, one of the courts in which the Faerie world is divided into, by Tamlin, the High Lord of that court. Feyre will start uncovering the secrets that lay between the walls of the Spring Court and will start developing feelings for the man who keeps her as a prisoner. This book has been described by the author as a modern version, a retelling of the novel *The Beauty and The Beast* whose first version dates back to the eighteenth century.

Nonetheless, there is a part of her story that has made readers from all over the world feel reflected in her figure. This is due to the fact that Feyre suffers sexism and is mentally abused and brainwashed in the course of the first and second books in the series. At the beginning, the readers are presented to what seems the typical and ideal romantic relationship which are so common in fantasy literature, as Feyre meets the High Lord of the Spring Court, Tamlin, and they start being involved in what at first glance looks like a normal 'love story'.

In a research article published by Jeana Jorgensen, she claims the following about Tamlin and Feyre's relationship:

The confining, controlling nature of Tamlin and Feyre's relationship in the second book is reminiscent of Gothic literature, or alternately of the abuse victim who remains entrapped in the patterns of earlier abuse, seeking out the same kinds of relationships again and again until the cycle is broken. Again, the series as a whole may be referred to as a "dark" fairy tale should one want to tap into the word's associations of something exploring the less genteel forms of human behavior and psychology, though as noted above, calling something a "dark" fairy tale is either too vague or problematic for its racial connotations. (Jorgensen, 2021: 10)

She compares their relationship with that relationship of abuse present in early literary genres and proves in her article that many researchers have been able to spot these toxic signs of abuse and sexism in the series from the very beginning.

If we were to talk and describe some of the signs or clues in which it can be seen that Tamlin was not as good as he seemed to be, it is of importance to highlight the fact that since he meets Feyre, he becomes strongly possessive of her. She treats her like she is a property or an object he is entitled to control and manipulate the way he sees fit depending on the occasion and not a person to love and treat as an equal.

So, you're sending me away because I'm useless in a fight?'

'I'm sending you away because it makes me sick thinking about you in their hands! (Maas, 2015: 244-245)



Illustration representing Tamlin's abuse from illustrator @Doodling

In this extract taken from chapter 27 of *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, we see some of the very trigger warnings that can be found about this character. At first glance, we could say that Tamlin is sending Feyre to her home again and kicking her out of the Spring Court because he is trying to protect her from all the threats lying low in the Faerie World, but this is not so, because if we consciously analyze this extract in depth, we can see how Tamlin cannot even conceive the idea of Feyre being with another man who is not him, and this thought sickens him and brings out his inner rage and anger.

'You're lucky I found you when I did, though,' he said. 'Because he would have smelled you, and claimed you, but it wouldn't have been Tamlin who brought you into that cave.' His eyes met mine, and a chill went over me. 'And I don't think you would have liked it. Tonight is not for lovemaking.'

I swallowed my nausea.

'I should go,' Lucien said, gazing at the hills. 'I need to return before he arrives at the cave- at least to try to control him when he smells you and can't find you in the crowd.'

It made me sick- the thought of Tamlin forcing me, that magic could strip away any sense of self, of right or wrong. But hearing that... that some feral part of him wanted me... My breath was painful.

'Stay in your room tonight, Feyre,' Lucien said, walking to the garden doors. 'No matter who comes knocking, keep the door locked. Don't come out until morning.'

(Maas, 2015: 194)

In the extract above, probably the biggest trigger warning for the readers is found. In this part of the book, the Rite is about to happen, which is a ritual in which faeries have

sexual relationships between each other. In the scene, Lucien, the second-in-command faerie and counselor of the Spring Court, warns Feyre that she should not be out of the manor during the night of the Rite, because if Tamlin finds her that night he will not be able to control himself, as he will be in his beast and primal form, and will attack her. Feyre falls into realization of what Lucien is warning her about, the possibility of Tamlin forcing her into doing something she is not willing to, into having a relationship she is not yet ready to have, but she chooses to ignore this and keeps thinking that he would not do that to her, under the pretense that he has showed nothing but affection since her stay in the Fae Court. This is probably the most disturbing scene from the first book and something that should have made us immediately aware that this character is nothing but an abusive character, as nothing can justify the possibility of him forcing another character into doing something they are not willing to and which has not been consented by the other party.

‘So I’m to live here forever, in ignorance of the true scope of what’s happening? If you don’t want me to understand what’s going on... would you rather...’ I swallowed hard. ‘Rather I found someplace else to live? Where I’m not a distraction?’

‘Didn’t Calanmai teach you anything?’

‘Only that magic makes you into a brute.’

He laughed, though not entirely with amusement. When I remained silent, he sighed. ‘No, I don’t want you to live somewhere else. I want you here, where I can look after you- where I can come home and know you’re here, painting and safe.’

(Maas, 2015: 206)

This is another key extract that shows the development of this abusive behaviour and that turns into the trigger that will give way to the events that make Feyre realize of the abuse she is undergoing and turn her back on Tamlin. At the beginning of the scene, it can be seen how Feyre shows her disappointment about Tamlin not confiding her anything and keeping everything a secret for her, about how he does not teach her the living way of the faeries, not even to read the language so she can understand all that surrounds her. Instead, Tamlin shows his true face at the end of this scene, as he confesses how he just wants Feyre to be inside the house all day long, not going anywhere, playing the role of the dutiful wife and becoming a mere servant for him and his needs. And the fact that he decides not to teach her anything, including reading texts, comes to be all part of his plan to keep Feyre ignorant of the issues of the world

outside, to keep her mentally weak and easy to manipulate, which is the main weapon abusers make use of to keep their victims under their control.

Another important point is made by Jeana Jorgensen is the fact that Feyre's healing journey does not begin until she is able to leave Tamlin's manor, as this place became a symbol of her trauma and the abuse she has suffered since she arrived there:

Feyre's healing begins not when she is removed from the initial site of torture, but when she is taken from Tamlin's household. That location became a place of additional trauma for her, both because she could not process the torture there, and because being physically confined was its own traumatizing act. (Jorgensen, 2021: 10)

When Feyre leaves the Spring Court and moves with Rhysand to the Night Court, her healing journey begins and she slowly starts to heal for all the trauma and pain inflicted to her by Tamlin, the one she thought would be the love of her life and ending up just becoming her biggest torturer.

I'm thinking that I must have been a fool in love to allow myself to be shown so little of the Spring Court. I'm thinking there's a great deal of that territory I was never allowed to see or hear about and maybe I would have lived in ignorance forever like some pet. I'm thinking . . . I'm thinking that I was a lonely, hopeless person, and I might have fallen in love with the first thing that showed me a hint of kindness and safety. And I'm thinking maybe he knew that – maybe not actively, but maybe he wanted to be that person for someone. And maybe that worked for who I was before. Maybe it doesn't work for who – what I am now. (Maas, 2016: 156)

This extract highlights perfectly the conclusion derived from the analysis of this character. In this scene, Feyre finally is able to talk about her experience after having escaped from Tamlin's abusive grip and shows her real feelings, her inner thoughts and biggest fears about what she has gone through. She comes to the realization that what she thought she felt for Tamlin was not love at all, as she just needed someone to be with her after her arrival to the Faerie World. And she knows now that Tamlin took advantage of this situation as she did not want to be alone and frightened in this new and unknown world for her and tried to become the person who Feyre needed. However, he ended up doing it all wrong and bringing out the worst version of himself, letting the monster he had kept inside a cage set loose and not becoming the person Feyre desired to have by her side, but becoming the living embodiment of a nightmare that would haunt her for a lifetime.

This is just a representation of many examples of toxic relationships in real life, of women who suffer abuse under the false pretense of love. The fact that these storylines are addressed in these novels could be a lifesaver for millions of female readers who are suffering from this situation and who can be saved with the help of these books, books which can open their eyes and bring them back from a toxic relationship.

3.3. The cliché of the femme fatale in *From Blood and Ash*'s Penellaphe Balfour

In this subsection of the analysis of characters, an important term in feminist literature will be introduced and this is no other than the concept of 'femme fatale'. The term was first coined in the field of French literature some time in the middle of the nineteenth century, and it was later established and coined all over Europe.

There are many definitions of this archetype of female character. One definition could be the following one:

The term 'femme fatale' was coined in nineteenth-century French literature to denote a woman who consciously or unconsciously seduces and destroys men. She possesses the power and irresistible sexual charms to direct the fates of the men who submit to her charms. Once enchanted by this woman, men cannot free themselves any longer from her spell and become subject to death and destruction. The term 'femme fatale' points out the most outstanding feature of this woman—namely her fatality. Wherever she appears, decline and fall become the fate of the protagonist. (Weiss, 1979: 1)

Another definition extracted from a book which does research about this type of character, and which summarizes quite well some of its features could be the following one:

The character called the femme fatale, like the notorious figure of the gangster, is at once everywhere yet difficult to pin down. Catalogues of the femme fatale's appearances in myth, the Bible and contemporary film certainly confirm her popularity; yet they threaten to constrain her by removing the obscurity that is so essential to her survival. The allure of the fatal woman begins to fade when her motives are revealed, and she becomes both obvious and familiar. Those femmes fatales who keep the source of their intrigue hidden, however, may delay the occupational Hazard of fatigue. Indeed, their careers depend on prolonging their allure, often by appearing nebulous, ethereal, and impenetrable. The fatal woman's enduring mystique in nineteenth-century literary forms highlights her integral role in a still developing cultural narrative of gender, genre and power. This complex

union of literary genre, cultural form, and the femme fatale uncovers significant shifts in thinking about gender, sexuality, and exoticism in nineteenth-century Britain. (Braun, 2012: 1)

After taking a look at these two definitions provided by two different authors, it can be said that this so-called 'femme fatale', even though the term had not originated up until the nineteenth century, has been present in literature and in every form of art since the beginning of the times.

For instance, some scholars have claimed that the first examples of this type of female character were found in the text of the Bible and have believed characters such as Eve or Lilith to be the first ever embodiments of 'femme fatale' found in history.

Since this term was first coined by scholars and researchers in the literary field, there have been many characters appearing under this definition in all kinds of storytelling, from literature to art to cinema or television.

To better illustrate this literary concept with examples extracted from contemporary young adult literature, one character will be analyzed under this concept or idea of the femme fatale. This character is Penellaphe Balfour from the *Blood and Ash* series by Jennifer L. Armentrout.

Penellaphe, or as the readers better know her, Poppy Balfour is the main character in the high fantasy book series *Blood and Ash* written by Jennifer L. Armentrout and whose first book was published in march 2020, in the midst of the COVID lockdown.

Since the series was first published, this character has been praised and loved by the community of readers all over the world. There are many reasons for this, some being for instance her fierce personality and the huge development she goes through over the course of the different books which compose the series, but one of the most important reasons that differentiate Poppy from many characters in young adult literature is the depiction of her body and physical features.

From Blood and Ash is a high fantasy book series which follows the story of Poppy, also known as The Maid, a girl who is destined to save the Kingdom and serve a higher purpose. What Poppy does not know, and what she will start discovering throughout the different books in the series, is that everyone in the castle has been lying to her and trying to hide the power she actually has. Poppy is more than the Maid and her destiny is even bigger than what she could have ever imagined. Alongside Hawke, her love interest, and Kieran, her best friend, she will embark on a mission to take down the Royal Crown and save the Kingdom from a system who has been taking advantage of

its citizens for centuries. And in the middle of this battle, she will realize she was never just a maid but the most powerful being in this world and that her power could either save or destroy the world.

Poppy Balfour is one of the few examples of female main characters written with a non-normative body and this aspect has made readers who felt invisible and not represented in books connect with her as they have finally found someone in books who looks like them and this is utterly important nowadays. The author constantly makes allusion to the curves in her body and the character being overweight and Armentrout has even called out some illustrators who have been drawing images of the character with a thin and normative body, as she claims that is not the character she is writing and has pushed really far to get this kind of representation in all of her books.



Image extracted from illustrator
Nessiarts, which depicted Poppy
in a normative way



Image of Poppy posted by the author
in her Facebook page with the real
image of the character

In the first image, this character has been depicted with no curves at all and with a normative and skinny body. This is just one of many examples in which Poppy's character is depicted in the wrong way and which spreads an image of her which is not real and which once again promotes an ideal image of the body of women which is far from reality. The author has constantly called out these kinds of artists as they are somehow invalidating the image she has created for her character and overshadowing the kind of normative representation she wants her readers to feel when meeting Poppy in her books. As a consequence, she posted in her Facebook page the second image to make clear how this character should be represented as it is written in this way by her.

In the second image, Poppy can be seen with a much more realistic body type, curves and not as skinny as other artists had been turning her into.

There is another aspect in Poppy's physical features to be mentioned. She has scars all along her thighs, but most importantly, all over her left cheek which crosses her face from the forehead passing through her left eye and brows. These scars have always made Poppy feel insecure and awful about her appearance, as everywhere she goes people always start staring at them and they have always made references to them, to how beautiful she would be if there were no scars destroying the portrait of her face. At the beginning of the series, this is something that is constantly mentioned and is one of the character's biggest weaknesses.

Hawke, her love interest and male protagonist of the book series, helps her to realize that these scars do not make her ugly at all, but that instead are nothing but a living proof of how strong she is and a warning to all of her enemies that she has survived the most dangerous perils thrown on her path and that she will not go down without a fight.

And your scars? They are a testament of your fortitude. They are proof of what you survived. They are evidence of why you are here when so many twice your age wouldn't be. They're not ugly. Far from it. They're beautiful. (Armentrout, 2020: 376)

This extract shows Hawke being supportive of this physical default of Poppy and encouraging her to feel secure about her scars. Poppy goes such a long way in regards to this issue from the first book, where the scars suppose one of her biggest daily issues, to the fourth book, where she finally has learned to love and embrace this part of her, and acknowledging this a symbol of the great courage she holds.

It used to bother me when someone saw them for the first time, but that was before I'd come to understand that they represented strength and survival—two things far more important than flawless skin. (Armentrout, 2022: 239)

In this extract it can clearly be seen how Poppy has finally turned one of her biggest weaknesses, the scars along her face, into a symbol of power, strength and fierceness. It is just another symbol of how reckless she is and a signal for her enemies not to cross her, as they are a sign of surviving one of the greatest tragedies of her life, when she was attacked by a horde of demons when she was just a little child.

Having discussed her physical traits, it is time now to talk about the aspects of her story and personal traits that place this female character under the concept of the femme fatale

and how all of these particular issues play a part on her journey throughout the course of the book series.

There are things far worse than death. Like her when she's annoyed." He jerked his chin in my direction. "She likes to stab things then. But when she gets angry? You'll see exactly what a god is capable of."

The Priest's eyes darted to me, and I smiled tightly. "I do get stabby. And I'm already annoyed by a whole list of things. (Armentrout, 2022: 132)

In this extract taken above, there is a clear example that fits Poppy into the sphere of the femme fatale archetype. In this part of the fourth book of the series, it is being alluded how dangerous it would be if Poppy would show her true emotions if she got angered by the actions of her enemies. It is being referenced how much she loves to stab the people who have wronged her in her life. This extract could be classified into one of the features of the femme fatale, which makes reference to the fear people show to women freely showing their emotions and feelings, and also making reference to the danger this would have as a consequence in female characters. In relation to this specific trait of Poppy's personality enters into play another concept which is highly being taken into account nowadays and which is known as female or feminine rage. This concept explores the inner rage or violent side of women who had been holding back her inner feelings and emotions and who let them go in an attempt to liberate themselves for all the things that have been affecting them for ages and for which they have been constantly silenced by other people, especially men.

In a chapter extracted from the book *States of Rage*, author Vanessa Friedman states the following about this concept:

Unspeakable female rage, when enacted, expresses the darkest, deepest secrets of Western patriarchal order. The first thought that probably comes to mind when people hear about a woman who has committed murder is that a crime against nature has occurred. That is, primarily a crime against her culturally prescribed nature. Somehow, almost nothing would seem as horrible or perverse as a woman who can kill. Women, after all, give life—they are not supposed to take it away. Men kill frequently in many deliberate ways (i.e. as soldiers in war) and our sensitivities do not seem nearly as offended when we encounter men who have murdered, unless they have done so in a particularly gruesome way. However, when confronted by a murder of the so-called fairer sex we somehow feel repelled at a much deeper level, as if what has occurred is not only a crime against society,

but a perversion of nature, a perversion of her nature as woman. (Friedman, 1996: 62)

This is a constant trait in this character's personality, as there are many moments in the books in which Poppy makes use of her inner female rage to fight their enemies. At the beginning of the series, her character had been controlled by men and women who wanted to make use of her power since she was a little girl and once Poppy found her inner power and let go of all the emotions she had been holding back, there was no stopping her and her enemies have no choice but to run away from her.

"You're more than a Queen. More than a goddess on the verge of becoming a Primal. You're Penellaphe Da'Neer, and you're fearless." (Armentrout, 2022: 456) is one iconic line that encapsulates this previously mentioned aspect about the character and which shows how reckless this character is and that the power she possesses gets only stronger day after day, which makes everyone fear her.

Make sure she knows that I am the Chosen, the One who is Blessed, and I carry the blood of the King of Gods in me. I am the Liessa to the wolveren, the second daughter, the true heir, owed the crowns of Atlantia and Solis. I am the Queen of Flesh and Fire, and the gods' guards ride with me. Tell the Blood Queen to prepare for war. (Armentrout, 2021: 617)

This extract above marks one of the most iconic moments of the entire series. These are the mind-blowing lines with which Jennifer L. Armentrout decided to put an end to *The Crown of Gilded Bones*, the third book in the series. In this scene, Poppy finally acknowledges who she really is and her true nature, and uses her power to scare her enemies to death. Using the power of the gods that resides inside her, Poppy decapitates King Jalara in front of all the guards of the Royal Army and declares war on her mother, the so-called Blood Queen by sending her the decapitated head of the King. This moment proves to be pivotal when fitting this character into the spectrum of the 'femme fatale', as it shows the immediate fear provoked in all the people witnessing this decapitation. It captures the fear men show when a woman proves to be powerful and fierceless, as they see Poppy as a monster and a dark creature just because of the power she possesses. This is a recurrent theme all throughout the books in the series, as everyone always seems to be scared of Poppy when she makes use of her power, even when she uses this power to save people, or even bring back good people from the dead, the citizens of the Kingdom of Solis see her as nothing more than an abomination, a creature that should not have been born in the first place.

The femme fatale, as studied in this section of our analysis, was a term coined by men who have been afraid of women and their power for centuries now. A term coined to call out women who did not conform to the common pattern in which they had to be submissive and weaker than the male counterpart. Femme fatales are women who are not afraid to show their inner power and deepest emotions, and who are willing to fight for what they want and this character is a clear example of this.

3.4. LGBTQ+ representation through the figure of Evelyn Hugo

This section of the analysis of characters is devoted to analyzing how the LGBTQ+ community is represented in this selection of young adult literature nowadays. To go through this topic, there is an iconic character worth of our mentioning, a character that has become one of the biggest icons in contemporary young adult literature and who is constantly receiving praise in the booktok and bookstagram communities of readers. This character is no other than Evelyn Hugo, the main character in the novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, written by Taylor Jenkins Reid and published in the year 2017.

In this novel, we are told the life of this woman, who is a worldwide known actress of Hollywood and who is more famous yet for marrying not once, but seven times, an aspect of the novel from which the title is taken. The narration of the story has a rather unique style, as we find out the different moments of Evelyn Hugo's life from her teenage years to her adulthood through an interview she gives to a reporter in her own house in her 70s. This is important because the story moves forward between the present and the past repeatedly.



Image extracted from illustrator @colouranomaly in Instagram

Near the end of the book, the author makes a great distinction between the concepts of sex and sexuality, and how they differ from each other through the eyes of Evelyn Hugo.

There's a difference between sexuality and sex. I used sex to get what I wanted. Sex is just an act. Sexuality is a sincere expression of desire and pleasure. That I always kept for Celia. (Jenkins Reid, 2018: 271)

Jenkins Reid here enters a field which has been considered taboo or forbidden for many centuries in literature, which is the spectrum of sex, sexuality and pleasure through the female character.

On the other hand, the concept of bisexuality is something that is explored with much care and respect by the author of this book. This has made the book to be extremely well received to the eyes and audience of the LGBTQ+ community and something that has turned Evelyn Hugo into an icon for many readers all across the global sphere.

"I'm bisexual. Don't ignore half of me so you can fit me into a box." (Jenkins Reid, 2018: 123) is a line from the book which has had great impact and has already become one of the most famous quotes in young adult literature. This has such a deep impact in terms of what bisexuality means, and the prejudices that revolve around this human sexuality, as it has always been considered like lust, or hunger for pleasure. It is probably the most discriminated sexuality in the community and the one which still is most rejected in society, as many people still cannot comprehend that one can feel attracted not to one, but to both sexes. Evelyn Hugo elevates this line into a whole other level if we take into consideration all of this, as she highlights the fact that she is bisexual and that both parts of her sexuality are just as important and cannot be denied.

In her article *Binge Reading, Beards and Biphobia: The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Chris Horsley addresses this modern biphobia which exists in our present society and this rejection to this sexuality reflected in the book, and more specifically, in the character of Evelyn, as it can be seen in the previous quotes analyzed before:

It is this obsession with labelling that Jenkins Reid addresses, the need to label everyone and box them into categories, when perhaps often they are incorrect. Evelyn grows frustrated at the views of those around her: when she loves a man, as she briefly does with Don Adler, she is labelled as a straight woman. When she loves Celia, her lesbian wife feels the need to either view her as a lesbian or feel threatened by male presences, the part she feels she cannot give. In response, Evelyn stresses over and over again: she is capable of loving both, Celia being the love of her life does not shift her into the box of a lesbian. (Horsley, 2012: 1)

There are more parts of the book, in which Evelyn Hugo's bisexuality is clearly silenced, even by the love of her life, Celia St. James, who should have understood her feelings better than anyone else in the story:

Ah, yes. So that people won't know you're a lesbian." I hated being called a lesbian. Not because I thought there was anything wrong with loving a woman, mind you. No, I'd come to terms with that a long time ago. But Celia only saw things in black and white. She liked women and only women. And I liked her. And so she often denied the rest of me. She liked to ignore the fact that I had truly loved Don Adler once. She liked to ignore the fact that I had made love to men and enjoyed it. She liked to ignore it until the very moment she decided to be threatened by it. That seemed to be her pattern. I was a lesbian when she loved me and a straight woman when she hated me. (Jenkins Reid, 2018: 238)

This part of the book is quite important because it shows how Celia, the love of her life and a person from the LGBTQ+ community, also denies her true nature. Celia, who is a lesbian, also tries to put Evelyn into the same 'box' and denies the other part of her, the part of her who has been married and in love with men.

With regards to this issue mentioned above, it is important to talk about how these characters experience and live their sexualities in the XX century in America. Emmi-Noora makes an important claim in her bachelor thesis about this particular aspect of the novel:

As the story goes on and Evelyn starts to explore her sexual orientation, it is important to note that society was very homophobic in the mid to late 20th century. It could have been dangerous to admit being part of the LGBTQ+ community during those times. At one point of the novel, set in the early 1960s, Celia wants to go public with their relationship, but Evelyn refuses as it is dangerous and could lead to ending up in prison or mental hospital. Although the story is fictional, it is something that queer people have had to be afraid of in the history, and even today, it is illegal to be homosexual in some countries and many religions forbid it. ()

This statement made by the author in her thesis is crucial to understanding how people in the LGBTQ+ community had to live their lives. They had to live in fear, hiding who they truly were, and unfortunately, this is not something only present in the America of the twentieth century, where our characters Evelyn and Celia lived their love story, this is something that still takes place in all parts of the world.

Up until the year 2023, to be homosexual is still considered to be illegal in 64 countries of the world, in which 12 of them are considered to be a severe crime for which to be

punished with a death sentence. This is something completely unacceptable and something which directly attempts to the most basic human rights of the citizens as everyone should be able to live their lives the way in which they want to, with no fear and all kinds of freedom as love should have no boundaries.

In relation to this, there is a part of the novel that becomes pivotal for our main character, a moment that somehow turns into an awakening for her and which changes the way in which she visualizes her sexuality and her way of living forever.

This was our people.

And here they were, revolting against the police, in the name of their right to be themselves. While I was sitting in a golden prison of my own making.

I was out in the terrace, directly in the sun, on the afternoon after the initial riots, wearing high-waisted jeans and a black sleeveless top, drinking a Gibson. And I started crying when I realized those men and women were willing to fight for a dream I had never even allowed myself to envision. A world where we could be ourselves, without fear and without shame. They were braver and more hopeful than I was. (Jenkins Reid, 2018: 235)

As stated before, this moment is something that changes and impacts Evelyn's perspective forever. Riots and protests to fight for LGBTQ+ people's rights have started to happen in the streets of Hollywood, and this is when Evelyn first becomes aware that her friends and Celia are actually willing to show themselves to the world, no masks, no fear, that they are more than willing to fight to death to achieve the same rights that heterosexual people enjoy. She discovers this and acknowledges the fact that, even though she has always been conscious of her bisexuality from an early age, she has been hiding this part of her identity to other people, living her true self indoors, and living a lie in the outer world.

When Celia said she couldn't have all of me, it was because I was selfish and because I was scared of losing everything I had. Not because I had two sides of me that one person could never fulfill. I broke Celia's heart because I spent half my time loving her and the other half hiding how much I loved her. (Jenkins Reid, 2018: 271)

In this extract taken from the novel, Evelyn is confessing her biggest secrets to Monique, the interviewer who is writing her biography. In these lines, she talks about how she lived her love life with Celia. She says that Celia was all she needed to be happy, but that she still was afraid of going out in public with her, of kissing her in front

of other people, ... She knew that if she did this, the whole life she had built for herself since she was a teenager, her fame, her work as an actress, it would all crumble. She was faced with a choice and she chose wrong, as she chose her fame and money over the love of her life, she chose to pretend Celia was just her best friend for years just so that her public figure would not be damaged by a society who was not ready at all to see two women being happily in love. And this is her biggest regret, this is something for which Evelyn Hugo never forgave herself.

This is a fictional story and fictional characters, but it is needless to say that this story is not far away from the real world and from the personal stories of millions of people belonging to the LGBT community. Although many improvements have been accomplished over the course of the past few decades and there is more freedom to live sexuality freely, there is still so much hate persevering, so much rejection. Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are not something of the past; they are still issues that our current society is suffering from, the fight is not yet over and there is still much to accomplish in this respect.

The fact that this is still the situation going on in the XXI century makes characters like Evelyn Hugo or Celia St. James crucial. Representation of these kinds of characters in literature is of a high importance, as many readers from the LGBTQ+ community who had felt invisible for centuries have a chance now to see themselves reflected in this kind of characters. It makes them feel that they are not alone in this and creates a sense of community between readers who had felt marginalized for many years now.

The fact that LGBTQ+ representation in literature sometimes goes by unnoticed as a consequence of being a part of the genre of young adult literature and not in other genres with more 'prestige' is something unfair. This is just another reason to look at young adult literature with other eyes, as it is a genre who dares to cross boundaries and explore places which other more canonical genres are still afraid to dive into, and in terms of any kind of representation, this is something to be praised by the audience.

Chris Horsley claims the following about this book and this character's repercussion in the readers community:

It is interesting and impressive what Jenkins Reid creates through Evelyn Hugo. The author expresses that her intention was to create a story of two women in love, and yet strongly stresses that it was also about putting a name to bisexuality at the detriment of subtlety in her language, in order to create understanding in bisexual readers. Evelyn is a protagonist who is not moral or entirely admirable: she is

branded as manipulative, selfish and a player. Yet, at the end of the novel, the reader is not left disliking her. (Horsley, 2012: 2)

This directly points to the fact that the author's main goal was always to create a complex character, a character who has done many things in her life that are not worthy of praise, but a character who you could get to admire at the end of the novel. And it is her endless fight for bisexual people and for bisexuality to not be mistreated that has made readers fall deeply in love with Evelyn Hugo, up to the point that she has become an icon for the LGBTQ+ community and a character to look up to by future generations of readers all over the world.

4. Conclusion

To conclude this and after analyzing the previous literary corpus, it is easy to realize the important role young adult literature plays nowadays both in the literary field and also for the movement of feminism.

Young adult literature has been mistreated for many years by scholars and specialists of the literary field but it has been proved throughout the different sections of this project, that this genre is not only meant to be a distraction for teenagers and that anyone can enjoy these novels. What is more, more attention needs to be paid to this marginalized genre as it deals with issues and topics of crucial importance for our society, as it has been clearly exemplified in the corpus.

Sexual and women abuse, mental health, LGBTQ+ representation and the concept of the femme fatale have been the main issues analyzed through the eyes of four different characters, but there are many more issues or types of representation in many of the novels of this genre. Other issues, such as eating disorders, racism or suicide attempts, can be found in the pages of these novels and they are dealt with in a very conscious and respectful way by different authors, enough reason for these young adults novels to have more prestige and recognition for part of the critics, as their authors have been brave enough to bring 'hot' debates into the conversation and put the spotlight into these problems so they can be tackled.

Moreover, the role of the female hero has been the other key aspect of this analysis. From the times in which characters like Ophelia from *Hamlet* or *Jane Eyre* were some of the only few female characters with any kind of room to tell their stories in literature, so much has changed and for the better. The movement of feminist literature changed forever the way in which female characters were written but even more important, the

way in which these characters and the female heroes were seen by the community of readers. This movement gave way to the creation of a 'new' female hero, one who was strong, powerful, independent and who fought for her own interests. Nowadays, there are thousands of these female characters who are role models for millions of women around the world, characters who share some of their struggles and in which they can see themselves reflected.

To conclude, it is important to take into account the main purpose trying to be achieved by this project, which is to look at young adult literature from a more internal perspective and not from the prejudices imposed over this genre. It has been proved with examples that this is not a simple, plain genre but a complex one worthy of analysis. There are thousands of books and authors of young adult novels deserving a more honorable mention by literary critics and there are a million of stories about women and important issues which deserve to be read and be spread to the rest of the world. Young adult literature is not just a hobby for teenagers but a diamond waiting to be cut for people to find the brighter light that lies underneath.

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