



DEPICTION OF FIRST LOVE IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

A Qualitative Study On Jenny Han's "The Summer I Turned Pretty" and Colleen Hoover's "It Ends With Us"

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Abstract: First love, often romanticized as an unforgettable and defining emotional experience, remains a recurring motif in contemporary romantic fiction. This qualitative research analyzes Jenny Han's *The Summer I Turned Pretty* and Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* to explore how both authors portray the emotional intensity, nostalgia, and psychological impact of first love on individual identity. Through thematic content analysis, the study examines the ways in which first love is depicted as both formative and haunting—something that shapes the characters' understanding of intimacy, loss, and self-worth. Han's portrayal of Belly's first love captures the innocence, excitement, and longing of adolescence, revealing how emotional memory and nostalgia influence personal growth and perception of relationships. In contrast, Hoover's narrative, while rooted in trauma and resilience, reflects how first love continues to hold emotional power even amid pain and transformation. Both works portray love as an enduring force—one that leaves an indelible mark on identity and emotional development. The study highlights how these depictions contribute to broader cultural narratives that idealize first love as a permanent emotional benchmark. By examining the tension between romantic idealism and emotional realism, this paper reveals how such portrayals influence readers' perceptions of love, attachment, and self-discovery. Ultimately, the analysis underscores that first love, as represented in these novels, extends beyond romance—it becomes a vital aspect of emotional formation and identity construction in young adulthood.

Index Terms: Contemporary Fiction, Nostalgia, Individual Identity, First Love, Emotional Development, Adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

First love, a universally recognized human experience, has been a central theme in literature, often shaping characters' identities and influencing their emotional and psychological development. In contemporary fiction, authors increasingly focus on the nuanced emotional landscapes of first love, reflecting its intensity and lasting impact on individual identity. The portrayal of first love is not merely a narrative device but a window into the complexities of human emotion, memory, and relational growth. As research suggests, experiences of early romantic attachment play a significant role in shaping self-concept and interpersonal behavior later in life (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019). Moreover, the nostalgic recollection of first love serves as a psychological resource, fostering reflection, emotional resilience, and a sense of continuity in one's personal narrative (Routledge et al., 2013). In contemporary young adult fiction, writers such as Jenny Han and Colleen Hoover depict first love as a deeply transformative experience, blending nostalgia with psychological realism to explore its enduring impact on selfhood and interpersonal relationships. These narratives often serve as mirrors reflecting the complexities of adolescent emotional development, identity formation, and the negotiation of romantic ideals versus reality. Han's *The Summer I Turned Pretty* portrays protagonist Isabel "Belly" Conklin's emotional journey through her first intense summer romance, highlighting the interplay of vulnerability, self-discovery, and the bittersweet intensity of first love. Similarly, Hoover's *It Ends With Us* delves into the complexities of first love within adult relationships, examining the psychological ramifications of early romantic experiences and their influence on future relational patterns.

Scholarly analyses emphasize the significance of first love in shaping individual identity and emotional resilience. For example, Lawton (2024) notes that young adult literature, such as Han's and Hoover's novels, offers readers narratives that mirror their own emotional experiences, facilitating self-reflection and insight into personal relationships. This aligns with research suggesting

that early romantic experiences are formative, influencing self-concept, empathy, and relational skills (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019).

Moreover, the portrayal of first love in these novels frequently intersects with nostalgia and memory. In *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, Han evokes the longing and wistfulness associated with youthful romance, illustrating how nostalgic reflection on first love reinforces identity and emotional growth. In Hoover's *It Ends With Us*, nostalgia for first love contrasts with the harsh realities of relational challenges, emphasizing both the enduring impact and the emotional complexity of early romantic experiences (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Juhl, 2013).

Jenny Han, a prominent contemporary young adult author, is known for her nuanced exploration of adolescent experiences, family dynamics, and coming-of-age themes. In *The Summer I Turned Pretty* (2009), Han presents the summer-long emotional journey of Isabel "Belly" Conklin as she navigates her first romantic encounters with the Fisher brothers, Conrad and Jeremiah. The novel emphasizes youthful innocence, the excitement and vulnerability of first love, and the bittersweet nostalgia associated with formative romantic experiences. Through Belly's reflections and emotional growth, Han illustrates how early romantic experiences shape identity, influence interpersonal relationships, and contribute to emotional maturity.

Colleen Hoover, on the other hand, is acclaimed for her contemporary romance novels that often explore complex adult relationships and psychological realism. In *It Ends With Us* (2016), Hoover delves into the life of Lily Bloom, who experiences the emotional intensity of first love while confronting the difficult realities of an abusive relationship. The novel examines the long-term psychological impact of first love and the ethical and emotional challenges that can arise in adult relationships. Hoover's narrative combines romance with profound social commentary, highlighting resilience, self-worth, and the difficult choices individuals must make when love and morality intersect.

While Han's narrative captures the immediacy and idealism of adolescent romance, Hoover's work foregrounds the enduring psychological effects of first love and its capacity to influence life decisions and emotional well-being. By analyzing these contrasting portrayals, this study seeks to explore how contemporary fiction represents first love across different stages of life, from the innocence of youth to the emotional complexities of adulthood, revealing its multifaceted impact on character development and identity formation.

Although first love is a prevalent theme in literature, there is limited critical research that examines its nuanced depiction in contemporary young adult and adult fiction. Most scholarly attention tends to focus on broader themes of romance, coming-of-age experiences, or psychological trauma, without specifically analyzing how first love shapes individual identity, emotional resilience, and relational development over time (Lawton, 2024). Contemporary novels such as Jenny Han's *The Summer I Turned Pretty* and Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* offer rich portrayals of first love that bridge adolescent and adult experiences, providing a unique lens to explore the emotional, nostalgic, and psychological dimensions of formative romantic encounters.

An additional reason for focusing on these two texts is their widespread popularity among readers, particularly adolescents and young adults. Han's novel has become a defining example of contemporary Young Adult romance, resonating with young readers through its portrayal of relatable adolescent experiences, family dynamics, and the emotional intensity of first love. Hoover's work, though targeted at a slightly older audience, has gained significant readership among young adults as well, due to its exploration of emotional realism, relational complexity, and the psychological challenges associated with first love and adult relationships (Hoover, 2016; Sarungu & Andayani, 2025). The popularity of these novels demonstrates their cultural relevance and impact, making them ideal subjects for literary analysis, as they not only reflect contemporary notions of love and identity but also actively shape readers' understanding of emotions and interpersonal relationships.

By analyzing these widely read works, this study contributes to literary scholarship while simultaneously exploring the ways popular contemporary fiction mediates social and emotional experiences. These novels provide insights into the formation of identity, emotional growth, and relational understanding through the lens of first love, emphasizing its psychological and cultural significance (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Juhl, 2013). Consequently, the study underscores the value of examining widely read contemporary literature to understand both the literary portrayal and social resonance of first love, bridging the gap between academic inquiry and popular culture.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to explore how Jenny Han's *The Summer I Turned Pretty* and Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* depict first love, with particular emphasis on its emotional intensity, nostalgic quality, and psychological impact. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To analyze the emotional intensity of first love in both novels, examining how characters experience passion, vulnerability, and relational dynamics during their formative romantic encounters.
- To examine the role of nostalgia in shaping characters' perceptions of first love, considering how past experiences influence their identity, decision-making, and emotional growth.
- To investigate the psychological impact of first love, including its effects on self-concept, resilience, and interpersonal behavior, as reflected in both adolescent and adult contexts.
- To compare and contrast Han's and Hoover's narrative approaches, highlighting how contemporary fiction addresses the universality and complexity of first love across different stages of life.
- To understand the broader cultural and literary significance of these portrayals, exploring how popular contemporary fiction mediates readers' understanding of emotions, relationships, and identity formation.

METHODOLOGY:

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the depiction of first love in contemporary fiction, with a focus on *This Summer I Turned Pretty* by Jenny Han and *It Ends With Us* by Colleen Hoover. These novels were selected for their widespread readership and their prominent exploration of romantic relationships, particularly the emotional and transformative aspects of first love. A content analysis method was adopted to systematically analyze the textual data. This approach allows for identifying patterns, themes, and narrative techniques used to portray first love as a profound and enduring experience.

The primary data sources are the full texts of the two selected novels. Secondary data include literary critiques, scholarly articles, book reviews, and online discussions, which provide contextual support and insight into readers' interpretations of first love.

A purposive sampling technique was used, focusing on chapters, passages, and dialogues that vividly depict first love. Excerpts highlighting emotional intensity, personal growth, relational dynamics, and nostalgic reflections were selected for in-depth analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to code and categorize recurring motifs and patterns in the depiction of first love. Themes such as emotional intensity, longing, personal transformation, and societal influence on romantic relationships were identified. Comparisons across the two novels were made to highlight similarities and differences in how first love is portrayed. Since this study is based on published novels and publicly available secondary sources, no direct ethical concerns arise. Proper citations are maintained to acknowledge intellectual property. The study is limited to two novels, which may constrain generalizability. Additionally, interpretations are influenced by the researcher's subjective perspective and cultural understanding of love.

DISCUSSION:

First love, a universally recognized human experience, has long been a central theme in literature, shaping characters' identities and influencing their emotional and psychological development. In contemporary fiction, authors increasingly explore the nuanced emotional landscapes of first love, emphasizing its intensity, nostalgic resonance, and lasting impact on individual identity. This study examines Jenny Han's *The Summer I Turned Pretty* (2009) and Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* (2016), two novels that portray first love in distinctly different contexts—adolescence and adulthood, respectively. By analyzing these texts, this paper seeks to understand how contemporary literature represents formative romantic experiences and their effects on character development and reader engagement. The emotional intensity, psychological complexity, and nostalgic undertones in these narratives not only offer rich literary insights but also reflect the cultural significance of first love in shaping social and emotional understanding.

In *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, Jenny Han captures the intensity of adolescent first love through the experiences of Isabel "Belly" Conklin, who navigates her feelings for the Fisher brothers, Conrad and Jeremiah. Belly's experiences reflect the emotional turbulence characteristic of early romantic attachments, where heightened feelings of love, jealousy, and vulnerability dominate her internal world. As Belly herself reflects, *"I had been lying to myself, thinking I was free, thinking I had let him go. It didn't matter what he said or did, I'd never let him go"* (Han, 2009). This quote exemplifies the emotional intensity of first love, illustrating how deeply formative romantic experiences can influence a young person's emotions and behavior. Research in cognitive psychology suggests that adolescents experience heightened emotional processing during first love, which contributes to vivid and lasting memories (Big Think, 2023). The novel emphasizes how these intense emotional experiences facilitate personal growth, fostering empathy, self-awareness, and the development of relational skills, thereby underscoring the psychological significance of first love in shaping identity.

In contrast, Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* presents first love from an adult perspective, illustrating the complexities and long-term psychological effects of early romantic experiences. The protagonist, Lily Bloom, experiences profound emotional turmoil as she navigates love, abuse, and the challenges of maintaining self-respect within relational dynamics. Hoover writes, *"Just because someone hurts you doesn't mean you can simply stop loving them. It's not a person's actions that hurt the most. It's the love"* (Hoover, 2016). This statement encapsulates the paradoxical nature of first love, where love persists despite emotional pain, shaping decision-making and emotional resilience. The novel highlights the enduring psychological impact of first love, including the formation of relational patterns, coping mechanisms, and ethical considerations in adult relationships (Sarungu & Andayani, 2025). By juxtaposing adolescent and adult portrayals of first love, these two novels illustrate the breadth of its influence across the life course, from the idealized experiences of youth to the nuanced complexities of adulthood.

Nostalgia is another central theme in both Han's and Hoover's narratives, playing a pivotal role in shaping identity and emotional perception. In *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, Belly frequently reflects on her past summers, evoking a bittersweet longing that highlights the enduring impact of her first romantic experiences: *"It was a summer I would never, ever forget. It was the summer everything began. It was the summer I turned pretty. Because for the first time, I felt it"* (Han, 2009). These nostalgic reflections underscore the formative influence of first love on Belly's self-concept, demonstrating how memory and emotion intertwine to shape identity. Similarly, in *It Ends With Us*, Lily recalls her first love with Atlas as a defining moment in her emotional development: *"I love him. I still do and I always will. He was a huge wave that left a lot of imprints on my life, and I'll feel the weight of that love until I die. I've accepted that"* (Hoover, 2016). This quote illustrates how first love leaves indelible marks on personal identity, influencing both emotional expectations and relational choices in later life. Studies in psychology have emphasized that nostalgic recollections of formative romantic experiences can provide comfort, foster self-reflection, and enhance emotional resilience (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Juhl, 2013; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019).

The psychological impact of first love extends beyond mere emotional intensity, encompassing identity formation, relational skills, and coping mechanisms. In *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, Belly grapples with conflicting emotions and relational decisions, illustrating the psychological complexity of first love: *"The old pull, the tide drawing me back in. I kept getting caught in this current—first love, I mean. First love kept making me come back to this, to him. He still took my breath away, just being near him"* (Han, 2009). This demonstrates how early romantic experiences can create persistent emotional patterns that influence future relationships. In *It Ends With Us*, Lily's psychological struggle is compounded by relational abuse, highlighting how first love can leave lasting emotional and ethical implications: *"Preventing your heart from forgiving someone you love is actually a hell of a*

lot harder than simply forgiving them” (Hoover, 2016). The line reflects Lily’s internal conflict. Here, ‘forgiving’ is both literal and metaphorical. Lily struggles not only with forgiving Ryle for his abusive behaviour but also with reconciling her enduring feelings for Atlas. First love has created a lasting imprint on her emotional and ethical framework-it shapes how she perceives love, trust, and moral decisions in all subsequent relationships. She instinctively compares Ryle’s actions with the purity of her first love, which makes her internal struggle more intense.

The narrative approaches of Han and Hoover further highlight the differences in how adolescent and adult experiences of first love are depicted in contemporary fiction. Han’s narrative emphasizes youthful innocence, idealized romance, and emotional discovery, resonating with adolescent readers through relatable experiences of vulnerability, longing, and self-realization. As Belly reflects, “Everything good, everything magical happens between the months of June and August. Winters are simply a time to count the weeks until the next summer” (Han, 2009). In contrast, Hoover employs a more complex and psychologically realistic narrative, reflecting adult relational challenges and moral dilemmas: “There is no such thing as bad people. We’re all just people who sometimes do bad things” (Hoover, 2016). This contrast underscores how the depiction of first love evolves with age, offering readers insights into both the idealized and challenging aspects of romantic experience.

The cultural and literary significance of these works is also notable. Both novels have achieved widespread popularity among adolescent and young adult readers, highlighting their resonance and relevance. Han’s *The Summer I Turned Pretty* has been celebrated for its portrayal of relatable adolescent experiences, family dynamics, and the emotional turbulence of first love (Han, 2009). Hoover’s *It Ends With Us*, though targeted at slightly older audiences, has also captured significant young adult readership due to its exploration of emotional realism and relational complexities (Hoover, 2016; Sarungu & Andayani, 2025). The popularity of these texts emphasizes their role in shaping readers’ understanding of emotions, relationships, and identity, bridging literary scholarship with popular culture and highlighting the societal impact of contemporary fiction.

The analysis of these novels provides several critical insights. Firstly, first love is depicted not merely as a romantic trope but as a transformative experience that shapes emotional and psychological development. Secondly, nostalgia functions as a mechanism through which characters reflect on past experiences, reinforcing identity and guiding relational behavior. Thirdly, the psychological implications of first love extend beyond immediate emotional effects, influencing moral decision-making, resilience, and relational patterns. Finally, the contrasting narrative strategies employed by Han and Hoover demonstrate how contemporary fiction captures the evolving nature of love across the life course, resonating with diverse audiences and reflecting broader cultural understandings of romantic experience.

In conclusion, Jenny Han’s *The Summer I Turned Pretty* and Colleen Hoover’s *It Ends With Us* offer rich, multidimensional portrayals of first love, exploring its emotional intensity, nostalgic significance, and psychological impact. Through vivid characterization, emotionally resonant narratives, and culturally relevant themes, these novels illuminate how formative romantic experiences influence identity, relational dynamics, and emotional growth. The juxtaposition of adolescent and adult perspectives on first love enhances our understanding of the universality and complexity of this human experience, emphasizing its enduring impact on both literature and readers. By bridging the gap between literary analysis and psychological understanding, this study underscores the significance of first love as a theme in contemporary fiction, demonstrating its role in shaping both character development and cultural perceptions of romance.

CONCLUSION:

This study examined the depiction of first love in Jenny Han’s *The Summer I Turned Pretty* and Colleen Hoover’s *It Ends With Us*, focusing on its emotional intensity, nostalgic resonance, and psychological impact. The analysis demonstrates that first love, while a universal human experience, is represented differently across adolescent and adult contexts. In Han’s novel, first love is characterized by youthful innocence, emotional vulnerability, and a bittersweet nostalgia that shapes the protagonist’s self-awareness and interpersonal growth. Conversely, Hoover’s narrative explores the enduring psychological ramifications of first love, emphasizing resilience, ethical dilemmas, and the complexities of adult relationships.

By integrating emotional, nostalgic, and psychological perspectives, this study highlights how contemporary fiction portrays first love as a transformative experience that significantly influences character development and identity formation. Both novels also underscore the cultural and literary significance of first love, reflecting readers’ emotional experiences and shaping societal perceptions of romantic relationships. The use of vivid narrative techniques and relatable characters allows readers to engage deeply with the emotional and ethical dimensions of first love, fostering empathy, self-reflection, and insight into human relationships.

Ultimately, the study affirms that first love is more than a romantic trope; it is a crucial formative experience that leaves lasting impressions on individuals’ emotional and psychological landscapes. By analyzing these widely read contemporary novels, the research contributes to literary scholarship, providing a nuanced understanding of how popular fiction mediates the experience of first love and its impact on identity, emotional growth, and relational understanding. The findings suggest that both adolescent and adult portrayals of first love remain culturally and psychologically significant, reinforcing the importance of literature as a medium for exploring human emotions and relationships.

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