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Trauma and Relational Dysfunction in Colleen Hoover's Ugly Love

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Colleen Hoover's *Ugly Love* (2014) through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, exploring how unresolved psychological trauma shapes emotional behavior and produces dysfunctional relational patterns in the novel's central characters, Miles Archer and Tate Collins. Using close textual analysis, the study argues that Miles's self-imposed rules never ask about the past, never expect a future function as recognizable traumatic defense mechanisms rather than deliberate moral failings. The analysis also interrogates the ideological implications of Tate's emotional persistence and questions whether the novel critiques or inadvertently romanticizes relational suffering. The concept of *Ugly love* is theorized as a cultural representation of love stripped of idealization messy, painful, and conditional. Findings suggest the novel engages meaningfully with psychological complexity even as it raises ethical questions about normalizing emotional unavailability in romantic relationships.

KEYWORDS: emotional avoidance, fragmented memory, relational dysfunction, trauma, ugly love.

I. INTRODUCTION

Popular romance fiction rarely gets taken seriously as a literary form, and that dismissal is understandable in the most generic cases. But Colleen Hoover's *Ugly Love* (2014) is not a generic case. It places psychological trauma at the structural centre of its narrative, using both character psychology and formal architecture to represent what it actually feels like to carry unprocessed grief into a relationship. That is unusual for any genre, and it warrants careful attention.

The novel follows Miles Archer, an airline pilot, and Tate Collins, a nursing student who has recently moved into his apartment building. Their relationship begins as a strictly physical arrangement governed by two rules Miles imposes: Tate must never ask about his past, and she must never expect a future from him. What develops from that arrangement is not simply a story of forbidden feelings but a psychologically specific portrait of how unresolved grief deforms the capacity for intimacy.

The novel's most striking formal feature reinforces this portrait. Miles's past chapters are rendered in fragmented, lyrical, second-person prose; Tate's present-tense sections unfold in conventional first-person narration. This structural contrast is not decoration it enacts the difference between traumatic and ordinary memory. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, developed in Unclaimed Experience (1996) and Trauma: Explorations in Memory (1995), provides the interpretive framework for understanding why that choice matters and what it reveals about the characters who inhabit the novel.

This article proceeds through a review of relevant scholarship, an account of the theoretical framework and methodology, a close analysis of the novel's key features, and a concluding discussion of what Ugly Love ultimately achieves and where it falls short.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Trauma studies as a scholarly field consolidated in the 1990s around the contributions of Caruth (1995, 1996), and Herman (1997). These scholars established trauma as an experience that resists ordinary narrative assimilation not simply because it is painful, but because it is not fully experienced at the moment it occurs. Caruth's particular contribution was to understand trauma as a crisis of representation: the survivor cannot tell the story directly because the event was not directly known in the first instance. This insight has been enormously productive for literary analysis, where fragmentation, repetition, and deferral in traumatic narratives can be read as formal enactments of that representational crisis rather than mere stylistic choice.

The application of these ideas to popular fiction, however, remains underdeveloped. Radway's (1984) Reading the Romance and Illouz's, Why Love Hurts approached romantic fiction from sociological and feminist angles, but neither engaged seriously with trauma theory as an analytical tool. More recently, Kamble (2014) argued for taking romance fiction seriously as an ideological form, and Roach (2016) noted the increasing psychological sophistication of new adult fiction. These observations are directly

relevant to *Ugly Love*, which demonstrates a sustained and specific familiarity with traumatic phenomenology even without explicitly invoking clinical language.

Herman's clinical framework identifies three core features of traumatic response: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. The last of this constriction, the narrowing of emotional and relational life as self-protection maps precisely onto Miles's characterization. Herman observes that a survivor who has organized their life around traumatic experience may feel that to let go of it would be to lose themselves entirely (p. 194). This is not selfishness or evasion; it is a survival strategy that has become, over time, its own form of imprisonment. Van der Kolk's work on physiological trauma storage adds a further dimension: the body continues to reach for connection even when the conscious mind has forbidden it, which goes some way toward explaining the compulsive physicality that characterizes Miles's relationship with Tate.

Feminist criticism of romance fiction provides an important counter-pressure. Modelski argued that the genre systematically reframes masculine emotional unavailability as romantic depth, training readers to interpret withdrawal as mystery. More recent scholars like Vivanco, have complicated this critique, arguing that the genre increasingly stages and interrogates those very assumptions. *Ugly Love* sits at exactly this intersection, honest about the damage Miles's unavailability inflicts while remaining susceptible to the ideological patterns its feminist critics have identified.

III.METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative textual analysis grounded in the close reading tradition of literary studies and the interdisciplinary methods developed within trauma studies. In practice, this involves sustained attention to specific passages, attending to language, narrative voice, structural organization, and imagery, and situating those local observations within the interpretive framework provided by Caruth's theory. The primary text is Hoover's *Ugly Love*; secondary sources are used to contextualize the analysis and situate the novel within broader scholarly conversations. The study approaches popular fiction with the same critical seriousness it would bring to any literary text, on the conviction that popular fiction's widespread readership gives it considerable cultural influence over how people understand emotional experience.

IV.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Caruth begins from a clinical observation: trauma differs from ordinary painful experience not in intensity but in structure. The traumatic event is not fully experienced when it occurs; it returns belatedly, in the form of flashbacks, compulsive repetitions, and intrusive memories. As Caruth writes, "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it". The survivor does not simply remember the past they are, in a meaningful sense, inhabited by it.

This temporal displacement has direct implications for narrative. Because the event was not fully experienced when it happened, its story can only be told obliquely, through fragments and circling returns. Fragmentation and non-linearity in traumatic narratives are not aesthetic affectations but formal necessities enactments, at the level of structure, of the difficulty of telling. Equally important is Caruth's concept of compulsive repetition. Drawing on Freud, she argues that the traumatized subject is compelled to re-enact the traumatic experience in an unconscious attempt to master, belatedly, what overwhelmed them at the time. The paradox is that this attempted mastery perpetuates the very suffering it seeks to resolve.

Caruth also identifies a relational dimension of trauma: the survivor's unresolved suffering is communicable, transmitted through the affective texture of interactions to those in close proximity. This dimension is crucial for understanding Tate's experience in the novel, where sustained closeness to Miles's grief gradually implicates her in its logic, drawing her into relational patterns that her own psychology would not independently produce.

V. ANALYSIS

A. Dual Timelines and the Structure of Traumatic Memory

The formal architecture of Ugly Love is itself a theoretical argument. Miles's past chapters are written in lyrical, present-tense, second-person prose; Tate's sections unfold in a relatively coherent first-person chronology. The contrast enacts the difference between traumatic and ordinary experience: where Tate's narration moves forward, Miles's circles back, breaks off, and defers. Sentences fragment mid-thought. Moments of happiness are rendered with painful sensory precision, while the traumatic event itself is approached in slow motion and withheld almost until the novel's final pages. The reader understands early that something catastrophic has happened; the nature of that event is revealed only after the narrative has established the relational conditions necessary for its telling.

The second-person address of Miles's chapters "You look at her like she's the only thing in the world worth looking at" performs a crucial feature of traumatic dissociation. The "you" he addresses is his pre-traumatic self, the person he was before the event that broke him. He cannot narrate that past as "I" because he cannot fully claim that earlier, vulnerable self as continuous with who he is now. The grammar of his chapters is a grammar of dissociation, and it is doing serious theoretical work.

B. Miles's Rules as Traumatic Defense

Miles's two rules never ask about the past, never expect a future read initially as the conditions of a transactional adult arrangement. As the novel deepens, they reveal themselves as survival strategies. The prohibition on the past is directly legible in Caruth's terms: the traumatic past is not simply painful but unassimilated, and Miles cannot speak about it because he has not yet integrated it into the narrative of his life in a way that would allow him to move forward. Every reference to the past risks bringing him into contact with an experience that overwhelmed him and has found no resolution since. The prohibition is not evasion but self-protection.

The prohibition on expecting a future is psychologically more complex. Both Caruth and Herman note that severe trauma forecloses future orientation the survivor loses the ability to project themselves forward in time, to plan and hope. The future that existed before the traumatic event has been destroyed, and a new one has not yet been constituted. When Miles tells Tate he cannot offer a future, this is, at a deeper level, a confession that he does not have one to give. Hoover is careful throughout to distinguish his responses from those of a man who simply does not care. When Tate pushes against his rules, his reactions are panicked and physically urgent the behavioural signature of the traumatic wound being approached too closely.

C. Tate Collins: Witness, Proximity, and Ethical Ambiguity

Tate is intelligent, self-aware, and honest with herself about the situation she has entered. Yet she persists. This persistence has been read as romantic self-abnegation another instance of popular fiction valorising feminine suffering in the service of male redemption and that reading is not wrong. But Caruth's framework of traumatic transmission offers an additional explanation. Trauma is communicable, transmitted through the affective texture of sustained proximity. Tate is not traumatized in the way Miles is, but her closeness to his grief gradually implicates her in its logic. She accommodates his limitations, adjusts her expectations, and organizes her emotional life around the spaces he allows. This is not simply weakness; it is relational responsiveness, and it is precisely this responsiveness that draws her into the structure of *Ugly love* the novel depicts.

The ethical dimension here is genuine and underexplored. Tate's refusal to abandon Miles can be understood as the kind of sustained witnessing that Caruth identify as essential to traumatic recovery the survivor needs someone who will hold open the relational space even when they contract it. What the novel does not fully reckon with is the cost of that witnessing. Tate's suffering is acknowledged but not dwelt upon; her needs are consistently subordinated to the narrative imperative of Miles's healing. This structural imbalance is ideologically significant and connects to a broader pattern in romantic fiction that the article returns to in its discussion.

D. Physical Desire as Compulsive Repetition

Miles's insistence on keeping the relationship purely physical is not straightforward hedonism. In Caruth's terms, it is compulsive repetition: the traumatized subject keeps approaching the territory of intimacy, reaching its edges, and then pulling back, in an unconscious drive to master what it once could not. Van der Kolk's account of physiological trauma storage is relevant here. Miles's body has not forgotten what it is to love; it reaches for Tate even when his conscious mind has forbidden it. Physical desire becomes his body's way of returning to connection without crossing the threshold that trauma has made catastrophic. The narrative pattern that results physical intensity, emotional contraction, distance, physical intensity again is not the conventional push-pull of the romance plot. It is a precise formal enactment of the traumatic dynamic Caruth describes.

E. The Revelation and the "Ugly Love" Concept

The climactic disclosure of Miles's past the death of his son and the destruction of his relationship with the child's mother arrives with a formal quality different from everything that has preceded it. Where his past chapters have been lyrical and oblique, the revelation comes with devastating directness. This formal shift is precisely what Caruth's framework predicts. Traumatic disclosure requires both adequate language and relational safety, and the revelation in *Ugly Love* becomes possible only after Miles's sustained contact with Tate has begun to reconstitute his capacity for emotional intimacy. Retrospectively, everything that has preceded it the rules, the withdrawals, the compulsive physicality, the fragmented narration now appears not as character flaw but as the comprehensible response of a man who has experienced unspeakable loss.

The title phrase receives its most explicit articulation in a conversation between Tate and her brother Corbin, who warns her early on that she is entering something that will hurt her. "Ugly love" names a distinction between love as cultural idealization and love as it is actually experienced by specific people carrying specific wounds love that withholds, that harms, that arrives without the redemptive promises the romantic tradition has taught us to expect. The novel deserves credit for naming this honestly. But its treatment of the concept is not without complications. While it acknowledges the damage Miles's unavailability inflicts on Tate, it consistently frames that damage as a necessary condition of his recovery rather than as a harm in its own right. Tate's suffering functions, in the novel's economy of meaning, primarily as a mechanism of his healing a structurally familiar arrangement that the novel's engagement with trauma theory does not ultimately displace.

VI. DISCUSSION

The analysis confirms that Ugly Love deploys a formal and characterological structure deeply consonant with Caruth's trauma theory. This is not incidental to the novel's aims; it is central to what the novel is doing. Miles's emotional behavior is legible as traumatic defense in Caruth's technical sense, and the trajectory of his recovery inseparable from sustained relational contact with Tate and eventual disclosure follows the broad outlines of clinical and theoretical accounts of traumatic recovery. The novel takes seriously the psychological specificity of traumatic experience, using both its formal organization and its characterological detail to represent that experience with genuine accuracy.

There is, however, a productive tension between the novel's traumatic logic and its generic imperatives. Caruth's framework implies a recovery process that is open-ended and never fully complete. Traumatic wounds do not close cleanly, and their stories do not have straightforward resolutions. Yet the romance genre requires exactly that: a union that signals the overcoming of obstacles. *Ugly Love* attempts to honour both demands simultaneously, but not entirely successfully. The conclusion, in which Miles's disclosure precipitates a rapid movement toward emotional availability and romantic union, feels too quick, too clean for what the preceding narrative has established.

The ideological questions raised by Tate's position are the most challenging and least resolved. Illouz, has argued that the figure of the emotionally damaged but redeemable man has become one of the dominant romantic archetypes in contemporary popular culture appealing precisely because it allows narrative to acknowledge masculine emotional limitation while offering a fantasy of its resolution. *Ugly Love* participates in this cultural pattern even as it represents its costs more honestly than most genre contemporaries. The concept of "ugly love" is most radical as a descriptor of the relationship in its difficult, unresolved middle; it is least radical as the frame for a conventional romantic conclusion. By naming the ugliness and then resolving it generically, the novel both opens and forecloses the critical space it has created.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

This article has argued that *Ugly Love* is best understood not simply as an emotionally intense popular romance but as a text that engages with genuine psychological sophistication with the phenomenology of traumatic experience. Caruth's trauma theory illuminates the novel's formal structure, the logic of Miles's emotional behavior, and the conditions under which disclosure and recovery become possible. At the same time, the analysis has identified a genuine tension between the traumatic logic the novel generates and the generic resolution it offers a tension that is not a failure but an index of what the novel is attempting.

The ethical questions raised by Tate's position who bears the costs of proximity to suffering, what is owed to the person whose patience enables another's recovery deserve sustained scholarly attention. Future work might examine these questions comparatively across the new adult fiction genre, or develop more theoretically rigorous accounts of the relationship between generic form and psychological representation in popular fiction. What this study has sought to demonstrate is that popular romance fiction rewards serious critical engagement.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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