

Redemptive Journeys Through Understanding and Emotional Ties in Colleen Hoover's *Ugly Love* and *Reminders of Him*

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Abstract—This paper delves into the theme of personal transformation in Colleen Hoover's *Ugly Love* and *Reminders of Him*, with a particular focus on how emotional understanding and interpersonal relationships propel the characters toward redemption. By examining the protagonists' internal struggles, the study emphasizes the profound impact of romantic, familial, or introspective connections on their journeys of healing. The paper analyzes how empathy, self-awareness, and the ability to confront one's emotional pain are essential for the characters to reconcile with their pasts and initiate significant personal change. In both novels, the characters' development is deeply intertwined with their ability to build emotional bridges with others, by helping them to overcome guilt, grief, and emotional isolation. Special attention is given to the role of forgiveness, both self-forgiveness and the forgiveness of others, as a critical step in the process of emotional renewal and growth. Through a close reading of Hoover's narratives, the paper demonstrates that love and emotional connections serve not only as sources of vulnerability but also as powerful tools for transformation. In conclusion, the study argues that emotional insight and meaningful relationships are central to the characters' redemptive journeys, illustrating the profound role that connection and understanding play in personal healing and change.

Index Terms—redemption, forgiveness, personal transformation, relationship, healing

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has consistently provided a lens through which human emotion is explored, particularly in relation to trauma, healing, and personal growth. Contemporary fiction often engages with these themes by presenting flawed characters embedded within emotionally complex narratives. Colleen Hoover, a bestselling contemporary author, is renowned for her emotionally driven storytelling and her ability to portray psychological depth and relational intricacies. Among her body of work, *Ugly Love* and *Reminders of Him* stand out for their depictions of individuals grappling with emotional scars, unspoken pain, and unresolved trauma. In these novels, the protagonists are not shaped by extraordinary circumstances, but by their internal battles, difficult pasts, and unmet emotional needs. In *Ugly Love*, the protagonist Miles Archer wrestles with the guilt and grief of a tragic past that has left him emotionally detached and unwilling to love again. His coping mechanism is emotional avoidance, which creates relational dysfunction and deepens his internal wounds. Similarly, in *Reminders of Him*, Kenna Rowan is a young mother recently released from prison, haunted by guilt and societal rejection. Her emotional journey is shaped by her longing for redemption and reconnection with her daughter, despite being met with hostility and mistrust. Both characters navigate a painful emotional landscape where love becomes the central force pushing them toward healing and self-forgiveness.

Colleen Hoover presents love not as a simplistic or idealized emotion, but as a transformative process that demands vulnerability, courage, and emotional awareness. The characters' redemptive journeys unfold through intense self-reflection and the gradual reparation of broken relationships. Emotional growth in these novels is made possible through compassion, forgiveness, and meaningful human connection. Importantly, forgiveness operates on two levels, directed outward toward others and inward toward the self. This duality reflects the essential role of self-acceptance and relational empathy in achieving emotional resolution. This study situates Hoover's novels within a broader literary context that values psychological realism and emotional complexity. It seeks to explore how emotional understanding and interpersonal relationships function as instruments of transformation for individuals burdened by trauma. By examining the emotional trajectories of Miles and Kenna, the paper illustrates how Hoover's fiction contributes to contemporary discussions on recovery, resilience, and inner renewal. Ultimately, her work underscores the enduring human desire for peace, connection, and redemption, offering powerful insights into the emotional bond that shape our lives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on Colleen Hoover's novels cover diverse critical lenses. Tiarawati and Ningsih (2019) analyze figurative language and its contextual meanings, while Ali (2022) offers a comprehensive literary analysis. Wahyono and Dewi (2024) explore fear and trauma as barriers to love. Foster (2023) examines social media's impact on Hoover's publishing success. Ganeshan (2023) critiques the romanticization of toxic masculinity, and Miclea (2023) highlights Hoover's emotional appeal and her strong connection with contemporary readers.

III. DISCUSSIONS

A. *Emotional Complexity in the Characters' Journeys*

Emotional complexity refers to the simultaneous experience of multiple, often conflicting emotions within an individual. Rather than feeling emotions in isolation, emotionally complex individuals find a spectrum of intertwined responses, such as love and fear, guilt and hope, or anger and sorrow at any given moment. Wahyono and Dewi (2024, p. 3) emphasize that,

...fear and trauma as a mental health problem that has become a rising issue in society nowadays make the writer conduct the study as the trauma has no boundaries regarding age, gender, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

This layered emotional reality often drives internal conflict and influences characters' behaviors, decisions, and personal growth. In literature, emotional complexity allows writers to explore the multifaceted nature of human experience, deepening themes of identity, resilience, and moral ambiguity.

In *Ugly Love*, Colleen Hoover explores emotional complexity through the character of Miles Archer, who is deeply affected by a painful past marked by loss and overwhelming guilt. Miles's internal world is fragmented by love, grief, fear, and self-imposed isolation. His emotional state is constantly fluctuating; he experiences love and desire for Tate, yet remains emotionally withdrawn, fearing the repetition of past pain. His responses often shift rapidly that one moment he can be tender and the next distant and cold. This emotional volatility contributes to how others perceive him as enigmatic or emotionally detached. Hoover captures Miles's (Hoover, 2014) internal struggle as, "He wasn't able to hide how he felt, because he felt so much. He's always felt so much" (p. 300). His inability to process his trauma openly results in a guarded persona, hindering his ability to form healthy emotional bonds. Hoover uses Miles's character to illustrate how unexamined emotional depth can lead to detachment and emotional isolation. His journey highlights the importance of confronting emotional pain in order to heal and connect with others.

Similarly, in *Reminders of Him*, emotional complexity is central to Kenna's character arc. Recently released from prison, Kenna attempts to reclaim her place in a world that has moved on without her. Her emotional state is a constant interplay of guilt over Scotty's death, hope of reuniting with her daughter, sorrow from years of separation, and longing for forgiveness. Throughout the novel, she experiences a range of emotions, from elation when recalling her love for Scotty to devastation over his loss, and an overwhelming maternal yearning for her daughter. Kenna's emotional complexity is further complicated by her interactions with Ledger, Scotty's best friend and her daughter's guardian. Whitaker (2016) stresses that, "People are healed by the process of telling their stories and feeling heard" (p. 93). Their shared grief, mixed with anger, mistrust, and undeniable emotional tension, reveals the fragile and often contradictory nature of emotional landscapes. Through Kenna, Hoover demonstrates that emotional complexity is not a weakness but a reflection of deep humanity. Kenna's internal turmoil becomes a vital part of her redemptive journey, showing that true healing begins when one confronts and processes every layer of feeling with honesty and courage.

Tyng et al. (2017) say, "Emotion is triggered by external stimuli and associated with the combination of feeling and motivation" (p. 2). Through these characters, Hoover underscores the essential role that emotional complexity plays in personal growth and redemption. Emotional complexity, as demonstrated in both Miles and Kenna's journeys, is not merely a challenge but a crucial component of the healing process. It is through engaging with their emotional complexity that both characters are able to confront their pasts, build meaningful connections, and find redemption.

B. *The Role of Relationships in Shaping Redemption*

Relationships play a crucial role in the journey of redemption, providing emotional spaces where vulnerability, reflection, and healing can take place. Familial, romantic, or platonic, interpersonal bonds often act as mirrors reflecting an individual's deepest flaws, unresolved trauma, and emotional wounds. Through meaningful interactions and emotional exchanges, individuals find the strength to confront guilt, seek forgiveness, and initiate personal growth. In literature, relationships are frequently depicted as transformative agents, facilitating not only plot progression but also emotional renewal. Buhler et al. (2021) point out that "Relationship satisfaction is not a pure characteristic of the individual... but it is conceptually related to the individual's specific environment" (p. 7). These relationships reveal the profound impact that empathy, trust, and consistent support have in enabling characters to confront their pasts and move forward. Healing is rarely an isolated process which unfolds through shared experience, emotional confrontation, and the rebuilding of broken connections.

In *Ugly Love*, Colleen Hoover constructs a redemptive narrative where healing is rooted in emotional relationships. The central relationship between Miles and Tate is fraught with boundaries, secrets, and emotional barriers. Miles,

burdened by a traumatic past, enters a relationship with Tate under strict conditions: no questions about the past and no expectations of a future. Despite his emotional detachment, Tate remains emotionally invested and patient, enduring repeated emotional disappointment in hopes of reaching the man behind the walls. Miles's (Hoover, 2014) emotional stance is encapsulated in his confession: "It's not that I don't like you, Tate... I just don't want to like you. I don't want to like anyone. I don't want to date anyone. I don't want to love anyone" (p. 83). Through their emotionally complex interactions, Tate becomes a mirror through which Miles begins to confront his grief and guilt. Her unwavering presence allows him to slowly process his trauma and open himself to the possibility of love and emotional connection. It is through their relationship, that Miles is able to begin healing. Tate, too, comes to understand that Miles's avoidance was driven by deep guilt, and her acceptance becomes the final step in his redemptive process.

In the novel *Reminders of Him*, the redemptive power of relationships is equally central. Kenna's journey back into society and toward reconnecting with her daughter is profoundly shaped by the relationships she must rebuild. The strained relationship between Kenna and Ledger, the child's guardian and her late boyfriend's best friend, encapsulates the emotional complexity of seeking forgiveness. Initially, Ledger harbors deep resentment and mistrust, but as he witnesses Kenna's genuine remorse and enduring love for her daughter, his perception begins to shift. Their evolving bond, though fraught with emotional tension, becomes a reason for healing. Kenna also faces emotional distance from her daughter's caregivers, and her patience underscores the necessity of emotional connection and mutual recognition in the redemptive process.

"Redemption is a key of salvation", says Estes (2011, p. 1935). Through both novels, Hoover presents redemption as something that is not easily attained but earned through emotional vulnerability, empathy, and the willingness to mend fractured relationships. Her narratives demonstrate that true healing is found not in isolation, but in the courage to be seen, to be understood, and ultimately, to be forgiven. Relationships become the crucible in which characters confront their pasts and initiate personal transformation, emphasizing that redemption is most profound when achieved in connection with others.

C. *Understanding as a Key to Personal Change*

Personal change is deeply rooted in the development of understanding oneself, others, and the circumstances that influence one's emotional and psychological state. Plaza (2024) insists, "On a personal level, it (change) allows us to develop new skills, overcome challenges and achieve goals that previously seemed unattainable" (p. 1). This form of understanding goes beyond surface-level awareness and requires a conscious process of reflection, emotional honesty, and empathy. When individuals begin to recognize and accept the complexity of their inner worlds and the external forces that have shaped them, they become capable of re-evaluating past actions, dismantling emotional barriers, and initiating meaningful transformation. In literature, this kind of deep emotional insight often acts as a source for significant character development. It marks the turning point where internal conflict gives way to self-acceptance, and stagnation transforms into personal growth. As the characters gain clarity and confront difficult truths, they also acquire the emotional resilience necessary to pursue redemption and healing.

In *Ugly Love*, Colleen Hoover presents understanding as a pivotal force in the emotional evolution of the protagonist, Miles Archer. Burdened by the grief and guilt of a past tragedy, Miles constructs emotional walls that prevent him from forming meaningful connections. His relationship with Tate is stifled by rigid boundaries set to protect them from the emotional wreckage he has never fully addressed. However, Miles's journey begins to shift when he confronts the truth of his past and sees how it has dictated his present. A key moment occurs when Miles meets Rachel, the woman he once loved and lost, who has since built a new life with her husband and children. This encounter forces Miles to re-evaluate his feelings of guilt and responsibility. Recognizing that Rachel has moved on and found happiness, he is finally able to reframe his grief, not as a permanent sentence, but as a part of his story that he can begin to heal from. This moment of understanding allows Miles to open his heart to change, accept love, and move forward with emotional maturity.

Similarly, in *Reminders of Him*, understanding emerges as a transformative force in the life of the protagonist, Kenna. Recently released from prison, Kenna is consumed by guilt and defined by her past in the eyes of others. She struggles not only with external judgment but also with internalized shame. However, as the narrative progresses, Kenna begins to reflect more deeply on the consequences of her actions and develops a more compassionate, honest view of herself. This personal clarity becomes the foundation of her efforts to reconnect with her daughter and repair strained relationships. Crucially, understanding also evolves in those around her, particularly Ledger, who initially views Kenna through the lens of loss and betrayal. As he gradually comes to see her pain, remorse, and sincere efforts to change, his perspective softens. Their shared grief becomes the starting point for mutual understanding, making space for forgiveness and emotional reconciliation. Hutchison and Bleiker (2008, p. 386) assert,

A thorough understanding of the powerful but often neglected role of emotions is essential to move from conflict-prone patterns towards the possibility of establishing a culture of healing and reconciliation.

Through these narratives, Hoover illustrates that meaningful personal change does not arise from avoidance or denial but from the courage to understand one's own emotional reality. When individuals embrace empathy, both toward themselves and others, true transformation becomes not only possible but enduring.

D. *Forgiveness and Letting Go on the Path to Redemption*

Forgiveness and the act of letting go are fundamental to emotional healing and personal transformation. Lijo (2018) highlights, “In family life, forgiveness has an important role in maintaining independence and relationships among family members” (p. 2). These processes often represent pivotal moments in a character’s journey toward redemption. Whether forgiveness is extended to others or directed inward, it is through this act that individuals begin to release emotional burdens such as guilt, anger, and regret. Letting go is not synonymous with forgetting or condoning harm; rather, it is a conscious decision to no longer be defined or controlled by past trauma. This emotional liberation allows individuals to reclaim their agency, reconstruct their identity, and engage in meaningful growth. In literature, the themes of forgiveness and letting go frequently serve as cause for redemptive transformation, which mark a shift from stagnation and emotional repression to compassion, understanding, and renewal.

In *Ugly Love*, Colleen Hoover presents forgiveness as the key to unlocking Miles Archer’s redemptive arc. Haunted by the traumatic loss of his child and the end of his relationship with Rachel, Miles internalizes a deep sense of guilt. His grief becomes a wall between him and any future emotional attachment, most notably with Tate, the woman who grows to love him despite his emotional distance. The narrator (Hoover, 2014) describes it as, “He’s not sick. He’s crying. Hard. So hard he isn’t even making a sound” (p. 15). This moment encapsulates the depth of his emotional pain, which he has kept buried. Miles’s journey toward redemption begins when he starts to confront this pain and recognizes the need to forgive himself. Tate, with her patience and emotional resilience, serves as a crucial presence in this transformation. Her willingness to forgive both Miles’s present detachment and the emotional baggage he carries allows her to provide him with the support he needs to begin healing. Tate’s understanding and compassion are pivotal in helping Miles realize that he is not unworthy of love. It is Miles’s decision to let go of his guilt and accept forgiveness, from both himself and Tate that paves the way for his emotional rebirth.

In *Reminders of Him*, forgiveness and letting go are equally essential in shaping Kenna’s path to redemption. After being imprisoned for a tragic accident that led to the death of her boyfriend, Kenna returns home seeking to reconnect with her daughter. She is met with intense hostility, particularly from Ledger, her late boyfriend’s best friend and the current guardian of her child. Ledger’s initial reaction is driven by anger and protectiveness, but as he witnesses Kenna’s sincerity, remorse, and commitment to change the situation, his perceptions begin to shift. The moment when he begins to see her humanity and “shows her his estate” (Hoover, 2022, p. 158) marks the beginning of mutual understanding and acceptance.

Colleen Hoover underscores that redemption is not merely about receiving forgiveness from others, but also about the courage to forgive oneself. Through Kenna and Ledger’s evolving relationship, the novel demonstrates that letting go of the past, though painful, is a necessary step toward reclaiming hope and building a future rooted in empathy, healing, and love.

E. Embracing Love as a Step Toward Healing

Love is a powerful and transformative force that plays a central role in emotional healing and personal growth. It is not merely a fleeting emotion or romantic ideal, but a conscious and courageous act that allows individuals to confront their pain, release emotional burdens, and move toward a more whole version of themselves. Whether directed inward as self-compassion or outward as affection for others, love fosters emotional resilience, mends fractured relationships, and cultivates a sense of hope and belonging. In literature, the act of embracing love often serves as a pivotal moment in character development, signifying a shift from emotional repression and fear to vulnerability and self-acceptance. Hoover’s portrayal of love reflects this complexity, offering narratives where love becomes not only a source of connection but a catalyst for healing. As Foster (2023, p. 26) notes,

Colleen Hoover is a spectacular phenomenon within herself, from her life experiences, to her writing, and her marketing. As an author, she writes about complex situations and meets her audience halfway, doing what she can do meet them where they are in their life.

In *Ugly Love*, Colleen Hoover portrays love as a force both painful and redemptive. Miles’s initial experience of love with Rachel, his step-sister, unfolds in a complicated and emotionally intense context. Their relationship, though unconventional, evolves into a deep bond, culminating in the birth of their son, Clayton. The couple’s love for each other and for their child brings joy and a sense of family unity. However, the tragic loss of their child in an accident shatters their emotional world. Hoover (2014) writes, “Little did he know, his happiest day became his unforgettable day for him...” (p. 270) capturing the devastating duality of love and loss. This trauma leaves Miles emotionally paralyzed, unable to love or allow himself to be loved. When Tate enters his life six years later, her patience and emotional depth challenge Miles’s guardedness. Initially, he resists her affection, fearing that embracing love again will only lead to more pain. Yet, as their bond grows stronger, Miles begins to see love as a means of redemption, a pathway to face his unresolved grief and rediscover emotional wholeness. Tate’s unconditional love becomes a healing balm that gradually softens Miles’s internal scars. By choosing to accept her love, he not only opens himself up to future happiness but also honors his past without being imprisoned by it.

In *Reminders of Him*, Hoover similarly presents love as a tender but transformative force. Kenna’s love for Scotty continues to haunt her after his accidental death, an event for which she was held responsible and incarcerated. Yet, it is the enduring love for her daughter, a child born in prison, which motivates her to seek redemption and reclaim her place as a mother. As Hoover (2022) writes, “Kenna gives birth to a girl, and tries to redeem her reputation to fulfill her role as a mother” (p. 56). Her love becomes the foundation upon which she builds a new life. Ledger, initially resistant to

Kenna's presence, eventually recognizes the sincerity and strength of her emotions. As he slowly allows himself to love again, their shared grief and emerging affection become channels through which both characters heal. Hoover illustrates that love, when rooted in empathy, honesty, and vulnerability, can bridge even the deepest emotional divides. It becomes an essential step toward healing, forgiveness, and finally redemption.

IV. FINDINGS

The study finds that in *Ugly Love* and *Reminders of Him*, Colleen Hoover portrays redemption as a gradual process rooted in emotional understanding, forgiveness, and the rebuilding of relationships. Characters like Miles and Kenna undergo deep personal transformations by confronting their past traumas, acknowledging their emotional complexities, and allowing themselves to be vulnerable. Emotional ties play a crucial role in facilitating healing. Hoover highlights that true redemption is achieved not through isolation, but through empathy, self-awareness, and the courageous acceptance of love and support from others.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study reveals that Colleen Hoover intricately weaves emotional resilience, vulnerability, and the complexities of personal healing into the journeys of her protagonists. The novels illustrate that redemption is not linear but layered with internal battles and gradual realizations. Both *Ugly Love* and *Reminders of Him* highlight how characters' emotional growth is intertwined with their willingness to confront difficult truths, accept imperfections, and trust in others. Hoover's portrayal of trauma, grief, and love offers a realistic depiction of healing as a process requiring patience and emotional courage. The characters' redemptive arcs are deeply human, marked by setbacks and breakthroughs rather than immediate transformation. Furthermore, the study finds that Hoover's emotionally charged narratives encourage readers to empathize with flawed characters, reinforcing the idea that healing often requires both self-compassion and the support of meaningful relationships. Her work thus positions emotional honesty as fundamental to achieving true personal redemption.

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