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Romanticisation of Violence in Film and Musical *Heathers*

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

This research investigates the romanticisation of violence in *Heathers* – both the 1988 film (dir. Michael Lehmann) and the 2018 musical adaptation. It examines the ambivalent representation of violence by analysing both the story and the discourse levels of the narrative. The study provides a detailed exploration of how violent acts – including murder, sexual harassment, and suicide – are framed and romanticised across different narrative layers. By focusing on these representational techniques, the thesis sheds light on the complex ways violence is reshaped and presented as something better than it is within entertainment media.

Keywords: romanticisation of violence, Heathers, narrative structure, film and musical adaptation, entertainment media, semiotics

Contents

Introduction

The depiction of violence in contemporary entertainment media is far from uncommon and appears across a wide range of genres, from drama and thriller to comedy and satire. Violence in storytelling is not a phenomenon unique to the modern era – its presence can be traced back to early human expression, such as hieroglyphic paintings and ancient mythologies (Nayar-Akhtar 2016: 511). What distinguishes the current landscape is the accessibility and intensity of such representations. In the digital age, violent imagery is not only more readily available but also more intricately produced and disseminated across multiple platforms, making it a regular part of everyday media consumption.

This increasing exposure to stylised, sensationalised, or even aestheticised portrayals of violence raises significant concerns about desensitisation[1]. Moreover, the diverse narrative and stylistic techniques used to frame violence – through irony, humour, romanticisation, romance or heroism – complicate its interpretation. These mediated forms of violence are often not received as purely negative or alarming, but rather as part of an engaging or entertaining experience.

Such ambiguity in the representation of violence prompts critical reflection on how media narratives may subtly reframe or repackage violent acts. In particular, the tendency to romanticise violence raises questions about the implications of violence representation in popular culture. This thesis seeks to explore precisely these issues, examining how violence is constructed, communicated, and occasionally romanticised in narrative media.

In this thesis, the concept of violence will be delimited and the clear definition will be followed. Understanding the typology and categorisation of violence is useful for the later analysis of its representation, particularly in the form of romanticisation.

[1] In this context, desensitisation refers to the process by which individuals who are repeatedly exposed to media violence gradually experience a reduced physiological and emotional response, reacting with less discomfort or arousal than they initially did (Anderson et al. 2003: 96).

From a semiotic perspective, it is essential to examine how violence is framed, encoded, and interpreted through specific representational choices. In this context, romanticisation of violence becomes an important semiotic issue. It illustrates how certain forms of violence are stripped of their destructive connotations and re-coded as something better, desirable, appealing etc. Studying the types of romanticisation offers a way to understand how meaning is constructed through layered and often ambiguous processes of signification. It shows how representational techniques can alter the way violence is depicted, making it appear less direct or less visible. This makes the process both ethically and semiotically significant, as it involves a subtle reworking of signs that can potentially shape the audience's reception of violence on-screen. The aim of this thesis is to study romanticisation of violence in entertainment media and to explore how the meaning of violence can be romanticised through these representational techniques, making it a relevant and necessary subject of investigation within the field of semiotics.

It is important to clarify that this thesis does not explore how audiences perceive violence in entertainment media, but rather focuses on the representation of it in the narrative text.

Selection of materials

With the romanticisation of violence as its central focus, this study examines the 1988 film *Heathers* (dir. Michael Lehmann) and its theatrical adaptation *Heathers: The Musical* (dir. Andy Fickman, written by Kevin Murphy and Laurence O'Keefe), staged between 2014 and 2018 in the USA and UK. The live performance analysed in this thesis is the 2018 West End production of *Heathers: The Musical*, chosen for its significant commercial success and its designation by the creators as the "complete and definitive" version (Korpi 2023: 12).

When discussing violence, it is important to consider the full range of its manifestations. *Heathers* is a black comedy with many examples of different types of violence. The film serves as a form of social commentary, critically engaging with high school social hierarchies. Within this framework, violence and dark humour function as narrative tools to exaggerate, distort, and intensify the unfolding events. One of the most

fascinating elements in this dynamic is how violence becomes obscured or re-coded through various representational techniques – most notably, romanticisation.

The narrative follows Veronica Sawyer (in the film played by Winona Ryder; in the musical by Carrie Hope Fletcher), a high school student caught within the rigid and often brutal social hierarchy at Westerburg High, led by a trio of girls all named Heather. Initially complicit in their cruelty, Veronica becomes disillusioned and, after meeting the enigmatic outsider Jason Dean – known as J.D. (in the film Christian Slater; in the musical Jamie Muscato) – , is drawn into a series of increasingly violent acts disguised as rebellion. What begins with a seemingly accidental death evolves into a pattern of staged suicides and murders, blurring the lines between victimhood and complicity. As the story progresses, Veronica must confront the consequences of these acts and ultimately oppose the seductive pull of violence framed as justice or empowerment.

In my reading, this complex portrayal of violent characters – who are not condemned but rather framed as romantic or powerful heroes – marks a key point where romanticisation of violence becomes embedded in the narrative. This framing subtly repositions destructive behaviour as noble or emotionally compelling. It is important to emphasise that, while humour plays a significant role in shaping the tone and message of *Heathers*, this study does not focus on its comedic elements. Although humour and romanticisation often serve similar purposes in obscuring violence, and frequently operate in parallel, this analysis is concerned exclusively with the representational mode of romanticisation.

Heathers remains a culturally relevant piece of entertainment media. Its continuing popularity since the late 1980s shows how narratives involving stylised, romanticised violence retain audience engagement. For this reason, it is crucial to interrogate how violence is represented, especially when such portrayals may implicitly endorse or soften the perception of violent acts.

It is important to mention the *Heathers* TV series (written by Jason Micallef, 2018; based on the original screenplay by Daniel Waters). However, this remake diverges significantly in both tone and content, reimagining the Heathers as “a trio of pretty white girls in preppy clothes” replaced by more diverse, alternative students (Flux 2019: 77), resembling those who were bullied in the original film. The types and representations of violence are also deliberately altered, shifting the narrative's meaning. As such, the series falls outside the conceptual scope of this thesis, and a proper comparative analysis would require a separate study.

Research questions

1) How can the concept of romanticisation of violence be defined within the context of entertainment media? How can romanticisation of violence be identified in entertainment media?
2) To what extent and through which representational techniques are acts of violence romanticised within the story and discourse of *Heathers*?
3) What medium-specific techniques contribute to the romanticisation of violence in the film *Heathers* and/or *Heathers: The Musical*?

Literature Review

Although *Heathers*, both as a film and a musical, has received limited academic attention, several studies have explored key narrative tropes and representations of violence. Sara Rosenkranz's bachelor's thesis "The Portrayal of Forms of Violence by Teenage Girls in High School Films and Stage Musicals Using the Example of HEATHERS (1989/2014)" (2022), focuses on female aggression, drawing on Dawn K. Cecil's (2008) work on relational violence in cinema, including *Heathers* and *Mean Girls* (dir. Mark Waters, 2004). Both examine violent female cliques in high school settings, though they touch only briefly on male characters.

Carmen Korpi (2023) addresses this gap by analysing male representation in *Heathers: The Musical*, focusing on the "rebel" trope and the expression of character subjectivity in teen musicals. Her work is central to my analysis of the musical's discourse. Similarly, Georgia Hampton's thesis (2020) discusses the main male character through the "bad boy" and "sexy psychopath" tropes, noting his violent behaviour and narrative ambivalence.

Further researches of *Heathers* appear in James C. McKelly's article "Youth Cinema and the Culture of Rebellion: Heathers and the Rebel Archetype" and Timothy Shary's article "The Stark Screen Teen" in J. David Slocum collection *Rebel Without a Cause: Approaches to a Maverick Masterwork* (2005). These articles position *Heathers*

within youth cinema, comparing its characters to rebellious icons like those in *Rebel Without a Cause* (dir. Nicholas Ray, 1955).

While prior studies cover character analysis and gendered violence, they do not fully address how violence is represented and romanticised through story and discursive mechanisms. This thesis aims to fill that gap by exploring romanticisation across both story and discourse levels of the narrative. I also draw on John Ross Bowie's *Heathers. A Novel Approach To Cinema* (2010), a non-academic but insightful source that supports my analysis.

A broader literature review on the romanticisation of violence in entertainment media follows in subchapter 2.2.

Theoretical framework

To analyse the romanticisation of violence in entertainment media, this study adopts Seymour Chatman's theory of narrative structure in fiction and film. His distinction between *story* (the sequence of events) and *discourse* (how those events are communicated) is key to identifying how violent acts are constructed and reframed within a narrative. Romanticisation often emerges not from what happens, but from how it is shown – through tone, perspective, or character framing.

This framework enables the analysis to isolate elements in both story and discourse that contribute to a romanticised representation of violence. As Chatman explains, discourse refers to narrative statements, defined as "basic forms of expression, independent of and more abstract than any particular manifestation – that is, the expression's substance, which varies from art to art" (Chatman 1978: 146). This approach allows the study to examine how meaning is shaped beyond the events themselves.

By analysing how violence is constructed across story and discourse, the study identifies mechanisms of romanticisation not just as themes, but as narrative effects. These will be categorised using the typology outlined in subchapter 2.3, offering a structured evaluation of how narrative strategies evolve between mediums while maintaining or modifying the original codes of representation.

Structure of the thesis

Chapters 1 and 2 address the overarching concepts of violence and romanticisation as they relate to this study. Subchapter 1.1 defines and delimits the concept of violence, drawing primarily on the World Health Organization's definition, as well as other key research on the classification and typology of violence. Subchapter 1.2 introduces the theoretical framework for analysing the representation of violence in media, supported by relevant prior studies. This section establishes key parameters for understanding how violence is typically depicted in entertainment contexts.

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical foundation for analysing romanticisation. It begins with broad definitions of the concept and narrows the focus to scholarly work that specifically addresses various types of romanticisation of violence in entertainment media. Based on the materials presented in chapters 1 and 2, a comprehensive working definition of the romanticisation of violence will be established, including the mechanisms and representational strategies relevant to this study. By the end of chapter 2, the first research question will be addressed: How can the concept of romanticisation of violence be defined within the context of entertainment media?

Chapter 3 begins the in-depth analysis of *Heathers*, offering an overview of how violence is represented within the narrative. This includes identifying events and actions that qualify as violent according to the typology introduced in chapter 1, as well as determining which characters act as victims or perpetrators. The analysis will also examine their interpersonal dynamics, the settings in which violence occurs, the perceived factuality of violent events from different characters' perspectives, and the explicitness of the violence depicted. It will explore the representational techniques through which violence is communicated, with the aim of explaining how certain acts may be understated or go unnoticed. The second part of the analysis will focus on identifying and examining instances of romanticisation of violence within the narrative and assessing how they contribute to reframing or reinterpreting violent acts, followed by the final discussion. In the final discussions, the results will be presented, more directly addressing the aim of the thesis.

1. Violence: typology and representation

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first provides a general definition of violence, outlining its different types and categories while focusing only on definitions relevant to this study. The second section presents the techniques of representation of violence in entertainment media that will be relevant for more in-depth analysis of romanticisation of violence as a mode of representation.

1.1. Types of violence

The most conventional understanding of violence, as defined by The World Health Organization (WHO) is

> the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation (Krug, Dahlberg et al. 2002: 5).

The intentional infliction of harm is a crucial aspect of violence, distinguishing it from unintended incidents such as road traffic accidents or burns (Krug, Dahlberg et al. 2002: 5). According to WHO, there is a distinction between the intent to injure and the intent to use violence. For example, in cultural contexts where harming others is socially accepted, individuals may not perceive their actions as violent, despite their intent aligning with definitions of violence (Krug, Dahlberg et al. 2002: 5).

WHO identifies four main types of violence based on the nature of violent acts: (1) physical, (2) sexual, (3) psychological, and (4) deprivation or neglect (Krug, Dahlberg et

al. 2002: 5). Additionally, violence is classified into three categories based on the victim-perpetrator relationship: (1) self-directed, (2) interpersonal, and (3) collective (Krug, Dahlberg et al. 2002: 5). In this study, I will refer to these categories as the direction of violence.

There are also narrower subtypes of violence that can fall under both the nature of acts and their direction. These include gender-based violence, domestic violence, bullying, financial abuse, emotional abuse, stalking, and socio-economic violence, among others[2] (Rutherford, Zwi et al. 2007). Notably, verbal abuse does not fit neatly into a single category, as it can be part of gender-based or domestic violence, sexual assault, bullying[3], and other forms of violence (Rutherford, Zwi et al. 2007).

In the context of this analysis, I will not cover all existing subtypes of violence but will mainly focus on different forms of suicidal behaviours, violence in intimate relationships, and bullying as a form of community violence. See Figure 1 for a basic overview of the violence typology referenced in this study.

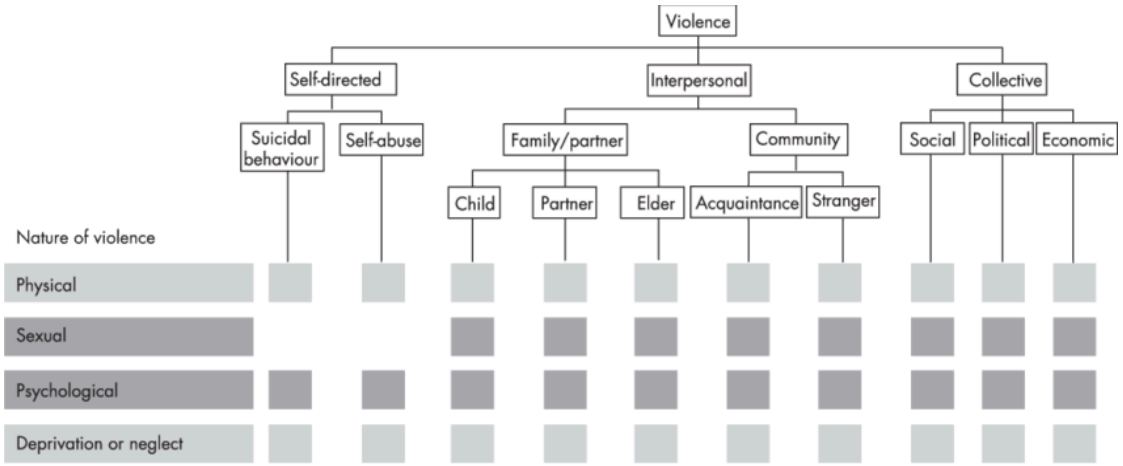

Figure 1. Typology of violence (Krug, Dahlberg et al. 2002: 7).

It is apparent that self-directed violence does not involve others, as the "perpetrator" causes harm only to themselves. I follow the next distinction of self-directed violence: suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and self-harm as forms of non-fatal suicidal behaviour, and suicides as a form of fatal suicidal behaviour (Rutherford, Zwi et al. 2007).

Interpersonal violence, on the other hand, has more complex subdivisions. It can

[2] Council of Europe on gender-based violence: Verbal violence and hate speech. https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/verbal-violence-and-hate-speech. 21.05.2025.
[3] Council of Europe: Preventing bullying and violence. https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/preventing-bullying-and-violence. 21.05.2025.

occur between two individuals, as seen in intimate partner and dating violence, child or elder abuse, and similar cases. However, interpersonal violence also encompasses community violence, where an individual targets a smaller group or vice versa, involving people who are not related by family ties (Mercy, Hillis et al. 2017). This includes sexual assault, rape, bullying, and assaults by strangers or acquaintances.

Bullying is particularly relevant to this analysis and is defined as "unwanted, aggressive behaviour which involves a real or perceived imbalance of power"[4]. Bullying encompasses four primary types of abuse: (1) physical – such as hitting, kicking, slapping, shoving, or hair-pulling; (2) relational – including behaviours like ostracism, spreading rumours, or social manipulation; (3) verbal – such as name-calling, teasing, or using belittling language; and (4) sexual – including sexual name-calling, unwelcome touching, or propositioning[5]. An additional category, cyberbullying, involves "the constant risk of public exposure, the complex roles of observers, and the size of the audience that comes with digital technologies"[6]. However, sexual bullying will not be discussed in this research, as all instances of sexual harassment are considered under the broader category of sexual violence. Likewise, cyberbullying falls outside the scope of this study and will not be addressed.

The third type, collective violence, consists of violent actions carried out by a group of individuals against another group or an individual, usually in political, ideological, economic or social context and is carried out by a larger group of individuals (Krug, Dahlberg et al. 2002: 6). For this study, the most relevant form of is ideological collective violence, which will be addressed in later analysis.

For this thesis, I will not differentiate between the concepts of aggression and violence; any form of verbal or physical assault will be regarded as violence. Despite its broad and often ambiguous nature, the strict definition of violence provided by WHO, along with its typology based on nature and victim-perpetrator relationships, is crucial to understanding how violence is portrayed in entertainment media.

[4] Council of Europe: Preventing bullying and violence. https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/preventing-bullying-and-violence. 21.05.2025.
[5] ibid.
[6] ibid.

1.2. Representation of violence in entertainment media

In this chapter, I will examine the role of violence in entertainment media, exploring modes of representation and highlighting key differences in its depiction. This discussion provides the foundation for a more detailed analysis of how violence is represented in *Heathers*.

What I refer to as the explicitness (versus implicitness) of violence is conceptually related to Chatman's distinction between overt and covert narration, which he characterises in terms of their "audibility" (Chatman 1978: 196). Simply put, it concerns how overtly violence is represented on screen and the intensity with which it is depicted. While Chatman's framework does not directly address explicitness in terms of violent content, the parallels are helpful for structuring this analysis. I propose four types of explicitness: (1) graphic violence, (2) explicit violence, (3) implied violence, and (4) non-violence. Categorising violence in this way helps identify how its varying degrees of intensity shape its narrative and psychological impact. Nayar-Akhtar argues that modern media's increasing portrayal of violence reflects a breakdown of taboos, which can lead to distorted artistic representations that blur the boundary between screen violence and real-life trauma (Nayar-Akhtar 2016: 513). This makes a closer study of explicitness essential.

The first category, graphic violence, represents the most intense and visible form. It includes gore, blood, and bodily mutilation intended to bring viewers closer to the action and evoke a visceral response (Potter & Smith 2000: 302). This type of violence often focuses on physical or sexual violence and rarely includes non-physical forms, underscoring the importance of cinematic discourse in amplifying its effect. Potter and Smith highlight that graphic violence centralises the violent act, making it contextually primary and instantly triggering viewers' schema for violence. The primary effects are fear and desensitisation, with the latter increasing with repeated exposure (Potter & Smith 2000: 303-304).

By contrast, explicit violence is less intense but still clearly depicted. It includes physical, psychological, and verbal violence, as well as censored or stylised portrayals of physical acts like murder, gun violence, or physical assault. While it may lack the visceral shock of graphic violence, explicit violence remains central to the narrative and visible to the audience, though often portrayed at a distance or with less focus on gore (Potter & Smith 2000: 303).

Implied violence is more elusive and complex to identify. It relies on suggestion, psychological tension, and off-screen cues rather than direct depiction. This type of violence can involve all the forms mentioned earlier – physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal – but is filtered through indirect means. Its subtlety often makes it more psychologically disturbing, as it forces audiences to imagine what is not shown. A relevant concept here is substitutional poetics, which arises from tensions between filmmakers and censors. To navigate restrictions, filmmakers often substitute unacceptable images with metaphorical or symbolic representations (Prince 2003: 205). These techniques, such as spatial displacement[7] or emotional bracketing[8] (Prince 2003: 207), help keep violence off-screen and emotionally distanced. Prince explains that "by displacing violence into an off-screen space, or into metonymy or index, a filmmaker could acknowledge these limits and implicitly shield the viewer from a direct confrontation with the details of brutality and death" (Prince 2003: 244).

Finally, a piece of media is classified as non-violent when no form of violence – physical, psychological, or verbal — is detected at any level of narrative. However, this category can be ambiguous. Some narratives may hint at aggression but not meet the threshold for violence. Craig A. Anderson notes the difficulty in drawing a clear line between mild aggression and actual violence, defining the latter as "extreme forms of physical aggression that have a significant risk of seriously injuring their victims" (Anderson et al. 2003: 83). For clarity, this thesis will refer to all physical aggression as violence. Distinguishing violence from non-violence requires not only noting the absence of explicit imagery but also recognising the lack of implicit, psychological, or verbal violence.

Although many representational techniques can be used to reframe violence, I argue that the tendency to represent violence implicitly is a key factor in its romanticisation. The more obscured violence is, the easier it becomes to re-code or diminish its significance within the narrative. This shift in representation allows violence to persist unnoticed, embedded in narratives that seem, on the surface, to be free of it.

[7] Spatial displacement refers to removing remarkable violent scenes from the eye of the camera and spectator to make the depiction of violence appear more discreet (Prince 2003: 208).
[8] Emotional bracketing means shaping episodes of violence with a controlled artistic design and moral purpose, intending to impact viewers emotionally (Prince 2003: 245).

2. Towards definition of romanticisation of violence

This chapter will provide an in-depth analysis of the concept of romanticisation, defining related terms to distinguish them from the core qualifications of romanticisation. I will outline various definitions of romanticisation as explored in previous studies and establish a precise definition of my own relevant to the current study. Therefore, I will conduct a second-wave review of existing research on the romanticisation of violence in entertainment media. Finally, I will describe the typology of romanticisation of violence, examining its specific applications, which will serve as the foundation for the subsequent analysis.

2.1. Definition of romanticisation

As a verb, 'romanticise', means "to talk about something in a way that makes it sound better than it really is, or to believe that something is better than it really is"[9]. The challenge with defining romanticisation stems from its broad nature, requiring clear delimitation. Moreover, it is often used interchangeably with various notions such as glorification, glamorisation, and idealisation. These terms convey the same idea of representing something better than it actually is, sharing a certain common core meaning, but differing in the nuances.

To bring an immediate example of frequent interchangeable use of similar notions, Peter Cochran defines the verb 'romanticise' as "to transfer it [a thing] from the mundane

[9] Cambridge Dictionary. Romanticize. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/romanticize. 20.05.2025.

to the ideal" (Cochran 2009: xii). He again mentions the correlation to the "ideal" in the next sentences, describing the act of romanticisation as "the elevation of the everyday into an ideal" and "the debasement of an ideal into the everyday", emphasising the paradox of the same word having two opposite meanings, and concluding by characterising the term as "not useful" and confusing (Cochran 2009: xii).

Priscilla A. Kenasri and Lidwina M. Sadasri (2021) in their study of abuse in romantic relationships exemplified in the Korean dramas, refer to romanticisation of abuse as "talking or thinking about things in a way that makes them seem more romantic or attractive than they are" and romanticised media as "an unrealistic or idealized depiction of a romantic relationship to appear more appealing than reality stemming from media influences" (Kenasri & Sadasri 2021: 203). Here again, the authors mention "idealised depiction" in correlation to "romanticised depiction", which is not necessarily true in my case. In the specific context of Kenasri and Sadasri's work, the romanticised depiction of abuse within romantic relationships is the central focus of analysis. In their discussion, the adjective 'romantic' is described as something appealing and positive, which aligns with the core idea behind romanticisation. However, it is important to clarify that romanticisation does not exclusively refer to romantic love, and this is not the sense in which the term is used in the present thesis. Here, romanticisation is understood more broadly as a representational strategy that presents the original object in a more positive light, regardless of whether romantic love is involved.

In her work, Liselotte de Beer (2020) describes romanticisation as a process that presents things as "not at all realistic and [makes] them seem better than they really are." (de Beer 2020: 1). She refers specifically to cinematic romanticisation of serial killers as "the way these killers are represented within cinema as more appealing than they are in reality" (ibid.).

Aytak Akbari-Dibavar refers to romanticisation as "the assimilation or internalization of an event by individuals or a community in a way that obscures its negative implications" (Akbari-Dibavar 2016: 126). The author discusses the phenomenon of romanticising silencing victims of violent events and their traumatic experiences. In this case, romanticisation does not specifically manifest as a more appealing or better portrayal of events, but the more important aspect of it is rather minimising or hiding the truth of an ultimate negative experience.

In recent years, multiple works on the problem of romanticisation of mental health issues have appeared. Although the subject of mental health issues is not directly

connected to the main subject of this study, these works give definitions of romanticisation that are crucial to analyse and discuss for the framework of this analysis. According to Anima Shrestha, romanticisation of mental illness is defined as "the depiction of mental illness as more glamorous, attractive, or alluring than it truly is" (Shrestha 2018: 69). In Brightness Lesedi Kgatla's research paper, she discusses the sentimental and "beautiful" portrayal of depression, which renders it inaccurate (Kgatla 2024: 8). In similar recent research by Issaka and Aidoo (2024), romanticisation of mental illness is defined as a "glamorous and desirable" portrayal (Issaka, Aidoo et al. 2024: 2). In these two cases, romanticisation is defined as "glamorous", which again proves how often it is compared to a similar term, that is, 'glamorisation'.

Another study about the perspective of romanticisation of mental illnesses by Nathania Danielle T. Quijano also describes romanticisation of mental illness as "attractive" and "desirable" (Quijano, Naval & Ignacio 2024: 50). The authors Jadayel and Medlej also researched a tendency of making mental illness seem better than it actually is, also interchangeably describing it as being "glamorised" and "romanticised" (R. Jadayel, Medlej, J. Jadayel 2018: 468), which again shows the constant tendency to use the concepts side by side.

In addition to interchangeable usage of similar terms, here is an example from Sophia Yao's study about the depiction of romanticisation of female mental illness in entertainment media: "a glorification or idealization of a concept or a person; putting them on a pedestal and looking at it through rose-tinted glasses; making something aspirational and iconic in popular culture" (Yao 2024: 6). These are just a few examples of how the terms are used interchangeably; many more can be found across various research papers, though not all can be addressed here in detail.

In this thesis, it is essential to differentiate these terms rather than use them synonymously, ensuring a focused analysis of romanticisation specifically. Understanding the nuances of romanticisation and the tone it imparts to a subject can help viewers recognise its influence on perception and interpretation. While numerous other terms may also share similarities, I will only provide the distinctions between romanticisation, glorification, idealisation, and glamorisation to maintain clarity and avoid unnecessary complexity.

Cambridge Dictionary defines glorification as "the act of describing something in a

way that makes it seem better or more important than it really is"[10]. Historically, glorification has strong ties to Christianity, often describing the act of giving glory to God[11]. In his article, Ilya Sobol explains that the purpose of glorification in the context of the European Court of Human Rights is "the prevention of speech that is supportive, approving, celebratory, or otherwise sympathetic to terrorist violence" (Sobol 2024: 1). Glorification refers to an increase in value through praise with the purpose of making something seem better, which impacts how people perceive its significance. In the introduction to her study, de Beer also mentions how romanticisation of serial killers does not entail their glorification, "as a glorified or iconised serial killer may still seem removed from humanity" (de Beer 2020: 1), which draws the fine line between two concepts.

Idealisation is another related notion. Cambridge Dictionary refers to 'idealise' as "to think of or represent someone or something as perfect"[12]. 'Ideal' is at the root of idealisation, coming from the Latin word 'idealis', meaning "existing in idea"[13]. As a noun, ideal refers to "(hypothetical) perfect person, thing, or state"[14], where the term 'hypothetical' is key, as it implies an unrealistic or unattainable standard attributed to the object in question. In the concept of idealisation, the emphasis is on thinking of something not just as "better than it really is", but perceiving it as perfect.

Another related concept is glamorisation, which, in my view, is the closest in meaning to romanticisation. Cambridge Dictionary defines 'glamorise' as "to make something seem better than it is and therefore more attractive"[15]. Glamorisation often involves making something appear attractive, typically for advertising or promotional purposes. Even when glamorisation does not explicitly promote something controversial, it still aims to sell an idea or product by intentionally overlooking flaws. For example, cinema has played a significant role in establishing a global tobacco culture by associating smoking with famous and glamorous cinema characters (Castaldelli-Maia 2016: 26). 'Glamorise' comes from Scottish word 'glamer/gramarye', that stands for "magic, enchantment, spell"[16]. This is related to ideas of beauty, charm and attractiveness,

[10] Cambridge Dictionary. Glorification. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/glorification. 20.05.2025.
[11] Etymonline. Glorification. https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=glorification. 20.05.2025.
[12] Cambridge Dictionary. Idealize. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/idealize. 20.05.2025.
[13] Etymonline. Idealize. https://www.etymonline.com/word/idealize. 20.05.2025.
[14] ibid.
[15] Cambridge Dictionary. Glamorize.
https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/glamorize. 20.05.2025.
[16] Etymonline. Glamorize. https://www.etymonline.com/word/glamorize. 20.05.2025.

especially associated with Hollywood celebrities and high-fashion[17].

In general, romanticisation can go to the extent of twisting the flaws of an object into something positive, changing the way viewers recognise and perceive the negative aspects. On a larger scale, romanticisation contributes to the construction of false narratives and misleading associations, potentially shaping the viewer's perception of reality. The application of positive meanings to romanticised objects is a defining characteristic of this process, highlighting its potential risks. Romanticisation functions as a representational mode that can be applied to a wide range of phenomena, shaping how they are perceived and understood.

While romanticisation shares certain features with other concepts, it is not synonymous with them. Glorification implies an overt celebration or endorsement of something, often elevating it to an admirable status. Idealisation refers to the portrayal of something as flawless or perfect, often to an unrealistic degree. Glamorisation emphasises making something appear visually attractive, often for aesthetic or promotional effect. Romanticisation differs in that it subtly reinterprets an event or situation by casting it in a more alluring light than it truly warrants, often through narrative framing and tone.

Recognising how romanticisation functions enables a more critical assessment of media and cultural narratives. In the following subchapter I will explain how romanticisation of violence in entertainment media was previously studied.

2.2. Approach to romanticisation of violence in previous studies

An important question arises when discussing romanticisation as a mode of representation in entertainment media: what do we actually study when we study romanticisation of violence? Recognising the patterns of romanticisation in entertainment media enables a more critical engagement with such representations and fosters a deeper understanding of their implications.

Firstly, I will examine the concept of romanticisation from the perspective of how this term is applied in the analysis of abusive relationships. In her article, Laura Béres discusses how this type of relationship is often portrayed as a situation in which the

[17] ibid.

woman who endures the abuse in the end is always rewarded for her acceptance and tolerance (Béres 1999: 199). The article explores in depth the abusive relationship trope in Disney's fairytale *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), where the heroine faces the abduction and violent behaviour of the perpetrator, only to be rewarded with a "perfect" prince in the end of the story. Béres emphasises how abuse and male controlling behaviour are romanticised through the love story – the alluring element of the narrative. The hero is initially portrayed as distant and abusive, having undergone traumatic experiences and been hurt in the past. He regains his charm and heals from his past through the love of the heroine (Béres 1999: 199), who is able to see beyond his flaws and love him despite them. The study clearly demonstrates the prince's love as a form of "reward" for patience and enduring suffering, including abduction and abusive behaviour, thereby illustrating the concept of romanticisation of violence.

In the study of the earlier mentioned Priscilla Kenasri and Lidwina Sadasri, the authors conduct a similar detailed analysis of individual scenes depicting intimate violence in the popular Korean drama, exploring how the romanticisation of violence is represented as an inherent element of the romance genre, both within the narrative structure and from the perspective of audience reception (Kenasri & Sadasri 2021: 204). In their analysis, it becomes evident that the term 'romantic' is once again presented as inherently positive, depicting the relationship better than it truly is, and thus serves as a key factor in the romanticisation of violent behaviour within this case study. One instance of this romanticisation is the portrayal of characters using violence as a means to "fight for the love" of the victim (Kenasri & Sadasri 2021: 210). This approach to violence is somewhat similar to the example from *Beauty and the Beast*, however there are still differences in the representation of violence in the context of "being something better". If Béres focuses on "reward" for the victim of violence (Béres 1999: 199), here the romanticisation of violence functions from the point of representation of the perpetrator, who uses violence to gain and conserve something worth having. Similarly, Jacobstein refers to the work of Veronica Hefner and Barbara J. Wilson (2013), who talk about the romantic ideal that "love conquers all", reinforcing the value of romantic relationships perpetuated by many popular forms of entertainment media (Jacobstein 2016: 16). The author examines the theme of violence in romantic relationships between the main characters in the original *Twilight Saga* novels (Meyer 2005–2008). She describes the abuser as someone who, despite his lack of morality and narcissism, possesses a charming personality that enables him to lure his victim "by making her feel special as the object of his desire, in spite of the danger he

poses to her" (Jacobstein 2016: 34). In addition, Anne Salmi examines patterns of abusive behaviour in Twilight's main character, Edward Cullen, arguing that the author intentionally romanticises him by framing situations in which he exhibits abusive traits in a positive light (Salmi 2013: 10). Edward's protectiveness over Bella and his persistent efforts to ensure her "safety" are portrayed as desirable qualities in a romantic partner, rather than as manifestations of controlling or violent behaviour (Jacobstein 2016: 36). Nevertheless, Edward continues to be depicted as a devoted romantic figure, with his abusive actions reframed as chivalrous acts of love (Jacobstein 2016: 34). It is a similar approach to the depiction of violent behavior, exemplified in the study of Kenasri and Sadasri, in which violent characters are presented as "fighting for love" (Kenasri & Sadasri 2021: 210). Similarly, Kyla Reyes highlights the frequent misassociation of abusive, controlling, and violent behaviour with the ideal of "unconditional love" (Reyes 2023: 5). A comparable pattern of portraying possessiveness and controlling behavior in a positive light is examined in the study by Aquarini Priyatna and Sri Rijati Wardiani (2022: 7). Their work explores how violent relationships can be framed within an already familiar romantic ideal, described as "very cool", "romantic", and "exhilarating" (Priyatna & Wardiani 2022: 7).

Another notable type of romanticisation of violence involves the relational dynamic commonly described as "us against the world." Closely related to ideas such as "fighting for love" or "love conquers all," this dynamic portrays a couple defiantly united against external opposition. Such portrayals often gloss over or obscure underlying violence and abuse within the dysfunctional relationship. In her study of *Heathers*, Georgia Hampton identifies this dynamic as central to the narrative, describing the protagonists' bond as a cathartic romantic relationship reminiscent of "Bonnie and Clyde" (Hampton 2020: 5). Similarly, Priyatna and Wardiani observe that in the novels they analyse, male aggression is not only normalised but also framed as an expression of romantic love (Priyatna & Wardiani 2022: 11), reinforcing the notion that violence can appear desirable or even alluring within romantic contexts.

Several studies examine the romanticisation of violence in various adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* (E. Brontë, 1847). In her study, Brianna R. Zgodinski explores how Heathcliff is romanticised through the perspectives of female protagonists (Zgodinski 2017: iv). The author argues that these portrayals contribute to an inaccurate representation of violent intimate relationships, where the idea of a "soulmate" relationship is prioritised over personal safety or autonomy (Zgodinski 2017: v). In this case, romanticisation

operates by framing the abusive relationship between the two characters as something positive, with Heathcliff's violent tendencies depicted as intrinsic to an alluring romantic ideal.

A more specific example of the romanticisation of violence can be found in study on the romanticisation of serial killers by Liselotte de Beer. She argues that there is a recurring tendency to present serial killers, who obviously are violent characters, as romantic heroes (de Beer 2020: 1), offering compelling examples of the techniques used to achieve this portrayal. However, in this case, the notion of love is not even a necessary factor – it is enough for the perpetrator to be represented as a charismatic outstanding figure. De Beer's case study analysis focuses on the cinematic techniques used to shape spectators' perception of serial killers as romanticised figures. She notes that the story mirrors elements of the romance genre, portraying a ruthless killer as a character deserving of the audience's empathy (de Beer 2020: 34). A crucial aspect of this case study is the deliberate obscuring of the character's violent actions, reinforcing the image of a positive romantic hero.

A different form of romanticised violence is the portrayal of suicide. Interestingly, most of the studies that cover this subject usually relate to romanticisation of mental illnesses, rather than self-directed violence. One of the most prominent examples of this can be found in the popular Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* (created by Brian Yorkey, 2017). The show's central narrative presents a problematic depiction of suicide, as it revolves around the story of a young girl who endures various forms of violence – including bullying, sexual harassment, and rape – which are framed as "reasons" justifying her decision to end her life. Many critics argue that this portrayal does not ultimately aim to raise awareness of the issue but instead reduces the protagonist's actions to a means of gaining attention and eliciting apologies from those who wronged her (Yang 2022: 343). Anima Shrestha aptly identifies the issue, stating: *"13 Reasons Why* romanticizes suicide by highlighting its appeal to a young audience, many of whom may be in the same situation as [the character] Hannah Baker" (Shrestha 2018: 71). This type of suicide portrayal has been referred to as "revenge suicide" (Yang 2022: 343), where revenge is depicted as something satisfying, thus making it appear appealing – aligning with the definition of romanticisation.

From overviewing these examples, in these representations, romanticisation manifests primarily through the story, where violence is presented as something alluring, either directly or subtly. Ultimately, all cases of romanticising violent characters and their

acts fall under the broader understanding of romanticisation of violence. These examples focus on specific types of violence; however, they share common traits that reflect the representation of romanticised violence, relevant for this study. Undoubtedly, there are even more instances of romanticisation of violence in entertainment media that I have not covered.

2.3. What is romanticisation of violence?

Based on the overview of previous studies, I identify four main means of romanticisation of violence:

(1) Romantic suffering – the process of framing a victim's suffering as meaningful or necessary, often tied to the idea of a "reward";

(2) Romantic cause – where acts of violence are portrayed as justified by a higher purpose;

(3) Romantic hero – romanticisation of a character whose violent behaviour is either tied to a noble cause or obscured altogether, framing them as emotionally complex or even innocent;

(4) Romantic love (in the sense of romanticisation, not romance) – representation of violence framed through the lens of love, often associated with ideals like "love conquers all" and "us against the world," where love is positioned as more powerful or meaningful than the violence itself.

It is crucial to point out, these categories are developed based on my evaluation of the previous studies, rather than being directly taken from or exclusively proposed by earlier authors. In all of these cases, the romanticisation of violence operates by invoking value systems that lie outside the violent act itself – for example, cultural ideals surrounding love or noble purpose, traditional roles assigned to romantic partners, sympathy for victims, or the perceived virtue of protecting a loved one. Similarly, revenge can also function as a form of romanticisation, as illustrated in the discussion of *13 Reasons Why*, where suicide is framed as a purposeful act meant to impart a lesson to the perpetrators.

Interestingly, the majority of the studies mentioned above focus exclusively on

romanticisation at the level of narrative story, without addressing how romanticisation might also operate on the level of discourse. The notable exception is Liselotte de Beer's (2020) study, which specifically examines cinematic romanticisation through visual framing and cinematic gaze. In the following analysis, I aim to adopt a broader understanding of romanticisation of violence, one that includes both its presence within the story and its construction through narrative discourse.

Additionally, I would like to distinguish between two types of romanticisation of violence that emerge from the reviewed literature:

(1) Romanticisation in representation, which primarily includes the representational techniques on the level of story and discourse; and

(2) Romanticisation in audience reception, which refers to viewers' tendency to interpret or perceive violent acts as romanticised, regardless of how they are represented.

Some of the studies I have reviewed include empirical research on audience perceptions of romanticised violence. However, within the framework of this thesis, analysing audience reception would be beyond the scope of the study, as such interpretations are deeply tied to individual socio-cultural background, and would require a separate methodological approach. Therefore, this research focuses on romanticisation as a form of representation within the story and discourse of fiction.

3. Analysis of romanticisation of violence in *Heathers*

Heathers presents a wide spectrum of violence, ranging from school bullying to homicide, suicide, and even acts resembling ideological collective violence. The narrative follows a sequence of shocking events, primarily seen through the perspective of the main character, and one of the most violent protagonists – Veronica Sawyer. The storyline centres on how Veronica and her partner Jason Dean (J.D.) commit a series of murders, later staged as suicides, while positioning themselves as agents of justice within a toxic high school environment.

As mentioned previously, *Heathers* (both the film and the musical) is a black comedy that appears to carry significant social commentary. My interest in studying *Heathers*' violence is rooted in my early observation of the various types of violence depicted in the film and how this said violence seemed not only to be accepted but even lauded within the storyworld, contributing to its ambivalent representation. This ambiguous representation of violence occurs in different levels and aspects of the narrative: representation of violent characters, their relationship with each other, the portrayal of victims, and the audio-visual elements featuring the scenes of violence.

The selected occurrences of violence in the narrative of *Heathers* will be analysed through the lens of narrative structure theory, as outlined by Seymour Chatman (1978). This theoretical framework offers a valuable approach for examining the romanticisation of violence in *Heathers*.

According to Chatman, every narrative text comprises two distinct components. Story is the content itself (what happens in the narrative), including the chain of events (actions and happenings) and existents (characters and settings). Discourse is the manner

of expression, or how the content is conveyed (how it is told) (Chatman 1978: 19). See Figure 2 for a visual representation of Chatman's model of narrative structure.

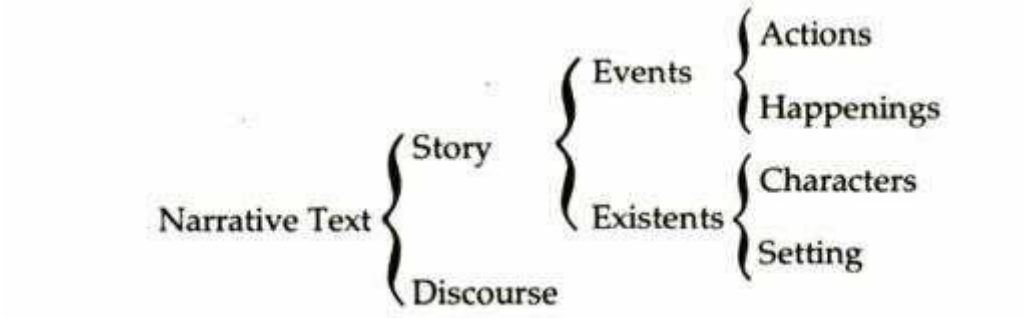

Figure 2. Diagram of narrative structure (Chatman 1978: 19).

Actions of the story events are the changes of state brought by the agents, and happenings are changes of state that entail a prediction, of which characters are narrative objects (Chatman 1978: 43-45). The second part of the story comprises the existents – namely, the characters and settings of the narrative (Chatman 1978: 19). Characters function as agents who perform actions and drive the plot forward, while settings are the physical environment and collection of objects "against which" these actions and passions meaningfully unfold (Chatman 1978: 138).

The discourse refers to the "how" all the components of the content are expressed. It is divided into two subcomponents: the structure of narrative transmission, and its manifestation – appearance in a specific materialising medium (verbal, cinematic, balletic, musical, pantomimic etc.) (Chatman 1978: 22). Narrative transmission concerns the relationship between the time of the story (the events as they unfold within the narrative world) and the time of the recounting of those events – that is, how and when the story is communicated to the audience. It also encompasses the source or authority of the narration, including narrative voice, perspective, and point of view (ibid.) These elements shape how information is selected, framed, and delivered within the narrative. Naturally, the medium plays a significant role in shaping narrative transmission (Chatman 1978: 22), whether through language, visual framing, sound, or performance. It is crucial to analyse how these technical means interact with structural elements to influence meaning and reception.

This distinction is essential when studying romanticisation, as it often arises not from the mere presence of violence in the story, but from the discursive techniques that

frame violence as more alluring than it is in reality. Through Chatman's model, the analysis can assess how elements such as visual composition, tone, narration, and character portrayal contribute to a portrayal of violence that is framed in a more positive light.

Moreover, Chatman's framework allows for a consistent comparative analysis across different mediums, which is particularly important in this study's examination of both the original film and *Heathers: The Musical*. While the story remains largely the same across both versions, the discourse – in terms of delivery, tone, and audio-visual expression – varies significantly, thereby reshaping how violence is romanticised in each medium.

The analysis chapter is divided into three parts. The first part briefly categorises, compares, and examines the various types of violence portrayed in the original *Heathers* film. I will address the research question concerning how representational techniques, discussed in subchapter 1.2, contribute to making many instances of violence in the *Heathers*' narrative go unnoticed. As the sequence of events in the film and the musical largely align, in the first section, I have chosen not to analyse the same events in both versions.

The second part investigates the presence of romanticisation of violence, analysing how it is constructed and can be identified in the narrative. Moreover, the second phase highlights key scenes that differ in the film and the musical and focuses on how violence is represented on the story and discourse levels across the two distinct mediums.

The third part of analysis is a concluding discussion, which synthesises the findings and reflects on their broader implications for the representation of violence in entertainment media.

3.1. Representation of violence in the narrative

As part of the pre-analysis, I created a table in which every instance of violence in the film *Heathers* is listed and classified according to the 5 parameters of categorisation of violence indicated in chapter 1. One additional column refers to the relation of the particular scene from the film to the scene from the musical. Due to the plethora of violent scenes, I chose not to classify every minor occurrence of a character using moderate/minor insults as a case of verbal violence, and aim for a more concentrated analysis. By the same token,

conversations about abstract or impersonal ideas of violence – such as the teachers' meeting on teen suicide prevention or the school's convention against teen suicide – are also not classified as form of violence in the table. However, if a violent act is explicitly or implicitly mentioned and directly involves or targets a specific character, it is considered a form of violence within the narrative framework. Ultimately, I identified and analysed the instances of violence in the film by the following parameters:

1) Type of violence (on the basis of typology outlined in subchapter 1.1)
2) Direction of violence (on the basis of typology outlined in subchapter 1.1)
3) Explicitness vs. implicitness (refers to the level of intensity with which violence is represented in the scene)
4) Who is the perpetrator
5) Who is the victim
*6) How the scene is represented in the musical

See Figure 3 for a more comprehensive example of the description of violent scenes according to parameters outlined above.

Timecode (film)	Scene in the film	Timecode (musical)	Scene in the musical	Type of violence	Direction of violence	Explicitness vs. implicitness	Perpetrator	Victim
00:10:04	The Heathers humiliate Martha in front of the students in the cafeteria.	00:32:34	Similar scene, but the setting is different: students are at the party.	Relational bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Heathers and other students	Martha Dunnstock
00:27:36	Veronica and J.D. kill Heather C.	00:44:45	Similar scene.	Physical - murder	Interpersonal	Explicit	J.D., Veronica Sawyer	Heather Chandler
00:41:58	Ram sexually assaults Heather M.	00:56:56	The Heathers leave the scene, leaving Veronica alone with the two jocks.	Sexual assault	Interpersonal	Explicit sexual assault; implied rape	Ram	Heather McNamara
01:07:10	Martha's suicide attemt.	01:52:16	Similar scene. Song: "Kindergarten Boyfriend."	Suicide attemp	Self-directed	Implied	Martha Dunnstock	Martha Dunnstock

Figure 3. Example of the description of scenes

In subchapters 3.1.1 and 3.1.2, I analyse instances of violence in *Heathers*. The first section outlines the different directions of violence in the narrative, followed by a discussion of the most prominent types of violence it represents.

3.1.1. Types and directions of violence

The direction of violence refers to the target of the violent act and can be categorised according to three types of victim–perpetrator relationships. *Heathers* presents various representations of violence across all these categories. Interpersonal violence is the most prominent, encompassing acts such as bullying – both between individuals, as in Heather Chandler (in the film Kim Walker; in the musical Jodie Steele) belittling Heather Duke (in the film Shannen Doherty; in the musical T'Shan Williams), and community bullying toward one individual, such as the Heathers and other students humiliating Martha Dunnstock (in the film Carrie Lynn; in the musical Jenny O'Leary). The film also depicts more extreme forms of interpersonal violence, including murder, suicide, and sexual assault.

Self-directed violence in *Heathers* includes instances of suicide, attempted suicide, and self-harm. The prominence of self-directed violence in the narrative highlights the psychological toll of the toxic high school environment and the intense social pressures imposed by the hierarchical structure.

While the term collective violence is not broadly applicable to the narrative of *Heathers*, as it typically refers to acts committed by a large group, the film does present an instance that does not neatly fall under interpersonal violence but aligns with definitions of ideologically motivated violence. This occurs when J.D. deceives the high school students into signing what they believe is a harmless petition, which is, in fact, a fabricated collective suicide note. Although the act is not executed by a larger group, but one individual, this moment blurs the boundaries between interpersonal and collective violence. Here, violence is framed as an extreme ideological solution, marking the only point in the narrative that reflects the characteristics typically associated with collective violence.

It is crucial to point out that bullying appears as the catalyst of other forms of violence. In the Heathers hierarchy, bullying is the central mechanism of power, with Heather Chandler being atop all bullies. As discussed in subchapter 1.1, bullying has many forms. In the context of *Heathers*, bullying is primarily expressed through name-calling, teasing, using belittling expressions, ostracising, spreading rumours, social manipulation,

kicking, slapping, etc.[18] Bullying is most prominent in the early part of the film, with the introduction of the school's primary aggressors – already hinted at in the title. The female clique known as the Heathers consists of three girls sharing the same first name: the leader Heather Chandler, Heather Duke, and Heather McNamara (in the film Lisanne Falk; in the musical Sophie Isaacs). In her study on relational aggression in teen girls movies, including *Heathers* and *Mean Girls*, Dawn K. Cecil explains how the clique of the Heathers embodies a form of relational aggression – targeting their peers through social manipulation, exclusion, and emotional cruelty, typically executed in ways that are indirect and rarely overt (Cecil 2008: 266). Cecil, however, does not largely address the topic of other forms of bullying, or other types of violence. Bullying is also present within the clique itself – Heather Chandler regularly belittles and undermines Heather Duke in a clear display of power and control. As the group's leader, Chandler is the most overtly abusive. She behaves as though the whole school is under her control. The Heathers rely primarily on relational and verbal bullying, rather than physical.

Veronica Sawyer is the reluctant fourth member of the clique. Although she is part of the group and participates in bullying others, she occasionally resists the Heathers' hierarchical power dynamics and is, at times, a target of their bullying herself. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that Veronica is not herself an aggressor. While her behaviour may differ in motivation and expression from that of the Heathers, she ultimately emerges as one of the most violent characters in the narrative.

Physical bullying is represented by two secondary characters: the quintessential American high school bullies, quarterback Kurt Kelly (in the film Lance Fenton; in the musical Chris Chung) and linebacker Ram Sweeney (in the film Patrick Labyorteaux: in the musical Dominic Anderson). In a post-funeral scene, Kurt and Ram first intimidate and then physically harass a fellow student, nicknamed "Braces", who inadvertently steps on Kurt's foot (film [f.] 00:40:02)[19]. Bullying is obvious and undoubtable, yet no one in the school environment, especially teachers or parents, acknowledges it as a problem. The only one who does is J.D. He appears not to be a bully himself. At first, he even seems like a decent, sharp-witted outsider who wants to challenge the toxic hierarchy. However, as the story progresses, his behavior becomes increasingly aggressive and violent. By the film's

[18] Council of Europe: Preventing bullying and violence. https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/preventing-bullying-and-violence. 21.05.2025.

[19] References in the format indicate the timecode of the scene in the *Heathers* film. Further citations follow this format, using "f." to denote film timecodes.

end, J.D. becomes the most dangerous and unhinged character.

The three most prominent male characters – J.D., Kurt, and Ram – are also responsible for most of the instances of sexual violence in the film. Despite the overt presence of bullying, murder, and suicide, sexual violence remains disturbingly under-acknowledged, both by the film's characters and its world. "Kurt and Ram had nothing to offer the school but date rapes and AIDS jokes," J.D. states, justifying their murder as a kind of vigilante justice (f. 00:54:56). His chilling observation highlights how normalised sexual violence is within the school environment – nobody seems to care. However, J.D. himself is not innocent; he harasses Veronica on multiple occasions.

Homicide is the most controversial type of violence in the narrative from the standpoint of representation. The acts are committed by two main characters – Veronica and J.D.

Finally, suicide emerges as the most openly discussed form of violence among the characters in the story. Despite this thematic prominence, the film depicts only one suicide. The rest are portrayed as suicidal behaviors, including two attempted suicides, passing suicidal thoughts, and several "fake suicides" – murders staged by Veronica and J.D. to appear as self-inflicted deaths.

Undoubtedly, the agency of violent characters plays a crucial role in understanding the representation of violence. According to the full table of classified instances of violence (see Figure 3), the most actively violent characters in the story are the three Heathers, Kurt, Ram, J.D., and Veronica. The Heathers and the two jocks represent the dominant social group, who maintain their power through bullying, control, and intimidation of their peers. In contrast, Veronica and J.D. position themselves as opponents of this social injustice, seemingly intent on challenging the violence and hierarchy upheld by the elite.

3.1.2. Explicitness of violence

This part of the analysis is essential for understanding how violence is represented in *Heathers* from the perspective of explicitness or implicitness, in order to establish a foundation for the analysis of the romanticisation of violence.

Violent scenes in *Heathers* range from passing references and mild insults to depictions of murder and sexual assault. Violence appears so frequently throughout the film that it often becomes almost invisible. For reference, I will proceed with a brief analysis of the acts of violence that take place already within the first minutes. The first instance of violence occurs in Veronica's dream: the Heathers play croquet while Veronica is buried up to her neck, and the girls aim the balls at her head – an act of interpersonal physical bullying, paired with demonstration of power and control (f. 00:02:50). The dream scene transitions into reality, where one Heather knees a passively seated Veronica to force her to "haul [her] ass to the cafeteria," following an order from Heather Chandler (f. 00:03:15) – same act of interpersonal physical bullying and control. In the cafeteria, Heather Chandler asserts her dominance by coercing Veronica to publicly humiliate Martha and by belittling Heather Duke, demanding she bend over so Veronica can write on her back (f. 00:03:54) – both instances of relational bullying. These first four minutes alone contain four violent acts – an indication of the narrative's density of violence.

Although the early scenes do not depict intense physical violence, they still qualify as violent acts and are categorised here as explicit violence. Scenes with greater intensity – such as the physical assault of a classmate (f. 00:40:25), sexual assault of Heather McNamara (f. 00:41:58), the murder of Heather Chandler (f. 00:27:36), or shooting of Kurt and Ram (f. 00:48:46) – also fall under explicit violence. There are no examples of graphic violence in the narrative.

Implied violence plays a key role in the film. One example occurs at a party, where a college student pressures Heather Chandler into a sexual act without her full consent (f. 00:19:10). Although she tells him to "go back to the party," he ignores her resistance. The camera's perspective shifts upward, and the act itself is not shown, leaving it implied. This moment is significant, as it reveals that even Heather Chandler, one of the main aggressors, can also become a target of harassment. Interestingly, in the later scene involving the sexual assault of Heather McNamara, the depiction of violence is more explicit, yet the act of rape remains implied rather than fully shown (f. 00:41:58). Discursively, this scene is particularly notable. At first, the camera isolates the pair, focusing solely on them. However, the camera soon pans away, placing Kurt and Veronica in the foreground (where Kurt makes a sexual remark toward Veronica, further implying their prior sexual encounter) while Ram and Heather remain blurred in the background. The scene continues for several moments as J.D. enters the frame and begins speaking with Veronica. During their conversation, Kurt is shown lying on the ground alone, while Ram and Heather

remain in the distance – still out of focus. Due to the blurring and lack of visual clarity, the rape remains unconfirmed on screen, reinforcing its implied nature.

Another example is J.D.'s reference to Kurt and Ram's "date rapes" (f. 00:54:56). Although he does not label them as rapists, he implies repeated acts of sexual violence. While the audience has already witnessed their aggressive behaviour – such as Ram assaulting Heather McNamara – this moment reveals that their violence likely extends further, suggesting a larger pattern of abuse that remains mostly off-screen.

Other instances of implied violence include Martha's suicide attempt (f. 01:07:10) and J.D.'s suicide (f. 01:38:00). In Martha's case, we see her walk into traffic, but the moment of impact is omitted. Her suicide attempt is only confirmed in the following scene, when Heather Duke informs Veronica (f. 01:08:29). J.D.'s suicide is similarly handled: we see him wearing a bomb while giving his final monologue, but the camera pans away before the explosion. The sound effects and rising smoke serve as indicators of his death.

In *Heathers*, explicit and implied violence serves as key dimensions for evaluating how violence is constructed. Even within the category of explicit violence, the severity varies – kicking someone with the knee and committing murder are both explicit acts, yet their narrative weight and ethical implications are vastly different. Although this study does not undertake a granular examination of violent severity, it is worth emphasising that the less intense or more casual the violent act, and the more ambiguously it is mediated or framed within the narrative, the easier it becomes for that violence to be overlooked – both by the characters and the audience.

3.2. Analysis of romanticisation of violence in the narrative

After outlining the most prominent depictions of violent behaviour and examining the different levels of explicitness, this chapter now turns to a more focused analysis of romanticised violence. It is important to note that not all scenes involving violence in *Heathers* are romanticised. For this analysis, I have selected the most significant and illustrative instances where romanticisation is clearly present.

In subchapter 2.3 I outlined four main means of romanticisation of violence: romantic hero, romantic cause, romantic dysfunctional relationship, and romantic

suffering. Here, I analyse these means of romanticisation of violence in *Heathers* on two levels of narrative structure: story and discourse. Romanticisation on the story level operates through the logic of events: harmful actions are rewarded or reinterpreted in a way that grants them emotional or moral value. The romanticisation lies in what happens, not necessarily in how these events are communicated to the audiences. The discourse level involves the presentation of events – narration, the stylistic and cinematic framing that shapes the way violence is represented.

In the case of *Heathers*, I will examine all distinguishable means of romanticisation of violence, drawing from both the film and the musical. Given the different expressive potentials of each medium, there is significant material for discourse-level analysis, alongside the story-level events. In some cases, the romanticisation is more distinctly expressed on the level of story, with examples of the scenes from the film and the musical either compared or analysed separately depending on their narrative function. In other instances, the discourse level plays a more significant role – particularly in the musical, where the story remains largely unchanged, but the form of expression more explicitly emphasises romanticisation.

In addition to the audio-visual analysis of the film and musical scenes, the level of narration plays a crucial discursive role in *Heathers*. Figure 4 below illustrates the narrative communication model as proposed by Chatman:

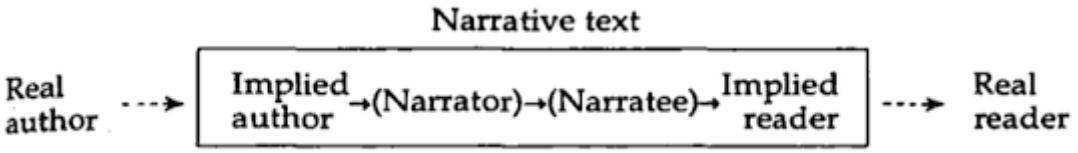

Figure 4. Narrative-communication diagram (Chatman 1978: 151).

This diagram is useful for understanding how narration is constructed in *Heathers*, providing a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis of the romanticisation of violence at the level of discourse.

Veronica plays a crucial role in narration in both film and the musical. The film opens with the garden scene, situated within Veronica's dream. At the conclusion of this scene, Veronica begins narrating by turning to her diary. This framing device suggests that

the events of the narrative may be filtered through her perspective and narrative voice. According to Chatman, this positions the character as the overt narrator, whose presence is strongly felt throughout the story (Chatman 1978: 219). Chatman defines narrative voice as "the speech or other overt means through which events and existents are communicated to the audience" (Chatman 1978: 153).

However, as seen in the film, Veronica is not strictly retelling events to her diary, but rather interpretations of events through her perspective. Using Gérard Genette's terminology, Veronica is not the narrator but rather the focaliser. Her internal monologue, expressed through diary entries, constitutes internal focalisation – meaning the events are primarily presented through her subjective lens (Genette 1980: 189). This narrative strategy draws the viewer closer to her perspective, allowing the audience to understand her worldview and internal logic.

In addition to Veronica as focaliser and occasional narrator, the narrative also implies the presence of an implied author. As Chatman explains:

> Unlike the narrator, the implied author can tell us nothing. He, or better, *it* has no voice, no direct means of communicating. It instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices, by all the means it has chosen to let us learn. We can grasp the notion of implied author most clearly by comparing different narratives written by the same real author but presupposing different implied authors (Chatman 1978: 148).

The implied author functions as a critical narrative construct – not a speaking presence, but an organising force within the narrative that guides the audience's interpretation of its message. The influence of focalisation and the role of the implied author in shaping the romanticisation of violence will be explored further in the analysis discussion.

Since the division into four means of romanticisation of violence is an artificial framework, it is important to note that these means often overlap and rely on one another. In the following analysis, however, I address each means separately in order to clearly distinguish the different representational techniques through which violence is romanticised. To structure this analysis, firstly, I will apply the four means of romanticisation of violence. The "romantic hero" and "romantic cause" primarily address violence from the perpetrator's perspective, helping to reveal the emotional or ideological justifications that make their actions appear less condemnable. The "romantic love" shifts focus to the romantic relationship that involves violence, framing it as an act of shared resistance that strengthens their bond. The "romantic suffering" highlights how victims may reframe their experiences of violence, perceiving some form of emotional or moral

benefit from their suffering. After the main analysis, I present a final discussion of the results.

3.2.1. Romantic hero

In this thesis, the "romantic hero" is one of the means of romanticisation of violence, discussed in subchapters 2.2 and 2.3. It refers to a character who drives the narrative and adds emotional weight to events. This figure is often romanticised through traits that cast him as morally complex or misunderstood. The romantic hero is a character who rejects conventional norms and societal laws, asserting himself forcefully at the center of existence (Wilson 1972: 246). His actions are framed as justified responses to societal flaws, often in pursuit of a noble goal. In *Heathers*, J.D. embodies this role. He is the rebellious outsider who challenges the school's rigid social hierarchy, ultimately escalating to violent acts – including a plan to destroy the school – as a form of systemic reset. Although J.D.'s role as a romantic hero is closely linked to his romantic cause, romantic suffering, as well as his relationship with Veronica, this subchapter focuses exclusively on the defining characteristics of the archetype itself.

J.D. arrives at Westerburg High having changed schools multiple times. From the start, he expresses contempt for the school's structure, especially the dominance of the Heathers. His comment – "Seven schools in seven states and the only thing different is my locker combination" (f. 00:42:25) – reveals his disillusionment and sense of alienation. Yet it also raises a question: does he also feel rejected by society, or is he the one doing the rejecting? His disdain suggests the latter – he dismisses both the system and those who uphold it.

Early on, J.D. is framed as the "mysterious outsider," appealing to both Veronica and the audience through character types like the "boy next door" or "not like other guys." His motive to dismantle the school's social order seems rooted in personal rejection – possibly from his parents, though this is addressed later. Rejection, in his case, fuels purpose. His unclear motives and troubled past contribute to his romanticised image. What begins as a seemingly noble mission grows darker, more violent, and morally troubling.

Still, the film's framing of his isolation and ideological rebellion lends emotional weight, and even a disturbing allure, to his actions.

His contrasting appearance is a significant narrative element on the level of story – he deliberately positions himself as a romantic hero, dressing differently from his peers in a long black coat worn indoors. Discourse reinforces this portrayal through stylised camera work and soft, mysterious background music, framing him as both intriguing and important (f. 00:06:14). This cinematic framing elevates J.D. beyond a simple new student. In the scene of his first entrance, Veronica's point of view becomes significant. J.D. is immediately positioned as a narratively important figure, marked by his alienation from the other students. At the same time, Veronica's gaze introduces another layer of romanticisation, hinting at the romantic bond between them, which will be explored in a later subchapter. Nevertheless, it is precisely because of his alienation, he allures Veronica to get involved with him romantically. His altered appearance, confident posture, and steady gaze set him apart, fully embodying the "not like other guys" archetype.

In the musical, this representation continues: J.D. enters after the Heathers' dominant "statement of power" song, holding a book, speaking to Veronica without lifting his eyes, reinforcing his image as an intellectual outsider. The dialogue that follows between two highlights this dynamic (musical [m.] 00:14:57)[20]:

> J.D.: You've clearly got a soul. You just need to work harder keeping it clean. We are all born marked for evil [*starts walking away*].
> Veronica: Um okay, don't just Baudelaire-quote me and then walk away, excuse me. I didn't catch your name.
> J.D.: I didn't throw it.

J.D. comments on how the Heathers and Veronica poorly treat her former friend Martha, pointing out that Veronica's role in society is more significant than simply going along with the cruel actions of a popular clique. As Korpi insightfully explains in her analysis of the musical, J.D.'s character as an outcast, confirming his relation to the romantic hero:

> However, he does stick out in a sore thumb kind of way, he is the only character who is sitting, and the only one who is largely devoid of colour, wearing all black and obscuring himself, diminished when compared against the Heathers, who are dressed in colour blocked outfits. Notably, he does not look up from the book, as if stuck in his own world. It further suggests that JD does not ever come out of his own head, unless he is quite literally forced to do so, for example, when threatened by the football players. Otherwise, he stays where he is and others engaging with him come and go. It expresses his preference for solitude (Korpi 2023: 36).

[20] References in the format indicate the timecode of the scene in *Heathers*: *The Musical*. Further citations follow this format, using "m." to denote musical recording timecodes.

The next time Veronica encounters J.D. is at a store, while she is on her way to a party with Heather Chandler. During their conversation, which is marked by flirtation, J.D. begins to share some of his personal fears and vulnerabilities. At this point in the narrative, J.D. appears unusual but not overtly threatening – his violent, ideologically driven nature has yet to surface.

After J.D. and Veronica kill Heather Chandler, J.D.'s behaviour becomes increasingly unsettling, and his image begins to shift away from that of the innocent, misunderstood outsider; however, this transformation intensifies his role as the romantic hero. Nonetheless, the earlier elements of his character – his distinct appearance, mysterious charm, and perceived moral purpose – lay the foundation for his representation as the story's romantic hero. As Hampton observes, J.D. ultimately reveals himself to be a psychopath, but the narrative initially conceals this through romantic framing (Hampton 2020: 5).

Korpi (2023: 7) describes J.D. as a "rebel" – an edgy outsider challenging authority. This aligns with the romantic hero: not all rebels are romantic heroes, but in Heathers, the two converge. J.D.'s name – Jason Dean – recalls James Dean's iconic role in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and also echoes "juvenile delinquent" (Shary 2005: 221)[21]. A portrait of James Dean appears at the party (f. 00:19:26), reinforcing this connection. Bowie notes that early drafts included J.D. carrying a *Rebel Without a Cause* lunchbox (Bowie 2010: 26). Toward the film's end, Veronica confronts him: "You're not a rebel, you're psychotic!" J.D. replies: "You say tomato, I say to-mah-to" (f. 01:17:55).

On the level of story, J.D.'s self-presentation as a romantic hero is central. From the start, he differentiates himself through his appearance – wearing a long black coat in contrast to the Heathers' colour-coded outfits[22] – and through props like his motorcycle, reinforcing his "rebel" image. Even his speech sets him apart: when Veronica greets him with a simple "Hello, Jason Dean," he replies, "Greetings and salutations!" – an unconventional, almost theatrical response for a teenager (f. 00:11:34). On the deeper

[21] Dictionary.com. JD4. https://www.dictionary.com/browse/jd. 22.05.2025.

[22] Colour-coding in *Heathers* is a separate, but noteworthy aspect of the film's visual language. Each of the three Heathers is associated with a specific colour: Chandler with red, Duke with green, and McNamara with yellow. While their, as well as J.D.'s clothing, could be interpreted as a discursive device, it functions primarily as part of their self-fashioned identity, keeping it on the story level. The Heathers' colour-coded outfits appear to be a deliberate choice within the story world – possibly dictated by Heather Chandler as the group's dominant leader. In contrast, J.D. intentionally selects a dark outfit, positioning himself as the antithesis of the Heathers, even through his clothing. His black coat visually signals his rejection of their world and reinforces his outsider status within the story. In the musical, this contrast is emphasised discursively through lighting: each Heather is spotlighted in her signature colour (m. 00:14:44; 00:21:21), while J.D. is typically shown in dark or muted lighting (m. 00:14:58), reinforcing his outsider status.

level, it is his rejection of the school's social hierarchy that positions him as the romantic hero.

This is also reinforced discursively. His entrance is accompanied by soft, mysterious music and fluid camera work – slow zooms and tracking shots – that enhance his enigmatic presence, first through Veronica's gaze and then through the audience's. Another example appears after Heather Chandler's funeral, when J.D. watches Kurt and Ram beat up a classmate (f. 00:40:40). The slow camera movement first shows him on his motorcycle, staring intently at the scene. The shot then shifts to his perspective, capturing a moment of eye contact with one of the jocks. This cinematic framing implies his moral judgment and highlights the ideological distance between J.D. and the bullies.

3.2.2. Romantic cause

The romantic hero perpetrator is additionally romanticised by attaching a so-called noble cause to his actions. J.D.'s violence is framed not as random but as ideologically driven – a mission to dismantle the injustices of high school hierarchy. Unlike the shallow aggression of the Heathers, Kurt, and Ram, J.D.'s actions follow a moral logic. He sees through the hypocrisy and confronts it through radical means. This narrative framing gives his violence a sense of purpose, presenting it as emotionally justified rather than senseless. His role as a violent *rebel with a cause* plays a key part in his romanticisation.

McKelly positions *Heathers* within a "postmodern culture of rebellion," arguing that its narrative contrasts rebellion with moral honour (McKelly 2005: 212). He notes that while *Rebel* centers on a conscience desiring inclusion, *Heathers* presents honour shaped by a drive for social justice – an ideal tied to exclusion (ibid.). This casts J.D. as a rejected romantic hero, though it is ultimately his ideology, not rejection, that isolates him.

J.D. arrives as the new kid and embodies the Starke-esque outsider (McKelly 2005: 213). While a full comparison lies beyond the scope of this thesis, J.D. differs from James Dean's character by having a clear agenda. His mission extends beyond school politics to a critique of society itself. As he declares: "People are gonna look at the ashes of Westerberg and say, 'Now there is a school that self-destructed, not because society didn't care, but because the school was society.'" (f. 01:34:42).

Despite his instability, J.D. often seems the most perceptive character. The adults are passive, the teachers clueless, and the students complicit. J.D., however, recognises the dysfunction and takes action. This perceived clarity lends emotional weight to his violence – making him not just brutal, but ideologically purposeful. This framing is central to the romanticisation of his violent acts: J.D. is not simply another bully, but a rebel whose violence claims to serve a cause.

Timothy Shary, in his comparative analysis of *Heathers* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, argues that the figure of the *Rebel* is not limited to J.D. alone – Veronica, too, fits this archetype (Shary 2005: 221). Her character is, in many ways, even more complex. At first, Veronica appears indifferent to the social injustices around her, reluctant to openly challenge the Heathers but also unwilling to fully endorse their cruelty. Her early moral ambiguity reflects a desire to belong rather than to resist. However, she gradually begins to assert her agency. This is clearly illustrated in the scene at Heather Chandler's house, where J.D. proposes a deadly "hangover cure" using drain cleaner. Initially framed as a dark joke, Veronica dismisses the idea, prepares an alternative drink, but then, after kissing J.D., switches the mugs, taking the one with the toxic mixture. The camera lingers on her hand brushing the lid, subtly implying her awareness. J.D., realising her "mistake", makes no effort to stop her (f. 00:24:36). J.D.'s murderous intent is overt from the beginning, he does not hesitate long before serving the fatal drink to Heather.

This scene underscores how Veronica's agency in acts of violence is central to the film's representation of morality. While initially influenced by J.D. and the pressures of her social environment, she is ultimately portrayed as an active participant rather than a passive victim. As the narrative progresses, her internal conflict grows, culminating in her rejection of J.D.'s ideology (she is the one actual person who rejects the "romantic hero"!) and her reassertion of control.

The character arcs of J.D. and Veronica follow a complex trajectory. J.D. begins as the archetypal rebellious outsider. The framing of his violence as part of a noble cause to destroy institutional injustice resignifies his brutality. Veronica, initially his love interest and accomplice, does not share his ideological mission. She becomes increasingly sceptical of his methods and begins to question the morality of their actions. She exclaims, "I'm so angry with chaos!", to which J.D. replies, "Chaos is great! Chaos is what killed the dinosaurs, darling. Face it – our way is the way! We scare people into not being assholes" (f. 00:58:58). After a seemingly deep exchange of feelings about J.D.'s parents, he blows up the radio, which makes Veronica decide to finally break up with him. In this moment,

Veronica finds her own cause – stopping J.D. In the musical, this transformation is even more pronounced, marked by her solo song "I Say No" (m. 01:47:25), where she decisively rejects both J.D.'s ideology and his influence over her.

While it may be debatable whether Veronica's newfound purpose can be classified as romantic cause, it is clear that she becomes an agent of change. She is not proud of her involvement in the murders. Hampton argues that J.D. tricks Veronica into killing her classmates (Hampton 2020: 5), but this perspective underestimates her awareness and complicity. Though influenced, Veronica is not tricked – she knowingly participates in the violence and later takes steps to stop it. Unlike J.D., however, she does not appear to suffer the consequences of her actions. In the film, her guilt is not fully explored. In the musical, she attempts to confess but is not believed. Nevertheless, her successful opposition to J.D. (which notably involves using violence against him) and her reclamation of power position her as the narrative's new heroine – "a new *Rebel* leader" (Shary 2005: 222). In Veronica's actions, these are not the killings of classmates that are romanticised, but being violent to J.D. in order to stop him. In the boiler room, J.D. tells Veronica which button she should press to turn off the bomb, but instead of doing so, she shoots him again, thinking she killed him and finally fulfilled her purpose (f. 01:34:58). "[I want] Cool guys like you out of my life" – she states. Her involvement with murders is also reframed – not as a flaw to be punished, but as part of a redemptive arc[23]. Though morally ambiguous, she is ultimately framed as the figure who defeats the antagonist and restores a sense of order, making her both a survivor and a symbol of narrative closure. This moment of triumph, paired with her escape from accountability, reinforces romanticisation of her violence.

All of the above underscores the theme of the romantic cause on the level of story. For J.D., this is expressed through his self-positioning as the romantic hero – a rebel with a cause. For Veronica, it emerges through her redemptive arc and ultimate opposition to J.D. On the level of discourse, the use of dramatic background music during the pivotal boiler room scene guides the audience's emotional response to J.D.'s impassioned monologue (f. 01:34:09). In the musical, Veronica's romantic cause is given greater emphasis: she is given a solo number in which she explicitly rejects J.D.'s ideology, highlighting this moment discursively (m. 01:47:25). It is even more pronounced in her song "Dead Girl

[23] After J.D.'s suicide, Veronica encounters confused Heather Duke, who is now wearing Heather Chandler's iconic red outfit. Veronica takes the red scrunchie from her and says, "There's a new sheriff in town" (f. 01:38:50). After confronting and ultimately stopping J.D., who had planned to bomb the school, Veronica steps into a position of power – signified by the red scrunchie, a symbol of leadership and dominance throughout the film.

Walking (Reprise)", where she clearly states that "J.D.'s solution is a lie", musically emphasising the importance of her cause to stop him (m. 02:03:40). Likewise, their final confrontation is accentuated by upbeat music and flashing lights, reinforcing the climax of the conflict between protagonist and antagonist, music and flashlights abruptly stopping when Veronica shoots J.D. (m. 02:06:25).

3.2.3. Romantic love

In addition to J.D.'s role as a romantic hero and Veronica's transformation into an empowered heroine, their romantic relationship itself is central to how violence is romanticised in the narrative. Georgia Hampton describes their dynamic as "a classic teen romantic comedy – two outcasts who find each other, fighting against the ever-present social hierarchy of high school" (Hampton 2020: 5). Their connection intensifies through a shared sense of rebellion, and as they begin killing their classmates, the narrative frames their bond as part of a grand, emotional struggle. Echoing the cultural myth of "Bonnie and Clyde," their romance makes violence appear not only horrific but also strangely desirable (ibid.).

The foundation of their connection is established in J.D.'s first appearance. Veronica's gaze signals her immediate interest (f. 00:12:24; m. 00:15:31), prompting the jocks to sneer, "Who's that guy in a coat think he is, anyway?" (f. 00:12:09). J.D.'s response to their taunting is swift and unexpected – he fires blanks at them (f. 00:13:22). In the musical, this scene becomes a stylised confrontation underscored by Veronica's solo "Fight for Me" (m. 00:16:11), where she both admires J.D.'s defiance and questions her attraction to his violence (Korpi 2023: 35). This moment arguably marks the beginning of Veronica's romanticisation of J.D.'s violence and their romantic bond: she is drawn to his alienation (as the romantic hero), and despite moral reservations, the musical foregrounds her emotional pull toward him, solidifying his position as her romantic interest.

Later in the film, after a party where Veronica has a major falling-out with Heather Chandler, J.D. climbs through her bedroom window (f. 00:22:34). On one level, this is an uninvited intrusion, a gesture that could easily be read as threatening. Yet the scene quickly shifts into a passionate and intimate encounter, reframing the act as a moment of emotional

connection. This contrast becomes especially striking when compared to an earlier scene at the same party, where a college guy makes an unwanted advance on Veronica (f. 00:20:16) – an act she clearly experiences as harassment. The difference lies not in the nature of the actions themselves, but in how they are emotionally framed. J.D.'s climbing through the window also centres Veronica's emotional perspective: she is upset and vulnerable, and her romantic interest's sudden appearance is not perceived as a threat, but as a romantic gesture. She is drawn to his otherness, which frames him – true to the romantic hero archetype – as someone willing to defy social conventions for love. This reinforces the romanticisation of violence, extending it into the domain of romantic relationships.

Interestingly, in the musical, this scene is reimagined: it is Veronica who climbs through J.D.'s window, initiating intimacy. After being threatened by Chandler for ruining her experience at the party, Veronica seeks distraction and comfort in J.D., who clearly welcomes her intrusion. This moment is expressed through the song "Dead Girl Walking" (m. 00:35:24), which later reappears as a reprise when, after staging her suicide, Veronica confronts J.D. in the boiler room, attempting to stop his violent plan. While this may seem like a minor narrative change, it significantly underscores Veronica's agency. She is the one who actively pursues the romantic hero and, ultimately, the one who defeats him as the story's antagonist in the end.

After the murder of Heather Chandler, their emotional bond becomes more pronounced. In the film, they sit together in J.D.'s living room, watching their classmates praise Heather (f.00:34:59), a scene that feels more like a casual date than the aftermath of a killing. Later, after the assault of Heather McNamara and Veronica in the field by Kurt and Ram, J.D. appears dissatisfied with Veronica's engagement with the students he despises. He notes to Veronica – "Our love is God," elevating their relationship as sacred and rebellious.

I argue that their representation as the violent couple is especially pronounced in the musical both on the levels of story and discourse. The use of ballads is an important discursive tool that heightens the emotional intensity and reframes the moral severity of the couple's violent actions. Unlike other means of romanticisation of violence, where the romantic hero and the romantic cause is emphasised mostly on the story level (especially in the film), the musical medium plays a uniquely powerful role here. Two key ballads illustrate this: "Our Love Is God", which accompanies their second murder (m. 01:05:35); and "Seventeen", a sensitive piece following a moment of emotional vulnerability and J.D.'s promise to change (m. 01:22:59). Both songs not only mark a turning point in the

narrative but also deepen the romantic framing of the pair's violence.

In both the film and the musical, the moment marked by "Our Love Is God" reveals J.D.'s transformation to an extremely violent figure. In the musical, however, this scene is particularly discursively charged. After the murder of the jocks, Veronica begins to realise the reality of what has happened. As J.D. confesses his devotion through the song – "worshipping" her – he embraces her from behind in a moment that is simultaneously intimate and disturbing. The dramatic swell of music and heightened lighting underscore the twisted nature of J.D.'s character. As Korpi explains:

> The song fully realizes JD as an agent and makes him the primary driver of the plot. Furthermore, the reveal that he had planned for the deaths to be realized the entire time, paired with the repetitions of the chorus lyrical material and the musical development of the motif introduced in "Death at Dawn," altogether can be read as realizing JD as a complete agent within the story, who now acts autonomously of Veronica, giving him more influence on the plot than she has (Korpi 2023: 67).

Although Veronica is visibly disturbed and unsettled by their actions, she remains emotionally connected to J.D. in this moment. The duets "Our Love is God" and "Seventeen" illustrate the complex, often twisted nature of their romance (Korpi 2023: 68), yet continue to frame them as lovers striving to endure and overcome their shared turmoil. During the performance of "Seventeen", Veronica explicitly pleads with J.D. to abandon the violence and embrace a more conventional teenage life, saying they could simply be "normal" teenagers again. This appeal introduces a moment of emotional clarity, contrasting their previous trajectory and further complicating the representation of their relationship – caught between sincere intimacy and escalating brutality.

> "We're damaged
> Really damaged
> But that does not make us wise
>
> We're not special, we're not different
> We don't choose who lives or dies
> Let's be normal, see bad movies
> Sneak a beer and watch TV
>
> We'll bake brownies or go bowling
> Don't you want a life with me?"

It also reinforces J.D.'s status as a romantic hero independent of his relationship with Veronica. While she tries to ground him in social norms and traditional ideals, he rejects these structures, viewing them as part of the problem. Korpi provides a good musical analysis of "Seventeen":

> He largely follows her lead in the music, and while there is a present dissonance in the mix between voice and accompaniment, overall, they achieve a balance of reluctance, angst, and vulnerability. The song presents JD as being conflicted about the remainder of the story but otherwise convinced of his feelings toward Veronica (Korpi 2023: 68).

While the current analysis does not explore the music itself, the use of ballads is clearly deliberate – framing their bond as emotionally complex and intimate. This framing culminates in the boiler room scene and J.D.'s suicide, which is not depicted as failure or punishment, but as a final, almost noble act. Even after his violent ideology is fully revealed, J.D. remains positioned as a romantic hero. His suicide is framed as romantic sacrifice: instead of completing his plan, he concedes and ends his life. In the film, this is portrayed as a philosophical monologue (f. 01:36:11), while the musical highlights his emotional dependence and obsessive love for Veronica. His final act becomes less ideological and more personal – an emotionally charged gesture. The song "I Am Damaged" reinforces this reading, blending tragedy and romance to complicate the audience's moral response (m. 02:08:30).

> "Hope you miss me
> Wish you'd kiss me
> Then you'd know I worship you
> I'll trade my life for yours
> [...]
> And once I disappear
> [...]
> Clean up the mess down here
> [...]
> Our love is God"

Here it becomes clear, the "us against the world" dynamic between two was either short-lived or one-sided – J.D. believed he had found a kindred spirit, only to be abandoned by the one person he trusted. This deepens his romantic character, defined by rejection, isolation, and disillusionment.

Musically, "I Am Damaged" merges the melodies of "Seventeen" in its verse and "Our Love Is God" in its chorus, uniting two of the most emotionally significant ballads in the narrative. This fusion reinforces the tragic conclusion of J.D.'s character arc. Where Veronica once sang "We are damaged" – suggesting shared responsibility – J.D. now stands alone, rejected and emotionally shattered, declaring "I am damaged." The song marks his final moment of defeat, stripped of agency and the ability to harm others (Korpi 2023: 119).

I argue that, compared to the film, the musical represents J.D. as a more emotionally expressive and eccentric character, and Veronica as more sensitive. While the film leans into irony and even absurdity in representing their romance, the musical relies more heavily on emotional discourse. For instance, in the film, after Kurt and Ram have been killed, Veronica realises that J.D. had planned to murder them all along – not just knock them out with blanks, as she believed (also an act of violence, that she earlier agreed to). In distress, she burns her hand with a car lighter. J.D. then casually lights his cigarette from her burn (f. 00:53:44), and Veronica shows no visible reaction. Instead, they begin arguing over whether she truly wanted the bullies dead all along. Their argument is noticed by Heather Duke, who sarcastically remarks to Heather McNamara, "Young love." By the end of the conversation, Veronica, despite her initial shock, accepts J.D.'s reasoning and remains loyal.

In the musical, this same post-murder dialogue is delivered with more emotional tension. J.D. asks, "Did they make you cry?" – casting the killings as a misguided act of protection and devotion (m. 01:13:53).

Following the sensitive ballad "Seventeen", which reinforces the strength of their bond and Veronica's temporary forgiveness, she is confronted by the ghost of Heather Chandler. With biting irony, Heather remarks, "And they lived happily ever after – you really believe that? Don't give me that wounded look. You know exactly what he is and you love it" (m. 01:26:24). This haunting confrontation underscores the deeply problematic nature of Veronica's continued affection for J.D., suggesting that her love persists despite clear awareness of his violent character.

Later, when Martha voices suspicions about J.D., Veronica initially chooses to protect him. However, unlike in the film, the musical presents her gradual reckoning with guilt – she finally admits to the three murders (m. 01:41:31). Mocked and dismissed by both her peers and teachers, Veronica soon finds herself confronted by an increasingly unstable J.D., prompting her to end the relationship. As discussed earlier, this scene marks the culmination of Veronica's character arc – the moment she finds her cause to stop J.D. and becomes disillusioned with the romantic fantasy. What has not yet been addressed, however, is J.D.'s reaction in the film to her assertive decision to end their relationship. With a calm, self-assured "You'll be back" (f. 01:01:45), he dismisses her autonomy, reinforcing the idea voiced by Heather Chandler's ghost from the musical – that Veronica has always known who he truly is and, on some level, accepted it. From Veronica's perspective, this moment marks the end of the romanticisation of his violence and their

violent bond, which began with their first encounter. Yet J.D., clinging to the myth of their love, refuses to let go. Until his final moments, he insists that "our love is God", preserving the illusion of transcendent romance even in the face of irreversible destruction.

One of the most striking examples of J.D. being portrayed as both violent and, paradoxically, still emotional in his relationship toward Veronica, is his performance of the song "Meant to Be Yours" in the musical (m. 01:59:29). In this scene, J.D. approaches Veronica's room through the window, intending to kill her – or to persuade her to join his murderous plan (Korpi 2023: 102). In the film, this moment unfolds as a mournful monologue in which J.D. expresses disbelief at Veronica's apparent "suicide", and reveals his plan of mass-murder, while lamenting over the fact that they will not be able to complete his plan of blowing up the school and "toast marshmallows" together (f. 01:23:06). However, in the musical, the scene is heightened dramatically through song. A particularly revealing moment occurs when J.D. pleads, "Open the door" – a line that integrates multiple levels contributing to the romanticisation of his violent behaviour. On one level, it evokes the desperation of a heartbroken lover seeking forgiveness, misunderstood, not only by society, but this time also his partner. This reinforces J.D.'s role as Veronica's romantic partner, eliciting audience sympathy. At the same time, he is armed with a gun, ready to force Veronica into compliance, or even to kill her should she refuse. As Korpi notes:

> Utterance is shown here as calling out for companionship, connection, seeking the return of a lost partner, explaining the laundry list of grievances he aims against her and against the world around them both. In doing this we as observers get a rare moment of extreme realism and frankness from JD that does not happen until this point. It acts as a glimpse into his humanity, and a true unfiltered view into his subjectivity (Korpi 2023: 104).

He seeks "companionship and connection", reinforcing his image as the mysterious romantic hero whom the protagonist first fell for in the cafeteria. According to Korpi (2023: 104), this scene offers viewers "a glimpse into his humanity" – a moment that, in my analysis, exemplifies the romanticisation of his violent nature. It flirts with the idea that J.D. is not simply a deranged antagonist, but rather a passionate, emotionally vulnerable figure who craves intimacy and understanding from his partner – even as he attempts to involve her in a mass murder. The song's discourse is central to this framing: through its emotional delivery and lyrical content, "Meant to Be Yours" humanises J.D., thereby complicating the audience's moral judgment.

Interestingly, in the film, J.D. sexually harasses Veronica on multiple occasions. For instance, when she attempts to break up with him, he physically restrains her and forcefully kisses her as she struggles to push him away (f. 01:01:13). A similar dynamic reappears during their confrontation in the boiler room (f. 01:32:15). In contrast, the musical omits these moments of harassment. Instead, it introduces the song "Seventeen", which reframes their relationship through a more emotionally redemptive lens. The song reinforces the idea of "curing" a partner with love, presenting romantic love as the reward for the heroine's suffering – a theme explored in subchapter 2.2. Although this section focuses on romantic love rather than suffering, Veronica's suffering caused by J.D.'s abusive and controlling behaviour overlaps with this idea. In "Seventeen", her plea – "let's stop being violent, and just be normal teenagers in love" – encapsulates this dynamic, highlighting how romanticisation downplays violence in favour of emotional reconciliation.

The means romantic love provides the strongest link between the romanticisation of violence across both mediums and at both narrative levels. On the level of story, both the film and the musical portray J.D. and Veronica's relationship as something almost sacred, reinforcing ideas such as "us against the world" and "love conquers all." However, this theme is more explicitly developed in the musical. J.D.'s character is reinterpreted as more emotionally vulnerable and eccentric, a shift supported by the conventions of the musical genre, which lend a heightened emotional appeal to his violent behaviour. Throughout the musical, J.D. repeatedly declares the importance of Veronica in his life, emphasising his overwhelming love for her, partly as a justification for his actions (next to his romantic cause).

On the level of discourse, the musical plays an even more significant role in reinforcing this romanticisation. Songs such as the two ballads and "Meant to Be Yours" dramatically elevate the emotional stakes, using music to frame J.D.'s violence through a lens of passion and longing. Although I do not engage in a detailed semiotic analysis of the music, it is evident that the medium's discourse intensifies the romanticisation of violence, presenting it as an expression of love rather than aggression.

3.2.4. Romantic suffering

In *Heathers*, romanticisation of violence through suffering appears in two key instances: (1) J.D. as a character with a traumatic backstory – having lost his mother and been emotionally neglected by his father; and (2) the diegetic romanticisation of suicidal behaviour.

J.D. is clearly the perpetrator of violence, yet he is simultaneously positioned, more subtly, as a victim. He emerges as a complex, morally ambiguous character – an outsider marked by his sharp intellect and charismatic defiance, which initially renders him appealing. Next to his framing as the romantic hero with a solid purpose, his self-positioning as a lonely victim helps to construct an image of J.D. as misunderstood and emotionally vulnerable, which again contributes to his appeal in the eyes of Veronica and the audience.

J.D.'s traumatic backstory surfaces more explicitly when he recounts the death of his mother. In response to Veronica's question about whether he likes his father, he replies: "Never given the matter much thought. Liked my mother," his voice breaking with longing and sorrow. He recalls her final wave before a building – rigged with explosives by his father – was destroyed, a memory that hints at deep psychological trauma that further complicates his motivations (f. 01:00:15). The film supports this emotional shift visually: the camera adopts J.D.'s point of view as it lingers on a photograph of his mother. Cinematically, this scene guides the audience into an empathic alignment with an experience of the character (Chatman 1978: 159).

The musical renders this scene even more dramatically. During a tense moment of ethical debate between J.D. and Veronica, she suddenly asks about his mother's death – shifting the focus more directly onto emotional trauma than in the film, where the conversation centres on his relationship with his father. J.D.'s response in the musical is fragmented and breathy, his voice trembling with grief and rage, delivered in a way that heightens his emotional instability while inviting sympathy from both Veronica and the audience (m. 01:21:17).

> J.D.: [...] She gets out of the car and walks into the building two minutes before Dad blows it up. She waved at me out the window and then...Kaboom. She left me.
> Veronica: I'm really sorry.
> J.D.: It's okay. The pain gives me clarity. You and I are special. We have a lot of work to do.
> Veronica: What work?
> J.D.: Making the world a decent place for people who are decent.

> Veronica: And when does it end?
> J.D.: When every asshole is dead.

Notably, this moment does not rely on romanticisation through musical discourse: there is no accompanying music, however the lighting plays a significant part. When J.D. begins telling Veronica the story of his mother, he turns his back to her. The lighting isolates him on stage, emphasising his loneliness, guiding the audience's emotional response. Additionally, the dramatic effect is conveyed through the emotionally charged performance of the actor. Korpi comments on the narrative significance of this scene:

> Furthermore, "the pain gives me clarity" is a dead giveaway that part of the justification for the murders is a sort of vengeance for his mother's death, and a misplaced sense of injustice as it pertains to the way the rest of his life has been handled by his father, and how he has been treated by the rest of the world because of that (Korpi 2023: 54).

Earlier in the musical, during the song "Our Love Is God", J.D. reflects on his loneliness after being abandoned by his mother, describing himself as "a frozen lake" that Veronica "melted awake". This metaphor frames him as a hopeful romantic who believes he has finally found love again (the romantic love). According to Korpi (2023: 54), the idea of "vengeance for his mother's death" functions as a justification for J.D.'s violent behaviour and his "misplaced sense of injustice." His bottled-up anger, pain, and the trauma of witnessing his mother's death drive him to seek revenge on societal injustice. Although the exact circumstances of her death remain vague, the narrative makes it clear that J.D. is deeply traumatised and isolated. These factors contribute to his self-perception as a romantic hero with a noble, if misguided, cause. In this way, the story provides implicit answers to questions such as: Why is he like this? Why has he embraced a twisted ideology and carried out murders without remorse? The answer, grimly laced with irony, seems to be: because of his tragic childhood, of course.

The portrayal of J.D.'s father differs significantly between the two mediums. In the film, Bud Dean (in the film Kirk Scott; in the musical Nathan Amzi) resembles other adults – emotionally distant yet maintaining a vaguely functional relationship with his son. In a scene where Veronica first meets J.D.'s father, the two perform a disturbing role-reversal ritual: J.D. mimics his father while his father pretends to be the son (f. 00:35:35). This absurd interaction briefly breaks when J.D. pointedly states, "Last time I saw mom she was waving from a library window in Texas. Right, Dad?" The father's hesitant response – "Right... son" – suggests guilt or avoidance. While J.D. clearly blames

his father for his mother's death, it remains ambiguous whether her death was murder or suicide.

In contrast, the musical presents a far more overtly abusive father. Mr. Dean is not just cold but actively hostile – rude to Veronica and aggressively controlling toward his son. In a later scene, he barges into the room where J.D. is with Veronica, ordering him to help blow up another building. When J.D. refuses, his father grabs him by the coat and snarls, "A lot of pretty women out there, sport. I can make another son anytime I want. Now get your ass in that car" (m. 01:46:00). This depiction intensifies J.D.'s image as a broken and traumatised figure, feeding directly into the romanticisation of his sufferings.

As J.D.'s violence escalates, it becomes increasingly unclear – whether his actions are driven by ideology or by the emotional pain and isolation he carries. The narrative blurs this line deliberately. In the musical's "Dead Girl Walking (Reprise)" (m. 02:05:15), Veronica confronts J.D. with a mix of pity and rage, stating she wishes his mother "had been a little stronger", that his father "were good", and that "grown-ups understood" – sentiments reflecting the broader theme of misunderstood adolescence in an unjust world. J.D.'s reaction – "Don't talk about my mom! Stop!" – delivered in a trembling, near-tearful voice, suggests the depth of his emotional fracture.

The film mirrors this vulnerability. After Veronica shoots him, a bleeding J.D. gasps, "So maybe I am killing everyone in the school… 'cause nobody loves me!" – a raw admission that collapses the distinction between victim and perpetrator (f. 01:34:15). In the musical's final scene, J.D. echoes this emotional unravelling: "You were right about me. I destroy things, just like my dad. I don't want you turning into my mom" (m. 02:08:18). He acknowledges his destructive nature, but still frames it within the context of inherited pain and unresolved trauma, not pure malice.

Ultimately, J.D. is constructed as both villain and victim, and this duality is central to the romanticisation of his violence. His suffering functions as a narrative tool that complicates moral judgment, casting his brutality through the lens of trauma. The story frames his violent acts as emotionally driven, rooted in a longing for love, particularly from his lost mother, and a hope that Veronica's love might serve as the "reward" for his pain. His rejection by his father and alienation from society also reinforce his role as a romantic hero: a lone figure battling an unjust hierarchy. This fusion of personal trauma and ideological rage presents his actions as emotionally and morally complex. Discourse further amplifies this framing – through cinematic point-of-view shots when he recalls his mother, or in the musical, through his final ballad and isolating lighting, which leaves

space for the audience to interpret him as an outlaw who, ultimately, just wanted to be loved.

A curious example of the romanticisation of violence through suffering is seen in how the narrative addresses suicide. Notably, the only real suicide in *Heathers* is J.D.'s. The others – Heather Chandler, Kurt, Ram, and Veronica – are staged. Heather, Kurt, and Ram are murdered by J.D. and Veronica, while Veronica fakes her own suicide to escape J.D.'s escalating violence.

The initial reaction to Heather Chandler's supposed suicide reveals how performatively the school community engages with the concept of death. One teacher comments, "Heather Chandler is not your everyday suicide. She was very popular." (f. 00:31:20). Another teacher, Ms. Fleming (in the film Penelope Milford; in the musical Rebecca Lock), urges students to "study Heather's suicide note" to grasp its "pathetic beauty," directly romanticising her "suicide" (f. 00:33:41). However, this emotional reaction is based entirely on a forged note, written by Veronica and J.D. The note portrays Heather as a misunderstood figure – a clear distortion of her actual personality. Based on this fake suicide note, everyone begins to reinterpret Chandler as someone with hidden emotional depth, rather than acknowledging her true role as a ruthless bully. This collective reframing is exemplified when one student reflects: "She said I was boring. But now I realise I really wasn't boring. It's just that she was dissatisfied with her life" (f. 00:34:33). The musical continues this theme with the ensemble number "The Me Inside of Me" (m. 00:47:00), a melodramatic song in which teachers and students romanticise Heather's supposed inner torment, turning her into a tragic, misunderstood icon. Similarly, the fabricated suicide note for Kurt and Ram paints them as secret lovers. These fictionalised versions of the characters' inner lives evoke newfound respect and emotional response from their peers – respect that, ironically, would never have been afforded to them while they were alive. Their violent deaths are thus re-coded through sentimental narratives, entirely stripping them of their brutality.

On the other hand, the students' grief is entirely performative. At Heather's funeral, the students' real thoughts are transmitted through their "prayers" for her soul (f. 00:38:14). One of the jocks asks, "Why did you [God] have to kill such a hot snatch?" while Heather Duke admits, "I prayed for the death of Heather Chandler many times. [...] Praise Jesus." Duke then seizes the moment to claim social dominance, taking Chandler's

iconic red outfit[24] and stepping into her place at the top of the hierarchy. In the school gym, Heather McNamara tearfully exclaims, "It's just so unfair! We should get off a whole week, not just an hour," further revealing the students' superficial and self-centered reactions to Chandler's death (f. 00:32:34).

Throughout the film, suicide is never approached with sincerity or realism. Instead, it is framed as poetic (Heather's note), ironic (Kurt and Ram's "romantic" deaths), or as a narrative twist (Veronica's faked suicide). The absence of genuine emotional or social consequences reflects how the story romanticises suffering, presenting suicide not as a tragic act, but as something noble or even escapist. Building on the earlier discussion of a "reward" for suffering, *Heathers* presents a broader perspective on romantic suffering. It reimagines Heather Chandler's "pathetic beauty" and Kurt and Ram's supposed "hidden love" as the emotional premises of their "suicides", subtly suggesting an inner complexity that did not exist in life. These false narratives romanticise their "self-inflicted" deaths, assigning them emotional or intellectual depth that is entirely constructed after the fact.

Beyond the theme of romantic suffering, suicide in *Heathers* is also partially framed as a romantic cause – specifically, a bid for attention. At Westerburg High, suicide becomes a cultural trend and a symbol of popularity. Media coverage, themed songs, and awareness events turn personal tragedy into superficial spectacle, bypassing any sincere emotional engagement.

This distorted mourning culture is explored in both the film and the musical. In one scene, Heather McNamara attempts suicide but is mocked by Heather Duke for not being "popular enough" to die. Veronica saves her just in time (f. 01:11:45):

> Heather M: Suicide is a private thing.
> Veronica: Heather, you're throwing your life away to become a statistic on "U. S. A. Today"; now, that's about the least private thing I can think of.

This attitude becomes even clearer when Martha Dunnstock – an actually bullied and unpopular student – attempts suicide and survives. Heather Duke reacts with contempt, telling Veronica it is "just another geek trying to imitate the popular people and failing miserably" (f. 01:08:47). In contrast to the performative grief surrounding Heather, Kurt,

[24] As previously noted, red was the signature color of Heather Chandler. When Heather Duke – who had often been subjected to Chandler's bullying – takes on Chandler's red outfit, she symbolically steps out of her role as the subordinate "Heather" into a position of power and leadership. In a musical, Duke's claiming of dominance is represented through the song "Never Shut Up Again" (m. 01:01:34). Later in the story, when Veronica takes the red scrunchie from Duke, it marks another shift in power dynamics: Veronica asserts dominance, effectively claiming leadership for herself.

and Ram, Martha's suffering is met with mockery and dismissal.

However, even Martha's attempt raises the question of attention-seeking. She does not try to end her life quietly but tapes a suicide note to herself (f. 01:07:10), mimicking the trend established by Heather Chandler's "suicide note". Though we never get to know what Martha wrote, the gesture leaves room for interpretation: perhaps her note was a sincere plea to acknowledge the harm caused by bullying rather than a grasp at popularity. The film leaves this question open, offering a subtle critique of how easily suffering is misread or co-opted by social trends.

It is notable that the romanticisation of suicide in *Heathers* is largely confined to the level of the storyworld, rather than being reinforced by discursive techniques. The film and musical do not themselves romanticise suicide – instead, it is the characters within the diegesis who do. For example, Heather Chandler's cruelty is posthumously reinterpreted as hidden suffering, but this distortion exists only within the narrative logic of the characters, not as an authorial message. Both versions deploy satire at the level of discourse to critique how society trivialises youth suffering. A striking example is the musical number "I Love My Dead Gay Son" (m. 01:15:14), a parody in which the fathers of Kurt and Ram rejoice at their sons' imagined posthumous "romance", even confessing their own suppressed desires. What begins as a funeral scene devolves into a flamboyant disco celebration – a sharp comedic move that exposes the grotesque ways in which death is romanticised and repackaged for emotional convenience.

Ultimately, *Heathers* offers a biting, satirical deconstruction of how teen suicide and violence are reframed through narratives of suffering and misunderstood depth. By highlighting how swiftly violent deaths are transformed into sentimental spectacles, the story critiques not just the characters' reactions, but broader cultural patterns that commodify tragedy rather than confront it.

3.3. Discussion

This subchapter explores the implications and conclusions drawn from the analysis of the romanticisation of violence in selected scenes from both the *Heathers* film and musical. It sums up how all four means of romanticisation of violence are related, as well as how

romanticisation operates differently on the levels of story and discourse within the narrative. Furthermore, it considers potential applications of these findings and suggests how the topic could be further developed in future research.

The analysis of types and explicitness of violence in *Heathers* demonstrates that violence is a ubiquitous narrative element, appearing in various forms and degrees of explicitness. However, I argue that this violence is presented in a manner that makes it almost invisible. Even when the acts are explicit, many are low in intensity (e.g., punching, verbal insults, psychological manipulation, and controlling). Other moments depict implied violence through visual elements – camera cuts or pans away from the act itself (such as Heather Chandler's sexual harassment, Martha's suicide attempt, or J.D.'s suicide) – or through indirect references to offscreen violence (e.g., J.D.'s mention of Kurt and Ram's "date rapes").

While more intense acts of explicit violence – such as murder, shootings, and sexual assault – do occur in *Heathers*, they are relatively rare. Even in those cases, the mode of presentation diminishes the moral weight these acts should carry: they are often presented with absurd or ironic tones, blurred into the background, and rarely shown from the victim's point of view. This study shows that invisible representation of violence functions together with specific modes of representation. As one of such modes, romanticisation substitutes and alters the real meaning of violence. In the case of *Heathers*, violence is also framed through satire, operating as a parallel mode of representation alongside romanticisation and certain means of substitutional poetics.

Through the analysis, it becomes clear that the four means of romanticisation of violence (outlined in subchapter 2.3) are closely connected. Romanticisation appears on both the story and discourse levels. At the story level, the perception of violence by J.D. and Veronica is fundamentally distorted. J.D. is introduced as a misunderstood outsider with a tragic backstory and a mission to reset societal injustice. His self-positioning as a romantic hero, coupled with his trauma, reinforces the idea of a romantic cause. He believes violence is justified as a means to bring about change, and Veronica initially perceives him as a rebellious romantic hero. Veronica's attraction to J.D. is rooted in this romanticised image, gradually evolving into a dysfunctional love story that ultimately leads to the central violent events of the narrative. Their relationship reframes their actions, allowing them to rationalise their violence through ideals like "us against the world" and "love conquers all."

As Veronica's arc progresses, she becomes disillusioned with J.D.'s rebellious

charm and ultimately finds her own cause in stopping his violence. How we evaluate Veronica's character remains open to interpretation. On one hand, she can be seen as an empowered, semi-positive figure who defeats the antagonist, aligning with themes of feminist agency. On the other hand, her involvement in the murders may be retrospectively justified by her eventual aim of stopping J.D. – yet this justification itself is problematic, as she resorts to violence in much the same way he does.

In one interview, Daniel Waters, the screenwriter of the original film, commented on the role Winona Ryder played in shaping the representation of Veronica:

> In my initial drafts, Veronica was much more evil and twisted. I referred to her as a female Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver*. And suddenly you're rewriting with Winona in mind, and Veronica becomes more of an audience surrogate (Markovitz 2014).

As previously referenced, Georgia Hampton argues that Veronica is manipulated by J.D. into becoming a killer (Hampton 2020: 5), representing her as a victim of his psychological control. However, Veronica ultimately emerges as the second-most violent character in the story – arguably on par with J.D. After the murder of Kurt and Ram, she insists she never intended for them to die, but J.D. counters: "You believed it because you wanted to believe it. Your true feelings were too gross and icky for you to face" (f. 00:54:00). Their exchange over whether she secretly desired the jocks' deaths highlights the ambiguity in her characterisation. Daniel Waters' reflection that early drafts portrayed Veronica as "more evil and twisted" (Markovitz 2014) raises a critical question: if the final version is intended to serve as the "audience surrogate", does this render her violence more forgivable – or even invisible? The narrative framing clearly encourages viewers to identify with her, subtly inviting them to overlook or excuse her role in the murders.

Additionally, the romanticisation of suicide by characters within the story functions in two distinct ways. First, romantic suffering is conveyed through the reimagining of violent bullies as misunderstood or tortured souls in the wake of their "suicides." The implication is that had Heather, Kurt, and Ram's deaths been correctly identified as murders, their true, less sympathetic characters might have come to light. This idea is particularly evident in the musical, where Veronica confesses to the murders, but no one believes her (m. 01:41:31) – by that point, the mythologised narratives around their suicides have become too deeply embedded in the social consciousness of the school.

Second, suicide is also romanticised through its portrayal as a romantic cause – framed as a distorted attempt to gain attention. This form of romanticisation aligns with the

broader theme of performative grief and superficial mourning, suggesting that even acts of self-destruction can be co-opted into the social currency of popularity and emotional spectacle.

The discourse in both mediums supports the romanticisation of violence in all its forms. In the film, this romanticisation occurs primarily through cinematic and musical framing. For example, J.D.'s first entrance positions him as a romantic hero, framed through Veronica's gaze, with mysterious background music and gliding camera movements, hinting at their future romantic connection (f. 00:06:14). Another instance is his monologue about his mother's death, delivered in complete silence, with deliberate pauses and no background music (f. 01:00:15) – underscoring the emotional gravity of the moment.

In the musical, visual discourse is conveyed through stage lighting: for instance, J.D. is often isolated in a spotlight to highlight his loneliness (m. 01:21:17), and during his final confrontation with Veronica, two separate spotlights emphasise the physical and emotional distance between them (m. 02:08:55). Additionally, the musical format introduces a new discursive layer through its songs. Every narrative element chosen to be expressed through music gains heightened emotional and narrative weight, reinforcing certain interpretations, particularly the romanticisation of violence.

It is essential to note how romanticisation of violence is shaped differently by medium-specific techniques. While most characters, settings, and events remain consistent between the film and the musical – with the former serving as the source material – the adaptation brings some relevant tonal shifts. The musical genre, being inherently more emotionally expressive and traditionally centered on the theme of love, foregrounds the romantic dynamic between J.D. and Veronica more prominently than the film. For instance, it could be inferred (though not explicitly confirmed) that in the film, J.D.'s decision to kill Kurt and Ram is triggered after he witnesses them bullying an innocent classmate (f. 00:40:40), potentially reinforcing his self-perception as a romantic hero enacting justice. This scene is omitted in the musical. Instead, his decision is driven by an emotional response to Veronica's suffering after being bullied by the two jocks, as made explicit in the song "Our Love Is God" (m. 01:50:38), where he sings: "They made you cry, but it will end tonight." This shift repositions his violence as an act of misguided romantic devotion rather than ideological vengeance.

Songs like "Our Love Is God", "Seventeen" and "I Am Damaged" are particularly crucial in this context, functioning as ballads that romanticise violence through the lens of

love. Their melodic intimacy and emotionally charged lyrics highlight the bond between Veronica and J.D., softening the perception of their violent actions. Moreover, the musical's tone – especially in its ballads and the heightened expressiveness of the characters – renders them more eccentric and emotionally vulnerable than their cinematic counterparts, further deepening the romantic framing.

Finally, I turn to the previously mentioned topic of focalisation and the role of the implied author in the narration. As noted, the narrative is largely filtered through the perspective and voice of Veronica, the protagonist. Her role as an "audience surrogate" (Markovitz 2014) shapes how violence is romanticised at the level of narration. Through internal focalisation, the story is anchored in her subjectivity, inviting the audience to experience events through her emotional lens. Early on, viewers are encouraged to share her fascination with J.D. and their budding romance. Even as her perception of him changes over time, as she becomes disillusioned, the narrative never fully dismantles the romanticised image of J.D. that has been established. His death leaves behind a lingering ambivalence: the audience is left to decide whether to view Veronica as a semi-positive agent of change who ultimately breaks the cycle of violence (ironically, through violent means) or to sympathise with J.D. as the tragic soul, undone by his own misguided mission to correct social injustice, defeated by the very person he loved.

The presence of an implied author suggests the solution for the audience. While J.D. is presented as a rebel with cause, willing to fight the bullies and injustice in the school, he does not actually intervene and help the victims when he is witnessing the violence. For instance, during the scene in which Veronica and J.D. ignore Heather McNamara being sexually assaulted by Ram (f. 00:42:15); or in the post-funeral scene, when he passes the jocks beating up a classmate, just staring at them, instead of helping (f. 00:40:40). This narrative juxtaposition implicitly reveals J.D.'s hypocrisy, undermining his self-positioning as a moral crusader. It is the implied author who subtly draws the audience's attention to this contradiction.

Similarly, in relation to characters' reactions to teen suicide, the implied author establishes a critical distance between the diegetic romanticisation and the audience's understanding of it. While characters within the story frame suicide in romantic or trivialised terms, the implied author's tone encourages the audience to question and critique these portrayals.

More broadly, the implied author invites the audience to interpret the narrative as a form of social commentary. The viewer is presented with two interpretive paths: to engage

with the romanticisation of violence and its characters on a surface level, or to read the narrative through a satirical lens that exposes the absurdity, hypocrisy, and dysfunction of the world depicted. J.D., paradoxically, is the only character to openly critique the school's hierarchy, comparing Westerburg High to society at large. The implied author presents his perspective as worthy of consideration, but ultimately aligns with Veronica's rejection of his violent methods. The ending of *Heathers* remains intentionally open. After J.D.'s death, the future of the school – symbolic of society – is placed in Veronica's hands. Whether she becomes "a new Heather" or genuinely works toward dismantling the toxic social order is left unresolved. This ambiguity is another gesture from the implied author: should the audience accept Veronica as the heroine who triumphed over violence, despite her own complicity and lack of remorse? Or does the narrative suggest that systemic injustice and personal violence are too deeply intertwined to be cleanly overcome? The resulting interpretation is as ambivalent as the narrative itself. While the romanticisation of violence is undeniably present, the satirical tone and overarching social critique complicate a straightforward reading of these portrayals. As a result, the viewer is left to navigate these layered meanings independently.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to study romanticisation of violence in entertainment media, and to explore how the meaning of violence can be romanticised through these representational techniques, using the film *Heathers* (1988) and its musical adaptation *Heathers: The Musical* (2018) as a case study.

The first and second chapters provided theoretical grounding by defining and delimiting the concepts of violence and romanticisation within the context of entertainment media. Drawing on relevant scholarship, the thesis developed a framework for identifying romanticisation of violence, addressing the first research question.

In the initial phase of analysis, a typology and degree of explicitness of violence were identified and examined through key scenes in both versions of *Heathers*, laying the foundation for the subsequent exploration of romanticisation. The second phase focused on an in-depth study of how romanticisation of violence functions through four key means: romanticisation of the perpetrator as a romantic hero; framing violence through a romantic cause; romanticising intimate relationships in relations with violence; and romanticising victim's suffering as noble or poetic. These were analysed on both the story and discourse levels. On the story level, romanticisation is conveyed through structure of narrative events, character portrayal and dynamics of their relationships, all of which merge within the four thematic means. On the discourse level, romanticisation is expressed through cinematic and musical framing in the film, and through song and lighting in the musical.

Medium-specific techniques reveal that the musical foregrounds romantic love more prominently as a form of romanticisation of violence. While the core narrative remains largely consistent, the musical format introduces significant tonal shifts through its emotionally driven structure, with music shifting the main attention to the instances of romantic love. The omission of certain scenes and the addition of emotionally charged

songs reposition violent actions as responses to personal emotional decisions rather than ideological motives. The musical's use of ballads and heightened emotional expression of characters reinterprets key moments as acts of romantic devotion, intensifying the romanticised framing of violence. As a result, the medium not only alters the tone but also deepens the audience's emotional engagement, offering a more intimate and emotionally resonant representation of the same events.

This research has demonstrated how story and discourse-level techniques contribute to the romantic framing of violent acts, including murder, suicide, and sexual aggression. By applying the narrative framework that distinguishes between story and discourse, the study has shown that violence in these works is not only embedded in the plot but also reframed through focalisation, tone, perspective, and other discursive mechanisms. In particular, the role of the implied author and the shifting focalisation through the protagonist reveal how contradictory meanings of violence can coexist – romanticisation on the surface, social critique beneath. This complex layering of representation allows violence to be recontextualised in appealing or emotionally resonant ways, often masking its ethical implications. The analysis confirms that romanticisation is not merely a thematic presence but a process shaped by how the narrative communicates and structures violent content. As such, the thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how entertainment media repackage violence in ways that obscure, reframe, or distort its meaning through carefully constructed representational techniques.

Heathers presents a complex case study in the romanticisation of violence. While this analysis has focused on specific aspects of story and discourse, several areas remain unexplored due to their limited relevance to the central research questions. Future research could develop in three key directions. First, although discursive techniques have been addressed in both mediums, a more in-depth semiotic analysis of music in *Heathers: The Musical*, in relation to the romanticisation of violence, could offer valuable insights. Such an analysis could be further enriched by drawing on Carmen Korpi's thesis (2023) on the characterisation and subjectivity of J.D's violent behaviour. Second, a study of audience reception could provide empirical data on how viewers interpret and emotionally respond to the narrative strategies behind the romanticisation of violence, offering deeper insight into its overall impact. Third, expanding the scope beyond *Heathers* to explore how romanticisation functions in narratives involving more explicit or graphic forms of violence could further illuminate the flexibility and boundaries of this phenomenon across different genres and media.

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Resümee

Vägivalla romantiseerimine filmis ja muusikalis "Heathers"

Käesolev lõputöö käsitleb vägivalla romantiseerimist meelelahutusmeedias filmi "Heathers" (1988) ja selle muusikali adaptatsiooni "Heathers: The Musical" (2018) näitel. Töö eesmärgiks on uurida, kuidas vägivalda saab erinevate representatsioonitehnikate abil ümber kujundada või varjata, mis teeb selle analüüsi oluliseks semiootika valdkonnas. Töö keskendub vägivalla kujutamise ambivalentsusele ja sellele, kuidas narratiivid võivad romantiseerida vägivaldseid tegusid, tõstatades kriitilisi küsimusi selliste kujutiste mõju kohta popkultuuris.

Analüüsi alustuseks defineeritakse vägivalla mõiste ja tüpoloogia ning raamistik romantiseerimise käsitlemiseks representatsioonilises võtmes. "Heathers"-i näide on valitud kultuuriliselt mõjusa teosena, mille stiliseeritud ja emotsionaalselt laetud vägivalla kujutamine pakub vaatajatele huvi ka aastakümneid peale teoste ilmumist.

Magistritöö keskendub neljale põhilisele viisile, kuidas vägivalla romantiseerimine toimib: vägivallatseja kujutamine romantilise kangelasena, vägivalla põhjendamine romantilise eesmärgi kaudu, vägivalla romantiseerimine läbi armastuse ning vägivalla ohvri kannatuste romantiseerimine. Neid aspekte analüüsiti kahel narratiivi tasandil: loo (story) ja diskursuse (discourse) tasandil, tuginedes Seymour Chatmani narratiiviteooriale.

Töö tulemused näitavad, et mõlemad narratiivi tasandid aitavad kaasa vägivalla romantiseerivale kujutamisele, seda ka mõrvade, enesetappude ja seksuaalse agressiooni puhul. Fokaliseerimise, tooni, perspektiivi, audio-visuaalsete elementide ja implitsiitse autori kaudu kujundatakse vaatajas emotsionaalne seotus, mis võib varjutada vägivalla moraalseid tagajärgi. Lõputöö järeldab, et romantiseerimine ei ole pelgalt temaatiline element, vaid keerukas narratiivne protsess, mis esitades seda emotsionaalselt mõjuva või ahvatlevana kujundab vaatajate arusaama vägivallast.

Annex

Table presenting the description of violent scenes in the film oh Heathers and its musical adaptation.

Timecode (film)	Scene in the film	Timecode (musical)	Scene in the musical	Type of violence	Direction of violence	Explicitness vs. implicitness	Perpetrator	Victim
00:02:56	Heather Chandler hits Veronica on the head with a croquet ball.	-	-	Physical and relational bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Heather Chandler	Veronica Sawyer
00:03:28	Heather McNamara kicks Veronica while she's writing, trying to drag her to the cafeteria to see Heather Chandler.	00:10:17	Heather Duke delivers Heather Chandler's message but does not physically assault Veronica in this scene.	Physical and relational bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Heathers	Veronica Sawyer

00:04:00	Heather Chandler exerts control by pressuring Veronica to bully and humiliate Martha. Veronica hesitates and tries to refuse.	00:11:44	The same scene is framed differently: the Heathers' power and control are conveyed through the performance of the song "Candy Store."	Relational bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Heather Chandler	Veronica Sawyer
00:04:41	Heather Chandler asserts dominance over Heather Duke with the command, "Heather, bend over."	00:10:29	Similar scene.	Verbal and relational bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Heather Chandler	Heather Duke
00:09:18	Heather asks the students a hypothetical question about aliens blowing up the world. One student responds with a violent fantasy involving killing a lion.	-	-	Physical violence - murder, assault	Interspecies	Explicit	Aliens/student	Humans/lion

00:10:04	The Heathers humiliate Martha in front of the students in the cafeteria.	00:32:34	Similar scene, but the setting is different: students are at the party.	Relational bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Heathers and other students	Martha Dunnstock
00:10:53	Heather Chandler bullies Heather Duke with a dismissive remark: “Grow up, Heather. Bulimia is so 87.”	00:05:57	Similar scene.	Verbal and relational bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Heather Chandler	Heather Duke
00:12:43	Kurt and Ram intimidate J.D. with a verbal threat: “Let’s kick his ass.”	00:15:37	Similar scene.	Relational and verbal bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Kurt and Ram	J.D.
00:13:22	J.D. fires fake bullets at the jocks, simulating a real shooting.	00:16:10	J.D. does not shoot the gun; instead, three guys engage in a physical fight. Song: "Fight For Me."	Physical - assault	Interpersonal	Explicit	J.D.	Kurt and Ram
00:13:55	Heather C. acts rude and manipulative toward Heather D.	00:19:30	Similar scene.	Relational and verbal bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Heather Chandler	Heather Duke

00:18:41	Veronica writes in her diary about wanting to kill Heather C.	00:40:23	Veronica tells J.D. that the world would be better without Heather, but does not explicitly say she wants to kill her.	Physical - assault, murder	Interpersonal	Explicit (film); n/a (musical)	Veronica Sawyer	Heather Chandler
00:19:25	Heather C. engages in a sexual act with a college student without her full consent.	-	-	Sexual harassment	Interpersonal	Implied	College guy 1	Heather Chandler
00:20:30	A man at a party harasses Veronica.	-	-	Sexual - verbal, unwanted physical touching	Interpersonal	Explicit	College guy 2	Veronica Sawyer
00:21:53	Heather C. and Veronica argue and threaten each other.	00:33:45	Similar scene.	Verbal and relational bullying, threat	Interpersonal	Explicit	Heather Chandler	Veronica Sawyer
00:27:36	Veronica and J.D. kill Heather C.	00:44:45	Similar scene.	Physical - murder	Interpersonal	Explicit	J.D., Veronica Sawyer	Heather Chandler
00:31:20	Veronica and J.D. stage Heather C.'s fake "suicide."	00:48:15	Similar scene. Song: "The Me Inside Of Me."	Suicide	Self-directed	Implied	Heather Chandler (actually J.D. and Veronica)	Heather Chandler

00:40:25	Kurt and Ram physically assault and name-call a schoolmate.	-	-	Physical - assault, hitting, bullying; relational and verbal bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Kurt and Ram	Schoolmate
00:41:48	Kurt and Ram physically assault a cow.	00:56:05	Not shown, but Heather M. mentions the assault on the cow.	Physical - violence towards animals	Interspecies	Explicit	Kurt and Ram	A cow
00:41:58	Ram sexually assaults Heather M.	00:56:56	The Heathers leave the scene, leaving Veronica alone with the two jocks.	Sexual assault	Interpersonal	Explicit sexual assault; implied rape	Ram	Heather McNamara
00:42:02	Kurt verbally sexually assaults Veronica, saying, "When I get that feeling, I need sexual healing."	00:56:59	Both Kurt and Ram sexually harass Veronica, initiating sexual activity without her consent. Song: "You're Welcome."	Sexual - verbal assault	Interpersonal	Explicit sexual assault; implied rape	Kurt and Ram	Veronica Sawyer
44:40:00	Kurt and Ram lie to everyone, falsely claiming they had intercourse with Veronica.	01:03:32	Kurt and Ram tell Heather D., who spreads the rumor. Song: "Never Shut Up Again."	Sexual - verbal assault, relational bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Kurt and Ram	Veronica Sawyer

00:45:36	J.D. suggests Veronica shoot Kurt and Ram with blanks to knock them out, then mock them by spreading a rumor that they are gay.	01:08:32	Similar scene. Song: "Our Love Is God."	Physical - shooting, relational bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	J.D., Veronica Sawyer	Kurt and Ram
00:48:46	Veronica and J.D. shoot and kill Kurt and Ram	01:10:38	Similar scene. Song: "Our Love Is God."	Physical - murder	Interpersonal	Explicit	J.D., Veronica Sawyer	Kurt and Ram
00:52:06	A policeman asks if the teenagers in the car are naked.	-	-	Sexual harassment	Interpersonal	Implied	Policeman	Veronica Sawyer, J.D.
00:52:18	Policemen declare Kurt and Ram’s deaths as “suicides.”	-	This scene is not shown, but the violent act is still portrayed as a suicide.	Suicide	Self-directed	Explicit	Kurt and Ram (actually J.D. and Veronica)	Kurt and Ram
00:53:52	Veronica burns herself with a car lighter.	-	-	Physical - self-harm	Self-directed	Explicit	Veronica Sawyer	Veronica Sawyer
00:53:53	J.D. lights a cigarette off of Veronica's burnt.	-	-	Physical - partner abuse, psychological - partner abuse	Interpersonal	Explicit	J.D.	Veronica Sawyer

00:55:00	J.D. remarks about Kurt and Ram's date rapes.	-	-	Sexual - rape	Interpersonal	Implied	Kurt and Ram	Students
00:59:15	J.D.'s phrase "Our way is the way" implies that killing is acceptable.	01:22:36	J.D. tells Veronica they "got a lot of work to do" by killing other "assholes."	Physical - murder	Interpersonal	Implied	J.D.	Students
01:00:00	J.D. tells Veronica how his mom died.	01:21:17	Similar scene.	Either accident (not violent) or physical violence - murder or suicide (unclear)	Interpersonal or self-directed	Implied	J.D.'s dad/J.D.'s mom	JD's mom
01:01:00	Veronica and J.D. break up. He shoots the radio, restrains her, and forces an unwanted kiss.	01:46:31	Similar, but there is no physical restraint or unwanted kiss in this scene.	Sexual - assault, partner abuse, psychological - threat, demonstration of force	Interpersonal	Explicit	JD	Veronica Sawyer
01:07:10	Martha's suicide attempt.	01:52:16	Similar scene. Song: "Kindergarten Boyfriend."	Suicide attempt	Self-directed	Implied	Martha Dunnstock	Martha Dunnstock
01:08:59	Veronica slaps Heather D.	-	-	Physical - slapping	Interpersonal	Explicit	Veronica Sawyer	Heather Duke

01:09:45	Heather M. calls a suicide hotline, but does not openly say she wants to kill herself.	01:36:56	Heather openly confesses her suicidal thoughts to teachers and classmates. Song: "Lifeboat."	Suicidal thought	Self-directed	Implied (film); explicit (musical)	Heather McNamara	Heather McNamara
01:10:37	Heather D. exposes Heather M.’s suicidal thoughts.	01:40:30	Heather D. bullies Heather M. more directly and explicitly.	Relational bullying	Interpersonal	Implied (film); explicit (musical)	Heather Duke	Heather McNamara
01:11:50	Heather M.'s suicide attempt.	01:42:30	Similar scene.	Suicide attempt	Self-directed	Explicit	Heather McNamara	Heather McNamara
01:14:34	Veronica attempts to slap Heather D.	-	-	Physical - slapping	Interpersonal	Explicit	Veronica Sawyer	Heather Duke
01:15:15	Veronica expresses her anger, saying she is thinking about “slitting Heather D.’s wrists open.”	01:47:20	J.D. suggests planning to kill Heather D.	Physical - murder	Interpersonal	Explicit	Veronica Sawyer	Heather Duke
01:15:20	J.D. harasses Veronica	-	-	Sexual harassment, partner abuse	Interpersonal	Explicit	J.D.	Veronica Sawyer

01:16:15	J.D. falsely tells Veronica's parents she wants to commit suicide, hinting at plans to kill her.	01:58:33	Similar scene. Song: "Yo Girl."	Physical - suicide thoughts, murder, partner abuse	Interpersonal/ self-directed	Implied	J.D.	Veronica Sawyer
01:19:00	J.D. threatens Veronica with a knife.	02:02:08	J.D., armed with a gun, pleads with Veronica to open the closet door. Song: "Meant To Be Yours."	Physical - threat of murder	Interpersonal	Explicit	J.D.	Veronica Sawyer
01:19:40	J.D. forces Veronica to write on a piece of paper.	-	-	Physical - restriction, partner abuse	Interpersonal	Explicit	J.D.	Veronica Sawyer
01:19:05	J.D. leaves to kill Heather D.	-	-	Physical - murder	Interpersonal	Implied	J.D.	Heather Duke
01:22:00	Heather C. appears in Veronica's dream and bullies her.	01:58:05	Veronica is haunted by the ghosts of Heather C., Kurt, and Ram. Song: "Yo Girl."	Physical - bullying, relational bullying	Interpersonal	Explicit	Heather Chandler, (Kurt and Ram in the musical)	Veronica Sawyer
01:23:14	Veronica fakes her suicide to deceive J.D.	02:03:33	Similar scene.	Physical - suicide "attempt"	Self-directed	Explicit	Veronica Sawyer	Veronica Sawyer

01:23:40	J.D. confesses he came to Veronica's house to kill her.	01:59:35	He does not explicitly mention he came to kill her.	Physical - murder	Interpersonal	Explicit (film); implied (musical)	J.D.	Veronica Sawyer
01:24:10	J.D. talks about faking a mass suicide at the school and blowing it up.	01:59:57	Similar scene. Song: "Meant To Be Yours."	Physical - murder	Interpersonal/Collective - ideological	Explicit	J.D.	Students, teachers
01:24:10	Mass suicide of the students.	01:59:57	Similar scene. Song: "Meant To Be Yours."	Physical - suicide attempt	Self-directed	Implied	J.D.	Students, teachers
1:29:35- 1:35:00	Veronica and J.D. have a physical fight.	02:06:10	Similar scene. Song: "Dead Girl Walking (Reprise)."	Physical - hitting, pointing a gun; sexual harassment, partner abuse	Interpersonal	Explicit	J.D., Veronica Sawyer	JD, Veronica Sawyer
1:33:48, 01:35:10	Veronica shoots J.D.	02:06:42	Similar scene.	Physical - shooting	Interpersonal	Explicit	Veronica Sawyer	J.D.
01:38:00	J.D. detonates an explosive, killing himself.	02:09:28	Similar scene. Song: "I Am Damaged."	Copmpleted suicide	Self-directed	Implied	J.D.	J.D.
01:38:53	Veronica declares, "There's a new sheriff in town," and takes Heather's scrunchie.	02:10:05	Similar scene. Song: "Seventeen (Reprise)."	Physical - bullying, psychological - bullying	Interpersonal	Implied	Veronica Sawyer	Students, Heathers

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