

# USURPING THE VICTIM'S TRAUMA NARRATIVE: VICTIM-BLAMING AND SLUT- SHAMING ON SEASON 1 OF *YOU*<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The American TV series *You* (2018-) has been the subject of a heated debate on both social media and Academia in regard to its ambiguous approach to feminism and gender violence, due to its prioritization of the perpetrator's voice over the victim's (Rajiva and Patrick 2019). In the present context of feminist activism, with movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up fostering female solidarity and giving voice to survivors of sexual violence, the series appears to have an opposite, and even sexist, agenda. Drawing on the concept of 'trauma narratives' (Vickroy 2004; Kohlke and Gutleben 2010), I argue that the first season of the show fails to grant the female victim, Beck, a therapeutic space where she can share her traumatic experience with a sympathetic audience, prioritising the perpetrator's POV, instead. This makes the audience align with him, blaming his female victims for their promiscuity and even falling for his romanticised view of violence against women.

**RESUMEN:** La serie de televisión estadounidense *You* (2018-) ha sido objeto de un acalorado debate en las redes sociales y el mundo académico en lo que respecta a su enfoque ambiguo del feminismo y la violencia de género, debido a su priorización de la voz del perpetrador sobre la víctima (Rajiva y Patrick 2019). En el contexto actual de activismo feminista, con movimientos como #MeToo y Time's Up que fomentan la solidaridad femenina y dan voz a las supervivientes de violencia sexual, la serie parece tener un propósito

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opuesto, e incluso sexista. Partiendo del concepto de 'narrativas de trauma' (Vickroy 2004; Kohlke y Gutleben 2010), defendemos que la primera temporada de la serie no le otorga a la víctima, Beck, un espacio terapéutico donde pueda compartir su experiencia traumática con una audiencia comprensiva, priorizando en su lugar el punto de vista del perpetrador. Esto hace que la audiencia se alinee con él, culpando a sus víctimas femeninas por su promiscuidad e incluso aceptando su visión romántica de la violencia contra las mujeres.

## INTRODUCTION

The successful American TV drama *You* (2018-) first premiered on the Lifetime network on September 2018 with a modest average of 1.1 million viewers a week in the U.S. Two months later, the show moved to Netflix, where it internationally debuted on December 26, 2018 and it was estimated that more than 40 million viewers binged-watched it during its first four weeks in the streaming platform (Yahr, par. 18). The first season of *You* is based on the homonymous 2014 novel by Caroline Kepnes, which follows Joe Goldberg, a New York bookstore clerk that gets obsessed with a female customer, Guinevere Beck (Beck). Joe starts stalking and following her until they eventually engage in a toxic and co-dependent relationship that ends up tragically for Beck. The series was renewed for a second season that premiered on Netflix on December 26, 2019 and was based on Kepnes's second novel, *Hidden Bodies* (2016). On January 14, 2020, Netflix confirmed that the series had been renewed for a third season, which will premiere on the streaming platform sometime in 2021 (Shenton, par. 2).

What *You* has in common with other young-adult TV series on Netflix—such as *Sex Education* (2019), *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-) or the Spanish *Élite* (2018-)—is that they all feature characters in their teens or early twenties searching for their true identity against all odds—a deed that most teenage viewers could relate to. Indeed, Judy Berman points out that although these shows are not only aimed at teenagers and young adults, the major success that the TV series *You* achieved on Netflix, as opposed to its modest ratings on Lifetime, makes “the synergy between the service and the seven-to-22-year-olds who comprise Generation Z” hard to ignore (par. 4).

Along the same lines, it seems that the casting of popular actor Peter Dinklage as the male protagonist of *You*, Joe Goldberg, and

actress Shay Mitchell as Beck's toxic best friend, Peach Sallinger, is not casual. Bangley is internationally known for his role as Dan Humphrey in the CW TV series, *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012). and is a likeable actor, well-known for his queer and feminist activism on Twitter (Ravija and Patrick 15). Mitchell, on the other hand, rose to fame starring as Emily Fields in the ABC Family/Freeform teen series *Pretty Little Liars* (2010–2017), and, consequently, has a solid female young-adult fan base. Hence, *You* arguably targets a female audience aged 18-30 who can potentially empathise with Joe's love interest, Beck, and the dangers of dating in the technological era. In fact, Mythili Rajiva and Stephanie Patrick warn that the show's ambiguous take on gender violence might influence its target audience, namely "young heteronormative women (and possibly men) navigating the perils of dating in an increasingly connected, 'woke,' and precarious world" (2).

On the other hand, *You* also shares a common feature with antihero narratives on screen like *Dexter* (2006-2013) or *House of Cards* (2013-2018): the constant use of voice-overs that echo the male protagonist's inner thoughts and narrate the story from his perspective. We also get a few glimpses of Beck's thoughts, but the series clearly prioritises Joe's point of view and silences Beck's voice. In the present context of feminist activism, with movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up challenging patriarchal discourse and denouncing sexual violence by granting women a stage where they can make their traumatic experiences visible, *You* appears to be doing just the opposite. Instead of undermining "the structures of inequality" (Clark-Parsons 3) that support those sexist behaviours, the series' appropriation and distortion of feminist discourses by a patriarchal perpetrator appears to be symptomatic of its postfeminist context of production.

However, as Rajiva and Patrick point out, *You* distances itself from postfeminist texts, in that it presents a world where feminism has failed its purpose and men like Joe are "the monstrous product of its failure" (11). The series originally showed a great potential in portraying gendered traumas, psychological manipulation and femicide, but ultimately fails in this task. Instead, it romanticises the perpetrator and places the blame on the victim, conveying a hopeless message to its female audience: men like Joe—and the patriarchal structures that he represents—cannot be stopped, so it is useless to fight them.

In this article, I first offer an overview of the theoretical framework of trauma studies, with an especial emphasis on the role of trauma narratives in allowing the audience to access traumatic experience and to help survivors work through their pain. Against this theoretical background, I then examine how the first season of the TV series *You* presents a story of abuse and gender violence from the perpetrator's perspective, who is constructed as a paternalistic and judgemental individual that 'slut-shames' his female targets. Next, I argue that by granting the patriarchal perpetrator a voice and obliterating the victim's perspective, the series is rendering her traumatic experience inaccessible to the audience, who is led to blame her for her promiscuous behaviour and to even empathise with the perpetrator's actions. This is evidenced at a paratextual level through Twitter interactions between Penn Badgley and a number of the show's female fans.

## **TRAUMA NARRATIVES**

Laurie Vickroy defines trauma narratives as fictional accounts that allow readers or viewers "to access traumatic experience" (1). She sees this type of therapeutic narratives as "personalized responses to this century's emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects of wars, poverty, colonization, and domestic abuse on the individual psyche" (x). Trauma narratives thrived in the 1980s and the 1990s, concurring with a rise of trauma studies in the humanities and an increase in collective awareness. Vickroy mentions Toni Morrison, Marguerite Duras, Jamaica Kincaid, Pat Barker, or Edwidge Danticat as the main contemporary writers of trauma fiction. These novelists produced narratives that are informed by trauma research and testimonies of personal and collective traumas in order to offer readers a fictional space where they can address them (Vickroy 2).

Hence, trauma narratives help readers and viewers sympathise with the characters' trauma, defined by Vickroy as "a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption" (ix). Moreover, trauma fiction underlines a number of "thought-provoking questions" for both authors and the audience, especially the ethical value of literature and other cultural manifestations. Likewise, trauma fiction reproduces some of the

main characteristics of trauma experience, such as rhythms, fears and anxieties, as well as the main difficulties to communicate and represent it, including “silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance and repression, among others” (Vickroy 3). By the same token, Suzette Henke coined the term “scriptotherapy,” which could be defined as “the process of writing out or writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment.” This technique was very common in survivor narratives and women’s autobiographies in the twentieth century (Henke xii-xiii), and draws on the pioneering ideas put forward by Dori Laub, especially the need for the victim to articulate their trauma and share it with an empathetic audience—i.e. their potential readers.

According to Laub, trauma survivors have “an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself,” so that they can work through their traumatic experience and start the healing process. Nevertheless, survivors tend to be haunted by a permanent silence or an “impossibility to tell,” which prevents them from sharing their stories (“Event Without Witness” 78). Furthermore, Laub stresses the pivotal role of witnessing in helping the survivor work through their trauma, and contends that if they do not have an empathic listener, they might resort to silence so as not to suffer public shame (“Event Without Witness” 79). Thus, in order to avoid this emotional entrapment, “a therapeutic process—a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalizing the event” needs to be carried out. (Laub, *Bearing Witness* 69).

The pivotal role of empathic listeners in trauma research has also been widely discussed by Dominick LaCapra, who asserts that it is fundamental for witnesses to develop an “empathic unsettlement.” This concept would require to establish empathy without completely identifying with the survivor’s traumatic experience, otherwise the observer might end up being traumatised by it. As a result, we should display an emotional reaction to others’ trauma and relive it, but always bearing in mind that the other’s experience is not our own (40). LaCapra further argues that empathy should never be perceived as “unchecked identification, vicarious experience, and surrogate victimage” (41), but rather as a crucial tool to prevent (self-)victimization.

On the other hand, Raya Morag contends that psychological trauma studies from Sigmund Freud to the present have mainly

focused on the identification with the victim and their traumatic experience. This also applies to trauma research in the humanities, “whose main tenets embrace the temporality of the victims’ traumatic memory” (95). Moreover, Saira Mohamed asserts that trauma scholars have traditionally focus their attention on victims and survivors for two main reasons: first, trauma is only acknowledged in the case of “individuals or communities viewed as legitimate and worthy of attention”; second, trauma studies in the humanities have always established a connection between trauma and the recovery of voice. Hence, trauma experienced by immoral or criminal individuals whose actions should not be sympathised with is usually ignored in both academic and fictional accounts of trauma. In fact, Mohamed contends that perpetrators are only considered to be traumatised if they have also suffered a previous trauma in their lives that triggered their current atrocities, that is to say, if they are also victims (1167).

However, Morag argues that there is a new trend in documentary cinema to shift the attention from the victim’s suffering to the perpetrator’s unacknowledged guilt. This recent tendency is known as perpetrator trauma and its representation entails some ethical and cinematic difficulties, especially in terms of “articulating the confession and reenacting the yet unacknowledged deed” (Morag 95) of the perpetrators. Fiction dealing with this kind of trauma usually portrays perpetrators who have conducted very extreme atrocities, “which leave them emotionally numbed and with unresolved guilt—gradually willing to take responsibility for their deeds” (Morag 95). In the case of *You*, even though at first it might seem that the TV series is addressing the perpetrator’s trauma and offering him a stage to confess and acknowledge his guilt, it ultimately fails to fulfil this ethical purpose, given that Joe neither confesses his crimes nor acknowledges his guilt, but rather silences Beck and presents himself as the real victim of the story.

Against this theoretical background, I discuss how the series *You* fails to grant the female victim a stage where she can verbalise her gendered traumas and share them with an empathetic audience. Instead, the show silences her and prioritises the perpetrator’s perspective—who does not show any signs of guilt or sympathy towards his female targets—, so that the audience is arguably led to blame the victim and empathise with her perpetrator.

## **INSIDE THE MIND OF A STALKER: VICTIM BLAMING AND SEXIST PATERNALISM**

Since the late 1980s the concept 'postfeminism' has been employed with a number of contradictory connotations. At first, it was symptomatic of the hostile response against feminism in Anglophone media. Imelda Whelehan defined it as a backlash against feminism in "an era of 'retro-sexism'" (11). For Antonija Primorac, this term has come to denote in American culture "a supposed obsolescence of feminism". Indeed, postfeminism appears to be "based on the superficial appropriation of elements of a feminist vocabulary for an individualistic consumerist notion of the self, who now has the right to choose traditional gender roles and imagine herself as being strong and empowered when flaunting her sexuality" (Primorac 39). But it was actually Angela McRobbie who redefined the concept of postfeminism as a "double entanglement" of both anti-feminist and feminist ideas (255) to fit a sexist agenda. Contemporary romantic comedies, as well as seemingly feminist TV series, such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) or *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), would fall under this category. However, *You* is quite ambiguous in its approach to (post)feminist culture. According to Rajiva and Patrick, it is not clear whether *You* is an ironically feminist, postfeminist or just a plain misogynistic text constructed as a "cautionary tale for girls and young women" (2), warning them of the dangers of the new technologies and apparently feminist men.

*You* is presented through the point of view (POV) of Joe Goldberg, a seemingly friendly and gallant bookstore clerk from New York, who is actually a serial stalker and killer. As stated by Karen B. Rosebaum and Susan Hatters Friedman, Joe displays an obsessive and invasive pattern of behaviour towards his female victims that lead him to commit a number of felonies, including "breaking into emails, perusing Facebook, looking through computer pictures and actual pictures, breaking into his targets' homes, posing as the idol of one of his targets, and speaking to the friends and loved ones of his targets to get more information about them" (267). Rosebaum and Friedman further argue that Joe fits into

several patterns of the “Mullen stalker typology,”<sup>2</sup> depending on which victim or what point in his relationship with them is being analysed. Joe could mainly be considered an “intimacy-stalker,” as evidenced in his constant need for love and affection, as well as his unrealistic view of romantic relationships. However, he could also fit the categories of “the predatory, rejected, and resentful” stalker, given that he picks his female targets among those who are more vulnerable and easier to prey on. After losing them, he becomes a rejected stalker, and tries to win them back. Finally, he is also resentful towards the people “who have wronged him or society. He views himself as an underdog who can save the world from phonies” (Rosebaum and Friedman 267). This is why he kills Benji, Beck’s love interest, and Peach, her best friend, two privileged people coming from wealthy families who have always looked down on working-class individuals like himself.

Rikki Thompson argues that point of view (POV) refers to “the position of the narrator in relation to the story,” which offers the audience a perspective on the action. POV can either be assumed by a character in the text, or, “a nonanthropomorphic existence,” as in the case of cinema and the visual arts, where the camera usually adopts that position (Thompson 462). However, in the case of *You*, Joe’s perspective is actually conveyed through the constant use of voice-overs reflecting his inner feelings and obsessive desires, which often contradict his chivalrous and feminist façade. According to Rajiva and Patrick, ironic voice-overs are often used in both cinema and televisual series in order to draw attention to their “mediated nature,” breaking the apparent sense of “objective ‘reality’” and questioning dominant and pre-established ways of thinking in the process (6). Hence, Joe’s inner tribulations could arguably be interpreted as ironically feminist: a nuanced critique of the patriarchal structures and rape culture that Joe encapsulates. As a result, the audience might cross-read the series through the lens of feminist criticism and conclude that it actually denounces violence against women in a disruptive and sardonic way. However, this cinematic technique is usually employed as a subversive device in anti-hero stories, so as to make the audience sympathise with flawed or morally ambiguous characters, as in TV series like *Dexter* or

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<sup>2</sup> Paul E. Mullen et al. distinguish five different groups of stalkers, based on context and motivation: rejected, intimacy seeking, incompetent, resentful, and predatory (1246).



*House of Cards*. This is the case of *You*, where the audience is led to align with Joe, the perpetrator, rather than with Beck, his current victim. This appears to be so because, even though Beck shares her thoughts with the audience in a couple of voice-overs and a monologue across the first season, Joe's POV is arguably favoured, while her version of the story is nearly silenced.

In Joe's voice-overs, there is a predominance of the second-person pronoun "you," which aims to include the audience in the narrative and is less common in narration than first- or third-person pronouns (Thompson 463). Unlike other TV series like *Dexter*, where the main character's voice-over is used to break the fourth wall and directly interact with the viewers, in *You* they are mostly directed at Beck, but placing the audience alongside her in the narrative. Hence, Rajiva and Patrick contend that even though there is a noticeable incongruence between Joe's supposed feelings of love towards Beck and his actions—which might allow an ironic interpretation of his voice-overs—, "Joe's address to Beck/us pushes heteronormative female viewers to reflect on how their attitudes and behaviors mirror that of Beck and, as such, serve to invite similar dangerous men into their lives" (7). Consequently, Joe's voice-overs might manipulate the female audience of the show to the point where they might blame the victim and sympathise with the perpetrator, falling for his romanticised view of abuse and his vilification of women's sexual liberation.

Joe constructs his female targets—both Candace, his first victim, and Beck—as promiscuous women and seductresses that exhibit themselves provocatively because they crave male attention. Indeed, in the series pilot, when they first meet in the store where Joe works, he sees Beck across the room flipping through some books and immediately assumes through her body language that she is seeking male company. In one of his voice-overs he thinks: "[y]our sweater's loose. You're not here to be ogled. But those bracelets jangle. You *like a little attention*. Okay, I bite" (00:00:30, my emphasis). Later on, he continues to observe her inquisitively from a distance and makes assumptions about her sexuality on the grounds that she is dressing 'provocatively': "[a]re you not wearing a bra? And you want me to notice. If this was a movie I'd grab you and we'd--right in the stacks in the moonlight" (00:02:30). I argue that his chauvinist attitude towards women's behaviour derives from the prevalent phenomenon of rape culture, where a number of male-dominated settings foster "sexist attitudes and behaviours and may

facilitate greater risk of sexual assault as well as victim-blaming myths” (Gravelin, Biernat and Bucher par. 81). In this culture of rape, while men are publicly praised for their multiple sexual partners by their male friends, women are often vilified and criticised for that same behaviour by society. According to Leanna J. Papp et al, these gendered double-standards are supported by ‘slut-shaming’, or the act of vilifying women owing to their actual or supposed sexual activity (par. 1).

Joe also displays other misogynistic traits, especially in terms of his paternalistic treatment of women. Lucía Estevan-Reina, Soledad de Lemus and Jesús L. Megías argue that men that oppose sexism might have two different drives, as they “may be motivated by feminist reasons but also by paternalistic ones.” In the latter case, paternalistic men would confront sexism in order to protect women, “thus paradoxically reinforcing the status quo” (Estevan-Reina, de Lemus and Megías par. 2). Joe considers himself as a feminist who respects and defends women because they are fragile things that need ‘good men’ like him to protect them from ‘bad men’ that use them and hurt them. However, given that paternalism is based on the idea that women are dependent on men, a male figure with these tendencies could never really contribute to a social change related to gender equality (Estevan-Reina, de Lemus and Megías par. 5).

There are two different types of sexist paternalism: on the one hand, dominative paternalism, which would refer to men that do not think of women as “fully competent adults,” and on the other, protective paternalism, based on men’s “dyadic dependence on women as wives, mothers, and romantic objects, who should be loved, cherished, and protected by men” (Estevan-Reina, de Lemus and Megías par. 5). Joe would belong to the latter category, since he considers women as delicate beings that need to be taken care of because they cannot survive on their own. In the following excerpt, he passes this set of beliefs on to his neighbour’s kid, Paco: “[t]he most valuable things in life, Paco, are usually the most helpless. So they need people like us to watch over them. Protect them. Y’know?” (Pilot, 00:22:03). However, Joe also infantilises Beck and feels entitled to organise her life and to decide what is best for her. In the pilot episode, he breaks into her house and criticises her for being messy and careless, and promises to take care of her when they get together: “[w]hen we live together, your place won’t be a pigsty. I’ll clean for us. And you won’t eat all this frozen shit. I’ll cook for you every day. Promise. [Joe lifts a pair of panties off the dresser. Holds

them tenderly in his hand. Pockets them.] I'll even do your laundry" (00:24:45).

Furthermore, Estevan, de Lemus and Megías assert that men that play the role of male protector usually oppose sexism, although only in regards to "socially close women," such as girlfriends, relatives or friends (par. 5). Indeed, Joe only shows respect towards his current female target, Beck, but is not as understanding or as protective of other women that he sees as potential threats to his relationship with her. These include her circle of friends, especially her closest one, Peach, a closeted lesbian who is secretly in love with Beck. Peach comes from a very wealthy and prestigious family and uses her money and influence to control Beck and sabotage her career as a writer so that she depends entirely on her. Despite the fact that Joe presents himself as a feminist in one of his voice-overs—"Sometimes I swear I'm the only feminist you know" ("Living with the Enemy", 00:03:03)—he vilifies Peach, portraying her as controlling, domineering and dangerous for Beck, but fails to acknowledge that he has the very same attitude towards her. After finding out that Peach has been obsessively stalking and controlling Beck for years—taking secret pictures of her and storing them on her computer, sabotaging her writing career, or even faking a suicide attempt to keep Beck close to her—Joe ironically concludes that: "[t]his is not what love looks like. This isn't how love behaves. This is the work of a sick mind. Let's call it what it is. Perversion [...] She wants to watch you, have you, control you like she controls every other piece of her life. She wants you all to herself. Beck... you've got a stalker" ("Living with the Enemy", 00:27:40). After Peach finds out the truth about Joe's violent and controlling nature, he murders her in cold blood. Just like Beck, Peach is not allowed to have a voice in the text or to tell her own side of story, so that Joe's perspective is prioritised and the audience is led to condone his actions on the grounds that she deserved her fate due to her controlling behaviour towards Beck.

## **USURPING THE VICTIM'S NARRATIVE: THE PERPETRATOR PRESENTS HIMSELF AS THE VICTIM**

Even though it is mostly Joe's voice and thoughts that we hear throughout the first season, there are a few times in the series that Beck is allowed to share her feelings and suffering, especially

through trauma metanarratives. According to Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, a very common way of representing suffering and pain in trauma narratives is through the constant inclusion of cathartic acts like narrating or writing, as well as reading or listening to a traumatic story. Through this metafictional technique, the traumatic narration becomes a trope in itself, since “the *mise en abyme* of written or oral testimonies highlights the verbalisation of trauma as the central act of the novelistic apparatus” (27, emphasis in original). Beck is an aspiring novelist who, in the first episodes of the series, struggles to write about her unresolved issues with her father, a recovering addict that abandoned her and her family some years ago. Nonetheless, these narratives lacked emotional depth and were not really cathartic for her because she had pretended that her father had passed away when she was a child, rather than confronting the reality of his abandonment. After her best friend Peach is found dead, she tries to translate her pain and confusion into short stories. However, she feels that Joe is not giving her enough space to grieve and to come to terms with her pain through her writing, and she resents him for it:

I haven't dealt with the shit that went on with me and Peach. Or my dad. Or Benji. And instead of putting it into my writing, I'm hibernating with you. And I resent you for it. I need space to heal. But every time I turn around, you're standing there, ready to make it all okay. But only I can do that. And if you really love me, you'll see that. You'll let me go (“Everythinship”, 00:34:37).

Kohlke and Gutleben name another narrative strategy to represent trauma, which is closely related to the inclusion of metanarratives in the text: “a self-generated healing” through narration. As discussed in previous sections, relating trauma is a performative process that only comes into being through its verbalisation and witnessing. Thus, a trauma metanarrative is “not only a verbal exchange; it also constitutes an act of generation, begetting the [...] understanding, transmission, and healing of trauma.” Moreover, by representing the witnesses' responses to trauma and, thus, creating a fictional empathic community towards the traumatised characters, trauma fiction is encouraging its audience to “create an analogous community of feeling” outside the narrative itself, in the real world. In other words, these trauma narratives could potentially transform trauma experience into

empathic collaborations and solidarity between trauma survivors and witnesses in the real world (Kohlke and Gutleben 28).

In the season finale, while being confined in Joe's cage, Beck reflects on her life and on how she has ended up trapped in a toxic and abusive relationship with a man that romanticises male control and violence against women. She typewrites a monologue where she points to the gendered indoctrination of little girls through fairy tales as the main reason why they aspire to be romantically involved with overbearing, controlling and paternalistic men. However, Rajiva and Patrick argue that this seemingly feminist monologue "doubles as an exercise in victim-blaming," since Beck "reflects on her complicity in creating the conditions for Joe's abuse" (12). In the following excerpt, she asks herself whether she asked for all the abuse and vexations that Joe has subject her to: "[d]idn't you want this? To be loved? Didn't you want him to crown you? Didn't you ask for it? Didn't you ask for it? Didn't you ask for it?" (00:22:47).

Female viewers might have felt identified with Beck's experience if that text had been expanded and shared as her trauma narrative with potential witnesses. That way, her audience would have become what Kohlke and Gutleben term "a community of feeling" (28) that could have been extended to the real world. This community would have borne witness to Beck's narrative and she would have been able to start the healing process through the verbalisation of her traumatic experience. However, in an attempt to make Joe trust her again and buy her freedom, Beck writes a false narrative where she confesses that she cheated on Joe with her therapist, Dr. Nicky, and claims that the latter is actually the obsessive stalker that murdered Peach and her ex-boyfriend Benji. After Joe kills Beck, he appropriates that false narrative and gets it published under her name so that, in the end, Dr. Nicky takes the blame for all of his crimes. Joe rejoices at his last vexation to Beck in the following voice-over: "I helped you become the writer you so wanted to be. Your lurid memoir of Dr. Nicky was the lead, but I cobbled that manuscript together from every one of your pieces fit to print. The book is yours, Beck, and it made you famous" ("Bluebeard's Castle", 00:45:58). Therefore, any possibility of sharing her traumatic experience with a sympathetic community is curtailed in the end, given that the perpetrator appropriates the victim's voice and her potential therapeutic narrative. His voice is the one that prevails, so that he can manipulate the audience into sympathising with him instead.

However, throughout the first season, it is implied that Beck is by no means Joe's first victim. He had a previous girlfriend, Candace, who allegedly cheated on him and then moved to Rome, leaving her life and friends in New York behind. Joe constructs himself as the victim of that relationship, and Candace as a promiscuous woman who sleeps with men who can help her advance her career in the music industry. As in the case of Beck, we only get Joe's POV, and Candace is not allowed to have a voice in the text. There are several flashbacks of heated arguments between the two, where Joe is seen going through her phone and reproaching her for dressing too provocatively ("Living with the Enemy", 00:35:24). It seems that Joe got violent with Candace on the grounds that she was cheating on him with the man that had signed her on his music label. He twists the narrative so that he looks like the victim and she as the villain of the story, with no regard for Joe's feelings. In one of his constant nightmares about their time together, he even tells her: "You're lying. You cheated on me. You broke my heart, Candace. I let you go! Isn't that enough?" ("Living with the Enemy", 00:35:44). Given that we do not get Candace's side of the story, the audience is led to align with Joe and accept the fact that she deserved what he did to her as punishment for being unfaithful to him. This would be another clear example of victim-blaming in the series.

Joe has recurrent nightmares and flashbacks about his time with Candace across the first season, but especially on the sixth episode, "Living with the Enemy", after he hits his head in a car accident. As discussed in previous sections, there is a recent trend in documentary films to explore the notion of perpetrator trauma (Morag 95). The perpetrator's sense of guilt can be manifested through nightmares, flashbacks, and isolation, typical symptoms of PTSD. However, as stated above, perpetrators are only considered to experience trauma if they are also victims/ survivors of a personal or a collective tragedy (Mohamed 1176). In the case of domestic violence, we have come to accept that the perpetrator probably "experienced some suffering in childhood—abuse by a family member, a parent's addiction, extreme deprivation or loss—that contributed to his criminal wrongdoing later in life" (Mohamed 1176). It is implied that Joe was raised by dysfunctional and absent parents, and that his mother did not protect him from his abusive father when he states that: "Mothers are supposed to protect their children from men like him" ("Bluebeard's Castle", 00:24:35). Consequently, the way Joe sees his female targets as seductresses

and himself, as an innocent victim of their perfidious games seems to have originated in this traumatised childhood. Likewise, his twisted moral code stems from a trauma he suffered when he was just an adolescent, perpetrated by his boss, who he sees as a father figure: Mr. Mooney. In this case, the audience is led to empathise with Joe, who was frequently kept against his will in a glass cage on the basement of the bookstore every time he misbehaved—the very same cage where he now keeps his victims before killing them. Mooney justified his brutish and abusive behaviour on the fact that he was teaching Joe discipline, and that sometimes one had to do difficult things for the people one loved. However, Rosebaum and Friedman contend that Joe uses his traumatic experiences with Mr. Mooney as an excuse to justify his abnormal behaviour (267).

Nonetheless, due to the fact that Joe does not feel guilty for the violence that he has perpetrated and does not empathise with his female victims—since he constructs himself as the real victim in his relationships—he would not fit the definition of a traumatised perpetrator. He does not try to make amends, nor does he confess his crimes, but rather keeps targeting women, controlling their narrative and silencing them, as unrepentant perpetrators have traditionally done (Mohamed 1177). In fact, Rosebaum and Friedman claim that Joe displays “an exaggerated sense of self, he is cunning and manipulative, he lacks guilt or empathy, demonstrates criminal versatility, and when his relationships end, they really end” (268). In the case of Candace, although throughout the first season it is implied that Joe killed her and made her disappear, silencing her voice and preventing her from constructing a trauma narrative of her own, she returns in the season finale to talk about “some unfinished business” (“Bluebird’s Castle”, 00:49:02). Thus, this ending leaves room for some hope that in the second season she might be able to tell her side of the story and share with a sympathetic audience her traumatic experiences with Joe.

### **YOU AT A PARATEXTUAL LEVEL: ROMANTISATION OF ABUSE ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

As mentioned above, the fact that *You* targets a young-adult, female audience is worrying, as they might easily be manipulated into accepting Joe’s romanticised view of gender violence and stalking. One of the ways in which the show encourages women to fall for Joe’s idealised view of abuse as an act of love is through the

casting of actor Penn Badgley. Rajiva and Patrick claim that Badgley's high-profile presence on social media might affect the way his role is perceived by the audience (13). This is evidenced at a paratextual level by his Twitter interactions with female fans, where some of them expressed that they found Joe's behaviour towards women romantic and appealing. A female fan even tweeted "@PennBadgley kidnap me pls [sic]," to which he replied "No thx" (@PennBadgley, January 9, 2019). While Rajiva and Patrick contend that in this case Badgley 'mansplained' gender violence to female users (13), I actually argue that he was merely trying to show his repugnance towards the idealisation of kidnapping and abuse. In another exchange that reflects the idealised view that a part of the audience has developed towards Joe, a fan tweeted: "@PennBadgley is breaking my heart once again as Joe. What is it about him?," to which Badgley replied, "A: He is a murderer" (@PennBadgley, January 9, 2019). Unlike the previous interaction, Badgley attempts to distance himself from the character he is playing and reminds his female fan that Joe is a criminal that should not be idolised. Finally, Rajiva and Patrick contend that the association between the actor and his character is even more complicated by the haunting presence of Dan Humphrey, Badgley's character from *Gossip Girl*. This is evidenced by another fan's tweet: "@PennBadgley was sexy as Dan but lord Joe is a whole new level," to which Badgley responded, ". . . of problems, right?" (@PennBadgley, January 9, 2019). Hence, it could be argued that the casting of Badgley as Joe further problematizes the series ambiguous approach to gender violence, given that part of its female audience seems to empathise more with Joe and his twisted vision of love than with the real victim of the story, Beck.

In fact, there are other Twitter posts by fans of the show followed by the hashtag "#YouNetflix," where they openly express their aversion towards Beck or even 'slut-shame' her for her promiscuous behaviour in the series. In one of these posts, a fan tweeted: "[m]e when I found out that Beck was a hoe #YouNetflix," followed by a gif of a man in an irritated pose. Another Twitter user posted that while Joe's aberrant behaviour did not annoy them, Beck cheating on him actually did: "[m]e when Joe kills Beck's best friend and stalks her vs. me when Beck cheats on Joe #YouNetflix." Other fans even wondered what Joe could possibly see in Beck, who they thought was underserving of his love, as in the following example: "Unpopular Opinion: Beck doesn't deserve Joe #YouNetflix." Other



fans went as far as wishing for Beck's death, which is arguably an example of public support of violence against women: "I'm on the 9th episode of #YouNetflix and all I have to say is can beck just die already???" However, there were also some fans that were aware of the show's ambiguous and confusing approach to feminism and gender violence, as one of them tweeted: "[t]his show is a twisted mind f\*ck [sic]. How is it possible that I like Joe more than Beck? Joe is a psychopath. #YouNetflix." All these exchanges in social media appear to demonstrate that the series' contradictory portrayal of a stalker and abuser leads the audience to condone his behaviour, and even to sympathise with him.

However, it is also worth noting that the ambiguity and doubleness with which the series explores delicate issues such as victim blaming, gender violence or 'slut-shaming' leaves the door open for a more nuanced interpretation on the part of the audience, who might read the series as an ironic and disruptive critique of patriarchal structures of gender oppression. Consequently, there might be viewers who understand Joe's inner narrative and his idealisation of gender violence as a sardonic denouncement of the pervasive rape culture that surrounds us. Nonetheless, owing to the fact that the show prioritises his POV over his victims, who are portrayed as promiscuous and deceitful women, I strongly believe that the show tries to manipulate its viewers into believing that Beck and Candace actually deserve Joe's abuse because they were being unfaithful and dishonest to him. As a result, *You* fails to grant Beck, the female victim, a therapeutic space where she can share her pain with a sympathetic audience. Instead, the perpetrator mutes her and usurps her trauma narrative, so that the audience is led to see him as the real victim and, therefore, to empathise with him instead.

## **CONCLUSION**

There has been a heated debate around the popularly acclaimed TV series *You* in terms of its ambiguous take on feminism and gender violence. It is unclear whether the show is an ironic feminist critique of abuse and stalking; an example of contemporary postfeminist media culture that superficially appropriates feminist discourse for sexist purposes; or just a plain misogynistic text that obliquely supports patriarchal violence against women. Due to the prioritisation of the perpetrator's POV in the text through the constant use of voice-overs—which give us an insight into his

feelings and thoughts—and the almost total marginalisation of his victim's perspective, I argue that *You* has a retro-sexist agenda that romanticises abuse and male control over women's lives. In the present context of feminist activism, with social movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up that offer survivors of gender violence and sexual assault a platform to voice and share their tragic experiences, *You* appears to be doing just the opposite: silencing the victims and giving credibility to the perpetrator.

At first sight, Joe, the perpetrator, appears to be an affable and chivalrous young man who cares for and respects women. He sees himself as a feminist and as a defender of his female friends. However, his thoughts and emotions—conveyed through voice-overs—contradict this gallant façade. He is actually a paternalistic man that infantilises women and considers them as fragile and inferior beings that need to be controlled and protected. Moreover, he vilifies them for their supposedly promiscuous and provocative behaviour, and even blames them for his violent and overbearing attitude towards them. These are clear examples of victim-blaming and slut-shaming, two common patriarchal behaviours in the prevalent rape culture that surrounds us.

Due to the fact that his perspective is privileged over his female targets' in the first season of the series, the audience is led to empathise with him, accepting his romanticised view of abuse, and even blaming the victims for his actions. Beck is not allowed to articulate her traumatic experience in the form of a trauma narrative in order to share it with a sympathetic audience, given that he usurps that therapeutic space when he manipulates her texts to fit his own narrative. Just like Beck, his previous victim, Candace, is portrayed as a promiscuous character that manipulated and made Joe suffer, so that she deserved what he did to her. Even if at first it seems that the series might portray Joe as a traumatised perpetrator through his constant nightmares and flashbacks about his time with Candace, the fact that he does not show any guilt or empathy towards his victims curtails this possibility in the end. In fact, his perspective prevails, and the victim is silenced and vilified for her supposed sexual activity. The audience's support and alignment with the perpetrator's perspective is reflected at a paratextual level, through a number of Twitter interactions between Penn Badgley, the actor who plays Joe, and several female fans, who both romanticise Joe's aberrant behaviour towards women and 'slut-shame' Beck. Even though it is possible that a number of both male and female

viewers might have read the series through critical lens and understood Joe's inner narrative as ironic and subversive, these examples of victim-blaming and support of patriarchal violence among young-adult female fans are quite worrying, and also prove that the TV series *You* perpetuates, rather than subverts, a gendered ideology that blames women for the violence perpetrated against them on the grounds of their sexuality.

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