

## BREAKING ROMANCE CONVENTIONS: HERO/HEROINE DYNAMICS IN ROWELL'S *ELEANOR & PARK*

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**Abstract:** This study examines *Eleanor & Park*, a contemporary romance novel by Rainbow Rowell, through the lens of Janice Radway's ideal romance formula. The novel portrays two central characters, Eleanor and Park, whose relationship deviates from traditional romance norms, offering a fresh perspective on love and identity. The objective of this paper is to explore how Rowell's characterization of the hero, Park, and the heroine, Eleanor, aligns with or challenges the conventional ideals of romance characters as outlined by Radway. Eleanor embodies traits of the ideal heroine—she is intelligent, spunky, and independent—while Park, although strong and caring, does not fully fit the traditional masculine hero image. This deviation from the typical hero archetype, combined with Eleanor's struggles and vulnerability, challenges the stereotypical gender roles typically found in romance novels. The study adopts a New Criticism approach, focusing on intrinsic elements of the text, particularly characterizations and plot structure, without considering external influences such as the author's biography or social context. The analysis finds that the characters' roles in the story push against traditional boundaries, as Eleanor's resilience and emotional depth redefine the notion of the ideal heroine, while Park's more sensitive and less traditionally masculine traits complicate the idealization of the romantic hero. Furthermore, the novel's plot emphasizes emotional growth, mutual understanding, and empathy over dominance or stereotypical gender dynamics. The open-ended conclusion of the story further subverts the expectations of a conventional romance, presenting the relationship as a tool for personal development rather than a perfect, idealized union. In doing so, the novel offers a more nuanced portrayal of teenage relationships, highlighting their impermanence and complexity. Ultimately, *Eleanor & Park* invites readers to reconsider conventional romance narratives by focusing on the internal growth and emotional connections between characters rather than adhering to formulaic depictions of love. This study contributes to a broader understanding of contemporary romance novels and their potential for depicting more diverse, realistic, and empowering portrayals of love and identity.

**Keywords:** Romance, Ideal Hero, Ideal Heroine, Impact on the Story, *Eleanor & Park*.

### INTRODUCTION

Romance novels have long been a popular genre, originating from European culture (Intan & Handayani, 2019). Despite their widespread popularity and status as bestsellers, they are often undervalued compared to other genres like detective or science fiction. This criticism is mainly due to

the perceived lack of tension in romance plots (Gray, 2000; Regis, 2007; Michaels, 2007). These novels typically focus on love stories, particularly appealing to female readers, and often portray a central heroine and hero whose love is tested by various obstacles (Michaels, 2007). Regis (2007) argues that the genre's traditional formulas can become tiresome,

prompting modern authors to adapt them to better satisfy reader preferences. Romance novels offer an emotional and immersive experience, allowing readers to connect with the characters' struggles and triumphs. They highlight love's power and the possibility of hope even in difficult times. According to Radway (1991), romance novels provide a safe space for female readers to explore their imaginations and desires, often featuring strong, realistic heroines who overcome challenges to achieve love and happiness.

Romance novels have long explored themes of love and emotional growth, often revolving around characters who face and overcome significant challenges. While traditional romance formulas have been critiqued for their predictability, contemporary works are increasingly deviating from these norms to present more complex, nuanced portrayals of relationships. This evolution in the genre offers fresh perspectives on love, identity, and personal development, as seen in Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park*. Published in 2012, this romance novel is set in 1986 and follows the story of Eleanor, a new student who faces bullying due to her unconventional appearance. As she navigates the challenges of high school, Eleanor forms a bond with Park, an American-Asian boy who shares her interests. Their relationship develops despite the obstacles they both face, particularly Eleanor's difficult home life, marked by abuse and her strained relationship with her stepfather, Richie. The novel presents a raw and realistic portrayal of teenage love, where the characters' emotional growth and mutual support become central to their connection.

In detail, this novel narrates the tale of a character named Eleanor, who is a new student with a strange appearance, leading her to become bullied at school. Eleanor meets Park, an American-Asian boy with the same hobbies and interests as her. After some time, they grew closer and became more attracted to each other. Then, Park begins to learn about Eleanor's family background, which he deems as flawed. Apart from not having any friends at school, Eleanor's life at home was less than ideal as she was often abused. She lives with her family and her stepfather, Richie, who treats her badly. For some time, Eleanor continued to hide her relationship with Park,

until one day Richie found out about this fact and did not hesitate to torture her. Until then, she decided to escape from her house and Park.

This study examines how contemporary romance novels depict the ideal hero and heroine through the lens of Janice Radway's framework from *Reading the Romance* (1991), focusing on how these idealized characters influence the plot. *Eleanor & Park* was chosen for its distinct narrative that diverges from Radway's traditional romance formula, especially in the characterization of the protagonists. This departure reflects both shifts in the genre and changing perspectives in modern literature. Radway's analysis in *Reading the Romance* (1991) stems from an ethnographic study of romance readers in a small Midwestern town, where she observed that many women read romances primarily for escape and relaxation. Based on this research, Radway developed an interpretation of romance novels, identifying specific traits that define the genre. These novels often reflect a patriarchal culture, which shapes the readers' choice of entertainment, particularly when they seek relief from dissatisfaction with their everyday lives. According to Cawelti (1972), the structure of romance novels follows a conventional formula, which includes recognizable narrative patterns and character traits. Radway's work emphasizes the intrinsic elements of the genre, highlighting how these elements are shaped by the expectations and desires of female readers. Through her study, Radway concluded that the romance genre is marked by distinct characteristics of both the hero and the heroine, which resonate deeply with the audience's desires and cultural context.

Romance novels are often told from the perspective of the female character, reflecting the genre's primary readership (Shepherd, 2007). In these stories, the heroine typically embodies qualities such as intelligence, spunk, and independence, yet still requires a man's protection and emotional support (Radway, 1991). The hero, in contrast, is depicted with exaggerated masculine characteristics: physically attractive, wealthier, and often older than the heroine (Modleski, 1996). These qualities align with conventional genre expectations where the hero is portrayed as the ideal man—strong, protective, and tender. According to Radway (1991), these traits

culminate in a structured narrative where the heroine's identity is challenged, and despite her initial resistance, she ultimately accepts the hero's love. This narrative typically ends with the hero's confession of love and the restoration of the heroine's social and emotional identity.

The narrative structure of romance novels generally follows a predictable formula, progressing through a series of events that ultimately result in the triumph of love (Wijanarka, 2022). Radway (1991) outlines a specific sequence that defines the ideal romance structure, which includes the destruction of the heroine's social identity; the heroine's antagonistic response to the hero; the hero's ambiguous behavior toward the heroine; the heroine interpreting the hero's behavior as evidence of a purely sexual interest in her; the heroine's initial response to the hero with anger or coldness; the hero retaliating by punishing the heroine; the physical or emotional separation of the heroine and hero; the hero treating the heroine tenderly; the heroine responding warmly to the hero's tenderness; the heroine reinterpreting the hero's ambiguous behavior as the result of previous hurt; the hero openly declaring his love for the heroine; the heroine's emotional and sexual response to the hero; and finally, the restoration of the heroine's identity (Radway, 1991). These 13 points ensure the romance narrative follows a structured course, delivering the expected emotional satisfaction and concluding with a reaffirmation of the characters' identities and love.

The predictable narrative structure in romance novels, as outlined by Radway, is an essential component when analyzing how characters and plot interact to form the ideal romance. By focusing on the ideal characteristics of the hero and heroine, as well as the structured progression of the plot, the genre adheres to specific formulas that resonate with readers' expectations. This formulaic approach allows for a consistent emotional payoff, which is crucial in fulfilling the genre's conventions. The structured narrative can then be examined through a literary lens that emphasizes intrinsic elements such as character development, plot, and thematic content, all central to understanding how romance novels are constructed.

To analyze Eleanor & Park and its deviation from traditional romance narratives, the study employed the New Criticism approach. This method focuses on deriving meaning solely from the text itself, often referred to as "close reading" in the United States, a method traditionally used in high school and college literary studies (Tyson, 2006). This approach emphasizes intrinsic elements of the text, such as themes, points of view, plot, setting, symbolism, and character development (Bansal, 2020; Carter, 2006, p. 23), while disregarding external factors like social, biographical, or authorial background. According to Hartoko (1986), New Criticism is egotistical and concentrates on the literary piece itself. It is unrelated to the writer (intentional fallacy), the context in which it occurred, readers' perceptions (affective fallacy), and critics' opinions (heresy of paraphrasing) (Martono, 2010, p. 190). This school of thought concurs that the only way to truly interpret a literary work is to examine its order and structure. This approach provides a consistent and objective method for analyzing literature, eliminating the need to consider external variables such as the writer's intent or the reader's opinion.

Such an analysis is valuable because it provides a deeper understanding of how contemporary romance novels, like *Eleanor & Park*, challenge traditional formulas and conventions that have long defined the genre. By examining how the ideal hero and heroine are depicted and how these characters influence the plot, the study highlights the evolution of romantic narratives in modern literature. It also underscores the growing complexity of character development, moving away from one-dimensional portrayals of love and relationships. This type of analysis contributes to a broader understanding of how romance literature has adapted to reflect changing societal norms and evolving gender roles, offering valuable insights into how love, identity, and personal growth are represented in contemporary fiction.

The analysis of contemporary romance novels, such as *Eleanor & Park*, is valuable as it offers a deeper understanding of how these works challenge traditional formulas and conventions that have long defined the genre. By examining the ideal hero and heroine through characterization, this study explores

how these characters, presented through actions, dialogues, and physical descriptions, influence the plot. Characterization allows readers to engage deeply with the characters, understanding their motivations, struggles, and growth, which in turn shapes the narrative (Sumardjo and Saini, 1997; Abrams, 1999; Holman, 1980). The plot, structured around a central conflict, drives the narrative forward by forcing characters to navigate and resolve issues through their decisions and relationships (Kiosses, 2021). The evolution of these characters and the conflict they face not only challenges traditional romantic expectations but also highlights a growing complexity in character development. This departure from one-dimensional portrayals of love underscores the shift in romance literature, reflecting changing societal norms and evolving gender roles. Analyzing both the characters and the plot in *Eleanor & Park* reveals how Rowell presents a modern, nuanced take on romance, offering insights into love, identity, and personal growth in contemporary fiction.

Previous studies related to romance formula theory have explored how the ideal romance formula is represented in various narratives. For example, Luthfiah, Assiddiqi, and Permanualudin (2023) examined how the ideal romance formula appears in the movie adaptations of *Emma* and *Persuasion*. Intan (2020) conducted a feminist literature analysis of *Perfect Romance*, utilizing the theoretical foundations of Cawelti, Radway, and Modleski. Similarly, Hayati and Emeraldien (2019) compared the characters of Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele from *Fifty Shades of Grey* with Radway's ideal romance thesis. Intan and Handayani (2019) applied Radway, Modleski, Gill, and Herdierckerhoff's theories in their study of romance narratives. These studies highlight the continued relevance of Radway's framework in analyzing the representation of romance in literature and film.

In contrast to these studies, which primarily focus on the psychological and sociological aspects of romance, several works have also examined *Eleanor & Park* through different lenses. For instance, Santosa (2022) explored the types of bullying experienced by Eleanor and its impact on the story, while Kinanti and Daulay (2020) delved into Eleanor's experience with child abuse at the

hands of her stepfather, Richie. Puteri, Oktaviani, and Safitri (2020) analyzed the social conflicts and values present in the novel. Another notable study by Savitri and Soelistriyani (2017), titled *Finding A Way to Survive from Domestic Violence: Feminist Reading on Rainbow Rowell's Eleanor & Park*, focused on the oppression experienced by Eleanor and her response to it. While these studies provide valuable insights into the novel's psychological and sociological dimensions, there is a need for broader research on *Eleanor & Park* that considers its character development, plot structure, and the evolution of romance in contemporary literature. This study fills that gap by examining the characters and narrative structure, offering a fresh perspective on Rowell's portrayal of love, identity, and personal growth.

This study addresses that gap by focusing on how *Eleanor & Park* challenges traditional romance formulas through its nuanced portrayal of the hero and heroine. Unlike the typical portrayal of a strong, masculine hero and a purely independent heroine, Rowell's characters deviate from these norms. Park, who is tender and emotionally sensitive, and Eleanor, who is intelligent yet vulnerable, break the mold of the idealized romance characters commonly found in the genre. This analysis highlights the impact of these non-traditional portrayals on the narrative structure, particularly how their evolving relationship fosters mutual growth and personal development. By examining these elements, this study offers a fresh perspective on Rowell's modern approach to romance, emphasizing emotional connection over stereotypical gender roles. Unlike previous works, this study specifically investigates the intersection of character development and plot structure in *Eleanor & Park*, filling a gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of how the novel's romantic elements subvert traditional expectations and reflect changing societal norms.

## METHOD

Primary data for this study were obtained from Rainbow Rowell's 2012 *Eleanor & Park* novel. Hachette UK published this novel in April 2012. Its digital version on Google Play Book consisted of 320 pages. Words, phrases,

and sentences from the chosen novel served as the source of data for the study. The analysis was carried out using pertinent theories following a categorization according to the discussion of the storyline and character division.

As mentioned above, the data were collected from the *Eleanor & Park* novel. The authors conducted several steps to obtain the data, including reading the novel repeatedly. This is necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of the plot and character characterization. The authors marked several quotations in the novel, including the words, sentences, narrations, and dialogues of the characters. The data obtained focused on the ideal hero/heroine and their impacts on the story.

After compiling relevant data, the researchers examined information on the research question. This analysis consisted of several stages. First, the authors analyzed the collected and recorded data. They were identified through a thorough examination of the novel's content. The authors then sorted the data according to the problem of the study. The data were analyzed to produce findings and gain insight regarding ideal hero/heroine and their impacts to the story. Lastly, the authors drew conclusions based on the examined data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Main Character's Characterization Based on the Ideal Hero and Heroine

The hero and the heroine are typically the two major characters in romance stories. In the novel *Eleanor & Park*, there is Park Sheridan as the hero in the story and Eleanor Douglas as the heroine. The researcher then examined the two characters to see if they both matched Janice Radway's ideal characteristics of a hero and a heroine in a romance story.

### Park's Characteristics Based on Radway's Concept of an Ideal Hero

Janice Radway discussed the traits of heroes in romance novels. According to Radway's conception, the ideal hero must possess the characteristics of being *strong but gentle, masculine but caring, protective of her and tender, a he-man but a loverboy too*

(Radway, 1991). In this case, Park does not fulfill several characteristics of the ideal hero.

Since Park's father forced him to participate in teakwondo practices, Park has been able to protect himself since he was a small child. In addition, Park made the decision to enroll in exercise classes. When Eleanor was bullied by Steve and his buddies, Park fought with Steve, demonstrating his strength.

*The school nurse said Park didn't have to go to the hospital, but he looked pretty bad. He had a black eye and probably a broken nose. Steve did have to go to the hospital. His tooth was loose, and the nurse was pretty sure he'd broken a finger (Rowell, 2012).*

Park demonstrated his strength by becoming enraged at witnessing Eleanor being bullied. After a fight broke out, even Steve—who is thought of as a character with good physical strength—had to be sent to the hospital for treatment.

Other than that, Park is also a gentle person, especially towards Eleanor. He showed this characteristic even at the start of the novel when Park did not yet know Eleanor. Though he thought Eleanor was weird, he maintained his composure and avoided making fun of Eleanor's appearance like his other friends did.

*Today the girl was wearing a giant men's shirt with seashells all over it. The collar must have been really big, like disco-big, because she'd cut it, and it was fraying. She had a man's necktie wrapped around her ponytail like a big polyester ribbon. She looked ridiculous.*

*And she was looking at his comics.*

*Park felt like he should say something to her. He always felt like he should say something to her, even if it was just 'hello' or 'excuse me.' But he'd gone too long without saying anything since the first time he'd cursed at her, and now it was all just irrevocably weird. For an hour a day. Thirty minutes on the way to school, thirty minutes back.*

*Park didn't say anything. He just held his comics open wider and turned the pages more slowly (Rowell, 2012).*

Park is an Asian youngster with a face that many people find pretty, and his family and schoolmates agree. Because of his strong feminine traits, Park frequently feels like an

outsider among guys, especially in the family environment and among his schoolmates.

*'That's not what I meant though. I meant ... that you're different from the other people in the neighborhood, you know?'*

*Of course he knew. They'd all been telling him so his whole life. When Tina liked Park instead of Steve in grade school, Steve had said, 'I think she feels safe with you because you're like half a girl.' Park hated football. He cried when his father took him pheasant hunting (Rowell, 2012).*

It is evident from the conversation between Park and Eleanor above that Park is aware of the fact that he is perceived as weak because of his appearance. Park does not meet the ideal of a romantic story's hero, which is to possess masculine traits. However, despite not being masculine, Park is a kind individual, particularly with Eleanor. Park would lend his books to Eleanor after learning that she frequently read his comics secretly while riding the bus. In fact, he took the initiative to make a playlist tape and lend Eleanor his Walkman in order to introduce her to this music after discovering that she was unfamiliar with some of his favorite musicians.

*He took his Walkman out of the pocket of his trench coat and popped out his Dead Kennedys tape. He slid the new tape in, pressed play, then – carefully – put the headphones over her hair. He was so careful, he didn't even touch her.*

*He could hear the swampy guitar start and then the first line of the song. 'I am the son ... and the heir ...'*

*She lifted her head a little but didn't look at him. She didn't move her hands away from her face.*

*When they got to school, she took the headphones off and gave them back to him (Rowell, 2012).*

Park's protective character became noticeable when Eleanor experienced bullying at school, which he took seriously. Since moving to that school, Eleanor has experienced bullying, particularly from Steve and Tina. Park began to feel as though he was unable to take the insults that people directed at Eleanor. He

refused to believe Eleanor had been mocked and that she had kept up her strong demeanor.

*He was suspended for two days. Steve was suspended for two weeks because this was his third fight of the year. Park felt kind of bad about that – because Park was the one who'd started the fight – but then he thought about all the other ridiculous crap Steve did every day and never got busted for (Rowell, 2012).*

According to the data above, Park received a suspension for two days because it was his first time fighting at school. Steve, who received a two-week suspension, was handled differently because he had three fights in a year. Park's fight with Steve caused him to feel somewhat guilty. However, because of Steve's behavior, which he believed could no longer be accepted, he believed that his action was appropriate.

It was mentioned in the previous statement that Park does not fit the definition of masculine, as explained in the previous statement. By contrast, a he-man character is a figure who is physically powerful and possesses a strong sense of masculinity. As a result, Park can't be considered a he-man in the definition.

However Park has a certain characteristic that makes him a loverboy. Girls may find themselves drawn to Park because of his attractive features and charisma. Before meeting Eleanor in high school, Park had a number of ex-girlfriends, that even Tina and her mother acknowledged as well.

*'Hey, Mrs Sheridan,' Tina said, holding a white washcloth over her eyes, 'have you met Park's girlfriend yet?'*

*His mom didn't look up from Tina's head. 'Nooo,' she said, clicking her tongue. 'No girlfriend. Not Park' (Rowell, 2012).*

It is clear from the foregoing examination of Park Sheridan's traits that Park does not possess the characteristics of the ideal romance hero. Park has the character of strong but gentle, caring, protective of the heroine and tender, and a loverboy. However, he is not a masculine figure and does not have he-man traits.

In the novel, Park is portrayed as having a mixed blood of Korean and American. He is

the concrete example of a character who does not belong to a common American family due to his heritage, which sometimes causes confusion. He is not as masculine as the ideal boy/man, as he embraces Korean culture that promotes unisex. This culture allows boys/men to use makeup and Park uses it too. He uses eye makeup and has confidence in using it. This confidence came from his upbringing as he has loving parents that become a good support system to him.

This so-called 'non-masculine' description of Park made him easy to approach. He is deemed harmless, especially for Eleanor. Eleanor who grew up in an abusive family longs for emotional safety. Being with Park, Eleanor felt respected and protected. Even though Eleanor looks resilient on the outside, she is fragile and insecure on the inside. Park shows Eleanor that being masculine can be put side by side with softness, defying traditional masculine traits, especially toxic masculinity, which is shown by Eleanor's stepfather.

In the novel's description, Park and Eleanor have contradictory characters. Their relationship embarked on the school bus where Park saw Eleanor's uniqueness and chose to share his hobbies with her, namely reading comics and listening to music. This beginning then strengthened the bond between Park and Eleanor.

The 'non-masculine' character of Park actually strengthened the bond between him and Eleanor. It was ironic as people would suggest that their differences would repel them. On the contrary, it was the glue which pulled them together. Park's openness meets with Eleanor's fragility, growing their relationship as partners. Eleanor who was first reluctant to open up, slowly surrendered to Park's tenderness. This unexpected bond between Park and Eleanor later promoted equity between them, making them grow closer and supporting their self-cultivation.

### **Eleanor's Characteristics Based on Radway's Concept of an Ideal Heroine**

According to Janice Radway's book *Reading the Romance*, there is a representation of the ideal heroine in a romance novel. She discovered this while studying Smithton women for her studies. This research led to the conclusion that the heroine in romance novels should have three specific qualities, i.e.,

*intelligent, spunky, and independent* (Radway, 1991, p. 125). According to Janice Radway's ideal heroine characteristics, Eleanor Douglass showed these three traits.

A girl named Eleanor recently moved to a new school. She is a teenager who sticks out from the other kids because of her unusual features. Because of her red hair, she lacks confidence and always believes that she is not attractive. Eleanor's distinctive nature is partly attributed to her family's lack of good fortune. Eleanor's personality allowed her to impress her teachers and friends with an outstanding performance when she recited a poem on the first day. She possesses intelligence, which she shows to her friends who previously looked down on her while on the school bus.

*Mr Stessman didn't stop her, so she read the whole poem in that cool, defiant voice. The same voice she'd used on Tina.*

*'That was wonderful,' Mr Stessman said when he was done. He was beaming. 'Just wonderful. I hope you'll stay with us, Eleanor, at least until we do Medea. That's a voice that arrives on a chariot drawn by dragons' (Rowell, 2012).*

The data above shows how Mr. Stessman praised Eleanor for her perfect poetry reading to her class. This shows that Eleanor has the intelligence to adapt to her new environment, even though she does not have good self-confidence. Also, it turns out that Eleanor is able to adapt to lessons at her new school.

Eleanor seems to fulfill not only the intelligent characteristic, but also the second ideal characteristic of a heroine character, which is spunky. Eleanor's tomboyish appearance and unconventional demeanor make her possess a lot of spunky characteristics.

Spunky in literal meaning can be defined as the integration of several traits, which is bravery, grit, perseverance, resilience, humor, and a sense of individuality.

*Not just new – but big and awkward. With crazy hair, bright red on top of curly. And she was dressed like ... like she wanted people to look at her. Or maybe like she didn't get what a mess she was. He had on a plaid shirt, a man's shirt, with half a dozen weird necklaces hanging around her neck and scarves wrapped around*

her wrists. She remembered Park of a scarecrow or one of the trouble dolls her mother kept on her dresser. Like something that wouldn't survive in the wild (Rowell, 2012).

The quote above at the beginning of the novel shows how Eleanor's appearance seems to defy individuality. Eleanor is aware that her appearance makes other people judge and bully her. Even so, she still stands for herself. She does not have any choice to appear otherwise. Her family's poverty made her the way she is. The fact that she does not conform to society's expectations caught the attention of Park and other students on the school bus. It was especially due to the unusual combination of her features. It is evident that Park thinks Eleanor is odd. Other data that shows Eleanor's spunky character is when she opposes the words of Tina and Steve who are antagonists on the school bus.

*'Hey,' Tina said loudly.*

*The girl kept moving.*

*'Hey,' Tina said, 'Bozo.'*

*Steve started laughing. His friends fell in a few seconds behind him.*

*'You can't sit there,' Tina said. 'That's Mikayla's seat.'*

*The girl stopped and looked up at Tina, then looked back at the empty seat.*

*'Sit down,' the driver bellowed from the front.*

*'I have to sit somewhere,' the girl said to Tina in a firm, calm voice (Rowell, 2012, p. 9).*

This data shows that Eleanor responded calmly and firmly to Tina's and Steve's behavior, despite the fact that Eleanor was a new student. It shows that Eleanor has a spunky nature that makes her stand out from the crowd and that she is a strong individual. Strong individuals do not hesitate to express their opinions. They are rarely cowed by other people's threats. By doing so, Eleanor challenges social norms. She does not like to appease others although she came from a poor and abusive family. She will not let that fact lower her worth.

As the first child in the family, Eleanor has a complicated family history, but she is certainly a person with an independent streak. There was never a moment when Eleanor was not independent. These qualities are made

abundantly evident throughout the narrative. Besides being independent, Eleanor has this witty and sarcastic humor. In the data below, she replied to her mother that she is a charter member of the family, not a fixed one. Even during the dark days when her stepfather would abuse her, she showed emotional resilience, fierce loyalty, and a protective instinct. She shielded her sibling when Richie, her stepfather, was out of control.

*'Richie said he'll take you,' her mom said. 'It's on his way to work.'*

*'Is he going to make me ride in the back of his truck?'*

*'He's trying to make peace, Eleanor. You promised that you'd try, too.'*

*'It's easier for me to make peace from a distance.'*

*'I told him you were ready to be part of this family.'*

*'I'm already part of this family. I'm like a charter member.'*

*'Eleanor,' her mother said. 'Please.'*

*'I'll just ride the bus,' Eleanor had said. 'It's not a big deal. I'll meet people' (Rowell, 2012).*

Eleanor Douglas fulfills Janice Radway's ideal heroine criteria with the way her character is presented in the story. She is depicted with her bright red and curly hair. She wears thrifted clothes. She attracts people with her mismatched clothing which later on invites ridicule from her peers and surroundings. Despite all of that, she stands firm, guarded, and conscious to show her fierce individuality. This makes Eleanor's character complex, as under her unique exterior, she longs for love and connection. Thus, she has all the characteristics of *intelligent, spunky, and independent*.

### **How the Ideal Hero and Heroine Depicted by the Eleanor & Park Novel Impacts the Story**

Previous analysis on the character of Park and Eleanor showed that Park did not fulfill the ideal characteristics of a hero, while Eleanor fulfilled the ideal characteristics of a heroine. According to some articles, Rainbow Rowell wrote *Eleanor & Park* with the aim of portraying an authentic yet complex love story of some teenagers. The novel explores themes such as identity, acceptance, and life challenges



through the two main characters, namely Park, a boy with a mix of American and Korean blood who faces racial identity issues and Eleanor, a girl who originated from a difficult family background.

This novel shows its unique story starting with the unusual male character who is not depicted as an ideal hero. Park possessed non-traditional masculinity traits. He has emotional sensitivity, a love for makeup, and a soft-spoken nature. These characteristics deviate from the patriarchal marks usually depicted in novels. The love story between Park and Eleanor describes a common teenage love story that values empathy and emotional connection over dominance or the traditional male stereotype. These traits later on create a more realistic and layered depiction of a teenage relationship which headlines mutual growth and understanding rather than idealized romance.

This novel describes Eleanor's struggle and vulnerability as the heroine. She fulfills the traits of an ideal heroine despite her circumstances. Different from common ideal heroines in romance stories who might be solely defined by the romantic endeavor, Eleanor instead faces some challenges, such as poverty, bullying, and abuse. Her relationship with Park became a refuge and a facility for personal growth. It seems that Rowell as the author refuses to give her imaginary main female character a 'happily ever after' ending. By doing so, she overthrows the traditional romantic narrative. This novel then highlights the importance of self-worth and survival in the harsh world.

The *Eleanor & Park* novel ends with an open ending. The ending of this story seems very intentional as it allows readers to imagine the kind of ending they wish for Eleanor and Park to have. It challenges the romantic formula's promise of fulfillment through love. By leaving it open-ended, the novel accentuates the complexities of love, growth, and the realities of teenagers. Perhaps, Rowell chose this type of ending to encourage readers to reflect on the impermanence of teenage relationships and the role they play in personal development.

In the end, the depiction of the ideal hero and heroine in the *Eleanor & Park* novel has a huge impact on the flow of the story. In its own way, the *Eleanor & Park* novel tries to challenge

the idea of traditional romance stories through its creativity and depth. The *Eleanor & Park* novel also offers the contemporary romantic relationship as a diverse experience. It explored new ways of connecting love through the diversity of the lovers' backgrounds. It also broadens the novel's socio-cultural implications.

Previous studies on *Eleanor & Park* have largely focused on the psychological, sociological, and thematic aspects of the novel. Research such as that by Santosa (2022) and Savitri & Soelistriyani (2017) examines the struggles of the characters, particularly Eleanor's experiences with bullying and domestic abuse, which shape her emotional development and responses to her environment. These studies align with the current paper in recognizing the complexities of the characters' emotional lives and the impact of external factors, such as social conflicts and personal trauma, on their growth. Similarly, studies by Puteri, Oktaviani, and Safitri (2020) explore social values in the novel, which also intersect with the themes of identity and personal development discussed in the present analysis. The previous works, however, focus mainly on the external influences on the characters, without delving deeply into the genre's conventions or how the characters' development challenges romantic tropes.

The present study differs by emphasizing the subversion of traditional romance formulas through the non-traditional characterization of the hero and heroine in *Eleanor & Park*. While earlier studies primarily focus on Eleanor's psychological resilience or the external forces she faces, this analysis shifts the focus to how the characters' evolving emotional growth and mutual understanding deviate from the typical romance narrative. Specifically, Park's non-traditional masculinity and Eleanor's independence challenge conventional portrayals of romantic heroes and heroines. Additionally, this paper explores how these character traits impact the plot structure, offering a modern take on romance where personal development and partnership replace the stereotypical dominant-submissive dynamics. This focus on how *Eleanor & Park* reimagines romance through character development and emotional growth presents a unique contribution to the existing body of

literature, reflecting broader societal changes in love, identity, and gender roles.

## CONCLUSION

The study analyzed Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park* novel using Janice Radway's theory of the ideal romance formula. It analyzed the two main characters' characteristics as well as their impacts on the story's plotline. The first character is Eleanor, who is the heroine in this novel. Upon analysis, it was found that Eleanor fulfilled all three requirements for an ideal romance story heroine. Eleanor is an intelligent, spunky, and independent individual. Park, on the other hand, does not fulfill the ideal characteristics of a hero for a romance story. Park has a strong, gentle, caring, and tender personality. Apart from that, he is also a loverboy. However, he lacks the qualities of a he-man and is unable to live up to the expectations of masculinity.

The impact of the ideal hero and heroine characterization in the story is that the story depicts a realistic teenage love story, emphasizing emotional growth and equal partnership between Park and Eleanor. Their relationship promotes empathy and emotional connection, challenging traditional romantic story plotlines that often highlight gender stereotypes. The open-ended story concludes the complexity of teenage romantic relationships, provoking the readers to not perpetuate young love and its role in personal growth.

This novel is a proven medium of innovation in creating literary works, especially in novels. Rainbow Rowell offers a fresh approach to the readers of the romance genre. This novel highlights the diversity of experiences and reflects broader socio-cultural implications. The novel rejects traditional romantic formulas, focusing instead on the power of relationships as a tool for self-development and as an escape from adversity. The article concludes that the characters and relationship dynamics in *Eleanor & Park* significantly shape the narrative, creating an authentic and deeply moving reading experience while challenging norms in romantic literature.

Lastly, it is worth noting that romance authors, particularly those found in novels, have always crafted stories about romance that shift from era to era. This theory then becomes interesting, because the literary works will continue to develop and might change with time, creating variations. It is imperative to acknowledge that this thesis has not yet attained perfect research. For this reason, it is very important for future researchers to study this theory more deeply. This theme may be explored in further research on other literary works. Future researchers can also explore the *Eleanor & Park* novel using other theories which have not been used to analyze this novel. Other researchers may obtain motivation and encouragement to conduct their own investigations or studies by using this paper as a reference.

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