

Toxic Relationship in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* And *We Can't Be Friends*

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Abstract:

This study explores the representation of toxic love relationships that cause emotional distress and leave deep scars. This study chooses two cross-media works, the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and Ariana Grande's song *We Can't be Friends (Wait for Your Love)* (2024), because these two works explore the dynamics of toxic love relationships. This study focuses on how these two works represent the theme of toxic love relationships, comparing the similarities highlighted and how the differences in approach are used to construct the meaning of destructive relationships. This study uses narrative as an analytical framework to examine how the plot, symbols, and storytelling structure are constructed in both the film and the song to represent emotional conflict. The method used is qualitative and comparative analysis with a close reading approach to both works, allowing for the identification of prominent narrative elements. The results show that although the two works are different in form, both are able to emphasize the destructive side of toxic love from their respective perspectives. The film depicts toxic love with the ambiguity of a complicated and endless relationship, while the song depicts clarity and self-acceptance in escaping from a toxic romantic relationship.

Keywords: love; toxic relationship; destructive; emotional scars

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi representasi hubungan cinta yang toksik yang menyebabkan penderitaan emosional dan meninggalkan luka mendalam. Penelitian ini memilih dua karya lintas media, film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) dan lagu Ariana Grande *We Can't be Friends (Wait for Your Love)* (2024), karena kedua karya ini mengeksplorasi dinamika hubungan cinta yang toksik. Studi ini berfokus pada bagaimana kedua karya tersebut menggambarkan tema hubungan cinta yang toksik, membandingkan kesamaan yang ditonjolkan dan bagaimana perbedaan pendekatan digunakan untuk membangun makna hubungan yang merusak. Studi ini menggunakan narasi sebagai kerangka analisis untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana alur cerita, simbol, dan struktur penceritaan dibangun dalam film dan lagu untuk menggambarkan konflik emosional. Metode yang digunakan adalah analisis kualitatif dan komparatif dengan pendekatan pembacaan mendalam terhadap kedua karya, memungkinkan identifikasi elemen naratif yang menonjol. Hasil menunjukkan meskipun kedua karya berbeda bentuk, keduanya mampu menekankan sisi destruktif dari cinta toksik dengan sudut pandang masing-masing karya. Dimana film menggambarkan cinta toksik dengan ambiguitas hubungan yang rumit dan tak berkesudahan, sedangkan lagu menggambarkan kejelasan dan penerimaan diri untuk lepas dari hubungan cinta yang toksik.

Kata kunci: cinta; hubungan toksik; merusak; luka emosional



INTRODUCTION

This study examines the representation of toxic love relationships in Michel Gondry's film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and Ariana Grande's song *We Can't be Friends (Wait for Your Love)* (2024). Both explore the complexity of love that fluctuates between affection and suffering, memories and loss. Although they come from different art mediums, they intersect thematically in exploring how love can be both a source of healing and destruction. What makes this comparison significant is that even though both works have similar themes, they approach them from different perspectives, offering complementary insight into the dynamics of toxic love relationships.

The reason for choosing these two works lies in the similarity of their themes. Ariana Grande, in an interview with Zane Lowe on the YouTube channel Apple Music, explicitly mentioned why *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is one of the inspirations for her song. "I think the movie is beloved because so many people can relate to knowing that something isn't right, but loving so much and wanting to stay and wanting to figure it out," emphasizing that the film reflects the relational experiences that many people have. Therefore, the song can be seen as a continuation or reinterpretation of the central theme of the film. The relationship between the two not only shows how cinematic narratives can inspire musical creation but also illustrates how art in various media can resonate with audiences facing similar emotional struggles.

The song *We Can't Be Friends* is one of the songs on Ariana Grande's seventh album, released on March 8, 2024, titled *Eternal Sunshine*. The lyrics of this song represent an emotional portrait of a relationship full of pain and instability, where intense love actually causes suffering. The lyrics highlight the experience of someone who is still emotionally attached to their lover, but realizes that the relationship is unhealthy to stay in. With a melancholic tone, this song describes an inner dilemma. On the one hand, there is a desire to stay close, but on the other hand, there is an awareness that closeness is actually destructive. Through this work, Ariana Grande emphasizes how toxic relationships not only destroy togetherness but also leave deep emotional scars, making the impossibility of "we can't be friends" a symbol of unresolved emotional attachment.

The film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, directed by Michel Gondry and released on March 19, 2004, shows the complicated and painful love story of Joel and Clementine, with a unique approach through the concept of memory erasure. The story focuses on the two main characters' attempts to forget their toxic relationship with the help



of technology, but instead reveals the paradox that memories cannot be completely erased because they are closely related to identity, emotions, and personal experiences. Through Joel's journey into his subconscious wants to forget it. This film not only critiques destructive romantic relationships but also explores major themes about memory, loss, and human vulnerability in the face of emotional trauma.

Both works, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *We Can't be Friends*, focus on the theme of toxic love relationships that leave deep emotional scars. Both highlight how love, which should bring happiness, instead become a source of suffering, and emphasize the difficulty humans have in truly letting go of emotional attachments. Both the film and the song show that even though the relationship has ended, traces of memories, feelings, and trauma remain, trapping individuals in a cycle of loss and longing. In their own ways, both show that toxic love never ends with separation, but lives on in memories and emotions.

While both works focus on the theme of toxic love relationships, they differ in their narrative strategies and emotional resolutions. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* places its narrative within the complexity of the memory cycle, showing the attempts to erase the past do not guarantee emotional healing, as love always appears in unexpected ways. In contrast, *We Can't Be Friends* presents a decisive breakup, depicting emotional closure as a liberating decision. While the film ends with ambiguity that reflects the complexity of love, the song emphasizes clarity and liberation from toxicity. This difference shows how the film and song, as different art forms, construct contrasting representations of similar issues.

Therefore, this study focuses on comparing the two works in adopting the theme of toxic love relationships by examining the similarities and differences in the approaches used. This analysis is important because both the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and the song *We Can't Be Friends* represent the emotional struggles of humans in dealing with romantic trauma, but through different mediums, perspectives, and narrative strategies. By comparing the two works, this study not only highlights how these two works interpret painful experiences of love but also reveals how aspects of memory, erasure, and rejection are positioned as responses to the toxicity of relationships. This approach is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of toxic love in contemporary culture, while also demonstrating the cross-media relevance in shaping the image of love, loss, and the process of emotional healing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study uses narrative theory as the main framework for analyzing both Michel Gondry's film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and Ariana Grande's song *We Can't Be Friends*. Narrative technique refers to the methods and tools used by writers or authors to tell a story, including elements such as setting, characters, point of view, atmosphere, symbolism, style, and theme. These components are important in analyzing how toxic love relationships are represented differently in cinematic and musical forms.

In film studies, Bordwell et al. (1997) emphasize that narrative and style are the two main formal systems in cinema, which include *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, and sound. These cinematic elements shape how stories are told and how audiences interpret themes such as love, conflict, and pain. On the other hand, narrative aspects shape the plot, premise, characters, and conflict, providing a structural foundation for understanding how a story develops within a medium.

By combining these perspectives, this study classifies *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* as a cinematic narrative that uses visual storytelling and temporal shifts in the plot with fragmented parts, while *We Can't Be Friends* utilizes lyrical narration and emotional tones as narrative techniques. This comparative framework allows for a deeper understanding of how different media represent the same theme, a toxic love relationship, with different narrative strategies.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a comparative qualitative approach. The qualitative approach of this study allows for an in-depth interpretation of the meaning, symbols, and narrative strategies used in both works. According to Setyowati et al. (2021), qualitative text analysis is an appropriate method for examining narrative and cinematic elements in film text. Similarly, Abdullah (2016) emphasizes that analyzing narrative technique requires attention to setting, characters, point of view, and symbolism, which are best understood through qualitative reading.

The researcher also uses the library to obtain data. Library research relies on written sources and previous studies as the basis for analysis. The data in this study consists of two main works: Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and Ariana Grande's *We Can't Be Friends* (2024). Secondary data was collected from academic



journals, theses, and articles discussing narrative theory, film analysis, and music interpretation.

This research process consists of three main stages: first, data collection, which includes collecting the main works of Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and Ariana Grande's *We Can't Be Friends* (2024). As well as secondary sources from scientific works on narrative theory; second, descriptive analysis, which focuses on identifying narrative techniques in both works, such as *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and storyline in film, as well as perspectives, symbolism, and atmosphere in song; and third, analytical interpretation, which consists of a comparative study highlighting the similarities and differences in depicting toxic love relationship, while also analyzing the intertextual relationship between the film and the song, especially how *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* inspired Grande's work. Through this methodology, this study aims to show how two different art media use different yet complementary narrative strategies in depicting the complexity of toxic love relationships.

FINDINGS

The film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and the song *We Can't be Friends (Wait for Your Love)* (2024) both depict the emotional turmoil of toxic relationships, where love is no longer a source of healing, but rather a source of suffering. Through different narrative techniques, both works portray the cycle of emotional attachment, the pain of memories, and the paradox between the desire to forget and the inability to truly let go. Although they come from different media, both convey the destructive impact of unhealthy love and the psychological difficulty of letting go of such attachments.

In the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the toxic relationship between Joel and Clementine is depicted through the act of erasing each other's memories. Instead of bringing healing, the act of forgetting reveals the depth of unresolved wounds. The film uses a fragmented narrative structure, dreamlike *mise-en-scène*, and a non-linear plot to represent emotional disorientation. Michele Gondry constructs a visual metaphor about the cycle of toxic love, where attempts to erase trauma only cause it to repeat itself. According to Matt Zoller Seitz in his review on rogerebert.com, the use of practical visual effects and "in-camera" filming help blur the line between reality and memory, creating an emotional experience that is "unforgettable and deeply resonant." (Seitz, 2024). Joel's journey into his subconscious symbolizes a desperate attempt to find peace by erasing the

past, but each memory he erases only strengthens his dependence on Clementine. This recurring cycle reflects a psychological trap that often occurs in toxic relationships; leaving does not necessarily mean release.

On the other hand, Ariana Grande's song *We Can't be Friends (Wait for Your Love)* expresses this emotional turmoil through its lyrical narrative and minimalist musical tones. The song depicts a person who realizes the toxicity in a relationship, but it still emotionally attached, according to NBC Insider (2024), Ariana Grande describes the feeling that "*We Can't be Friends*" as a feeling where she cannot be friends with someone she once loved because that person's presence makes her lose her identity.

*I don't wanna tiptoe, but I don't wanna hide
But I don't wanna feed this monstrous
fire Just wanna let this story die
And I'll be Alright*

The lyrics reflects the inner conflict between acceptance and rejection, a form of inner acceptance that love has turned destructive, in line with Clementine's decision to forget Joel. Meanwhile, Songs Magazine (2024) argued that the song presents a melancholic portrait of love that ends in loss and regret, where sincerity becomes the cause of suffering. Ariana Grande's soft yet bitter tone and the repetition of the phrase "*we can't be friends*" symbolize the impossibility of forming a relationship without opening old wounds.

Both works show that toxic relationships often blur the line between love and dependence. The film portrays this through Joel's confusion and Clementine's impulsive behavior, while Ariana Grande expresses it through self-reflection and emotional surrender. The difference between the cinematic and musical media also results in differences in emotional resolutions. The film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* ends with ambiguity that reflects the complexity of love. While song *We Can't be Friends* presents clarity and acceptance as a form of emotional release. This difference confirms that toxic love can be understood both as a painful process towards self-liberation.

From a narrative perspective, both Michel Gondry and Ariana Grande construct an emotional space where love, memory, and pain are intertwined. Gondry uses fragmented storytelling to depict the chaos of emotional trauma, while Ariana Grande uses lyrical intimacy to explore her psychological depths. The intertextual relationship between these works is also reinforced by the fact that the music video for *We Can't be Friends* is visually and conceptually inspired by *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, where the concept of memory erasure is a central (Apple Music, 2024). Thus, *We Can't be*



Friends does not merely refer to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, but reinterprets its main message, turning the tragedy of “forgetting” into the power of “acceptance.”

At the end, both works show that toxic love relationships leave deep psychological wounds, even after a breakup. Whether through erased memories or unhealed emotions, both emphasize that the way out of toxicity is not by running away from your partner, but by facing yourself. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *We Can't be Friends* stand as parallel reflections on the paradox of love, how something that should heal can instead destroy, and how that destruction can sometimes be the beginning of self-awareness and personal growth.

CONCLUSION(S)

The Analysis of Michel Gondry's film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and Ariana Grande's song *We Can't be Friends (Wait for Your Love)* (2024), it can be concluded that both represent the complexity of toxic love relationships. Both the film and the song present an emotional portrait of how love, which was supposed to be a source of happiness, turned into a source of suffering. Through different narrative approaches, cinematic visuals, and musical lyrics, both highlight the psychological impact of destructive relationships, as well as the individual's struggle to find self-healing amid painful emotional attachments.

The film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* depicts the toxicity of relationships through a narrative about memory erasure. The process of forgetting by Joel and Clementine becomes a metaphor for the human desire to avoid pain, yet it affirms that memories and feelings cannot be completely erased. On the other hand, the song *We Can't be Friends* presents an introspective narrative focused on self-awareness and acceptance of toxic relationships. Through melancholic lyrics and emotional vocals, Ariana Grande emphasizes that letting go does not mean hating, but realizing that certain relationships no longer bring any comfort.

A comparison between the two works shows how different media can build complementary understandings of toxic love relationships. The film highlights the destructive side and the endless emotional cycle, while the song emphasizes the importance of having the courage to stop and free oneself from painful attachments. Both show that the process of healing from a toxic relationship does not occur through escape or erasing the past, but rather through acceptance and self-reflection. Therefore, it

can be concluded that *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *We Can't be Friends* together present a cross-media discourse on the paradox of love, that deep love can cause the deepest wounds, but it is precisely from those wounds that a new understanding of oneself and the meaning of emotional freedom emerges. These two works not only depict the sadness of loss but also emphasize that in dealing with toxic love relationships, humans must have the courage to choose between remaining in destruction or finding freedom through self-acceptance.

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