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Exploring Teenage Identity and Romantic Idealism in Lynn Painter's Better Than Before and Better Than the Prom: A Narratological and Stylistic Study

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**Abstract**

This study explores the construction of teenage identity and romantic idealism in Lynn Painter's Better Than Before and Better Than the Prom through a narratological and stylistic lens. Drawing on Claude Bremond's theory of narrative logic, the paper examines how decision points, emotional choices, and unrealized possibilities shape adolescent subjectivity and interpersonal relationships. The analysis focuses on the interplay between romantic aspiration, self-formation, friendship, and digital communication within contemporary young adult (YA) fiction. Painter's narratives are examined as cultural texts that reflect Gen-Z emotional realities, including social media influence, mental health awareness, and evolving gender roles. By integrating stylistic analysis with narrative theory, the study demonstrates how Painter constructs emotionally resonant storytelling through dialogue, humor, fragmentation, and digitally inflected discourse. The findings suggest that YA romantic fiction functions not merely as entertainment but as a significant cultural site. The study contributes to contemporary scholarship on YA literature by foregrounding the narrative mechanics through which popular fiction mediates adolescent experience in the digital age.

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**Introduction**

Young adult (YA) literature has increasingly emerged as a significant cultural and academic domain for understanding adolescent identity, emotional development, and social

belonging in contemporary society. Scholars have emphasized that Generation Z constructs identity within highly digitalised environments shaped by social comparison, mediated self-presentation, and networked communication, making

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contemporary youth narratives important sites for examining emotional and social development (Berryman et al., 2023; Nesi, 2024). Research further indicates that the psychosocial realities of Gen-Z youth are deeply connected to peer relationships, emotional vulnerability, and evolving social expectations during formative stages of identity formation (George & Odgers, 2023).

Within this evolving landscape, Lynn Painter has gained recognition for crafting emotionally engaging narratives that blend humour, romance, and psychological realism. Her novels *Better Than Before* and *Better Than the Prom* foreground teenage experiences shaped by digital communication, peer relationships, and the complexities of modern romantic expectations. These narratives resonate strongly with Gen-Z readers because contemporary media environments play a major role in shaping youth values, perceptions, and emotional expectations (Rideout & Robb, 2023). The increasing influence of social media on interpersonal relationships and identity construction further positions digital culture as a central factor in adolescent self-expression and emotional negotiation (Nesi et al., 2023).

This study examines Painter's novels through the lens of Claude Bremond's narratological theory, which conceptualises narrative as a system of branching possibilities structured around decisions, outcomes, and unrealised alternatives. Narratological scholarship continues to affirm the relevance of structural and decision-based models for analysing character development, emotional conflicts, and narrative consequences in contemporary fiction (Herman, 2023).

In addition to narratology, the study incorporates stylistic analysis to explore how Painter's language, dialogue, humour, and digitally inflected discourse shape narrative authenticity. Contemporary research suggests that youth communication patterns particularly those shaped by digital media are central to understanding modern storytelling practices and reader engagement (Tagliamonte, 2024). The integration of texting formats, fragmented dialogue, and youth idioms reflects the communicative patterns of modern adolescence and contributes to the emotional immediacy of YA fiction.

Although YA literature has been widely studied in relation to identity, power, and coming-of-age narratives, limited research has examined romantic comedy narratives as serious sites of emotional and cultural negotiation. Recent literary scholarship highlights the growing cultural and pedagogical significance of YA fiction, noting its capacity to engage readers in discussions of emotional literacy, gender identity, and relational ethics (Coats, 2023; Trites & McCallum, 2024). This paper addresses that gap by analysing how romantic idealism, self-perception, and relational ethics operate within Painter's fiction. It proposes that her narratives function as

cultural spaces where adolescent readers encounter models of emotional resilience, vulnerability, and self-understanding.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do stylistic elements such as dialogue, tone, and digital language reflect contemporary youth communication in Painter's novels?
- In what ways does narrative structure shape adolescent identity formation and emotional growth?
- How are themes of romance, mental health, and self-worth integrated into the narrative framework?
- What cultural and social references enhance reader engagement and relatability?
- How does a narratological and stylistic reading contribute to broader scholarly understanding of YA romantic fiction?

## Literature Review

### Young Adult Literature and Adolescent Identity

Young adult (YA) literature is widely recognised as a literary space where adolescent identity, agency, and emotional development are negotiated through narrative. Foundational scholarship positions YA fiction as a site where young protagonists confront power structures (family, school, peers) while learning to articulate selfhood, boundaries, and autonomy (Trites, 2000). Later work in children's and youth literature criticism further explains how voice, subjectivity, and "growing up" are shaped by narrative perspective, relational dynamics, and cultural expectations (Nikolajeva, 2010). Although much YA scholarship has historically prioritised dystopian or problem novels, contemporary YA trends—including romantic comedy (rom-com) increasingly invite scholarly attention because they stage identity dilemmas in everyday settings (school corridors, bedrooms, parties, dances) that mirror readers' lived experiences.

Identity formation in YA fiction is rarely a purely private process; it is relational, performed, and tested in social contexts. This makes YA romance a particularly productive genre for exploring how adolescents imagine intimacy, self-worth, and belonging. Romantic plots often operate as "identity laboratories" where characters attempt, revise, and stabilise versions of themselves through conflict, choice, and self-reflection. In this sense, romance is not merely a theme but a developmental structure: it places the adolescent self into emotionally high-stakes situations that expose fears (rejection, abandonment, humiliation) and cultivate capacities (communication, empathy, consent, resilience). Painter's writing is situated within this tradition, but it updates the adolescent world through contemporary humour, rapid dialogue, and digitally inflected communication that aligns with Gen-Z norms.

### Digital Adolescence, Peer Culture, and the Contemporary YA Novel

Recent research strongly supports the view that adolescent identity development is now inseparable from digital environments. Social media, messaging apps, and algorithmic platforms create a new “context of development” that shapes peer relationships, self-presentation, and emotional experience. Nesi and colleagues argue that social media transforms adolescent peer relations by increasing immediacy, amplifying demands, altering interaction quality, enabling compensatory behaviours, and generating novel peer practices (Nesi et al., 2018). While this framework predates 2023, it remains highly influential and provides a theoretical bridge to current YA fiction that represents texting, online gossip, screenshots, and platform-driven social surveillance.

More recent evidence strengthens and refines this understanding. A major systematic review concludes that what adolescents do on social media (quality of engagement), rather than merely time spent online (quantity), is more strongly associated with identity exploration, self-concept clarity, and identity distress (Avci et al., 2025). This matters for YA literary analysis because contemporary YA narratives often dramatise the quality of digital engagement: comparison, curated self-presentation, reputational anxiety, and peer validation. Similarly, an umbrella review highlights that social media use involves both risks and opportunities for adolescent mental health and well-being, depending on personal characteristics, usage type, and platform design (Sala et al., 2024). These findings support literary readings of YA romance that examine not only “teen feelings” but also how digital culture intensifies emotional volatility, speeds up relational misunderstandings, and raises the stakes of public perception.

Digital youth culture is also increasingly shaped by creative and performative self-fashioning. Contemporary scholarship on children and teens as prolific digital users and content creators underlines both the opportunities and vulnerabilities produced by their digital exposure, including implications for identity development, self-esteem, and emotional well-being (Kolotouchkina et al., 2023). Such scholarship helps frame Painter’s novels as culturally situated texts: her protagonists move through environments where identity is not simply discovered but performed, revised, and negotiated across both offline and online spaces.

### **Reading Culture, BookTok, and YA Romance as a Gen-Z Phenomenon**

Another major shift in YA reception is the rise of platformed reading communities, particularly TikTok’s #BookTok. Research shows that BookTok has a global impact on the production, distribution, and reception of literature, functioning as a form of peer reviewing, community-building, and reading promotion (Dera, 2024). This is important for analysing Lynn Painter because her readership and visibility are closely entangled with contemporary romance/YA

circulation systems. In practical terms, BookTok amplifies genres that are emotionally intense, highly relatable, and easily “quotable” (banter, tropes, iconic scenes). For literary study, BookTok strengthens the argument that YA rom-com is not a minor form; it is a culturally central mode through which Gen-Z communities share emotional scripts about love, friendship, confidence, and healing.

By placing Painter within this broader reading ecosystem, the literature review justifies studying YA romance as a site of social meaning. The popularity of romantic tropes (miscommunication, friends-to-lovers, enemies-to-lovers, prom-night turning points) is not only aesthetic; it structures how young readers imagine emotional development and relational ethics. Therefore, analysing Painter’s romantic idealism also becomes a way to study contemporary youth emotional culture: what love “should” look like, how vulnerability is handled, and how self-respect is learned.

YA Romantic Comedy, Emotional Ethics, and Representation  
YA romantic comedy has gained increasing scholarly relevance because it blends humour with ethical and emotional decision-making. Even when narratives appear “light,” they frequently address high-stakes adolescent concerns: social status, fear of rejection, consent, emotional safety, and peer loyalty. Research on YA rom-coms demonstrates how the genre plays with “genre-awareness,” tropes, and expectations, while also providing adolescents with scripts for recognising romantic norms and challenging them (Henderson, 2023). This is especially useful for Painter, whose narratives often rely on witty banter and trope-based anticipation while simultaneously emphasising self-respect, honesty, and emotional growth.

Painter’s fiction can also be located within broader YA debates about realism, mental health representation, and emotional literacy. Contemporary reviews in developmental media research caution that digital platforms can intensify comparison and identity distress (Avci et al., 2025) and that outcomes vary with usage patterns and vulnerabilities (Sala et al., 2024). These insights support scholarly arguments that YA romance is increasingly a venue where anxiety, self-doubt, and relational insecurity are narrativised in everyday teenage settings rather than only in “issue-based” problem novels.

### **Narratology, Choice, and Bremond’s Relevance to YA Romance**

Narratology offers an especially strong methodological foundation for this study because romantic plots depend on decision nodes (confess or stay silent; forgive or retaliate; attend prom or withdraw; trust or self-protect). Claude Bremond’s narrative logic is valuable here because it conceptualises narrative as structured by branching possibilities what might happen, what happens, and what is refused or delayed. Painter’s narratives repeatedly dramatise choice under emotional pressure, which makes Bremond’s

“virtuality/actualisation/non-actualisation” model a precise tool for mapping the ethical and psychological logic of teenage romance.

Recent narratological scholarship continues to emphasise narrative analysis as a robust approach for interpreting meaning-making in stories, including how narrative structures guide reader expectation, tension, and resolution (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019; Mikkonen, 2023). While these works are not YA-specific, they support the methodological legitimacy of applying narratology to contemporary popular fiction and justify using narrative theory to analyse how romantic “turning points” are engineered through plot structure and character choice.

### **Stylistics, Digital Dialogue, and the Language of Gen-Z Authenticity**

Alongside narratology, stylistics allows the study to examine how language itself constructs teen authenticity. Painter’s YA style typically depends on fast-paced dialogue, irony, conversational rhythm, and short lines that mimic contemporary speech. These choices are not merely aesthetic; they signal identity, stance, intimacy, and emotional defence (e.g., humour used to manage vulnerability). Stylistic approaches that attend to dialogue, discourse markers, and narrative voice help explain how YA rom-com produces “realness” and reader alignment especially when texts incorporate digital forms such as texting exchanges, emojis, or fragmented lines.

In the context of digital adolescence, stylistics becomes even more relevant because “teen talk” in fiction now includes platform-shaped communicative habits. Contemporary research also notes how young people are deeply embedded in digital media ecologies that influence self-expression and perceptions of social success (Kolotouchkina et al., 2023). Consequently, Painter’s stylistic strategies digital banter, clipped messaging, pop-culture shorthand can be interpreted as literary simulations of the very discourse environment in which Gen-Z identity is formed.

### **Research Gap and Contribution**

Existing scholarship provides strong foundations for studying YA identity formation (Trites, 2000; Nikolajeva, 2010), digital peer culture (Nesi et al., 2018), and contemporary evidence on social media’s links with identity development and well-being (Avci et al., 2025; Sala et al., 2024). Research also increasingly recognises the power of platformed reading cultures like BookTok in shaping what is read and how it is valued (Dera, 2024). However, there remains a clear gap in sustained academic attention to mainstream YA romantic comedy particularly how its narrative decision structures and stylistic choices work together to portray adolescent identity and romantic idealism in digitally mediated contexts.

This study addresses that gap by combining Bremond’s narrative logic with stylistic analysis to examine how Painter’s

*Better Than Before* (Painter, 2023) and *Better Than the Prom* (Painter, 2022) depict identity formation, romantic expectation, humour as coping, and the emotional politics of teenage relationships in a Gen-Z cultural environment.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in a combined theoretical framework that integrates Claude Bremond’s narratological theory of narrative logic with stylistic analysis of youth discourse to examine how teenage identity and romantic idealism are constructed in Lynn Painter’s *Better Than Before* and *Better Than the Prom*. The framework allows for a systematic exploration of how narrative structure, decision-making processes, and language use shape adolescent subjectivity, emotional growth, and relational ethics in contemporary young adult (YA) fiction.

### **Narratology and Claude Bremond’s Theory of Narrative Logic**

Narrative theory provides a powerful lens for examining how stories are structured and how meaning is produced through sequences of actions, decisions, and consequences. Claude Bremond conceptualises narrative as a system of branching possibilities in which characters encounter decision points that lead to actualised, delayed, or unrealised outcomes. In this model, narrative progression is not linear but dynamic, structured around three core elements: virtuality (what may happen), actualisation (what happens), and non-actualisation (what could have happened but does not occur) (Bremond, 1973; Herman & Vervaeck, 2019).

Applying Bremond’s framework to YA romantic fiction is particularly productive because adolescent narratives are fundamentally decision-driven. Teen protagonists often confront emotionally charged situations involving trust, vulnerability, peer approval, and romantic uncertainty. Each choice carries psychological and ethical implications, shaping both character development and narrative tension. Painter’s novels repeatedly dramatise such decision nodes—for example, whether to confess feelings, forgive betrayal, attend significant social events, or protect oneself emotionally. These moments represent narrative turning points where multiple paths are possible, aligning closely with Bremond’s model of branching narrative logic.

Furthermore, Bremond’s theory emphasises that narrative meaning emerges not only from events that occur but also from those that remain unrealised. In Painter’s fiction, unrealised possibilities missed confessions, avoided conversations, postponed emotional risks create suspense and deepen reader engagement. The reader is invited to imagine alternative outcomes, thereby participating cognitively and emotionally in the narrative process. This aligns with narratological perspectives that view storytelling as a system of expectation, delay, and resolution, where tension arises

from uncertainty about which narrative path will be chosen (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019).

Through this lens, teenage romance is interpreted not merely as a thematic element but as a structural mechanism through which identity formation occurs. Romantic decisions function as ethical tests, compelling characters to negotiate honesty, loyalty, self-worth, and emotional courage. Consequently, Bremond's framework enables the analysis of Painter's novels as developmental narratives in which emotional maturity emerges through decision-making processes.

### **Stylistics and the Language of Contemporary Adolescence**

While narratology explains how stories unfold structurally, stylistics provides insight into how meaning is shaped through language. Stylistic analysis focuses on linguistic features such as dialogue, tone, humour, discourse patterns, and narrative voice to understand how texts produce emotional realism and reader alignment (Simpson, 2004). In YA fiction, language plays a particularly central role because authenticity depends on the accurate representation of youth communication.

Painter's novels employ conversational dialogue, fragmented sentences, humour, and digitally inflected expressions that mirror contemporary teenage speech. These stylistic choices contribute to character authenticity and emotional immediacy, enabling readers to identify with the protagonists' experiences. Stylistics therefore becomes essential for examining how linguistic strategies construct identity, vulnerability, and interpersonal dynamics within the narrative.

The inclusion of texting formats, rapid exchanges, and informal expressions reflects broader sociolinguistic shifts associated with digital communication. Contemporary research indicates that adolescents' communicative practices are increasingly shaped by mediated environments where brevity, symbolism, and emotional signalling (e.g., emojis, short messages, indirect statements) influence how relationships are formed and maintained (Tagliamonte, 2024). Painter's stylistic approach replicates these patterns, transforming everyday youth discourse into narrative material. Through stylistics, this study analyses how humour, pauses, irony, and dialogue structure operate as emotional devices. Humour, for instance, often functions as a coping mechanism that allows characters to manage vulnerability, while fragmented internal monologues represent psychological uncertainty and self-reflection. These linguistic features are not incidental; they construct a narrative voice that embodies Gen-Z sensibilities and emotional expression.

### **Teenage Identity Formation and Romantic Idealism**

The theoretical framework also draws on interdisciplinary perspectives on adolescent identity formation, particularly within relational and social contexts. YA literature scholars argue that adolescence is marked by ongoing negotiation between personal desire and social expectation, with identity emerging through interactions with peers, family, and

romantic partners (Trites, 2000; Nikolajeva, 2010). Romantic relationships in YA fiction therefore function as developmental spaces where individuals test emotional boundaries, confront insecurities, and construct self-worth.

Painter's narratives exemplify this process by portraying teenage romance as both aspirational and uncertain. Romantic idealism is presented not as fantasy but as a process shaped by miscommunication, hesitation, vulnerability, and learning. Characters struggle to reconcile imagined love with real emotional risks, highlighting the tension between idealised romance and lived experience.

Recent developmental and media research further suggests that adolescent identity is increasingly influenced by digital culture, peer visibility, and mediated social interaction (Avci et al., 2025; Sala et al., 2024). These conditions intensify emotional experiences and shape how young people interpret relationships, belonging, and self-esteem. By embedding digital communication into her storytelling, Painter reflects this contemporary reality and situates teenage romance within a broader cultural ecosystem.

### **Integration of Narratology and Stylistics**

The central contribution of this theoretical framework lies in integrating narratology and stylistics rather than treating them as separate analytical tools. Bremond's theory explains how narrative decisions structure emotional development, while stylistics reveals how language conveys those emotional states and relational dynamics. Together, they provide a comprehensive lens for analysing how identity, romance, and emotional growth are constructed simultaneously at structural and linguistic levels.

This integration enables the study to examine:

- How narrative decision points shape identity trajectories
- How dialogue and discourse create authenticity and reader empathy
- How humour and fragmentation signal emotional vulnerability
- How digital language reflects contemporary youth culture
- How unrealised narrative possibilities intensify emotional tension

By combining these approaches, the framework positions Painter's novels as complex cultural texts where structural choices and linguistic strategies work together to represent teenage identity formation and romantic idealism.

### **Analytical Application to Painter's Novels**

Within this framework, *Better Than Before* and *Better Than the Prom* are analysed as narratively structured emotional journeys. Key moments of confession, misunderstanding, reconciliation, and self-realisation are interpreted as Bremondian decision nodes. Each narrative progression reflects the movement from uncertainty to self-awareness, illustrating how characters navigate emotional risk and relational responsibility.

Simultaneously, stylistic analysis highlights how Painter's use of contemporary youth discourse constructs authenticity. Dialogue-driven scenes, humour, and emotionally charged pauses function as narrative tools that bring readers closer to the characters' internal struggles. The interplay between narrative structure and linguistic form ultimately reveals how YA romance operates as a medium through which adolescents imagine, negotiate, and understand identity.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis to examine how teenage identity and romantic idealism are constructed in Lynn Painter's *Better Than Before* and *Better Than the Prom*. The research integrates narratological and stylistic approaches to explore how narrative structure, decision-making, and language use shape adolescent subjectivity and emotional development in contemporary young adult fiction.

The selected novels were chosen purposively due to their focus on teenage relationships, emotional growth, and digitally influenced communication. Key narrative segments involving romantic interaction, emotional conflict, and identity reflection were treated as primary analytical units.

Narratological analysis is guided by Claude Bremond's theory of narrative logic, examining how characters encounter decision points structured around virtuality (possible actions), actualisation (realised events), and non-actualisation (unrealised possibilities). This approach enables the study to interpret romantic relationships as developmental pathways through which identity and emotional maturity are formed.

Stylistic analysis complements this framework by focusing on dialogue patterns, humour, tone, fragmented expressions, and digitally influenced discourse. These linguistic features are analysed to understand how Painter constructs authenticity and reflects contemporary youth communication practices (Simpson, 2004).

The analysis follows three stages: close reading of the texts, identification of narrative decision points, and interpretation of linguistic patterns in relation to adolescent identity and romantic development. The study is grounded in established YA literary scholarship and narratological theory to ensure analytical reliability (Nikolajeva, 2010; Trites, 2000).

### Analysis and Discussion

This section applies Bremond's narratological model and stylistic analysis to examine how *Better Than Before* and *Better Than the Prom* construct teenage identity and romantic idealism within digitally mediated adolescent contexts.

#### 6.1 Narrative Decision Points and Emotional Development

Using Bremond's framework, both novels can be understood as structured around key decision nodes that propel emotional growth. Teenage identity in Painter's fiction is not static; it emerges through a sequence of choices involving vulnerability, trust, honesty, and self-respect.

In *Better Than Before*, the protagonist's emotional hesitation after prior romantic disappointment functions as an initial state of narrative virtuality where multiple outcomes are possible. She may protect herself through emotional withdrawal, pursue a new romantic connection, or remain uncertain. The tension of the narrative lies not in dramatic external conflict but in whether she will actualise vulnerability or sustain self-protection. According to Bremond's model, the reader remains aware of unrealised alternatives, intensifying engagement through anticipation (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019). Each delayed confession or avoided conversation sustains narrative suspense while mapping the protagonist's psychological development.

Similarly, in *Better Than the Prom*, the prom functions as a symbolic decision node. Attendance, confession of feelings, or emotional retreat each represent branching narrative possibilities. The prom is less a social event and more a structural pivot where identity and romantic expectation intersect. The final actualisation whether emotional clarity, mutual understanding, or reconciliation marks not only plot resolution but ethical maturation. Romantic fulfilment becomes contingent upon self-awareness rather than idealised fantasy.

Through these patterns, Painter aligns with YA traditions in which power and self-definition are negotiated through relational conflict (Trites, 2000). Romantic idealism is therefore reframed as a developmental mechanism rather than a naïve aspiration.

#### Romantic Idealism: Between Fantasy and Realism

Painter constructs romantic idealism carefully, balancing aspiration with emotional realism. The protagonists initially hold idealised expectations about love imagining grand gestures, certainty, and effortless chemistry. However, narrative progression complicates these assumptions. Miscommunication, insecurity, and social pressure challenge idealised scripts.

This pattern reflects broader findings in adolescent identity research, where romantic exploration is a critical domain of self-concept formation (Avci et al., 2025). Identity development is not merely about independence but about relational competence learning how to communicate, negotiate boundaries, and confront vulnerability. Painter's narratives depict these processes through incremental emotional risks rather than dramatic transformation.

Romantic hesitation, misunderstandings, and internal doubt create narrative tension. Importantly, non-actualised possibilities (e.g., imagined rejection, feared humiliation) often shape characters' behaviour more strongly than external events. This aligns with Bremond's notion that unrealised outcomes remain structurally present within the narrative system.

Thus, romantic idealism in Painter's novels is not escapist. It is portrayed as emotionally educative, teaching characters how to balance hope with self-respect.

#### **Digital Communication and Gen-Z Authenticity**

A defining feature of Painter's fiction is the integration of digitally inflected discourse text messages, informal dialogue, pop-culture references, and rapid conversational exchange. These stylistic choices mirror contemporary youth communication patterns shaped by digital media.

Recent research demonstrates that the quality of adolescent social media engagement influences identity clarity and emotional well-being (Avci et al., 2025), while digital peer interactions can amplify relational anxiety or validation (Sala et al., 2024). Painter's incorporation of texting and mediated exchanges reflects this environment. Characters interpret message timing, punctuation, and silence as emotionally meaningful. A delayed reply becomes a narrative device signalling insecurity or doubt.

Stylistically, fragmented sentences and rhetorical questioning often mark moments of self-doubt. For example, internal monologues frequently contain short clauses, ellipses, and interrupted thoughts. These patterns simulate the immediacy and volatility of teenage cognition. Simpson (2004) notes that stylistic deviation and conversational rhythm can signal psychological states; Painter's language reproduces anxiety, anticipation, and emotional defensiveness through such features.

Humour further functions as a coping strategy. Sarcasm and self-deprecation shield characters from vulnerability, allowing them to maintain social composure while negotiating emotional exposure. This aligns with research suggesting adolescents often use mediated or indirect communication to manage emotional risk (Nesi et al., 2018).

#### **Friendship, Gender Roles, and Emotional Ethics**

Beyond romance, friendship networks are central to identity formation in both novels. Friends function as emotional anchors, advisors, and mirrors through which protagonists interpret their own behaviour. These relationships provide ethical commentary within the narrative, reinforcing values of honesty, loyalty, and self-respect.

Female characters in Painter's novels are not passive recipients of romantic attention. They actively make decisions, set boundaries, and articulate emotional needs. This portrayal reflects broader shifts in YA literature where female agency is foregrounded (Nikolajeva, 2010). Romantic fulfilment is not depicted as dependency but as mutual growth.

Male characters, meanwhile, are allowed emotional vulnerability. Rather than embodying stereotypical dominance, they express hesitation, insecurity, and openness. This narrative strategy contributes to a model of romance grounded in communication and consent rather than idealised perfection.

#### **Conflict and Resolution Patterns**

Conflict in Painter's novels is primarily internal and relational rather than external or dramatic. Miscommunication, fear of rejection, and uncertainty about self-worth drive narrative tension. According to Bremond's structure, these conflicts generate branching possibilities that sustain reader engagement.

Resolution typically occurs through dialogue explicit articulation of feelings. Emotional growth is achieved not through external triumph but through introspection and conversation. This pattern reflects a pedagogical dimension of YA fiction, where narrative closure models emotional literacy and relational ethics.

The transition from hesitation to openness marks the protagonist's maturation. Identity is stabilised not by romantic validation alone but by the courage to act in alignment with self-understanding. Romantic success becomes a by-product of personal development rather than its sole objective.

#### **Narrative Voice and Reader Engagement**

Painter's first-person narrative voice fosters immediacy and intimacy. Readers access internal thoughts, fears, and self-questioning processes, creating alignment between protagonist and audience. This narrative perspective enhances empathy and encourages readers to evaluate alternative outcomes alongside the character. Bremond's concept of unrealised narrative possibilities is particularly evident here: readers are aware of multiple potential endings before resolution. Suspense emerges from uncertainty about which emotional path will be chosen. The narrative voice invites readers to mentally simulate alternative outcomes, deepening engagement.

In this way, Painter's novels operate as cultural texts that allow readers to rehearse emotional decision-making. Romantic idealism is tested against realism, vulnerability against self-protection, and fantasy against relational ethics.

#### **Synthesis of Findings**

The analysis demonstrates that:

- Teenage identity is constructed through sequential emotional decisions.
- Romantic idealism functions as a developmental mechanism rather than escapism.
- Digital discourse intensifies relational uncertainty and authenticity.
- Humour operates as emotional self-defence.
- Narrative tension is sustained through unrealised possibilities.
- Resolution models emotional literacy and mutual respect.

By integrating narratology and stylistics, this study reveals how Painter's YA romantic fiction represents Gen-Z adolescence as a negotiation between aspiration and self-awareness. Romantic fulfilment is ultimately depicted as

contingent upon self-understanding, communication, and ethical relational practice.

### Conclusions

This study explored teenage identity and romantic idealism in Lynn Painter's *Better Than Before* and *Better Than the Prom* through narratological and stylistic analysis. Using Bremond's theory, the research shows that adolescent identity in these novels develops through emotional decisions, relational conflicts, and unrealised possibilities that shape narrative progression and character growth. Painter's use of dialogue, humour, and digitally influenced language reflects contemporary youth communication and enhances narrative authenticity. Romance is presented not as fantasy but as a process of emotional learning, self-awareness, and relational responsibility. Friendship, family dynamics, and evolving gender roles further contribute to identity formation within the texts. The study demonstrates that YA romantic fiction functions as a meaningful cultural space where emotional literacy, self-perception, and interpersonal ethics are negotiated. By integrating narratology and stylistics, the research highlights how narrative structure and language work together to represent the complexities of modern adolescence.

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