

REDEFINING “IDEAL HUSBAND” IN THE 21ST CENTURY THROUGH *IT ENDS WITH US*

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to redefine the concept of the ideal husband in the modern era by analyzing Colleen Hoover's novel *It Ends with Us*. Specifically, it seeks to 1) explore the forms of masculinity depicted in *It Ends with Us*, 2) redefine the ideal husband through the portrayal of masculinity in *It Ends with Us*, and 3) investigate shifts in societal gender expectations through the redefinition of the ideal husband. This study applies qualitative methods and Judith Butler's theory of "Gender Performativity" as the basis of analysis. The findings reveal two distinct forms of masculinity depicted in the novel. These forms of masculinity are not innate traits of a man but are shaped through repeated performative acts. Furthermore, the modern concept of the ideal husband is based on emotional maturity and the ability to build an equal relationship with their partner. Finally, the redefinition of the ideal husband reflects a shift in society's views on gender roles in marriage. Traditionally, husbands were often seen as the primary breadwinners and dominant figures, but today, marital relationships are expected to be more equal, support their wives' careers and share domestic responsibilities.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Ideal husband, Marriage, *It Ends with Us*

A. INTRODUCTION

In the pre-industrial era, societal systems had normalized gender roles within marriage, with men designated as the primary breadwinners and heads of the household, while women were solely responsible for managing household affairs (Sear, 2021). These stereotypes were further reinforced by the patriarchal system, which granted authoritarian power to husbands and fathers within the family (Szołtysek et al., 2022). Liu (2024) argues that although marriage is essentially based on mutual love, in practice, women as wives are expected to show more respect and obedience to their husbands. These rules ultimately give rise to social norms that establish male authority and female subordination within a marriage. The formation of these social norms then influences the concept of the ideal partner within the framework of certain communities and institutions (Caeli & Himawan, 2025). Although every society tends to have its own expectations of an ideal partner (Gupta et al., 2025), ideas about the ideal husband and wife continue to shift along with social, economic, and cultural

changes (The Men’s Project & Flood, 2024). Therefore, the concept of the “ideal husband” is an important topic that must be re-examined to challenge the patriarchal values established by society in previous eras.

In the 21st century, the husband's role in the family have shifted as movements for feminism and gender equality have gained increasing support and attention. Modern husbands are expected to share household and be more emotionally involved with their wives. This shift in perspective has been further amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, when men were forced to work remotely (Carlson et al., 2024; Fry et al., 2023). In addition, this shift in views on gender roles in marriage has also been influenced by increased access to education and greater career opportunities for women (Leesch & Skopek, 2025; Mendiola & Cortina, 2025). Traits such as gentleness and emotional sensitivity are now more valued by society as qualities a husband should possess, which are subsequently associated with masculinity (Connor et al., 2021; Wojnicka & de Boise, 2025). A study by Connor et al. (2021) shows that masculinity is a social construct that continues to evolve over time in accordance with prevailing social norms.

The changes that have taken place in this century can be observed in existing literary works, as literature reflects the state of society in every era of human life. As Dhini & Haryanti (2025) argue, literary works can function as a medium for reflecting complex human experiences and their long-term impacts. One such genre is the romance genre, which can function as a cultural space that challenges societal norms regarding marital expectations (Felski, 2022; McAlister et al., 2023). As an example in the 21st century, there is an increasing diversity of social perspectives that extends across society in the United States. This phenomenon can be seen in Colleen Hoover's novel *It Ends with Us*, which presents various types of masculinity through its male characters, ranging from assertive and dominant behavior to gentle and vulnerable behavior (Sampurna et al., 2024).

Many previous studies have analyzed *It Ends with Us* in depth from various perspectives. Most of these studies examine the theme of domestic violence using a feminist perspective (Lestari et al., 2023; T. A. Lestari et al., 2019; Septiandra et al., 2024; Winarsih & Yustisia, 2024), while others analyze the impact of childhood trauma experienced by the main female character (Dapawole & Arini, 2024; G. Sarungu & Andayani, 2023; Hassannudin & Bazlan, 2024; Nurkamila & Zahro, 2022). A small number of other studies address the psychological problems of abusive male characters (Otaiwi et al., 2025) and analyze the novel's romantic tropes (Rouse, 2025). Thus, the main focus of current research on *It Ends with Us* revolves around its depiction of domestic violence, as well as the female protagonist struggling to escape an abusive relationship that triggered her childhood trauma. While these studies have made significant contributions to feminist literary analysis, there has been less discussion of how society shapes men as husbands. However, previous feminist studies has not yet been able to explain the shift in public perceptions of the ideal husband within the context of gender performativity regarding masculinity. Therefore, this study examines how the construction of masculinity and gender performativity shape the redefinition of the ideal husband following social changes in the post-pandemic era. This study aims to answer three research questions: first, "How is masculinity depicted in the story?", second, "How does this representation redefine the idea of the Ideal Husband?", third, "How does this redefinition reflect a shift in gender expectations?"

B. METHOD

This study applied a qualitative research approach to analyze the representation of masculinity and the redefinition of the ideal husband figure through *It Ends with Us* novel. This approach was used because it allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning, behavior, and social construction of literary works (Creswell, 2009). The analysis was guided by Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which views gender as a socially constructed identity produced through repeated actions and behaviors. This theoretical framework was used to analyze how masculinity is constructed and performed by male characters in the novel. The object of this study was Colleen Hoover's novel *It Ends with Us*, which serves as the primary data source. The primary data consisted of sentences, dialogues, events, and symbols that represent masculinity, gender performativity, and marital relationships within the novel. In addition, secondary data were obtained from scholarly books, journal articles, and previous studies related to masculinity, gender performativity, and feminist literary criticism. These sources were used to support and strengthen the interpretation of the primary data.

The data in this study was collected through close reading techniques. Colleen Hoover's novel *It Ends with Us* was read repeatedly to identify passages representing forms of masculinity and gender expectations in marriage. Close reading method allowed researcher to understand the text more deeply to find behavioral patterns that continue to appear in male characters in the story (Forbes, 2022). During the reading process, important quotes and scenes were highlighted, collected, and then grouped based on recurring behavioral patterns of male characters in the novel. Furthermore, the collected data was categorized into several themes such as hegemonic masculinity, alternative masculinities, dominance, control, empathy, and equality. This grouping was carried out through a thematic analysis process that focused on identifying and classifying emerging patterns in the data (Forbes, 2022). The themes obtained were then interpreted using Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and supported by previous research on masculinity. Finally, the categorized data was interpreted using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Masculine identity can be identified through an analysis of the male characters' actions, speech, attitudes, and interactions with their partners. Furthermore, this study examines how these repeated actions shape the image of the ideal husband in the novel. The findings of the analysis were then connected to changes in modern society's views on marriage, gender relations, and the role of men in marriage.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study based on the three research questions. The analysis is organized into three main parts. First, this study examines the representation of masculinities in *It Ends with Us* through the characterization of male characters and their gender performance. Second, it explores how these representations contribute to the redefinition of the ideal husband in the context of contemporary marriage. Third, it discusses how this redefinition reflects broader shifts in gender expectations within modern society. The findings are interpreted using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and supported by relevant studies on masculinity, marriage, and gender relations.

1. Representation of Masculinity in *It Ends with Us*

In *It Ends with Us*, Colleen Hoover portrays masculinity not as a natural trait of men, but as a social construct shaped by repeated behavior and interpersonal relationships through its male characters: Ryle, Andrew Bloom, Atlas, and Marshall. Through a comparison of the masculinity displayed by the male figures, as well as the shift of Lily Bloom’s perspective on these two forms of masculine performativity, the novel illustrates how masculine identity is expressed, recognized, and redefined.

According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), the masculinity presented by Ryle and Andrew Bloom is categorized as a form of hegemonic masculinity, where dominant masculinity gains social legitimacy through power, authority, and control over women. Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* argues that gender is not something we are born with, but something we repeatedly perform until it seems “natural” (Butler, 1990). In the novel *It Ends with Us*, this masculine identity is continuously performed through symbols of social status, professional success, as well as possessive and controlling behavior toward partners. Take an example from Ryle who is not only seen as attractive because of his personality but also because of the social attributes associated with him: a successful neurosurgeon. Lily’s admiration for these symbols indirectly reinforces the masculine identity performed by Ryle, making his hegemonic masculinity appear as something normal and ideal. This can be seen in the novel when Lily describes his appearance, “*He’s in scrubs, and I absolutely hate that he’s in scrubs right now. Holy hell. So much better than the onesie and way better than the Burberry*” (Hoover, 2016). Lily’s fascination with Ryle’s appearance with work-related uniforms illustrates how society acknowledges and normalizes common perceptions of masculinity as a benchmark for masculine identity.

The performance aligns with Judith Butler's (1990) perspective that views gender as a result of repeated actions until they appear stable and "natural." Hegemonic masculinity is characterized by constant dominance, protectiveness, ambition, and control over one’s partner, which is then reinforced by recognition from the society, causing it to seem normal. Therefore, Ryle's masculinity is not innate but rather formed through the repetition of behaviors in accordance with social views of how men "should" behave. Butler also emphasizes that gender performativity always requires social recognition to maintain its legitimacy, and is strengthened by Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) that suggest hegemonic masculinity gains its power by appearing natural. This is represented in the novel in the following quote: “*You are my wife. I’m supposed to be the one who protects you from the monsters. I’m not supposed to be one*” (Hoover, 2016:190). In this quote, Ryle tries to disguise his dominance and convince Lily that men are supposed to act as protectors in a relationship. In other words, hegemonic masculinity in this novel is not only practiced by the men who display it, but is also reinforced by the recognition of society around them.

Meanwhile, the performativity of masculinity is not permanent, nor does it always proceed smoothly in practice. In her book, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, Butler (2025) explains that change can emerge through “deviant repetition,” a form of repetition that differs from the gender patterns considered normal by society. In the novel, Lily realizes this deviant repetition which led to her decision to divorce Ryle. Previously, his possessive attitude, emotional manipulation, and violent behavior were often interpreted as signs of love, affection, protection, and a response to personal trauma. Such behavioral patterns can be illustrated by the following quote: “*You fell,’ he said calmly*” (Hoover, 2016:182). According to Butler (1990) this behavior can be viewed from the perspective of the

construction of gender norms through the repetition of daily practices, which gradually become normalized and inevitable. Male dominance in a relationship is not a biological concept, but rather something that develops through repeated actions and gains recognition from the people involved in a particular relationship. When Lily decided to stop justifying Ryle's actions and divorced with him, she succeeded in breaking the cycle of that masculinity.

By leaving her marriage, Lily action shows that masculinity is not permanent and can be changed. According to Butler (1990) gender identity is always fragile because it is based on constant social repetition. Thus, male dominance loses its effectiveness when women refuse to accept it. Through Lily, *It Ends with Us* not only depicts a rejection of domestic violence but also illustrates how women have the right to redefine the nature of masculinity within marriage. Lily's decision to leave Ryle signifies a shift in modern relationships away from sacrifice, fear, and power imbalances. Alternatively, Hoover offers another perspective on a more equal masculine identity, in which women are no longer positioned as weaker to preserve the institution of marriage by introducing Atlas. Differing from hegemonic masculinity, which involves domination and control, Atlas embodies a different concept of masculinity that is characterized by mutual respect and an emotional bond between partners. Instead of dominating Lily, Atlas offers her a sense of security and creates a safe zone for her. This is evident in the following quote from the book: "*Some people just have a calming presence about them, and he's one of those people. Completely opposite of my father*" (Hoover, 2016:53). In this quote, Lily shows her recognition to Atlas' alternative masculine identity. From Judith Butler's (1990) gender performativity, Atlas's masculine appearance demonstrates that masculinity can be expressed through activities distinct from hegemonic masculinity. In other words, *It Ends with Us* illustrates that there is no single, universal, or inherent version of masculinity. Lily's acceptance of Atlas's masculine performance helps validate his masculine behavior as socially acceptable and challenges the traditional standards of masculinity shaped by social recognition.

However, alternative masculinity does not imply weakness or a diminishment of masculine traits. According to Elliott et al. (2022), men can remain socially connected, and independence can coexist with empathy, togetherness, and concern for others. Atlas also embodies some of the stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity associated with being an independent man and having financial freedom, yet he does not use these traits to dominate women (Siamer & Benfodda, 2023). Therefore, *It Ends with Us* demonstrates that men can meet certain expectations without losing their independence. In addition to Atlas, *It Ends with Us* offers another example of alternative masculinity in the character of Marshall. Unlike Atlas, who appears less dominant and more emotionally invested in his partner, Marshall embodies a more relaxed approach to masculinity in marriage. He does not see his wife's strength and charisma as a reason to dominate or control her. Instead, he embraces her and admires her for all her qualities shown in the following quote: "*He puts his arm around her and kisses the top of her head. 'I'm proud of you, Issa'*" (Hoover, 2016:46). This behavior demonstrates that masculinity can be expressed through caring and supporting one's partner, not through dominance. Aligns with the study of Hanjani et al. (2025), which argues that a woman with masculine traits can subvert the stereotypical role of men as dominant figures. Marshall's behavior thus illustrates that masculinity does not have to be heroic or dignified to attract attention. As Butler (1990) explained, these actions embody masculinity and demonstrate that masculinity is not a rigid construct.

2. The Redefinition of the Ideal Husband

The analysis reveals that *It Ends with Us* not only portrays different forms of masculinity but also challenges traditional assumptions about what constitutes an ideal husband. Through the contrasting characters of Ryle and Atlas, the novel demonstrates a shift from conventional masculine ideals based on authority, social status, and control toward a more contemporary model that values empathy, emotional maturity, and equality in relationships. This redefinition reflects changing societal expectations regarding marriage and gender roles in modern society. The following discussion explores the limitations of traditional masculinity through Ryle’s character and examines how Atlas emerges as a representation of the modern ideal husband.

In a society that holds traditional views on masculinity, the “ideal” husband is expected to fulfill the roles of primary breadwinner and protector within the marriage (Oliffe et al., 2023). Social status and financial independence are viewed as key indicators of this type of masculinity. Gonalons-Pons & Gangl (2021) agree with this assessment, emphasizing that the view of men as breadwinners persists and significantly influences perceptions of men’s roles in marriage. Traditional masculinity views ideal husbands as a man with high social status and financial freedom. Thus, within this framework, a husband’s success is judged by his social standing, rather than by how well he treats his partner. In the novel, this phenomenon is represented by Ryle’s success as a surgeon with his attractive appearance and financial freedom. However, several contradictions emerged in Ryle’s self-presentation as a masculine figure, leading to a failure of his performance as ideal husband. This suggests that traditional masculinity does not offer the qualities necessary for healthy relationships in today’s society.

Ryle’s failure as the “ideal husband” demonstrates that a masculine identity based on status, strength, and power is contrary to the qualities required for healthy relationships in today’s world. Despite his professional success and high social status, Ryle repeatedly abuses Lily, which weakens his masculine performance. Ryle’s actions illustrate how perpetrators can hide behind the guise of “controlling love” to deceive their victims about their true intentions (SafeLives, 2019). An example is the stairwell incident, which showed that emotional abuse, in many cases, is accompanied by expressions of affection and creates confusion for the victim (SafeLives, 2019).

Therefore, to counter society’s view of destructive traditional masculinity, Hoover introduces Atlas as a representation of the ideal husband in today’s modern era. Atlas shows great empathy for his partner, Lily, and respects her independence. In this context, he is seen as a more balanced character in the context of modern marriage, who is emotionally stable, confident, and respectful of his wife, thus having a much stronger marriage than the marriage between Lily and Ryle, which is influenced by social class and success (Driebe et al., 2024). He is a proof that empathy, emotional sensitivity, and compassion do not make a man weak, but rather exemplifies a new kind of masculinity. He still embodies traditional images of masculinity such as independence and professional success, while his masculinities more based on equality and empathy.

Finally, from the analysis, *It Ends with Us* explores the redefinition of the role of a husband within marriage in modern society through its male characters’ masculinity. Ideal Husband in the modern era has changed to someone who demonstrates emotional intelligence, respects women, and treats their partners with compassion and understanding.

3. The Shift of Gender Expectations in Modern Society

The findings suggest that the redefinition of the ideal husband in *It Ends with Us* reflects broader changes in gender expectations within contemporary society. Through the contrasting portrayals of Ryle and Atlas, the novel illustrates how traditional gender roles are being reconsidered and replaced by more egalitarian relationship values. This shift can be observed through changing post-pandemic gender roles, the deconstruction of traditional masculinity, and the increasing emphasis on equality and emotional maturity in marriage.

The redefinition of the ideal husband from a figure with traditional masculine values to a gentler and emotionally mature figure in the novel *It Ends with Us* demonstrates a shift in gender expectations in society. Particularly in American society, ideal masculinity is often measured by a man's ability to act as the primary breadwinner, head of the household, and possess absolute control. The "male breadwinner" model peaked in 1940, encompassing 57% of marriages where the husband worked and the wife had no paid employment (Ruggles, 2015), and persisted until 1972 (Fry et al., 2023).

Changes in the ideal husband's values in 21st century society have altered how people view gender roles. The Pew Research Center shows that the increasing number of women entering the workforce has resulted in an increase in two-income households and more equal marital relationships (Fry et al., 2023). Furthermore, COVID-19 has pushed men to contribute to household chores and childcare responsibilities through remote work (Carlson et al., 2024; Petts et al., 2023). A study shows that the United States experienced the largest increase in marriage household work during the early pandemic among all nations (Petts et al., 2023). The 2024 Pew Research Center survey found that Americans today are more accepting of men taking on domestic responsibilities and childcare while their wives pursue careers. The majority of respondents believe that changing gender role values help women achieve career success and experience greater life satisfaction (Horowitz & Parker, 2024).

The concept that men must serve as the primary financial providers for their families does not constitute a fundamental human trait (Butler, 1990). The belief exists because people in society develop customs that become established through continuous practice until they achieve universal acceptance as fact. For decades, men have displayed their masculine identity through prestigious jobs and leadership positions and their efforts to control different situations. People have established this behavior as their regular way of living because they engage in it repeatedly.

Traditional behavioral patterns can be transformed into new ways of life. Through Ryle and Atlas, *It Ends with Us* demonstrates that traditional masculine values can be replaced with alternative masculinities. Butler explains that gender expectations are not fixed and can be reshaped as human behavior changes (Butler, 1990). The shift in gender roles from male breadwinners to more equal roles demonstrates that men express their masculinity through behaviors that align with current expectations.

Ryle's violent character and his need to control others in the novel reflect the values of toxic traditional masculinity (Breu, 2022; Sampurna et al., 2024). Through her novel *It Ends with Us*, Colleen Hoover demonstrates that social norms about masculinity create dangers that destroy marriages. Meanwhile, Atlas represents a preferred version of 21st century American masculinity, one that includes men who express their feelings, honor their partner's rights, and help women achieve their professional goals. Atlas shows how people should build

relationships through empathy and mental health knowledge, as Americans now recognize emotional intelligence as an essential life skill. A 2024 survey by the Pew Research Center showed that while society now places greater value on empathy and gentleness, men with these qualities still lack full social acceptance (Horowitz & Parker, 2024). The shift in masculine values in society is a result of economic, social, and cultural changes. Social movements that arise in society create opportunities for American women to develop their capacity to recognize unfair power dynamics. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced society to redefine what it means to be a husband who fulfills domestic responsibilities (Carlson et al., 2022).

As a popular novel, *It Ends with Us* shows how modern gender roles have changed through its story, setting new standards for marriage relationships. It shows that modern society defines an ideal husband through Lily's decision to leave Ryle because men should now be emotionally mature partners who treat their partners as equals while respecting their independence (Hoover, 2016; Sampurna et al., 2024). Marriage and relationships are now seen as requiring both partners to establish equal treatment through mutual consent and emotional maturity. Neither partner should dominate or control the other. Thus, women today no longer need to endure abusive relationships to meet financial needs or social status. This change is evident in Lily's decision to leave Ryle, when she realized that finding true love shouldn't require sacrificing self-respect and personal safety.

Men nowadays establish their masculine identity through respect for others and their strength rather than their ability to provide financial support. The standard of idealized masculinity assesses a man by his ability to show empathy and build respectful relationships with his partner, express his emotions, and divide household responsibilities. Atlas represents the modern masculine ideal, which requires men to support their partners' professional independence while learning from past experiences and practicing open dialogue rather than controlling their feelings. Through Ryle and Atlas, Colleen Hoover shows how toxic masculinity remains present in society while she establishes a new standard for 21st century husbandhood.

D. CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the forms of masculinity represented by several male characters in the novel *It Ends with Us*. The findings reveal two distinct types of masculinity: hegemonic masculinity and alternative masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, represented by Ryle and Andrew Bloom, is shaped through acts of domination, violence, and control over partners, whereas alternative masculinity, represented by Atlas and Marshall, is characterized by more equal, gentle, and emotionally mature traits. Neither of these masculinities is a natural trait of a man but rather is shaped through repeated actions that create the illusion that such masculinity is natural. Furthermore, the performance of these masculinities is not permanent and can be disrupted through “deviant repetition,” which can lead to change.

In this study, gender studies and gender performativity theory are combined to analyze how values of masculinity are shaped through social norms that ultimately define the figure of the ideal husband in society. *It Ends with Us* initially portrays the traditional ideal husband through Ryle. He is depicted as a man with a prestigious career, wealth, a dominant personality, and attractive looks. However, with Lily leaving her marriage with Ryle, the perception of the ideal husband begins to be replaced by Atlas, who displays a gentler, more

understanding nature and prioritizes equality in the relationship. Nevertheless, Atlas also embodies the values of a traditional ideal husband by having a good career and financial stability. This shift also indicates that hegemonic masculinity, which once became the norm in society, is now gradually being replaced by alternative forms of masculinity that are softer and more equal. Furthermore, the shifting perception of the “Ideal Husband” in the 21st century reflects how society’s views on gender roles in marriage have changed. By replacing Ryle with Atlas, *It Ends with Us* reflects how today’s society values more equal forms of masculinity and prioritizes emotional maturity, characteristics that are associated with Atlas’s alternative masculinity. This change is supported by the growing feminist movement in the 21st century, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has redefined the role of husbands in society. Ultimately, this study can be seen as a first step in research on the redefinition of the ideal husband through 21st century romantic genres. However, the results must be interpreted with caution due to a limited scope within a single object. Future research could further examine the differences between hegemonic masculinity, such as that embodied by Ryle, and alternative masculinity, as embodied by Atlas, in various contemporary novels including the sequel to *It Ends with Us* itself, *It Starts with Us*, to provide a deeper understanding of the evolving definition of the ideal husband in popular literature.

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