“I don’t approve of you dating in your condition”: Constraint and Confusion in Jason Reitman’s *Juno* and Non Pratt’s *Trouble*
Abstract

Since the popular indie-film *Juno* came out in 2007, it has received massive attention including both praise and harsh critique. Some have celebrated the protagonist Juno’s strong personality and her initial sexual liberty, but the majority have questioned what they see as the film’s anti-abortion message. In contrast, the more recent work *Trouble*, a young adult (YA) fiction novel from 2014 by Non Pratt, has received very little attention from scholars despite treating the same sensitive subject of teenage pregnancy. Therefore, this essay involves a comparative analysis of the two texts, which examines how the protagonists experience their pregnancies by looking at aspects such as the pregnant body, sexuality, maturation, identity and existential questions. The essay also takes into consideration some of the critique that previously has been voiced regarding the messages that *Juno* and other YA fiction send. The aim is to contribute to the same discussion by analyzing the film from a slightly different angle and by introducing an analysis of *Trouble*. In accordance with previous research, the essay concludes that these two works reveal traditional values and perspectives on teenage pregnancy that limit the protagonists’ sexual agency and leave them feeling isolated and confused.

**Keywords:** *Juno; Trouble; teenage pregnancy; YA fiction*
Teenage pregnancy is a sensitive issue because it raises questions about sexuality, choices and responsibilities. When the popular American indie-film *Juno* was released in 2007 it caused quite a stir due to its conflicting themes. Some praised the film for portraying a strong young woman who makes her own decisions and others criticized and questioned its traditional discourse on sexuality and its, according to some, anti-abortion message. Seven years after *Juno* entered the cinemas, the young adult (YA) novel *Trouble* was published. By depicting a teenage girl who becomes pregnant and decides to keep the baby, the book has many similarities with *Juno*. However, journalists and academia have not taken an interest in this more recent work, despite its clearly sensible and debatable themes. Therefore, there is a need for a comparative analysis of *Juno* and *Trouble* in order to see what messages these narratives possibly send to their young audience.

In 2001, Joy B. Davis and Laurie MacGillivray examined a sample of YA fiction novels and short stories on the topic of teen pregnancy. They presented their study describing some common messages that they had found in the narratives. For example, one of the observations was that most characters become pregnant the first time they have sex, which Davies and MacGillivray believe reflects the situation in the US where most sexual debuts occur without the use of contraception. Also, in most novels, the young women keep their babies, with only three out of seventeen narratives including abortion and only two including adoptions. Those who stay pregnant experience loneliness without much support from friends, boyfriends or parents. Davies and MacGillivray conclude their study by discussing the role of YA fiction, which they believe can be an important source of information regarding sex and reproduction. Additionally, they see literature as a “vehicle for readers to reflect upon their own decisions
and actions” (96). In other words, they stress the importance of analyzing what kinds of underlying messages books convey to a young audience.

With the majority of the narratives in Davies and MacGillivray’s study being written in the 1980s and 1990s, it is interesting to see whether more recent fiction shows similar or different patterns. Indeed, in 2007, Kristen Nichols did a similar study of YA fiction novels but she included more recent works. She set out to examine whether novels dealing with teenage pregnancy today reflect the reality of their readers. Her findings were negative, revealing that while abortion is common and adoption uncommon among real teenagers, the majority of the books show a reverse picture. In other words, most protagonists “decide[...] against abortion” (32), often because of religious, spiritual or “emotional” reasons (33). Hence, it would not be inaccurate to state that a majority of previous YA fiction deal with teenage pregnancy in an old-fashioned way where young motherhood is preferred before abortion.

This paper investigates how two contemporary YA fiction works¹, Juno and Trouble, deal with the topic of teenage pregnancy. The aim of this study is to complement the studies of Davies and MacGillivray and Nichols. This is done by revealing the messages and patterns that these two more recent works contain. I particularly wish to analyze the protagonists’ own perspectives on their pregnancies and how they themselves deal with their situations. In other words, this essay examines the texts on two different levels: by looking at the whole works but also by studying the main characters and their experiences.

Based on this analysis I suggest that both Juno and Trouble send double messages: whereas the narratives on the surface present the protagonists as strong, sexually liberal young women and thus suggest a feminist approach, this essay reveals another layer of traditional and stereotypical views on teenage pregnancy and abortion. I claim that however much these girls try to free themselves from older values regarding sex and sexuality, they are ultimately constrained by society and by the conventions of the genre itself. As a result, they experience isolation and confusion.

I will support my claim by examining how the protagonists feel about their bodies and their sexuality, and what they think about the different choices they have regarding their pregnancies. I will also look at how the two works deal with some of the key themes of YA fiction, namely maturation, identity and existential questions.

¹ In Literature for Today’s Young Adults, Juno is on a list of films that all share characteristics with YA books (Nilsen et al. 2).
Losing Control over the Body: Forced Identity and Denied Pleasures in *Juno* and *Trouble*

At first glance, both Juno and Hannah, the protagonists in *Juno* and *Trouble*, seem to be great role models for young feminists. They do not seem to care about what other people think of them, and they are sexually liberal and liberated. Homosexuality, teenage sex, drugs and abortion are portrayed as normal and part of these young people’s everyday life. Although very different in personality, both Juno and Hannah are strong, witty young women who hold power in their sexuality. They know that they are wanted by young men—“Steve Rendazo secretly wants me” Juno explains to the audience (00:11:38–00:11:40)—and they know that they are the ones to decide whether or not they will touch or let themselves be touched.

However, this changes when Juno and Hannah become pregnant. Jessica Willis puts forth an important analysis regarding *Juno* and sexual subjectivity. She notes that Juno’s sexuality is intimately connected to her ability to reproduce and that her pregnant body becomes the symbol for her sexuality rather than her actual sexual thoughts, actions or feelings (242). In *Trouble* we see a similar depiction. Hannah becomes pregnant the first time she has sex. Davies and MacGillivray note that this is a common feature in YA fiction that deal with the topic of teen pregnancy. The books they examined seem to give one great advice: do not have sex even once, or you will get pregnant (90). Many novels that deal with the topic of teen pregnancy thus seem to serve as cautionary tales, warning teenagers that sex very easily can lead to pregnancy. Even those characters who used contraception ended up pregnant because they used it wrongly (e.g. by not taking the pill regularly), leaving “no room for error” (90). This is also true for Hannah, who believes everything to be under control until she discovers that she is pregnant. Moreover, the connection between pregnancy and female sexuality is also seen in Hannah’s increased sexual desire when being pregnant. This is a problem for her, since the pregnancy also limits her from going out and being sexually active. After revealing the identity of the father to her parents, Hannah is even forbidden to have any contact with the world outside her home except school. Hannah’s mother has taken her cellphone, shut off her Internet connection and waits in the car when Hannah writes an exam in school. In *Juno*, although saying it with a jocular tone, Juno’s father Mac voices the idea that pregnant girls should not go out and have sex by telling his daughter that he does not approve of her dating in that “condition” (01:15:40). He emphasizes his point by using what he perceives to be the language of the young: “That’s kind of messed up […] That’s pretty skanky. Isn’t that what you girls call it? Skanky? Skeevy?”
In addition, while it is apparent to the audience that Juno and Bleeker (the father of the baby) are in love with each other, Bleeker suggests that maybe they can “get back together” when “this is all over” (00:51:59, 00:51:46). This too implies that Bleeker has internalized the idea that it is not acceptable for them to date when Juno is pregnant.

While initially introducing Juno and Hannah as free, sexual individuals, both texts later constrain them by giving their bodies an excessive role in the narratives as if the body now were to represent who they are. In both works, the physical aspects of the pregnancy are given much more attention than existential or psychological ones. After getting pregnant, Juno’s and Hannah’s everyday lives are filled with issues like heartburn, the constant need to urinate, swollen feet and food cravings. The narratives’ various chapters are also based on the different stages in their pregnancies. In Juno, the film is divided into “Autumn”, “Winter”, “Spring” and “Summer”, whereas in Trouble, the book’s parts are named more explicitly after the pregnancy trimesters: “First”, “Second” and “Third”. Furthermore, the camera repeatedly zooms in on Juno’s belly, and the front cover of Trouble informs the reader that the narrative is about “A BOY. A GIRL. A BUMP” suggesting that the bellies function as subjects too.

In other words, not only do society’s norms limit Juno and Hannah’s sexual choices, but the narration itself also limits them by objectifying them though not as sexual objects but as childbearing bodies, who do not engage in sexual activities. Juno complains: “Why is everyone always staring at me?” (00:59:06–00:59:08), which accentuates the pregnancy in terms of bodily features. Both the audience and the other characters often see the belly before they see Juno’s face. Although Juno does not complain very much about her new isolated role, her emotions show in a fight with Bleeker in the school corridor. She reveals how unfair she thinks it is that she has to “have the evidence” of having had sex “under [her] sweater” when Bleeker does not (01:02:36–01:02:38). In Trouble, Hannah has slightly more conflicting emotions as how to feel about her pregnant body. On the one hand, she is afraid of being reduced to a pregnant person instead of just being allowed to be Hannah. On the other hand, she wonders why it is not acceptable for her to “wanting to show off” her “new improved pregnancy curves” (Pratt 190).

Interestingly, in at least one instance in Trouble we can see a possible intertextual relationship with Juno. Many of Hannah’s concerns regarding pregnancy could be seen to originate from, or respond to, the film. Indeed, when Hannah is contemplating the issue of abortion, it seems as if she indirectly refers to the scene in the film when Juno, after finding out that her baby already has fingernails, changes her mind at the abortion clinic (00:16:55–00:18:30):
You hear about people changing their mind outside clinics because they find out that their foetus has already got fingernails or genitals or a tattoo saying “Mum” on its arse or whatever. But it’s not like fingernails = soul. They don’t qualify you for anything other than a manicure. (Pratt 82)

To Hannah, the factor that causes Juno to change her mind somehow seems unrealistic or invalid. Furthermore, we could imagine that Hannah’s irritation about not being “allowed” to dress sexy when pregnant could just as well be directed to Juno, who is portrayed as a cool pregnant teenage girl who prefers to dress less feminine and actually complains about having to wear a bra now that her breasts are getting bigger (00:58:55–00:58:57).

It is safe to assume that Hannah has built many of her ideas about pregnancy on cultural representations such as Juno and other Hollywood films that deal with the topic. After all, Juno is perhaps the most famous pregnant teenage girl (though fictional) of her time, and Hannah might feel as if she cannot live up to this image. Indeed, Juno, despite becoming unintentionally pregnant, can clearly be an object of envy. In contrast to Hannah, she is supported by her family and friends and she is in love with a boy who loves her and cares about her. In addition, Hannah might feel as if she is not supposed to be sexy when pregnant since Juno is not. However, Kelly Oliver’s book Knock Me Up, Knock Me Down shows how women in Hollywood (both on and off the screen) and in many other places in the western world today are expected to “have it all”—babies, careers, the man of their dreams, and sexy bodies (6). Her observation is that “the pregnant body has gone from asexual, even abject, to sexual object” (46). Yet, while Oliver problematizes all the new expectations that women have to live up to when becoming pregnant, Hannah finds the absence of expectations a problem:

I don’t even know why I’m bothering. It’s only a trip to the cinema with Gideon, Anj and Aaron. Those guys don’t care if I turn up in leggings and a hoodie. Somehow that thought depresses me even more.

I don’t want to be the only one who cares what I look like. (Pratt 190–91)

Hannah wants to be allowed to be pregnant and sexy at the same time, but that does not seem to be an option for teenage girls. After all, most pregnant women in Hollywood films are not minors living with their parents but grown up career women who have “baby hunger” and are stressed by their ticking “biological clocks” (Oliver 5–6). So, instead of being stressed by the demands to “stay sexy” when pregnant, Hannah’s reality involves fears of becoming invisible and desexualized which she might have seen happen to Juno. Furthermore, although she tries, Hannah admits that being sexy and pregnant is not easy: “In some ways I’m looking forward to having the baby — at least then I might get my body back, even if it is different from how it was when this started” (Pratt 355). With these words, Hannah expresses her feelings of being
almost “trapped” by her changing body, and so does Juno: she complains and says that she has to “rub all this nasty cocoa-butter on myself so, like, I don’t know, my skin won’t explode” (00:58:57–00:59:02). Kyra Clarke confirms this idea by suggesting that “Juno’s statement about cocoa butter produces pregnancy as abject and thus restricts the agentive nature of her sexuality, with pregnancy a negative and confronting experience” (464). Moreover, when Juno is upset with Bleeker for taking another girl to the prom she sarcastically says that she is great “despite the fact that [she’s] in a fat suit [she] can’t take off” (01:01:05–01:01:08), thereby expressing this claustrophobia more explicitly. This means that even though Oliver has observed a changing view on the pregnant body in films, these two YA narratives, Juno and Trouble, show that young pregnant girls do not feel free or sexy, which suggests a conservative approach to teenage pregnancy.

To “get my body back” is a common expression among pregnant women that Hannah must have acquired from her surroundings. Oliver sees the concept as implying that the pregnant body is not the woman’s real body (2), and thus contributing to the women feeling trapped in a “fat suit”. At the later stages of her pregnancy, Hannah also verbalizes the fear that pregnancy will signify a permanent loss of sexual power:

I miss being sexy. I really do. No one finds a pregnant person sexy, not even the person who’s pregnant. After this what will I be? A saggy bag of stretch marks and pregnancy weight with lady parts like an overstretched elastic band?

Will I be someone anyone wants? (Pratt 347)

Hannah fears that she will not regain the sexual agency that she lost when becoming pregnant. Although she at several instances in the narrative enjoys the “curves” that her new body possesses, she at the later stages of her pregnancy starts to doubt that she will ever be considered attractive again. In other words, although Hannah does not have a problem with the idea of pregnant women being sexy, she both doubts that she is allowed to be sexy and that it even would be possible to live up to this ideal. Furthermore, even if Oliver’s observation about pregnant women today being considered sexy is true, they are not necessarily sexual subjects. This concern has been raised by feminists such as Iris Marion Young, who, in Oliver’s words, believes that “recognizing the pregnant body as not only a desirable body but also a desiring body would be liberating for women” (Oliver 36). Even though Hannah’s sexual desires are expressed in Trouble, she is never given the opportunity to act on them and thereby she is not fully allowed to be a sexual subject. This means that Hannah is neither a sexual subject nor a sexual object, thus living up to more traditional expectations on pregnant women.

Juno and Trouble challenge some of the contemporary expectations on pregnant women (as described by Oliver) but in different ways. The film does this by not sexualizing or
“feminizing” Juno’s body at all; Trouble does this by explicitly questioning whether it is possible or acceptable to be sexy and pregnant at the same time, with Hannah concluding that it is very difficult. Despite of this, Hannah is more objectified than Juno. Aaron, the male narrator in the novel, is surprised to note how beautiful Hannah is when she enters the school a couple of weeks before giving birth. She is described as “radiant”, with “glowing” skin and with her hair looking “model perfect” (Pratt 342, 343). However, only a few pages later we learn that Hannah does not share that idea about herself but instead has very low self-esteem. In other words, she is objectified as beautiful by her male friend but not by herself. Moreover, despite their differences, the two works confirm the idea that young pregnant women are in a state of imprisonment since they cannot be sexual subjects even if they wanted to.

Sexuality is of course not the only sensitive question that these works raise. Whereas Trouble has not received any attention from scholars, Juno has been debated from many different angles. Pamela Thoma, for example, sees Juno as an expression of anti-feminism and anti-abortion (410, 416). The character Juno, Thoma suggests, is possibly a feminist but she ends up with an unwanted pregnancy and surprisingly does not opt for an abortion. Juno, by first acting like a feminist through her seemingly open attitude towards female sexuality and abortion, thus “fails” by ending up pregnant and staying so despite having completely different initial intentions. In other words, Thoma argues that the film evokes and rejects the idea of feminism since it first presents Juno as a feminist character to whom abortion is an option but later it represents “abortion as a ‘bad’ […] choice” with Juno opting for adoption instead (416).

The notion of “the right to choose” is also relevant to the analysis here. It is an interesting concept because historically it has been used to support women’s decisions to not keep their babies (i.e. to get an abortion). However, Oliver notes that many Hollywood films today have borrowed the rhetoric normally used by the pro-choice movement to instead highlight “the woman’s ‘right to choose to have her baby’” (10). Oliver further suggests that this rhetoric might be an attempt to “reassure us that although pregnancy may be an ‘accident,’ babies are not” (10). I argue that this conservative approach can be seen in both Juno and Trouble. Despite mocking and dismissing all religious beliefs concerning pregnancy (“I’m a sacred vessel” [00:38:17–00:38:19]), Juno ultimately chooses to adopt a spiritual way of looking at her decision of giving her son away. In a voiceover after the labor scene, Juno says that “he [the baby] didn’t feel like ours. [The camera sweeps over the hospital newborn nursery and shows Vanessa, the adoptive mother, waiting anxiously outside to meet her son] I think he was always hers” (01:23:58–01:24:08). Here we can see that it is consoling for Juno to view herself as simply a bearer of another woman’s child rather than a mother giving up her baby.
In other words, Juno does not see it as her stepmother who, when finding out about Juno’s pregnancy and her plans on adoption, says: “Somebody else is gonna find a precious blessing in this garbage dump of a situation” (00:25:27–00:25:31). Instead, Juno chooses to think that her pregnancy “happened” for a reason, namely, to give a baby boy to a childless woman. For Juno, then, the situation was never “a garbage dump of a situation” but it was “meant to be”. This confirms Oliver’s suggestion that films avoid viewing babies as accidents. This also means that Juno at the end of the film has adopted many of the viewpoints that she laughed and joked about at the early stages of her pregnancy. The words and ideas expressed after giving birth truly reveal that it becomes important for Juno to change her idea about pregnancy and adoption. Although it may be argued that giving a baby up for adoption is difficult independent of the prevailing notions about pregnancy and motherhood, I suggest that Juno’s need to console herself through spirituality may to an even larger extent stem from societal values that have made both teenage pregnancy and the options a pregnant teenager has taboo. In other words, I argue that Juno finally is affected by these ideas and values surrounding her despite initially seeming immune to them.

In Trouble, Hannah has an inner monologue about abortion which may seem confusing to the reader. Hannah begins by dismissing Juno’s and others’ seemingly naïve reasons for not getting an abortion, and concludes by saying: “I’m all for choice, but what happens when you really don’t want to choose?” (Pratt 82). It is difficult not to interpret Hannah’s argument as a paradox, and as readers we might question whether she really is for choice as she claims. Later in the novel, I end up feeling as if we as readers are supposed to view Hannah’s baby as a divine gift for Aaron, who suffers from having lost his best friend. Aaron tells his parents that he needs Hannah’s help and that he wants to “matter” (169), which changes the view of the baby from being an accident to a blessing. Aaron implies that Hannah can help him heal from his sorrow by letting him take on the father role of her unborn child and that doing that would make him matter. Feeling guilt for his friend’s death, he seems to view the baby—a new life—as a sort of redemption. Of course, Aaron would never have had the chance to meet this baby if Hannah had not “chosen” to keep it. Thus, in both Juno and Trouble, Oliver’s suggestion about the use of pro-choice rhetoric seems perfectly valid. Overall, it is not news that anti-abortion statements often are accompanied by religious expressions, and hence it would not be surprising to find this in novels where abortion is avoided. As already mentioned in the introduction of this essay, Nichols noted that the characters’ decisions against abortion often are based on religious or spiritual reasons, with one woman feeling uneasy to abort after having “felt those little butterfly
moves inside”” (33). A similar approach towards pregnancy and abortion seems present in *Trouble*.

However, there are scholars who do not analyze *Juno* in political terms. In contrast to many other articles, Juan Antonio Tarancón argues that the film should not be seen as promoting a certain ideology, but rather as a representation of teenagers’ confusions regarding sex and reproduction (453). Although not viewing cinema as an exact mirror of the society in which it is produced, Tarancón describes the context as meaningful for understanding and interpreting film. The context he describes as relevant for *Juno* is a society which gives young people conflicting messages about sex and sexuality, with the Christian Right denouncing pre-marital sex at the same time as “sexualized images” are constantly shown in media and other public spaces (443).

Still, how the main characters are portrayed and on what they base their decisions cannot be completely ignored in terms of what messages the texts may send to their audience. While Juno constantly mocks the idea of pregnancy as something big and sacred, her decision to stay pregnant and give the baby away is regarded as “a beautiful and a selfless thing” (00:30:12–00:30:14). In *Trouble*, Hannah refers to her decision of keeping the baby as “the right thing” (Pratt 349). This could easily be seen as expressions of a clear pro-life rhetoric, but it could possibly also support Tarancón’s claim that culture represents teenagers’ confusion about sex and reproduction in a world that repeatedly throws conflicting messages at them. If taking this stance instead, we could especially view Hannah’s inner monologue as an attempt to console herself and respond to the doubts she might have regarding the pregnancy but that she never really utters. This would certainly create a more credible story: the reader might otherwise be puzzled by Hannah’s strong will to keep the baby despite having so many odds against her and despite mocking Juno’s reasons for not having an abortion. In fact, in both works, we never get to hear a clear explanation as to why they want to stay pregnant. Here we encounter several problems. First, the fact that both women have the possibility to do an abortion and even receive support and encouragement from family and friends to do so may cause the reader to wonder what keeps them away from this option. It might also make us view the works as anti-abortion statements. Secondly, questioning the characters’ decisions or at least seeking an explanation for them could be a problem in itself. By doing that, the readers risk being criticized for denying the girls their integrity and their right to choose for themselves. In other words, this poses the question whether other people have the right to demand an explanation from someone wanting to make an abortion or keeping the baby. The answer to
that might be that in real life we do not (have the right), but in literature and film we want to know which messages the stories send to young people.

However, if looking at Juno and Hannah’s decisions to remain pregnant from a genre perspective instead, we can conclude that their choices stand in contrast to their parents’ opinions. After all, YA fiction often positions parents as the main authority which has to be opposed (Nikolajeva 57). That being said, we can note that both Juno and Hannah opt for something that their parents would not have suggested. Whereas this is only carefully, implicitly stated in Juno with the stepmother asking Juno whether she has considered “the alternative” (00:24:23), Hannah’s mother is sad and disappointed that she will not have an abortion (Pratt 141). Interestingly, what Juno and Hannah seem to fear the most when finding out about their pregnancies and having decided to stay pregnant is to tell their parents. This is, however, not surprising if returning to the literature examined by Davies and MacGillivray. They describe how parents in those books “are adversaries, not confidents”, and that they “scold and express disappointment, shame, or anger” (92). Thus, it is no surprise that “telling the parents” is an important part of Juno as well as Trouble.

Furthermore, Nikolajeva defines YA fiction as “a genre depicting the character’s marginal situation between childhood and adulthood, when there is no way back, but the inevitability of the final step into adult life has not yet been accepted” (57). This seems to be a relevant description for both Juno and Trouble. Not only are the protagonists marginalized because of their pregnancies, but they are also caught between childhood and adulthood as any other teenager. The problem is of course that they are in a situation normally considered to belong to adult women when they are minors living in homes where they are treated as girls and not as women. Clarke summarizes this dilemma and argues that Juno “ruptures the expected linear process from girl to woman by existing as both at the same time. Pregnant but girl-like, Juno’s body represents a juncture between girl/woman, innocent/sexual, teenage/maternal, and places these binaries in question” (258).

Character maturation is thus a component that is crucial for YA fiction. Interestingly, however, this is an expectation that Hannah has a problem with. She says: “I feel like there’s something wrong with me — I’m supposed to want to be a different person now that I’ve been sperminated, but I don’t” (Pratt 190). Hannah thus reacts against the expectations that a girl must “mature” when she becomes pregnant. Indeed, Juno has been considered a coming-of-age story (Willis 242; Tarancón 458) but while Juno in many ways seems to “grow up” before the audience, Hannah refuses to. The two endings thus stand in stark contrast to each other: Juno succeeds in “fixing” her problem and come out of the pregnancy with both a boyfriend and a
more mature and humble attitude towards the world whereas Hannah does not. Still, in both texts, pregnancy is used as a narrative vehicle for maturation. In fact, although Hannah’s degree of maturation can be questioned, the narrative seems to suggest to the reader that Hannah does grow up. On the back cover of the book, it says: “Growing up can be trouble but that’s how you find out what really matters”, which implies that Hannah’s pregnancy is tough but that it forces her to grow up. It also implies that growing up means finding out what “matters”, which can be understood as keeping and having a baby. This reveals a highly traditional perspective on the role of women as meaningful and growing up only if they choose to become mothers.

Related to the theme of maturation and pregnancy is of course the question of identity. By becoming pregnant, Juno and Hannah’s identities are questioned by themselves and by others. Whereas Hannah ultimately seems to embrace her new role as a mother, exclaiming “I AM A MUM” (Pratt 380), Juno does not want to be labeled anything from the beginning to the end of the film. Although she refers to herself as a “freaky girl” (00:11:42), and relates that “normalcy” is not her or Bleeker’s “style” (01:26:24), she becomes irritated and confused by the adults around her who label her as “sexually active” (00:14:26–00:14:31, 00:23:09). Furthermore, the issue of what “kind of girl” Juno is is addressed when being asked that by her father and Mark, the planned adoptive father, at two separate occasions to which Juno shyly answers that she simply does not know. After telling her father and stepmother about the pregnancy, Juno’s father says: “I thought you were the kind of girl who knew when to say when” (00:24:51–00:24:54), to which Juno responds: “I don’t really know what kind of girl I am” (00:25:00–00:25:02). In the second scene, Mark and Juno, who have become friends due to similar taste in film and music, dance in a basement discussing proms:

JUNO Dances are for nerds and squares
MARK What are you?
JUNO I don’t know. (01:05:23–01:05:29).

Juno’s words about who she is are particularly significant due to the fact that she expresses this idea of uncertainty twice in a film with only so much dialogue. It also confirms the idea that pregnancy is seen as a life-changing experience where the young woman’s identity is questioned. Her father’s words especially imply that he views teenage pregnancies as something that only “happens” to a certain kind of girl.

In Trouble, Hannah feels that pregnancy has made her lose her identity. At her grandmother’s, she reflects upon how it is to be young and pregnant, and she feels that older people do not understand her:
Who I am depends on what lies ahead. All the things I thought would happen have vanished—just like that—and without them I’m not so sure who I am any more. I need to get a bit more me going on before I face my family. (Pratt 95)

Hannah’s words show that pregnancy has made her question who she is and left her feeling lost and confused. Because she seems to view her inner self as determined by the future, Hannah is unsure about who she is now that her future looks drastically different from what she earlier had expected. Confronting her family and informing them that she is pregnant is also, she believes, something that requires her to be “more herself”. This suggests that she considers her “old self” strong and brave, and the new Hannah, the pregnant 15-year old, as having none of those qualities. Pregnancy, in other words, has not only deprived her of a sense of self but also of a sense of strength.

Existential questions are closely related to the notion of identity. Although the body receives more attention than does psychological aspects of pregnancy in Juno and Trouble, both narratives show their protagonists experiencing some type of existential crisis. First of all, we can assume that this is what affects Juno’s decision not to go through with an abortion. She seems to change her mind at the abortion clinic due to some sort of existential angst after hearing that her baby already has fingernails. Apart from this, however, Juno seems rather calm with the existential aspect of her pregnancy since she feels certain that Vanessa will be a good mother for her child. This might be the reason why some readers, for example in online discussions of the book, have deemed Juno to be less realistic than Trouble, in which Hannah repeatedly returns to doubts about herself and her choice of staying pregnant (Goodreads Community Reviews, n.p.). Seven months pregnant, Hannah feels fear: “For the first time since I took that test in my gran’s bathroom […] Raw, terrifying, uncontrollable fear that I have made the biggest mistake of my life” (Pratt 287), and with only a couple of weeks left for the baby to arrive, she narrates her fears of being “responsible for another human being” (346).

As we have already mentioned, it is rather unclear as to why Hannah decides to stay pregnant despite having so many odds against her. It would probably be too extreme to suggest that she does it as a sort of teenage revolt, but that does not mean that her decision cannot be a naïve one. Davies and MacGillivray describe how the characters in the books they analyzed choose to stay pregnant for many different reasons. One of those is a strategical one, where the young woman plans to escape poverty by staying pregnant so that she would have to change homes and hopefully get married and be economically supported by the baby’s father (93). Although not having an economic problem, Hannah could seek another strategic outcome by keeping the baby. Oliver discusses the ideological implications of what she refers to as “mom-
coms”: a new type of romantic comedy (“rom-com”) where the romance is centered on a pregnancy. She notes that the typical feature of these films is that the conflict often is resolved through the birth of a baby which brings the couple together because they realize what a beautiful thing they have made (Oliver 57). In Trouble, it would not be impossible to view Hannah as having this in mind. Being in love with her stepbrother who is the father of her baby, it may be wishful thinking or even a desperate attempt to make them get together as a couple. In fact, Hannah even seems to lie to herself about this matter:

Why can’t Jay be un-shit? Why can’t he be the boy I’ve been in love with all my life? Why can’t he just man up and deal with this? It’s not like I want him to marry me. All I want is for him to come clean so I can stop lying to everyone. (Pratt 337)

Interestingly, Hannah’s monologue starts by lamenting the fact that Jay does not want her like she wants him. Then she moves on to argue that he is doing wrong by not “manning up” and being there for her. Next she says that she does not want to marry him, just like Juno says when denying that she is in love with Bleeker (01:02:02). Hannah finally concludes that the only thing she wants is for Jay to admit that he is the father so she does not have to lie, when that is actually what she is doing to herself. We can see that Hannah’s argument goes from being purely emotional to rational in that she ultimately tries to convince herself that she in fact does not care about Jay’s love (or absence of love) for her but only about not lying to others.

For a long time, Juno does a similar thing. She is uncomfortable by Bleeker’s approaches and suggestions that they should get back together, but at the same time she worries about Bleeker not finding her “cute when [she is] huge” (00:51:32–00:51:33), and she becomes furious when he takes another girl to prom after Juno suggested that he should do just that. This inconsistency is not surprising if we look at the two works as love stories (with Juno having a classical, happy ending and Trouble as a more modern story with an ambiguous, less happy ending). After all, a good love story, as any other plot, must include tension and moments of doubt. By adding teenagers to that we have the recipe for a rollercoaster ride. However, on top of being young and in love, our protagonists are pregnant. The isolation they experience, as discussed earlier, undoubtedly contributes to their confusion. Apart from having different endings in terms of romance, Juno and Hannah have contrasting expectations on love: Juno does not expect romance to originate from her pregnancy, Hannah does. Hannah repeatedly reveals to the reader that she expects Jay to take on the role as father and be Hannah’s partner, and consequently she shows much disappointment when this never happens.

Hannah’s use of expressions, common in cultural works about pregnancy (e.g. “get my body back”), as well as her references to Juno—by mocking her decision not to abort because
of the fetus having fingernails and stealing her rhetoric about marriage as an attempt to lie about her feelings—make it likely to assume that Hannah has received many ideas from films and other cultural expressions. Perhaps because pregnancy has started to function as a vehicle for romance in Hollywood films, Hannah’s own pregnancy made her expect love from the young man who made her pregnant. However, the idea that Hannah possibly received from the so-called mom-coms reveals itself to not be entirely realistic. The message that both Juno and Trouble instead send is that pregnancy is a life-changing experience from which the young woman can learn much, good things as well as bad. Juno learns that she loves Bleeker, and Hannah learns that she can not get love from Jay. This, however, also means that the protagonists’ difficult experiences again are overshadowed by a message that depicts teenage pregnancy as something leading to some form of enlightenment.

Conclusion

Several scholars have viewed Juno as both promoting and discarding old values regarding sexuality and pregnancy. Shaw sees the film as both “challeng[ing] and perpetuat[ing] the stigma” related to teenage pregnancy (55), and Jessica Willis says the film “produces a fusion between hegemonic discourses and feminist discourses of sexuality” (250). This is done by portraying Juno as a strong, young woman who knows what she wants at the same time as her sexual desires are overshadowed by her pregnancy.

This essay complements and builds on these assumptions by showing more examples from Juno, and by adding a completely new element: comparing the film to the YA fiction novel Trouble. I suggest that as a result of the prevailing moral standards regarding female sexuality and pregnancy, Juno and Hannah experience isolation, confusion and existential crises. It is likely that they would not have suffered from these problems if the values surrounding them had been different. Both Juno and Trouble leave the audience with many questions about the characters’ different choices and decisions. While this likely could be the cause of concern for many, the fact that the two stories raise questions also make them beneficial for educational purposes.

To conclude, in this essay we have seen various approaches to cultural works addressing young viewers and readers. Davies and MacGillivray see YA books as a potential source of information about sex and reproduction (including contraception and prenatal care) and so they believe it is important to reflect upon the underlying messages that a novel sends to its readers. For example, their study reveals that many of the books which they analyzed serve as cautionary
tales by implying that sex very easily can lead to pregnancy. My comparative analysis of Juno and Trouble has revealed that the topic of teenage pregnancy still is approached in conservative ways by depriving the protagonists of the sexual liberty that they possessed before becoming pregnant. Based on Jessica Willis’s study, I have demonstrated that Juno’s and Hannah’s sexualities are intimately connected to their ability to reproduce. Because of their pregnancies, they are not allowed or expected to date or to be sexy, and both texts constrain the protagonists by giving excessive attention to their bodies and thus reducing them to childbearing objects instead of thinking, feeling individuals. In other words, their independency and sexuality are overshadowed by their pregnancies. Although Kelly Oliver has noticed that the pregnant body is more sexualized in films today, Juno and Trouble show a reverse picture. Apparently, pregnant teenagers are not subjected to this change but instead treated with a conservative approach. The consequence is that the experience of being pregnant negatively affects their self-estees to the extent that they start doubting that they will ever be considered attractive again.

I have further revealed that in these two texts, teenage pregnancy is treated together with the topic of spirituality, which is intimately connected to the pro-choice rhetoric used in many other works that promote an opposite view on abortion. In accordance with Oliver, I have demonstrated examples where both Juno and Trouble depict the pregnancies not like accidents but as blessings, despite the girls becoming pregnant unintentionally. Finally, I have suggested that this approach to teenage pregnancy in these two works could partly be due to the traditional values that still seem to dictate the reality of young girls and partly due to the conventions of YA fiction in which characters are caught in a state between childhood and adulthood and where parents often are oppressive authorities. Furthermore, the almost obligatory theme of maturation, when combined with the topic of teenage pregnancy, inevitably risks positioning the latter as crucial for a young girl’s development and importance in society. In other words, it could be interpreted that the narratives send the message that a girl “matters” only when she fills the traditional role of a woman who reproduces. Since Hannah shows indications of having acquired certain ideas about pregnancy from other narratives, not least Juno, I agree with Davies and MacGillivray that it is important to examine the values that film and literature convey to its audience. However, although my essay suggests that Juno as well as the more recent work Trouble have traditional values embedded in the story, I do not claim that the works are not suitable for young people to watch or read. Suggesting that teenagers would avoid contraception or abortion after having enjoyed these works would also be to underestimate their
ability to engage in critical reflection. After all, that is what we should be teaching them in school.
Works Cited


Goodreads Community Reviews.


