This semester, we started the Monday-night tradition of having people over to watch *The Bachelor* in our apartment. We’d change into our pajamas, drink wine, laugh at the ridiculousness, and comment on the show’s gender politics.

This season of *The Bachelor* made waves by featuring its first virgin bachelor -- former football player Colton Underwood who is saving himself for love -- an ambitious move on a 12-week reality television show where women compete for a marriage proposal. Contestants made constant jokes about Colton’s virginity, and countless petty fights broke out among the women — Courtney did *not* like being called “the cancer of the house.”

We loved and pitied the women who tried so hard to make themselves memorable. One contestant showed up in a sloth costume and was sent home. Another woman tried to spice up her personality with a fake Australian accent -- she also didn’t last long.

To be clear, our weekly *Bachelor* viewing parties were a guilty pleasure, and we spent much of the season criticizing the show and relentlessly mocking its participants. And then, something shocking happened in the last few episodes of the season: it got serious.

Picture this: it’s week nine, and Colton has three women left. There’s Cassie, a charming speech pathologist; Hannah, wide-eyed and sweet, who received Colton’s first impression rose; and Tayshia, a bubbly personality, whose smile Colton frequently comments on.

In a surprise twist, Cassie, a fan favorite who has made it to the end of the show and shares seemingly powerful chemistry with Colton, breaks things off. On their overnight date, she explains to Colton that she isn’t in love with him like she’d thought. A conversation with her father (who is dubious that his daughter could be in love after mere weeks) clarified many things for her, and she realizes that she isn’t ready for marriage. She tells Colton that she is leaving the show. He begs her to stay, claiming he can be patient, take things slow. “I don’t know that I’m ever gonna get there,” she responds.

Then, Colton quickly transforms into the obsessive, mad-for-love male protagonist that we know all too well. Embracing the tropey “grand gesture,” a frustrated and love-struck Colton hops the gate of the hotel and runs away, sending the whole *Bachelor* crew out looking for him. The following episode sees him break things off with Hannah and Tayshia by saying he is in love with Cassie and is “going to fight for her.”

While begging Cassie to be with him, Colton says, “I gave everything up ... I’m not telling you that I love you. I want to show you. I want you to see exactly why and how much I’m willing to give up and give to us.” Cassie responds, “I just don’t understand what’s happening.” Colton says, “I hopped an eight-foot fence and walked away. I grabbed my wallet, and I ran away!” Like so many depictions of men trying to
win over women, his efforts to show his love do not involve him acknowledging her own emotions and feelings.

Cassie is stuck, succumbing to her partner’s desires when she’s unsure about her own—a visceral, relatable entrapment. When Colton tells her that he has broken up with the other women, the pressure seems real, even on camera. Cassie bursts into tears, clearly shocked and confused. She says she doesn’t know if she’ll be able to give him what he wants—a sentiment glazed with the special sort of selflessness that many women are socialized to carry. It’s tempting to dismiss it all as trashy reality television, but occasionally we’re reminded that these are real people grappling with real emotions. When Colton breaks up with Tayshia, she whispers that she doesn’t want to do this on camera and invites Colton into the apartment, away from the crew. The camera stutters and shakes, giving us a view of the camera person’s shoes and the tropical ground. The microphone picks up on hushed sobs as Tayshia tries to comfort the man who has just dumped her.

The sad part is that after all his begging and promising to take things slow, Cassie gives in and agrees to be with him.

It’s easy to analyze the way The Bachelor embodies problematic gender dynamics—in this case, the pressure exerted on women to satisfy male desire. We can also look at it as an example of how not to show love. Toxic relationships surround us in real life, but when viewers see TV and movies as idealized versions of our world, we absorb all the wrong ways to show love. The public’s reactions to this season of The Bachelor serve as evidence. One article, published in Cosmopolitan, is titled: “Bachelor’ Season 23 Finale Recap: Colton and Cassie’s Love Is Real. Trust Me, I’d Know.” In Kroger, we thumb through an issue of People with Cassie and Colton on the cover. A whole spread is dedicated to the couple. They sit together, Cassie draped over Colton’s lap, all smiles. Above them, in large letters, is a quote from Colton. “I Couldn’t Let Her Go!” it says. The start of the article reads, “He professed his love, she left him broken-hearted. But the star of The Bachelor refused to give up and won his dream girl back. Now the couple is happier than ever and starting a life together.” It’s a simplistic, soft way of reframing what happened between the two. It places responsibility on Cassie for breaking Colton’s heart, but reassures the audience that Colton’s persistence saved the day, ensuring happiness for both of them.

The toxic narrative is not foreign to us; romantic comedies, arguably America’s favorite genre, often celebrate the “romantic” grand gesture—the last-ditch effort, what’s supposed to be the “purest” expression of a person’s love. We see it in Love Actually when Mark professes his love to his best friend’s wife on her doorstep with her husband in the other room. We see it in Say Anything when, after their breakup, Lloyd stands outside of Diane’s bedroom window, his boom box blasting the song they listened to while having sex for the first time. We see it in the more contemporary example Sierra Burgess is a Loser when Sierra catfishes Jamey the entire movie, even kissing him without his consent but wins him back in the end with an
emotional song. We see it in *The Bachelor* when Colton is so overcome with his love for Cassie that he jumps a fence and dumps the other two prospects.

That romantic comedies encourage unhealthy behavior isn’t a hot take: people are increasingly critical of romantic comedies, cognizant of the ways in which harmful behavior is framed as romantic. Beyond the screen, film and television shape our realities—they have a direct impact on what we deem “normal,” what we are willing to settle for, how we perceive ourselves and our relationships. It’s important to dissect our world views and separate them from the warped movie logic we have internalized. In *The Bachelor*’s case, we have to stop congratulating Colton and instead acknowledge his extreme lack of respect for Cassie’s clearly-communicated desire to disengage. It is never a good idea to relentlessly pursue a person against their wishes—let alone on national television. Of course, we don’t want to presume that *The Bachelor* is “real,” but even so, the show sends a harmful message. Colton’s actions are emotionally manipulative and shouldn’t be regarded as anything else. Mainstream media behave irresponsibly when they endorse Cassie and Colton’s relationship as something to aspire to. “I couldn’t let her go!” is hardly a healthy sentiment.