

Pursuit of Empowerment: The Evolution of the Romance Novel and Its Readership in  
*Fifty Shades of Grey*

By

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## ABSTRACT

### PURSUIT OF EMPOWERMENT: THE EVOLUTION OF THE ROMANCE NOVEL AND ITS READERSHIP IN *FIFTY SHADES OF GREY*

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This thesis examines the new-adult romance work *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E L James and the novel's readership to identify the evolution of the romance genre and the ways in which the genre is used as a tool for empowerment. As the genre evolves, subgenres develop with the new "empowering" characteristics. As new technologies present themselves to readers, readers have more opportunities to participate with one another and affect the genre's evolution. I assert that *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the romance community are limited by the patriarchal values traditionally portrayed by the genre; however, the nature of the "empowering" characteristics of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism (BDSM), and the growing interconnectedness of the romance reading community suggest a growing awareness of this pervasive patriarchal influence.

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## INTRODUCTION

For most of the twentieth century, mainstream books reached audiences much differently than they do in today's interactive world. Prior to our current age of computers and smart phones, a manuscript would be carefully selected and pruned by an agent; the agent would sell the manuscript to a publisher; and the publisher would publish the book, enlist publicists to get the book reviewed in traditional media outlets (newspapers, magazines, and television shows), and send the author on a multi-city book tour. Books that were selected for the special privilege of reaching mainstream audiences did just that—easily, and without needing to cut through too much noise to become successful. The romance novel, however, was always forced to take a slightly different path to reach readers. The romance genre was considered low-class literature, and there was public scrutiny surrounding its readers despite the genre's overwhelming audience and popularity. As a result, publishers did not often tout romance books in the same public way they did books in other genres (with traditional media and book tours).

Romance publishers have traditionally marketed their books to middle-class women.<sup>1</sup> While the romance genre dates back to sentimental literature of the nineteenth century (Jane Austen, for example), its twentieth-century paperback form was perfected and formulized by Harlequin/Mills & Boon and Avon publishers. Their tactic for getting books into readers' hands was dependent upon the romance-novel formula (creating a

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<sup>1</sup> Scholar Janice Radway says in *Reading the Romance* (1984), “[M]iddle-class women are book readers because they have . . . time. . . . [So]cial custom kept them out of the full-time paid labor force and in the home where their primary duties involved . . . nurture of the family. . . . Because children are absent from the home for part of the day . . . their mothers have blocks of time . . . [for] reading,” (45).

specific, easy-to-replicate story structure and characters that emphasize the patriarchal values of heterosexual romance, female submissiveness, male dominance, and women's ultimate fulfillment through heterosexual romance and domesticity) and placing titles in easily accessible locations for their market (grocery stores and suburban shopping malls). Romance publishers were some of the first to embrace the cheap, mass-market paperback book, as it fit with their marketing scheme to create a loyal and hungry readership by delivering new (easily disposable) books as often as readers could finish them. These tactics, while very effective, were also more grassroots in nature than marketing for other genres; usually not having much traditional publicity outside of product placement meant readers were left to hear about new works on grocery-store shelves and word-of-mouth methods like book clubs and trusted booksellers. This word-of-mouth marketing (loyal readers finding new material by whispering to other loyal readers) created a large readership community and loyal fans for the genre.

Over the years, the romance novel itself has evolved into subgenres that pick up different traits appealing to new and different readers. Ultimately, these traits could be viewed as empowering features of a genre traditionally considered to be upholding patriarchal values and lacking empowering feminist messages. For example, erotic romance features more explicit sex and female sexual pleasure; chick-lit features women in careers and modern materialism. Yet these "empowering" characteristics have historically been problematic. Where these empowering features occur they also tend to be incomplete; for example, the explicit sex in erotic romance might show female pleasure, but it will most likely show her receiving pleasure objectively through

subjective male pleasure; in chick lit, the heroine will either learn to place her career beneath the “greater” value of domestication or, in finding her partner, she will suddenly find the fulfillment she’s been seeking in other areas of her life (career, family, friends, etc.). Usually, the incompleteness and limitation of these “empowering” features is due to the pervasiveness of the Harlequin/Mills & Boon/Avon formula in the genre. The formula is as much a marketing tool as it is a narrative form, and it generally remains untouched with each new subgenre despite the subgenres’ development of new character traits and plot events that connect with modern audiences.

More recently, “new-adult” romance literature (a fresh subgenre whose poster child is E L James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey*) has taken a spotlight in the romance genre. New-adult romance literature is still in its early stages, so its defining characteristics are limited to dealing with characters who are college aged or new college graduates, but it also tends to borrow features from chick-lit and erotic romance. Like other subgenres before it, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a flagship of the new-adult romance subgenre, has traits perhaps meant to appeal to new audiences. New-adult literature is said to target the post-young-adult readership; however, in the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, its nickname “mommy porn”<sup>2</sup> is due to the fact that it has been reported to initially appeal to the traditional romance-novel readership, but has also created many new audiences for romance.

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<sup>2</sup> See Julie Bosman’s *New York Times* article, “Discreetly Digital, Erotic Novel Sets American Women Abuzz,” par. 1.

James's use of bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism (known as "BDSM," consensual power imbalances and role playing in relationships as a means of sexual pleasure) to define the terms for the central relationship could be viewed as *Fifty Shades of Grey*'s differentiating "empowering" feature. However, with *Fifty Shades of Grey* as well as with the other subgenres, this "empowering" feature is problematic and incomplete. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the BDSM fails to be consistently consensual, values the hero's pleasure before the heroine's, and ultimately acts as a medium for a destructive and abusive relationship to ensue. And, of course, the traditional romance-novel formula pervades.

While *Fifty Shades of Grey* is itself not a formula-breaking work within the romance genre, its public reception has indeed broken many barriers. In the present life of the genre, the method in which women discover new works remains the same as it has been historically (word-of-mouth and book clubs), but the word-of-mouth mediums through which readers are engaging in their community are becoming more far reaching. Modern technology and social media allow for the traditional word-of-mouth and product placement tactics to reach levels of effectiveness and influence never before possible from a grocery-store shelf. These technological shifts and advancements have allowed readers to participate in the evolution of the genre and what is being written; publishers now have potential for far greater understanding of their readership's desires, concerns, and interests, as blogs and social media can say specifically that which sales numbers previously only hinted. *Fifty Shades of Grey* has been one of the key books in the past five years to take advantage of these new word-of-mouth mediums, and its success in



these channels has even led to attention in previously barred publicity avenues: traditional media and traditional book tours.<sup>3</sup> Yet the newfound attention to the genre and *Fifty Shades of Grey*'s sudden acceptance in traditional publicity outlets—suggesting that the book has transcended the nightstand into the “mainstream”—does not necessarily indicate a sudden cultural acceptance for the novels' readership.

In order to examine the current culture and climate of the romance readership and the evolution of the genre, we must examine where the novel has been and how the readership has used it. In the first chapter, I will explore the evolution of the novel through the development of subgenres, the “empowering” traits that they each adopt, and the ways the subgenres participate with the traditional romance novel formula; also in this first chapter I will take this exploration and examine it against the historical romance readership and identify the ways the readership has interacted with the novel. The second chapter will be a textual analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey*; I will use the traditional romance-novel formula to inform the analysis, but I will also examine the “empowering” trait of this book (BDSM) and how it fails to reform the patriarchal narrative of the genre's formula. The third chapter will be an examination of the public reception around *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the ways in which technological opportunities intersected with the release of the book and helped to popularize it, and how readers were able to be empowered within the community and in their reading of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (however

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<sup>3</sup> In September of 2012, early in my decision to write about *Fifty Shades of Grey*, I had the pleasure of meeting E L James doing a traditional book signing (after her success) at the Galleria Barnes & Noble in Edina, Minnesota. She declined to be interviewed for this thesis, though she expressed that she was honored and gave her encouragement.

limited the empowerment might be); this chapter will also look at the reception in traditional media and show that the mainstream public response to *Fifty Shades of Grey* does not indicate a shift in the public perception of romance readers, nor does it indicate a shift from the cultural patriarchal narrative. Ultimately, this study will show that, as exemplified by *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the established romance novel has not transcended the original romance-novel formula venerating patriarchal values despite its venture into subgenres and applying empowering characteristics; further, this study will show that the public reception of these works is positioned through the same patriarchal lens through which the novels themselves are written.

## CHAPTER ONE

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Romance novels have long played a significant role in women's cultural experience, existing in a variety of subgenres that emerge with shifting cultural ideologies, influences, and readership habits. Harlequin/Mills & Boon and Avon<sup>4</sup> standards are characterized by the traditional character archetypes of the virginal, feminine heroine and the brute, masculine hero. "Rape romances" feature an early rape scene, but conclude with marriage. Erotic romantic fiction, such as Virgin Book's Black Lace imprint, is a form of erotica characterized by explicit sex and an emphasis on female pleasure. The "single working girl" heroine whose navel-gazing and vast sexual experience dictate the success of her romantic endeavors categorizes the chick-lit subgenre. More recently, the romance genre has welcomed new-adult romance, marketed to young people in their late teens and early twenties. The new-adult romance subgenre is still developing, but it tends to have coming-of-age tropes like young-adult literature, but

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<sup>4</sup> According to Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance* (1984), these publishers standardized the modern romance novel in the twentieth century through clever marketing aimed at women homemakers (by printing cheap, easy-to-discard, replaceable paperbacks and selling them on grocery store shelves and in suburban shopping malls) and formularizing the stories for easy replication. This formula created a brand that readers came to find pleasantly predictable; once these books worked into readers' routines, a loyal fan base was born. According to Margaret Ann Jensen in *Love's Sweet Return* (1984) "Repetitive games and stories appeal to two conflicting psychological needs. . . . [E]xcitement to escape the boredom . . . [and] security to protect us from our anxieties," (17-18).

features slightly older characters (late teens and early twenties) and more explicit sexuality not seen in young-adult literature.

Scholarship surrounding the romance genre suggests that romance writers and readers have historically used the romance novel as a tool of empowerment. As the romance genre evolves, writers pick up on cultural movements (such as women in the work force and female sexual agency) and incorporate them into romance novels. With each subgenre, the details of characters' lives and relationships shift and evolve, interacting with feminist assertions of empowerment (such as *Black Lace*'s focus on female sexual pleasure<sup>5</sup> and chick lit's emphasis on the heroine as a career woman<sup>6</sup>). However, the messages of empowerment fail to change the genre's foundation and structure; despite the trend of implementing feminist interests, patriarchal values (such as female domesticity, male dominance, and fulfillment through heterosexual romance) prevail in the structure, plot, characterization, and final denouement of the novels.

According to scholars Pamela Regis in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003) and Kathryn Weibel in *Mirror Mirror* (1977), the romance-novel formula—rooted in patriarchal values of female submissiveness, domesticity, and male domination—idealizes the heterosexual romance and the heroine's ultimate fulfillment through the “happily ever after” denouement (the conclusion of the heterosexual domestic

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<sup>5</sup> According to scholars Simon Hardy in “More Black Lace: Women, Eroticism and Subjecthood” (2001) and Esther Sonnet in “‘Erotic Fiction by Women for Women’: The Pleasures of Post-Feminist Heterosexuality” (1999).

<sup>6</sup> According to scholars Stephanie Harzewski in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011) and Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff in “Rewriting the Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?” (2006).

partnership) (Regis 30; Weibel 34). This formula often contradicts empowering messages that might exist within the plot's details (which differ based on the subgenre). Regis identifies "eight narrative events" that are standard in the overarching romance genre. These events create a repeated plot structure existing beneath the potentially "empowering" features of the subgenres:

[T]he initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by the heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal. These elements are essential.

(30)

These eight events make up the structure or formula, which exists in some fashion beneath the plot details in every subgenre of romance. Whether the subgenre is erotic romance or chick lit, these elements will dictate the plot of the novel, the characterization and nature of events being more malleable to the subgenre's characteristics. Weibel describes how this structure plays out in a traditional romance novel in her book *Mirror Mirror*:

An experienced young woman meets an enigmatic and commanding older man and they get off to a bad start. Anywhere from three encounters to several months of constant companionship later, the heroine realizes she loves the hero but this only increases her distress. . . . Then, after a few chapters in which the heroine misinterprets everything going on around her, the hero reveals that he has loved

her from the beginning, explains away all her confusions, and the curtain falls as he begins to discuss marriage. (34)

While Weibel's description of the plot does include details that can shift in later subgenres (for example, chick lit does not always portray the hero as much older), Weibel states that this formula pervades multiple subgenres of romance (Weibel lists Harlequin romance, Gothic mystery romance, and historical romance). Weibel's and Regis's observations of the formula intersect with the empowering characteristics of the novel, limiting how far the empowerment messages can act as change agents for readers. Readers can glean empowering messages from some of the subgenre's features and in the ways they choose to use the novels themselves, but in the end, the romance novel formula supports traditional gender roles and patriarchal values.

This replication of the romance formula is perhaps a product and perpetrator of the fact that women are supplied with extremely limited versions of themselves as whole, fulfilled, happy people in patriarchal society, and that all said versions illustrate ultimate satisfaction as something that occurs from domestic partnerships with men.<sup>7</sup> Scholar Ann Snitow in her article "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women Is Different" (2001) says:

Harlequins fill a vacuum created by social conditions. When women try to picture excitement, the society offers them one vision, romance. When women try to

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<sup>7</sup> Argued by scholars Jan Cohn in *Romance and the Erotics of Property* (1988), Margaret Anne Jensen in *Love's Sweet Return* (1984), Merja Makinen in *Feminist Popular Fiction* (2001), Tania Modleski in *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982), and Ann Snitow in "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women Is Different" (2001).

imagine companionship, the society offers them one vision, male sexual companionship. When women try to fantasize about success, mastery, the society offers them one vision, the power to attract a man. (313)

Snitow argues that for women, ultimate fulfillment of emotional needs, companionship needs, entertainment needs, intellectual needs, sexual needs, and general needs for success are shown to be rooted in heterosexual sex and romance in patriarchal culture. Romance novels replicate and inform this vision of fulfillment, and this vision informs women's "empowerment" through heterosexual sex and romance. Scholars argue that the formula of the romance novel does not transcend patriarchal values, the narrative eroticizing heterosexual courtship and traditional gender roles. Thus, despite the evolution of the romance genre and the empowering messages in its subgenres, women romance readers can be empowered only within the patriarchal structure and cannot be empowered to transcend its limitations through reading romance.

The evolving characteristics of the main genre and subgenres can function as limited messages of female empowerment. A longstanding debate among feminist scholars in regard to romance novels is whether or not romance novels can be empowering with the addition of these characteristics despite the structure of the novels being firmly rooted in patriarchal thought. Merja Makinen in her book *Feminist Popular Fiction* (2001) states that feminist theorists debate whether the traditional romance novel "reinforces patriarchal constructions of femininity" in women's relation to men or "given its commercial sensitivity to reader preferences, [the romance novel] gives voice to women's real concerns and desires, in relation to their own roles" (42). Makinen suggests

that the romance novel supports women in traditional gender roles as the novel's structure "reifies men's phallic power as central to a woman's life and positions marriage as the solution for women's happiness" (42–43). While there are empowering purposes to women engaging in the romance genre, the novels seem to do more to help women feel comfortable and satisfied in their subordination to men than to empower women beyond their traditional roles.

The romance novel's participation in female empowerment is often contradicted by the novel's structure. In her article "The Barrister's Bedmate: Harlequin Mills & Boon and the *Bridget Jones* Debate" (2009), Rochelle Hurst argues that Helen Fielding's chick-lit work *Bridget Jones's Diary* portrays a conclusion that supports patriarchal values and negates the heroine's empowering growth over the course of the novel:

One could perhaps describe Fielding's novel as an incomplete feminist revision of the conventional romance, given that it problematically retains Harlequin Mills & Boon's romantic ending as an indicator of Bridget's growth. *Bridget Jones's Diary* undoes the most rigid and pernicious conventions of the mass-produced romance only to restore its romantic conclusion, thereby conveying plural and conflicting meanings. (465)

Hurst suggests that romance novels' unchanging structural focus on female fulfillment and enlightenment via the heterosexual union (a patriarchal assumption of the female experience) contradicts feminist influence evident in the evolving plot details and themes.

The contradiction between the romance structure and the empowering plot details can also be seen in how chick-lit heroines engage in their careers and the ways that their



male partners inject themselves in the process. Unlike heroines in traditional Harlequins, chick-lit heroines tend to be performing in a career. Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff suggest in their article, “Rewriting the Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?” (2006), that while chick-lit heroines have careers (the “empowering” plot and characterization detail), they find the strength to strive for higher career goals through the confidence they gain in submitting to a heterosexual union: “as soon as [the heroines] decide to marry their heroes, the heroines magically have the courage to ditch their dead-end jobs and fulfill their dreams” (495). According to Gill and Herdieckerhoff, the other option for the chick-lit heroine is that she is already a high-powered, unpleasant, and cold career woman who is thawed by romance and ultimately domesticated. The result of the heroine’s emotional, physical, and intellectual fulfillment (stemming from contentment in a heterosexual union) undoes the “feminist” messaging of career and financial independence.

Similarly to how chick lit aligns women’s career success with her romantic success, the romance genre in general tends to take the concept of money and material extravagance and entwine it with its eroticism of heterosexual union. In romance novels, money and consumerism are major elements in the power dynamic between the male and female protagonists. Harlequin romances usually feature an extremely wealthy and glamorous hero and a less-fortunate heroine. Jan Cohn in her work *Romance and the Erotics of Property: Mass-Market Fiction for Women* (1988) explains that the heroine must be righteous and exhibit no greed for the hero’s possessions, yet she must also covet the protection and security that comes from being his wife, creating a complex

relationship between money and romance: “The key to the contemporary romance hero lies in how the sexual and the economic power have become fused. . . . Sexual power means economic power . . .” (41). The chick-lit subgenre takes detours with the heroine’s character: she is blatantly and unapologetically materialistic. Her career functions not for personal fulfillment but so she can afford certain material luxuries. She allows herself luxuries, usually in the form of designer clothing and footwear, and is empowered by adorning herself in her success; however, in blessing herself in fine things, she is also partaking in a ritual to attract a boyfriend. This is evidence of the structural narrative focus on heterosexual romance interrupting the empowerment process. Deborah Philips in her article “Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative” (2000) asserts: “While [wearing expensive lipstick] is undoubtedly about the heroine preparing to be an object of the male gaze, there is also considerable pride in the consumer sophistication of the lipstick’s brand name, and in her ability to afford it” (239). The empowerment the heroine feels when she decorates herself with expensive things is borne of her intention to please and gain attention from men and hopefully achieve sexual and romantic satisfaction. According to Stephanie Harzewski in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011), the hero exists on this same continuum with material successes, as the heroine does not simply seek his attention and affection; he is perceived in terms of monetary and material value: “The diamond as a fetish object is substitutable for man as category and consumer . . . the diamond operates as a reified phallus” (Harzewski 90). In aligning the heroine’s financial and material fulfillment with her romantic and sexual fulfillment, the chick-lit genre eroticizes material gain through sexual union. Because sexuality and materialism

are interwoven in the dynamics between the characters, the empowerment the heroine can feel from her own monetary success is limited and further complicated by her using her success to attain material items to attract a mate. This is another example of a romance subgenre using a mode of empowerment (women's financial independence) to support the values of traditional gender roles.

The chick-lit subgenre tends to also depict contradicting messages of sexual independence. The chick-lit novel takes detours in the sexual experience of the heroine; the heroine's sexual experience is not only much greater in these novels, but she also expresses a wider gap in satisfaction and dissatisfaction in her sexual activities, suggesting that she has sexual agency. However, Gill and Herdieckerhoff argue that the heroine is not fulfilled in her sexuality until she submits to the heterosexual union: "the narrative constructs the heroine as re-virginised and innocent, so that the hero can make her into a real woman" (494). This sends a contradicting message of sexual liberation with sexual servitude and submissiveness.

Chick lit and erotic romance (Black Lace) novels use sexuality and frankness around eroticism as a mode of empowerment, but this is also complicated and interrupted by the presence of male gaze. Harzewski suggests that chick lit is "significant not only for its inclusion of graphic sexuality in its romance plot but also for its frankness on the degree of erotic gratification its heroines experience" (35). These genres portray heroines as having awareness over their sexuality (if not control and agency over their sexuality); this suggests an empowering message relating to female sexuality. However, the typical chick-lit or Black-Lace heroine also tends to make herself so sexually available that she

often lacks the discernment to recognize her “Mr. Right” until the final stages of the novel. She often uses sex as a means to achieve relationships with men. She often expresses neurotic self-examination and harsh self-judgment that stems from not being able to find a satisfactory male partner: “The protagonist never realizes that she makes herself too sexually available, thinking she has to compensate for being slightly overweight, if she is even that, by sexual favors to uncommitted partners” (Harzewski 134). The contradiction validates the importance of male gaze and women’s sexual pleasure being secondary to male sexual pleasure.

While chick lit and Black Lace tend to feature heroines who appear to be embracing sexual agency, female sexual agency in these novels is further complicated by the heroine’s internalized male gaze over-sexualizing herself. According to Esther Sonnet in her article “‘Erotic Fiction for Women By Women’: The Pleasures of Post-Feminist Heterosexuality” (1999), the writers of Black Lace, erotic fiction “for women by women,” claim to feature more explicit erotic events and women employing sexual agency; however, the sexuality presented in these novels is limiting in its ability to be empowering for women despite the fact that it commodifies female sexual pleasure. Sonnet argues that attempts to elevate female sexual pleasure in Black Lace novels results in further sexualizing the female character through internalized male gaze: “in the context of patriarchal dominance, women’s pleasure in consuming pornography must always be overdetermined by an internalization of the male gaze” (181). Scholar Simon Hardy in his article “More Black Lace: Women, Eroticism and Subjecthood” (2001) argues that these novels reflect pornographic scenes traditionally catered to men,

featuring a female object and a male subject, referring to Black Lace novels as a “hybrid” genre of pornography and romance: “There are . . . some grounds for concluding that this hybrid genre [pornography and romance] does more to perpetuate women’s identification with the objectifying ‘male gaze’ than it does to institute a female counter-subject” (439). The romance and pornography hybrid—“by women for women”—not only portrays female sexual pleasure through the objectification of men, but also eroticizes the act of women objectifying themselves through the internalized male gaze. While this sexuality does feature female sexual pleasure, the pleasure is limited in its potential to empower because it continues to portray the sexuality through the gaze and subjecthood of men. In doing so, it empowers women and their sexual agency only within traditional sexual dynamics, failing to transcend them.

Romance novels do not just eroticize women’s internalized male gaze in sexual events but eroticizes all dynamics of gender roles and heterosexual courtship, empowering women with their very own romantic “pornography” informed by patriarchy. Cohn suggests that patriarchal culture has taught women to seek to “deserve” protection and economic security from men, but to do so by embracing “modesty, submissiveness, and self-abnegation,” further eroticizing the authority of men (57). In her article “Wavering between Worlds: Feminist Influences on the Romance Genre” (1997), scholar Lynn Coddington suggests that romance novels examine culturally prescribed gender roles, and that the novels’ portrayal of gender is meant to explore and reinvent gender relations, to “remake them at times, at other times to take pleasure in a put-on identity, maybe a dated identity construction that allows us certain games, some of which

can be amusing and erotic” (70). Coddington suggesting that these gender roles are dated indicates an observation that Western culture no longer needs these patriarchal gender roles and desires. Yet the fact that the eroticizing of traditional gender roles in these novels often plays the role of pornography for women suggests that our culture has not transcended these ideologies, but also that women writers and readers have attempted to be empowered within them, however limited that empowerment might be. Snitow indicates that traditional romance novels eroticize the ways in which the heroine’s emotional, psychic, physical, and intellectual energies are all focusing on gaining her hero’s pleasure, internalizing and eroticizing the male gaze both inside and outside of the bedroom:

She feels an urge toward deep emotion; she feels anxiety about the serious intentions of the hero; she role-plays constantly, presenting herself as a nurturant, passive, receptive figure; and all of this is part of sex to her. . . . The romantic intensity of Harlequins—the waiting, fearing, speculating—are as much a part of their functioning as pornography for women as are the more overtly sexual scenes. (318)

Snitow suggests that the romance genre is pornography for women in patriarchal culture, empowering women only within the patriarchal sphere by providing them with sexual and emotional release via the validation of gender roles and traditional power dynamics of heterosexual relationships. Scholars argue that works of the romance genre must not only glorify but *eroticize* the power dynamics between the genders, the patriarchal gender

roles, and the emphasis of female focus on male pleasure in order for women to glean pleasure—sexual or otherwise—for themselves.

In eroticizing the patriarchal power dynamic in heterosexual courtship, the violence (or threat of violence) from the masculine, dominant hero to the feminine, submissive heroine is also eroticized, especially in Harlequin romance novels. In her book *Endless Rapture: Rape, Romance, and the Female Imagination* (1983), scholar Helen Hazen argues that violence in sex is “the attempt to exploit emotion through physical action” (12). Hazen argues that rape in romance novels is proof of our human desire for “excitement.” Of women reading “rape romances” (romance novels that begin with a rape that transforms into marital union), Hazen says, “Both rape and a broader spectrum of seemingly unpleasant impositions are forced onto women by themselves for the sheer sake of enjoyment” (17). Hazen suggests that in reading rape romances, women become aroused by objectifying themselves and imagining themselves in the role of the sexual victim. Hazen describes women being empowered by granting themselves the freedom to enjoy arousal in ways they see fit. While empowered in their sexualities, the fact that Hazen’s women might be aroused by reading rape scenes indicates another contradicting message of empowerment. In their quest for sexual empowerment, women are becoming aroused by fantasizing about a violent act against a woman who is portrayed as powerless—empowerment via powerlessness. That they are seeking independence over their sexualities is significant, but women reading rape romances for arousal indicates that they lack the framework to transcend this form of gender oppression and rather must resort to feeling empowered within it.

Consumer product lines of sexual toys for women have been developed in recent years, accompanying romance novels in empowering women in their independent sexuality. As made evident by the at-home erotic paraphernalia parties for middle-aged housewives who once only bonded over Tupperware, Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs assert in *Re-Making Love: The Feminization of Sex* (1986) that the “modern” sex industry is catering to mainstream women. The presence of these mainstream commodities for women suggests that women are eroticizing the traditional sexual dynamic in an outward, intentional way. Many of these products outfit sexual events in bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism (BDSM), agreed-upon role-playing that eroticizes power disparities between sexual partners. Scholars Darren Langdrige and Trevor Butt suggest in their article “The Erotic Construction of Power Exchange” (2005) that BDSM participants “magnify and ironize the way power infuses sexual relationships in everyday gender relations,” implying that BDSM allows participants to step outside of traditional gender roles to examine and exploit them, and potentially challenge them (72). Scholar Patrick D. Hopkins argues that BDSM might be a way to examine gender roles in a way that challenges traditional gender roles: “SM is a . . . site for sexual subversion and to the extent that patriarchy requires (natural) sexual categories, perhaps even a site for opposition to patriarchy” (136). While BDSM certainly exists in a number of capacities for various gender identities, in the case of most romance novels, BDSM usually exploits, exaggerates, and eroticizes traditional patriarchal gender roles. For women, submissiveness to male domination has been the standard in sexual



encounters for thousands of years. Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs suggest that BDSM might allow them to feel more empowered within that sphere:

For some women, S/M may have been an improvement on the old, unconscious variety of sadomasochism promoted by the marriage manuals of the fifties. At least with S/M, a woman had a chance to be a consumer in her own right, rather than being the passive instrument of male urges. (131)

Most romance subgenres exploit sexual power dynamics, though BDSM has recently become more popular in new-adult romances. Romance literature and products supporting BDSM could be examined as empowering tools for examining gender relations, and they can be used as tools to increase women's "confidence." Still, these narratives in romance novels tend to allow women pleasure through submissiveness and being the object for male sexual pleasure, even when that power dynamic is "ironized."

Some scholars argue that these variances in power dynamics are inherent in female sexuality because of the biological desire to reproduce. Therefore, these scholars see that empowerment can be gleaned from these romance novels simply because the novels are said to reflect "natural" female desires in sex and romance:

Every cell in her body is attuned to this charge [the evolutionary responsibility to reproduce], and . . . intelligent beings have a need to ritualize the impulses. . . . The ritual provides a structure for the urges, and I cannot feel that romantic notions are degrading or that they will force me to do more than my share of the housework. (Hazen 13)

Hazen argues that women can be empowered by the sexuality present in romance novels because the sexuality fulfills biological female desire. Scholar Jennifer Cruise Smith mirrors Hazen's ideology of the natural occurrence of gender traits in her observation of romance novels' tendency to highlight details of aesthetics in clothing, décor, etc.: "Through both socialization and biology, women are junkies for minutia" (86). Hazen's and Smith's ideologies regarding "natural" gender roles are problematic, as the assumption that women's (biological) interests and desires are reflected in romance novels rejects the idea that gender is informed by patriarchal ideology. If our belief that "patriarchal culture" is actually just "human culture," and that "human culture" is represented by individuals expressing inherent gender roles, patriarchal culture is not a pervading influence but is a natural state of humanity.

Some scholars<sup>8</sup> suggest that readers can find empowerment in reading romance novels by being agents of their own interpretations. In their article "Romance and Agency: An Argument Revisited" (1997), Marcella Thompson, Patricia Koski, and Lori Holyfield argue that feminist scholars' assumptions that readers and writers of romance are blind victims of patriarchy discounts writers' and readers' ability to create, interpret, and use romance texts in individual and empowering ways. They suggest that this certain "feminist" slant creates yet another structure within which women must perceive romance novels, further limiting readers' potential to experience the novels:

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<sup>8</sup> Marcella Thompson, Patricia Koski, and Lori Holyfield in "Romance and Agency: An Argument Revisited" (1997); Stephanie Harzewski in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011); and Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance* (1984) and "Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context" (2001).

It is counterproductive to assume that readers of romance do not possess [sic] a framework that at once allows them to combine an objective understanding of their position in relation to men with a subjective acknowledgement of their practice of reading. (448)

This theme of individual interpretation is carried through the romance novel characters in certain subgenres; of the chick-lit genre, Harzewski says, “Chick lit’s affirmation of the individual as an agent borrows from liberal feminism” (169). Other scholars suggest that readers’ interpretations of texts are subject to both individual and cultural influences. Scholar Janice Radway in her article “Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context” suggests that reader interpretation is “the result of a complex, temporally evolving interaction between a fixed verbal structure and a socially situated reader” (324). Readers can glean empowerment in reading romance novels simply for their own interpretation, but patriarchal influence remains as a lens to readers’ interpretations.

Other scholars suggest that women are empowered by rallying around the romance novel, uniting women in sisterhood around a common interest. According to scholar Laura Struve in her article “Sisters of Sorts: Reading Romantic Fiction and the Bonds among Female Readers” (2011), romance readers are often argued judged harshly by society and are usually left to “get news about a book . . . by word of mouth,” (Struve 1293–94). Romance novel readers have traditionally learned of new books by perusing the grocery-store book aisles, whispering to each other in line, and in small romance book clubs. Struve suggests that the harsh social judgment romance readers have traditionally

faced has led to an active community of romance readers and writers who must rely on one another to engage in the evolution and growth of their beloved genre: “Readers and writers see themselves as participating in a literary tradition that voices female concerns and is produced by women for the enjoyment of other women” (Struve 1295). Janice A. Radway in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984) suggests:

[B]ecause romance publishers have not engineered a perfect fit between the product they offer and their readers’ desires . . . women have discovered that their tastes are better served when . . . [reading choices are made] by a trusted selector. . . . (50)

The “trusted selectors” are usually limited to other women who read romance, as mainstream book reviewers typically do not review romance novels. Struve’s scholarship argues that the romance novel caters to women by uniting them in their shared experience. Readers of romance are actually empowered with the ability to inform the genre, as the network among readers and writers in romance publishing is tightly knit: “When romance readers seek out other readers, they are seeking out other women, and when readers become writers, they identify themselves as writing within a female tradition” (Struve 1297). In being able to connect with one another and partake in the evolution of the genre, the books begin to cater to readers in very intimate ways, and readers and writers are able to take an agency stance over their reading practices.

According to Radway, readers are using romance novels as a way to both escape and validate their lives in light of domestic challenges. “Romance fiction . . . supplies

[readers] with an important emotional release that is proscribed in daily life because the social role . . . leaves little room for . . . pursuit of individual pleasure” (Radway 95). Radway suggests that readers find emotional release (and thus empowerment through independent pleasure and satisfaction) via the emotional fantasy portrayed in the heterosexual courtship and union in romance novels. Reading romance seems to be a way in which domestic women can escape the challenges in their domesticity. This escapism is particularly interesting because of the romance genre’s exaltation of the domestic: “[Reading romance] engages [readers’] attention that enables them to deny their physical presence in an environment associated with responsibilities . . . too onerous to bear” (Radway 93). Margaret Ann Jensen agrees: “[Romances] are ambiguous and even contradictory, a . . . combination of the realistic problems women face . . . and escapist solutions” (18). In romance novels, the ending portrays a heroine whose every need is met in domesticity; while this does not release the reader of caretaking duties, it serves to allow her to both remove herself from as well as feel validated within her domestic life. In her work *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982), scholar Tania Modleski argues that women undergo a “disappearing act” while reading romance novels. According to Modleski, the disappearing act is a process of readers leaving the consciousness of their daily lives to a world where the heroine finds fulfillment and pleasure from the very same patriarchal values of female submissiveness and caregiving that exist in their daily lives. Modleski argues that this gives women the strength and stamina to persevere in their roles: “The energy women now use to belittle and defeat themselves can be rechanneled into efforts to grow and to explore ways of affirming and asserting the self” (58). Modleski argues

that women are being empowered by the act of escaping domestic duties via reading romance novels, simultaneously validating and removing themselves from their experience in order to exist more contently within it. Struve says, “Modleski suggests that Harlequin romances are like tranquilizers: they alleviate the reader’s anxiety only at the cost of a greater dependency [on the narrative]” (Struve 1291). Modleski’s “disappearing act” theory suggests women are engaging with an alternative consciousness that soothes their frustrations associated with domestic life while simultaneously validating domestic life.

Despite the fact that women are being empowered by their “escape” from domesticity, scholarship still suggests that women are doing so under the influence of patriarchy that is ultimately oppressive to women. Snitow’s observation that women are provided very few, limited versions of themselves as fulfilled individuals in our culture (most fulfillment stemming from union with men) suggests that women’s escape of domestic challenges via the romance novel may be indicative not of female empowerment but of an inability to transcend deep-seeded social implications. This dependency on romance novels to endure challenges of domestic life suggests that women may not be using romance novels to feel strong and empowered but to simply endure.

In more drastically challenging domestic relationships, such as relationships in which domestic violence occurs (psychological, sexual, or physical), women’s true empowerment through the disappearing act becomes even more problematic. Modleski’s theory applied to the context of an abusive relationship suggests that women might be

using abuse in romance novels to escape from and validate the abuse they experience in their daily lives. Scholar Julia T. Wood in her article “The Normalization of Violence in Heterosexual Romantic Relationships: Women’s Narratives of Love and Violence” (2001) argues that romance novels help women validate the domestic violence present in their own lives; when the hero of the novels rapes the heroine, professes his love to her, and marries her all within one hundred pages (as with rape romances), readers in domestic abuse situations have a tool allowing them to return to a place of romantic adoration for their partners after a violent incident. Wood argues that these scenes in the novels help women cope with violence from their partners by rationalizing that violence is a standard part of the romantic experience:

Women who seek to sustain a relationship that is fraught with chaos have available to them culturally legitimated narratives that reconcile what is irreconcilable, make sense of what is not sensible . . . when used to justify violence in relationships, they are a resource with the potential for very troublesome consequences. (244)

Wood’s observations point out the most problematic realities of Hazen’s limited argument that nonchalantly and dangerously undermines the impact of male violence and domination in romance novels: “Rape occurs in the woman’s world of illusion; it is a ritual love that exists in fantasy: a man says to a woman that she is so desirable that he will defy all the rules of honor and decency in order to have her” (Hazen 8). The problem is not that women read fantasies that feature rape and domestic violence; the problem,

according to Wood, is that women are possibly reading stories like this to escape from and validate the realities of violence in their lives.

The feminist scholarship surrounding romance novels informs us that any empowering messages that can be taken from reading romance novels are indeed limited, as the narratives do very little to challenge gender roles and reinforce women's equality with men. Rather, time and time again, readers encounter contradicting messages of sexual liberation and sexual submission, financial freedom and financial gain in domestic union, empowerment through an engaged community and the need for escapism to validate domestic life. The romance narrative pervades not only the books a woman reads, but also the songs she listens to, the movies and shows she watches, the advertisements she encounters, and what she is told as a little girl when a caring adult sits down to read her a fairy tale about a beauty and a beast who live happily ever after.

Interestingly, the romance genre's evolution has followed our Western, patriarchal culture to a postfeminist ideology<sup>9</sup> that suggests we *are* beyond the need for feminism, that we *have* transcended it, and because we *say so* we are no longer limited by patriarchy's spell—thus, we can exist under the umbrella of patriarchal values with an “empowered” understanding: “In relation to sexual relationships a discourse of freedom, liberation, and pleasure seeking sits alongside the equally powerful suggestion that married heterosexual monogamy more truly captures women's real desires,” (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 500). Gill and Herdieckerhoff do not ignore the fact that patriarchy

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<sup>9</sup> Here, “postfeminist ideology” refers to the idea that “true” feminism means equality of choice, whether a woman's choice is to be a homemaker or a CEO.



remains an influence, but suggests that society does have the intellectual power to exist within it and outside of it at the same time.

This idea that women can choose to be empowered within their roles—whatever their roles may be—is reflected in *Fifty Shades of Grey* as the novel’s heroine attempts to consensually engage with the novel’s romantic hero in a relationship in which they both mutually accept his ultimate power over her (through BDSM, which can be argued to be an “ironic” force in traditional sexual power dynamics that allows people to step outside power imbalances as a means to experience them, explore them, and eroticize them). The series aided in the sudden mainstream popularity of BDSM. For example, a special-issue magazine entitled *Fifty Shades of American Women* was published in summer 2012, just as the series was at the height of its popularity. The cover delivers messages of women’s sexual agency (“93% of women want to spice up their relationships with role play!” and “Release Your Inner Goddess! With 80 pages of jump-starting sex secrets”). Still, these messages of sexual agency sit beside other article taglines validating traditional gender roles, male subjecthood, and female pleasure through male pleasure (“Sex Whisperer: ‘I use my body to fix broken men like Christian Grey’”). The cover features the bare backside of a slender, attractive woman holding a copy of E L James’s first installment of the series, her revealing allure suggesting women’s pleasure through objectification and male gaze. This cover seems to suggest that the culture surrounding the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon is one that does not necessarily cause many empowering shifts for women or deviations from other romance novels. Yet women are talking. They are engaged. At the very least, the mainstreaming of *Fifty Shades of Grey* might indicate that

these “consensual” power imbalances might be covering new ground in the misled name of female sexual liberation. But, as in other romance novels before it, empowerment messages in *Fifty Shades of Grey* are likely have some “grey” areas.

## CHAPTER TWO

EROTICIZING AN INEQUITY OF POWER: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF *FIFTY SHADES OF GREY*

Since the romance genre was first popularized in its modern form in the twentieth century with the Harlequin/Mills & Boon and Avon, the genre has gone through many new interpretations (or subgenres), and each subgenre reflects some sentiment of the generation of people consuming it. The genre's youngest progeny is seen in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, E L James's new-adult romance self-publishing "phenomenon." It is interesting that this three-part, (likely accidentally) almost-satirical, classic rendition of a romance novel was able to reach greater spans in the romance market than almost any other work of romance fiction in recent history. And yet *Fifty Shades of Grey* is not solely a classic rendition but a borrower of other subgenres; it borrows from chick lit, rape romance, and erotic romance. Also interesting is that the novels stemmed from fan-fiction,<sup>10</sup> blatantly riding on the coattails of Stephenie Meyers's young-adult paranormal romance, *Twilight*. But *Fifty Shades of Grey* is no young-adult work; it is firmly in the romance subgenre of new adult, aimed at eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds. New adult is a relatively new subgenre in romance, developed to define literature written for the audiences suddenly "too old" for young adult literature. The subgenre began budding in the late 2000s—right around the time that *Fifty Shades of Grey* came into the genre sphere—and it often deals with typical concerns of college-aged people (such as school, future career, friends, etc.),

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<sup>10</sup> See Boog, pars. 4–5.

but like chick lit and erotic romance, it deals with explicit sexuality rarely seen in young-adult literature. Of course, *Fifty Shades of Grey* hits many other markets beyond this age group and has even been dubbed as “mommy porn.”

Despite its new tropes in new-adult literature, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a familiar work of romance. Like other romances before it, at the heart of the series are two characters engaging with eroticized power imbalances—both having much and having little. The characters eroticize this power imbalance through sexuality, money, and emotions. Like other romance novels, this power strictly reflects traditional patriarchal power structures. However, the series brings these power dynamics to the surface through the prominent romantic relationship being run by the concept of BDSM. These power dynamics were always present in the genre, though often camouflaged by sexually or financially empowered female characters in the recent romance-novel subgenres of chick lit and erotic romance (of which our heroine, Ana, is neither). The BDSM dynamic provides the vehicle through which this traditional patriarchal power dynamics can exist and be exaggerated. At the same time, this dynamic gives the perception of female agency (this particular story’s mode of empowerment), as a BDSM relationship is considered to be a consensual imbalance of power; Christian, the romantic hero, says, “I need to know your limits, and you need to know mine. This is consensual, Anastasia,” (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 103). While the characters in *Fifty Shades of Grey* do not always practice BDSM when they engage in sexual activities, the influence of the power dynamic it enforces pervades the sex in the relationship as well as mundane aspects of their romance and day-to-day life: “‘You will eat,’ he says simply. *Dominating Christian*

...” (103). The BDSM element, camouflaged as a tool of sexual empowerment for the hero and heroine, actually exists as the tool through which the hero can engage the heroine in an abusive relationship.<sup>11</sup> Like other methods of empowerment seen in previous subgenres of romance, the BDSM element in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a tool that empowers readers within the confines of the traditional romance formula—and the traditional patriarchal structure.

The concepts behind the BDSM community are the power of choice, mutual pleasure, and mutually agreed-upon rules. However, like other methods of empowerment implemented in romance novels before it, BDSM in *Fifty Shades of Grey* cannot truly be empowering due to the romance-novel structure and characteristics permeating the empowerment vehicle. Any empowerment or female agency in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is intersected and blocked by the structure and tenets of the romance genre requiring the romance novel’s outcome to be that of ultimate female fulfillment through heterosexual romance, female domesticity, female submissiveness, female pleasure through male pleasure, and other patriarchal values. Rather than providing a medium for true female agency, the BDSM in *Fifty Shades of Grey* provides a medium through which traditional patriarchal power dynamics in the characters’ romance are not only exercised but enhanced. Further, the BDSM in this series is a vehicle through which an emotionally, sexually, and mentally abusive relationship can take place.

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<sup>11</sup> BDSM itself is not an abusive form of relationship, though it is used to create an abusive situation in this series.

The central relationship in *Fifty Shades of Grey* follows the inherent romance formula existing in every traditional heterosexual romance subgenre. This formula glorifies female domesticity and heterosexual partnership. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, this formula is played out in a romanticized abusive relationship that is justified through the BDSM element. While this study will mostly focus on the events and character interactions of the first book in the series (*Fifty Shades of Grey*), the latter two books in the series (*Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*) will be referenced to identify key narrative events in the romance-novel structure.

The first novel begins with a fertile environment for romance to blossom between Anastasia “Ana” Steele and Christian Grey with traditional characterization of the lovers. Christian is a handsome, powerful, cold, distant, controlling, damaged, and often cruel character whose seemingly sole fascination (and frustration) is with Ana. Ana is a virgin whose naiveté and general insecurity render her powerless when it comes to a romance with Christian.

Throughout James’s novels, Ana exhibits the classic romance heroine contradiction of hopelessly lacking self-awareness yet spending almost all of her time navel gazing. Ana says, “A lifetime of insecurity—I’m too pale, too skinny, too scruffy, uncoordinated, my long list of faults goes on. So I have always been the one to rebuff any would-be admirers” (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, 51). She frequently states that she does not desire romance with the hero, yet she still wants ultimate fulfillment from a relationship with him. In doing so, she is acting out a traditional heroine characterization in that she must at once be humble and unaware of her positive attributes yet impossibly

alluring to the hero; further more, she must be resisting of the relationship while also willing it to move forward. In addition, Ana mirrors traditional romance heroines in that her sexual pleasure must be channeled solely through engaging sexually with the hero. Ana never once masturbates or achieves any solitary pleasure throughout the series, with the exception of an accidental orgasm due to a dream about Christian in the first book. This lack of self-awareness paired with a lack of sexual awareness creates a perfect victim for a manipulative and controlling male protagonist like Christian.

These familiar contradictions in Ana's character are played out through the exaggerated means of using several narrators when she speaks or has internal dialogue. Her humble and oblivious perceptions are often expressed through her alter egos: her "subconscious"<sup>12</sup> (whose purpose alternates between expressing self-doubt and common sense) and her "inner goddess"<sup>13</sup> (typically expressing sexual desire and possibly agency). These alter egos are in addition to her uncategorized (presumably "real") internal narrative. She least often uses her spoken narration. These different narrative voices allow for the traditional character contradictions to exist in Ana's consciousness in an obvious, almost external way:

I'm missing that need-a-boyfriend gene, but the truth is I just haven't met anyone who . . . well, whom I'm attracted to, even though part of me longs for the fabled trembling knees, heart-in my-mouth, butterflies-in-my-belly moments. . . . But in

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<sup>12</sup> Throughout the series, Ana typically references her "subconscious" as an alter ego expressing her logical intuition.

<sup>13</sup> Throughout the series, Ana typically references her "inner goddess" as an alter ego to express her sexual desire and pleasure.

reality, nobody's ever made me feel like that. . . . *Until very recently*, the unwelcome, still-small voice of my subconscious whispers. NO! I banish the thought immediately. . . . I know I've dreamed about him most nights since then [the lovers' first meeting], but that's just to purge the awful experience from my system, surely. (24)

Ana's split consciousness is significant in that it reveals her fear, loathing, and desire to escape from a potential romance with Christian (which could turn into a domestic union) and is contradicted by the other realm of her consciousness openly desiring the romance and wishing to be validated by it. Traditionally, while the heroine's ultimate fulfillment must undoubtedly come from domesticity in a marital union, and eventually does in this series, the heroine is usually not allowed to appear as though she desires it. Furthermore, she must examine herself constantly, especially her appearance, objectifying herself with internalized male gaze. At the same time, she must not see herself clearly to maintain her meek, unassuming, "feminine" nature. Ana's lacking of the "need-a-boyfriend gene" is quickly contradicted in "the meeting between the heroine and hero,"<sup>14</sup> which happens within the first two pages. Within the first moments of the lovers' meeting, Ana falls to the floor, her belongings scattering around her while Christian lifts her to her feet. In addition to the obvious physical weakness and clumsiness is Ana's inherent weakness of character:

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<sup>14</sup> One of Pamela Regis's "eight narrative events" in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 30.



I am on my hands and knees in the doorway to Mr. Grey’s office, and gentle hands are around me, helping me to stand. . . . I have to steel myself to glance up. . . . It takes a moment for me to find my voice. (7)

This small event sets the stage for the sexual power dynamic in their romance—Ana’s perceived physical and emotional/mental weakness and faltering, Christian responding in a dominant, confident, protective manner.

The language Ana uses to describe Christian sets up their sexual power dynamic, which also reflects a traditional romantic notion that the heroine must be impressed and fearful of the hero’s overwhelming masculinity. When Ana arrives at Christian’s place of work for the first time, she describes Christian’s office building and her emotions about it with classic phallus-worshipping language: “It’s a huge twenty-story office building, all curved glass and steel, an architect’s utilitarian fantasy”; “a colossal glass-and-stone edifice”; and “His office is way too big for just one man” (4–8). Ana acknowledges the size and shape of Christian’s building in language that reflects her awe, fear, and intimidation of his sexual power. Additionally, her descriptions of “steel” and “glass-and-stone” suggest cold, smooth, impenetrable surfaces—a metaphor for Christian’s cold demeanor and hard outer shell—perhaps both physically and emotionally. From the very beginning, Ana positions herself as submissive to and intimidated by Christian’s powerful sexuality.

Christian, like the traditional romantic hero, is damaged from traumas of his past and used them to fashion his cold, distant, and detached demeanor. He is described as “megalomaniac,” “mercurial,” “moody,” and a “recluse.” Like other romantic heroes,

readers are to pity Christian as a damaged soul. Christian's addict mother was a victim, as was he, of violence inflicted by her boyfriends. The greatest trauma in his life was witnessing his mother's death at an early age and being locked in a house with her corpse for four days. Christian built his BDSM sexuality around willing submissives sharing physical attributes with his "crack whore" mother. With BDSM, he is able to exercise a feeling of ultimate control and to channel the anger and aggressions still lurking in his psyche.

Like Ana, Christian's character portrays seemingly contradicting behavior; however, his contradictions tend to be intentional manipulation in which he wields his power over Ana. She refers to his allegedly unpredictable mood swings as him exercising his "mercurial" nature—though there is a specific, incessantly repeated pattern to his behavior. His contradicting behavior is manipulative, both intimidating and enticing to Ana, and Ana acts accordingly with contradicting fear and desire. For example, Christian saves Ana from the danger imposed by a runaway bicyclist one moment; the next moment, he threatens, "Anastasia, you should steer clear of me, I'm not the man for you," and then, "That idiot was riding the wrong way. I'm glad I was here. I shudder to think what could have happened to you" (49–50). Christian saving her from the bicycle and his indication that she would have been in grave danger without his help places Ana in a position of weakness and in need of a male protector; in the same exchange, he reminds her that he is capable of causing her damage and that she should "steer clear" of him. The pattern to Christian's manipulative, "mercurial" messages to Ana are destructive and

cruel; he is using his power over her to confuse and manipulate her emotions, which motivate her to act in a mode of compliance to his desires.

Before a full courtship ensues in a traditional romance novel, there are events in which the hero and heroine interact and toy with the idea of a romantic or sexual relationship. Most often, the hero is presented as mysterious, perplexing and intimidating. In the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the lovers' first few interactions consist of Christian asserting his dominance over Ana with threats to her body through both verbal and physical/proximal intimidation. In their second meeting, Christian "drops in" on Ana at the hardware store where she works under the premise that he was in the area and their meeting is coincidental (Ana never tells him her place of work in their first meeting—it is later revealed that he did a background check on her after their first meeting, which is brushed off as standard curiosity rather than stalking). He asks her to help him find various items, all of which might be typically used in a BDSM encounter or, alternatively, for actual violence: cable ties, masking tape, and rope. This action, perplexing and intimidating to Ana, takes Christian's subtle threat of physical dominance a step beyond intimidation by actually hinting at the ways in which he would like to physically overpower Ana. All the while, Ana responds to Christian's threat with fear, awe, and even deeper feelings of lust and infatuation. She says, "my heart almost strangling me"; "with trembling fingers"; "I gasp involuntarily as I feel it all the way down to somewhere darn and unexplored, deep in my belly. Desperately, I scramble around for my equilibrium"; "I dare not look at him. Jeez, could I feel any more self-conscious?" (26–27). The language she uses to describe her feelings suggests

intimidation, insubordination, and fear. However, her sense of helplessness and intimidation is romanticized and eroticized—thus, romanticizing and eroticizing the imbalanced sexual power dynamic. Ana says:

Damn, he's handsome. . . . *Why is he in Portland? Why is he here at Clayton's?*  
 And from a very tiny, underused part of my brain . . . comes the thought: *He's here to see you.* No way! I dismiss it immediately. Why would this beautiful, powerful, urban man want to see me? (26)

This time, Ana's subconscious plays the role of the common sense. The contradiction of Ana's excessive self-examination with the lack of realistic self-awareness also emphasizes the cognitive power imbalance between the characters—Christian being knowing, secretive, and preying and Ana being naïve, worshiping, and fearful. Each imbalanced power dynamic in these scenes—physical, emotional, monetary, and sexual—is highly romanticized and eroticized.

The subject of Christian's threats eventually shift to actual assaults—which, like the threats and manipulation before it, is romanticized. Ana calls him while she is intoxicated to attempt to assert her feelings that he is “strange” and “domineering.” As a “result” of her behavior, Christian tracks her down at the bar (without her telling him which one). She wakes to find that he has taken her to his hotel room (kidnapping), taken off her clothing while she was passed out (sexual assault), and had his assistant purchase new perfectly fitting undergarments and clothing for her. These actions go beyond Christian closing the characters' physical proximity without Ana's permission—he is committing punishable felonies. He commits all of these acts under the guise that he is

protecting her from the very threat that he himself poses—that of uninvited sexual attention from men. To make this contradiction more extreme, Christian then blames Ana for the ordeal: “‘If you were mine, you wouldn’t be able to sit down for a week after the stunt you pulled yesterday. . . .’ When he opens his eyes, he glares at me. ‘I hate to think what could have happened to you.’” (67). Again, Christian manipulates Ana with guilt and threats followed by affectionate language. Despite Christian’s obvious violation and manipulation, Ana ignores, downplays, and romanticizes these events, distracted by his appeal. “His eyes narrow, and then he grins wickedly. It’s disarming. One minute, I’m confused and angry, the next, I’m gazing at his gorgeous smile. . . . I quite forget what he’s talking about” (68). Though she momentarily acknowledges her displeasure, she treats it merely as fleeting frustrations and quickly returns to a place of awe and infatuation when he smiles and she remembers her desire for him. Later, Ana recalls the incident both with contradicting clarity and denial: “Kind, caring Christian, who rescues me from inebriation . . . and the monster who possesses whips and chains in a special room” (102). Clearly Ana is seeing a contradiction in Christian’s “mercurial” behavior, but again, he manipulates Ana in how she perceives herself and her relationship with him.

Ana does eventually come to acknowledge, without denial, the true nature of Christian and his intentions with her. In the last pages of the first book, Ana finally asserts herself by rejecting Christian after he shows her “how much it can hurt” by spanking (or “punishing”) her to the extent of his intentions. She is horrified and quickly leaves, but is almost immediately met with a sense of regret and sadness (504–14). At the very beginning of the second book, this barrier is rectified by no more than a few

manipulative emails, much like Ana's quick forgiveness for Christian's other transgressions. By convincing her that she is in need of saving and that his abuse is affection, Christian creates a dynamic where she might assume her own best interest is to trust his whims to control her. As a result, their relationship develops an environment in which his hitting and whipping her will be perceived as an act of romantic trust rather than one of abuse.

Christian tends to use many avenues and mediums to manipulate Ana. As is seen in other romance subgenres, and especially in chick lit, the hero's financial power in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is on the same continuum as his sexual power, and he uses his financial success to wield his power over the heroine. Christian is a billionaire, an entrepreneur in charge of 40,000 employees, and he uses his monetary power to manipulate Ana. Being a recent college graduate, Ana is in a drastically different financial place than Christian, and he uses this imbalance as a tool to assert his power over her. He gifts her with a \$14,000 first-edition of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*—a Victorian novel in which the heroine is raped and later left by her husband because, due to the rape, she was not a virgin when they married. In giving Ana this gift, Christian is certainly attempting to “woo” Ana, but he is also asserting his physical power through the mirroring of the story in Thomas Hardy's novel with his own situation with Ana; Ana says, “I think it's a warning” (55). In buying the novels for Ana, Christian is asserting his monetary power over her. Buying the novels for her is further manipulating and preying on her emotions—another seeming contradiction, a threat with an invitation. Christian admits his intentions in buying it for

her were to create an image for Ana of the directions he imagines their relationship going:

“It seemed appropriate. I could hold you to some impossibly high ideal like Angel Clare or debase you completely like Alec d’Urbervilles,” he murmurs, and his eyes flash dark and dangerous.

“If there are only two choices, I’ll take the debasement.” I whisper, gazing at him. (95)

Here, Ana has clearly accepted Christian’s terms for the direction of the relationship without asserting any agency for how she would like to see the relationship move forward—she simply accepts his two options. Ana’s acceptance of his threat is eroticized and identified as a romantic exchange, as she “gazes” at him. Further, this quote identifies the contradicting characteristics of the romance heroine as seen through male gaze (i.e. the hero and internalized by the heroine), the impossibly pure and the sexual object.

Christian’s gift giving and assertion of his monetary power is problematic in other ways. As their relationship progresses over the course of the first novel and Ana has become his lover, Christian gives Ana a very expensive Audi vehicle for her “safety,” an unreleased MacBook Pro, and a Blackberry. He uses gift giving as another means to wield his control over Ana and undermine her judgment:

“I will buy you lots of things, Anastasia. Get used to it. I can afford it. I’m a very wealthy man.” He leans down and plants a swift, chaste kiss on my lips. . . .

“It makes me feel cheap,” I murmur. . . .

“It shouldn’t. You’re overthinking it, Anastasia. Don’t place some vague moral judgment on yourself based on what others might think. . . .” (252)

Here, Christian dismisses Ana’s reasonable concerns and implores her to ignore her feelings. He also uses a decidedly “chaste” kiss as means to distract her from his intentions. As Ana accurately identified, the gifts are byproducts of her having sex with Christian at times, places, and in circumstances entirely of his choosing, which make the gifts logically resemble compensation for prostitution. This is even more valid because Christian claims that the only type of relationship he will be able to have with Ana is one associated with BDSM—not “hearts and flowers,” or traditional romance (thus another “barrier to the union”<sup>15</sup>); this intentional void of emotion in favor of a purely sexual, physical relationship aligns Ana with a commodity, objectifying her physicality and sexuality. Compensating this type of relationship with gifts is placing a direct value on her “company.” In addition, the natures of these gifts allow Christian further access to and control over Ana. The car is another tool with which Christian assumes his responsibility over Ana and her safety, further supporting the dynamic in which Ana is dependent Christian’s judgment and protection: ““Anastasia, that Beetle of yours is old and frankly dangerous. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you when it’s so easy for me to make it right . . . .”” (261). The computer and the Blackberry, which Christian uses to connect with her almost hourly, provide him constant access to Ana’s emotions and additional tools with which he can manipulate and control her.

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<sup>15</sup> One of Pamela Regis’s “eight narrative events” in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 30.



Christian also uses his financial success to control Ana's career. He finds out where she has gotten her internship in publishing and purchases the publishing house. Eventually, he ensures that she is running the publishing house, though she is only months out of college. His involvement in her career does two things; first, it ensures that he has access to all correspondences and events in Ana's day, granting him further control over her; second, it places her in a position where even her "ultimate fulfillment" in career is to be attributed to her relationship with Christian. In other words, she is in a position where she cannot attribute her success to her own achievements and abilities, but rather to her value to Christian as a sexual and romantic partner. Christian manipulating away Ana's opportunity to earn a career in her own right places her in a position where she must acknowledge her success is attributed to her sexuality rather than her own talents and skills. That she will logically attribute her success to her sexual appeal could potentially result in Ana's increased insecurity and dependence on Christian's long-term attraction to her (aligning his desire for her as a vitally important piece of her self-worth) and her decreased confidence as a person rather than a sexual object. This contributes not only to the perceived power disparity between the lovers but also to Ana's growing dependence on Christian for even the most basic needs.

As a means to rectify Ana's lack of agency in regard to Christian's threats and assaults, as well as to create the perception that their relationship is consensual rather than coerced, Christian insists Ana must sign a nondisclosure agreement in regard to all aspects of their relationship (due to the BDSM nature of their sex). However, the agreement also serves as a justification for alienating Ana from her trusting network of

friends and family. Per the agreement, Ana is forbidden to discuss anything about their relationship to anyone. This agreement not only prevents her from feeling safe to share the nature of their relationship with other people whom she trusts, but it makes her feel unsafe getting help if she feels Christian is being abusive. As their relationship is based on emotional, physical, and sexual punishment as a means for sexual pleasure (supposedly due to the BDSM in their sex and relationship), Christian enforcing that Ana sign a “legal” document to prevent her from seeking help outside the relationship is an action of abuse. Christian alienates and isolates Ana from her connections, which abusers are often known to do to their victims.

A mode of empowerment that could be argued in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is that Ana has some agency through the act of being a willing submissive. As previously stated, the nature of BDSM is that all aspects of the relationship are mutually agreed-upon. Because Christian is established as the “Dominant” and Ana is established as the “Submissive,” Christian allegedly attempts to control Ana and the nature of their relationship in an official way that both parties agree to in a mutually established contract. Ana is able to negotiate small details of the contract; for example, Christian’s initial proposal of the contract stated that Ana was to “eat regularly to maintain her health and well-being from a prescribed list of foods. . . . The Submissive will not snack between meals, with the exception of fruit” (172). Ana communicates her dissatisfaction with this arrangement, and renegotiates what she is “allowed” to eat. These discussions give the illusion that Ana has agency in her relationship with Christian due to the fact that she is negotiating and providing her consent. However, because her “consent” (i.e. agency) is only within

the confines of Christian's desires, her agency is drastically limited if present at all. In other instances, Christian repeatedly ignores her requests and preferences when his preferences differ from hers. For example, he repeatedly scolds her and insists she eat when she has expressed no longer being hungry. Though he buys her a car "for her safety," he generally refuses to allow her to drive it when she wishes in favor of having one of his employees escort her; he insists that this is also "for her safety," as he can get full reports on her status and whereabouts when he uses hired services to transport her. Christian withholding such basic freedoms to Ana is a means for him to express his feelings of ownership and control over her, and these occurrences are evidence of the classic abusive nature of their relationship. This also suggests that Ana lacks agency even where she might appear to have some, as Christian has the power to change rules and agreements based upon his own desires and whims.

In their sexual relationship, it could be seen that Ana has some agency in that she achieves sexual enjoyment from their encounters, and is occasionally able to request or suggest sex. However, she has no ultimate choice as to where, when, how, and under what circumstances their sex takes place; in addition, when she is given the option to dictate sex, Christian has informed her that she is in charge, thereby only "giving" her power when he decides to. As a heroine in traditional romances is virginal and naïve about sex and will not ask for it for her own pleasure, the BDSM element of submission provides the vehicle through which the traditional romance can be portrayed in a modern setting. Like other aspects of their relationship, Ana's true attempts to exercise free choice are often ignored by Christian in honor of his own interests. A most blatant

example is that Christian often indicates to Ana that she is allowed to leave at any point, saying, “You can leave anytime” (97). However, he conveniently forgets granting her this respect when she sends him an email indicating that she has decided to leave after reading through the contract for the first time; she says, “Okay, I’ve seen enough. It was nice knowing you. Ana” (188). Moments later, he shows up at her home and proceeds to tie her up, blindfold her (threatening to “gag” her if she refuses to keep quiet), have sex with her, and punish her with a spanking. Though Ana gets sexual pleasure out of this event, the event was in direct contradiction with her request. These instances where Christian disregards her preferences and his own word in favor of his own desires indicates that Ana does not actually have agency—sexual or otherwise—in their arrangement.

When the couple engages in sex, Christian constantly references Ana being “his,” as though he does not simply own her, he owns her sexual experiences as well. While they are engaging in sex, he says, “I don’t think you’re ready to come yet. . . . Besides, you have displeased me. . . . So perhaps I won’t let you come after all” (264). The notion that Christian has the power to “let” Ana orgasm, and to assert when he has determined she is ready and that the timing is appropriate, suggests that not only does Ana lack sexual agency, but that Christian feels true ownership over Ana’s sexuality. Only a few pages later, Christian says:

“Miss Steele, you are not just a pretty face. You’ve had six orgasms so far and all of them belong to me,” he boasts, playful again.

I flush and blink at the same time, as he stares down at me. . . . His brow furrows.

“Do you have something to tell me?” his voice is suddenly stern. (270)

In this exchange, Ana admits to having had an orgasm in her sleep during a dream about Christian; this is the only orgasm in the entire series that Ana has managed to achieve on her own, and it was both unintentional and still on account of her attraction to Christian. This is evidence not only of a lack of her own autonomous sexuality, but is also a standard characteristic of traditional romance novels: the heroine does not know or engage in sexuality without the hero, and is thus made into a “real woman” by him. Christian telling Ana that she is “more than just a pretty face” in the same exchange that he reminds her of his ownership over her reinforces how little he respects her—suggesting that she is, in fact, just a “pretty face” without him. This statement also reinforces his attempt to decrease her self-esteem and increase her dependence on him. Christian’s furrowed brow and “stern” voice suggest that he is shaming her for having a sexual experience without him—despite him being the obvious inspiration for Ana’s dream. Christian’s attitude and feelings of ownership in regard to Ana’s sexuality is classic abuser behavior; if he is not in control of her experience, and if she discovers her own agency and autonomy, her dependence on him and his authority over her is threatened. Again, not only is Ana’s agency limited within the realm of patriarchal values and ideals, it is immediately quashed even in accidental assertion.

More problematic than using sexuality as a means of control is Christian’s use of sexuality as punishment:

“Are you going to hit me?” [Ana]

“Yes, but it won’t be to hurt you. I don’t want to punish you right now. If you’d caught me yesterday evening, well that would have been a different story.”

(317)

This quote blatantly indicates the exaggerated traditional patriarchal dynamic exercised through the BDSM element. That Christian uses Ana’s sexuality against her as a punishment or a reward suggests ideological complications in regard to sexuality and power. In their world, pain and sex exist on a continuum and both are used as expressions of power. Ana gives away her sexual power, pleasure, and pain to Christian and his whims, suggesting that she has been made to internalize his belief that he owns her sexuality. Christian’s ownership over Ana is exacerbated later in the series once Ana is domesticated in marriage; for example, in *Fifty Shades Freed*, the third installment of the trilogy, Christian is angry with Ana for “defying” him when he asked her not to go for a drink with a friend. He uses her sexuality to “punish” her by forcing her to get to the brink of sexual climax over and over without allowing her to release, finally stopping when she is crying and can no longer physically handle his assault. He then forces her to romanticize the situation by associating it with her feelings of love:

“Do you still love me?” he asks.

“Of course I do. Christian, I will always love you. No matter what you do to me. . . . Were you going to let me come?” (256–57)

In this passage, it is clear that Ana has not only internalized Christian's ownership and control of her sexuality, but she has accepted that he might do anything to her that he pleases, and she has promised to love him regardless.

Like many romances, E L James's trilogy embodies the fairytale sentiment that "love conquers all" and that true romance means truly unconditional love and domesticity for the heroine. Because of this familiar trope, readers know before a relationship can happen that Ana's ultimate challenge (and success) will come from loving Christian enough to make him change, and that her greatest fulfillment (sexually, emotionally, intellectually, and otherwise) will stem from her ability to do so. Readers are led to believe that Ana's ability to love Christian enough will be the balm to heal his wounds from his past and transform him into the perfect partner. For Ana and Christian, what must be conquered with Ana's love are the demons from Christian's past. Like many romantic heroes before him, Christian's ability to love is allegedly blocked by his traumas, which are expressed through his need for sexual fulfillment with a BDSM relationship. Christian's emotional pain—a "barrier" to the romance—is physicalized in Christian's disdain of being touched. However, that she cannot touch him is another narrative tool that establishes Christian's sexual needs (to be dominant and not to be touched) at the forefront and removes Ana's potential subjecthood in their sexual relationship. Ana not being allowed to touch Christian creates a barrier for Ana to express control in their sexual encounters, and thus a barrier in her sexual agency. As their emotional relationship is so closely informed by their sexual relationship, this is also a barrier for the development of a full emotional relationship. However, eventually, this is

resolved and Ana is allowed to touch Christian in their sexual encounters, which becomes an indication of Christian's healing. And, as with the traditional romance novel, Christian does indeed heal from Ana's love, which carries Ana into her ultimate fulfillment of domesticity and heterosexual partnership with a betrothal, marriage, and motherhood.

Traditional romance novels provide a depiction of a relationship in which power imbalances are erotic, controlling behavior is affection, and in which a woman's love for an abusive man can teach him to respect her and transform him into a loving partner; *Fifty Shades of Grey* holds true to this. According to scholar Karen Lynch in her article "The 'Heterosexualisation' of Sadism and Masochism" (2003), the unrelenting narrative dictating that a romantic heterosexual relationship must exhibit an imbalance of power is due to the pervasiveness of our Western patriarchal system:

Our [Western] notions of heterosexuality have a sedimented association with the binary of the beater and the beaten: traditional concepts of heterosexuality, in so far as they involve the roles of domination and submission, are dramatically re-enacted in texts which show a woman victimised at the hands of a man. (34)

If this is accepted as truth, and this romance narrative is implicit in our society, it is potentially significant that one of the newest contributions to the genre uses a narrative tool (BDSM) that forces these dynamics to be obvious, exaggerated, and consensual. BDSM as a narrative tool could suggest that writers and readers of the genre are attempting to transcend the patriarchal system by knowingly and consensually partaking in it. BDSM could be viewed as an act in which the participant(s) step outside of the



dynamic to reenact it, performing the dynamic as a means to acknowledge and understand it.

Unfortunately, the BDSM as it occurs in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is not as consensual as it is coerced, nor is the relationship as loving as it is abusive (within and outside the BDSM element). While the characters' acknowledging and intentionally acting out these traditional power dynamics through BDSM could be a symptom of awareness budding in the genre's writers and readers, the fact that alarmingly *non*-consensual violence still occurs parallel to and within this dynamic in *Fifty Shades of Grey* (sexual assault, stalking, kidnapping, beating, manipulation, controlling, etc.) suggests that empowerment or transcendence of this patriarchal dynamic through the means of BDSM is at best incomplete and at worst has a horrifically adverse affect. Much of the violence in this series is not simply reenacted for the sake of eroticism, but is acted out as a *first* account. The violence is usually not a consensual side act of Ana and Christian's mutual sexual enjoyment, but genuine, impulsive, entitled acts by a character who sees his dominance as truth rather than allegory. And Ana follows Christian's assumptions unquestioningly, accepting and believing wholeheartedly that their imbalance and her submission is a natural, enticing reality of their relationship. Due to the ongoing abuse in the core relationship, it would seem that the empowerment potential in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is not only as limited and incomplete as in other romances, but potentially reinforces and normalizes highly dangerous and abusive relationship dynamics.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE ROMANCE GENRE'S COMING OF AGE IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In the past decade, blogging and social media have moved into and dominated traditional media, creating exciting new opportunities in book publicity for publishers and in readership communities for readers. Where traditional media and publishing have historically been one-sided—media personnel filtering news and content and delivering it to the public—blogging and social media engage the public in multi-sided dialogue. Furthermore, because blogging and social media can be directed and engaged with by anyone with Internet access, an environment has been created in which information is instant for any taste or niche audience. According to Meredith Nelson in her article “The Blog Phenomenon and the Book Publishing Industry” (2006), “The blogosphere is a massive conversation that’s playing an increasing role in establishing trends, reporting news and opinion, and generating buzz” (3). The blogging and social media world has created an environment in which the general public is able to participate with and direct cultural events in ways never before possible.

In the book world, blogs and social media have replaced much of the highly controlled traditional media outlets for getting books into readers’ hands (or onto their Kindles). Because of the vastness of the Internet, blogs and social media have also made room to publicize the vastly larger quantity of books being written annually, much due to the technological opportunities in self-publishing and e-publishing.

For the romance genre, the advent of these tools has made all the difference in the accessibility of new reading material and the interconnectedness of the readership community. This success for the romance audience is due to the fact that the technology mimics same word-of-mouth methods through which romance readers have historically found new reading material, but now they are able to do so on a much grander scale than the grocery-store line. Blogs are created around niche topics and carefully marketed on social media sites and on other blogs with similar audiences, and the success of blog content (i.e. being widely distributed) is attributed to the classic grassroots or word-of-mouth spreading methods. The difference is that each Tweet or post of a romance-novel review on a blog site can reach millions of readers; a whisper in a grocery-store aisle might only reach one.

The fact that readers no longer depend on publishers and traditional media to deliver content and reading suggestions has also meant that publishers might no longer be leading the trends but following them:

Book marketing budgets are shrinking, consumer attention spans are waning, and reading is incredibly subjective, so it's very important that marketers to find populations of people who really want to engage with their books . . . can use blogs to research communities that might be interested in their books. (Nelson 11)

And this is exactly what is happening; publishers are now seeking out bloggers' reactions to self-published or e-published works, and this is one of the main slush piles for what publishers choose to publish. The change that bloggers have effected is that they've taken advantage of the blog space to connect in faster ways than small book clubs ever could

have in previous decades, as exemplified in romance-genre review blogs. This leaves publishers to watch and respond to what readers want rather than directing and leading readers' choices as they have in the past. As such, *Fifty Shads of Grey* was indeed a trend to which publishers had to react, not instigate.

The growth of the blog as the medium for self-made journalists provides a space for authors and publishers to connect more directly with readers and niche audiences. Over the past decade, the self-publishing and e-publishing movement and the blogging movement intersected, creating a kairotic<sup>16</sup> moment that changed the ways in which book communities on the whole share books and the ways in which genres grow and develop. For bloggers and readers, this means more choices in reading as well as a space where they can participate in shaping book trends and actually participate in determining what is published. "Blogs enable an alternate literary culture that allows members that lack the 'connections' that serve as barriers of entry in the traditional publishing world" (Nelson 9). This means that not only are writers able to gain more control of their craft due to self-publishing and e-publishing, but the readership community is able to participate in the growth of the genre as well; by being active in online communities around their favorite genres, readers are able to connect with each other and support authors in more direct, connective ways.

This kairotic moment perhaps affected the romance genre more closely than any other genre; the RWA (Romance Writers of America) reported that the romance genre

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<sup>16</sup> Referring to the concept of kairos, a moment in which necessary events occurred perfectly to allow for another cultural event to take place that would not have been possible in another time.

was the “top-performing” category on bestsellers’ lists (*New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Publishers Weekly*) in 2012. The blog medium provided a space for romance readers to connect in the same ways they always have (grassroots and word of mouth) and do so on a scale never before possible. Self-publishing and e-publishing provided a tool for romance authors to add reading material to the genre’s reading list and forego the gatekeepers in traditional publishing and media. The seemingly never-ending romance blogs created a space for this new influx of titles (and readers), as the “publicity” for titles goes directly to readers through the blogs and online communities without the help of traditional media outlets like newspapers and talk shows. Though, as the RWA reports, and as seen in the case of E L James’s series, the books can and do eventually make it into traditional media outlets with enough buzz and readership support.

In the book world, blog participation exists in many forms—book review blogs, fan-fiction sites, autobiographical diary-like blogs-turned-memoirs, etc. Here, I will focus on romance book review blogs, particularly those pertaining to E L James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and the ways in which women readers use the blogging medium to participate in the community and effect change. I will examine whether the act of participating on blogs and influencing the evolution of the genre is an empowering act. Finally, I will examine the messages surrounding *Fifty Shades of Grey* in traditional media and how its participation in the publicity of the books contributes to the genre and its readership.

As stated previously, bloggers and blog communities exist in niches. The blog provides an opportunity for agency and empowerment to participants by providing bloggers and blog readers the opportunity to be part of a “community,” the validation in

being heard and the ability to influence. According the 2012 study by Carmen Stavrositu and S. Shyam Sundar “Does Blogging Empower Women? Exploring the Role of Agency and Community,”

We conceptualize empowerment to reflect three main themes: connectedness, mastery and control over aspects of one’s life, and ability to effect change. . . . By affording users ways to develop a competent, confident and assertive voice (sense of agency) as well as the ability to enter into dialogue with others (sense of community), these relationships [in a blogging community] are likely mediated by sense of agency and/or sense of community. (Stavrositu and Sundar, 370–72)

In other words, the empowerment bloggers and blog participants feel in participating in blogs occurs in the connection of community, the validation of one’s opinions and actions, and in the power to influence the growth and evolution of the community to which they belong. Feona Attwood’s article “Intimate Adventures: Sex Blogs, Sex ‘Blooks’ and Women’s Sexual Narration” (2009) focuses largely on the ways in which women are sharing autobiographical accounts of sexual interactions through the blogging medium, providing a space not just for being active in a community but to share their experiences and lives and to exercise agency in the way they perceive their sexual encounters. Attwood says, “While women blog for a variety of reasons, their main motivation appears to be the validation that they receive from communicating in public . . . .” (Attwood 6). For the romance-reading community, these articles suggest that the readers are being empowered by the acts of being heard, participating in a community of likeminded readers, helping to shape the evolution of genres, participating in what is

being published, and potentially using the books as a means to exercise sexual agency. What readers find empowering about the blog medium is perhaps not *what* is being said, but they are rather empowered solely in their ability to share, be validated, and influence others.

For E L James's series, it is well-known that the first installment was originally written as *Twilight* fan-fiction (fan-fiction is a genre in which writers, usually fans of a particular book or series, "borrow" the original writer's characters to create original stories) with an estimated "37,000 reader reviews on FanFiction.net before James moved it to her own site," according to Jason Boog in his *NPR* article, "'Fifty Shades of Grey': Publishing's Sexiest Trend" (2012). This suggests that E L James, like her readers, was originally empowered by the opportunity to partake in the readership community. What resulted from James's fan-fiction popularity was James rewriting the first book as a romance book independent of the original source material (*Twilight*). Fan blogs continued to tout the book, encouraging hoards of readers to read it. Lynsey Newton, the *Narratively Speaking* blogger, says that she "first heard about the book back in March [2012] when there were some mutterings on Twitter from across the pond." This shows the direct effect of the "viral" nature of blogging and social media—whisperings from a world away. Newton goes to say,

At first, I was embarrassed to tell people that I'd read the book as it was my own little guilty pleasure [sic] but now everyone's reading it so what does it matter? I'm not ashamed to say that I really liked it and as with *Twilight*, I quickly

devoured all three books in a matter of days. What I will say though is that if you're going to read it in public, use an ereader. . . . (Newton)

Here, Newton offers her endorsement of the book while identifying the book's role as a newly mainstream cultural spectacle. She offers a technological option, a medium for the book to reach new readers and potentially create new fans of the genre, for those readers still burdened by the cultural shame of reading a romance book that would have once been hidden in bedside drawers. One of Newton's commenters says, "I've been curious about this book for a long long [sic] time [sic] your review persuaded me to download a sample onto my kindle [sic] and I liked what I read!" (Jess Hearts Books!). This is a small-scale example of the way new word-of-mouth technologies can encourage and inspire new and old romance readers, change tastes, and launch technologies. Of course, these small-scale actions can have large-scale results, and can actually have more access to audiences than traditional media (because there are fewer barriers to the medium than traditional media). Occurrences such as this provide additional examples of the kairotic moment that occurred when the technological opportunities of self-publishing and e-publishing and the blogging medium collided to make the romance genre the "top-performing" genre it is today. As Lynn Comella says in her article "Fifty Shades of Erotic Stimulus" (2013):

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly why *Fifty Shades* has captured the sexual imaginations of so many women. Erotica, after all, is not a new genre. Perhaps it's the ease with which the books can be downloaded onto a Kindle or iPad or the fact that they conform to familiar tropes that have long defined the romance



novel. Maybe the label “mommy porn,” a description that has been used by several media outlets to describe the books, has given some women permission to see for themselves what all the fuss is about. (563)

This undeniable boom in readership via e-readers matched by bloggers’ “word-of-mouth” whisperings about books (giving publishers new insight into readers’ tastes) has perhaps been the coincidence romance has been looking for to be viewed as worthy of traditional media coverage.

As technology continues to evolve, more closely connecting people and more intricately localizing a global community with each passing year, the line between internal and external gets thinner and less apparent and our sense of internal self becomes more and more externalized. With this, our personal, self-validation moves from internal places to external “internal” places like blogs. If we look at Tania Modleski’s theory that reading romance is an escape as well as a validation for women’s domestic lifestyles that are informed by patriarchy, participating on a blog about the same topic could theoretically take this pattern of escapism and validation to a much greater level and, for some serious bloggers, even make it a lifestyle. According to Stavrositu and Sundar, “This repeated self-expression, in the process of which the blogger develops a voice of her own that is also visible to others, is likely to empower the individual user” (370). Nelson states, “The proliferation of sex blogs . . . can also be read as expressive of a memorializing culture in which [technological] advances . . . facilitate new and multiple

forms of self-narration. . . .” (Nelson 13). This split consciousness<sup>17</sup> is an event Modleski claims that readers experience in reading romance novels—a desire to escape coupled by a desire to engage and be validated.

Fans of the romance genre use blogs as a meeting space to talk about the things they enjoy and dislike about books they are reading, much like they did in the grocery-store lines before the age of the Internet. This is the development of community in the readership. As Stavrositu and Sundar assert,

The more comments a blog receives, the more likely it is for the blogger to feel that she is part of a larger community of like-minded individuals. . . . The more visits a blog receives, the more likely the blogger is to feel her voice, i.e., a keen sense of agency. (377)

It would seem that interacting and participating via a blog can lead to bloggers to feel agency and empowerment, regardless of the content and topics of the blog. For example, the blogger for the site titled *Fiction Vixen: Avoiding Reality One Page at a Time* says in “Review: Fifty Shades Darker by E L James,”

For any romance reader out there who loves alpha heroes who are controlling, domineering, obsessive, possessive, intense, tortured, mysterious, sexy, mercurial, but with a surprising and oh-so-sigh-worthy funny, playful, ironic, generous, caring, romantic, and sweet side, then look no further: Fifty Shades is your man

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<sup>17</sup> Referring to Tania Modleski’s “disappearing act” in which a woman must remove herself from her domestic life by reading romance novels in which she observes “herself”—or a female character who strives to engage in a domestic relationship and is eventually fulfilled by doing so.

(except for he's mine, so back off). And note to those romance readers: we are *sooooo* [sic] twisted and probably need therapy. (Blogger names not stated)

In bringing her readers into the dialogue by speaking to them and including them in her assessment, she is aiding in the continuing of the romance-reader community by inviting them to partake. She is communicating her passion for the storyline and “dangling bait” for other readers. This faux rivalry and camaraderie encourages an emotional response from other readers, encouraging them to “take a side” and become emotionally invested themselves. In turn, her readers engage her in faux rivalries for the hero's affection, rally behind her in faux crusades against the female nemesis in the story, and share in her enthusiasm for the series and its characters.

Still, like much about the romance genre and its readers, there are contradicting messages in the *Fiction Vixen* blog. The blogger is empowered by participating in a community, exercising her agency by sharing her voice, and being validated by the community in which she's participating. That said, like the empowering features of the subgenres, the empowerment potential for these readers is still incomplete because it is still within the confines of patriarchal narrative that the blogger is empowered; it is particularly problematic that the blogger is expressing a sexual attraction to men who are “controlling, domineering, obsessive, possessive, intense, [and] tortured” and playfully suggesting that women should compete for his affection. That she has sexual attraction to men with these qualities shows she is immersed in the book's (genre's) eroticizing of these characteristics; that she (even jokingly) suggests that his affections must be won in a competition against other women suggests that she has also internalized the notion that

women's value is in their sexual appeal, that women should look at other women as sexual competitors, and that the ultimate prize (fulfillment and, perhaps, validation) would come from winning the affections of such a man. Yet the blogger also acknowledges that this is problematic and limiting; she suggests that holding these views is "twisted" and that the readers "probably need therapy." That she acknowledges this suggests an awareness of the patriarchal influence and an awareness of her participation within it.

Though she admits she is under the spell of these dynamics and influences, this blogger also suggests that they are potentially problematic. Her awareness of the problematic nature of her romance community's attraction to Christian is significant, and perhaps suggests something similar to what the presence of BDSM indicates in the series. The BDSM in *Fifty Shades of Grey* perhaps indicates that readers and writers in the romance genre are acknowledging this inherent power dynamic and patriarchal influence, and, even if challenging these dynamics was unintended or unsuccessful in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the BDSM is possibly an unconscious attempt to explore these dynamics and influences by exaggerating and ironizing them. This blogger admitting her attraction and acknowledging that the attraction is potentially problematic is a reflection of the same concept at work in the novel through the BDSM. Her attraction, like the "natural" power imbalance between the hero and heroine, is a culturally informed position; yet she has awareness of the potentially problematic nature of her attraction, just as the BDSM in *Fifty Shades of Grey* (an "ironized" and intentional form of the culturally informed power

imbalance) suggests a new awareness of the power imbalance and the patriarchal influence.

Another blogger for the site titled *Journey with Books* said on June 21, 2011, “What I liked most about this one is that even though it’s an adult themed fiction, the author did not sacrifice the depth of the story. It sustained the plot” (blogger not named). Like on the *Fiction Vixen* blog, the *Journey with Books* commenters responded to the invitation to participate by supporting the blogger’s claims. “I appreciate it when an adult author takes the time to give an in depth back story, there has to be more than the sex!” (Susie Rosso Wolf). Another commenter on the *Romance under the Moonlight* blog concurs and encourages other readers in the community to read the books: “I’ve read the entire series twice because I love Christian! Through the many horrible reviews, I proudly say I would have signed the contract! Don’t stop reading till you’re Freed!” (Valloryv). These blogs and their commenters show the participants’ embracing of the community through mutually shared opinions, emotionally charged causes, and encouragement to continue reading. Within the community, the participants seem to find their enjoyment and value in the opportunity to be enthusiastic with others about their topic. Many of the bloggers and commenters acknowledged their attraction to Christian and the many negative reviews surrounding the story. Yet their enjoyment of the books—and the value they found in participating in the community around the book—remained. And with the community, as seen on the *Fiction Vixen* blog, comes a growing awareness of the patriarchal influences that inform the values of the genre and their readership.

With the excitement around the community comes the validation participants feel in the simple act of sharing their opinions. On the romance book review site *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*, the blogger Sarah Wendell reports, “Alas, this book didn’t work for me. I kept trying, and going back to it more than I normally would because of the number of people who adore this book and talk about it so reverently” and “Christian is instantly taken with Anna [sic], and though he warns her away from him, she’s fascinated with him, and they do the dance as old as romance, which usually totally works for me,” (Wendell). Despite the fact that the blogger did not share the opinions of so many other fans, the act of expressing is personally validating for the blogger. Further, that she is able to identify the dynamic to which she is attracted (the hero is both alluring and threatening, and obsessed with the heroine) is an intentional acknowledgment of this patriarchal dynamic and influence; Wendell even acknowledges that it is an endlessly repeated narrative. Cassandra Parkin’s blog post, “Adventures In Trash: Fifty Things That Annoy Me About ‘Fifty Shades Of Grey,’” showed a similarly external validation of Parkin’s internal feelings:

After weeks of dithering, it finally dawned on me that I can’t blog about genre fiction and not face up to the existence of the Genre Fiction hit of the year. On the other hand . . . well, frankly, I don’t want to face up to the existence of the Genre Fiction hit of the year. It annoys me. I wish it wasn’t there.

So I decided to read it until I’d found fifty things that annoyed me, and then stop. Here’s my list. (Parkin)

As is seen in these two examples, the act of blogging as a medium for engaging audiences and participating in public dialogue can be a powerful and validating one. Regardless of whether the bloggers appreciate or dislike the writing skills being exhibited in the books, or whether they adore or despise the style of romantic relationship being portrayed and perpetuated in the books, the act of releasing one's opinion and participating in the dialogue can be an empowering act. These bloggers were not citing their opinions for the sake of creating new *Fifty Shades of Grey* readers, but to express themselves and partake in the dialogue surrounding a very popular topic. Particularly, they are participating in identifying the novel(s) as potentially problematic. What is released as a public presentation solely for self-satisfaction can quickly multiply, as in Parkin's case when her blog post received its "viral" Internet status, meaning it was forwarded and posted many thousands of times over. Her blog entry eventually resulted in Parkin being commissioned to write three humorous critical analyses of the series (which have been e-published and promoted on her blog, of course).

Popularity is what allows bloggers to create impact and effect change. As Nelson says, "'popularity breeds popularity' in the blogosphere" (7). Where *Fifty Shades of Grey* is concerned, Wendell says in her post "50 Shades of Grey: Why Is It So Increasingly Popular" a few months after her initial review:

It's mostly impossible to really define why one book is popular, particularly one surrounded by ethical concerns and one which even the fans who adore it openly state is not well written or edited. The media coverage doesn't really help with

that, either, since it focuses on the fact that women are spreading the word about it because they find it so tantalizing and, frankly, arousing. (Wendell)

Wendell acknowledges the problematic nature of the text by suggesting there are “ethical concerns” and that it is not “well written or edited.” She suggests that the media coverage—a shift from the way romance novels have been traditionally marketed—is unhelpful because it focuses on the “viral” nature of the book and its sexually arousing nature to readers, often in a mocking light.

The popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its popularity-earned placement in traditional media has also meant the genre is subject to criticism in mainstream media. As the publisher of Vintage Anchor (the “high-brow”<sup>18</sup> publisher who won the bidding war for the book) Ann Messitte says in Julie Bosman’s *New York Times* article, “An Erotic Novel, ‘50 Shades of Grey,’ Goes Viral With Women” (2012), “We’re making a statement that this is bigger than one genre. . . . The people who are reading this are not only people who read romance. It’s gone much broader than that,” (Bosman). The mainstreaming of a romance novel is rarely seen, and has never been seen for a self-published (originally fan-fiction) romance.

The public criticism in traditional media around *Fifty Shades of Grey* is complicated in many ways. *Fifty Shades of Grey* has proven to have an audience worthy of traditional media coverage, and many of the audience members acknowledge the problematic nature of the text. Yet in the public sphere, the potentially empowering

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<sup>18</sup> See Bosman, pars 2–3.



qualities of the book—that it is creating a community of women expressing their tastes and sexual arousal, regardless of the problematic causes of the arousal—are treated in an almost humorous, mocking manner. As *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* blogger says in “50 Shades of Grey: Why Is It So Popular?”: “About as difficult to answer as the question why this book is so compellingly popular is the question why female arousal can’t be treated with some frank curiosity, and not mocking fear” (Wendell). This “mocking fear” of women’s sexuality is especially true for women outside of the thin, young, and beautiful societal standards. For example, this 2012 *Huff Post Women* article about *Fifty Shades of Grey*, “Fifty Shades of Grey’: Erotic Novel Gets Women Fantasizing—and Causes Controversy”:

*Attention suburbia: . . . British novel Fifty Shades of Grey by author E.L. James (a woman in her 40s) is getting women talking—and fantasizing. . . . This morning the TODAY show aired interviews with a group of women, all married with children, who read the novel for their . . . book club. The women were unanimously enthusiastic about Fifty Shades of Grey and its storyline. . . . But . . . Dr. Drew . . . told the TODAY Show that he finds the novel “disturbing” and even suggested that the submissive sex the book depicts is essentially violence against women. [emphasis added] (Grey)*

The article indeed does acknowledge the potentially damaging and dangerous implications of the book’s popularity. However, beneath the legitimate warning that the book supports violence against women, the writer also subtly suggests that the real controversy around the series’ popularity is that women who are not traditionally thought

to be in their prime years of sexual appeal (married mothers in their forties living in suburbia) are not only sexual beings, but they are ready to experience their individual sexualities outside of traditional sex with their husbands—even if it is within the confines of Modleski’s “disappearing act” that provides an escape from their domestic lives while also validating them, and even if they are discovering their sexualities through a text rife with male subjecthood and male gaze.

This mainstream media has also led to commenters and criticism from outside the romance readership (many of who have very likely not read E L James’s work). This public participation is another effect of the “mainstreaming” of a romance novel in the age of new online public mediums like blogs and social media. As a result, the genre and its readers are potentially subject to far more public scrutiny than in the past. For example, a commenter named “Brim Stone” on Boog’s online *NPR* article, “ ‘Fifty Shades of Grey’: Publishing’s Sexiest Trend,” mocks readers by saying,

Women’s romantic erotica reminds me of women’s shopping. Women can spend hours *fascinated* by the *slightest variations* in dresses which *all look pretty much the same* to me. It’s like *they somehow don’t realize* that the dress is just decoration and that you always find the same thing underneath. (Brim Stone)  
(emphasis added)

“Brim Stone,” (who does not claim to be male or female, but whose word choice indicates that “he” views woman as “other”) belittles romance-novel readers by expressing stereotypical opinions of these readers’ habits (shopping) and comparing shopping to the repetitive formula of romance novels. The commenter insults romance

readers (women) based on his perception that women believe they are able to distinguish between dresses (i.e. books) based on “slightest variations,” yet he does not perceive variations; because, of course, if he is unable to perceive true variations, the variations must not be there at all. Despite the commenter’s correct acknowledgement that the romance formula is pervasive, he was unable to identify that the repetition of formula is, in fact, the point of the romance novel, the reason many women continue to read them, and that the audience is actually more aware of this formula than he is. As Wendell says of the formula present in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, “[T]hey do the dance as old as romance, which usually totally works for me.” Neither does the commenter correctly assert that this formula is actually part of a greater cultural narrative that validates his supposed superiority; just as trying on dresses or “decoration” could be argued to be an activity where women internalize the cultural narratives of consumerism and male gaze, reading romance is also a “ruse” (like the artificial “decoration”) that allows women to simultaneously escape and validate their domestic position (dependent on the repetition of the formula). Of course, “Brim Stone” is likely not part of the traditional romance readership.

Though the long-term effects of public participation in the romance genre are yet unknown; what we can be sure of is that dialogue around women’s sexuality, however mocking, is at least acknowledgement. The traditional patriarchal narrative was solely supportive of women’s purity. This outward change in women’s public sexual experience isn’t limited to the books; Comella reports that “Fifty Shades mania” has been adopted by sex-shop retailers across the world with “Fifty Shades Fantasy” displays in the windows

and special sections that included the now-famous riding crops and other paraphernalia. This movement, as it has unquestioningly become, has brought in new customers who would have perhaps never previously considered going into a sex-shop to “explore their sexuality” (Comella 564), providing further evidence of the growing readership potential caused by the blogging and e-publishing intersection actually effecting change in tastes and attitudes.

Ultimately, these articles and blogs show that though readers and public media still filter messages through the traditional patriarchal lens. However, the intersection of these technological mediums with the increasing interconnectedness of romance-reading community (and the community’s new influence on the genre) might be creating a growing awareness of this pervasive patriarchal lens and the limiting and damaging inequality it can create.

## CONCLUSION

In years to come, the patriarchal values that inform our culture's media, entertainment, and communications will surely continue to be the lens through which the romance genre is written and experienced. The advent and mainstream success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a novel that fits comfortably within the confines of the romance novel formula, does not necessarily indicate great changes in the genre; nor does the intersection of public participation in the genre suggest that there will soon be shifts in the patriarchal cultural ideology that informed the romance-novel formula in the first place.

The formula commoditized by Harlequin/Mills & Boon and Avon was a part of our cultural narrative long before the twentieth century, and even before the sentimental novels of the nineteenth century. It is the romance of our fairy tales—of a beauty and a beast, a mermaid and a human man, and a princess and a frog. It tells young females from childhood that they are valued in domesticity, fairness, and beauty; that they should value love and their ability to do so above all other achievements; and that the ability to find love in domestic heterosexual union will lead to the “perfect ending” or fulfillment they seek. The leap is not far to compare these fairy tales to the young-adult novel *Twilight*, nor is it difficult, of course, to compare *Twilight* to the fan-fiction-inspired *Fifty Shades*

*of Grey* or any other adult romance novel. This patriarchal cultural narrative is ingrained in us, and will likely remain the mainstream lens through which romance writers write, romance readers read, and public media perceives the genre.

Despite *Fifty Shade's of Grey's* clear support of this cultural narrative, there are still shifts in motion. The fact that *Fifty Shades of Grey* was birthed from a reader (E L James) publicly participating in the fandom another book (by writing *Twilight* fan-fiction) is evidence that readers have more opportunity to control the direction of the genre than ever before, and that they are taking on the challenge. The BDSM element, though a failed empowerment tactic, suggests an attempt to step outside of and examine the traditional power dynamic in romance novels. The book's surprising popularity due to new interconnected technological mediums means even more opportunity for public participation in the genre to come, which might mean even more awareness of the patriarchal lens through which we view all content in our culture. Ultimately, though the existence and popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* does not mean ideological change, it does, perhaps, hint at awareness of our cultural ideology, which is the first step to changing it.

Beyond the growing awareness, blogs, social media, multifaceted public media, and the increasing interconnectedness and public participation on these mediums provide opportunities for self-actualization and transcendence of ideology for romance readers and writers. These mediums provide opportunities for agency where there once was none (or, at the most, the opportunities for agency were limited to local book clubs). Outside of mainstream romance, there are already budding communities perhaps successfully

participating in shifting the genre; for example, slash fan-fiction authors are taking published works of fiction and borrowing characters to devise romances between same-sex/transgender/queer characters. Though no work of slash fiction has made it to *Fifty Shades of Grey*-caliber mainstream, the slash fan-fiction community is an active and supportive one.

*Fifty Shades of Grey* has been a fascinating cultural spectacle, to be sure, yet we cannot know how the romance works to follow will affect the growth of the genre and its readership. What we do know is that no ideological shift can happen without acknowledgement of the cultural influences, and no cultural acknowledgement can happen without dialogue. Thanks to our evolving mediums for dialogue, we might at least be starting to acknowledge the patriarchal lens that dictates our cultural narrative.

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