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“I Do as I’m Told”: Gender Dynamics, the Dark
Side of BDSM and Antifeminism in E.L. James’
Fifty Shades of Grey

Author

Rosa Carolina Castillo Grange

Supervisor

Mónica Calvo Pascual

Faculty of Arts

Universidad de Filosofía y Letras de Zaragoza

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Abstract

Female sexuality has always played a central role when it comes to feminist studies. It was precisely during the period of the 1980s and 1990s when this controversial theme took the shape of the so-called 'Sex Wars' in which feminists divided themselves into 'radical feminists' and 'libertarian feminists'. The issue of pornography in relation to female sexuality was not only debatable in the 80s and 90s but has also posed a problem in our present-day society since pornography has become part of our daily lives. This dissertation about E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) revolves around gender roles, BDSM and pornography as a source of female oppression. In order to show how E.L. James romanticizes BDSM relationships and tries to sell a feminist message of empowerment through violent sex (which is not feminist at all), the analysis of the novel is going to tackle issues of female powerlessness, dependence and submission embodied by the female protagonist-narrator, and heteropatriarchal tyranny and dominance in the figure of the male character.

Resumen

La sexualidad de la mujer siempre ha ocupado un papel central en lo referente a estudios feministas. Fue precisamente durante el periodo de los años 80 y 90 cuando este tema tan polémico tomó la forma de lo que se denomina como 'Sex Wars' en las cuales las feministas se dividieron en 'feministas radicales' y 'feministas libertarias'. El asunto de la pornografía en relación con la sexualidad de la mujer no solo fue cuestionable en los 80 y 90, sino que también ha supuesto un problema para la sociedad actual debido a que la pornografía forma parte de nuestra vida diaria. Este trabajo sobre *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) de E.L. James gira entorno a los roles de género, el BDSM y la pornografía como fuente de opresión femenina. Con el propósito de demostrar como E.L. James romantiza las relaciones basadas en el BDSM y trata de vender un mensaje feminista de empoderamiento a través del sexo violento (que no es feminista en absoluto), el análisis de la novela va a abordar problemas como la falta de poder de la mujer, la dependencia y la sumisión encarnados en la protagonista y narradora femenina, así como la tiranía y dominio heteropatriarcal en la figura del personaje masculino.

1. INTRODUCTION

E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) is a thought-provoking erotic romance novel which becomes the first instalment that constitutes the *Fifty Shades* trilogy together with *Fifty Shades Darker* (2017) and *Fifty Shades Freed* (2018). Originally, the novel was written as a fan fiction of the *Twilight* saga. Therefore, Bella Swan and Edward Cullen – the main protagonists in *Twilight* – were the source of inspiration for James' characters: Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey. *Fifty Shades of Grey* deals with the hard-to-understand and controversial relationship between Christian Grey, a 27-year-old millionaire, authoritative and powerful businessman, and Anastasia Steele, a 21-year-old innocent, clumsy and virginal student of English Philology. The 26 different chapters are structured around their sexual encounters, after Christian introduces the sexually inexperienced Anastasia into the dark world of BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism).

This dissertation aims to analyse how *Fifty Shades of Grey* follows the man-as-powerful and woman-as-powerless dynamics, and how within this clash, Anastasia Steele is portrayed as an ambivalent and anti-feminist character, who does not only undervalue and endanger herself, but also tries to comply with her position as a submissive woman in BDSM practices just to reach Christian's heart.

From the many motivations behind the choice of the topic of this dissertation, the following are to be stressed: to show how the novel is supposed to emphasize female empowerment through the appropriation of the language and style of pornography on the part of the female protagonist-narrator, but ends up working as an anti-feminist narrative which reinforces heteropatriarchal stereotypes and gender roles; to deal with BDSM as a source of control and oppression; to bring a romanticised relationship down by revealing its toxic hidden reality; and to demonstrate how Anastasia reinforces the idea of *Fifty*

Shades of Grey as an anti-feminist narrative through her own objectification and dependence on a man.

To start with, I will provide some information about the period of second-wave feminism and the well-known ‘Sex Wars’ which raised so much controversy about the concepts of ‘sex’ and ‘sexism’. More specifically, I am going to concentrate on the division of feminists into ‘radical feminists’ – those who defended that pornography stands for violence against women – and ‘libertarian feminists’ or ‘anti-prudes’ – those who spoke in favour of pornography as an exaltation of women’s empowerment and liberation. After that, I will focus on pornography as discussed in Andrea Dworkin’s *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1989). Lastly, I will bring to the fore some ideas on pornography in the 21st century.

Regarding the central part of this dissertation, I will divide the analysis of E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey* into four parts. First, I will relate BDSM and the role that Christian and Anastasia take in this sexual practice with gender roles. Following this, I will focus on the figure of Christian Grey and the idea of the “male gaze” that is omnipresent in the novel. After that, I will concentrate on Anastasia as an ambivalent character whose thoughts are split into her ‘inner goddess’ and her ‘subconscious’, being the two of them in a constant tension. Finally, I will deal with how our female protagonist undervalues herself throughout the novel, which reveals that anti-feminist and powerless side of hers. In order to conclude the dissertation, I will bring together the main ideas that have been presented in the analysis of the novel.

2. FROM 20TH TO 21ST CENTURY FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON PORNOGRAPHY

2.1 Second-Wave Feminism and the ‘Sex Wars’

According to Chancer (2000), during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, the second-wave feminist movement boosted the importance of sexuality, which became a growing subject matter in the year 2000 as part of women’s research and on a more scientific level (78). As a result, sex became vital to the definition of gender studies. With the coming of early feminism, “it was now legitimate to explore problems of sexual oppression and sexual repression” (Chancer 78) that have had a negative impact for both men and women all throughout history. However, the advancements that took place between the 1980s and 1990s furthered the notion of sexuality as part of the feminist agenda. Moreover, feminism started to be focused on “racial, class, and sexual divergences in women's experiences and perspectives” (Chancer 78).

The issue of sexuality led feminists to disagreement since it was difficult to determine whether the main focus had to be put on sexual oppression or sexual repression. As a consequence of this controversy, the well-known ‘Sex Wars’ of the 1980s started. The ‘Sex Wars’ took the shape of debates which were based on the division between the themes of sex and sexism. Regarding the issue of sexism, patriarchal societies were to blame for female oppression. In this case, the problem was the difference in terms of power that women suffered “in the law or at workplaces” (Chancer 78) and which led to gender discrimination. On the other hand, sex became a priority theme for some feminists. The main goal was to fight for women’s sexual liberty, men being the ones who curbed female desires as a way to control them. During the 1980s and 1990s, five different themes regarding the split between sex and sexism were brought to the surface: the debates about pornography; sadomasochism; sex work; women affected by violence; and the idea of beauty (Chancer 79-80).

2.2 The Barnard Conference: ‘Radical Feminists’ VS ‘Libertarian Feminists’

Bracewell (2016) explains that “On April 24, 1982, some eight hundred scholars, students, artists, and activists convened at Barnard College for a conference titled ‘The Scholar and the Feminist IX: Towards a Politics of Sexuality’” (Bracewell 23). The woman in charge of coordinating this meeting, Carole Vance, stated that the conference aimed to “refocus” the “feminist agenda on sexuality” (qtd. in Bracewell 23). Ferguson (1984) argues that feminists were divided into two groups according to their sexual moral standards. On the one hand, the ‘radical feminists’ defended the idea that sexuality jeopardized women in societies dominated by men. Therefore, sexual practices were the equivalent to “violence against women” (Ferguson 106). On the other hand, there were feminists who referred to themselves as ‘anti-prudes’, and who Ferguson prefers to call ‘libertarian feminists’ (Ferguson 106). This group called attention to the fact that the determining factor of sexuality was its sense of freedom because of “the exchange of pleasure between consenting partners” (Ferguson 106).

Ferguson also states that there was a contrast between the history and the philosophy of both movements. From a historical perspective, ‘radical feminists’ are connected to “a lesbian-feminist community that rejects male-dominated heterosexual sex. Radical feminists tend to condemn sadomasochism, pornography, prostitution, cruising (promiscuous sex with strangers), adult/child sexual relations, and sexual role playing (e.g., butch/femme relationships)” (Ferguson 107). By contrast, ‘libertarian feminists’ are “heterosexual feminists or lesbian feminists” (Ferguson 107) who are in favour of sexuality as a means to achieve an exchange of pleasure between its participants, involving practices such as “sadomasochism, pornography, role-oriented sex, cruising, and adult/child sexual relations” (Ferguson 107).

Regarding a more philosophical point of view, both ‘radical feminists’ and ‘libertarian feminists’ were considering “a number of philosophical assumptions about the nature of sexuality, power, and freedom” (Ferguson 107) whose defence and progress were not correctly taken into account. The philosophy of ‘radical feminists’ on sexuality adhered to the following line of thought: 1) Heterosexual practices show how men were the “subjects and masters” (Ferguson 108), whereas women were objectified and treated as “slaves” (Ferguson 108). Thus, these sexual relations exerted violence upon women; 2) Those sexual encounters in which sex becomes a source of male aggression should be avoided and discarded by feminists; 3) Women’s sexual desires – different from males’ – had to take centre stage and be prioritized. In this sense, the emphasis should be laid on “intimacy” rather than on “performance” (Ferguson 108). An exemplary sexual relationship is one in which there is equality and consent between both parts, who have also an emotional side and do not follow any kind of role assignment (108). Opposed to these ideas, ‘libertarian feminists’ argued the following: 1) “Heterosexual as well as other sexual practices” (Ferguson 108) are repressed. “The norms of patriarchal bourgeois sexuality repress the sexual desires and pleasures of everyone by stigmatizing sexual minorities” (Ferguson 108) and thus, they promote control and purity; 2) “Feminists should repudiate any theoretical analyses, legal restrictions, or moral judgments that stigmatize sexual minorities” (Ferguson 108) and in which liberty is curbed; 3) “As feminists we should reclaim control over female sexuality” (Ferguson 108) which can be reached through the demand of having the choice to decide what is pleasurable and satisfactory; 4) “The ideal sexual relationship is between fully consenting, equal partners who negotiate to maximize one another's sexual pleasure and satisfaction by any means they choose” (Ferguson 108).

2.3 Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1989)

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines pornography as "books, magazines, DVDs, etc. that describe or show naked people and sexual acts in order to make people feel sexually excited, especially in a way that many other people find offensive". As Chancer (2000) explains, the issue of pornography caused disagreement from the period of the 1970s onwards. Some feminists tried to censor "sexually explicit materials" (79) and associated pornography with violence and female oppression. Two of the most talked-about names were Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. These women were set out to achieve the enactment of a law that could dismantle "the subset of these pornographic images that was perceived to be most objectionable" (Chancer 97). On the other hand, feminists such as Ellen Willis and Carole Vance claimed that pornography was a source of sexual liberation for some women (97).

In her book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1989) Andrea Dworkin explains that "the word *pornography*, derived from the ancient Greek *porne* and *graphos*, means "writing about whores" (Dworkin 199). Moreover, *porne*, which literally stands for 'whore' makes reference to "the lowest class of whore, which in ancient Greece was the brothel slut" (Dworkin 199) to whom all the male citizens had access. According to Dworkin, this whore "was the cheapest (in the literal sense), least regarded, least protected of all women, including slaves" (Dworkin 200). Therefore, she could be labelled as a sexual slave. Dworkin also defines *pornography* as "the graphic depiction of women as vile whores" (Dworkin 200). Dworkin suggests that nowadays pornography goes back to its original meaning: "the graphic depiction of vile whores, or, in our language, sluts, cows (as in: sexual cattle, sexual chattel), cunts" (Dworkin 200). However, she identifies a change in meaning in the word *graphos*: it is related to technology. According to Dworkin, the best way to define pornography is as follows: "the graphic depiction of the

lowest whores” (Dworkin 200). The ultimate goal of whores is to please men sexually and thus, “whores exist only within a framework of male sexual domination” (Dworkin 200). It is difficult to understand the word *whore* without taking into consideration “the lexicon of male domination” (Dworkin 200). Dworkin claims that men are the ones who have shaped “the group, the type, the concept, the epithet, the insult, the industry, the trade, the commodity, the reality of woman as whore” (Dworkin 200). Following this line of thought, pornography and male sexual domination are intertwined. They show the reality and the objectification to which these women as whores are submitted (200). To call pornography ‘dirty’ can be associated with the belief that women’s sexuality is also ‘dirty’. In fact, this is what pornography tries to represent: that not only are their bodies – and more specifically, their genitals – filthy, but indecent too (201). As a result, Dworkin states that pornography is the embodiment of this idea, and thus, the industry takes advantage of and boosts this belief (201).

2.4 The Emergence of “Raunch Culture” and 21st Century Views on Pornography

In the introduction to her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2005), Ariel Levy talks about “Female Chauvinist Pigs” as “women who make sex objects of other women and of ourselves” (Levy 4). She claims that living at a time in which the feminist movement has an active role does not necessarily mean that all our generation’s actions instantly become part of the feminist program (5). For Levy, “‘Raunchy’ and ‘Liberated’ are not synonyms” (5). Moreover, she connects ‘Raunch culture’ to something commercial rather than to something which implies progress (29). Levy also points to the fact that “hotness has become our cultural currency” (31). But most importantly, the word “hot” – when attached to women – stands for “fuckable and saleable” (31). Related to this idea of ‘hotness’, Levy remarks that women search for approval, and in fact, to be approved by others can be understood as ‘hot’ (33). Therefore,

“for women, and only for women, hotness requires projecting a kind of eagerness, offering a promise that any attention you receive for your physicality is welcome” (33). Levy argues that “some version of a sexy, scantily clad temptress has been around through the ages” (34). In this sense, obscenity has also been demanded throughout time. Not only men, but also women “have developed a taste for kitschy, slutty, stereotypes of female sexuality resurrected from an era not quite gone by” (34).

In *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, Natasha Walter explains that “many women who would call themselves feminists” (102) admit that pornography is increasing in our present-day society and that it “will be part of almost everyone’s sexual experiences” (102). Consequently, Walter says that we are living a moment “in which even many feminists have stopped trying to condemn pornography” (104). This could be seen as an enormous radical change regarding feminists’ thoughts (104). Walter argues that in the 1980s feminists were determined to bring the pornography industry down (104). The original feminist perspective on pornography “saw women only as victims of a male-dominated pornography industry” (104) that both degraded women and “encouraged violence against them” (104). Walter claims that “now that many women have talked openly about the pleasures of pornography themselves” (105) it is not worth clinging to that original feminist discourse that positioned men and women on different sides of the coin with regard to pornography (105). Walter interviewed people about their pornographic experiences, and she concluded that “despite the absence of much public debate on the issue, many women are struggling with the influence of pornography on their private, emotional lives” (109). She argues that, although they are against the original feminist discourse in relation to depicting pornography as a source of male violence against women, “many of them were still concerned about the fact that pornography foregrounds a view of sex that can be profoundly dehumanising” (109).

3. “I DON’T MAKE LOVE. I FUCK... HARD”: BDSM, POWER DYNAMICS AND ANTIFEMINISM IN *FIFTY SHADES OF GREY*

3.1 BDSM and Gender Roles: Anastasia as the ‘Sub’ VS Christian as the ‘Dom’

Fedoroff (2008) explains that BDSM is a “portmanteau acronym for Bondage–Discipline, Dominance–Submission, as well as Sadism–Masochism. Clearly these headings define various sexual interests” (643). Within BDSM sexual practices, the participants take different roles, “such as the dominant role (or the ‘dom’: the person that exerts control), the submissive role (‘sub’: the person that gives up control) or switching between both roles depending on the occasion (‘switches’)” (Wismeijer & Assen 1943). According to Horn (2015), those who are involved in S/M practices attach sexual intercourse to safety, sanity and agreement. By contrast, psychologists regard S/M “as an extreme, and atypical practice, characterized by suffering, humiliation and torture” (Horn 5). Horn also claims that “S/M is made more digestible when practitioners are white, heterosexual, monogamous, married, and of course, the female partner is submissive to the male partner” (5). Therefore, this stereotypical portrayal of S/M relations involves a hazard for women (5).

One of the central themes in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is the portrayal of gender roles through BDSM practices. Curiously enough, both protagonists are white and heterosexual, but most importantly, the female character happens to be the submissive one. Throughout the novel, Anastasia is presented as an easily manipulated, sexually inexperienced and fragile character. By contrast, Christian is sexually experienced, successful and self-assured. In this sense, there is a clear-cut division in terms of power from the very beginning of the novel. Therefore, it is easy to infer who is going to play the ‘dom’ – Christian – and who is going to be the ‘sub’ – Anastasia. In Chapter 1, Anastasia already makes a reference to her future condition as a submissive woman: “I

am trying to brush my hair into submission” (3). This could be seen as an anticipation of what is expected from her in terms of power; she is going to take the powerless side not only in that sexual relationship, but also regarding other aspects such as the economic and the social. In this first chapter, Anastasia interviews Christian and they meet for the first time. The issue of power and control is again brought to the surface. Christian represents the other side of the coin since he is going to be the powerful man throughout the novel. These quotations show how he reasserts his position from the beginning of their first encounter: ““Oh, I exercise control in all things, Miss Steele”” (10); ““I’m very singular, driven. I like control – of myself and those around me’. ‘So you want to possess things?’ *You are a control freak.*’ ‘I want to deserve to possess them, but yes, bottom line, I do”” (12).¹ Their second meeting catches Anastasia by surprise as Christian suddenly enters “Clayton” – the hardware store where Anastasia works. This is by no means a coincidence: Christian as a “control freak” starts to exert control on Anastasia by investigating where she works. Thus, there is this division between the man as the hunter and the woman as the defenceless prey. In this non-accidental encounter, Christian buys some do-it-yourself articles such as “cable ties” (25), “masking tape” (26), and “some rope” (27). Although these articles seem to be innocuous and unimportant, they are associated with BDSM and Christian’s tastes. In fact, these objects are the tools that Christian will use in order to find sexual pleasure while having sex with Anastasia. The “Red Room of Pain” (157) as Anastasia calls it, is full of these objects used for BDSM practices.

As the novel advances, Christian is clearly interested in getting to know Ana for the various occasions in which he tries to contact her as he gives Anastasia his phone

¹ The use of italics in the novel stands for Anastasia’s subconscious or inner goddess’s thoughts. In this case, this sentence is internally uttered by her subconscious.

number, to buy her luxury presents such as a first edition of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and to help her – when she gets drunk and Christian “rescues” her from her friend José's attempts to give her a kiss. However, his intentions are rather different from what Anastasia might expect. Anastasia is fully attracted to Christian, but she appears to look more fragile and smaller when she is with him: “I feel like a two-year-old. [...] My voice is small” (66). So, once and again her powerlessness is reinforced throughout the novel. Christian looks like the kind of mysterious figure who is hiding something which is slowly revealed as the chapters unfold. In Chapter 5, he clearly makes a reference to sex as he says: “Well, if you were mine, you wouldn't be able to sit down for a week after the stunt you pulled yesterday” (67). First of all, he completely objectifies Anastasia (“if you were mine”) and he unconsciously makes the reader aware of his brutality regarding sexual practices, thus, reinforcing his control and power over women in general, and over Anastasia in particular. At the same time, Anastasia feels confused because of Christian's attitude: “One minute he rebuffs me, the next he sends me fourteen-thousand-dollar books, then he tracks me like a stalker” (68), but she also feels “protected” (68). Therefore, Christian is not only an enigmatic man, but also a “fake” prince charming who invades Anastasia's mind: “He cares enough to come and rescue me from some mistakenly perceived danger. He's not a dark knight at all, but a white knight in shining, dazzling armor – a classic romantic hero – Sir Gawain or Lancelot” (69). Anastasia's fantasies come to an end when Christian lets her know that he is not “a hearts and flowers kind of man” (72), to what he adds: “I don't do romance. My tastes are very singular. You should steer clear of me” (72). In a way, Christian warns Anastasia, which suggests that there is something wrong with him, that he is clearly hiding a dark secret.

One key moment in the novel is the first time they kiss at an elevator after Christian says: “Oh, fuck the paperwork”. The way in which Christian grabs Anastasia’s face and pushes her towards the elevator’s wall is very aggressive, although perceived by Anastasia as passionate: “I have never been kissed like this” (78). However, she also feels trapped and powerless: “I’m helpless, my hands pinned, my face held, and his hips restraining me” (78). This moment foresees what their sexual encounters will be like: violent and spontaneous. Obviously, Anastasia is going to feel helpless all the time, while Christian is going to be in control of the situation as the “dom”. It is important to pay attention to the above mentioned “paperwork”. This “paperwork” reveals Christian’s secret to Anastasia: he is a dominant who has a “Red Room of Pain” and expects Anastasia to sign a contract so as to establish a real dominant-submissive relationship. In Chapter 6, Anastasia finally discovers what Christian has been hiding when he invites her to his luxury flat. There, he says: “Come, I want to show you my playroom” (96), which obviously makes reference to the “Red Room of Pain” where Christian takes his sexual partners. When Anastasia discovers what is inside the playroom, she is in a state of shock: “I’ve time-travelled back to the sixteenth century and the Spanish Inquisition. *Holy fuck*” (97). At this point in the novel, Anastasia is introduced into the BDSM world. Moreover, power dynamics are emphasized as Christian explains to Anastasia what BDSM consists in: “I do this to women who want me to. [...] I’m a dominant. [...] It means I want you to willingly surrender yourself to me in all things. [...] I want you to please me. [...] The more you submit, the greater my joy – it’s a very simple equation” (99-100). This idea of entering the playroom and being in contact with BDSM could metaphorically imply Anastasia’s crossing the threshold and changing her life. In this sense, she is going to be acquainted with sex in general, and BDSM in particular, for the first time. However, BDSM is going to position her as a submissive woman who is going to be constantly

objectified, dehumanized and reduced to the role of pleasing and obeying Christian: “I have rules, and I want you to comply with them. They are for your benefit and for my pleasure. If you follow these rules to my satisfaction, I shall reward you. If you don’t, I shall punish you, and you will learn” (100). The conclusion that Anastasia reaches is that Christian “likes to hurt women” (100) and that he is a “monster who possesses whips and chains in a special room” (102). According to Christian, BDSM is “the only sort of relationship” (103) he is interested in since that is the way he is.

In Chapter 8, Christian discovers how innocent and pure Anastasia is because she is a virgin. He decides to “make love” to her in order to solve her “situation”, meaning that being a virgin is some sort of a problem or something unusual. Once again, during the sexual practice, Anastasia feels “helpless” (119), and Christian reasserts his power over her: “You are mine. [...] Only mine. Don’t forget it” (119). Anastasia describes his voice as “intoxicating” (119), like their relationship. Apart from “helpless”, she feels paralysed: “I want to stiffen my legs, but I can’t move” (120); “Holding my head immobile. I cannot move” (121). These allusions to immobility could be related to entrapment and suffocation both in sexual terms and also regarding the control that Christian exerts on Anastasia outside the playroom. It is important to notice that they have sex for the first time in Christian’s bed (not in the playroom) because Ana is still a virgin and thus a bed stands for the typical place to lose your virginity. This immobility will then increase in the “Red Room of Pain” through the use of the different sexual objects that will make Anastasia feel helpless, powerless and paralyzed. Anastasia is also dehumanized during the different sexual encounters, as if she was a docile dog when Christian calls her “Good girl”. This points out Anastasia’s obedience as the main source for Christian’s pleasure. Metaphorically speaking, Christian’s power and the contract that he expects Anastasia to sign, could be connected with the devil. In a way, Anastasia

renounces to her own life and independence to become dependent on a man by signing what might be described as “the devil’s contract”. Even Anastasia says: “I am his” (142), suggesting absolute possession and control over her. Christian also makes himself look like the devil: “If you give yourself to me, it will be so much better” (142). Thus, Anastasia is endangering herself by selling her soul and body to the devil, to Christian: “*He’s got a Red Room of Pain, and he wants to make me his sex slave*” (159). Obviously, to become a “sex slave” is a way to denigrate Anastasia as a woman. In fact, this idea of Anastasia being completely obedient was something that Christian thought of when he first met her: “You know, when you fell into my office to interview me, you were all ‘yes sir’, ‘no sir’. I thought you were a natural-born submissive” (226).

Anastasia also shows how she feels compelled to satisfy Christian: “I’ll have emotionally invested three months, doing things that I’m not sure I want to do” (229). This points to the idea of manipulation and low self-esteem as Anastasia is incapable of taking decisions since she feels coerced to please a man sexually. It is not a coincidence that one of the sentences that Anastasia uses the most throughout the novel is: “I do as I’m told”. Furthermore, the novel makes use of imperative verbs when Christian talks so as to reinforce his authoritative power as a man who obtains everything he wants. Basically, he is portrayed as a dictator who uses and imposes his influence to dominate women. In Chapter 15, Anastasia says: “I feel so powerful” (265), “I am fucking him. I am in charge. He’s mine, and I’m his” (266). Although this quotation contributes to bringing a real breath of fresh air regarding gender roles – as it is the first time Anastasia takes the reins – we should consider that if Ana is “powerful” it is just because Christian lets her feel so. It is not Anastasia’s merit, but Christian’s, since he is getting what he wants: a dependent and obedient woman who pleases him and fully engages in BDSM practices despite her recurrent reticence.

Furthermore, this sadomasochistic relationship is not all about sexual intercourse since there are moments in the novel in which Christian physically hurts Anastasia: “he hits me – hard” (274), “I do it for you, Christian, because you need it. I don’t. [...] But when you want to punish me, I worry that you’ll hurt me” (503). Christian punishes Anastasia twice because it is part of BDSM rules. If Anastasia as a submissive disobeys the dominant, the dominant has to punish her and teach her a “lesson”. Although BDSM could be regarded as pleasurable and innovative throughout the novel, it is just a way to dehumanize a young and sexually inexperienced woman. The hidden message of BDSM transforms itself into control, blind obedience, possession and coercion. Within this relationship, Anastasia is presented as a weak and emotionally dependent character who follows rules and becomes smaller in all respects. On the other hand, Christian is presented as the male authoritative figure in the couple not only regarding BDSM but also in other aspects, increasing the idea of toxicity and manipulation as the novel advances.

3.2 The Figure of Christian Grey and the Male Gaze

Fifty Shades of Grey in general, and Grey in particular, could be associated with the figure of The Marquis de Sade. Lewis Corey (1966) explains that “The Marquis de Sade, and the Sadism with which his name is associated, have been a cultural and political influence in Europe for 150 years” (17). The degradation and sexualisation of women as playthings just for men’s pleasure lies at the core of Sade’s writings (17). Corey argues that the most important elements in ‘Sadism’ are not the perversions themselves, “but the insistence on the inequality of men and women and on masculine despotism as the mainsprings of sexual pleasure, which must be unequal to satisfy the man” (19).

These ideas of male domination and gender inequality in sadism find their expression in Grey. However, if there is a male figure who best encapsulates what Grey’s life represents that is Bluebeard. V. Walter (2004) explains that Bluebeard became part

of Charles Perrault's fairy tale collection *Histoire ou contes du temps passe* (1697). In Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) Bluebeard is called "Marquis" (4), which echoes The Marquis de Sade. He seems to be a wealthy man since he is described as being as "rich as Croesus" (4), and his castle is a marvellous, remote and Gothic-like place: "And, ah! his castle [...] that lay on the very bosom of the sea [...] that castle, at home neither on the land nor on the water, a mysterious, amphibious place" (6). However, Bluebeard hides a secret, as Kari E. Lokke (1988) explains:

Bluebeard is a wealthy merchant or king who marries and then murders a series of wives. [...] After marriage, each wife is given the key to a forbidden chamber of horrors where the former wives are interred, and, of course, each wife breaks the taboo and enters the forbidden room when the husband is absent. The "disobedience" of each wife is, in turn, betrayed when the key becomes indelibly bloody. (8)

Taking all these ideas into consideration, a parallel between Christian Grey and Bluebeard can be established. Obviously, Grey is not a murderer but a mysterious kind of Gothic figure who happens to be rich as well. Besides, if Bluebeard lives in a castle which represents all his wealth, Christian Grey lives in a luxury flat which may echo Bluebeard's castle. Christian Grey's 'Red Room of Pain' – red being connected to blood – could be the equivalent to Bluebeard's bloody chamber not because it stands for death, but because women in both cases and places are affected. On the one hand, Bluebeard could be a dominant figure once he enters the room as he decides over the life of his wives, being his ultimate choice to kill them, thus making women vulnerable and helpless. On the other hand, Grey's 'Red Room of Pain' metaphorically "kills" women's powers as they enter the room since it is the male figure who becomes the dominant one. In fact, Anastasia makes reference to Bluebeard in order to establish a clear link between this

frightening figure and Grey: “I call Kate. When she doesn’t answer I leave her a grovelling message to tell her I am alive and have not succumbed to Bluebeard. [...] The more girly I look perhaps the safer I’ll be from Bluebeard” (126).

Connected to this idea of Grey as a powerful Bluebeard-like figure, the issue of the male gaze also plays a prominent role throughout the novel. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) Laura Mulvey tackles the theme of the male gaze in the cinematographic field. She argues that scopophilia is one of the pleasures offered by cinema. That is, “there are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (59). Mulvey also explains that in *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) Freud connected the issue of scopophilia to “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (59). According to her, it is precisely the lack of equality regarding sexuality that has underscored a division in the act of looking between “active/male and passive/female” (62). Following this line of thought, she claims that “the woman displayed” (62) has been divided into two levels: “as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (62). If these ideas are extrapolated to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it is important to consider the number of expressions and verbs which are associated with Grey’s gaze. There are more than 100 instances in which the word “gaze” appears – connected to Grey – as it is described by Anastasia as: “steady” (11), “penetrating” (14), “intense” (15), “unwavering” (24), “anxious, burning” (48), etc. There are also some sentences related to the act of looking which highlight the importance of the male gaze in the novel: “He stills, gazing down at me, his eyes bright with ecstatic triumph” (117), “he’s been watching you like a hawk” (243), “he takes a step towards me wearing his sexy predatory look” (426), “and he eases me on to him,

slowly, exquisitely slowly... filling me... watching me as he takes me” (437), and so on. In most of the cases, the male gaze takes a central role in sexual encounters and thus a sexual connotation could be attached to it, which matches Mulvey’s thoughts on how the male gaze participates in women’s sexual objectification. The male gaze also appears as an example of gender inequality in BDSM practices: ““Why can’t I look at you?’ ‘That’s a Dom/sub thing. You’ll get used to it’” (222). This conversation between Anastasia and Grey points to gender imbalance since she is not allowed to look at him from her position of submission, whereas he can look at her, the ultimate goal being to control the sub and even derive sexual pleasure from this act.

3.3 Anastasia as an Ambivalent Character: Her ‘Inner Goddess’ VS Her ‘Subconscious’

One of the most remarkable tensions in the novel could be that of Anastasia’s ‘subconscious’ and her ‘inner goddess’. In this sense, it is as if Anastasia’s thoughts split into two diametrically opposed forces: her ‘inner goddess’ which stands for physicality, sexuality and the figure of the temptress, and her ‘subconscious’ which represents rationality and Anastasia’s emotional side. They play such an important role in the novel that they could even be considered as characters. On the one hand, Anastasia’s inner goddess could be regarded as a hidden part in her thoughts which is brought to the surface when sexual attraction takes the leading role: “and my very small inner goddess sways in a gentle victorious samba” (78). This excerpt of text belongs to the first physical approach between Anastasia and Grey as they kiss. Therefore, from this moment onwards, Anastasia’s inner goddess is going to overwhelm her thoughts as it prompts Anastasia to explore her sexuality deliberately and discover that hidden side of her virginal-like personality. These ideas are in tune with radical feminists’ views on the exaltation of women’s sexuality as part of their agenda. Although this emphasis on her sexuality seems

to be positive at first sight, it is in fact following her inner goddess what drives her into submission, as this exploration of sexuality means to blindly obey a man and thus it jeopardizes Anastasia's position and power as a woman. So, what is supposed to be regarded as a mere act of "feminist" empowerment through sexuality, ends up as something which dehumanizes Anastasia – which is not feminist at all. In opposition to the idea of the male gaze, a "female gaze" can also be found in relation to her inner goddess. In that sense, Anastasia sexualizes and idealizes Grey as a kind of God: "Quickly, he clambers out of the bath, giving me my first full glimpse of the Adonis, divinely formed, that is Christian Grey. My inner goddess has stopped dancing and is staring" (138). Her inner goddess does not seem to be as innocent as Anastasia is for it objectifies Christian as well. There are numerous references to Christian's body as described by Anastasia's more sexually-oriented thoughts: "my mouth goes dry looking at him... he's so freaking *hot*" (36), "he's too gloriously good-looking" (53), "he looks yummy" (63), "why is he so damned attractive? Right now I want to go in and join him in the shower" (68), "his beauty is derailing" (144), etc. In general terms, Anastasia could be regarded as an ambivalent character since she does not only participate in her own objectification, but also objectifies others at the same time. Following this line of thought, she is presented both as the object and the subject within this sexual relationship because of her inner goddess, which regards sexual encounters as highly pleasurable and describes them in pornographic terms. It is as if having sex with Christian resembles a highly smut scene in which she participates as a subject, equating violent sex with obscenity. It is important to notice Anastasia's role as the internal narrator because her inner goddess's descriptions of sex are also very explicit. This is something that emphasizes the ambivalent side not only of Anastasia as a character, but of the novel as a whole: filthy sex is supposed to be sexually liberating and exciting from her inner goddess's point of

view, which could be regarded as “feminist”, but it just shows how pornography stands for female powerlessness and submission, which is what radical feminists of the 1980s and 1990s claimed. On the other hand, her subconscious tries to guide her in the right direction in order to avoid all those sexual temptations that are considered dangerous and a source of objectification. Although her subconscious works in a more rational level, it also brings Anastasia’s romantic feelings to the fore as she seems to love Christian. However, real feelings in this sexual relationship are seen as a threat since love and sex are not compatible regarding BDSM practices. This is going to pose a problem for Anastasia in general, and for her subconscious in particular, since it tries to prevent Anastasia from exploring her sexual hidden side as it is considered a hazard:

How can I possibly agree to all this? And apparently, it’s for my benefit, *to explore my sensuality, my limits – safely* – oh please! I scoff angrily. *Serve and obey in all things [...]* *You can’t seriously be considering this...* My subconscious sounds sane and rational, not her usual snarky self. (175, 176)²

This clash between ‘inner goddess’ and ‘subconscious’ affects Anastasia’s actions, decisions and real behaviour. The outcome of this tension is that Anastasia submits to Christian’s sexual demands – following her inner goddess’s instincts and sexual appetites – but she does so in order to reach Christian’s heart. Sex and love are intertwined in order to both please a man and try to carve a place in Christian’s romantic life. Therefore, Anastasia uses sex and unconsciously contributes to her own submission to conquer a man: ““I want his love. I need Christian Grey to love me”” (472).

² The use of italics in this case corresponds to Anastasia’s subconscious.

3.4 “I Don’t Fit in Here at All”: Low Self-Esteem and Dependence

From the very beginning of the novel Anastasia presents a very low self-esteem in contrast to that of her flatmate Kate, who is described as “irresistible, beautiful, sexy, funny, forward... all the things that I’m not” (84). As the novel unfolds, she always compares herself not only to women but also to men, and in particular to Christian, who is completely idealized throughout the different chapters: “He’s the epitome of male beauty” (25), “Michelangelo’s *David* has nothing on him” (69). Anastasia defines herself as “too pale, too skinny, too scruffy, uncoordinated, my long list of faults goes on” (51). There is then a clear contrast between how Anastasia perceives herself and how she perceives others. The fact that she feels vulnerable and powerless points to how she becomes easily manipulated by Christian. This division in terms of power and her low self-esteem are also emphasized when she says: “Yeah... he’s a little out of my league, Kate. [...] We are poles apart and from two very different worlds. He’s not the man for me” (52, 53). The fact that Anastasia studies English Philology is by no means accidental. In this sense, she is portrayed as a romantic character who is very fond of literature and thus it is precisely literature that lies at the core of her perception of an idyllic and romantic relationship: “Sometimes I wonder there’s something wrong with me. Perhaps I’ve spent too long in the company of my literary romantic heroes, and consequently my ideals and expectations are far too high” (24). However, it is precisely this insistence on finding a prince-charming in Christian that leads Anastasia to undervalue herself by choosing the wrong path. For a start, she starts shaving her legs to please a man: “My legs and underarms are shaved to perfection, my eyebrows plucked, and I am buffed all over. It has been a most unpleasant experience. But she assures me that this is what men expect these days” (85). She also starts wearing make-up and changes her style so as to meet Christian’s expectations: “I rarely wear make-up – it intimidates me. None of my literary

heroines had to deal with make-up. [...] I slip on the plum-colored stilettos that match the dress” (214). It is quite interesting that it is not until she has Christian’s approval that she “values” herself: “‘You’re beautiful.’ He runs his hand through his hair again. *Beautiful*. I flush with pleasure. Christian Grey thinks I’m beautiful” (109), “‘Anastasia, you’re a very beautiful woman, the whole package’” (133-134). Therefore, she is not only physically dependent on Christian, but also emotionally.

Another important issue regarding the figure of Anastasia is that of money. It is unquestionable that Anastasia’s way of life is inferior to that of Christian. Thus, it is highly remarkable that as a sub, Anastasia has to accept different expensive gifts from Christian, which in fact become more expensive as the novel unfolds. From a collection of books to a luxury car, Grey starts buying Anastasia’s submission in a sense. This could be seen as a way to reduce Anastasia’s possibilities of economic independence as a woman, to remind her that Grey exerts control on every aspect of her life, and to underscore the patriarchal power and influence that Christian represents. The final outcome is that Anastasia succumbs to Christian’s power although this means losing her power as a woman, something which goes against the principles of feminism.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is an erotic novel which presents this rather ambivalent relationship between the powerful Christian Grey and the innocent Anastasia Steel. The novel seems to take sides with BDSM as a way to explore infinite pleasure. Nevertheless, as the novel unfolds, the dangers of BDSM for women, toxicity, gender dynamics and issues of power are brought to the surface. Within this relationship and the BDSM practice, it is the female figure – Anastasia – who internalizes a submissive role, while the male figure – Christian – takes on a dominant position. These two characters are presented as totally opposed figures from the very beginning of the novel. On the one

hand, Anastasia has a low self-esteem, she is sexually inexperienced, sentimentally dependent; she lacks confidence and is totally susceptible to manipulation. On the other hand, Christian embodies all the features attached to a dominant-like figure for he is the representation of patriarchy and male brutality, he is also powerful – not only economically, but also socially – and he knows how to control others. Christian introduces Anastasia in to the dangerous world of BDSM and thus Anastasia's more sexual but hidden side makes her submit to Christian's power. However, her more sentimental part sets out to reach Christian's heart, which poses a problem since sex and love are incompatible forces for Grey. All throughout the novel, Grey is equated to Bluebeard and the figure of the Marquis de Sade as sadism and sexual brutality become the main ingredients in his 'Red Room of Pain'. Not only is Anastasia dehumanized in this room, but also outside it because Christian's ability to control her is exerted in every aspect of Anastasia's life.

From my point of view and considering the aim of this dissertation, it is clear that *Fifty Shades of Grey* tries to offer a romanticized view of BDSM-pornographic-like relationships and violence. Therefore, the novel could be labelled as an antifeminist narrative as it tries to sell the idea that brutality can find its way through romantic and real love. Taking into account a libertarian feminist perspective, and the fact that the message of this group of feminists was that sex and pornography were a source of liberation for women, *Fifty Shades of Grey* sees eye to eye with this point of view for Anastasia's inner goddess thinks that BDSM will provide her with a wonderful sexual experience that will end up with her innocence by exploring her sexuality. The female protagonist-narrator dynamics that characterizes the novel shows how BDSM is described with pornographic language from Anastasia's point of view and internal focalization. The novel makes use of Anastasia – an innocent girl – as the narrator to subtly promote

pornography as a site of female pleasure. Therefore, *Fifty Shades of Grey* describes a kind of pornographic sex which is typically heterosexual, male-oriented and in which women are dominated by men and depicted – from radical feminists’ point of view – as “vile whores”. It is precisely exploring sex and eroticizing BDSM that drives Anastasia to become even more powerless and helpless in the sense that rather than discover a pleasant experience, she is constantly dehumanized, objectified and undervalued as a woman by a man that embodies the most stereotypical heteropatriarchal values.

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