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Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s) Dr. Brooke Belasco _____ Date _____
[Signature] _____ Date 5/05/15

Reader(s) Dr. Jason Rangel _____ Date _____
[Signature] _____ Date 5/8/15

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Fifty Shades of Fucked Up: On the Use and Abuse of a Sexual Subculture to Sell Books

A Thesis

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and for

Departmental High Honors

Viviane Panagiotis Linos

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CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH FOCUS/AIM

Introduction

Representations of Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism (hereinafter “BDSM”) in the mainstream media have quietly infiltrated pages, screens, and the imaginations of consumer audiences. Over the past 20 years, the trend of conventionalizing imagery of alternative sexualities has increased exponentially (Weinberg and Magill, 1995, p. 223). From the implicit scenes of bondage in marketing campaigns (Dannon La Crème, 2002; Ikea, 2001) to the more explicit depictions of BDSM relationships in popular media music, literature and film industries (Rihanna, 2011; Jaeckin, 1975; Shainberg, 2002; Lyne, 1986) it appears that BDSM has entered our popular culture (Weiss, 2006, p. 104).

With the proliferation of ‘deviant’ imagery mass produced and increasingly accessible, albeit sensationalized and scandalized, society has demonstrated desensitization to BDSM. This desensitization has led to increased commodification of BDSM, which has taken on traditional ideological structures and lost any potential for radical sexual liberation or subversion of oppressive hierarchies of sexuality. According to literary critic Margot D. Weiss, when mainstream representations of sexual minorities are visible and acknowledged, the paradigm of our liberal political system allows for an illusion of progress. With the increased visibility, acceptance, and understanding of BDSM in society, it is difficult to recognize representations of BDSM and other sexual

minorities in largely available mainstream media outlets. This is a problematic occurrence. (Weiss, 2006, p. 112)

One such modern representation of BDSM is James' trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey*; these books have emerged as a cultural phenomenon as they swept mainstream readers into the literary genre of 'erotic fiction' (James 2012a-2012c). With worldwide sales exceeding 100 million copies, translations in 52 different languages, and a firm yearlong hold on the *New York Times Bestseller* list, the trilogy –which began as fan fiction– engages the sexual fantasies of readers (Bosman, 2014). While the imminent film adaptation suggests the popularity of these books, and in the aforementioned profits, the pedagogical potential of these books is unclear.

For the majority of readers, these books are the first exposure to a supposedly non-normative, narrated relationship between consenting partners that includes brief moments of alternative sex. Diving into the world of Kink (i.e. BDSM, leather, fetish, and polyamory), James provides a space for discourse on Kink to be explored, interpreted, and reproduced by mainstream culture. However, the connection readers make with the characters of *Fifty Shades of Grey* allows for a false belief in the knowledge of BDSM. Through the understanding of Foucauldian notions of knowledge as power, it is appropriate to explore ways in which this deceptive grasp of sexual subversion through knowledge, frames interpretations of BDSM by mainstream consumers (Foucault, 1980, p. 234).

In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, James masterfully utilizes a first person narrative to ease readers into unfamiliar sexual territory. However, while introducing relatively accurate

terminology to enlighten her readers on BDSM practices, James further perpetuates the pseudo-acceptance of such sexual deviance by relying on mainstream, vanilla, or non-BDSM practicing audience members to insert their own normative framework into the narrative (Weiss, 2006, p. 114). This literary approach allows readers to unknowingly utilize these fictional texts as an educational tool to understand BDSM. *Fifty Shades of Grey* utilized as a pedagogical tool is counterproductive to an accurate understanding of BDSM. With James' weak character development and reliance on an easily absorbed romance/love narrative, mainstream readers are enabled and encouraged to use a heteronormative framework to interpret the brief BDSM scenes contained in *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Weiss, 2006, p. 114).

Synopsis of Text

The focus of this project is *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012), the first book in James' trilogy. The book follows the relationship between Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey. Through a first person narrative the female protagonist, Steele, a 22-year old English Literature senior at Washington State University, captures the splendor and shock as she becomes the object of desire for 27-year old billionaire CEO (and eligible bachelor), Christian Grey.

In their first encounter, Steele steps in for her sick roommate/best friend Katherine (Kate) Kavanagh, in an interview where Steele ends her inquiries by innocently asking Grey if he is gay (James, 2012a, p. 13). From there, Steele and Grey engage in a handful of coffee-dates and unexpected run-ins, culminating in a bar-scene

rescue where Grey saves her from the clutches of unwanted male suitors and her own vomit (James, 2012a, p. 60).

From there, their relationship is solidified and the author introduces the specifics of Grey's sexual appetite. Grey is a sadist (someone who enjoys participating in consensual S/M activity), and enjoys the control and power to inflict pain or humiliation on others for erotic purposes (James, 2012a, p. 100). As the book progresses, the readers are bombarded with Steele's thoughts of confusion and fear as she attempts to understand Grey's particularities. Steele's bewilderment continues throughout the novel as their relationship becomes more serious.

Grey later introduces Steele to his playroom or 'Red Room of Pain' which contains his sex toys and other sexual paraphernalia (James, 2012a, p. 126). The story continues as Grey discusses the S/M contract with Steele, outlining the specifics of their potential sexual relationship. The contract outlines hard and soft limits as well as safewords to use in the event of Steele's wish to terminate the BDSM scene (James, 2012a, p. 165). Eventually, in the name of love, Steele agrees to 'trying' the role of a Submissive (James, 2012a, p. 245).

As Steele cannot seem to conform to the Submissive role Grey desires, ultimately, the relationship stagnates. The text ends with Steele professing her love for Grey after an intense spanking scene (James, 2012a, p. 509). However, unable to fully grasp the emotion, Grey is left dumbfounded. He is left with disbelief and Steele is led to reevaluate the reciprocity of their relationship. Steele ultimately decides to end the relationship.

This concludes the first book. However, it is worth noting that the remaining two books in the trilogy *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed* result in the couple rekindling their romance, getting married, and eventually having children (James 2012b-c).

Problem Statement

This project focuses on *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the overwhelming influence of the book on mainstream popular culture. Given that, *Fifty Shades* has such influence on introducing BDSM to the general public, how BDSM is projected in the text deserves significant attention. The deconstruction of the narrative and text will provide a greater understanding of the commodification, and ultimately use of sexual subcultures to create large profits for its author.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this project is to deconstruct the first text of James' erotic fiction trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Using various theoretical frameworks, in analyzing the text, the pedagogical potential of this novel will be shown to be abusive to BDSM communities.

The notion that James' fiction can serve as a source of true understanding for outsiders into the real lives of the BDSM community is a dangerous one. This thesis examines the problems underlying this notion, the incongruities between James' fantasies and actual BDSM communities, and the harm that the little knowledge James provides can do this will be examined through the lens of Feminist theory, Queer theory, and Kink theory.

This analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, will explore the false presentation of sexual liberation and hopefully will encourage readers to examine ways in which the structure of this seemingly progressive text unfortunately encourages the reader to further discipline and demonize the BDSM community.

Definition of Relevant Terms

For the purpose of this project, relevant terminology are defined as follows:

- *Kink*- An umbrella term utilized to encompass certain kinds of erotic behavior between consenting adults. Such practices include, but are not limited to, BDSM, leather, fetish, and polyamory (Call, 2011, p. 132).
- *BDSM*- Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism (Ayzad, 2013, p. 4).
 - *Bondage/Discipline*- The act of restraining and disciplining consensual partner(s) for the purposes of a safe, scripted, and agreed upon scene (Ayzad, 2013, p. 4).
 - *Dominance/Submission*- The general relations of roles in consensual exchange of erotic power scenarios in an agreed upon and scripted scene. Other variations include: top/bottom, master/slave (Ayzad, 2013, p. 4).
 - *Sadism/Masochism*- The identification of one who inflicts or receives (respectively) consensual pain or humiliation, for erotic purposes. It is important to note that it is the illusion of violence, rather than the pain itself, that is arousing (Weinberg, 1995, p. 19).
- *Play*- Enacted BDSM encounters maintain the understanding of these acts as 'play'. Play includes frameworks of fantasy and illusion. This is in stark contrast to the realities of systems of oppression and abuse of which these acts tend to satirize (Ayzad, 2012, p. 6; Weinberg, 1995, p. 115).

- *Scene*- BDSM encounters generally exist within a carefully orchestrated, previously agreed upon framework. The Scene involves specific consensual acts, an agreed upon timeline of events, and works to narrate the play in a scripted, set, space. This is in contrast to experiences and realities outside of the BDSM encounter (Weinberg, 1995, p. 129).
- *Safeword*- BDSM encounters involve the usage of Safewords. Safewords are code words agreed upon by participants that will signal one of the participants wants to stop the play. Safewords are used as a precaution to create a safe environment—to be used when sensations become overwhelming, the participant(s) need(s) to end the scene abruptly, and/or one wants to stop the play before the agreed upon time (Weinberg, 1995, p. 50).
- *Vanilla Sex*- Describing any sexual practices or acts that do not fall into the category of Kink. Therefore, Vanilla Sex defines what our culture understands as mainstream sexual practices (Weiss, 2006, p. 105).

Significance

While James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* might not be a literary masterpiece, it is definitely a financial success. James reportedly receives \$1 million a week from the sale of kindle e-book versions of her text alone (Comella, 2013, p. 563). Even more interesting is the production of spin-off texts geared toward men such as M. Alan's 2012 book *Fifty Shades of Grey Decoded: A Man's Playbook*. Kink activists such as sex educator Tristan Taormino utilized the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* as an opportunity to endorse safe and consensual BDSM through the text *Fifty Shades of Kink: A Beginner's Guide to BDSM* (Comella, 2013, p. 563). The popularity of these books sparked the record-breaking film adaptation of *Fifty Shades of Grey* which made \$100

million during its four-day holiday weekend debut. Along with the significant domestic sales, the film made even more money in its international debut. It opened in 9,637 locations in 58 countries and earned roughly \$160 million in foreign sales (Lang, 2015). The film also holds a record for the most profitable 'R' rated film by Universal Studios. With an overall worldwide profit of \$502 million, it is not surprising that the franchise has expanded well beyond the realm of written and visual literature (Child, 2015).

James' literary trilogy is credited as being the springboard for the 'erotic money making machine' for the *Fifty Shades* franchise. The phenomenon of 'kinky sex' captivates not only audiences, but also marketers as they evaluate the advertising possibilities of such sensationalized erotic texts (Comella, 2013, p. 564). The first company to capitalize on the popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* was U.K. retailer Love Honey which claims the right to *The Fifty Shades of Grey* official "Pleasure Collection." James endorses this expansion as evidenced by her quote on Love Honey's website: "This range is what I always imagined while I was writing *Fifty Shades of Grey*. I'm so excited the toys I described in the books have come to life and can now be enjoyed around the world." (Comella, 2013, p. 563).

However, James (a citizen of the U.K.) is not only contributing to her local economy, but she is also contributing to the American Sex-Toy Industry. U.S. sales of erotic toys have skyrocketed. In 2013, The Adult Entertainment Expo in Las Vegas, which is the leading adult industry showcase in the United States, dedicated an entire seminar to the importance of the *Fifty Shades* enterprise (Comella, 2013, p. 564). Even LELO, a Swedish-based company that produces sex toys has been positively impacted by the

Fifty Shades enterprise. LELO sells a product called Luna Beads that are similar to the 'pleasure beads' used by the characters in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. LELO has reported a 400 percent growth in sales since the release of the trilogy (Comella, 2013, p. 565).

The surge in consumerism, based on the multi-billion dollar *Fifty Shades* franchise, displays an interesting phenomenon in our global culture. With a resilient grip on the imaginations and wallets of people around the world, it would be in error for critically conscious individuals to ignore the implications *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The mere popularity of BDSM images in mainstream media translates to a societal desire for transgression, authenticity, and erotic excitement. However, the over-saturation of these images leave audiences bored and desensitized, ultimately de-radicalizing subversive forms of sexuality and appropriating them to be understood within a normative framework (Weiss, 2006, p. 106). Understanding the process by which knowledge develops in mainstream culture to produce power over minority groups, who enact this power to discipline, abuse, and use sexual minority groups, is the most significant aspect of such analyses.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Mainstream Representation of Kink

Representations of sadomasochism can be traced back to the 18th century. The term *sadism* can be found in the works of French nobleman and writer Marquis de Sade. His works include *Justine* and *Juliette* (De Sade, 1791; De Sade, 1797). These 18th century works depict cruelty, pain, and humiliation as a part of sexual pleasure. Similarly, the term *masochism* comes from de Sade's contemporary Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Von Sacher-Masoch's work include *Venus in Furs* which reflects his own personal erotic fixation with humiliation, submission, and pain (Weinberg and Kamel , 1995, p. 16).

Shifting from literature to psychoanalysis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Sigmund Freud gave scientific significance to BDSM (Weinberg and Kamel, 1995, p. 17). While differing in the exact causation of and the stimulation from such sexual practices, both Krafft-Ebing and Freud portrayed sadomasochism as pathological and correlated to cruelty. Unfortunately, these interpretations of BDSM are still widely held today. However, psychologists have offered some support for kink practitioners. In the 1940s, Havelock Ellis modified the dominant notions of S/M by rejecting the ideas of previous psychoanalysts (i.e. that cruelty was the main motivating factor) and instead, proffered that sadomasochist practices were based in some sort of love and respect (Weinberg and Kamel, 1995, p. 18).

The above-mentioned psychological interpretations raised awareness of BDSM. However, the pathologized versions of BDSM remained only in spheres of engaged

psychologists and knowledgeable individuals. The psychological interpretation of BDSM also reinforced non-inclusive biological notions of sexuality. Therefore, the general public was not aware of true BDSM until anthropologist Paul Gerhard published his famous article “Fetishism and Sadomasochism” in 1969. Gerhard’s work positioned acts of Kink within a cultural context. (Weinberg, 1995, p. 20). The introduction of BDSM as a social behavior opened the door for more mainstream representations of Kink separate from a pathological explanation.

Around the turn of the century, BDSM content shifted to mainstream media towards the end of the 1990s. Personal advertisements published in large metropolitan areas such as New York City, Toronto, and San Francisco started allowing space for BDSM related ads (Weinberg and Magill, 1995, p. 225). While these often-cryptic personal ads were geared towards the informed BDSM community, the advertisements were relevant to the general population as well. The more realistic narrative depictions of BDSM relationships acted as a more tangible source of information for non-BDSM practitioners.

In fictional literature, erotic themes captivated readers and allowed a voyeuristic lens to uncover the mysteries of BDSM. Most popular with American audiences was *The Pearl* written by Algernon Charles Swinburne. His work was translated into 18 different narrative issues and was widely distributed between 1879 and 1880. (Weinberg and Magill, 1995, p. 226). Following his textual descriptions of Kink practices, many other BDSM literary interpretations emerged. A more recent example of BDSM inspired texts was *Sex* written by popular culture icon Madonna. The book containing S/M inspired

erotic photographs depicted the singer in various sadomasochistic poses (Weinberg and Magill, 1995, p. 227).

BDSM's transition from books to film was a seemingly fluid one. With the turn of the 20th century, depictions of BDSM shifted from shocking and exotic to more mundane and conventional (Weiss, 2006, p. 108). This shift occurred in the realm of primetime television, a medium which to date was reserved for family-friendly sitcoms and soap operas. In 2001, the widely acclaimed sitcom *Will & Grace* aired an episode portraying the jovial remodeling of a BDSM dungeon to a nursery by Grace, the sitcom's protagonist and interior decorator (Weiss, 2006, p. 109). BDSM entering television marked a noteworthy moment for those involved in the Kink community.

Most appropriate to the analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey* was the 2002 film *Secretary*. At its time of release, *Secretary* depicted the most accurate and simplistic S/M relationships. *Secretary's* plot depicts the lead female protagonist, Lee Holloway, being saved by sadomasochism. After her release from a mental institution for self-inflicted cutting, Holloway begins to work as a secretary for a dark, brooding lawyer Mr. Grey. Their work relationship swiftly moves to incorporate power play and sexual discipline. The demise of the relationship comes from Mr. Grey when his emotions pierce the seemingly platonic agreement. Holloway, desperate, depressed, and in pain demonstrates her determination to win back her lover. She eventually does, leading the couple to marry and live happily ever after (Shainberg, 2002). In particular, this film demonstrates a relatively accurate portrayal of a S/M relationship and the public's

reception speaks to the increasing acceptance of BDSM themes in mainstream film industry.

However, the film is not without critique. As agreed upon by academicians and Kink activists, the most problematic aspect of the film is the pathologization of BDSM encounters; encounters which form a platform for mainstream acceptance and a false understanding of BDSM. The conventional love story plot secures the normalization of the relationship between Grey and Holloway, allowing audience members to accept the insertions of Kink. By pathologizing the characters, the film creates a feeling of comfort for mainstream viewers unfamiliar to BDSM. Specifically, the narrative supports a medical understanding of Holloway as the film introduces her as a mentally ill individual recently released from a mental institution (Shainberg, 2002).

As demonstrated above, BDSM is prominent in global media. While these depictions of BDSM may be popular, their mere existence offers little help in liberating the BDSM community. Rather, the increased exposure creates avenues for false understandings of BDSM. The most modern representation of BDSM within mainstream media, James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*, is not without a similar negative impact on the Kink community. By providing audience members with a successful form of entertainment, James positions *Fifty Shades of Grey* to be widely read and thus widely consumed as a text depicting BDSM to vanilla audiences. Regardless of its entertainment value, the BDSM phenomenon did not come without its own set of critiques. The mass popularity of the *Fifty Shades* enterprise not only increased profits but also increased criticism.

Previous Analyses of *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Although *Fifty Shades of Grey* remains popular, it still receives tough criticism from many. *Fifty Shades of Grey* has inspired a firestorm of social critiques from self-identified practitioners of Kink to those who chose to weigh in on the phenomenon. Attempting to capitalize on the hype, journalists Purcell and Morgan, academicians Barker, Downing, and Stevens, used queer and feminist theory to deconstruct James' problematic narrative. Kink bloggers Pepper Mint and Kitty Stryker, shedding some light on the realities of the BDSM community; have also commented on James' work. The role of consent in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and how it conflates consensual BDSM with domestic abuse is the most prominent critique.

Analyses of "consent" within the novel frame the discussion for most critics. Journalists' attacks of the book centers on the perceived encouraging and romanticizing domestic abuse while focusing on the physicality of the sexual encounters (Morgan, 2012, p. 2; Purcell, 2013, p. 3). The incorporation of abusive tropes in a romanticized relationship model, as is present with Grey and Steele, directs audience members towards the more obvious indicators of abuse: physical contact and/or stimulation. This leaves out the moments of control, stalking, and unhealthy obsession, which are causes for concern in relationships. Therefore, a more refined analysis might provide support for James' demonization of BDSM as lack of consent or abuse instead of the aforementioned identifiers. This interpretation of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, positions BDSM as abusive. Therefore, James not only excites readers by inserting moments of BDSM

but simultaneously constructs a narrative to demonize Kink as abuse. (van Reenen, 2014, p. 229; Barker, 2013, p. 908).

In a narrative that enforces the active/Dominant man and the passive/Submissive woman, it is obvious that the ability to consent becomes more complicated (van Reenen, 2014, p. 226). The incorporation of hyper-traditional gender roles enforces a stark power differential between Grey and Steele. Therefore, a close evaluation of the gendered power dynamics between Grey and Steele in *Fifty Shades of Grey* supports the incorrect interpretation of BDSM as lacking consent. This may translate into an environment that facilitates and promotes abuse. Ultimately, the author's investment in the submissive, virginal female protagonist's love for the powerful, wealthy, and domineering male protagonist disguises the lack of egalitarian power dynamics. This then creates an environment which allows powerful characters to have access to consent, whereas less powerful characters—burdened with the illusion of choice—suffer the consequences of not saying no (Barker, 2013, p. 904).

The lack of authentic forms of consent within a pseudo-egalitarian relationship is an area of concern within BDSM communities. Prominent BDSM blogger, Pervocracy, provides an important assessment of the initial outrage of many in this community. Pervocracy feels that *Fifty Shades of Grey* misrepresents consensual BDSM practices. Pervocracy does this by highlighting the ways in which even established Kink Communities still struggle with issues of abuse (Pervocracy, 2014). Ultimately, bloggers and other members of the Kink community use mainstream appearances of BDSM (such

as in *Fifty Shades of Grey*) to address and hopefully work towards ending instances of abuse within their own Kink communities. (Barker, 2013, p. 903).

Taken together, previous scholars, bloggers, and concerned citizens all have highlighted the ways in which James provides a narrative, which supports romanticized notions of abuse. This is done through the hyperbolized gender roles of Grey and Steele in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which act to misrepresent a consensual BDSM relationship and frame it as abuse. It is my aim to delve deeper into the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novel. Representations of romanticized abuse, disguised by lack of understanding for BDSM, are inherently problematic. However, this thesis seeks to demonstrate how the text further marginalizes and demonizes BDSM. An analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey* using a Feminist, Queer, and Kink theory lens will show how insertion of 'kinky fuckery' for entertainment value is detrimental to the commonly misrepresented and misunderstood BDSM community.

Introduction to Relevant Theory

Feminist, Queer, and Kink theory will be utilized as central elements of this analysis of James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*. While the scope of these areas of academic thought are rather broad, for the purposes of this study, a brief introduction to relevant theorists, concepts, and histories will bolster this thesis' ability to construct a transparent, viable argument.

Feminist Theory

The first wave of feminism as a political movement in the United States was spawned by the strife of women demanding suffrage. Since this most visible, initial political rallying in the nineteenth century, women have continuously struggled against masculinist perspectives. The misuse of phallogocentric idealisms used to understand female sexuality is one common theme of the feminist movement. Specifically, the movement aims to reclaim the feminist narratives of women's sexuality and by doing so, claiming female authority on women's bodies and sexual identities (Vance, 1984, p. 1). Historically, it proved helpful to create a commonality of womanhood to collectively contest misogynistic ideals of female sexuality. However, the juxtaposition of pleasure and danger in the realm of sexuality caused some division and caught the attention of feminist theorists. This chasm challenged the harmony of the mainstream feminist movement (Vance, 1984, 2).

The 1980's saw the great schism of feminism known as The Sex Wars. This division in feminist thought resulted in two separate camps of feminist theory. One group was the Pro-Sex feminists and the other was the Anti-Pornography/Anti-Sex feminists. The Pro-Sex group, saw sexual freedom as central for the battle against gender inequality. This fight for equality resides both within the realm of gender but also outside in other realms such as race and class. Opposed to this ideology, the Anti-Pornography or Anti-Sex feminists condemn what they deem institutions of violence against women, these being pornography, sex work, and BDSM (Hunter, 2006, p. 22).

Strong advocates of the Anti-Pornography/Sex feminist division such as radical feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin demonized female sexual desire. Specifically, under the guise of sexual liberation they saw all forms of female sexual desire—especially those of deviance—as derived from phallocentrism under the guise of sexual liberation. According to this logic, any enactment of female sexual desire or agency within the context of ‘deviance’ (sex work, pornography, BDSM) was incongruent with authentically sexually liberated women. Instead, Anti-Pornography feminists saw these acts of female sexual agency, as an internalization of patriarchal values. Therefore, any enactment of female sexual desire in sex work, pornography, or BDSM was actually a product of male fantasy (Dworkin, 2007, p. 31).

In opposition, the voices of the Pro-Sex Feminist partition such as Amber Hollibaugh, Carole S. Vance, Gayle Rubin, and Pat Califia envisioned sexuality as holding a broad range of pleasure and possibility. This cohort encouraged true sexual freedom as being a way of addressing issues of violence in sexual settings. For these women, any enactment of consensual female sexual agency, whether that be non-normative or Vanilla, should be celebrated and encouraged (Vance, 1984, p. 23; Hollibaugh, 1984, p. 409).

These two feminist theories on sexuality frame academic discourse of female sexual experience. They are especially useful in the understanding of how, in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, James portrays potentially feminist notions of sexuality.

Queer Theory

Moving feminist theory towards queer theory, cultural anthropologist and activist Gayle Rubin addresses the “limitations of theory singularly invested in identity politics” (Goldstein, 1994, p. 4). Through her revolutionary work *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*, Rubin teases out the tangled space of gender –largely focused on in feminist theory—and sexuality –housed in queer theory. This is done in order to more accurately reflect on the separate social realms of these identities (Goldstein, 1994, p. 5). In order to deconstruct a perceived hierarchy of sexuality, Rubin’s work engages theoretical frameworks of queer theory. She does this by discerning the ways in which sexuality in and of itself “has its own internal politics, inequities, and structures of oppression” (Rubin, 1994, p. 143).

Rubin aptly names this hierarchy the ‘charmed circle’ and constructs her model as a form of evaluation for mainstream hierarchies of sexual value. These values are enforced in accordance to hegemonic understandings of sexual privilege. Defining the confined space of sexual privilege, expectation, and compulsory activity is the term: heteronormativity. Therefore, heteronormativity can be understood as the epitome of privileged sexual identity: monogamous, heterosexual, reproductive, and non-commercial. Without an authentic concern for ethics, society demonizes anything outside of the privileged, or ‘sacred circle’ using various other ideologies such as racism, classism, and sexism (Rubin, 1994, p. 152).

Arguing for the regulation of sexuality based on respect, consent, and mutual pleasure, Rubin identifies institutions of sexual oppression –such as the ‘charmed

circle’—as forms of demonizing sexuality. She cautions that even within apparently radical or progressive sexual communities, such oppression can still exist (Rubin, 1994, p. 152).

Kink Theory

Moving from the anti-essentialist critique of sexuality by queer theorists, the scrutiny of power structures can also be analyzed through the lens of Kink theory. In his 2005 essay *Structures of Desire: Postanarchist Kink in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany*, post-anarchist thinker Lewis Call, is credited for coining kink theory. Ultimately, this form of critical analysis which examines the ways in which consensual and erotic power relations act as a viable option to the unethical and non-consensual power structures of our dominant modern ideology (Call, 2011, p. 132).

Exploring power structures within Kink theory allows for an understanding of the specific form of erotic consent present in BDSM. While social institutions strategically stabilize our social power in everyday exchanges, the basis of BDSM encourages power relations to be fluid (Califia, 1995, p. 146). In a state of constant struggle against systems of oppression from social, political, and economic power, mainstream society does not encourage egalitarian forms of consent. In contrast, the flow of power offered by the consensual nature of BDSM is ethical because it challenges these previously mentioned inequalities (Call, 2011, p. 133). In addition to Kink theory, a supplementary analytical tool used in this thesis is based on the work of Michel Foucault.

The work of Michel Foucault offers valuable insight into the disciplinary impact of problematic power structures identified within kink theory. In his 1976 work, *The*

History of Sexuality, Volume 1 and 1975 book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he sets forth a compilation of interviews and other writings from 1972-1977 entitled *Power/Knowledge*. In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault reflects on his works and provides further discussions of his arguments on social control through societal institutions. Foucault argues that through the intimate relations between production of knowledge and power, the cyclical phenomenon of sexual discipline exists. Ultimately, this sexual discipline relies on increased familiarity and exposure to the intended disciplined deviance. All this, under the guise of sexual liberation or revolution (Foucault, 1980, p. 188). By creating a platform onto which disciplinary power infiltrates society, Foucault's arguments are incredibly applicable to the deconstruction of institutions of power in kink theory.

CHAPTER 3: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Introduction

Previous literature containing BDSM has acted as a tool for the production of knowledge on the topic of Kink by shifting the power differential from the sexually liberated to the mainstream voyeur. However, none have truly captivated audiences quite like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. With this in mind, the trope of the inexperienced female (pseudo) Submissive introduced into the world of BDSM by the more experienced Dominant male is a recurring theme and therefore deserves attention. Through the insertion of love and romance, these texts create a teaching vehicle for Vanilla populations (Downing, 2013, p. 96; Weiss, 2006, p. 113; van Reenen, 2014, p. 227). I will argue the integral component of this specific text, acting to 'break in' mainstream audiences to the realm of kinky sex is the overemphasized virginal protagonist Anastasia Steele.

In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, James, through her character Anastasia Steele reproduces the heteronormative framework necessary for mainstream appeal of BDSM. Supporting this claim is the upholding of traditional gender roles in Steele's relationship with Grey. The unquestioned gross power differential between Grey and Steele, establishes, supports, and normalizes these gender norms between the two protagonists (Barker, 2013, p. 907; Stevens, 2014, p. 263). The familiar distribution of power between man and woman is essential for the roles of Dominant and Submissive

to gain a recognizable allure. This supports the romantic view of Grey and Steele's relationship rather than challenge the moments of inequality as being problematic.

I propose that Anastasia Steele works within the heteronormative and hegemonic framework established by James to act as a window for voyeuristic audiences to access the normally underground world of sexual minorities. Most significantly, the ability for Steele's character to so effectively aid readers in navigating this new world of Kink is precisely that which allows her to successfully navigate the world of Christian Grey: her virginity. Entering the narrative as a 'true' virgin, unfamiliar with any sexual or intimate/romantic happenings, Steele acts as a surrogate for naïve, or virginal, vanilla audience members. The association of the virginal identity of Steele introduces mainstream readers to the unfamiliar practices of BDSM.

Referencing the work of Foucault on increased visibility causing increased discipline, Steele's inexperienced and virginal gaze is instrumental in introducing discipline to the practices of her counter-protagonist Grey. However, the masterful creation of a first person narrative allows not only Steele to enforce her own discipline onto the deviance (BDSM), but transposes the heteronormative discipline of readers as well. Thus, the vanilla readers' assumptions about BDSM and potential moral incongruities with the sexual deviance are utilized during the reading of the text. This simultaneously curtails the liberating possibilities of such radical inclusion of BDSM in a mainstream society.

As previous analyses have established, insertions of heteronormative frameworks diffuse the deviance of BDSM in mainstream outlets. Therefore, identifying

Steele and Grey's relationship in *Fifty Shades of Grey* as heterosexual and monogamous, creates a situation where BDSM briefly occurs. The heteronormative understanding of James' fictional couple also reinforces traditional gender roles. James constructs a virginal female protagonist, Steele, to reinforce the most basic and traditional notions of gender and sexuality, thereby eliminating the possibility of a true depiction of BDSM. Overall, it seems as though both author and readers have an investment in the 'blank slate' that is virgin protagonist Anastasia Steele in order to facilitate personal assumptions and understandings of deviant sexuality in a safe, unchallenged space.

Feminist Critique

I will next examine the ways in which James writes Anastasia Steele to legitimize the heteronormative structure of *Fifty Shades of Grey* through a feminist theoretical lens.

Traditional gender roles (or social differences that define 'woman' and 'man') largely support the framework of the novel. Establishing protagonist Christian Grey as a self-made, billionaire-CEO contributes to his gendered characterization. Through his capitalistic success, James highlights Grey's intellect and reason, placing him in hyper-masculine territory and justifying his general lack of emotion. This point is most accurately represented in Grey's assertion that "...[he's] not a hearts and flowers kind of man....[he] doesn't do romance" (James, 2012a, p. 72). This proclamation of manhood immediately establishes an understanding of Grey being disassociated with the traditional realm of femininity, which includes romance and emotion. In order to solidify Grey's gendered difference from that of Steele, James further writes that Grey's

“...tastes are very singular” (James, 2012a, p. 72). As the novel proceeds, readers become aware that this singularity is S/M and thus the narrative justifies Grey’s detachment from emotion by his over-attachment to sex, specifically ‘deviant’ sex.

While sexual fantasy and desire exists within the realm of masculine possibility, Grey’s identification as an S/M Dominant further emphasizes his encompassing of traditional expectations of manhood. In authentic BDSM relations, the role of Dominant is interactive with that of the Submissive. This manifests itself through an egalitarian flow of power. However, James’ overemphasis on Grey’s dominance outside of the agreed upon S/M encounters, works to further perpetuate the dichotomized gender roles of Grey and Steele in (Califia, 115, p. 147). In this sense, James creates a space for the understanding of Grey as a ‘control freak’ and thus convolutes the dominance he enacts in supposedly consensual S/M activities with an unhealthy dominance within his romantic relationship with Steele.

From the first few pages of the text, James establishes a gross power differential between the characters. Through a conversation set in the initial meeting scene of the two protagonists, Steele interviews Grey and lays a foundation for Grey’s controlling characteristic outside of sex and equates it to his business success. This framework —of understanding power in relation to success in a capitalistic business setting—allows audience members to not feel threatened by the potentially abusive characteristics that Grey pronounces. Claiming that he “exercises control in all things,” James allows Grey to lay the groundwork for his pompous and celebratory acclimation: “immense power is acquired by assuring yourself in your secret reveries that you were born to control

things” (James, 2012a, p. 10). Establishing this unquestioned, birthright power in a realm of business which mainstream audiences can respect, Grey’s ‘control issues’ are attributed to his business savvy and is a part of him being financially lucrative and thus acceptable.

This groundwork leads the way for the abusive tendencies, which James casually writes in for Grey’s character throughout the novel. From tracking Steele’s geographic location without her knowledge, delivering items to her new, assumedly unknown address, to controlling her appointments with a gynecologist, Grey moves his controlling behavior out of the realm of professional endeavors and into the realm of romantic relations (James, 2012a, p. 62, 82, 271). These trivialized and romanticized abusive tendencies are brushed off through James’ writing. Steele acknowledges the abuse, but James structures it in comedic terms by writing Steele to joke, “stalking is one of his [Grey’s] specialties” (James, 2012a, p. 308). By reflecting on the romantic implications of such extreme tendencies, Steele’s character is utilized by James to establish not a scary and abusive understanding of Grey, but a caring and enamored one: “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 Sir Lancelot” (James, 2012a, p. 69).

These brief moments of abuse, glossed over through instances of comedic relief and romance, pave the way for mainstream readers to conflate Grey’s abusive tendencies in his relationship with Steele, with BDSM. If physical infliction of pain is equated to abuse, then *Fifty Shades of Grey* discourages readers from recognizing

emotional and psychological abuse. Instead, James demonizes consensual BDSM. Many previous analyses have explored the problematic instances of romanticized domestic abuse within *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Downing, 2013, p. 96; Barker, 2013, p. 899). For the purpose of this analysis, these previous understandings of James' depicted abuse will aid in the deconstruction of the text's false portrayal of consensual BDSM as abuse. Specifically, the ways in which Grey's recognized power allows him to use, as protagonist Steele says, "sex as a weapon" (James, 2012a, p. 224).

James creates the character of Steele as the perfect agent of passivity in order to allow for the successful implementation of this sexual power on a willing (or coerced) individual. Essentially, in *Fifty Shades of Grey* romanticizes the severely gendered relationship dynamic between Steele and Grey through the words of Steele herself. Readers therefore understand this gendered distinction of Grey as the dominant, powerful man only in comparison to Steele as the traditional, passive woman, as 'normal' within a traditional heterosexual relationship.

Further perplexing the relationship between the protagonists, James appeals to audiences with a seemingly empowered, but very much relatable female lead (Steele), someone who manages to corral the eligible bachelor Christian Grey into a romantic relationship. Although Steele is presented as infantilized, through her virtual naivety with all things—from romance, to sex, to alcohol – her engagement, for example, with the negotiations of Grey's S/M contract and her eventual ending of the relationship, grant her moments of initiative and perceived empowerment (James, 2012a, p. 27, 108, 165, 181, 513).

The usage of Steele's first person narration guides audiences into her false empowerment. Understanding the world through her eyes is both relatable and authentic. James is overbearing with the grossly infantilized characterizations of Steele, obvious in her obsessive use of the exclamation "double crap" (James, 2012a, p. 7, 14, 61, 146, 270, 304). Readers are determined to view Steele as not naïve, but relatable, and therefore a surrogate into the world of sexual agency and exploration for female readers. James, through this specific characterization of Steele, enables the character to act as the heroine to the largely female audience who use her as a window into an erotic world of S/M. However, Steele's manufactured post-feminist appeal, is largely in contradiction to the actuality of her feminist positioning.

The pseudo-sexual agency James writes for Steele through Steele's engagement with BDSM, presents a pseudo pro-sex feminist agenda. However, Steele generally reacts negatively towards the BDSM Grey suggests, therefore, in actuality, supporting rather anti-sex feminist values. If Steele is perceived as 'in control' of her sexuality, then Grey's control issues are offset by this enactment of female agency. This convoluted is vital to understanding the acceptance of Grey as an abusive partner. Due to the understanding of Steele as a sexually liberated woman engaged in her own sexual desires and therefore in line with pro-sex feminism Grey's abusive tendencies are masked. However, I would argue that this appropriation of feminist initiatives to enable women to engage in pleasurable sexual experiences is misguided. Under the guise of a woman enabling post-feminist discourses, space is created for a romanticized abusive relationship with undertones of sexual liberation. With Steele enacting a personality

type conducive with mainstream understandings of post feminism, James creates a confusing space for feminist interpretations of the text and ultimately leaves the readers unsure of the feminist potential of Anastasia Steele.

By maintaining an allusion of agency, James enables Steele's character to reinforce traditional gender dynamics with authenticity. If Steele's femininity exists in her obsession with romance, then James leaves no doubt for readers that Steele represents the hyper-feminine subject we all crave. In order to solidify our expectations of a relationship with normative gender dynamics, protagonist Steele must overcompensate for the machismo construction of Grey.

This oppositional status endures throughout the relationship as Steele indulges in cheesy and forceful interpretations of heterosexual romance. Constantly striving for 'normalcy' in her relationship with Grey, Steele demonizes BDSM practices. James does this by stressing the importance of a marriage trajectory and constantly questioning the mental stability of Grey. Overall, James portrays Steele as largely disinterested and rather turned off by Grey's S/M activities: "For the first time, I'm wishing he was normal – wanted a normal relationship that doesn't need a ten-page agreement, a flogger, and carabiners in his playroom ceiling" (James, 2012a, p. 199). This privileging of 'normalcy' or a heteronormative framework, bolstered by exaggerated gendered relations, leads audiences to 'other' Grey and the BDSM lifestyle he represents. This 'othering' is done through the pathologization of Kink and the dissociation of such practices with the expected trajectory to marriage and offspring.

Queer Critique

Through a Queer theory lens, I will examine the ways in which James writes Steele's character to advance the legitimized heteronormative framework. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, this privileging of 'normalcy' through Steele is done to enact oppression on alternative sexualities as being a product of pathology and unproductive in terms of reproductive capacity.

As socialization encourages monogamous, vanilla sex relationships, as set forth by theorist Gayle Rubin's 'charmed circle,' societal expectations of romantic and sexual relations are compulsive to mainstream society (Rubin, 1994, p. 153). Therefore, discipline is enacted on any sexuality considered deviant. This devalued (deviant) sexuality, on the margins of the circle containing appropriate forms of sexuality, inspires discipline as society deems fit (Rubin, 1994, p. 154). In the case of the BDSM dispersed through the narrative of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Steele is the tool in which these misconducts are interpreted as negative, disciplined, and ultimately positioned as 'other.'

By pathologizing Grey's interest in BDSM (or placing it in the medical realm of physical or psychological abnormal or unhealthy behavior) James utilizes the relationship readers have to protagonist Steele to construct her presentation of BDSM. This tactic is not subtle, as James pushes the characterization of Grey as 'monstrous,' 'insane,' 'dangerous,' or simply 'fucked up,' through the perspective of most, if not all, characters in the text, regardless of their information on his sexual endeavors (James, 2012a, p. 101, 110, 127, 269). Further, it seems as though Steele is constantly perplexed

by Grey's nature, claiming, "it's so alien to anything [she] knows," or framing it as a "biased, kinky-as-hell, distorted worldview regarding sex" therefore personally chastising his actions (James, 2012a, p. 127, 132). Through this 'othering' process, James demonizes Grey and his specific sexual preferences. James condemns not only Grey's sexual behaviors but attempts to sell Grey as morally, mentally, and emotionally inferior (Rubin, 1994, p. 152).

In order to solidify this misunderstanding of Grey, James introduces the interpretation of him as a monster (James, 2012a, p. 110). "Kind, caring Christian who rescues me from inebriation and holds me gently while I'm throwing up into the azaleas, and the monster who possesses whips and chains in a special room" (James, 2012a, p. 102). Arguably this characterization of Grey allows for the distinction between the sweet, romantic man who Steele is in love with and the sick, deviant monster who forces her to engage in S/M. Therefore, Grey himself is not characterized as deviant, but his preferred sexual practices are. The binary structure of Grey's personality is a common trope throughout the text. As Grey is characterized as both a 'dark knight' and 'white knight' and questioned as being a product of 'nature' or 'nurture' (James, 2012a, p. 92, 127). This dichotomized version of the protagonist creates a space for an explanation for his undesirable characteristics hinging on his troubled past. Ultimately, this could be interpreted as Grey's allowance into 'normalcy' through the careful maneuvering of his polarized character traits.

James explains Grey's interest in BDSM by creating a backstory of abuse (James, 2012a, p. 269). As readers become engrossed in the narrative and overwhelmed by

Grey's sexual 'deviance,' James manages to calm mounting concerns by her insertion of Grey's "rough introduction to life" and seemingly pedophilic, and non-consensual engagement with the older Dominatrix from his past, Mrs. Jones (James, 2012a, p. 269, 155). These above two moments in the text, illustrate not Grey as the deviant, but rather, the BDSM sex as the real problem. This deviance works to obstruct Steele from her idyllic romance with Grey. Finally coming to some sort of an understanding of his 'deviance,' Steele reflects on her newfound information:

He's such a complicated person. And now I have an insight as to why. A young man deprived of his adolescence, sexually abused by some evil Mrs. Robinson figure.....no wonder he's old before his time. My heart fills with sadness at the thought of what he must have been through. (James, 2012a, p. 164)

This binary —of Grey as good, and past abuse as bad—allows for readers to retain their approval of Grey. This is first gained in his financial success, and follows suit with Steele's turn from disapproval to pity. Therefore, "[p]oor, fucked-up, kinky, philanthropic Christian" remains the romantic hero and the BDSM becomes pathologized and removed from the romantic narrative (James, 2012a, p. 237).

Hope for a future monogamous and reproductive relationship encourages readers to accept the moments of 'kinky fuckery' in order to achieve the much sought after happy ending. In addition to James' incorporation of past psychological trauma to account for moments of 'deviant' sexuality, the hope for a traditional trajectory for heterosexual romance is a leading trope in her novel. Although the relationship does not

reach marriage and offspring until the second and third books, James incorporates allusions to marriage throughout the first text (James 2012b-c).

Most obvious is the direct reference to marriage when introducing the S/M contract for the proposed relationship between Grey and Steele (James, 2012a, p. 165). It is here in which the fundamental terms, activities, and Safewords are described in detail to both Steele and the readers (James, 2012a, p. 165-175). Immediately after the text displays the specifics of the contract, readers reflect with Steele as she references the term “Serve and obey in all things” and connects this passage to marriage vows (James, 2012a, p. 175). Furthered by rhetoric of “being mine” and “saying yes” James effectively creates foreshadowing to marriage (James, 2012a, p. 138).

This foreshadowing is particularly important because it enables readers to predict and envision a heteronormative ending to the characters’ present kinky relationship. By James’ framing of the *Fifty Shades* relationship in terms of eventual marriage and reproduction, readers are able to distance themselves from the deviance. The separation thus encourages disciplining the deviance (BDSM) appropriately through support of Steele’s own dialogue. This deviant activity is maintained within the confines of the ‘Play Room,’ acting to physically separate the location of normative (vanilla) and non-normative (BDSM) sex (James, 2012a, p. 96). This fragmented understanding of space replicates the fragmented timeline of ‘immature’ relationship sex (BDSM) to ‘mature’ relationship sex (procreative). The emphasized ‘Red Room of Pain,’ always locked and containing BDSM paraphernalia, is positioned by James in direct contrast to

Grey's sleek, clean, white bedroom which is reserved for more appropriate types of sex such as Steele's virginity loss (James, 2012a, p. 132, 111).

Throughout *Fifty Shades of Grey*, James perpetuates the understanding of non-normative sexual practices as pathologized and irrelevant to the course to marriage and children. The author does this with an emphasis on Steele and Grey's relationship as overwhelmingly heteronormative. Confirming the heteronormative framework of the text is James' representation of BDSM as consensual and the general implications of this text as a first exposure to BDSM for mainstream readers.

Kink Critique

Finally, I will examine the ways in which James writes Anastasia Steele to navigate erotic consent in her engagement of BDSM through a Kink lens, while keeping in mind how the overall heteronormative framework speaks to the problematic nature of the James' interpretation of BDSM.

The envisioning of Kink practices as encapsulated in individual desires and responsibilities further supports the framework of heteronormativity. The established foundation of traditional gender roles and Vanilla sex as privileged are built upon by the idea of consent. While authentic scenarios of Kink are most often cooperatively narrated, executed, and understood, James manufactures a disjointed formation of such a relationship. James and positions both participants –Grey and Steele—at odds with each other with regards to BDSM (Califia, 1995, p. 147). Initiated in the first scene of sexual behavior between the pair, James presents Grey's sexual experience in direct contrast to Steele's virginity (James, 2012a, p. 108). This gross differential of sexual

knowledge is set forth in a 20 page scene as the couple 'make love' and Steele loses her virginity (James, 2012a, p. 108-127). Allowing audiences to understand Grey as taking care of Steele's deprived sexuality, or "rectifying the situation" James immediately creates a viewing of the partners as sexually individualized and even opposite (James, 2012a, p. 109).

As James continuously positions Steele as the 'student' and Grey as the 'teacher,' the separation of the couple's sexual inexperience is perpetuated. This is evident in the text, as the two discuss the S/M contract (a contract which Grey writes himself without Steele's own input). Aware of her naivety to the terminology, Grey tells her to do research online, saying: "You'll be amazed what you can find on the Internet" (James, 2012a, p. 148). Therefore, James hints at the opportunity for readers to explore their own BDSM curiosity through the Internet, inappropriately positioning Kink as such a trivial practice as to gain understanding of it through brief online research.

Continuing this appropriation of Kink, James positions Steele as completely detached from the enactment of BDSM scenes. She accomplishes this by writing Grey as the mastermind behind the practices and the rules of engagement without inclusion of Steele in the negotiations (James, 2012a, p. 224). James manages to compose the characters of Grey and Steele within in such opposition to each other's to even allow Steele to question her own free-will within the relationship:

'I'd never do anything I didn't want to do, Christian.' And as I say the words, I don't quite feel their conviction, because at this moment in time, I'd probably do anything for this man seated beside me. (James, 2012a, p. 92)

Without a firm understanding of her own sexual agency and Steele's disassociation from the S/M, questions of consent surface. Specifically, the understandings of power and the inability to consent manifest itself in Steele. As the woman and the potential Submissive in the relationship, Steele is expected to take responsibility for her own understandings of BDSM and ultimately make a decision about whether to engage in such practices with Grey. Putting the sole responsibility of consent on Steele disregards her inexperience as a possible hindrance of her ability to consent. This, therefore, introduces a convoluted understanding of consent as separate from the Dominant, Grey. Within *Fifty Shades of Grey*, James utilizes Grey's character to enforce this dynamic, after their first spanking scene, as he confuses Steele by claiming she has the authority to make decisions in regards to their relationship:

For the record, you stood beside me knowing what I was going to do. You didn't at any time ask me to stop – you didn't use either Safeword. You are an adult – you have choices. (James, 2012a, p. 293)

The division between active man and passive woman reinforces the understanding of heteronormative sexual dynamics and the assumption that lack of objection to sex is, in itself, consent. However, this is a rather complicated understanding of consent. Under the conditions wherein one participant is naïve to not

only the overall expectations of the relationship but even their own sexual desires and the other participant is well versed in their own and even claims to know the desires of the other, consent is a grey area. Therefore, while Grey seems to dictate where Steele receives pleasure, for example when referencing her confusion by her body's response to spanking, Grey tells Steele that " [she was] sexually aroused by it...", Steele seemingly has no say in the matter and must accept Grey's interpretations of her own physiology and understood pleasures (James, 2012a, p. 288).

Overall, the power to consent (or to understand and experience pleasure) and the power to discipline (or to appropriate sexual eroticisms) are convoluted in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. By positioning the two protagonists in contradiction to each other, James deconstructs the dynamics of an authentic BDSM relationship. James' characters are two separate and opposite players in the text's engagement with BDSM, ultimately supporting the appeal of a romantic narrative.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Reaching audiences all over the World, James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* has had dramatic influence on mainstream perspectives of BDSM. The romantic narrative of Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele has created a sensationalized view of BDSM. Captivating audiences and creating a multi-billion dollar franchise for author E.L. James, the *Fifty Shades* enterprise presents a falsified, progressive, and radical inclusion of BDSM which results in a form of oppression to the Kink community (Cormella, 2013, p. 563).

By jolting readers into most likely an unknown realm of Kink, James attempts to appropriate BDSM sexual practices in order to enhance her normative narrative framework. Utilizing an agreeable and popular romantic scenario, James is able to insert brief moments of kinky sex. James essentially exploits the erotic nature of the Kink Community in order to sell books. This is problematic in that it provides mainstream audiences a false sense of knowledge about BDSM, which allows for further marginalization of the Kink community.

Applying a critical lens to the heteronormative framework in which the book is presented, *Fifty Shades of Grey* should not be used to teach the general public about true BDSM practices. Specific attention was focused on how the text wrongly perpetuates binary gender norms and power differentials inherent to them. In addition, attention was given to the ways in which James pathologizes the practices of BDSM, establishing prerequisites of abuse for kinky desires. Lastly, I shed light on the ways

James maintains transparent allusions to traditional heterosexual marriage and reproductive trajectories in an effort to maintain readers' attention. Ultimately, this leads to the conclusion that *Fifty Shades of Grey* misrepresents central elements of BDSM, such as consent and power structures.

Successful at entertaining readers, the text functions to provide misguided information with the trade-off of sensationalized eroticism and fast sales. Therefore, to view this novel as anything more than a problematic text would be generous. James not only extrapolates BDSM from its original context to add some excitement to her book, but falsely positions mainstream audiences to oppose Kink. James does a disservice to the BDSM community and falsely enacts supportive visibility to the community by writing through the privileged state of 'normalcy.' Visibility in this case, opens the door to further de-radicalize the subversive potential of representations of BDSM in mainstream media.

I was able to highlight specific instances where the text is problematic. An understanding of the book as heteronormative, supporting traditional gender relations, and containing falsified sexual agency revealed the text as anti-feminist. Further, the highlighting of the heteronormative framework supporting traditional tropes of sexuality, such as the trajectory to marriage and the necessity of pathology for deviant sexualities revealed the text as anti-queer. Lastly, the book's interpretation and presentation of consent and its relation to power and knowledge revealed the book as ant-kink.

An appropriate conclusion to this analysis of James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which highlights the appropriated version of Kink through a lens which demonizes its existence outside of a heteronormative framework: "This is wrong, but holy hell is it erotic" (James, 2012a, p. 120).

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