

"We aim to please": A Feminist Perspective on E.L. James' "50 Shades of Grey"

Božić, Kristina

Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2018

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:758588>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-11-14**



Repository / Repozitorij:

[FFOS-repository - Repository of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Osijek](#)



Sveučilište J. J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i pedagogije

Kristina Božić

“Želimo zadovoljiti”: Feministički pristup romanu *50 nijansi sive* E. L. James

Završni rad

Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

Osijek, 2018.

Sveučilište J. J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i pedagogije

Kristina Božić

“Želimo zadovoljiti”: Feministički pristup romanu *50 nijansi sive* E. L. James

Završni rad

Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

Osijek, 2018.

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Study Programme: Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature
and Pedagogy

Kristina Božić

“We aim to please”: A Feminist Perspective on E. L. James’ *50 Shades of Grey*

Bachelor’s Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Biljana Oklopčić, Associate Professor

Osijek, 2018

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

Study Programme: Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature
and Pedagogy

Kristina Božić

“We aim to please”: A Feminist Perspective on E. L. James’ *50 Shades of Grey*

Bachelor’s Thesis

Scientific area: humanities

Scientific field: philology

Scientific branch: English studies

Supervisor: Dr. Biljana Oklopčić, Associate Professor

Osijek, 2018

Contents

- Introduction 1**
- 1. A Very Brief Consideration of Basic Tenets of Feminist Theory 2**
 - 1.1. The Usage of Pseudonyms by Women Writers 3**
- 2. Erotic Romance Novels..... 5**
 - 2.1. First-Person Erotic Fantasies 6**
- 3. The Difference Between Male and Female Protagonists 7**
- 4. Christian Grey as a Literary Hero and Anastasia Steele as a Damsel in Distress? 9**
- 5. The Biblical Imagery in *Fifty Shades of Grey*'s Depiction of Sex and Sexuality 12**
- 6. Sex and False Interpretation of BDSM 13**
- 7. The Depiction of Gendered Relationships 16**
- Conclusion 17**
- Works Cited 18**

Abstract

Fifty Shades of Grey (2011) is an erotic romance novel written by E.L. James. The story is based on the relationship between Christian Grey, a wealthy businessman, and Anastasia Steele, a humble college-graduate. Their relationship is filled with many ups and downs but it survives because Anastasia decides to break her boundaries for her partner. The decadence of her character has been viewed as either something that characterizes her as a strong person or as a woman who decides to subject herself to the insatiable sexual nature of her partner. Many feminist critics have dealt with the plethora of issues portrayed in this novel but it all breaks down to two dominant stances that originate from The Sex Wars of the 1980s-feminist movement. Feminists have alerted women to the fact that themes exploited in popular culture have become engraved into women's very subjectivities and encouraged them to fight against trends that teach them about submissiveness and obedience. The aim of this paper is to analyze the deepening relationship between Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey through a feminist lens while emphasizing the politics of The Sex Wars.

KEYWORDS: *Fifty Shades of Grey*, feminism, subjection, submissiveness, BDSM, gendered relationships.

Introduction

Fifty Shades of Grey (2011) is a novel written by E.L. James and it is the first installment of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. The novel is an erotic romance that depicts the relationship between Anastasia Steele, a modest college graduate, and Christian Grey, a powerful businessman. Anastasia Steele falls for this troubled young billionaire who is only interested in a dominant/submissive relationship, and is consequently faced with numerous acts of punishment and submission. The novel has brought up harsh criticism for its portrayal of sexuality bordering on pornography. It has also become notable for its explicit scenes featuring elements of sexual practices involving Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism (BDSM). The aim of this paper is, therefore, to analyze the deepening relationship between Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey through a feminist lens while emphasizing the politics of The Sex Wars in the 1980s. During those times, feminists divided themselves into Pro-Sex Feminists and Anti-Sex Feminists. Anastasia's engagement in BDSM sexual activities makes her the embodiment of a "pseudo pro-sex feminist agenda" (Panagiotis Lino 30).

The first chapter of this paper will briefly deal with the essential tenets of feminist theory and explore the usage of pseudonyms by female authors and their reasons for such a practice. The second chapter will attempt to define erotic romance novels and further concentrate on first-person erotic fantasies and their merit in literary circles. The next chapter will briefly explain the difference between female and male protagonists in erotic romance novels by focusing on the protagonists of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, while the fourth chapter will discuss the portrayal of Christian Grey as a literary hero and Anastasia Steele as a damsel in distress. The fifth chapter will explore the connection between biblical imagery and feminist thought with the help of several examples from the novel. The last two chapters of the paper will analyze the issues of sex, gendered relationships, and false interpretation of BDSM.

1. A Very Brief Consideration of Basic Tenets of Feminist Theory

Female writers and feminist critics started to examine what it means to write as a woman in a world where male writing and writing style are still valued above female's. Just like most of the spheres of our lives, literature has been dominated by men:

Systemic male dominance reproduces itself by reproducing dominance as the meaning of maleness, the dominant way that men understand, read and write, enact themselves as men. Feminism attempts to lay bare this cycle of violence by insisting that the 'reproductive activity' involved in perpetuating male dominance isn't genetic, chromosomal, natural or inevitable, but rather linguistic, semiotic, textual and representational. (Plain and Sellers 188)

Literary culture did eventually become conscious of the rise of the "New Woman" – "educated, emancipated, independent, outspoken, feminist – and the crisis in sexual politics that she personified" (Mullin 136). Although this consciousness has been raised, many women are still fighting for their voices to be heard, but somehow they still remain unnoticed.

The most important feminist period for understanding James' novel is *The Sex Wars*, which appeared in the 1980s in America. The feminist thought was then divided into two separate camps of feminist theory. On the one hand, there were Pro-Sex feminists who "saw sexual freedom as central for the battle against gender inequality" (Panagiotis Lino 19) and thought that the consensual sexual act can serve as an act of liberation for women. This approach was supported by the publication of various "sexual self-help books," such as those written by Masters and Johnson in the 1970s (Plain and Sellers 194). Masters and Johnson, as well as some other authors, revolutionized the view on sex as an activity where both sides are to be pleased.

On the other hand, there were Anti-Pornography or Anti-Sex feminists who condemned pornography, sex, and BDSM as "institutions of violence against women" (Panagiotis Lino 19). They believed that "any enactment of female sexual desire in sex work, pornography, or BDSM was actually a product of male fantasy" (Panagiotis Lino 20). Sex was perceived as the means of controlling and manipulating women, through which men put themselves above women, perceiving them only as sexual objects. One of the most prominent figures in the anti-

pornography theory stream has been Gail Dines who believes that pornography and the rising popularity of sex encourages women “to see cruelty as hot sex” (Van Reenen 226). Apart from the pornographic features criticized for portraying women as instruments for the achievement of sexual pleasure, anti-pornography feminists argue that the “erotic garbage of culture’s promotion of fairy tale notions of romance encourages women to be dependent and needy” (Kinnahan 60). Also, the sexual violence found in erotic romances is seen as “antifeminist and often antihuman,” which brings the topics of BDSM and consent into focus and stirs a debate of global proportions (Campbell 122). There is a great gap between the two stances, but they are somehow combined in the character of Anastasia Steele as she is on the verge between being completely comfortable with her own sexuality and subjecting herself to the sexual preferences of her partner. These two theories are particularly useful in understanding how E. L. James possibly portrays sexuality through the feminist lens.

For the purposes of this paper, it is also important to note that androcentric cultures have suppressed female labor in general but encouraged prostitution as a male entitlement. Such cultures created double sexual standards, which “restricted women’s erotic options and institutionalized sex divisions and inequalities” (Allen 43). The creation of divisions and inequalities in the fields of sexuality has supported the construction of “male erotic privilege” (Allen 44). This certain privilege allows men to express themselves in a casual way when they are feeling aroused but it denies the same right to women who are obliged to hold back when it comes to satisfying their needs. Women are not allowed to talk openly about sex, and if they do they are frowned upon. The inequality between the sexes is present in many spheres but is most pronounced in the field of sexuality, which is one of the prime examples of double sex standards in today’s society.

1.1. The Usage of Pseudonyms by Women Writers

Many women have been forced to write under a gender neutral or male pseudonym in order to avoid mockery and oppression. For them, it has been a way to encourage their male colleagues and the readers to see them as being on par with male authors. Female authors have thus been unable to “reveal their true and complete identity because the male audience will be put off by a book written by a woman” (Op de Laak 20). This is what the author of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy has experienced.

Erika Mitchell is the woman behind the pseudonym E.L. James and she is one of those women who try to escape the restrictions that are brought by their gender. “The pseudonym is a combination of her real name and the family name James” (Op de Laak 17). It is believed that E. L. James has trouble coping with all the attention she is getting, especially because most of the attention she is being given is negative. Even though she has written such a spicy and daring novel, she was still well aware that she was going to be degraded because of creating such an explicit sexual imagery. The only difference between female writers in the past and those that write in the present is that a lot of them were forced to hide their identities in the past while many of today’s writers choose to hide their identities because of a particular reason. E. L. James chose to write in anonymity in order to protect her children from the people who considered her novel to be the epitome of “erotic garbage” (Kinnahan 60).

2. Erotic Romance Novels

All novels are romantic in their essence even though some of them do not even deal with the subject of love. Romances, though, are love stories that apply a fictional treatment to the subject of love. In a romance novel, the plot's central focus is on the romantic relationship between the two main characters. There are also other complications and problems, such as mysteries to be solved, career goals or social successes to be achieved, but these are always secondary to the love interest (Ramsdell 4). It is also important that they have the satisfactory ending, which usually, but not always, implies the traditional happy ending, "with the two protagonists forming some kind of committed relationship (usually marriage) by the book's conclusion" (Ramsdell 4). *Fifty Shades of Grey* has both of these features because the focus is on the relationship between Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey and they eventually end up getting married and having children in *Fifty Shades Freed*, the third installment of the trilogy.

The most enduring genre of Contemporary Romance is the Basic Contemporary Romance, which is a love story with a contemporary setting (Ramsdell 46). The way in which sex is handled also varies greatly in these stories, ranging from innocent to erotic. It is obvious that *Fifty Shades of Grey* puts a great emphasis on the erotic part, which is why it had brought up many controversies. Valerie Parv (2004) defines Erotica as "any work of literature that is both romantic and sexually explicit" (15). True erotica is likely to be expressed in more simple and frank language and the characters' sexual experiences are likely to be more adventurous than those that could be found in works of other genres. The tone of the books may vary from fun and flirtatious to dark and sensual (Parv 34). The tone of E. L. James' novel is more dark and sensual, but there are moments when the relationship between the protagonists is romantic, lively, and fun. This is one of the rare things in the novel that somewhat resembles real life because all relationships have their ups and downs. The language is sexual and it is expressed in explicit adult terms rather than "couched in flowery phrases" (Parv 35). According to these features, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, without doubt, belongs to the genre of erotic romance because of its passionate imagery and explicitness. Most people find erotic romances to be very open about various topics, but there are still some taboos that will never come into consideration. Most publishers of erotica will not consider books dealing with pedophilia, vulgar descriptions of bodily functions, and practices that most reasonable adults are likely to regard as perverse. In this lies the main point of difference between erotica and true pornography, which has almost none of these limitations (Parv 15).

2.1. First-Person Erotic Fantasies

E. L. James' novel is a first-person narrative, in which Anastasia Steele narrates the story of her relationship with Christian Grey and gives us a glimpse of her life. We receive the character's world through her eyes and ears and through her opinions and inner monologues. The only exception in narration occurs when the readers are given descriptions of the heroine's outward appearance, usually with the help of devices such as mirrors in the hallway (Talbot 109). This notion is present in the novel itself when, at the very beginning, Anastasia wakes up and looks at herself in the mirror: "I scowl with frustration at myself in the mirror. Damn my hair.... I roll my eyes in exasperation and gaze at the pale, brown-haired girl with blue eyes too big for her face staring back at me" (James 3). This excerpt clearly shows that the heroine lacks confidence – a trait that will later be changed by the presence of Christian Grey.

Furthermore, "the female protagonist of popular romance fiction is almost always a woman tormented. She is sexually aroused by the attentions of a man who is the epitome of masculinity" (Talbot 109). At first, she dislikes him, but eventually she realizes that there is something that pulls her closer to his manhood, throwing her into an excruciating state of confusion and mixed emotions. Without doubt, Anastasia Steele's story line most certainly follows this particular narrative element of an erotic romance novel.

First-person narration is known to be less reliable because of its subjectivity, but it somehow brings the reader closer to the protagonist and creates an unbreakable bond between them. Through this feature, the story becomes more emotional for the readers because they find themselves sharing the rollercoaster of emotions with their heroes. However, feminist critics often argue that the usage of Steele's first person narration guides audiences into her false empowerment (Panagiotis Lino 30).

3. The Difference Between Male and Female Protagonists

There is as great a difference between male and female protagonists in literature as it is between men and women in the real world. In erotic romances, the heroine is far from being the submissive type of woman found in some other romance subgenres. She is usually fiercely independent and capable of handling her own life. Her behavior often reflects contemporary feminist thinking, “especially in the areas of choice and self-determination, and although she often battles with the hero over her ‘revolutionary’ ideas, he usually comes to see things her way in the end” (Ramsdell 165). Anastasia Steele is most certainly not all of those things, even though she does possess some of those traits. She is obviously an intelligent woman because she is a college graduate, but she is presented as being too romantic for her own good. She spends her life waiting for her own prince in a shiny armor, but once the time comes she lets herself drown in the darkness that surrounds Christian Grey. She is a determined woman and that is the reason why the two of them fight most of the time, yet she becomes weaker as she gets to know him and she lets her guard come down.

When it comes to male protagonists of modern erotic romances, it is safe to say that they show their dominance in every aspect of their lives. The romance heroes are exciting and dangerous, and erotic because of it (Williamson 127). They are masters of their own universes, perfect in their outer appearance, powerful and dominating. For all of those traits, they are presented as desirable, highly eroticized and utterly irresistible (Williamson 127). Physical power, along with aggression and muscular build, is very important for these stories because it is the quintessential masculine attribute (Armstrong 108). Women are drawn to such men because of their overpowering dominance, which is the reason why they often find themselves in subordinate roles. A good deal of story space is given over to the display of those characteristics, which is the case with *Fifty Shades of Grey* as well.

The powerful, domineering hero of the romance novel has been the subject of criticism for a very long period of time. What is still not understood is that the hero’s strength is a measure of the heroine’s power. It is actually her task to conquer him: “Every good romance heroine must have a hero who is worthy of her. And in most cases he is a mean, moody, magnificent creature with a curling lip and mocking eyes and an arrogant air of self-assurance—until he meets the heroine” (Donald 81).

The heroine's primary role in the story serves to encourage the readers to cope with their fears. On the other hand, the male protagonist's role is to motivate the readers to face and accept the sexually charged, aggressive parts of their personalities. This part mostly refers to the female audience because they need to liberate themselves and stop associating power and sexuality with masculinity. From childhood, men have more outlets for their aggressions, but they also have more outlets for their sexuality. Their sexual activities are not repressed, but rather encouraged. Most women, on the other hand, are instructed from childhood to control their erotic drives and to even hide that part of their personality (Barlow 49-50).

In addition, in erotic romances the "heroine does not lose her innocence along with her virginity" (Williamson 130). It does not matter what the nature of her past love affairs was, nobody has ever touched her or made love to her in the way the hero does. She actually discovers the power of her own sexuality through the hero's lovemaking (Williamson 130). This is visible in James' novel as well because Anastasia Steele develops her sexually through her relationships with Christian Grey. She grows from being a virgin to celebrating every orgasm with her inner goddess. Her "very small inner goddess sways in gentle victorious samba" (James 78) every time he makes love to her. This partly changes once she finds out about his dark side as she realizes that Christian Grey does not make love but is more prone to BDSM sexual activities; as she realizes that he does not see sex as a means of deepening the relationship between two people, but rather as an instrument for achieving pure physical pleasure.

4. Christian Grey as a Literary Hero and Anastasia Steele as a Damsel in Distress?

A lot of issues arose with the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey*: consent, BDSM, submission of women, and various other problematic subjects that were covered in the novel. From the beginning to the end of the story, there is a plethora of issues concerning abusive behavior, so this chapter will deal with the instances in which such behavior was shown.

Christian Grey is presented as a control freak who exercises “control in all things” (James 10) and who is used to getting his own way (James 44). Through his character, James managed to accurately portray the male kind because they tend to be very controlling in their relationships with women. If things do not go their way, some of them can get aggressive and abusive. Grey also states that there are people who would say that he does not have a heart and he acts very calm and proud while talking to Anastasia about it (James 11). This reflects the state of affairs present in today’s society where men are supposed to be cold and proud of it, and women are supposed to be clingy and annoy men because of it. Men are never publicly shamed for treating women the way they do. On the contrary, they are encouraged to act tough and merciless in order to give off the impression that they are the ‘alpha’ males.

Like many other women in real life, Anastasia Steele sometimes wonders if there is something wrong with her. Perhaps she has spent too much time in the company of her literary romantic heroes and, consequently, her ideals and expectations are far too high (James 24). This points out two things present in feminist thought: (1) women are forced to think of themselves as having too high expectations, and (2) they are coerced into thinking that they should conform to whatever type of man comes their way because of their inferiority. Maybe the reason for these high expectations originates from the fairytales, which were read to them while they were little girls, but that is undoubtedly not their fault. It is not fair to put pressure on women for having unattainable standards, but such standards should be encouraged because women should know their real worth. Romances do create a false sense of the real world, but one should see them as an escape from reality, so women are not to be blamed for enjoying their romantic novels. Connected to women’s expectations and high standards attainable only through a (non-existent) literary hero is the question if Grey is one (James 34). There are several instances where Grey’s behavior is beyond chivalrous, like the one when

Jose tried to take advantage of drunk Anastasia but he came to her rescue and said that he thinks the lady (Anastasia Steele) said no (James 59).

One of the issues the novel touches upon, as announced by the previous paragraph, is the concept of ladyhood present in two quotes from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* that Anastasia receives as Christian Grey's gift. Those quotes serve to portray women as if they were living in their perfect world and expecting too much from the opposite sex. The first quote – "Ladies know what to guard against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks" (James 55) – implies that it is much easier for women to get through life because they read novels, teaching them how to behave and what to expect in real life. Grey's intention was obviously to tell Anastasia to stay away from him because he is not good for her, but the problem is that women are not supposed to guard themselves from men because their behavior should reflect the respect they have for women. The second quote puts an even greater emphasis on the abusive side of the relationships between men and women: "I agree to the conditions, Angel; because you know best what my punishment ought to be; only- only- don't make it more than I can bear" (James 249). Both of these quotes, however, make Grey a part of the literary world, in which he is either a hero or a devil.

On the other hand, there is Anastasia, filled with self-doubt and lack of confidence. She is an anxious girl who is afraid of letting her boyfriend down because of her fear that he will find her lacking in some way (James 92). As many other women, she compares herself to other women and that is the source of the lack of her confidence. Christian Grey saw that in her and thought that all of those traits would make her a great Submissive in his world of twisted sexuality. Anastasia's submissiveness in her relationship with Grey reflects her subordination in real life. She is sort of portrayed as a damsel in distress in need of a hero who is going to show her what she has been missing in her life. Anastasia has succumbed to his dubious sexual habits, even though she does not even know what she was getting herself into (James 149). She has fallen for a man who has turned her world upside down, but she conforms in order to fix him.

It is possible to view Anastasia Steele as a damsel in distress who needs a savior, but if much more thought is put into that matter, then it is possible to say that she is also very strong for breaking her own boundaries. The problematic part is that most of the time she does it without her own consent. In numerous instances, Anastasia does surrender to Grey's controlling ways in order not to bear the brunt of his rage and rejection. She wants to release

her control voluntarily, yet she does not quite succeed. In this way, the author removes the sexual acts played out in Christian's 'red room of pain' from the love story that ends in a somewhat conventional marriage with children (Van Reenen 228).

5. The Biblical Imagery in *Fifty Shades of Grey*'s Depiction of Sex and Sexuality

“I gasp, and I’m Eve in the Garden of Eden,
and he’s the serpent, and I cannot resist” (James 245)

The guiding biblical imagery in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is most certainly the comparison of the two protagonists with Eve and the serpent. The story of Adam and Eve is a well-known story originating from the Bible. Adam and Eve failed God once a serpent deceived Eve to take the apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This comparison represents the spell Christian cast on Anastasia making her sin. According to such interpretation, she is a weak woman unable to control her emotions and so liable that one man has the power to make her do the things that she thought she would never do.

“Sex, especially premarital sex, is seen as a taboo subject in Christian circles, and for good reasons” (Argo 8). The Bible makes it clear that sexual immorality is a sin. Non-consenting sexual intercourse, lustful intercourse, and any sexual act not intended by God are seen as great sins. “Christians believe that God created sex to be a wonderful bond between man and wife; but, when this bond is seen outside of marriage or the act of sex is to punish a partner, then it is seen as immoral” (Argo 9). The sex scenes in the novel are often immoral because Anastasia does not always consent right away and Christian takes advantage of her. “He uses sex as a weapon” to make her more obedient or to punish her, which is, by all means, antifeminist and antihuman (James 201).

Another important biblical imagery is a part of the contract, in which it is stated that the submissive shall “serve and obey in all things” (James 175). “Actually, don’t the marriage vows use those words... obey? This throws me. Do couples still say that?” (James 175). It is preposterous to think that women have to subject themselves to men even in their marriages especially because marriage is supposed to be an institution in which husband and wife are equal and form one being. “It does not take a radical feminist genius to recognize that patriarchal rule is all the more easily maintained if grounded in the premise that ‘the world’ was created by an Almighty Male Deity who still Lords over His creation” (Plain and Sellers 192).

6. Sex and False Interpretation of BDSM

The reception of the novel has drawn attention to the issue “that readers of ‘erotic fiction’ may indulge in fantasies that seem incompatible with the feminist ethical ideal of recognizing women’s true value” (Van Reenen 223). *Fifty Shades of Grey* mostly portrays well-known patterns of gender-stereotyping with models that explicitly encourage sexual aggression and male dominance (Van Reenen 223).

E.L. James creates the character of ‘Ana’ Steele as the perfect agent of passivity in order to allow for the successful implementation of “sexual power on a willing individual” (Panagiotis Lino 29). *Fifty Shades of Grey* romanticizes the gender relationship dynamic between Steele and Grey, imposing on readers the gendered distinction of Grey as the dominant, powerful man only in comparison to Steele as the passive woman, which is absolutely ‘normal’ within a traditional heterosexual relationship (Panagiotis Lino 29).

Female readers thus view Anastasia Steele as not naive but relatable, transforming her into a medium that takes them into the world of sexual agency and exploration. Through this specific characterization of Steele, James enables the character to act as the heroine to the largely female audience who uses her as a window into an erotic world of BDSM. Initially, Steele is portrayed as rather turned off by Grey’s sexual tastes: “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 carabineers in his playroom ceiling” (James 199). Several feminist critics who support BDSM criticize E. L. James for disparaging the BDSM lifestyle through the pathologization of such behavior and taste. When it comes to the analysis of consent as it is depicted throughout Grey and Steele’s relationship, many critics attack the novel because of its focus on the “perceived encouraging and romanticizing domestic abuse while emphasizing the physicality of the sexual encounters” (Panagiotis Lino 17). The novel has had a great influence on the introduction of BDSM to the general public, so it is very important to highlight all forms of abusive behavior and differentiate it from BDSM because it is nonconsensual. The incorporation of abusive tropes such as moments of control, stalking, and unhealthy obsession should be some of the greatest causes for concern in relationships. This interpretation of *Fifty Shades of Grey* positions BDSM as abusive, which is an incorrect interpretation of BDSM as lacking consent (Panagiotis Lino 17).

Van Reenen (2014) further states that the emotional and psychological abuse are evident in Christian Grey's attempts at control, extreme anger, jealousy, mood changes, stalking, threats, and isolating the female from friends and family. "Anastasia begins to withhold information about her whereabouts and tries to manage 'perceived threats.' She fears the consequences of not acquiescing to Christian's demands" (Van Reenen 229). This behavioral pattern is common in most abusive relationships. Sexual violence is also present throughout the novel and it includes Christian's use of alcohol to compromise Anastasia's freedom to consent. He later denies her pleasure in teaching her 'control' by not letting her have an orgasm. Van Reenen also states that the couple's sexual encounters are 'nonegalitarian' and not typical in BDSM relationships, which leads to the aforementioned misinterpretation of BDSM lifestyle. Christian often initiates sex and 'punishment' when he is extremely angry and this is not really connected with BDSM, but more with abusive sexual behavior that Anastasia Steele is not even aware of.

Fifty Shades of Grey is often considered to be "an instruction manual for an abusive individual to sexually torture a vulnerable young woman" (Inzunza 37), glamorizing intimate partner violence in popular culture through the normalization of sexual violence. "Many sexologists have commented that one of the leading fantasies of women is to be taken against their will, or to be unable to resist a complete surrender to their partners" (Van Reenen 225). This lack of awareness becomes evident when the eroticization of violence is viewed as something that has a therapeutic effect on the individual. In order to raise the awareness, it is important for women to understand the difference between BDSM-related activities and nonconsensual sexual violence.

Another issue arises in relation to the binding contract between Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele as there are several troublesome terms regarding the outward appearance of the Submissive and their sexual activities in general. Under the clause 'Submissive,' it is stated that "the Submissive accepts the Dominant as her master, with the understanding that she is now the property of the Dominant" (James 169). This perfectly reflects the common misconception that women are the property of men, when in reality they are independent beings who have brains of their own. This clause is connected with the term that declares that "the Submissive shall submit to any sexual activity demanded by the Dominant and shall do so without hesitation or argument" (James 170). From a feminist, or even female, point of view, this is disturbing on so many levels, but mostly on the level that men give themselves the right to treat women as sexual objects. There are many more alarming parts of the

contract, but the one that should also be discussed is the clause dealing with personal hygiene/beauty where it is stated that the Submissive “will undergo whatever treatments the Dominant sees fit” (James 173). In this certain clause is represented the entire oppressive culture of beauty in today’s world where women only feel attractive if they are attractive to men. Men dictate what is beautiful and women are there to be subjected to their beauty standards.

In addition, many feminists and critics raise objections to the images of women in pornography that depict women as objects to be taken by men, who believe that pornography implies that women want to be hurt, abused, and humiliated (Van Reenen 229). Oftentimes regarded as a “domestication of pornography” (Inzunza 37), *Fifty Shades of Grey* evokes this idea by the comparison of Christian Grey with an animal because of his insatiability: “The man is insatiable, or maybe all men are like him” (James 484). Women sometimes feel scared to say ‘no’ to their boyfriends or husbands because they believe it is their duty to please their men, but consent is not to be ignored in relationships. For example, Anastasia tried to justify Grey’s behavior by comparing him to an animal and laughing with Kate about it. It is unacceptable for women to force themselves to justify men who coerce them into having sex just because they are not able to control their sexual drive.

The novel further supports this idea by mainly concentrating on the sexual preferences of Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele’s subjection to them. The first book, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, is basically a sequence of 18 sexual scenes. According to Katherine Argo (2015), nearly 16% of the first book involves obscene scenes in exquisite detail. The details of 94% of the scenes add very little to the character development and plot line (Argo 4). The novel also portrays all sexual relationships as modeled on a basic pattern of dominance and submission or as something that men do to women (Inzunza 37). Feminist critics have varying reactions to the amount of sex in the book. On the one hand, they feel disgusted by the fact that any woman would willingly subject herself into a submissive role. On the other, part of the feminist movement and feminist theory is all about empowering individuals to make their own decisions and explore their sexuality. They believe that “feminism can be an answer to any choice that a woman wants to make, as long as it is the woman making the choice” (Argo 7).

7. The Depiction of Gendered Relationships

Traditional gender roles largely support the framework of the novel. Establishing Christian Grey as a wealthy, powerful man contributes to his gendered characterization. “Through his capitalistic success, James highlights Grey’s intellect and reason, placing him in hypermasculine territory and justifying his general lack of emotion” (Panagiotis Lino 26). Anastasia Steele, on the contrary, is a real feminine figure who is a hopeless romantic and is waiting for her Prince Charming. Her character is submissive and that is visible in the scene where Steele and Grey are in a restaurant and she offers to pay the bill. His reaction is pretty horrifying because he asks her if she was trying to completely emasculate him (James 459). In this instance, it is obvious that Christian Grey has to be dominant in every sphere of their lives, just like men in real life. It is emasculating for some of them to let women pay for a meal or anything else because they are ‘the providers’ and they do not want to let women be their equals.

There is also one more troubling part of the story that perpetuates the fantasy that with love and time, a woman can ‘reform’ or ‘save’ a troubled man. This idea that women have the power to change a man’s negative behavior is fictional, but the problem is that some women will try to implement it in real life. If they do such a thing, it may be dangerous because it may bring them into a situation where they have no control (Argo 6). Anastasia also feels like Christian is dragging her into the dark, but she asks herself if she can still guide him into the light (James 355). Throughout the novel, it is visible that Grey changes because of Steele’s love, but once again it is important to state that that is pure fiction, and that it might have a completely opposite effect in real life.

Like many other women, Anastasia Steele does not feel comfortable in her own company and that is the reason why she searches for love in all the wrong places. She feels lonely and uncomfortable, unhappy with her own company because she blames herself for everything that has happened to her (James 278). It is crucial to notice that women should, first of all, feel contented, safe and relaxed in their own company, and they should know their worth so that they do not let men walk all over them.

Conclusion

After analyzing the relationship between the two protagonists, Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele, it is safe to say that their amorous entanglement does not represent the ideal love that people want to find in their lives. This novel can be approached from two feminist perspectives, and that is the Anti-pornography stance that states that sexual activities do not liberate women, and the opposite one, Pro-Sex, that believes in the fact that women can become liberated through consensual sexual activities if they feel like doing so. No matter which concept one decides to stand for, it is still important to emphasize the fact that it is fully possible for a woman to see herself as being both pro-sex and anti-pornography.

Also, the common misconception about BDSM being nonconsensual should be abandoned because it creates false notions of abuse and terror in such relationships. Violence, pain and destruction are nonconsensual in abusive relationships and that is the fact that people need to bear in mind. What is also important is that gendered relationships should become a part of the past. Not only women, but people in general, should fight for the destruction of gender roles and differences because they bring more hardships than blessings.

E.L. James' novel has raised many controversies, but that also depends on whether one sees it as crude or liberating. In reality, male privilege transcends race, class and social standing, but that does not have to be the case if women decide to stand up for themselves even more. It is important to encourage women to speak louder for themselves and to not write under pseudonyms in order to hide their real identity in front of their male colleagues. Women need to embrace their flaws and virtues because only in that way will they be able to fight back.

Works Cited

- Allen, Judith. "Progressive Portraits: Literature in Feminisms of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Olive Schreiner." *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory*, edited by Robin Truth Goodman, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 42- 54.
- Argo, Katherine. *Love, Sex, and Feminism: A Critique of Fifty Shades of Grey*. Dort College, 2015.
- Armstrong, Nancy. "What Feminism Did to Novel Studies." *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, edited by Ellen Rooney, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 99-119.
- Barlow, Linda. "The Androgynous Writer: Another View of Point of View." *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, edited by Jayne Ann Krentz, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992, pp. 45- 53.
- Campbell, Patty. *Campbell's Scoop: Reflections on Young Adult Literature*. Scarecrow Press, 2010.
- Donald, Robyn. "Mean, Moody, and Magnificent: The Hero in Romance Literature." *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, edited by Jayne Ann Krentz, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992, pp. 81- 85.
- Inzunza, Beatriz. "The Understanding of Romance in Audiences of *50 Shades of Grey*." *Global Media Journal México*, vol. 12, no. 23, 2015, pp. 35-48.
- James, E. L. *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Arrow Books, 2015.

- Kinnahan, Linda. "Feminist Poetics: First-Wave Feminism, Theory, and Modernist Women Poets." *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory*, edited by Robin Truth Goodman, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 54-69.
- Mullin, Katherine. "Modernisms and Feminisms." *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, edited by Ellen Rooney, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 136-153.
- Op de Laak, Britt. "Feminism in *Fifty Shades of Grey*." MA thesis, Utrecht University, 2017.
- Panagiotis Lino, Viviane. "Fifty Shades of Fucked Up: On the Use and Abuse of a Sexual Subculture to Sell Books." Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Butler University, 2015.
- Parv, Valerie. *The Art of Romance Writing: Practical Advice from an International Bestselling Romance Writer*. Allen & Unwin, 2004.
- Plain, Gill and Susan Sellers. *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Ramsdell, Kristin. *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genreflecting Advisory Series*. Libraries Unlimited, 1999.
- Tabolt, Mary. "An Explosion Deep Inside Her: Women's Desire and Popular Romance Fiction." *Language and Desire: Encoding Sex, Romance and Intimacy*, edited by Keith Harvey and Celia Shalom, Routledge, 2003, pp. 106-123.
- Van Reenen, Dionne. "Is This Really What Women Want?: An Analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and Modern Feminist Thought." *South African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2014, pp. 223-233.

Williamson, Penelope. "By Honor Bound: The Heroine as Hero." *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, edited by Jayne Ann Krentz, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992, pp. 125- 133.