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Senior Seminar

Thesis Paper

10/24/18

“Chains and Whips Excite Me”: The Awakening of Female Sexuality Through The *Fifty Shades of Grey* Phenomenon

Sitting in the back corner of the room, I silently listened to the students of the Senior Seminar English course debate the legitimacy of calling the New York Best Seller novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, literature. While the conversation initially revolved around E.L. James’s technically poor writing of the novel, there were undertones of harsh judgment as people threw out critical comments regarding the erotic content of the book. In an attempt to play devil’s advocate, I spoke up in defense of the book, while having never even read it. Almost immediately, the tone of the conversation and the atmosphere of the room left me feeling much more comfortable in silence. But why? Why, as a woman, did I feel so vilified supporting the novel that’s been made famous by its resonance with a female audience? I left that class, purchased *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and shamelessly read it while seated in public places, welcoming the scrutiny. I got looks from people. I noticed them but could not have cared less. I not only found the book to be empowering, but feel that its astounding success is an important step in working to end our society’s historic repression of female sexuality.

History of Female Sexuality

The Oxford English Dictionary defines sexuality as “Sexual nature, instinct, or feelings; the possession or expression of these”. Historically, the acceptance of and the conversation

revolving around, female sexuality has been much less than that of male sexuality. Although it seemed the sole purpose of women in society for quite some time was to birth children, the act of “creating” those children, having sex, was taboo. It could be spoken of by men, even enjoyed by men, but women were simply expected to be the receptacles of this act.

Through most of the Nineteenth Century, so little was known about female sexuality that doctors often diagnosed those expressing any form of sexual desire as being “hysterical”. The removal of the female clitoris, a clitoridectomy, even became a common treatment of hysteria in an effort to keep women submissive to their husbands. Alternatively, and as further evidence of the ignorance of the female body at the time, a different treatment plan for hysteria involved the manual stimulation of the clitoris of a woman until she was brought to the point of a “paroxysm”. We now know these paroxysms women were experiencing which were curing them of their hysteria were orgasms. The treatment was so popular it gave way to the invention of the first vibrators. Alright, maybe not exactly. The first vibrators were invented to be used, no surprise here, to treat male muscles (Silva). However, it was soon discovered that they were effective and efficient in treating hysterical women as well. Pair the medical view of female sexual activity with the religious expectations of women during the nineteenth century to remain “pure”, and it’s no surprise women didn’t speak openly about the reality of their sexual desires.

Female Sexuality Today

This misconception of female sexuality in comparison to men is something that we’ve unfortunately seen continue into the Twenty-First Century. Birth control may be easily accessible as early as the age of 16 without parental consent, and we may have over-the-counter access to a “the night after” pill, but a societal double standard about sexual desire is still very much present today. “Boys will be boys”, but girls get sent home from school for showing a

shoulder. Boys become sexually active at a young age and get high-fived by their friends, but girls have their first sexual encounter at a questionable age and they're deemed a slut, exiled by even their female classmates. On the contrary, a man wants to remain abstinent until marriage? He's a true gentleman, a rare find. But if a woman wants to refrain from sexual activity until married? Well, she's probably just a prude.

Ana's Inner Goddess

There are some circulating critiques of the book which claim the plotline is pointless and that the characters are stagnant; meaning they don't undergo any kind of transformation throughout the progression of the novel. I feel as though this criticism doesn't give the character of Anastasia Steele enough credit.

This novel follows Ana, a virgin before meeting Christian Grey, through her personal sexual awakening. She states multiple times that she's never physically felt aroused by someone or attracted to someone as she is to Christian. Her physical experiences with men have been as non-existent as her interest in any physical interactions. The novel being written in first-person from Ana's point of view gives us insight into her physical, mental, and emotional states throughout her journey. Some of these insights come from what Ana refers to as her "inner goddess" and "subconscious". Ana's "inner goddess" speaks for her new-found sexual desires and her body's physical response to Christian Grey. Her "subconscious", on the other hand, speaks from a more logical perspective, originating from her mind and usually representing her insecurities. The two compete with one another for control over Ana's actions, and it's through them that we find evolution in the character of Anastasia Steele.

I think the development of Ana as a character, as subtle as some may think it is, holds partial responsibility for the success of the book. I found the battle between her subconscious and inner goddess to provide a point of resonance for female readers, representing the battle many may experience between their sexual desires and society's acceptance of them. This ties back into society's perception of female sexuality and how that affects women during their discovery of their own sexuality. Women's bodies may physically respond differently to certain scenarios than their minds expect them to, causing confusion for some. The mind is influenced by a person's exposure to societal norms, but the body's physical, instinctual response is not. When Ana is doing her preliminary research on what it means to be a "Submissive" she acknowledges to herself that, "part of me, a very moist and integral part of me that I've only become acquainted with very recently, is seriously turned on." (186). During part of the book where Christian and Ana are negotiating terms of their possible contract, the topic of bondage comes up. At the mention of bondage Ana's inner goddess "bounces up and down like a small child waiting for ice cream." (257). These instances show the development of Ana realizing what she enjoys sexually in the context of her evolving inner goddess.

The struggle for Ana at multiple different points in the novel is whether she should embrace her inner goddess or submit to the advice of her subconscious. Before her first spanking from Christian she must decide which voice to listen to. Her inner goddess encourages her to "Do it!" while her subconscious is entirely paralyzed. Immediately following the spanking and sex, Christian pulls down Ana's sweatpants again to apply baby oil to her sore behind. At this point, Ana's subconscious responds bitterly to the action with "Up and down like whores' drawers" (277) attempting to make Ana feel guilty after she's just enjoyed her punishment from Christian. Later in the book Christian sends Ana to the Red Room to wait for

him. As she kneels on the floor in her instructed position she silently states to herself, “I cannot deny it, I’m excited, aroused, wet already. This is so... I want to think *wrong*, but somehow it’s not.” (484). These moments of turmoil between her inner goddess and subconscious show Ana struggling to choose, essentially, whether she should listen to her body’s physical desires for Christian, or to what her mind, conditioned by society, tells her to do. Results of studies performed, like one by Terri Fisher, a psychologist at Ohio State University, “suggest that some sex differences in self-reported sexual behavior reflect responses influenced by normative expectations” for both genders, but especially women. The study required male and female participants to answer a questionnaire about sexual activity under three conditions: they were told they’d be handing the answers to a fellow participant who could view them while they answered, they were given assurance that their answers would remain anonymous, or they were hooked up to a fake polygraph machine while they gave their answers. The results of the study, as talked about by Daniel Bergner in his book, “What Do Women Want?”, showed drastic differences among the answers of women from the three different testing conditions. Berger writes in his book,

The male replies were about the same under each of the three conditions, but for the females the circumstances were crucial. Many women in the first group said they’d never masturbated, never checked out anything X-rated. The women who were told they would have strict confidentiality answered yes a lot more. And those who thought they were wired to a lie detector replied almost identically to the men.

BDSM or Abuse?

BDSM is an acronym used to refer to a broad category of sexual interactions involving bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism. Those taking part in BDSM practices may participate in all categories or only some. *Fifty Shades of Grey*, while it was cause for conversation everywhere, was cause for some unhappiness in the BDSM community. The BDSM community vocalized concern after the release of the novel in regard to its inaccurate portrayal of BDSM practices, especially around the topic of consent.

An article in *Psychology Today*, “What the BDSM Community Can Teach a Kinky World”, by Joe Magliano Ph.D., Kathryn Klement, M.A., and Brad Sagarin, Ph.D., outlines the added emphasis on consent in the BDSM community and how it differs from consent during a more “traditional heterosexual encounter”. The article explains that consent during traditional encounters is usually “implicit”, meaning that silence implies consent to continue. However, during BDSM interactions, or “scenes” as they’re commonly referred to, consent is “explicit”. The explicit consent is prevalent in all parts of the scene; pre-scene negotiation, during the scene check-ins, and the “aftercare” period. The pre-scene negotiations involve a conversation during which each party identifies activities they are “interested in”, “willing to engage in”, and activities that are “out of bounds”. Check-ins during the scene utilize the use of predetermined code words like “yellow” and “red” to identify when certain activities need to slow down or stop entirely. There is usually quiet time spent together after the scene is complete, which is referred to as the “aftercare” period. This period is considered a very important part of BDSM practices, as it allows time for care, comforting physical contact, and conversations about what happened during the scene. The benefits of the rules of explicit consent are that everyone is empowered through having to ask for what they want, and that ambiguity is removed from the situation. If a certain action isn’t specifically spoken about before the scene, it’s not an option during the scene.

This can allow both parties to be entirely present in what they're doing as opposed to worrying about the other's comfort (Magliano, Klement, and Sagarin).

The authors of the *Psychology Today* article performed some testing to determine whether the expectations of explicit consent throughout the BDSM community added to the community's understanding of what it meant to have consent violated. To do this, the authors, accompanied by their colleague, Ellen Lee, spoke to BDSM practitioners, other adults, and college students to compare their attitudes. In the article they state the findings of the study:

Compared to college students and other adults, BDSM practitioners held fewer false beliefs about rape (such as, "Rape happens when a guy's sex drive goes out of control"); showed less of a tendency to blame the victim of sexual assault; and had less paternalistic attitudes toward women (Klement, Sagarin, & Lee, in press).

Numerous articles and blog posts online have been written with the intent of highlighting how the novel contributes to a societal acceptance of domestic abuse and "the rape culture" we're currently combatting. One article titled "Issues of Abuse, Consent, and Rape in 'Fifty Shades of Grey'" written as part of a blog called Broken Quiet, quotes direct passages from the novel which are supposed to show how Christian Grey's interactions with Anastasia are examples of rape. The trouble with this is that the lines are taken entirely out of context to prove a point. The first passage used in the article takes place in the novel when Christian arrives at Ana's apartment unannounced, shortly after Ana has gone for a run. He ties her hands up with his silver necktie and moves to begin removing her sneakers. The article uses the quote "'No,' I protest, trying to kick him off. He stops. 'If you struggle, I'll tie your feet too. If you make a noise, Anastasia, I will gag you.'" The author of the article points out that Christian continuing to have sex with Ana despite her saying "No", classifies this scene as non-consensual. What the

author fails to mention is that the lines of the book immediately preceding the quoted lines say, “He bends and starts undoing one of my sneakers. Oh no...no...my feet. No. I’ve just been running.” Ana isn’t protesting Christian having sex with her, she’s protesting him removing her sneakers out of embarrassment over the state of her feet from her run.

Another example of “rape” from the novel used in the Broken Quiet blog comes from when Ana receives her first spanking from Christian, spanking being something Ana has already agreed she’s willing to try. The lines used describe Ana’s face “screwed up against the pain” (274) and her thought process as the spanking occurs. Ana thinking to herself afterwards, “I can’t say that I enjoyed the experience. In fact, I would still go a long way to avoid it” is used by the author of the article to show how clearly miserable Ana is after her experience. The full line from the book her thoughts were pulled from, however, reads “I can’t say that I enjoyed the experience. In fact, I would still go a long way to avoid it, but now... I have this safe, weird, bathed in afterglow, sated feeling.” (277). When Christian asks if Ana is okay she also comes to the “humbling” realization that she feels “radiant” (276). Context directly surrounding every quote used in the article can be used to invalidate every claim of rape in *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Other than a supposed lack of consent, there are circulating complaints that *Fifty Shades of Grey* misrepresented BDSM culture through lack of concern for safety, safe-words, and aftercare. However, in the Dominant/Submissive contract Christian presents Ana with one of the final sections is titled “Safewords”. This section of the document outlines that:

Two safewords will be invoked depending on the severity of the demands.

19. The Safeword ‘Yellow’ will be used to bring to the attention of the Dominant that the Submissive is close to her limit of endurance.

20. The Safeword 'Red' will be used to bring to the attention of the Dominant that the Submissive cannot tolerate any further demands. When this word is said, the Dominant's action will cease completely with immediate effect (171).

Furthermore, later in the novel, before Christian and Ana have sex in the Red Room, Christian reiterates to Ana that they have safewords implemented, with or without the contract being officially signed, and insists that she repeat the words back to him. As far as aftercare is concerned in a BDSM relationship, I found multiple points in the novel where Christian offered intimate, tender care to Anastasia after their scenes. After Ana's first spanking and the sex that followed it, the two lay together in bed while Christian strokes Ana's hair. When he exits the room he returns with baby oil from the bathroom and uses it to soothe Ana's behind. After the pair's first experience in the Red Room Christian lets Ana down out of the restraints and as they sink to the floor together they talk about their scene. "Did that hurt?" Christian asks Ana. "Did you expect it to?". "Would you do it again?" (325). After another Red Room scene that same night Christian releases Ana's wrists, massages them gently, leads her to the door where he helps dress her, carries her down the hall curled against his chest, and then climbs into bed with her.

The Fifty Shades Phenomenon

The success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* goes beyond chart-topping book sales. The novel ignited a phenomenon evident in multiple different aspects of our society. February 13, 2015, almost exactly three years after the first book's release, the first movie of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film series hit theatres. Produced on a budget of only \$40 million, the movie earned over double that in its opening weekend alone. Given the nature of the story it was only fitting that

the movie be released on Valentine's Day, this also playing a role in its gaining of a male audience. Recognizing the momentum of the movement, E.L. James didn't stop there. The author released a second and third book, *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*, completing the trilogy. The corresponding movies were also released on Valentine's Day of 2017 and 2018 to wrap up the film series.

Inevitably, additional authors have tried to capitalize on the movement started by E.L. James's erotic trilogy. Bookbub.com had a list for *Fifty Shades of Grey* readers of 19 books hitting shelves in the Fall of 2017 alone. The books all attempt to capture the reader's attention with the same ominous allure, some, like *Dirty Little Secret* by Kendall Ryan, sounding especially familiar:

She's much too innocent for me, but that doesn't stop me from wanting the sweet, young librarian. I'm dominating and possessive, and my control streak runs a mile wide.

The way she looks at me — like I'm one of the heroes in the books she loves, like I'm broken, and she wants to be the one to piece me back together — it only complicates things further. I'm nobody's hero.

But there's no denying my tragic past reads like one of her favorite literary classics.

Outside of the literary and film world, *Fifty Shades of Grey* has become a brand and a lifestyle that people are trying to obtain. Hotels mentioned in the novel are offering special packages, the clothing industry is benefitting from the increase in neck tie sales, and there has even been a noticeable upward trend in rope sales. Typing *Fifty Shades of Grey* into the search bar on Etsy generates thousands of results, including everything from t-shirts, to home décor, to replicas of items used in the novel. The industry that has seen the biggest effect of the novel's

success is the sex toy industry. Not long after the novel's release, a Fifty Shades of Grey sex toy line was introduced, including many of the props used in the novel. You can currently pay \$259.99 for a gift set of 24 different *Fifty Shades of Grey* toys. But sales of sex toys not included under the *Fifty Shades of Grey* brand have risen as well. According to BusinessInsider.com:

Babeland, a New York-based sex shop, told The Post that it has experienced a 30 percent sales increase in the last few months and visits to the bondage portion of the site increased by 81 percent. To accommodate the demand, Babeland created a 50SOG-themed bondage kit, which includes "Spank Me Baby" body powder, restraints, and a riding crop for \$169.

The Conversation

The most resounding effect of the Fifty Shades Phenomenon is the conversation it's started. A conversation about the perception of female sexuality, the deeper sexual desires of women, and about the BDSM culture. One of the reasons for the historical double standard of men and women in their sexual roles is the lack of discussion around the topic of female sexuality. Even when it was finally realized that women had a drive and sexual needs of their own it wasn't openly talked about. But with so many people reading about Anastasia Steele's discovery and exploration of her inner goddess, they now feel it's fair game to talk about their own. As they should. The impact of the book has been so widespread that it's created an accepting atmosphere for women to finally speak up about what they want, need, or simply want to try in the bedroom without feeling out of line.

Once women realize they have every right to be every bit as sexually driven as men, hopefully they can become more in-sync with what their body wants, without worrying about whether it's okay to want it. Dr. Meg-John Barker, author of multiple books on sex and gender

studies including “Rewriting the Rules”. On their website, rewriting-the-rules.com, they published an e-mail interview done on the topic of BDSM following the publishing of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. In the interview Barker speaks, as someone studying BDSM practices for about ten years, about the increased interest in BDSM they’ve seen from people as a result of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. They credited the social acceptance of *Fifty Shades of Grey* for the interest saying:

It has brought BDSM into the mainstream and enabled a lot more people to be open about their interest and to bring these kinds of practices into their sex lives. I don’t think it is so much that more people are interested who weren’t before. Surveys have always found high numbers of people to have fantasies about being tied up, spanked etc. (often over 50% of people for these common activities). It is more that people now feel more able to be open about it.

A woman’s mission to more deeply understand her body can, in addition to improving her relationship with herself, help improve her relationship with a partner as well. Dr. Barker mentions in their interview that due to the nature of BDSM practices, couples involved must have exceptional communication, and that often times this creates a much more intimate relationship. A certified sex therapist, Dr. Stephanie Hunter Jones, told a *TIME* interviewer about the positive impacts she’s seen BDSM practices have on relationships. Also touching on the importance of communication in BDSM relationships, regardless of the level of intensity, Jones says, “I often prescribe BDSM for power struggles or control issues. Or, if one partner had a bad sexual experience in the past, I prescribe it as a way to give that partner back some feeling of control.”.

Yes, there's some justified controversy surrounding *Fifty Shades of Grey*. It isn't hard to read the novel and pick out moments of reinforced societal gender norms or even moments of worrisome behavior from Christian Grey. It is, however, impossible to ignore the movement the book has ignited. You don't even need to have read the book to know what it's about. It's incredible success, if not for the novel's critically acclaimed less-than-stellar literary techniques and unimaginative plot, is due to its resonance with so many people. E.L. James constructed a story that tapped into a well-kept-secret, primal desire in women, awakening the sexuality of the female population. The book provides a starting point for conversations that can lead to the abolishment of gender-based double standards and the empowerment of women throughout society.

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