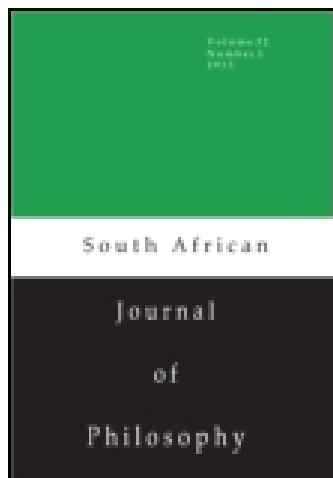


This article was downloaded by: [University of the Free State]  
On: 19 September 2014, At: 05:07  
Publisher: Routledge  
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## South African Journal of Philosophy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsph20>

### Is this really what women want? An analysis of Fifty Shades of Grey and modern feminist thought

Dionne van Reenen<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

Published online: 04 Jul 2014.

To cite this article: Dionne van Reenen (2014) Is this really what women want? An analysis of Fifty Shades of Grey and modern feminist thought, South African Journal of Philosophy, 33:2, 223-233

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2014.925730>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

## Is this really what women want? An analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and modern feminist thought

Dionne van Reenen

Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa  
[dionnev@sparta.co.za](mailto:dionnev@sparta.co.za)

The article briefly presents a paradox generated by the unprecedented sales of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy by E.L. James and explores some pros and cons of this new literary genre ('erotic fiction'), while examining the discourse of polarised reactions thereto. Attention is given to Freud's unanswered question, cited in the context of the difficulties associated with defining women's roles as relative to those of men. This context reflects the patriarchal basis of political structures that have been grounded in the accepted subordination of women. The origins of feminism were driven by these political concerns and will be used as perspectives from which to understand the 'Fifty Shades' phenomenon. 'First wave' feminism succeeded in instantiating some public-legal equality for women and gave rise to the 'second wave' that sought to address inequality between the sexes in all areas of social interaction. However, both did not succeed in eradicating troublesome patriarchal stereotypes that persist today. The well-publicised anti-pornography movement is considered for initiating wide-ranging discussions regarding the sexual role of women. This produced a strong reaction from the so-called 'third wave', which embraces an alternative sex-positive stance. The reception of 'Fifty Shades' has drawn into question the problem that readers of 'erotic fiction' may indulge in fantasies that seem incompatible with the feminist ethical ideal of recognising women's true value. The possible reasons for the success of the 'Fifty Shades' sales are investigated, with suggestions offered as to why this particular series has made an indelible mark on contemporary popular culture.

### Introduction

In 2011, the popular erotic romance *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James 2011, 2012a, 2012b) was published. It immediately presented female audiences with a paradox: on one hand, the novel quickly gained notoriety for its pornographic<sup>1</sup> and explicit bondage/discipline–dominance/submission–sadism/masochism (BDSM)<sup>2</sup> content, which sparked much controversy. On the other hand, female readers could not resist engaging with this literary genre. Sales escalated while references to the novel were evident everywhere. Before any critical examination of the material could be found, 'mommyporn' had infiltrated the suburbs. Any objections to this sexually explicit subordination of women, as being degrading to women, were deftly swept under those nicely vacuumed carpets. *Fifty Shades* mostly reproduces familiar patterns of gender-stereotyping with models that explicitly sanction male dominance and sexual aggression. Pornography and BDSM

- 1 In this sense, I will take the simple definition of 'pornography' to mean 'any material (either pictures or words) that is *sexually explicit*' (see West 2013). Add-ons suggest that pornographic material is specifically for sexual arousal and, furthermore, that the material is harmful in some way. *Fifty Shades of Grey* involves vivid descriptions of sadomasochistic sex acts. On this definition, the novel would qualify as pornography.
- 2 Like Bonomi et al. (2013) below, I am specifically discussing this subculture as it is presented in the novels, not actual BDSM practices, which are far more diverse and are not necessarily accurately represented in the *Fifty Shades* narrative. BDSM communities largely endorse some form of SSC (Safe, Sane, and Consensual) or RACK (Risk Aware Consensual Kink). The controlling, coercive behaviour of the male protagonist is not representative of these ethics.

narratives are mainstreaming, as the media market shows, and material practices of female subordination might entrench themselves in cultural or social formations as an ascendant narrative. Analysts may query: is this the sexual model to which women should now aspire? Are women, in general, to consider BDSM seriously as a means to reclaim their sex lives and spice up their marriages simply because of this new sex-positive fad? This might be the next hurdle women have to jump in order to realise their freedoms that they rightly should possess at birth.

On an initial examination of the numerous media responses to the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, it became clear that women are divided on whether the narrative and/or the sadomasochistic content of the novels is harmful. Feminist theories should provide more elucidation on this complex topic, as I consider feminisms to offer some of the most important perspectives from which popular culture has been theorised in recent history. First, some relevant views from anti-pornography stances (a movement originating during the ‘second wave’ of feminist activism) are considered. Second, some counter-objections from sex-positive movements (often called the ‘third wave’ in the literature) will be taken into account. The aim is to shed some light on why this particular novel might be considered by some to be liberating for women and by others to be degrading or dehumanising to women. Third, the following questions are explored: What could be responsible for the unprecedented success of *Fifty Shades*? Which elements in *Fifty Shades* could be considered harmful to women? It is suggested that both inquiries have something valid to contribute to the topic. Fourth, the problem of what this phenomenon is saying about society’s attitude to such sexual representation will be examined, with particular reference to the pervasive problem of violence against women. Fifth, the lack of consensus regarding how much political action can impinge on personal freedoms is discussed. Finally, evidence of arduous contestation in areas of sexual ethics and politics leads me to conclude that awareness is key to the ongoing debate on public–private tensions.

### **The waves of feminism and the flood of pornographic material into mainstream markets**

In the previous century, Freudian psychoanalytic theory had profound effects on the understanding of the connection between mental health and sexual health. Freud was substantially preoccupied with issues of sex and sexual difference throughout his career, but it seems he was perplexed by an unresolved problem: ‘What does a woman want?’ (Jones 1955: p. 421). This quotation is often cited with some irony and amusement in demonstrating the infinite unknowability of women. One could forgive Freud’s apparent bewilderment regarding what he famously called ‘the “dark continent” of femininity’ (Gatens 1991: p. 105), due to the nature of the lifeworld in which he lived. At that time, the roles of men and women were clearly demarcated. The vast majority of women were expected to be the nurturing agents in their homes, with their children and husbands (within a heterosexual marriage). Historically, women remained largely disassociated from rational and scientific modes of thought and actions, which were left to the professional and public affairs of their male counterparts. Moreover, it is with a sense of unease that many feminist theorists note, implicit in a question, such as that of Freud, ‘there is a history of women being defined only in terms relative to men’ (Gatens 1991: p. 94).

Jane Rendall (1985) provides a useful account of pre-twentieth century contexts of modern feminist inquiries in the United States of America, the United Kingdom and France. Underlying the origins of Western feminisms<sup>3</sup> were societies in which patriarchal relationships were regarded as foundational models of political structures. The family formed ‘part of the pre-political fabric of society’ (Rendall 1985: p. 9). The family, produced and sustained by women, was a support structure to political activity, not a part of it. As a result, women were strongly discouraged from participation in any public role by a deeply encoded male authority. Consequently, norms and standards for women were largely decided by men. The resulting expectations of women were coupled to concerns, such as ‘beauty’ and ‘delicacy’, while their

3 I am particularly referring to the origins of Western feminism for the scope of this paper. However, I would like to acknowledge that there have been many developments in different feminisms (both in thought and theory) in diverse socio-cultural contexts around the world. They may deviate in their various interests from what is discussed here. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to state that all feminisms are concerned with eliminating injustice towards women.

sexual character, imposed from early on, was designed to ‘make women pleasing to men’ (Rendall 1985: p. 61). Furthermore, the sexual activity of women was inextricably linked to the bearing of children. When the sexual activity of women was suggested as going beyond that of fertility, important debates regarding birth control and abortion began to emerge (Rendall 1985: p. 225). These early disruptions in traditions, which were brought about by the initial demands for equality between the sexes, gave rise to a notable tension in feminist theory and practice; the tension between ‘the desire for individual autonomy for women’ and the ‘sense of collectivity...the necessity for association’ (Rendall 1985: p. 324) that is required to propel social and political reform.

Emergence from the isolating confines of the home and family paved the way for what is now referred to as ‘first wave’ feminism, of which the ‘chief aim of formal equality between the sexes was regarded as having been achieved through the process of enfranchisement’ (Whelehan 1995: p. 1). This collective initiative was realised in the successes of suffrage movements in the United States of America and Britain. The public placement of women in the political and legal systems was a turning point in history that had permanent effects on the confrontation of inequality between the sexes in all aspects of social life. However, it should be noted that feminists cannot reason from outside the structure of patriarchy that produced them. This impasse could partly account for the perpetuation of the patriarchal, heterosexist stereotypes mentioned below.

Moving beyond the boundaries of legal-political discourse that characterised the ‘first wave’ brought about a ‘second wave’ in feminism that sought to address sexual inequality in all social interactions. Undoubtedly, the counter-culture movements and the sexual revolution of the 1960s provoked a spirited challenge to dominant representations of femininity, sexuality and women in the mass media. This is why women ‘burnt their bras’ and ‘went to the barricades’, so to speak. ‘This overt resistance to conventional definitions of what “being a woman” means came to characterize second wave feminist activism’ (Whelehan 1995: p. 5), and is chiefly what concerns many feminists in the contemporary context of female sexual representation. In spite of all the objections, and the ongoing disquiet in feminist theories regarding received representations of femininity, the public gaze is still being ‘tyrannised’ by the unrealistic male expectations of female sexuality and beauty (cf. Wolf 1990: p. 2) in widespread media-imaging. Moreover, much of popular culture remains rooted in the comfortable stereotypes of ‘fixity of aggressive male sexual impulses’ (Whelehan 1995: p. 79) and the heterosexual female responsibility to meet those needs. The popular *Fifty Shades* novels do not depart radically from that fixation, as shown in the discussion of the narrative below.

If there is some doubt as to the persistence of these stereotypical views in the Western media, one need simply consult opinions of prominent sexologists, such as Dr Laura Berman, who claims that *Fifty Shades* is prompting fantastical conversations between partners and awakening the sex lives of women everywhere. To boot, she defends the notorious content maintaining that ‘...anything that gets partners connecting again on a sexual level is okay in my book!’ (Berman 2013). 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. This lack of awareness becomes evident in such discourse when the eroticisation of violence is uncritically touted as therapeutic. The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction website (2013) states that ‘While both men and women experience similar fantasies, women more often fantasize about taking a passive role or being dominated...’ (Leitenberg and Henning 1995).

At this juncture, one can appreciate the obvious incompatibility between such discourses in popular culture and contemporary feminisms regarding women’s sexual lives. Katie Roiphe confirms that feminists have long been mystified by people’s continuing investment in fantasies that serve to reproduce an account of women’s desire for control and domination in the romantic realm. She proposes contentiously, ‘It may be that, for some, the more theatrical fantasies of sexual surrender offer a release, a vacation, an escape from the dreariness and hard work of equality’ (Roiphe 2012). The author, E.L. James, expresses her view on the plight of modern women on ABC News: ‘...it’s just hard work doing everything...’ (ABC News 2012). This implies that modern women need to find a release from everyday pressures either literally, in the arms of an

alpha male, or vicariously, through someone else's fantasy (Radway 1983: p. 63). One cannot assume that Roiphe's statements are made in absolute seriousness, but it does emphasise the point that women might harbour fantasies, wittingly or unwittingly, that are wholly incompatible with the feminist ethical ideal of recognising the true value of women.

The more radical anti-pornography lobbies targeted all pornography, not just violent pornography. They were quickly attacked for being 'repressive, reactionary and anti-sex' (Paul 2005: p. 4). The attack emanated from the pro-sex and pro-pornography campaigns that gained popularity in the 1990s and have been designated as the 'third wave' in feminism. These movements focused on the importance of 'civil liberties, sexual liberation and science' (*ibid.*). The tension between the two movements has become vehement and they are as divided as women everywhere on *Fifty Shades*. One of the most prominent figures in the current anti-pornography crusade is Gail Dines. She has been forceful in her criticism of the author who she reviles for 'getting women to see cruelty as hot sex' (Dines 2012). Sex-positive critics have responded by claiming that in exercising their choice to consume such material, women are reclaiming their sexuality and rejecting sexual shame/repression. This back and forth parley does not offer any resolution but it does raise awareness of the convoluted problems regarding the widespread consumption of sexually explicit material (see Shrage 2012 for extended discussion of these markets). The reception of *Fifty Shades* shows these problems quite clearly.

### The light side: familiar tropes in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy

The runaway success of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy cannot be ignored. However, the quality of the prose has been severely disparaged by critics. In spite of this, it is the fastest-selling book of all time and has topped best-seller charts in both the United States of America and the United Kingdom. It has been on the *New York Times Bestseller* list for over a year. Trachtenberg (2013) and *Forbes* (<http://www.forbes.com>) report that worldwide sales have exceeded 70 million copies. Book rights have been sold in 37 countries, doing financial wonders for the publisher, Random House. In December 2012, it claimed the prize for 'Popular Fiction' as well as 'Book of the Year' at the UK National Book Awards, with *Publishers Weekly* naming James the 'Publishing Person of the Year'. This caused relative pandemonium in the literary world, leaving some commentators outraged, as exemplified in the hyperbolic *New York Daily News* headline: 'Civilization Ends: E.L. James named Publishers Weekly's "Person of the Year"'! (Young 2012). Most critics cited here have objected to the poor literary quality of the trilogy; thus, alternative reasons for its success need to be assessed.

Many commentators, such as Emanuelle Grinberg (2012), have attributed the success of the series to a 'perfect storm' of several factors:

- (1) Firstly, the most obvious of these is the old adage 'sex sells' and it would seem that kinky sex sells even better than its vanilla counterpart, although the author has been insistent that this is a love story and not pornography (ABC News 2012).
- (2) Secondly, the privacy and anonymity afforded by e-book technology allows one to read socially illicit material, without having to disclose to peers or the public what one is doing.
- (3) Thirdly, the clever marketing strategy of the tasteful, discreet and understated cover images (a silk tie, a mask and a key in muted silvery tones) minimises the possibly perceived bawdiness of the pornographic content and thereby captures a wider female demographic.

This said, one might press the point: erotic literature has been around since ancient times (e.g. the Latin *Satyricon*, Gaius Petronius), so what made *this* novel so popular? Modern legislation now permits readers to freely buy, possess and read legally published, erotic works by authors such as D.H. Lawrence, without fear of being prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act (1959).<sup>4</sup> Yet, why has no work of 'erotic fiction' ever come close to selling the number of copies that the *Fifty Shades* trilogy has managed? Moreover, the series has sparked a significant explosion in this literary genre (see, for example, commentary by Sidley 2013), as well as increased sales of sexual accessories, pain and pleasure props, and associated products, such as music collections and even board games. The film will be released in 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence was successfully published by Penguin in the United Kingdom in 1960, after a legal defence (artistic merit and the public good) against obscenity was successful. The case was highly publicised.

While all of the above provide plausible reasons for sizeable sales, they do not sufficiently elucidate how the book series has made such a substantial mark on popular culture. It is the initiation of public conversations about *Fifty Shades* in the media and society that has significantly boosted the numbers, and then perpetuated sales (cf. Grinberg 2012). It is suggested here that the familiar romance narratives and tropes, understood as recurring elements typically exploited in formula fiction, provide some useful answers. I make no assumption that there is a unanimous reader response here. Radway (1983: p. 54) warns against such reader theorist bias. Of course, huge sales do not indicate whether all consumers enjoy what they have read (or even that they have read the books). I do suggest that the tropes exemplified below seem to provide the continuity of elements across shifting representations of femininity in contemporary cultures, while the kinky themes, explored from the female perspective, provide the discontinuity usually found in romantic literature. This seems to have resulted in sufficient fascination and consequent popularity. For mass audience appeal, the plot should also resonate with people's unconscious foundations and the characters cannot be too far out of the thematic scope of identification. Damasio (2010: p. 279) sums it up well in his discussion of the influence of the unconscious in fundamental narratives: 'The cognitive asymmetry of sexuality in men and women, many parameters of which are engraved in our genomes, lurks behind the behaviour of these characters and keeps them ever modern'.

On initial reading of *Fifty Shades of Grey* it might not seem representative of a typical love story. In fact, it could be classified as quite radical in contemporary romance literature. However, if one looks beneath the controversial surface, the plot does not depart significantly from the typical tropes found in the romantic comedy (or sex comedy) genre; tropes that have become so familiar that audiences hardly seem conscious of them. By and large, the most common and well-known formula in this genre is based on some variation of:

Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy gets girl back. (e.g. Shumway in McDonald 2007: p. 2).

Usually, in such film narratives, the ending is a 'happily-ever-after' one, complete with the protagonists embracing to sentimental music crescendos, rising and revolving camera angles, with all preceding crises successfully resolved. The gestalt of 'acquisition–loss–retrieval' is so expected that there is often a dissonance or despondency induced in the reader when there is a deviation in the plot. For example, this could be one of the protagonists dying hopelessly, such as in *Leaving Las Vegas* (O'Brien 1990) or the couple not ending up together, such as in *The Bridges of Madison County* (Waller 1992). Incidentally, these examples are classified as 'romantic dramas'. Certainly, the *Fifty Shades* series follows the familiar pattern but it is related from the female protagonist's perspective. The young, virginal Anastasia Steele meets and falls desperately for the sophisticated, irresistible billionaire, Christian Grey. At the end of the first book, she leaves him after he physically hurts her in one of their numerous sexual encounters. Both characters are devastated. Early in the second book, the break-up is too much for both of them to bear and they resume their relationship with some new agreements in order to avert the previous disaster from recurring.

The familiar audience 'hook' in romances is the initial chance meeting. In this instance, Anastasia stands in for a colleague who was supposed to interview Christian, and so they are drawn into a chance meeting by fate and the romance begins. Shortly thereafter, the reader is made aware of a number of possible obstacles to the goal of long-term happiness in the relationship. These obstacles are commonly referred to as 'second act complications' (Ballon 2005). Christian discloses his sadistic, dark side and engagement in BDSM relationships. The author makes clever use of Anastasia's naïveté to introduce the reader to the details of this sexual practice and lifestyle. Anastasia questions Christian as to the nature of contracts, safe words, hard limits, soft limits, and the use of all sorts of sexual and pain paraphernalia, relieving the (unknowing) reader of the inconvenience of having to do their own research.

Familiar 'second act complications' include various threats to the new romance. Among them is an older ex-lover who was Christian's first (she was a dominant in the relationship and he the submissive, as a teenager) and she interferes in the new relationship. There is also the

ex-submissive, with whom Christian was previously involved. She becomes psychologically unstable and stalks the couple. A foster-brother from Christian's troubled past also threatens the couple physically. All are portrayed as posing a dangerous threat to the relationship. In typical fashion, they have to be neutralised and the tensions resolved before the 'happy ending fantasy' can be concluded (see Radway 1983: p. 59 for an interesting discussion on how readers *expect* this transportation as an escape from reality).

Another familiar trope is that secrets or abnormalities must be overcome in the narrative, with the protagonist experiencing feelings of humiliation and internal struggles (Ballon 2005: p. 49) in order to provide insight and induce emotion or understanding in the reader. The importance of tears and emotions are well-noted in the romance genre, which has habitually been associated with a female audience (McDonald 2007: p. 17). The pain of the loss of love makes the recovery of that love that much more satisfactory for the reader. It is, at least, a requirement for readers to like the man who will realise the 'happy ending' trope by marrying Anastasia, having a family and living a wonderful life. Furthermore, he should be healed in order to overcome the conflicts that drove them apart. It seems that, once again, the emphasis in love stories of this ilk is the aggressive male needing to be placated by the enduring love and devotion of a heterosexual female. Although Anastasia is willing to participate in BDSM because of her love for Christian, she will also be his healer and lead him from a damaged past into happy, domestic hetero-normality. This type of struggle is reminiscent of the narratives found in classics such as Heathcliff and Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë 2009) or Rhett and Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind* (Mitchell 2008). In *Fifty Shades*, the female does manage to tame her 'bad boy'.

A switch from the male perspective has brought with it a romance trope for the modern woman: not only does the female get her man, but gets him the way she wants him. However, he has to go through some sort of partial metamorphosis before she will have him and give herself to him completely. Critics should appreciate the irony that, in embracing her 'inner goddess', Anastasia becomes a servant to her master in the bedroom and ultimately yields to being looked after and (over)protected by a rich, powerful man. In numerous instances, Anastasia does succumb to his controlling ways in order not to bear the brunt of his rage and rejection. She wants to release her control voluntarily but that does not quite materialise. In this way, the author removes the 'abnormalised' BDSM antics played out in Christian's 'red room of pain' from the love story that concludes in a somewhat conventional marriage with children.

All the familiar tropes that have been reworked in the *Fifty Shades* series are largely responsible for the mass audience appeal producing millions in profit. Furthermore, these tropes have been successfully infused with many prevailing ideological trends in modernity:

- (1) The modern world is one open to transformation by human intervention (Giddens & Pierson 1998: p. 94). This is apparent throughout the novel. The depiction is of a young power-couple who have all the mental and physical resources to overcome any problem.
- (2) Modernity places an emphasis on capital, industrial production and economic institutions (*ibid.*). Prosperity is judged largely in terms of doing well financially. The protagonists have excessive wealth and access to every whim they desire. They are the proverbial fantasy couple. It is not surprising, therefore, that their intimate life is permeated by opulence, glamour, and technologic and erotic gadgets.
- (3) Modern attitudes to life are also marked by preoccupations with freedom, visual culture (Kelly in Jones 2010: p. 85) and a firm focus on the future (Giddens & Pierson: p. 94). This representation of the modern couple has taken full advantage of the exploitation of permissive, sexually liberated and independent young professionals. Everything about their life is visually appealing and the future is there for the taking.

At this point I have casually speculated whether *Fifty Shades* would have had so sizeable an impact in a different cultural setting, or with ordinary-looking people with not so much wealth and so many accomplishments, or not with these hyper-sexualised, heterosexual characteristics. The sameness in the universals, and the differences in their presentation, forms the right mix of unconscious identification and conscious excitement to attain maximum success. But, one may postulate, did readers overlook abusive patterns of behaviour because they were attractively packaged?

### The dark side: abuse patterns and intimate partner violence imaged in *Fifty Shades*

With similar erotic romances now flooding publishing companies, it seems that sexual violence is becoming somewhat normalised, and even glamorised in popular culture. Whelehan (1995: p. 76) makes an interesting observation from *Sexual Politics* (1969) by Kate Millett: ‘Millett embarks on a scathing critique of the violent and offensively sexualized imagery of women in novels by male literary lions of the twentieth century’. Researchers might question how much *Fifty Shades* has contributed to the continuity of this predicament, even though the author is female. James vehemently rejects any complaints about abuse or pornography; however, that does not let her off the hook. Whelehan affirms that ‘the anti-pornography lobby became a powerful arm of the women’s movement’ (Whelehan 1995: p. 156). Objections to images of women in pornography are further raised by authors, such as Andrea Dworkin who states that these images depict women as objects, to be taken by men, forcibly or violently: ‘...pornography says that women want to be hurt, forced, abused...raped, battered, kidnapped, maimed...humiliated, shamed, defamed...’ (Dworkin 1988: p. 203). Catherine MacKinnon took up similar work in the analysis of pornography and she is often referenced with Dworkin in this regard (see Mason-Grant in Soble & Power 2008: p. 401). Gail Dines is also currently associated with this movement.

Indeed, Bonomi et al. (2013) raise a valid concern in their investigations into the links between such narratives manifesting in popular culture and their reinforced characterisation of intimate partner violence (IPV). In actual fact, IPV is a serious problem in relationships, affecting some 25–44% of women in the United States of America (U.S. Department of Justice/Centers for Disease Control<sup>5</sup>), with similar figures listed in the United Kingdom (Women’s Aid Federation of England 2013). ‘Scholars specifically argue that stories are especially influential when readers become drawn into them and cognitive resources, emotions and mental imagery faculties are engaged’ (Bonomi et al. 2013: p. 734). They mention the success of the *Twilight* series (Meyer 2005, 2006, 2008), which elucidates similar themes. This series formed the impetus for James to write fan fiction, which developed into her *Fifty Shades* series.

Bonomi et al. (2013) note that the issue of consent is central to acceptable BDSM practices but they argue that the illustrations of consent in *Fifty Shades* are coerced and this could have potentially harmful outcomes if readers follow suit in adopting this as tolerable in their real-world postures or outlooks. They identify abuse patterns in the narrative that are consistent with the CDC<sup>6</sup> definitions of IPV and Smith’s conceptualisations of how abuse adversely impacts females and abuse-related harmed identity.<sup>7</sup> Briefly, these actions include:

- (1) Emotional and psychological abuse: this is evident in the male protagonist’s incessant attempts at control, extreme anger, jealousy, withdrawal, mood changes, stalking, humiliation, threats, and isolating the female from friends and family (e.g. in the third book he travels back from a business trip because he hears she has gone out for a drink with a friend). Bonomi et al. (2013) note that 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. This behavioural pattern is common in abusive relationships.
- (2) Sexual violence: this includes Christian’s use of alcohol to compromise Anastasia’s freedom to consent and the intimidation of her. He later denies her pleasure in teaching her ‘control’. Bonomi et al. (2013) list aspects of the couple’s sexual encounters that are decidedly ‘nonegalitarian’ and not typical early on, in BDSM relationships. Christian often initiates sex and ‘punishment’ when he is extremely angry and this is not necessarily anything connected with BDSM.

Bonomi et al. (2013) finally conclude:

‘...our analysis shows perpetuation of abuse in one of the Western world’s most popular novels... Concerning is that the banning of *Fifty Shades* in public libraries is linked to

5 Referenced in Bonomi et al. (2013: n1) from the National Violence Against Women Survey.

6 An acronym for ‘The United States Centers for Disease Control’.

7 Paige Hall Smith is the Associate Professor of Public Health Education and Director of the Center for Women’s Health and Wellness at the University of North Carolina. She has written extensively on violence and abuse against women.



issues of semi-pornographic content, rather than to the underlying pervasive abuse patterns we documented... This suggests, in part, a continued underlying societal tolerance of abuse' (2013: p. 742).

An expanding body of research and exposure in the media is beginning to provide a shocking global synopsis<sup>8</sup> of the scale and reality of violence against women (see Watts & Zimmerman 2002). Society can no longer plead ignorance. Although these crimes are universally underreported, once society knows, society should also examine its attitudes and ethics of care regarding gender-based violence. The fact is that 'intimate partner violence; sexual abuse by non-intimate partners; trafficking; forced prostitution; exploitation of labour, and debt bondage of women and girls; physical and sexual violence against prostitutes; sex selective abortion; female infanticide, and the deliberate neglect of girls; and rape...' (*ibid.*: p. 1232; this list is not exhaustive) are rooted in sexual inequality. Sexual inequality is widely represented in popular culture and may be described as 'a place holder for another story' to borrow a phrase from Doyle (in Jones 2010: p. 11). Societal tolerance of abuse, societal acceptance of abuse and societal entertainment by abuse contribute directly to the widespread perpetration of these crimes. This is the significance of the unnerving, but necessary, conversation that feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, Kate Millett, Susan Griffin and others, have initiated. Griffin offers a perspective on the problem of violent imaging in pornography: 'Indeed, here is a classic mental pattern by which images must accelerate in their violence until they become actual events, events which devastate countless human lives' (in Humm 1992: p. 81). Griffin, in fact, goes as far as to reject the use of the term 'erotic' in favour of 'pornographic'.<sup>9</sup> I am not specifically sanctioning some radical feminists' perspective that penetrative intercourse is, in itself, an endorsement of the inferiority of women. However, the instances of graphic abuse depicted in pornography<sup>10</sup> should be addressed because what is accepted in society is often represented as normal or even quite glamorous in popular culture (see an example of this in a piece by Tisdale in Soble & Power 2008: p. 419, which can be described as a personal apologia for pornography).

The ostensibly sugar-coated term 'mommyporn' does not detract from potentially harmful patterns. I am not certain what the term 'mommyporn' is intended to convey. It could be that mothers are not up to the task of serious, hard-core or violent pornography. Or, it could mean that mothers have such boring, unfulfilling lives raising children and running homes that they need this kind of excitement to keep them going (cf. Radway 1983: p. 60). Alternatively, it could mean that professional/intellectual women, who do not work in the home, would not read this kind of fiction. Either way, gross stereotyping is implicit in the term. The more troubling problem is that many people are using such books as some kind of sexual pedagogics, and assuming the content is *de facto* what 'women want'. This is simply not true. Neuroscientists suggest the rewiring of the pleasure systems in one's brain will determine whether BDSM is the preferred form of sexual expression for an individual (Doidge 2010: p. 124). Individuals not having this kind of predisposition will probably not experience any sexual pleasure, either being subject to pain or provoking pain. It is hoped that continued dialogue on these subjects will enforce the distinction. Feminists are, at least, engaging in such dialogue.

### The 'personal is political' is a problem

Anyone who peruses feminist literature will come across the phrase 'the personal is political'. This was, in fact, the title of an article written in 1969 by Carol Hanisch and it has been adopted as the slogan of contemporary feminism. The aspect of second-wave feminism that is particularly relevant in this phrase is the 'appeal to lived experience' of women (Whitford 1991: p. 151). There have been many (mis)interpretations of this short, impactful piece but, to be fair, what Hanisch

8 See comprehensive figures (United Nations statistics and reports; United Nations 2010) and articles such as 'Violence Against Women: Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Against Women' on the World Health Organization website (WHO 2013). These show the pervasiveness and density of the problem.

9 Griffin (in Humm 1992: p. 79) refers to pornography as 'the poetics of oppression'.

10 I do not assume that *all* pornography depicts male domination over females but a great deal of it does and it is this type of pornography, as well as violent pornography, which is denoted in this context.

highlighted was the function of the liberation groups that formed in the late 1960s. They were not established as some sort of group therapy to relieve women of their personal suffering, but to form connections and general themes from the personal experiences communicated in these sessions. In addition, one can recognise that no matter how constitutions, laws, policies and procedures aim for sexual equality in the public sphere, it does not follow that they will be realised in the ethical–existential realm of the life histories of individuals. Foucault recognised the importance of analysing experiences and practices, and raises a valid point: ‘Singular forms of experience may perfectly well harbour universal structures; they may well not be independent from the concrete determinations of social existence’ (in Rabinow 1984: p. 335). Foucault further encouraged an analysis of both determinations and structures in that experiences may well be representative of widespread phenomena. What Hanisch, and those like her, in the struggle of the Women’s Liberation Movement really contributed was a view that consciousness-raising was political. ‘Political’ in this context is not to be understood in the sense of party politics, but in the sense of addressing oppression and power imbalances and, indeed, who is benefiting from those power imbalances (Hanisch 2006).

Hanisch explains clearly in her paper and subsequent remarks that the fight was never against women who, for example, participate in beauty contests, or who work at home, or who enjoy heterosexual relationships. The debate was to interrogate the anti-woman line of argument and provide actual, material analyses and sound challenges to (among other things) the proponents of sex role theory, in order to give a ‘solid, real foundation on which to fight for liberation’ (2006). The kind of movement discourse that was born in the 1960s was not without some justification; the convincing intent being to take what was assumed by society to be natural, normal, traditional and common-sense and relate it to power, domination and ideology. (Ultimately, this can be traced back to Marx who wished to redirect the classical focus on idea, knowledge and geist toward the material, cf. Tong 1989: p. 40; Williams in Jones 2010: p. 508). The whole context of social movement culture and its associated protest movements are important in history, since they oppose hyper-distortions and the accepted structures of domination. These patterns pervade the entire social landscape, right down to the micro levels. However, when the ‘personal’ is metaphorically identified with the ‘political’ it assumes that *only* the political impact on the personal should be exposed, thus distorting the whole landscape as one massive power struggle. The personhood and identity of women cannot be wholly determined by the political, which is only one aspect of people’s lives – a necessary one at that. In other words, private choices of alternative forms of sexual expression cannot be construed as political activism. Engaging in these expressions is no guarantee of freedom in other areas of the human experience. Glick (2000) offers excellent expositions of the problems associated with such radical sentiments.

### Conclusion

It may be somewhat of an inconvenience for feminisms that the erotic fancies of a number of women appears to be not very compliant concerning correct politics. Whether people like it or not, it seems that the ‘erotic fiction’ vogue is here to stay; at least, for a while. What feminists have alerted women to, in their various levels of critique, is that themes exploited in popular culture become imprinted, albeit inadvertently, into women’s very subjectivities. They pervade the ordinariness of everyday existence, becoming part of people’s worldview. Women, in particular, have to remain vigilant against subscribing to these kinds of trends so that their consciousness is not rendered powerless by dominant discourses. Damasio remarks:

*we think* we are in control, but we often are not... Our biological makeup inclines us to consume what we should not, but so do the cultural traditions that have drawn on that biological makeup and been shaped by it (2010: p. 281).

All industries exploit this. Moreover, Damasio credibly comments that there is no ‘cultural conspiracy’ here; it is just part of the complexity of human existence. These biological, emotional, social, economic, cultural, political, legal and personal aspects of life should function in tandem with one another, without having to be reduced, in order to establish legitimacy in theory and in

practice. Overemphasising one side of the problematic, or demonising another, does not create the kind of balance needed. It merely creates more controversy. Furthermore, the issue for feminism, it appears, is not one of state censorship or moral standards; it is about freeing up discourse regarding the actuality/potentiality of harmful practices in pornography to women and children. This warrants attention and serious reflection in light of the abusive reality with which many women and children are currently living. Wherever one positions oneself in terms of the ongoing debate between different feminisms and diverse sexual representations, the most important point is that awareness and consciousness is raised. One does not have to be trapped in radical either-or positions. After all, it is fully possible for a woman to identify herself as anti-pornography *and* pro-sex.

## References

- ABC News. 2012. 'Fifty Shades of Grey: author speaks', ABC News, 20 April 2012. Available at <https://www.google.co.za/#q=Fifty+Shades+of+Grey%3A+Author+speaks+youtube> [accessed July 2013].
- Ballou, R. 2005. *Blueprint for Screenwriting: a Complete Writer's Guide to Story Structure and Character Development*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Berman, L. 2013. 'Why women love *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Do you have a dog-eared copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey* by your bedside?' *Everyday Health*, 1 March 2013. Available at <http://www.everydayhealth.com/sexual-health/dr-laura-berman-why-women-love-fifty-shades-of-grey.aspx> [accessed July 2013].
- Bonomi, A.E., Altenberger, L.E., Walton, N.L. 2013. "'Double crap!' Abuse and harmed identity in *Fifty Shades of Grey*", *Journal of Women's Health* 22(9), 733–744.
- Brontë, E. 2009. *Wuthering Heights*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Damasio, A. 2010. *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Dines, G. 2012. 'Sadistic romance: why are women devouring *Fifty Shades of Grey*?' *CounterPunch*, 27–29 July 2012. Available at <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/07/27/why-are-women-devouring-fifty-shades-of-grey> [accessed March 2013].
- Doidge, N. 2010. *The Brain that Changes Itself*. Melbourne: Scribe Publications.
- Dworkin, A. 1988. *Letters from a War Zone: Writings 1976–1987*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Gatens, M. 1991. *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A., Pierson, C. 1998. *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Glick, E. 2000. 'Sex positive: feminism, queer theory, and the politics of transgression', *Feminist Review* 64(1), 19–45.
- Grinberg, E. 2012. 'Explaining "Fifty Shades" wild success'. CNN, 17 July 2012. Available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/07/13/living/fifty-shades-buzz-50-shades-success/> [accessed November 2013].
- Hanisch, C. 2006. 'The personal is political. The Women's Liberation Movement classic with a new explanatory introduction'. Available at <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP/html> [accessed November 2013].
- Humm, M. (ed.) 1992. *Feminisms: a Reader*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- James, E.L. 2011. *Fifty Shades of Grey*. New York: Vintage Books.
- James, E.L. 2012. *Fifty Shades Darker*. New York: Arrow Books.
- James, E.L. 2012. *Fifty Shades Freed*. New York: Arrow Books.
- Jones, A. (ed.) 2010. *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (2nd edn). London: Routledge.
- Jones, E. 1955. *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2. New York: Basic Books.
- Leitenberg, H., Henning, K. 1995. 'Sexual fantasy', *Psychological Bulletin* 117(3), 469–496.
- McDonald, T.J. 2007. *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Meyer, S. 2005. *Twilight*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Meyer, S. 2006. *New Moon*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Meyer, S. 2008. *Midnight Sun*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

- Mitchell, M. 2008. *Gone with the Wind*. New York: Pocket Books.
- O'Brien, J. 1990. *Leaving Las Vegas*. Wichita: Watermark Press.
- Paul, P. 2005. *Pornified: How Pornography is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*. New York: Owl Books.
- Rabinow, P. (ed.) 1984. *The Foucault Reader: an Introduction to Foucault's Thought*. London: Penguin.
- Rendall, J. 1985. *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780–1860*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers.
- Radway, J.A. 1983. 'Women read the romance: the interaction of text and context', *Feminist Studies* 9(1), 53–78.
- Roiphe, K. 2012. 'Working women's fantasies', *Newsweek*, 7 December 2012. Available at <http://www.newsweek.com/working-womens-fantasies-63915> [accessed July 2013].
- Shrage, L. 2012. 'Feminist perspectives on sex markets', in Zalta, E.N. (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 edn). Available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-sex-markets/> [accessed March 2014].
- Sidley, K. 2013. 'Meet four South African women who have taken over where *Fifty Shades* left off ... Except this time, women are in charge', *Fairlady* June.
- Soble, A., Power, N. (eds) 2008. *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. 2013. Frequently asked sexuality questions to The Kinsey Institute. Available at <http://www.kinseyinstitute.org/resources/FAQ.html> [accessed November 2013].
- Trachtenberg, J.A. 2013. 'Oh, my! That dirty book has sold 70 million copies', *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 March 2013. Available at <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323466204578384743129294104> [accessed November 2013].
- Tong, R. 1989. *Feminist Thought: a Comprehensive Introduction*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- United Nations. 2010. 'Violence against women', in *The World's Women 2010: Trends and Statistics*. New York: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, pp. 127–139. Available at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/documents/egm/NeglectAbuseandViolenceofOlderWomen/Violence%20against%20women.pdf> [accessed November 2013].
- Waller, R.J. 1992. *The Bridges of Madison County*. New York: Warner Books.
- Watts, C., Zimmerman, C. 2002. 'Violence against women: global scope and magnitude', *The Lancet* 359(9313), 1232–1237.
- West, C. 2013. 'Pornography and censorship', in Zalta, E.N. (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 edn). Available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/pornography-censorship/> [accessed January 2014].
- Whelehan, I. 1995. *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-feminism'*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Whitford, M. 1991. *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*. London: Routledge.
- WHO (World Health Organization). 2013. 'Violence against women: intimate partner and sexual violence against women'. Fact Sheet no. 239. Available at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/> [accessed January 2014].
- Wolf, N. 1990. *The Beauty Myth*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Women's Aid Federation of England. 2013. 'Statistics about domestic violence. Incidence and prevalence of domestic violence: general'. Available at [http://www.womensaid.org.uk/core/core\\_picker/download.asp?id=1602](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/core/core_picker/download.asp?id=1602) [accessed July 2013].
- Young, C. 2012. 'Civilization ends: E.L. James named Publishers Weekly's "Person of the Year"', *New York Daily News*, 30 November 2012. Available at <http://www.nydailynews.com/blogs/pageviews/civilization-ends-e-james-named-publishers-weekly-person-year-blog-entry-1.1639523> [accessed July 2013].