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Love, Sex, and Feminism: A Critique of *Fifty Shades of Grey*

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Dr. Mary Dengler

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As you read this paper have an open mind and push back. Understand that I do not recommend *Fifty Shades of Grey* for the purpose of pure enjoyment but for the purpose of understanding what society is reading. Everyone, on some level, is exposed to *Fifty Shades of Grey*. We encounter and minister to a population that struggles with their identity, and they turn to a genre of books that satisfy their carnal desires. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is not a piece of distinguished literature, but it has captivated almost 100 million consumers. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a part of society now and Christians need to be aware of both the good and the bad found in the book so that they can push back against society's perspective. With so many negative book reviews from Christians on the market, there needs to be some balance, if it is at all possible. With the help of a fine-tooth comb, readers can discover that the plot and characters of *Fifty Shades of Grey* are altogether intriguing, familiar, and dynamic; however, the plot is overshadowed by the poor literary elements of linguistics, sentence structure, and imagery.

When the topic of *Fifty Shades of Grey* comes around in conversation the typical response is one of shock and disgust: "That book is just a load of housewife pornography, and exemplifies an abusive relationship." While I am not denying these facts, I must emphasize that there is more than what meets the eye. Stripped down to the bones, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a story about deception, love, revenge, and redemption. It is a plot line similar to that of many other books on the shelves of the library: boy meets girl, they fall in love, girl gets hurt, boy wins girl back, trouble ensues, love conquers all, and they live happily ever after (van Rensen 227). It is this simple plot line that continues to captivate the attention of society.

The first book, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, centers on the sexual preferences of Christian and the way he draws Ana to him by using her curiosity of sex. When Ana asks for more than sex in their relationship, Christian tries because he is captivated by Ana, but at this point it is nearly

impossible for him to give up his sexual lifestyle. It is his lifestyle that allows him to feel in control. Christian is involved in a BDSM sexual lifestyle – Bondage/Discipline, Sadism/Masochism, Dominant/submissive. By the end of book one, Ana gives in to Christian's lifestyle because it is the only way that he opens up to her. Therefore, Christian goes all in and punishes Ana, using a belt. There is a fine line between pain and pleasure, which is the breaking point for Ana, and she leaves Christian; she recognizes his abusive behavior.

Book two, *Fifty Shades Darker*, goes beyond the covers and into the hearts of the characters. Sex continues to remain a major part of the book, but after being left by Ana and feeling devastated, Christian no longer feels the need to live out his lifestyle, if it means he can be with Ana. He shows that he cares by sharing part of his life story with her, by sharing his family with her, by taking her on his sail boat, and by buying Jose's pictures of Ana. As Ana and Christian get back together, they are joined by one of Christian's ex-submissives, Leila. Leila is looking for revenge to the point that she threatens Ana's life and Christian has to come to the rescue. The next major event that happens is that Christian's helicopter, Charlie Tango, is sabotaged. He makes a crash landing and finds his way home to discover that everyone one has thought he died and was worried, feelings that Christian is unfamiliar with. This event brings Christian and Ana closer together, allowing Christian to open up another part of himself. Christian proposes to Ana and Ana accepts him unconditionally.

Again, the plot thickens in book three, *Fifty Shades Freed*, as the lives of the entire Grey family are threatened and Christian is forced to face his past. Part of the Grey House is set on fire by suspected arson. Ana discovers that the perpetrator is Jack Hyde, her former employer that made a pass at her. Jack attempts to kidnap Ana, but he fails and is caught. Ana becomes pregnant but Christian cannot cope with her pregnancy; they are at odds. Jack is given bail and

kidnaps Mia Grey, Christian's sister. Next, Jack communicates only with Ana and sets ransom for \$5 million. Ana does not tell Christian and makes Christian believe that she is leaving him. She saves Mia and is beaten badly by Jack. After the event, Christian reconciles with Ana, accepts the baby, and opens himself fully and willingly to Ana.

From a literary standpoint, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy is a disappointment. Looking strictly at linguistics, the prose is written very simply, a simplicity that has its pros and cons. By writing character's speech in simple language, E.L. James appeals to a broader audience, creating an easy read. The idea behind romance fiction is that the books provide a fast and entertaining plot that does not require too much thought. Additionally, the language is considered simple because the sentences are short and the language emulates that of a sixteen-year-old, not a twenty-year-old. *Fifty Shades* is written for the adult population; therefore, having characters sound as if they are sixteen-years-old is slightly degrading for readers. Granted, the language James uses in her book does not appear in a daily conversation at work, but the language she uses is the speech of thought patterns. For example, individuals often think to themselves and make comments in their mind about the environment around them. These "mind comments" may be short, clipped, and cliché just as Ana's comments are in the book.

Secondly, James tries to employ the use of imagery throughout her book. Imagery can be a very effective tool, allowing readers to experience what the characters see, feel, and sense, enhancing the effect of an escapist book. To name a few examples, the color of Christian's eyes are repeatedly mentioned, how and where Christian's hands move are explained, the scene is always described vividly including the color of the sheets and the location of objects within the room. Readers are transported off of their couch and into the chairs at Grey's Escala breakfast bar. On the other hand, the use of this imagery exploits human desires, corrupts minds, and turns

*Fifty Shades of Grey* into a sequence of 18 sexual scenes (just in the first book). Nearly 16% of the first book involves obscene scenes in excruciating detail. The details of 94% of the scenes add very little to the overall plot line and character development (only the punishment scene is necessary). James inserts these scenes to appeal to her audience of housewives that she believes need and want a sexual awakening. However, these scenes are unnecessary and cause unneeded mental imagery to the younger group of society that will read the books. James uses the sexual scenes to inaccurately depict BDSM and exploit human desires.

On the other hand, character development is one area in which James has exceeded. First, Christian starts out the book as a closed, cold, and straightforward billionaire. By the end, Christian opens up to Ana and shares in a “hearts and flowers” relationship. Christian completes three phases as his character develops: (1) hitting rock bottom with a glimpse of something good, (2) vulnerability with the capability of caring, (3) restoration with a new understanding love. At first, all Christian wants is Ana to be his submissive – he only wants her body. However, after the first time he shows her his apartment, he cares for her like he has not done for any of his other submissive relationships. Realizing that there is something different about Ana marks Christian’s first step towards becoming more than a dominant male. Christian finds himself opening up and sharing his entire life, even if it is in bits and pieces, with Ana. The development of Christian, in a way, is a story of firsts – first time for Christian to “make love” (Vanilla sex), first time he has introduced a girl to his family, first time he has taken a girl in Charlie Tango, first time he has slept in the same bed with a girl without having sex, first time he has let a girl touch him, first time he has truly cared for a girl.

Christian’s next step in transformation comes after the punishment scene. After punishing Ana, Christian begins to recognize the extent of his depravity. His depravity is that he feels

the need to implement punishment in his relationships in order to feel in control of his environment. In reflection, he comes to the realization that Ana has started to change him. He felt terrible after the punishment because it has pushed Ana away and he is not able to comfort her; in fact, the punishment he induced did not bring him control.

Readers view Christian as a lost, adolescent boy that cannot get a grip on his feelings. Control is one aspect that Christian cannot seem to give up at this point. Because he is not in control of his feelings, he needs to exert a level of control over the people around him. Christian has never had a relationship that has not put him as the one in control. He understands that in order for his relationship to work with Ana, he needs to give her more: more of his story, more caring moments, and more safety. Christian does not want to give Ana information about his past because he feels that his history would turn her away, and it takes away his sense of control. However, after Charlie Tango's crash he begins to understand that the people he has surrounded himself with, love him. Despite this confirmation of love, Christian views himself as unlovable. Additionally, the crash and the love of his family give him the opportunity to be vulnerable and open up to Ana, the start of phase two – vulnerability.

Readers learn that the reason Christian is controlling and the reason he lives the way he does is because of his mother. Christian's "crack-whore" worth of a mother never once stood up for him when he was being abused and never once showed him any affection (James). But, as a child Christians wanted love; he wanted affection, but he could not stand physical touch to his chest, the body part where he was most abused. Seven scars on his chest mark seven repeated cigarette burns. His past does not make his lifestyle acceptable, but it allows readers and Ana to understand him. As he unfolds his story, Ana finds cracks within it to pour in her love, helping to bring light to Christian's life.

After a phase of vulnerability, one has to put back together the pieces that were opened; restoration does not come easy. Christian is still vulnerable for most of the third book. Again, he has to hit rock bottom and reach total depravity before realizing his true potential of loving selflessly. Christian needs to let go of his control and establish his priorities. Ana's pregnancy accomplishes this goal. Christian's need for control is lost when Ana tell him she is pregnant. Eventually, after almost losing Ana and seeing Ana sacrifice herself to save Christian and his family, Christian to the realization that his way of life has hindered him from growing and being able to accept love. Christian sees unconditional love in Ana when she loves and cares for him and his family.

Christian no longer feels the need to control his wife because her love has penetrated him. Instead of his old lifestyle, he has exchanged it for doting on his wife and son. He show his love by building a house, and setting up a train set the night before his son's second birthday. Christian's barrier was broken through, after which he realized he is capable of being loved. He has been yearning for unconditional love and that is what Ana provides him with. Even after delving into his deepest darkest secrets, Ana has stayed by his side.

One theme presented in the book is that girls have the power to change a man's negative behavior. This is a tricky subject to maneuver because in reality, only God has the power to change people. Girls might not understand that this theme is fictional and will try to implement it in real life. This is dangerous because it places those girls in situations where they have no control. Reality and research will show that love cannot simply change a strong mental behavior like Christian Grey's, and the other party member will bring on herself un-needed anguish, abuse, and stress. Miriam Grossman, MD, writes that "In the real world, Christian wouldn't change to any significant degree" because of Ana's love and devotion to him. However, this



book is an escape from reality and into the lives of fictional characters where readers can dream that anything is possible through love.

Feminists have varying reactions to this book. On one hand, they feel disgusted by the fact that any woman would willingly subjugate herself into submissive role. Feminists fight for gender equality on all levels, even including the bedroom. On the other hand, part of the feminist movement is all about empowering individuals to make their own decisions and recapture their sexuality; therefore, they rise to meet the challenge and accept that if one chooses this life then one is all the more empowered. Crispin, a writer for *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, writes that this is a narcissistic view of feminism; in short, feminism can be an answer to any choice that a woman wants to make, as long as it is the woman making the choice. Van Reenen, writer for the *South African Journal of Philosophy*, states that feminists have sparked a response in all women to clearly examine the effect that *Fifty Shades* has on the mind and relationships; she goes on to conclude that anything can influence a worldview and women need to remain strong on their stance and not be “rendered powerless by dominant discourses” (231). In general, feminists are outraged by the sexual acts, violence, and submissiveness portrayed in the book, but they are open to the discussion surrounding it in hopes that talk will help bring down the glass ceiling.

Two of the biggest themes in the book are love and sex. Christian love is seen through 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. (NIV)

With this verse in mind, Christians will see that the characters in *Fifty Shades* have a hard time falling into the category of Christian love. Christian is jealous, Christian has a temper, Christian makes lists of Ana's vices, and Christian leads a lifestyle of immorality. Ana, however, shows a kind love. Her love for Christian is unconditional. She wants to protect Christian, and she trusts him even though she does not know the whole truth. The love Ana has for Christian perseveres and leads her to stay with him through the darkest of times. Furthermore, Ana's love is an aspect of the book that Christians can reclaim. God created everything and there is portion of it that is still good; everything is tainted by sin, but nothing is completely evil. Christians need to find the good and point others towards that redeeming fact. Although there is one great and excellent aspect in the book, it does not mean that the good cancels out the bad; the good is merely a way to redirect a conversation towards focusing on the important and sticky subjects.

One concept that might deter readers from the book is the amount of sex and the type of sex found within the book. Sex, especially premarital sex, is seen as a taboo subject in Christian circles, and for good reasons. Several passages state the facts surrounding sexual immorality; for example, Ephesians 4:19 states, "Having lost all sensitivity, they [the gentiles] have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed" (NIV). It is obvious that greed is sinful; when greed is applied to sex it implies impurity. Sex within the book is very much centered on greed and is not always consensual. Furthermore, Galatians 5:13-26 gives Christians guidelines to living a life led by the Spirit, including virtues that allow one to live a fulfilled Christian life and vices that drag Christians away from Christ. This is exemplified in verses 19-21:

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions,

factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (NIV)

The Bible makes it clear that sexual immorality is a sin. Sexual immorality is seen as non-consenting sexual intercourse, greedy lustful intercourse, and any sexual act not intended by God. In general, 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. Often times the sex scenes in the book are immoral because Ana does not always consent right away and Christian takes advantage of her, and Christian uses sex to taunt and punish Ana. Undeniably, most Christians see the problem with *Fifty Shades* in the way that it glorifies this type of sex. How much sex is there really? Book one contains 18 scenes equaling 16% of the book. Book two contains 18 scenes equaling 13% of the book. Book three contains 14 scenes equaling 11% of the book. Even though good does not cancel out bad, it does not mean that bad overpowers good. In fact, this statement means the opposite – there is hope.

Despite the fact that there is human redemption in the book, the amount is not enough, nor is it strong enough, to make it a book that everyone needs to fill his or her mind with. Philippians 4:8 states, “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (NIV). Paul writes to tell Christians that in order for them to grow closer to God, they need to take care of their mind because what enters the mind may find its way into action. Taking care of one’s mind entails curbing thoughts that are not true or pure. *Fifty Shades* is a book that contains varying amounts of lies and impure scenes that can creep into the minds of readers. Therefore, Christians need to be wary of reading the book.

There is a common preconception that the book *centers* on sex. But, there is a camp of individuals that believe the book has more than sex, and they are willing to look for that something more. This does not mean that readers should willingly fill their minds with every scene in the book. There are several studies that examine the abuse in the books, and determine that the trilogy has negative effects on the real relationships. However, it is an undeniable fact that *Fifty Shades* is here to stay in our society; therefore, it is worthy of at least a little attention to reclaim the good parts, critique, and push back on the bad parts.

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