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## Violence and Sexuality - from Transgressive de Sade to Consumerist Grey = Przemoc i seksualność - od transgresywnego de Sade do konsumenckiego Greya

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## **VIOLENCE AND SEXUALITY – FROM TRANSGRESSIVE DE SADE TO CONSUMERIST GREY**

PRZEMOC I SEKSUALNOŚĆ – OD TRANSGRESYWNEGO  
DE SADE DO KONSUMENCKIEGO GREYA

### **Abstract**

With the release of *50 Shades of Grey* film version a few days before Valentine's Day 2015, and its immediate box office success, sadomasochistic aesthetics seems to have finally made its way into mainstream popular culture. This feat, however, is only seemingly an accomplishment in liberalisation of general approach towards sexuality. The novel is rather an attempt to commercialise BDSM as a mass-market consumerist option, which compromises its original, subversive potential. The aim of this paper is to study sadomasochism historically, as a tool used to denounce the limitations of democracy and formal equality, and in this context to show how much *Fifty Shades of Grey* is not subversive but actually profoundly regressive. Beginning with what Slavoj Žižek refers to as “the heroism of the

### **Abstrakt**

Wraz z wejściem na ekrany filmu *Pięćdziesiąt twarzy Greya* kilka dni przed walentynkami 2015 i jego sukcesem kasowym, estetyka sadomasochistyczna dotarła na dobre do mainstreamu popkultury. Jednak tylko pozornie jest to osiągnięcie na drodze do większej liberalności w podejściu do seksualności. Powieść jest raczej próbą skomercjalizowania BDSM jako jednego z towarów na masowym rynku konsumenckim, co stoi w sprzeczności z jej oryginalnym subwersyjnym charakterem. Celem tego artykułu jest analiza sadomasochizmu z perspektywy historycznej jako narzędzie do obnażenia ograniczeń demokracji i równości i co za tym idzie ukazanie, że *Pięćdziesiąt twarzy Greya* jest raczej głęboko wsteczne niż subwersyjne. Rozpoczynając od tego, co Slavoj

Marquis de Sade's project for a democracy of enjoyment" voiced at times of libertarianism and the French Revolution's declaration of universal human rights, the paper retraces how sadomasochism re-emerged throughout modern popular culture (Bloomsbury group, punk) providing means for the exploration of personal freedom and the extremes to which it can be taken. In this context, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a great step back as it reiterates traditionalist stereotypes concerning sexuality and gender roles. The novel categorises good and bad sex, stigmatises homosexuality, presents BDSM as an illness that "only love can cure", and entrenches 19<sup>th</sup> century's definitions of masculinity and womanhood. Under the guise of promoting kinky sex, it introduces a new normativity whose laws are dictated by market economy.

**Keywords:** *Fifty Shades of Grey*, BDSM, sadomasochism, the Marquis de Sade, Bloomsbury group, punk, normativity, consumerism, gender roles.

## 1. Introduction

There is a common presupposition about a supposed constant libertarian progress in Western approach to sexuality, i.e. that we are on a clear way towards more liberal mores. For some, the recent success and massive readership of E. L. James's novel *Fifty shades of Grey* is evidence of such a tendency. It is indeed an unprecedented phenomenon – mainly female readers massively buy a book which can be classified as "sexual fiction", though some classify it as pornography (a term for a new genre, "mommy porn", has even been coined). The starkly new element is the allegedly sadomasochistic nature of the relationship between the protagonists, Anastasia "Ana" Steele and Christian Grey. I say allegedly, because the aim of this paper is to take a brief look at sadomasochism, precisely at its progressive or transgressive potential, its manifestations throughout history, and in this context to show how much *Fifty shades of Grey* is NOT subversive but actually profoundly regressive.

## 2. Sadomasochism throughout history

The term *BDSM* was first used in 1991<sup>1</sup>, and is interpreted as a combination of the abbreviations B/D (Bondage and Discipline), D/s (Dominance and submission), and S/M (Sadism and Masochism). While the terms sadist and masochist refer respectively

Žižek określił jako "heroizm projektu markiza de Sade w sprawie demokracji przyjemności" ogłoszonego w czasach libertarianizmu i deklaracji Rewolucji Francuskiej w sprawie uniwersalnych praw człowieka, artykuł ten opisuje jak sadomasochizm pojawił się ponownie we współczesnej kulturze popularnej (Grupa Bloomsbury, punk) dostarczając sposobów zgłębiania wolności osobistej i jej granic. Z tej perspektywy *Pięćdziesiąt twarzy Greya* jest krokiem wstecz ponieważ powiela on tradycyjne stereotypy dotyczące płci i seksualności. Powieść dzieli seks na lepszy i gorszy, stygmatyzuje homoseksualizm, przedstawia BDSM jako chorobę, którą „tylko miłość może uleczyć” i umacnia dziewiętnastowieczne definicje męskości i kobiecości. Pod pozorem promowania perwersyjnego seksu, książka wprowadza nową taksonomię, której prawami rządzi rynek.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Pięćdziesiąt twarzy Greya*, BDSM, sadomasochizm, markiz de Sade, Grupa Bloomsbury, punk, normatywność, konsumpcjonizm, rola płciowa

<sup>1</sup> A date quoted by the Oxford English Dictionary (see References)

to one who enjoys giving or receiving pain, practitioners of sadomasochism may switch between activity and passivity. The link between sadism and masochism was first made by Sigmund Freud in his 1905 “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality”<sup>2</sup>. Not everyone agrees with such interpretation, but for the purpose of this article, especially in the light of the modern term BDSM, the term “sadomasochism” will be adopted. This part will offer a brief overview of how sadomasochism manifested itself at different moments of modern history, and to what extent it can be interpreted as subversive and revolutionary.

### 2.1. De Sade

At the origin of sadism lie the Marquis de Sade’s writings describing perverse, horrific orgies. Although to some readers Sade’s books can seem merely a collection of utter abominations, there exists a long critical tradition of reading the Marquis de Sade’s oeuvre as a masterpiece of transgressive philosophical thought, on multiple levels.

First, Sade explores the man’s link to nature. Sade is a naturalistic philosopher, but unlike Rousseau, who sees nature’s influence on man as healing and beneficial, he believes in powerful, brutal nature which is centre of chaos. For Sade, a man living according to the law of nature is ruthless and egoistic and the greatest good for him is self-fulfilment. Perversely, he stated: “Cruelty is natural... Cruelty is the energy in man civilisation has not yet altogether corrupted: therefore it is a virtue, not a vice.” [Charney, 1981, p. 37] Thus, Sade reminds us that violence is the intrinsic part of human nature, and what “a return to nature” might mean. Georges Bataille, in his book *Erotism*, claims that

*today we realise that without de Sade’s cruelty we should never have penetrated with such ease the once inaccessible domain where the most painful truths lay hidden. . . . Now the average man knows that he must become aware of the things which repel him most violently—those things which repel us most violently are part of our own nature* [Bataille, 1986, p. 196].

Bataille underlines that “De Sade’s perversion brings violence into the field of conscious experience” [Bataille, 1986, p. 194] and asks a fundamental question: is our sadism something

*which may once have had a meaning in human terms but has now lost it, which can easily be eradicated at will, in ourselves by asceticism, in others by punishment... Or are we concerned on the contrary with a sovereign and indestructible element of mankind, yet one that evades conscious appraisal?* [Bataille, 1986, p. 184]

In Sade, violence, eroticism and death are intertwined. The sexual act is always a violation, an excess, it implies disorder and waste. In French, the expression used for orgasm can be translated literally into “little death”, and the potential lethal danger of squandering and exhausting one’s energy and resources through uncontrolled sexuality had already been apprehended by Ancient Greeks and Romans, as described by Michel Foucault in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> volume of *History of Sexuality*. From there stems the

<sup>2</sup> According to Freud, masochism needs sadism because “Every active perversion is . . . accompanied by its passive counterpart” [Freud, 1986, p. 34], and thus “masochism is nothing more than an extension of sadism” [Freud, 1986, p. 26].

conviction about the need to limit and control human sexuality and pleasures.<sup>3</sup> In this context, Sade is clearly transgressive. He explores the boundaries of pleasure, his libertines, who live only for pleasure, go in for “frightful anomalies”, because “the mediocrity of ordinary sensuality” is of no value for them anymore. They have destroyed in themselves all their capacity for pleasure and they intend to exploit their insensitivity. Sade’s characters choose the path towards the highest satisfaction, and this means “refusing to stoop to a lower degree of pleasure, refusing to opt out.... There is a movement forward of transgression that does not stop before a summit is reached. De Sade has not shirked this movement; he has accepted it in all its consequences.” [Bataille, 1986, p. 175].

Needless to say, that such explorations are today more topical than ever, as in a consumerist society more and more people are living in a constant pursuit of pleasures, and the overabundance of merchandise together with the overstimulation provided by information technologies result in increasing numbness. On the other hand, excessive production results in squandering of goods, exhaustion of resources, and destruction of human’s natural environment.

Apart from being philosophical, Sade’s transgression is clearly political. The Marquis wrote most of his work in captivity, where he spent the majority of his adult life (over 32 years in prisons or an asylum). This, paradoxically, happened in the times when the fundamental document in the history of human and civil rights was adopted, namely, *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (in 1789). It was founded on the principle, that the rights of man are universal: valid at all times and in every place, and pertaining to human nature itself. However, the Marquis de Sade denounces the limitations of democracy and formal equality. In *Looking Awry*, Slavoj Žižek analyses what he calls “the heroism” of the Marquis de Sade’s project for “a democracy of enjoyment”:

*To the list of the “rights of man” proclaimed by the French revolution, Sade adds the “right to enjoyment,” an embarrassing supplement that secretly subverts the universal field of rights in which it purports to place itself. Again we witness... (that) the field of the universal “rights of man” is based upon the exclusion of a certain right (the right to enjoyment); as soon as we include this particular right, the very field of universal rights is thrown off balance.* [Žižek, 1992, p. 167]

A universal right to enjoyment would affirm that anybody “has a right to dispose freely of any part of (somebody else’s) body in order to satisfy in any conceivable way his/her desires” [Žižek, 1992, p. 167–8], in other words, that “everyone has a right to exert his/her particular particular fantasy” [Žižek, 1992, p. 168]. Such a universal norm “is self-defeating insofar as it excludes reciprocity” [Žižek, 1992, p. 168] and because fantasies by definition simply cannot coexist peacefully. By creating a model of sovereign man, one “whose privileges would not have to be agreed upon by the masses” [Bataille, 1986, p. 166] Sade confronts us with the fundamental impasse of democracy, showing that formal democracy always conceals an imbalance of contents, and therefore a concrete and complete democracy is practically impossible.

<sup>3</sup> Bataille claims that taboos (including the taboo on sexuality) are there to make work (human productivity) possible, and to keep people from plunging in constant violence or constant pleasure. [Bataille, 1986, p. 68]

Apart from denouncing democracy, Sade is politically transgressive because he establishes a new order. His project is reasoned, intellectual,<sup>4</sup> and a logical consequence of pursuing one's erotic whims to the end. In *Sexual Fiction*, Maurice Charney notices how Sade

*succeeds in creating a world apart in which old-fashioned religion and morality have been replaced by purely sexual mores and rules. This is 'sexual politics' in its most literal sense. Everything in this... society is dominated by sex as the instrument of natural law and power. Nothing can be imagined apart from the tyrannous control of sex which is the source of whatever order and stability remain in a world given up to the brute control of erotic impulse* [Charney, 1981, p. 7–8]

Sade creates a new order, a new “code of love” with strict rules and conventions, and the defined roles of libertine and victim. Thus, he manages to break the status quo, to propose a “social contract” drastically remote from the one we are accustomed to. Today's BDSM contracts where partners consent to sadomasochistic practices remain just so much beyond understanding to some, as are the writings of Sade.

This ends the brief overview of questions that Sade's writings inspire. I have mentioned the problematic definition of human nature and man's relation to nature, the place of violence in human life and in sexuality, the limits of pleasure and the limitations of democracy. This list is by no means exhaustive, contemplating the misfortunes of Sade's characters leads to other philosophical paradoxes, as the novels tamper with the equivocal boundary between ecstasy and degradation, self-annihilation and self-exaltation, religion (understood as martyrdom, and an act of benevolence – “giving but not taking”) and blasphemy, and even women's subjugation and liberation.<sup>5</sup> Some of these questions will be referred to in the subsequent parts of this paper.

## 2.2. Bloomsbury

Sadomasochism alternately disappeared and re-emerged throughout modern culture, providing means for the exploration of personal freedom and the extremes to which it can be taken. In the UK, after sixty-four years of Victorianism, the twentieth century brought new hope for a fresh humanist thought, with the emergence of Modernism, and notably the constitution of the Bloomsbury Group.

Bloomsbury members sought novelty in every aspect of human creation: artistic, literary, but also in life. They experimented in terms of sexuality, they rejected conventional truths about gender roles, and conventional relationship models. Among them was Lytton Strachey, presumably one of the first homosexual writers who did not conceal his

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Charney describes *The 120 Days of Sodom* as “a masterpiece of sexual knowledge that can rival the French *Encyclopédie*, which had been completed about ten years earlier. . . The very idea that all of human experience can be universalized and categorized under 600 sexual passions is itself extraordinarily original” [Charney, 1981, p. 39-40].

<sup>5</sup> In *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* Angela Carter considers Sade to be the first writer to see women as more than mere breeding machines and, as such, finds him liberating. Similarly, in an article on the radical potential of female masochism as a challenge to mainstream ideas about women's traditional role (i.e. marriage and reproduction), Alex Dymock argues that “Women who consent to harm may in fact be enacting what is ultimately a resistant category of feminine sexuality, one that is uncivilised, monstrous and impossible to accept because it is anti-reproductive, and therefore distinctly non-normative.” [Dymock, 2012, p. 65]

sexual orientation. There was common assumption, until recently, that due to his shyness and reluctance to mingle with lower-class boys his carnal fascinations remained largely in the sphere of fantasy. However, a set of Strachey's letters, edited by Paul Levy and published in 2005, reveals that Strachey and his last lover, Roger Senhouse, had a secret relationship of a sadomasochistic nature in the early 1930s. In one of the letters, Strachey describes the mock "crucifixion" they staged<sup>6</sup>, relishing in the memory of supreme sensations and excitements of that "very extraordinary night", which include "the clearly defined pain of the cut and then the much vaguer afterpangs of crucifixion" [Levy & Strachey, 2015, p. 625].

This event is thought-provoking and important in several ways. First, we are dealing—in a very Sadeian spirit—with exploration and experimentation of pleasure logically pushed to their limits, reaching the extremes beyond commonsensical comprehension, and ignoring taboos and commonly accepted standards of behaviour. Also, it is important that we are being confronted with a fact, not literary fiction—it has the value of authenticity, but at the same time—it is mediated through a private letter which in case of Strachey is more than mere correspondence. The reader is compelled to make a judgement, to take a stance more urgently than when reading a work of fiction, in an effort to understand the "historical truth" behind the act.

Moreover, the particular choice of sexual practices that the two men engaged in tampers with the thin line between sacrifice and sacrilege, between religiousness and blasphemy, and between religious exaltation and sexual climax. One cannot ignore the obvious ambiguity in Christianity's glorification of pain and suffering. Fetishizing the figures of martyrs and Christ himself in order to reach a higher level of religious ecstasy, self-flagellation practised for example in the Catholic lay organization Opus Dei and by the late pope John Paul II, and finally—the crucifixion re-enactment that takes place every year in the Philippines every Good Friday with people literally being nailed to the cross in front of an excited crowd—may be equally disturbing to a non-religious observer than the mock-crucifixion carried out by Strachey and his lover.<sup>7</sup> Bataille rightly states that "the divine is no less paradoxical than the vicious" [Bataille, 1986, p. 180] since it "will only protect us once its basic need to consume and to ruin has been satisfied." [Bataille, 1986, p. 181] The violent aspect of divinity was traditionally manifested in sacrificial rites which often were extravagantly cruel and horrifying. The ordeal of the Cross itself links Christian conscience to the frightfulness of the divine. In any way, the link between infliction of pain and the glory of religious or sexual rapture escapes straightforward conclusions.

<sup>6</sup> "Such a very extraordinary night! The physical symptoms quite outweighed the mental and spiritual ones - partly because they persisted in my consciousness through a rather unsettled but none the less very satisfactory sleep. First there was the clearly defined pain of the cut (a ticklish business applying the lanoline - but your orders had to be carried out) and then the much vaguer afterpangs of crucifixion - curious stiffnesses moving about over my arms and torso, very odd - and at the same time so warm and comfortable - the circulation, I must presume, fairly humming - and vitality bulking large... where it usually does - all through the night, so it seemed. But now these excitements have calmed down - the cut has quite healed up and only hurts when touched, and some faint numbnesses occasionally flit through my hands - voilà tout, just bringing to the memory some supreme highlights of sensation..." [Levy & Strachey, 2015, p. 625].

<sup>7</sup> Some try to take advantage of this ambiguity: "in 1996 a Japanese citizen attempted to get nailed to the cross as part of a porn film." (Troup Buchnan)

### 2.3. Punk

Approximately forty-five years later, another substantial cultural phenomenon emerged in Britain, this time in the realm of popular culture. Punk was born in the UK when Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood rebranded their clothes shop into “Sex” in 1974, and the Sex Pistols formed in 1975. Punk’s iconic figure was the rebel, and the punks’ rebellion was expressed partly in their style with clear references to sadomasochism and sexualized violence. Common features were black leather and latex garments, heavy boots, hobnails, piercings including self-administered safety-pins, and references to rape: torn clothes suggesting the wearer was a victim of an assault, or a famous “Cambridge rapist” T-shirt celebrating a fearful habitual criminal of that time.

Punks’ apparel was the result of their ideological stance: they stood in opposition not only to the social order and harsh economic reality of mid 1970s Britain, but also to their predecessors—the hippies. At the turn of the 1960s the West experienced a sexual revolution driven mainly by the hippie movement, and in the 1970s these newly acquired freedoms made their way into popular culture. More and more people were seeking self-realisation and fulfilment with sexuality at its core, and the flower-power imagery of free love found expression in styles such as glam, which adopted the colourfulness of the hippies to produce sexually ambiguous “gender-bending” pop stars like Marc Bolan or David Bowie. In a reaction to this hippy illusion that the West had allegedly become a land of sexual freedom, punks openly adopted violent sadomasochistic imagery in order to show, that there still are taboos in sexuality which have a real shock value, and that the achievements of the sexual revolution are partial and overestimated.

This is not the only ideological message coded by punks in BDSM references. In “Ups and downs for the babes in bondage”, Angela Carter notes that the ‘après-rape’ garments were worn to “continually remind us of our socially induced masochism until they become, once again, like second nature.” [Carter, 1998, p. 122] In punk songs such as X-Ray Specs’s “Oh Bondage! Up Yours!” bondage is a metaphor of the violence of consumerism, and the chain that one can use in sadomasochistic practices recurs in phrases like “chain-store” or “chain-smoke” to draw parallels between the addictive pleasures of hardcore sex and unbridled consumerism. The numbness that comes with overconsumption applies to sex itself just as well, and punks indeed spoke of sex being overestimated or overhyped. The notorious lead singer of The Sex Pistols, Johnny Rotten, famously stated that sex is nothing more than “two minutes and 52 *seconds of squelching noises*” [Simpson, 2012].

Finally, in my opinion, punk may have been the last moment when sadomasochism violently entered the public sphere as transgressive, but at the same time – the first moment when it began to be fully commercialized. Westwood, the creator of punk admits that it was above all “a fashion that became a marketing opportunity” [Westwood, 2011]. For many it was thoughtless and probably few teenagers actually reflected on what it could mean to wear a t-shirt of the Cambridge Rapist. It just had the shock value, it was thrilling, exciting to do something that seemed appalling, morbid, and forbidden. The exploitation of this aspect of sadomasochism has reached its apogee with the 21<sup>st</sup> century saga about Christian Grey and Anastasia Steel.



### 3. Fifty Shades of Grey

Forty years after the heyday of punk we witness another peculiar cultural phenomenon: the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* – a book whose popularity has left many perplexed. It ranks among the top 5 best selling book of all times, surpassed only by da Vinci Code & Harry Potter [Rogers, 2012]. With the release of *Fifty Shades of Grey* film adaptation a few days before Valentine’s Day 2015, and its immediate box office success, sadomasochistic aesthetics seems to have finally made its way into mainstream visual culture. Superficially it may therefore look like a triumph of liberalisation in popular approach towards sexuality, with sadomasochism having been accepted as a legitimate set of sexual practices. However, a closer look at the plot of the novel and the values that it promotes reveals that we are far from that, actually even further than back in the 1980s or 1990s. There are multiple issues with *Fifty Shades of Grey* which compromise its subversive potential, the book actually perpetuates and amplifies the most poignant and backwards false assumptions and stereotypes concerning sexuality.

#### 3.1. Consent and submission

First of all, despite common belief, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is actually not about a proper sadomasochistic relationship, as the narrative breaches most of the rules set up by contemporary BDSM practitioners. The basis of a BDSM relationship is its consensual nature, all participants freely consent to the activity, this is expressed by a contract. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, despite tedious discussions of this matter (several chapters are devoted to it) Anastasia never actually signs the consent form. Moreover, Christian never adheres to his own rules anyway. Only minutes after informing Ana that he won’t even touch her without her written consent [James, 2012, p. 68] he lunges at her in the elevator growling: “Oh, fuck the paperwork” [James, 2012, p. 71], blocking her hands in a “vice-like grip”, and grabbing her pony-tail to pull her head to kiss her. Soon after, he again “makes an exception”, this time to deflower her, saying: “forget about the rules, forget about all those details for tonight” [James, 2012, p. 97]. Grey’s behaviour is confusing and Anastasia feels insecure. When she discovers Grey’s penchant to BDSM, her first “overriding feeling” is fear, followed by being “depressed” by the idea that “he likes to hurt women” [James, 2012, p. 88]. In an interview for *Huffington Post*, the head masters at La Domaine Esemar, a BDSM training chateau in the US, expose all the inadequacies that lurk in *Fifty Shades*:

*BDSM is about creating vulnerability, opening yourself up to your partner in a way you can trust them to take you to some of these dark places that are considered taboo overall, but in a loving way. That’s what’s missing from the Fifty Shades of Grey. Christian continuously violates (Ana’s) trust and her ability to feel safe, and that any person in their right mind would get out of a relationship that’s like that.* [Marcus, 2015]

Anastasia’s insecurity is exacerbated by the nondisclosure agreement that she is forced to sign – she cannot talk to anyone about details of her relationship which puts a great strain on her and distances her from her family and friends (she often repeats: “if only they knew”). She feels trapped and cut off sane relations and relevant information, she feels she even cannot talk to Christian because of his mood swings (“It’s perfectly natural that

I should talk to someone—and I can't talk to him if he is so open one minute and so stand-offish the next" [James, 2012, p. 129]. In an analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey* Dionne van Reenen points out that "Anastasia begins to withhold information about her whereabouts and... fears the consequences of not acquiescing to Christian's demands. This behavioural pattern is common in abusive relationships." [van Reenen, 2014, p. 229] Indeed, *Fifty Shades* confuses Christian's manipulative, controlling and domineering behaviour with sexual dominance. Grey, referring to Anastasia as "the submissive", expects her to do what he tells her (i.e. meet her in the places he indicates, accept the things he buys her despite her protest, change her diet etc.) This understanding of "the submissive" is wrong and it has little to do with a genuine BDSM relationship.

The fact that *Fifty Shades* disposes of the issue of consent so lightly has several other worrying consequences. Anastasia is an inexperienced college student, and a virgin, who suddenly starts engaging in very rewarding sexual intercourses. Since she is innocent and somehow ignorant, therefore she has the licence to do all, without complicity and without guilt. This can lead to risky conclusions concerning women's submission fantasies, their alleged desire to "feel highly sexualized without taking responsibility for it" [Bennet, 2015, p. 44]. Such thinking can perpetuate the rape myth (the appeal of a situation where "being forced to have sex alleviates guilt" [Bennet, 2015, p. 44] as well as give rise to dubious assumptions about contemporary women's secret desire to be free from the "burden of free will" (a result of women's emancipation) and to be submissive because "power and all of its imperatives (have become) boring" for women (an idea suggested by Katie Roiphe in her highly criticised article "Spanking Goes Mainstream"<sup>8</sup>). *Fifty Shades* blurs the line between fantasies of sexual submission and actual submission in other spheres of life which can lead to numerous misinterpretations resulting in harmful and false stereotypes about women and their aspirations.

### 3.2. Pathologization and normativity

*Fifty Shades of Grey* represents Grey, a BDSM practitioner, as a deeply disturbed person who openly admits he is "fifty shades of fucked up" [James, 2012, p. 216]. Moreover, it is suggested that his interest in sadomasochism is a result of a past trauma – Christian's biological mother, a drug addict and a prostitute, died by suicide when he was 4 years old, and then he was seduced at the age of fifteen into a sadomasochistic relationship by a much older woman (an circumstance to which Ana exclusively refers as Christian having been "sexually abused" [James, 2012, p. 134] by a "paedophile" [James, 2012, p. 323]. As a result, BDSM itself is presented as a sickness and is linked with other pathologies. *Fifty Shades of Grey* entrenches prejudices and misconceptions concerning BDSM which are contradicted by psychological studies stating that people in BDSM relationships are healthy and balanced.<sup>9</sup> What *Fifty Shades of Grey* does is

<sup>8</sup> ee: Doll 2013, Abad-Santos 2013.

<sup>9</sup> "That if you are into (BDSM) you were abused as a child, . . . is absurd . . . . The concept that if you are into it you are going to be abusive, is also absurd. Most psychological studies coming out now say that people in BDSM relationships are very healthy, and often far more balanced because we communicate so much, and we are trying so hard *not* to be abusive. . . . (A) study published in the Journal of Sexual Medicine in 2013, found those involved in BDSM scored better on certain indicators of mental health than their counterparts. Other studies suggest bondage can induce altered mental states and reduce anxiety." [Marcus, 2015]

simply divide between “good” and “bad” sexual practices, consider BDSM as the latter and condemn it altogether. It is a very conservative and harmful approach. Moreover, linking BDSM to mental disturbances and ignoring the importance and validity of consent suggests to the readers another commonly held misconception, namely, that “no one who is sane would consent to such practices.” Proponents of such opinions fail to notice their cultural arbitrariness – if fact, people who decide to participate in a boxing match or who become professional athletes consent to a greater amount of pain and a greater risk of injury than those who consent to BDSM, and still they are revered, rather than condemned, for their endurance and strength.<sup>10</sup>

While Christian is presented as a “pervert”, suffering (as it is suggested) from his “affliction”, Anastasia is innocent and largely unaware of “Grey’s dark secret”. This serves to entrench another stereotype, namely the “seduction myth”—a scenario according to which if an inexperienced person starts enjoying non-normative sexuality it is because they were manoeuvred into it and tricked by a sexual predator. Christian Grey being so creepy, he fits well into this model. This, however, is a common disciplinary narrative used for example against nascent homosexual desire in adolescent boys or girls – the assumption that they must have been seduced by an older, debauched homosexual. Ironically, homosexuality in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is also presented as something undesirable, it is a “relief” to discover that Christian is not gay for his mother [James, 2012, p. 126]. In fact, “gay” is the no-no word throughout the book, when Anastasia incidentally asks Grey if he is gay (a question suggested by her friend) Christian “inhales sharply, and (Ana) cringe(s), mortified” [James, 2012, p. 15]. She later ponders: “asking him if he was gay! I shudder. I can’t believe I said that. *Ground, swallow me up now!* Every time I think of that question in the future, I will cringe with embarrassment” [James, 2012, p. 18] and indeed she is “mortified” every time “the ‘gay’ question” re-emerges. The amount of embarrassment is really perplexing. My suggestion is that from people who engage in non-normative sexual acts one would expect a more relaxed and humorous reaction. Also, if the novel really attempted to present an alternative model of a modern, taboo-free sexuality, and if Grey was supposedly the paragon of this new eroticism, he would be far more flexible. One could expect Grey to occasionally explore beyond the binary division of homo- versus hetero-sexual, one would also appreciate if he engaged in both dominant and submissive behaviours. As a matter of fact, *Fifty Shades of Grey* ignores that in real BDSM relations the man is often submissive, an interesting game of twisting gender roles and exploring masculine sexuality and vulnerability. However, James’s novel recognises none of the recent advances in understanding gender roles, cementing instead a highly conservative approach to sexuality. One should not forget that Anastasia never wanted to enter a BDSM relationship in the first place. Describing her reaction to the sexual act she writes: “during the whole alarming process I felt demeaned, debased and abused” [James, 2012, p. 232], and throughout the book she wishes Grey “was normal” [James, 2012, p. 165], envying her friend Kate that she “has found herself a normal man” [James, 2012, p. 167].

<sup>10</sup> In a similar tone, Mistress Couple of La Domaine Esemar rightly notes: “the pain and endorphin rush a runner feels from getting a side cramp is comparable to the sting of a mistress’ whip” [Marcus, 2015]

### 3.3. Feminism and Womanhood

Apart from a highly traditionalist approach to sexuality, *Fifty Shades of Grey* offers similarly regressive views on the role and nature of “womanhood”. It is actually suggested, that Ana’s innocence is supposed to “heal” Christian, to deliver him from his condition, and allow him to enjoy a life free from his non-normative preferences through marriage, which is considered as the antidote to perversion. (Ana, weeping, ends chapter 13 with a grandiose sentence: “Perhaps together we can chart a new course.” [James, 2012, p. 186] Ana’s womanhood brings to mind the Victorian concept of a perfect woman being “the angel in the house” whose role is to guide the man into marriage and reproduction, and to become a wife and mother selflessly devoted to her children and submissive to her husband. In conclusion to her very insightful article on *Fifty Shades*, Lisa Downing notices how, “setting up BDSM as nothing more than a sick, scary – albeit titillating – adult symptom of childhood trauma”, the novel presents marriage and parenthood as the inevitable desires of a woman, and the means via which a woman can “save (or “free” in the language of the trilogy) a sexually and socially errant man”<sup>11</sup> [Downing, 2013, p. 100]. This obviously goes against the spirit of considering sexuality a free realm of exploration, not necessarily confined to reproduction. Downing, however, sees a benefit in this aspect of *Fifty Shades*. *She proposes: a “reading-against-the-grain” of the text with regard to its parallel treatments of contractual BDSM relationships and the institution of marriage:*

In multiple ways, the texts reveal the monogamous heterosexual relation and its contractual manifestation—marriage—as comparable to the undertaking of a BDSM contract of the kind that Grey attempts to persuade Steele to sign. BDSM is, in fact, held up as the more sinister sibling of matrimony throughout the trilogy, and parallels between marriage and BDSM recur. [Downing, 2013, p. 98]

Ana notices it herself, it is her first reaction to the contract: “Serve and obey in all things. All Things! I shake my head in disbelief. Actually, doesn’t the marriage ceremony use those words ... *obey*? This throws me. Do couples still say that?” [James, 2012, p. 149] This topic is not, alas, elaborated on in the novel.

*Fifty Shades of Grey* has stirred a debate among feminists, as questions have arisen whether the popularity of the book is due to the fact that “this is what women really want” [van Reenen, 2014, p.223]. Some commentators have claimed that the book is empowering for women [Bennet, p. 44]. The fact that a woman author is writing about women’s sexuality openly can be considered an act of re-appropriation, reclaiming and exploring female sexuality away from a masculine perspective. The empowerment is allegedly also reflected in the plot: eventually Anastasia “gets what she wants”, she manages to change Grey, although initially he wanted to change her. However, this interpretation seems too optimistic, as in fact, Ana undergoes several changes, all with the sole purpose of pleasing her lover. The novel really reveals how much women suffer on

<sup>11</sup> Downing emphasises how *Fifty Shades* forgets “Simone de Beauvoir’s warning of more than 60 years ago regarding the deceptiveness of the ‘dream of attaining through (marriage and) a child a plenitude, warmth and value one is incapable of creating oneself’, and Shulamith Firestone’s assertion that the nuclear family and biological motherhood are the cornerstones of the continued oppression of women as a class” [Downing, 2013, p. 100]

a daily basis trying to control their “perfect image”: Ana is constantly self-conscious about how she looks, how she walks, what she is wearing etc, and the book contains detailed descriptions of her meticulous grooming [James, 2012, p. 172]. Even in the intimate and landmark moment of their (and Ana’s first ever) sexual intercourse, she is thinking: “I’m in the pale blue lacy perfect-fit bra. *Thank heavens.*” [James, 2012, p. 97] Ana also drops her own style to replace it with more business-like apparel, i.e. a dress and stilettos, and she does it to please (Grey’s reaction being: “A dress Miss Steele – I approve” [James, 2012, p. 173]. Alicja Długołęcka notes the deeply unsettling aspect of *Fifty Shades*, that Anastasia “becomes extraordinary and unique” only thanks to a relationship with a man, and the suggestion that “only the recognition and attention of a man can trigger a transformation in a woman” [Illouz, 2015, p. XXXVII]. Moreover, Grey is sexually aroused when Anastasia is wearing pigtails, and on numerous occasions it is mentioned that Ana “looks so young” [James, 2012, p. 119] or even “like a child” [James, 2012, p. 34, 153]. This can suggest a less obvious aspect of kink that transpires from the novel: inciting women to look and act as if they were underage to draw men’s attention. The argument of *Fifty Shades* empowering potential because of Anastasia’s “getting what she wants” also does not hold because the trilogy’s fairy tale ending is hardly plausible. Gail Dines denounces the novel as a “women’s relationship fantasy... a story of how a woman got a rich and powerful boyfriend because she is good in bed”, and she concludes: “*Fifty Shades* is about as realistic as *Pretty Woman*. How many prostitutes do you know who end up living in marital bliss with a former john?” [Dines, 2012]

### 3.4. Patriarchal masculinity and abuse

*Fifty Shades of Grey* not only entrenches traditional narratives of marriage as the only solution for a couple, but it also promulgates the idea that a heterosexual relationship is a game of power relations in which the woman is the submissive and the man is the dominant.<sup>12</sup> The book promotes a very backwards and dangerous model of masculinity. In an analysis of the novel, van Reenen quotes a study identifying abuse patterns in Grey’s behaviour which include: “incessant attempts at control, extreme anger, jealousy, withdrawal, mood changes, stalking, humiliation, threats, and isolating the female from friends and family” [James, 2012, p. 229].<sup>13</sup> Grey’s obsessive, cruel behaviour—invading Anastasia’s house, forcing her to take contraceptives, limiting her social life etc.—match the definition of domestic violence, but in the novel they are interpreted and legitimized as evidence of love and devotion. Grey’s mood swings and unpredictability are either played down (Ana’s mother says: “Most men are moody, darling, some more than others” [James, 2012, p. 309] or romanticised (Anastasia asks herself the rhetoric question: “Will I ever be able to understand this mercurial man?” [James, 2012, p. 261] The protagonist’s abusive disposition is obvious from the beginning of the novel and it extends to

<sup>12</sup> Eva Illouz says Grey follows a “feudal code” of masculinity [Illouz, 2015, p. 101] where the man commits himself to caring and protective duties in return for actual ownership of the woman.

<sup>13</sup> In a similar tone, Gail Dines denounces Grey’s “jealous, stalking, sexually sadistic behaviour, his hypersensitivity, his whirlwind romancing of a younger, less powerful woman, and his Jekyll-and-Hyde mood swings” to conclude: “Any one of these is potentially dangerous, but a man who exhibits them all is lethal.” [Dines, 2012]

his workplace. His company (where he has ultimate control since there is no board) looks like a kernel of mobbing: Anastasia notices that his employees are all blonds (wondering idly “if that’s legal” [James, 2012, p. 9] and that the younger employee is so nervous that she keeps jumping from her seat. Grey’s jealousy is sinister and predator-like, he watches Ana and her male friends “like a hawk” [James, 2012, p. 31], “his jaw clenches, and his eyes burn”, making her feel “paralysed”, “squeak” [James, 2012, p. 128] and “squirm uncomfortably, hypnotized by his glare” [James, 2012, p. 190]. Anastasia’s reactions are clearly that of a harassment victim—she has nightmares, identifies Grey as “a stalker” [James, 2012, p. 57] who is “threatening” [James, 2012, p. 53]. She is worried that he will hurt her [James, 2012, p. 381], and many of her utterances are very disturbing (e.g. “I’m too frightened to show you any affection in case you flinch or tell me off or worse—beat me” [James, 2012, p. 278], “You scare me” [James, 2012, p. 305], or “as soon as I’m in my mother’s arms, I burst into tears” [James, 2012, p. 306]. Nevertheless, *Fifty Shades of Grey* has been banned in some public libraries for “pornography” but never for abusive patterns or violence. This, according to Bonomi et al., “suggests, in part, a continued underlying societal tolerance of abuse” [Bonomi et al 742].

### 3.5. Money and Consumerism

In my opinion, what is truly obscene in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, is the pornographic display of wealth. Currently, social activists, NGO representatives, politicians, and even some business people increasingly condemn the growing disparities between the rich and the poor, and emphasize the need to curb consumerism. The extreme earnings of corporate executives are a commonly denounced pathology of modern capitalism. Yet, what Anastasia truly relishes is Christian Grey’s money. James is blatantly open about this, at the first encounter Grey is presented as “the ultimate consumer” [James, 2012, p. 14], and on several occasions he spends excessive amounts of money on unnecessary comforts and goods “just because he can”. Dines points to the fact, that Grey’s generosity is supposed to compensate for his abusive behaviours: “his wealth acts as a kind of up-market cleansing cream for his abuse, and his pathological attachment to Anastasia is reframed as devotion, since he showers luxury items on her.” [Dines, 2012] British humorist Caitlin Moran sarcastically says about Anastasia: “every time she’s good and submits to pain, he buys her something or takes her off in his f---ing helicopter... The whole plot is ‘will-get-spanked-on-the-clitoris-with-ahairbrush-in-exchange-for-an-iPad.’” [Bennet, 2015, p.s 43] The iPad irony is hardly exaggerated as Ana is overwhelmed by “new Converse” trainers and “exquisitely designed fancy European lingerie” which Christian’s butler buys her after she vomits on herself, and even when she and Christian take a bath, Ana crudely mentions “expensive-looking bath oil” [James, 2012, p. 115]. There are brands listed on every second page of the book: Converse (mentioned six times in the first ten chapters), Calvin Klein, BMW, BlackBerry. MacBook Pro etc.

This, in my opinion, is the true shade of *Fifty Shades of Grey*—the triumph of consumerism. The success of the book is not literary but commercial. The author, E.L. James, is a professional TV executive [James, 2012, p. 3] which makes her an expert in tailoring a mass culture product to the consumer’s needs. The writing of *Fifty Shades of Grey* was an example of “prosumption” – a phenomenon in which the media consumer participates

in its production. The novel was initially published in instalments as fan fiction in the Internet, and this allowed James to directly consider readers' suggestions and monitor readers' preferences. The publication of the book simultaneously set off a skyrocketing demand for sex toys and other Grey-related objects (grey ties and other items of fashion and accessories, special edition CDs with music to which Ana and Christian had sex, and even wines from the list of those mentioned in the novel). The fact that so many people have attempted to emulate the characters may actually mean that they felt compelled to do so in order to aspire to a certain lifestyle. Eva Illouz remarks that it was possible because the novel has been written as a handbook [Illouz, 2015, p. 126] of how to fix your relationship and improve your sex life. However, the solution suggested is to turn to gadgets, sex-toys, and luxury goods. This has little to do with a true sexual revolution. In *Sexual Fiction*, Maurice Charney notes that when you link sexual expression with consumerism, sex becomes part of "a histrionic, self-conscious, hedonistic and performative attitude" [Charney, 1981, p. 151–152]. Indeed, one of the main features of consumerist culture is to be concerned with high-quality performance, and one's ambition may be to "become a connoisseur of sex just as one can become a gourmet, an oenophile and almost a tennis pro" [Charney, 1981, p. 133]. The market is flooded with self-help books designed to improve the quality of one's sex life, and it is a marketing scheme to keep customers dissatisfied with their sex life in order to make them buy the books and magazines in question. The pressure on the consumer is increased by the fact that sex is also being marketed as a health issue, i.e. a healthy individual should have good sex. *Fifty shades of Grey* is part of a sex-as-a-commodity trend, and it does not offer its readers ways of attaining sexual freedom but quite the opposite: it feeds the readers with descriptions of Anastasia's earth-shattering orgasms in order to exacerbate their dissatisfaction with their own sexual lives and push them onto the consumer treadmill of the sex industry, while maintaining most of the retrograde assumptions about male and female sexuality, and the blissful role of marriage and reproduction.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Fifty Shades of Grey* may have some qualities, and it was not the aim of this paper to deny them, nor to patronize those who enjoyed it or defend it. But with regards to deregulating sexuality, or understanding sadomasochism as a transgressive practice (or even as a choice) the novel's potential is squandered in 100%. It gets us nowhere closer, indeed it distances us drastically from all the advances and gains achieved by the sexual revolution, by repeating the most regressive stereotypes concerning sexuality. The novel categorises good and bad sex, stigmatises homosexuality, presents BDSM as a illness that love can cure, and entrenches 19<sup>th</sup> century's definitions of masculinity and womanhood. Under the guise of promoting kinky sex, it introduces a new normativity: a narrative, according to which it is a priority to boost your sex life. Michel Foucault has aptly shown that merely "embracing sexual desires" is not a path to liberation [Foucault, 1978, p. 157]. Sexuality is a modern, constructed discipline and by buying into it one stays within the frame of disciplining discourses. After *Fifty Shades* it is perfectly "healthy" to enjoy kinky sex but we should not be fooled that we are living in a realm of sexual freedom – the realm of "unhealthy" and stigmatized remains ever more present.

The true freedom is in what stays uncharted, unclassified, and this field is –paradoxically–shrinking. Overabundance of sexual content in the media can be compared to full shelves in supermarkets—it is a goods surplus which nevertheless needs to be consumed and that is why kink enters the repertoire—as means of additional excitement. It is the natural course of things—a craving for intensification, a search for more extreme sensations to counter overconsumption-related numbness. The solution offered is to introduce an element of danger, violence, hazard, risk, or pain to spice up the relationship, otherwise it doesn't work anymore. The “sex + violence” trend has a long tradition of success (James Bond films and the whole action-adventure genre) and recently has targeted a new, much younger clientele.<sup>14</sup> And the laws of consumerism and marketing will provide that those who succeed in embracing kink will be hailed “winners” of this new paradigm (just like any successful businessmen and businesswomen), while others will feel coerced to pursue this lifestyle in order to stay in vogue, to keep up with the new standards, just as it is the case with any other novelties or gadgets.

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<sup>14</sup> The videos of teenage pop sensations Miley Cyrus and Justin Bieber are a good example example. In “Dooo It!” we see Miley Cyrus being forced to swallow various thick fluids, having her head held from behind, her face smeared with the excess of the substances which she spits and which cover her forehead and get into her eyes. Bieber's “What do you mean” shows a boy (played by Bieber) and a girlfriend in a motel room, the date is not going well until an intrusion of masked kidnapers who abduct the couple. However, the violent intrusion is actually the boyfriend's scheme, a successful attempt to make the relationship more exciting, since while in captivity, the couple make up and make out, and afterwards they celebrate.



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