

As I sit down to write this review I must admit that I am somewhat disappointed in myself for not having begun this endeavor sooner. Not because it is a task that I have a great interest in doing, but because it is something that I simply must do in order to achieve some semblance of catharsis. Having waited far too long I must recourse to referencing the feelings that have stayed with me these weeks since completing E.L. James's best-selling *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Any critique of a production of the imagination must necessarily, for the sake of fairness, attempt to see both the good and the bad in the work before deciding on which side the scale falls, and it is in that spirit that I will direct my attention towards explaining why this novel is as popular as it is.

The first thing that simply must be said about *Fifty Shades* is that it is very easy to ingest and digest. James's vocabulary is within the range of any English-speaking person and she should be applauded for not overreaching herself in order to achieve the desired effect. By staying within her lexical limits, James manages to focus much more on story-telling, and even I am forced to admit that she manages to command the reader's interest, forcing them to keep turning the pages in order to find out what will happen next to the protagonist. This combination of great-tasting and easily digestible material renders *Fifty Shades* a story that, although one might wish they could devour in a single bit, a literary meal that is simultaneously sates the reader's hungry while forever leaving him unsatisfied. Put simply, James's writing style is addictive and the only means of dealing with this addiction is to indulge, or quit cold turkey. I was able to achieve both paths in my experience with this author.

The other way in which James manages to invoke dependency in her reader's is the subject matter, which is quite obviously the greatest draw of the novel to the vast majority of its readers. Everyone has heard of the novel, both because of the general subject matter- "sex sells" is a statement that will always hold true- and because of the specific and taboo topic of Bondage-Domination & Sado-Masochism (BDSM). The first point needs no further elaboration from me, but I think a brief attempt to explain the second is worthwhile, though slightly too easy. I would contend that nearly every reader of this will be aware of the fact that despite what persons are willing to disclose to others about their preferences in public, there is a long-list of interests that humans have that they are usually unwilling to disclose. The advent of prophylaxis has enabled humanity to fully explore their own sexual preferences without having to fear the notorious consequences of sexual play that has dominated most of human history. There is a robust, undiscovered (for most humans) literature that seeks to explore and describe the various forms that sexual desire may take, and I am not very surprised that a novel that seeks to explore one of these "darker" forms has become very popular.

James's choice to take the first-person perspective of an uninitiated woman as her mode of narration could explain her novel's popularity since the reader is able to own the protagonist's innocence with respect to the dark side of human sexual identity. This method of delivery does not just provide a safe vantage point for the individual reader, but also for readers who wish to discuss the novel with each other. By displacing the reader's curiosity and interest onto the narrator fans of the novel are able to indirectly discuss their own curiosity and intrigue with each other while evading the implication that they themselves are directly interested in BDSM sex. This is actually quite an impressive accomplishment for an author that I had so gravely underestimated, and is yet another reason why *Fifty Shades* is to be commended if only for surreptitiously rendering a taboo form of sexuality as mainstream.

Having given my reasons for this novel being significant and popular I have finally freed myself for the negative aspects of my critique, which I feel are much more robust and persuasive. Before I begin I must stress that person's should still read the novel lest they be tempted to take my personal review as the be all end all review of this intriguing cultural phenomenon. Stressing the importance of forming one's opinion for oneself I will now give my best attempt to give as accurate and objective criticism of the novel as a possibly can.

The first thing I simply must note (in fact, the first thing that I noticed before I even opened the book for the first time) is that discussions of the novel seem to suggest that one of its primary uses is as a masturbatory aide for women who have weathered menopause and are seeking stimulation. This might be vague but it is a moral certainty that the majority of readers are female, and that the graphic depictions of sex contained throughout the novel no doubt fulfill this function to some extent or another. Well, if we accept that this is the purpose of *Fifty Shades* then I think it only fair to grade the novel's merit on this basis. One simply cannot help but notice the James's unimaginative naming of the two main characters of this story. "Anastasia Steele" and "Christian Grey" might as well be names taken directly from a pornographic movie, which might have been her intent, although one would imagine that she could have conveyed the same effect without having to resort to such a blatantly cliché nomination. One could argue that the latter's name is a necessity due to the title of the novel, which is an amalgamation of the anti-hero's surname and the protagonist's description of his being "fifty shades of fucked up." I would accept this argument although I still think that the choice of title leaves the work open to my most basic attempt to discredit the banality of James's writing style.

*Fifty Shades of Grey* is an apt title for a story that is written in such a manner that one simply cannot miss the novel's sheer lack of color. Writing about humanity's most carnal desire's is a cheap way of

adding color to a story, and is easily displaced by James's inability to describe the act of fornication with language that would merit the adjective "risqué". Having read the first book of Mario Puzo's *Godfather* I believe that I can state ambivalently that writing about sex is more complicated than merely "writing about sex". A talented writer can really make an person of basic sexual experience really imagine the act being described while a less skilled writer can only give the most base and bland description of the act. An argument against this perspective would take the form of referencing the inexperience of our narrator effecting the description of the acts in which she participates, but this seems to be too easy of an out. If sexuality is the main theme of the novel, one would expect that the author ought to do her best to convey this theme in such a way that does justice to this theme in spite of the inexperience of the narrator. The reader has surely noticed the way James casually evades using any direct references to the genitalia of either participant, and only attempts a direct reference after more than three-quarters of the novel has run its course.

I could not shake the feeling that James had written all of the descriptions of Miss Steele and Mr. Grey's sexual encounters beforehand and had only recycled this sole description throughout the novel with slight variation. Perhaps she was attempting to make the point that the sexual act can become, or in fact is, commonplace, but I would not grant James the credit of having such lofty sexual existentialist themes in mind. Thus, I simply must suggest that she was rather uninspired in her descriptions and that this salient fact simply cannot be ignored. Perhaps she means to highlight the distinction between "vanilla sex" and more adventurous acts, but again I am forced to the conclusion that James did not have such lofty goals in mind while writing the novel. I would buttress this point by the fact that she overuses the adjective "dryly" in describing Grey's chosen manner of speaking, but even with my limited vocabulary I cannot help but notice that introducing the term "arid" occasionally would have at least added some spice and variation to her description of his demeanor. The point is to make Grey seem robotic, but the effect is that Steele seems unable to vary her descriptions of him, which suggests that her imagination might, in fact, be the infertile culprit of this description.

I hope that I am not the only reader who was completely disgusted by the protagonist's use of "oh my" and her embodiment of her sexuality as an "inner goddess" to be contrasted with the personification of her conscience. This seems to suggest that one's sexuality and innocence cannot be contained within the same mind without dissonance, but this seems to hold these two concepts in opposition and, at least in my opinion, seems to suggest contempt for human sexuality. For a novel that is supposed to be aimed at liberating female sexuality, the suggestion that women keep two sets of books

with respect to sexual desire and moral conscience implies that female sexuality is not just something that is repressed, but further that it is something that ought to be repressed. Despite my Christian upbringing I do not regard females in this way and I was disappointed that James seems to. Again one might parry my point by repeating the fact of Steele's sexual innocence, but this only leads me back to the aspect of *Fifty Shades* that most unnerved me in the first place.