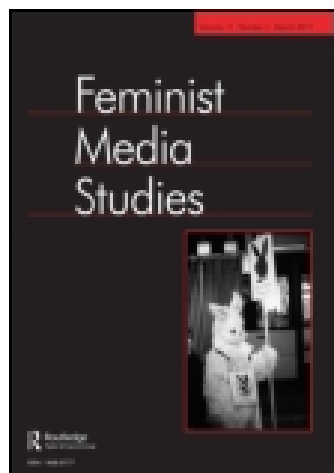


This article was downloaded by: [Northern Alberta Inst of Technology]

On: 31 January 2015, At: 18:00

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Feminist Media Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfms20>

Is Christian a Sadist? Fifty Shades of Grey in popular imagination

Salam Al-Mahadin^a

^a American University of Madaba

Published online: 07 May 2013.

To cite this article: Salam Al-Mahadin (2013) Is Christian a Sadist? Fifty Shades of Grey in popular imagination, *Feminist Media Studies*, 13:3, 566-570, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2013.786271](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2013.786271)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2013.786271>

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>

Jones agreed and summed it up this way: "The store, staff and bank account are grateful to Ms. James and her success."

REFERENCES

- ALAN, M. (2012) *Fifty Shades of Grey Decoded: A Man's Playbook*, Kindle Edition.
- JAMES, E. L. (n.d.) 'The official *Fifty Shades of Grey* pleasure collection.' *Lovehoney.com*, [Online] Available at: <http://www.lovehoney.co.uk/fiftyshadesofgrey/> (1 Feb. 2013).
- JAMES, E. L. (2012a) *Fifty Shades of Grey*. London: Cornerstone Digital.
- JAMES, E. L. (2012b) *Fifty Shades Darker*. London: Cornerstone Digital.
- JAMES, E. L. (2012c) *Fifty Shades Freed*. London: Cornerstone Digital.
- LONDON, BIANCA. (2012) 'Is this *Fifty Shades* too far? New book-themed collection of sex toys aimed at the frustrated housewives of Middle England.' *Mail Online*, 2 Oct., [Online] Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2211596/50-Shades-Of-Grey-sex-toys-The-collection-E-L-James-hopes-spice-Middle-England.html#axzz2KGgH1DQP> (1 Feb. 2013).
- SAX, DAVID. (2012) 'The *Fifty Shades of Grey* stimulus.' *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 24 May, [Online] Available at: <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-05-24/the-fifty-shades-of-grey-stimulus?cmpid=msn> (15 Aug. 2012).
- TAORMINO, TRISTAN. (2012) *Fifty Shades of Kink: A Beginner's Guide to BDSM*. Berkley, CA: Cleis Press.

IS CHRISTIAN A SADIST? *FIFTY SHADES OF GREY* IN POPULAR IMAGINATION

Salam Al-Mahadin, American University of Madaba

Today, passionate engagement is considered almost pathological. I think there is something subversive in saying: This is the man or woman with whom I want to stake everything. This is why I was never able to do so-called one-night stands. It has to at least have a perspective of eternity. (Slavoj Žizek, 2012)

At the time of writing this, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy—*Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012a), *Fifty Shades Freed* (2012b), and *Fifty Shades Darker* (2012c)—by E.L. James is still enjoying a very advanced spot on Amazon.com's bestseller list, which is testimony, above all, to a ferocious media machine and viral marketing that secured the trilogy unprecedented coverage (Meredith Bennett-Smith 2012; Jo Piazza, 2012). The latter, however, is not sufficient to explain why the controversial book, unlike many erotic novels before, proved to be such a huge hit. Hundreds of articles have been written about the book speculating on the secret of its success, but few rigorous academic efforts have been undertaken to extricate the trilogy from the annals of journalism to the more discerning efforts of academia.

Although not especially well-written, *Fifty Shades of Grey's* success, arguably, lies in its ability to lend itself to several generic memberships: the material excesses propagated by tabloid coverage of celebrity life, the traditional romance novel, and the erotic novel. The resultant pastiche borders on the highly improbable, but fan readers are willing to suspend disbelief in return for the transgressive fantasy afforded by these books. The trilogy is at once old and new. By paying homage to some of the traditional elements of romance novels (the vulnerable virgin heroine and the aloof, dark and handsome hero locked in a cat and mouse pursuit of an intermittent love/hate relationship that culminates in a denouement of reconciliation and happily-ever-after), the books succeed in cushioning the blows of sadomasochism against a backdrop of what is now daily fodder of Western tabloids: the excess pleasures of celebrities; the modern tragic heroes boasting of childhood abuses that inspired them to succeed while tabloids celebrate the details of such success (the private jets, the expensive homes, the designer clothes, and all the other trappings of the high-flying life). Many of James' descriptions of Christian Grey's lifestyle would not seem totally out of place in a right-wing tabloid. Serge Moscovici (2000) argues that new social representations are created by anchoring the unfamiliar in the familiar, and that's precisely how James unwittingly creates one of the biggest publishing phenomena of late. The unfamiliar, sordid world of dungeons and bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism (BDSM) was brought to bear upon the life of a character most young women could relate to (the lonely, undecided, career woman of chick-lit who had graduated from romance novels). The money and power elements only added to the edgy fantasy.

Within the culture industry of today, it would be reductionist to claim that these books interpellate readers—especially female ones—to occupy certain subject positions without allowing for their agency to influence such interpellations. Even more important is the attempt to reduce the trilogy to a simple linearity of cause and effect. Similar to many other phenomena, they are very complex constructs that should be seen as a point of convergence between a litany of cultural, social, sexual, economic, and political discursive practices that reveal more about the social subjects that read them than they do about the books themselves. It is the combination of these elements that created a winning formula and, I suspect, had any of the elements that follow been lacking, the books would not have enjoyed such a great success.

Beginning with psychoanalysis, it is crucial that these novels be approached as a form of transgressive fantasy rather than a wish-list for the modern-day woman. Fantasy functions as a space in which we are afforded the opportunity to act out all of those transgressive desires and dreams we have had to renounce to engage in a social contract with others. Contrary to the perceived notion that in a fantasy we are imagining an ego-ideal or a vision of the self as one wishes the others to see us:

[T]he fantasy represents what we want to do to the others. For example, fantasising about being famous and powerful is at its heart a desire to arouse envy and jealousy and wield power over others rather than a narrative about a more well-known, beautiful, wonderful and coherent self. (Salam Al-Mahadin 2013)

Readers/spectators are aware of the delineating power of fantasy versus reality, the latter being the make-believe world of ideologies that masks the Lacanian Real that we had to give up by entering the symbolic order (which organises our subjectivities and relations to others while simultaneously checking our transgressions through the power of language) but still makes itself felt and realised in the form of fantasies and dreams. Therefore, it is

simplistic to argue that women buy the book because they identify with Ana. A more accurate rendering of this relationship would be to see the books as representative of a fantasy that can be enjoyed from a safe distance similar to the experience of enjoying the violence and sexual transgression of a film from a masochistic subject position, submitting to another book, character, or film while ensuring it does not hurt us. On one level the books act as a fantasy that interpellates a willing participant in a Deleuzian masochistic aesthetic. Ana may have surrendered all her power to Christian in the trilogy but this is not very different from the dynamics of a masochistic relationship. It is important to note here that, according to Gilles Deleuze (1991), sadomasochism is a linguistic anomaly that misrepresents the reality of the relationship between torturer and tortured. Christian is not a sadist since the latter can only enjoy an unwilling victim and engage in "institutionalised possession" while the masochist thinks in terms of "contractual alliance" (Deleuze, 1991, pp. 20–21). The sadist would be angered if his/her victim experienced pleasure. Conversely, and in a masochistic situation—where no sadist could possibly exist—the torturer "incarnates instead the element of inflicting pain in an exclusively masochistic situation" (Deleuze, 1991, p. 42). James has unwittingly created a masochistic rather than sadistic "situation" if only evidenced by the contract that Christian forces his submissives to sign. In this contractual alliance, Christian may appear to be a sadist but he is in fact an "element" and an "essential subject" in a masochistic not sadistic context of pleasure.

The first book of the trilogy was originally conceived by James as fan fiction of the vampire *Twilight* series (Bennett-Smith 2012). Residing outside the canonical world of fiction, the books were more of an exercise in a self-reflexive take on the niches and gaps James felt were left unfilled by the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer (2010). The attempt to fill that void thus should not be seen within the constraints of traditional works of fiction but rather as an aesthetic commentary that combines, in the forms of a pastiche, elements of sexual, material, and emotional excesses similar to any fantasy. In fact, the trilogy's improbable elements (Christian's obsession with Ana for no apparent reason, the endless series of holidays and luxuries, the non-stop lovemaking, Christian as a multi-billionaire at the young age of twenty-six) fit neatly if the novels are taken as an embodiment of a fantasy that draws upon the surreal, irrational, and the unrealistic, because it is not in the nature of any fantasy to follow the set rules of ideologically-laden realities. The trilogy is to fiction what surrealism was to Victorian art. It is an anti-novel—a novel that dispenses with the traditional elements of novels—precisely because it was conceived as a fan fiction novel.

The scopophilia of fan fiction reflects the general fascinations with the sexual life of celebrities (be they fictional or real). Thus, a pornographic tape of a celebrity is guaranteed to instantiate the scopic drive more forcefully than a tape of a virtual unknown. This is the context within which James' original fan fiction was situated since they are loosely based on the characters of the *Twilight* series. More pertinently, James incorporates the fetishised materialism of celebrity life embodied by the explosion of celebrity culture over the past two decades, aided by the ubiquity of the internet. Ana and Christian's relationship is set against such a fetishised and almost clichéd materialistic context. Reality television, the tabloid press, and magazines have reconfigured the tenets of fame to include a calcified and fetishised lifestyle schemata nearly identical to the one in James' trilogy. Christian could have easily been a middle-class accountant but James' fantasy world had to combine obsessive emotionality with the fetishes of materialism and the improbability of sexual pleasures (the virgin Ana achieves an orgasm the first time she has intercourse).

So far, the argument has demonstrated how the trilogy can be approached as an anti-novel, a surreal space, a fantasy construct that manifests the transgressions of the Real, an essentially masochistic rather than sadistic situation (see Deleuze, 1991), and a fetishised embodiment of celebrity culture. Any feminist reading of the novel would do well to avoid the simplistic claims made by some (see Kathryn Casey, 2012; Katherine O'Clare, 2012), that it glorifies domestic violence. Not all popular representations of violence are incitements thereto. Nor should the abovementioned be construed as a defence of the books which many critics bemoaned for their very poor quality of writing (O'Clare, 2012; Carey Purcell, 2013). My primary intention has been to rescue the books from the grips of sadism to the annals of masochism, thereby alleviating any fears that women are subjecting themselves to abusive violence. Once we get past that, feminists may begin to query why thousands of women have been swayed by the passions of this trilogy. Accusations that these books are of such low quality that they don't merit feminist interest were once levelled against romance novels, but Tania Modleski (1984) advocates in her groundbreaking book *Loving with Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* a form of "engaged feminist criticism" that examines any aspect of popular culture without making distinctions on the basis of low and high art. Modleski further demonstrates that it is counter-productive to use "dumbed-down Freudianism to claim that mass-cultural texts invited a straightforward identification on the part of the reader/viewer" (1984, p. xvii). Both cultural social/political and economic constructs on the one hand and the reader's agency on the other are required to forge a more complex understanding of how female readers engage with these books, why many found them especially intriguing and fascinating while others did not.¹

NOTE

1. Amazon.com reviews page is split down the middle between close to 15,000 readers who heaped praise or wrote scathing critiques of the first part of the trilogy.

REFERENCES

- AL-MAHADIN, SALAM. 2013. "A Pharaoh and Multiple Gods: Writing the Female Self on Arab Drama Series." forthcoming.
- BENNETT-SMITH, MEREDITH. 2012. "'Fifty Shades of Grey': What is the Appeal." *The Christian Science Monitor*, 15 Mar., [Online] Available at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/Books/chapter-and-verse/2012/0315/50-Shades-of-Grey-What-is-the-appeal> (10 Jan. 2013).
- CASEY, KATHRYN. 2012. "Is 'Fifty Shades of Grey' dangerous." *Forbes*, 23 Jun., [Online] Available at: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/crime/2012/06/23/is-fifty-shades-of-grey-dangerous/> (15 Jan. 2013).
- DELEUZE, GILLES. 1991. *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*. Cambridge, MA: Zone Books.
- JAMES, E. L. 2012a. *Fifty Shades of Grey*. London: Cornerstone Digital.
- JAMES, E. L. 2012b. *Fifty Shades Darker*. London: Cornerstone Digital.
- JAMES, E. L. 2012c. *Fifty Shades Freed*. London: Cornerstone Digital.
- MEYER, STEPHENIE. 2010. *The Twilight Saga Complete Collection*. USA: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
- MODLESKI, TANIA. 1984. *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*. New York & London: Routledge.

- MOSCOVICI, SERGE. 2000. *Social Representation: Essays in Social Psychology*. London: Polity Press.
- O'CLARE, KATHERINE. 2012. "Why I Hate Fifty Shades of Grey (It's not for the reasons you Think)." *Crushable*, 30 Jul., [Online] Available at: <http://www.crushable.com/2012/07/30/entertainment/fifty-shades-of-grey-sexual-assault-bdsm-603/> (20 Dec. 2012).
- PIAZZA, JO. 2012. "Erotic Novel '50 Shades of Grey' Unites Gals, Unnerves Some Guys." *Fox News*, 14 Mar., [Online] Available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2012/03/14/erotic-novel-50-shades-grey-unites-women-unnerves-some-men/> (25 Dec. 2012).
- PURCELL, CAREY. 2013. "Fifty Shades of Feminism: A Response to E.L. James' 'Fifty Shades of Grey'." *Huffington Post*, 2 Jan., [Online] Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carey-purcell/fifty-shades-of-grey-feminism_b_2395932.html?utm_hp_ref=arts&ir=Arts (9 Jan. 2013).
- ZIZEK, SLAVOJ. 2012. "Interview with Katie Engelhart." *Salon*, 29 Dec., [Online] Available at: http://www.salon.com/2012/12/29/slavoj_zizek_i_am_not_the_worlds_hippest_philosopher/ (10 Jan. 2012).