

BEATING BDSM: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF FIFTY SHADES OF GREY

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When first asked to write on *Fifty Shades of Grey* for The Record, I was ready to laugh at some horrible screenwriting and a ridiculous portrayal of over-the-top BDSM (which stands for bondage, domination, sadism, and masochism). And believe me I did laugh (rather loudly) at certain points, much to the annoyance of the middle-aged white ladies and slightly uncomfortable couples surrounding me. But what I experienced was a lot more troubling than laughable. I knew there would be a lot of sex in the film, it being about a BDSM relationship after all. Around twenty minutes of the one hundred and twenty minute film were taken up with graphic BDSM sex scenes which could make even Rihanna, who we all know loves “whips and chains,” uncomfortable. But the danger in this story lies behind the BDSM sex, in the true emotional abuse that is occurring in the main characters’ relationship. This emotional abuse is then manifested in the main characters sexual relationship, twisting BDSM into abusive power and control rather than loving consent.

Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele’s relationship (yes, her name is Anastasia) starts out with a very obvious power differential. She is just about to graduate from college when she interviews Grey, a rich CEO of some major corporation, who then goes on to develop a creepy obsession with her. She walks into his huge office and sits down while he towers over her. The power dynamic is made even more obvious when Grey immediately begins ridiculing her and points out how she is not conducting the interview properly. This being their first interaction it can be truly hard to understand how and why a relationship forms between them. But this is not the case for all the women sitting in the theater. All they see is a powerful, good looking, and rich man taking notice on a poor, clumsy, and innocent college student. They see this emotional abuse as romantic. I could see on the women’s faces that they were thinking something along the lines of “Wow, this amazing man sees something in this quirky girl. That could be me.”

Anastasia’s and Grey’s relationship from this point on shows many different signs of an emotionally and psycho-

logically abusive relationship. First sign: he starts stalking her directly after they meet. He shows up at her workplace and pretends it is coincidental. Later in the film he shows up at her apartment, though she had not told him where she lived. (I was thinking to myself as I clutched my armrests “How does no one else have a problem with this? He is at her apartment!”) He shows up at a bar where she is celebrating with friends. He knows where she was at all times because he was tracking her phone...tracking her phone... Second, he is incredibly controlling. When he shows up at the bar unannounced he beats up a guy that likes her then says to her “You are mine. Only mine.” (Ok, buddy, calm down.) He steals her car to buy her a fancy new one without asking. Yes, I said steal. He gets angry at her when she decides to visit her mom for a vacation. This leads to sign number three: he isolates her from her friends and family members. He disallows her from talking to anyone about their relationship, placing her in a position in which she is completely cut off from everyone she is close to except for him. And finally, he is emotionally manipulative to get his way within each of the aforementioned situations.

But how is all of this abuse made out to be romantic? He uses what appear to be logical reasons as to why he stalks her (because of love, *obviously*), why he is possessive of her (because of his all-consuming passion, *obviously*), and why he isolates her (because of the delicate nature of their BDSM relationship, *obviously*). The audience is convinced of his care for her through his obsessive behaviors. We are manipulated by the screen, just as Anastasia by Grey, into believing all these horribly abusive behaviors are just evidence of his passionate love for her. And just in case that fails, all of these emotionally and psychologically abusive elements are cleverly concealed by a whole lot of sex—which we all know for a fact is very distracting.

By covering up all the emotional and psychological abuse with a lot of sex, this film is able to convince the audience that Grey’s possessiveness, control, and obsession are romantic. No matter what one’s moral opinion of BDSM sex is, what happens in the film is not in any way “okay,” inasmuch as Grey’s

and Anastasia's sexual liaisons are simply expressions of violent emotional abuse translated *into* violent sexual abuse. By distracting the audience with sex the film not only eroticizes violence but also socializes us to be attracted to abuse and the abuser. It has done this so well that many women, young and old, want to attract a Christian Grey and many men want to be him. More to the point, as psychiatrist Dr. Miriam Grossman so aptly puts it, "*Fifty Shades of Grey* teaches [women] that pain and humiliation are erotic, and [tells men] that [women] want a guy who controls, intimidates, and threatens."

This eroticization and romanticization of emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse causes far more than a perpetuation of rape culture (although, trust me, it does do that). The film explains that Christian Grey is how he is for a reason. He had a rough childhood. Grey's first sexual experiences began at 15 years old with a much older woman, who established herself as his Dominant. Grey is essentially a victim of sexual assault and abuses his lovers in the same way he was treated as a child. The film never acknowledges that his past is abusive. In fact, it uses his history to normalize his behavior, which in any other context would be seen as horribly sick. In this way, the film glorifies the perpetuation of the abuse he suffered. He is a messed-up, brooding, tortured dude who believes he is incapable of loving or being loved. This makes him a "romantic" and pitiable figure in need of sympathy. This need for sympathy is utilized to excuse his abuse and to push the notion that Anastasia can change her abuser by staying with him. This not only portrays a very dangerous way of dealing with abusive relationships, but also belittles those who are currently in or are survivors of abuse.

"Rape is power, not sex." This saying was coined by a rape crisis movement in the 1970s and is utterly vital to know in order to understand sexual violence. Sexual violence is all about power. Grey and Anastasia's sexual relationship is not based on love or even just desire; it is based on power. BDSM, and its portrayal in pornography and movies like *Fifty Shades* "eroticizes hierarchy, [and] it sexualizes inequality." Individuals are rewired to find violence erotic. Dr. Pamela Cooper-White claims that "one of the most dangerous aspects" of the "blending [of] sex and violence is the depiction of the woman as experiencing arousal, orgasm, or other enjoyment as a result of sexual assault."

It is important to know why this movie is harmful. It is not because it is rated R. It is not because it is sexually explicit. It is because it makes abuse seem romantic and sexual violence seem erotic. And this is terribly dangerous. If we are not aware of why something is harmful, how can we fight the implications of it within our society or even just in our own lives? Acknowledging the danger in such a film as *Fifty Shades of Grey* allows us to push even further to examine where we are accepting less apparent versions of the same lies.

We may not have much of a BDSM problem at Wheaton College, thankfully. But emotional and psychological abuse can be a lot harder to identify, especially when we live in a wid-

er culture that makes submissiveness cute and control manly. There might be many situations on Wheaton's campus of emotional and psychological abuse and we must be able to identify them. These are the roots that most sexual assault and domestic violence stem from. And Wheaton's sub-culture has many specific ways in which it potentially perpetuates these greater cultural beliefs. Even something as simple as the ideal that only men should do the asking-out creates a power hierarchy that is dangerous. We make this ideal romantic as well, without even realizing that we are actually romanticizing men having power over women in the conduct of a romantic relationship. Of course, guys asking girls out is not a bad thing. But when we make it the norm, and when we make assertive women (for example girls who ask boys out) foreign, we misrepresent their intentions. Girls who make the first move are often perceived to be very interested in their date, while this action does not carry the same connotations for men. Even something as petty as men making the first move must be applied as a preference and not a necessity, with the understanding that women have equal agency at every point in the relationship.

Another belief our subculture has is our strong stance on women's modesty. This is one of the most starkly one sided values in our culture. We instruct women to be modest, that their purity extends to her outward appearance, but for men there is no converse application. Women are forced to have ridiculous conversations on the morality of yoga pants or necklines, while men are essentially free to wear whatever they want. This double standard essentially implies that visually, the female body is full of potential for sin, while the male is all but void of sexual temptation. For men, modesty is merely a spiritual practice. Men remain modest by turning from sexual temptation, by rejecting the sinful nature in the female body. This focuses all physical manifestations of sexual sin on the women. While not explicitly blaming her for abuse or violence, the question must be raised, "What about your body was inciting your attacker's lust?" Although Christian morality in no way approves of Grey's actions, our own actions still oppress women. We make them easier targets of abuse than men, and place the cause of sexual sin in their body and the man's heart. The markings of female immodesty are physical, while men's are spiritual. Thus we can see female ambivalence towards modesty merely by looking at women, with men we only see it when their spiritual ambivalence becomes physical. In the case of abusive relationships, it is already too late to save the victim from suffering.

In conclusion, this film is pretty lame. The only redeeming thing was the remix of Beyoncé's "Crazy In Love." It promotes sexual violence and domestic abuse (psychological, emotional, and physical). It is the story of a victim of sexual abuse perpetuating this abuse. The plot romanticizes emotional abuse and glorifies sexual assault. Although most of us will never spend a penny on the franchise and actively disapprove of its implications, the film opens a door to discuss our community and our cultural structure that can place women in passive postures, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and victimization.

