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Shades of Grey, Indeed: A Nuanced Feminist Analysis of Women's Submission in BDSM Erotica

Tamara Rutledge

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Tamara Rutledge

Shades of Grey, Indeed: A Nuanced Feminist Analysis of Women's Submission in BDSM

Erotica

Women's frank writing about sex—specifically BDSM relationships—is just as taboo, scandalous, and exciting now in the twenty-first century with the 2011 publication of E. L. James's BDSM erotica *Fifty Shades of Grey* as it was in 1954 when a woman using the pseudonym Pauline Reage published the novel *Story of O* about a woman's submissive journey. The French government banned *Story of O* for its explicit sexual content, and mystery surrounded the author's real identity (Bedell; Kaufmann 883). Almost universally, French feminists living at the time condemned the book, asserting that it could only have been written by a man wanting to push a patriarchal agenda (Poggi 77).

More recently, E. L. James's erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* did not fare any better than the 50s novel *Story of O* in feminists' eyes. Some of the same accusations, such as the fact that the novel idealizes toxic relationships and devalues women's bodies and agency, are the same criticisms that were leveled at Pauline Reage. Although *Fifty Shades* and *O* are vastly different in their representations of submission, messages about women and sexuality, and writing styles, all of which I will explore more later, they are worth looking at together because of their themes of female sexual submission and similar cultural impact at the times of their publication. As testament to their popularity and cultural power, both novels have reached bestseller status and were popular enough to garner movie adaptations. That *Story of O* has never been out of print is testimony to its worth as a subject of study, and despite the fact that James is not the first to explore the BDSM erotica genre, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, with its very recent

publication, has called attention to a genre that most people were happy to ignore, a genre with an overwhelmingly female fanbase.

Story of O by Pauline Reage follows a young Parisian photographer who is addressed throughout the novel by her initial O. At the start of the story, O and her partner Rene are in a car on their way to Roissy, a castle that serves as the base for what contemporary readers might consider a sex cult where women are trained in the art of submission. At Roissy, the men may have sex with any woman they want, and the women are not allowed to look at the faces of any of the men or speak to them. Once a woman leaves Roissy, she is given a ring to identify her, and even outside of Roissy, any man who recognizes the ring and wishes to have sex with the woman who wears it may do so. O enters Roissy to prove her love and devotion to Rene, but he gives O to his friend Sir Stephen, and the men use O to try and recruit other women to Roissy. O later completes her submissive training with Anne-Marie and a group of other women submissives. However, the men's attitudes towards O change, and the story ends tragically for her. Sir Stephen's and Rene's interests in O evaporate, seemingly because of their new interest in O's friend; and because O has built her entire life and meaning around the men and her relationship to them, she would rather kill herself than go on living without them.

While many of the characters in *O* are neither heterosexual nor monogamous, the central relationship in *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James is familiarly monogamous and heteronormative. Anastasia Steele is a recent college graduate who meets Christian Grey, a handsome CEO, when she interviews him for the student newspaper in place of her sick roommate. Ana and Christian find themselves attracted to each other, but Ana is repulsed when Christian shows her his BDSM dungeon. Despite the fact that their needs are incompatible, they try to negotiate a relationship throughout the novel while all Ana wants is for Christian to give

up his dominant sexual desires and lead a vanilla life with her. The trilogy ends with marriage and children.

This paper will analyze the above works through a feminist lens. Both historical French feminist theorists and contemporary writers will inform the analysis as well as interviews with and statements from the writers and fans themselves. Women's writing, especially in the romance and erotica genres, is often quickly dismissed as being silly and frivolous, and along with this, the readers and their desires are often treated similarly and subject to ridicule. In many people's minds, erotica is not useful or meaningful writing, which prompts one to ask what readers of all kinds can learn from erotica. Can erotica ever be art, and if it can, what is the boundary between pornography and art? How does a woman's submissive identity fit with her concept of herself as a feminist? The popularity and staying power of these books certainly says something about modern Western societies and women's places within them. Anastasia Steele's character, no matter how problematic and flat we may see her, is important because of the world of meaning that created her and evolves around her and exists because of her. The disturbing force of O's submission and the life of the woman who created her force us to consider the limits and meaning of sexuality and emotion in women's (imagined and real) lives.

As a result of centuries of Western literature being dominated by men, women writers and feminists are examining what it means to write as a woman in a world where men's writing and writing styles are still valued above women's. Written in 1975, Helene Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" links women's sexual pleasure and personal power with their writing, claiming that both have been long repressed and calling for women to reclaim their sexual and creative spirits. Cixous describes creativity as its own kind of birth and motherhood, and she cites the libido as a catalyst for political and social change (9-10). In the 80s, not long after the

publication of Cixous's essay, French feminist Xaviere Gauthier asks whether women's writing differs from men's and if women's writing identifies them as women (161). She goes on to explain that women's writing should not merely conform to the standards set before them by men, but that "their speech should disrupt" (Gauthier 162-63). She closes her essay by asserting, "If the reader feels a bit disoriented in this new space, one which is obscure and silent, it proves perhaps, that it is women's space" (164). Unlike Pauline Reage's contemporaries, I would argue that her writing does have an "obscure and silent" quality, an obvious female voice. The disrupting speech that Gauthier cites can be found in the writing of women who break outside of the masculine conventions of writing by fearlessly writing their sexualities into their work by harnessing it as creative energy. Controversial content aside, *O* has the authentic sound of a woman writing a woman's thoughts and feelings, of which I will explore more later. People's hesitancy to label the book as pornography because of its uniquely poetic and minimalist prose or, as journalist Geraldine Bedell at *The Observer* puts it, "an almost hallucinatory, erotic intensity" points to its disorienting quality.

Cixous writes that "almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality" (14). According to Cixous, this tradition of women who tackle matters of women's pleasure and sexuality in their writing is just beginning to gain strength. In the Preface to *Delta of Venus*, a posthumously published work, Anais Nin explains that "France has had a tradition of literary erotic writing, in fine, elegant style" (xii). Nin herself, a French-American writer, is part of this tradition along with French writer Pauline Reage. Interestingly, the short works that comprise *Delta of Venus* were originally written for a male patron, as explained in the book's preface (Nin vii). This recalls the very similar situation that Reage wrote under, on a dare from her male lover who believed women could not write erotica (Bedell; Paulhan xxxi). Either

way, these tales of feminine sexuality were originally conceived because of men. This does not tarnish them, however. Nin explains that “for centuries we had only one model for this literary genre—the writing of men” (xiv). She continues on to explain how writing erotica was a learning experience for her, a quest to find a female voice that is distinct from men’s voices (Nin xv). Cixous proposes a related thought, explaining that sexual modesty has caused women to ignore their bodies (14), and as a result, their creativity has suffered and so needs to be rediscovered.

One could see BDSM erotica, a combination of sexuality and creativity, as a possible fulfillment of Cixous’s vision. It is easy to dismiss E. L. James’s trilogy for many reasons, but is doing so harmful to the women who have (re)claimed their sexualities as a result of reading James’s work? For many women, reading romance novels, and *Fifty Shades* in particular, functions as a “declaration of participation” by allowing women to openly discuss women’s sexuality in a way that was being excluded in the larger public debate (Deller and Smith 937). Ruth Deller and Clarissa Smith explain the use of the label “mommy porn” and how it is used to further “denigrate” women-centered genres (936). The addition of the adjective “mommy” in front of the word “porn” points to another level of oppression of women’s lives and work because it implies that the job and role of a mother are exclusive of sexuality, that being a mother means that one is no longer a sexual being. Additionally, Deller and Smith point out that the “mommy porn” insult “understands the novels as so tame and vanilla that *even* mothers indulge in it” (936). Sexually explicit materials aimed at men do not have these types of modifiers because male sexuality is “normal.” *Fifty Shades* is a perfect example of the “‘domestication of pornography’, the taming of a genre traditionally understood to be male” (938). In this way, *Fifty Shades* is subversive by claiming for women what has always been the domain of men.

For many women, literature is the primary way that they encounter sexually explicit content, possibly because mainstream porn is both unacceptable for “good” women to be interested in and unappealing to women because of its objectifying male gaze. Erotic literature is also an interesting genre because it is created primarily by women and intended for a female audience, unlike the bulk of visual pornography. Therefore, especially with the advent of ebooks, literature is a more acceptable, safe, and anonymous way for women to engage with their sexual fantasies (Deller and Smith 933). That “women’s” or “feminist” porn exists outside of mainstream pornography points to the fact that women’s sexualities still make many people uncomfortable and are thus not actively catered to. The invention of feminist porn is a direct response to the mainstream’s neglect and fear of women’s sexualities, revealing the need for women to write about women’s lives for other women.

The fact that these works are produced by and for women raises important questions about pleasure and sexual consent. Although the women’s movement has advanced women’s rights and roles in romantic relationships through the legal system, many heterosexual relationships still follow traditional gender norms that remain unquestioned by the people involved in the relationship and the larger society. In her article on gender norms and their relationship to kink, Lisa Downing points out that novels like *Fifty Shades* and the public’s simultaneous fascination with and fear of kink work together to cover up the “ethically and politically problematic aspect of heteronormative courtship narratives ending in marriage and reproduction by othering and scapegoating non-normative practices such as those included under the BDSM umbrella” (92). She argues that we should examine more closely what we consider “normal” because the assumption of what is normal also being without harm is dangerous (Downing 95).

Ana represents the norm, longing for a “hearts and flowers” romance that ultimately ends in marriage. Christian represents danger and the taboo as he tries to get Ana to sign the BDSM contract throughout the book. Christian points out that the contract is not legally binding and that it is not something that he could enforce (James). However, a marriage on the other hand would be legally binding. In this case, the unknown is presented as being more dangerous than a normative relationship dynamic, and the conflict in the novel revolves around whether or not Ana will enter into a submissive relationship with Christian. Within the BDSM contract, expectations and consent are to be fully negotiated to ensure each person’s safety and comfort, a very feminist thing to do when entering into a new relationship. Yet explicitly laying out what one wants or expects is depicted as uncomfortable and threatening compared to the vague expectations of vanilla romance (James). Most uncomfortably, as a result of Ana’s unwillingness to be open about sex, she never seems to give her consent, and even if she does tell Christian that she trusts him, she questions his motives and her safety (James). This creates an atmosphere of dubious consent that ends with Ana storming away from Christian. While Ana repeatedly dreams of a relationship without kink, she never stops to consider that abuse can also happen within the confines of a traditional marriage relationship. Unlike vanilla heteronormative relationships, BDSM relationships are one dynamic that has an explicitly stated and acknowledged power difference between participants. However, women often take the submissive role to a dominant male partner in heterosexual kink relationships, which is the aspect of BDSM that feminists take the most issue with.

As with many debates, two distinct feminist perspectives—sex-positive feminism and radical feminism—have formed on the subject of women’s participation as submissive partners to men in the context of BDSM (also known as SM, S&M, or D/s) relationships, both in real life

and in literature. Sex-positive feminists tend to believe that all sexualities and practices (including BDSM and submission) are feminist if a woman is making a choice and asserting her right to sexual pleasure as she sees fit. As a result of women's sexualities being repressed and labeled as dangerous and unnatural by men for centuries, sex-positive feminists believe that any woman claiming sexual pleasure is a positive and feminist act. However, radical feminists look closely at the inherent sexism in many societal norms and practices, seeing them as oppressive to women, and wish to deconstruct these systems. Therefore, in the case of BDSM, radical feminists see such a power dynamic as imitating and enforcing the patriarchal structure that has held women down in the past. To preface this discussion, it is important to make a distinction between those who practice BDSM in real life and the events and characters within novels. The real-life BDSM community operates under a strict code of consent and safety and largely does not support the kind of relationship dynamics portrayed in novels like *Fifty Shades*, denouncing them as unhealthy, unrealistic, and dangerous.

When it comes to real-world BDSM, Angelika Tsaros points to a perspective outside of the sex-positive/radical feminist dichotomy. She discusses Maneesha Dekha's "world-travelling" approach which asks feminists to look at the BDSM subculture with fresh eyes, detached from automatic cultural assumptions and history, therefore seeing the BDSM subculture as one would a different country. She argues that this would allow for "a reconsideration of SM as a legitimate feminist praxis" (869). She goes on to reason that "a more honest dialogue" would arise if feminists recognized the legitimacy of other women's sexual choices, even as they occur in a world colored by patriarchal norms. This take can be refreshing, as dichotomies quickly become inadequate when dealing with the topic of BDSM. Additionally, Alex Dymock cites work that tries to reconcile the pro- and anti-BDSM camps by asking feminists to acknowledge women's

choices to participate in a relationship, abilities to negotiate the boundaries of the relationship, and “[submissive women's] strong differentiation between fantasy and reality” (58).

While the above arguments steps outside of the sex-positive versus radical feminist dichotomy when trying to discuss BDSM, Alex Dymock also explores why feminists have often resorted to polarizing arguments. Sex-positive feminists tend to explain that BDSM is inherently transgressive by being outside of the norm and that it therefore acts as a form of resistance, continuing on to explain that the power play in an SM relationship are simulated inequality rather than actual inequality. Meanwhile, Lisa Downing points out that sex-positive feminists tend to focus too much on a woman’s sexual pleasure and orgasm in a way that can be reductive, pointing out that “many women orgasm in the course of sexual abuse or rape” (94). The radical feminist side counters that SM relationships are approving of differential power in relationships simply by enacting them, therefore supporting "paternalistic, violent heterosexuality" (58). Some radical feminists have responded that the eroticization of male dominance is a result of dealing with men’s violence (Downing 94). However, Downing sees this too as a reductive view.

A French feminist theorist writing during the later 20th century, Luce Irigaray falls more on the side of the radical feminists in her analysis. She explains that in many cases, women are the “complacent facilitator for . . . men’s fantasies” and that women experience “vicarious pleasure” through pleasing men (100). Irigaray argues that rather than enacting one’s own agency and achieving one’s own pleasure, for a woman heterosexual sex “is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own and that leaves her in her well-known state of dependency . . . she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants” (100).

If Irigaray could stage an intervention for O and help her reclaim her selfhood, what would it look like? One familiar with O could see how Irigaray's assertions about heterosexual sex and women's dependency on men in order to experience pleasure apply to O despite O's support of her relationship dynamics and being able to see the situation for what it is. Throughout the novel, O thinks of herself in terms of an object, even using the word "prostitution" in reference to herself and is helpless when the men she has devoted herself to begin to abandon her. When O attains the height of her submission at the end of the novel, the men seem to want nothing more to do with her, having destroyed her personality completely. She is merely an object to the people around her at the party as she sits, masked and still, like an anonymous statue as the party guests fondle her. In the very last paragraph of her novel, Reage writes, "O, seeing Sir Stephen was about to leave her, said she would prefer to die. Sir Stephen gave her his consent" (196). O's situation is a perfect illustration of the destruction that results when one follows the dependency that Irigaray describes to its extreme conclusion.

Later in her essay, Irigaray cites "discover[ing] the love of other women" as one step towards women taking back their power. This, perhaps, is the advice that Irigaray would give to O. Here, though, I would like to point out that Irigaray is not against heterosexual relationships, seeing their restriction as "another form of this amputation of power that is traditionally associated with women" (106). Rather, I think Irigaray is advocating for the building of relationships and communities among women in order for women to recognize their power as an individual. Readers of *Story of O* must wonder if changing one event would have led O down a different path. What if, before being taken to Roissy, O confessed her affection for her female co-worker Jaqueline? Even by the time O goes to Anne-Marie to further her submissive training exclusively among other women, it is too late. All of her interactions with women are colored by

her desire to please Sir Stephen and, by extension, Rene, but not purely for herself. O's musings about Jaqueline midway through the novel take on a level of honesty and realism that pull one out of the plot's fantastical elements. O's thoughts sound like the words of a woman who knows what it feels like to have crushes on women, one of the main reasons why the rumors of Pauline Reage being a man do not make intuitive sense. In fact, in modern terms, Pauline Reage (or Dominique Aury/Anne Desclos)¹ would have been identified as bisexual and polyamorous, devoted to a "fidelity . . . of hearts rather than bodies" (Bedell; Kaufmann 893), and this comes through in her writing.

If O is a master at introspection and understanding the conventions driving her, then Ana, the protagonist of *Fifty Shades*, is at the opposite end of the spectrum of understanding, often resorting to a shallow virgin/prostitute dichotomy when thinking about herself and Christian Grey's previous submissives, often using the term "sex slave" to describe them (James). Irigaray saw "social roles" for women limited to the virgin, prostitute, or mother, explaining, "Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has a woman any right to her own pleasure" (187). The above roles are the "safe" and conditioned ways that society categorizes women and therefore controls their sexuality.

Despite the fact that Ana does have sex with Christian, she stays in the virgin category. By Irigaray's definition, this includes "modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure" (186). When Anastasia and Christian eventually discuss the BDSM relationship contract in detail, Ana blushes and balks at most of Christian's interests and requests, and Christian laughs at her reactions, saying, "You're just so inexperienced," when she questions

¹ Because she has been identified by three pseudonyms and used them at different times in her life for different works, I will alternate among them throughout the paper. When using a certain name, I am following the practice of the specific secondary source that I am dealing with.

how anal sex works (James). That Ana's sexual inexperience is constantly discussed as something that makes her desirable is uncomfortably similar to the fetishizing of women who have not yet had sexual partners. In these cases, a woman's value is reduced to her worth as a sexual object. Pages later, when Christian expresses his desire to have sex with her, she is confused while simultaneously thinking of how "[her] blood pounds through [her] body, warming places [she] didn't know existed until very recently," reminding the reader once more of her innocence (James).

Lisa Downing argues that there is nothing new in the above, writing that "the idea of the woman who is initiated into BDSM by a more experienced, often older, man is a long-standing and somewhat ubiquitous trope in both fictional and first-person confessional accounts" (96). The emphasis on Ana's complete sexual inexperience heightens this fact. It is important to note that Ana *never* signs the contract that would officially make her a submissive, and although Christian is constantly bringing up the contract as a discussion point, he continues to have sex with Ana throughout the novel despite the fact that she always seems hesitant. Downing very appropriately uses the term "ambiguous coercion" to describe Ana's and Christian's sexual encounters. Downing sees Ana's "mild, sometimes faked, form of submission" aligned with the general view that women are naturally subservient and obedient in their everyday lives, saying that Ana's submission is not related to eroticism (97).

Throughout the novel, Ana shows very little real agency. The "inner goddess" segments seem like a weak attempt on James's part to maintain the character's virgin-like modesty by showing her resisting Christian (and therefore, the reader should think, being a strong, independent woman), when in fact, she does little to act outside of her thoughts. Ana's inner goddess, a more outspoken personality constrained to Ana's thoughts, will dance, smack her lips,

stomp her feet, wave her fists, or pant as Ana alternates between being furious with Christian and, later, longing to have sex with him, but none of the characters except Ana is aware of this internal monologue. Outwardly, Ana continues to blush, whisper, or mutter (James). This strange dichotomy in Ana's head points back to the social roles (especially those of the virgin and prostitute) Irigaray described. James seems to include Ana's mental resistance as a way of trying to relieve Ana of any actual responsibility. Ana does not verbally express her desire for sex even when she does feel sexual, and she believes that the boundaries of the relationship are outside of her control (James).

Additionally, Ana sees herself as a "sex slave" to Christian, "a receptacle—an empty vessel to be filled at his whim," and "a convenient new toy that he can bed and do unspeakable things to," all while acknowledging, "if I do this thing with him, I will get hurt" (James). Ana fears losing him if she speaks up for her needs but resents him because he is not "normal." In these moments of insight she usually cries or feels a painful tug at her heart but resolves to continue with the relationship for reasons that are not entirely clear. Because James restricts Ana to her inner goddess, Christian is the only actor in the story, and Ana and her tumultuous thoughts go along with him.

Alternatively, in *Story of O*, as O looks at her naked body in a mirror, Reage writes, "And yet never had she felt herself more totally committed to a will which was not her own, more totally a slave, and more content to be so" (58). While some of the language in *O* sounds similar to that of *Fifty Shades*, the key differences here when compared to Ana's thoughts above are the words "committed" and "content." Whenever Ana refers to herself or Christian's previous fifteen submissives as "slaves," it is always with derisive apprehension while O is at peace with her decisions and relationships.

O subverts relationship norms and lacks the appropriate inner goddess segments to make it palatable to the mainstream, whereas *Fifty Shades* works to obscure whatever non-normative content there is. *Fifty Shades*' widespread appeal points to what Lisa Downing terms "kinkphobia," the fact that the mainstream is actually uncomfortable with BDSM and therefore tend to normalize it within a heteronormative framework and seek an explanation for the characters' kinks rather than just seeing it as a natural part of them. Kinkphobia is likely one reason why *Story of O* has not seen the kind of attention that *Fifty Shades* has in the U.S. Downing explains that *Fifty Shades* caters to "generic expectations of romance and the books' very mainstream intended readership," therefore limiting the plot and characters (92). Downing points out that *Fifty Shades* is actually "a very classic romance" in which "closure is found in the marriage plot" and the BDSM element is for "'novelty' value" only (93).

Important to note, however, is the *Fifty Shades* fanbase's reactions to the book, which they do not see as problematic but rather empowering as a whole. During an event allowing fans to meet with James, one fan exclaims to the author, "You have changed every mother, and if you're not a mother, every woman's life," amidst a roomful of adoring, screaming women (Luscombe, Tsai, and Laub). "It's my fantasy writ large. I created this mystery man. He's very good looking, he's very good at sex, he's disgustingly rich. He's every woman's dream in a way—well he's certainly my dream," James says of the books (Luscombe, Tsai, and Laub). James's comment is a perfect summation of stereotypical romance genre plot that *Fifty Shades* has been derided for, yet the book has become something far greater and meaningful to many readers. James says, "I get the most extraordinary, heart wrenching emails from people who have been deeply touched by the books" (Luscombe, Tsai, and Laub).

Everyone seems to have a response to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, many of them more complex than the binaries presented in news accounts, and people's conversations about the book serve many purposes. Ruth Deller and Clarissa Smith point out the importance of factoring reader reactions into the dialogue around the book because the media conversation has tended to omit reader voices in favor of conversations about mainstreaming BDSM and criticizing the book's tropes (932). Not all readers fall into the polarizing camps of loving vs hating *Fifty Shades*. In their study, Deller and Smith found that some readers could be critical of the book while still enjoying the romance (944). While much of the criticism of the book has focused on the clichéd and unfeminist imagining of Ana's character, some readers did not find any problem with her relationship with Christian and found his attraction to her ordinariness appealing rather than improbable (944). While one reader in the study found the ease and frequency with which Ana orgasmed "MOST OFFENSIVE," 67% of the readers in the study found *Fifty Shades* arousing (945).

Whether Pauline Reage's contemporaries found *Story of O* arousing is more difficult information to find. However, there is evidence that the process of writing *O* was empowering for Reage in a way that reading *Fifty Shades* is for some. In an essay discussing the real-life elements that could have influenced the novel, Dominique Aury states that the personality of Anne-Marie's character, the single dominant female character in the novel, was based on her friend Edith Thomas. Reage explains how "from [Edith Thomas] Anne-Marie could have derived her resolve and her rigor, and her clean and upright way of exercising her profession" (qtd. in Kaufman 896). Interestingly, when Aury presented her novel to Thomas, her friend was "horrified, scandalized" (qtd. in Kaufman 897).

While people may have a similar reaction to the novel as Edith Thomas, and while feminists often reduce the work to that of a sexist man with a power fantasy, Aury had thought very deeply about the depth of O's submission and what it meant. Complicating the image of the writer of *O* as a sexist man, Aury self-identified as a feminist, aligning herself with "a feminism of equality rather than of difference" and gracefully acknowledged speculation about the male authorship of *O* by saying that people are entitled to their own imaginations (Kaufman 900). Part of Aury's own philosophy was inspired by Francois de Fenelon, a priest who was cast out of the church for his subversive writings about love (Kaufman 897). Fenelon writes about finding happiness amid pain and suffering, ultimately stating that "profane love" and "sacred love" are not different at all, only the object of the love (897). From this, Kaufman concludes, "O's terrifying desire to be sexually degraded and destroyed by the lover to whom she ascribes absolute power is inseparable from her yearning to be freed from herself and given over completely to the transcended being she adores," for this reason calling the work "pornographic mysticism" (897). This is the perfect name for the tone of Aury's work for it is highly philosophical, and the sexual elements do not exist merely for masturbatory purposes. Even while Aury describes the sex acts in detail, the characters do not feel objectified though a male gaze. The women's lives and emotions are real, and the plot is not merely a vehicle for sex, as happens in a lot of contemporary erotica. To expand on the above assertions, the plot is very much a vehicle for personal exploration and philosophical questioning.

All of this makes sense when looking at the life of the author. Kaufman claims that Aury's life "was that of a rebel against traditional expectations for women of her generation" (897). Occupationally, she worked as a writer and literary critic and was involved in the stress of political activism. Kaufman suggests that Aury's "underground self" arose because of the stress

she faced in these visible roles (902). She devoted herself fully to her political cause similarly to the way that O gives up her self to prove her love. While many people fully equate a writer's work with their personal life and desires, Aury presents a more nuanced perspective that simultaneously claims *Story of O* while also distancing the author from her work: "“Fantasies are unlivable, but they help in living”" (903). For those who may question why someone, especially a woman, would write a work like *Story of O*, Aury makes it clear that a woman's feminism and self-liberation can take many different forms. Desire can be both part of and outside a person, something that is useful as one works through meaning and identity while simultaneously being something that the person would not want to experience in reality. Perhaps the sexual nature of the novel prompts people to read it in a literal, straightforward manner, the way one would with material created for purely pornographic purposes.

Pauline Reage's multiple pseudonyms point to the fact that she does not want to be easily pinned down nor does she want her work to be quickly dismissed after surface level judgments. Kaufman acknowledges, "The female signature of the text matters," that one's reading of it needs to hinge on this understanding (902). While the writer of the novel was still anonymous and many readers assumed the writer to be a man, one type of reading was given. However, feminists need to begin again with their analysis of the text in light of the author's true gender. Kaufman asserts that one must keep in mind that even the male characters, Rene and Sir Stephen, have feminine attributes, and even though O takes a submissive role throughout the novel, the power that Aury wields as writer balances that (902).

Readers' tendencies to automatically characterize works like *Story of O* as pornographic rather than erotic points to what black lesbian feminist writer Audre Lorde identifies in her essay "Uses of the Erotic" as a cultural problem among those raised in a European-American way of

thinking. Rather, the pornographic and the erotic are at two opposite ends of a spectrum, with the erotic being based in one's full acknowledgment and acceptance of their spirituality and emotion and pornography being a "plasticized sensation" that strips feeling from not only one's erotic encounters but also one's daily life (Lorde). Lorde explains that the erotic, which can be a great source of power for women, is misidentified and suppressed to the detriment of women's entire mode of being, thinking, and feeling. She acknowledges those who favor the suppression of the erotic as a way for women to reclaim power, saying that this is only an "illusory" power that has been created within a narrative of male dominance (Lorde). "Of course, women so empowered are dangerous," Lorde explains, "So we are taught to separate the erotic demand from the most vital areas of our lives other than sex" (Lorde).

Lorde's ideas about the erotic might explain the undertone of derision and fascination in much of the media coverage around the *Fifty Shades* fandom and the banning of *Story of O* in 1950s France. Women writing about sex and women who own their own sexuality and sensuality through their writing are dangerous because they inspire other women's sleeping erotic natures in a way that does not involve men and works directly against social prescriptions for "proper" womanly behavior. Lorde, citing the Greek origin of the word "erotic," says, "When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives." Women writing erotica is perhaps one of the highest expressions of this "creative energy empowered," and this rings similarly to Cixous's insistence that women write themselves and their experiences. Perhaps Kaufman's description of *O* as "pornographic mysticism" should be revised in light of feminist theory. Coming from Lorde's understanding of the erotic, the "mysticism" part of the term is especially appropriate, but the

word “mysticism” implies the spiritual and emotional elements that Lorde sees as necessary to the erotic while pornography is in direct opposition to these traits. Therefore “pornographic mysticism” becomes a contradiction. Instead, Reage’s novel should be considered “erotic mysticism” or just “erotic” if everything that composes mysticism is contained within that single word.

One cannot come down with a straightforward decision on whether these books are feminist or not, which is what a lot of people understandably try to do. Rather, in light of all the above feminist theory, I prefer to see these works as existing on a spectrum in which something can have more or less feminist elements. For instance, with *Story of O*, the book is written by a woman who identifies as feminist, and the novel has some feminist elements such as a woman exploring her sexuality. One must also understand that the events in the work were not meant to be taken as some sort of aspiration on the part of the author. It is the product of a woman sorting through her own life and desire through fiction. All of these are very feminist things, but the ending of the novel makes it very hard for one to declare it *a* feminist work. Although O’s complete loss of identity is a fictional representation of one’s fervent searching for self and understanding, she does ultimately wish to kill herself because she has lost her individuality and life purpose in pursuit of pleasing two men, both of whom decide they do not want her in the end (and do not seem to care about her wellbeing). Still, one must understand that the author was not condoning or idealizing this behavior but rather using the medium of fiction as self-exploration to go to an extreme that would be damaging in real life. However, this does not negate the fact that it is a very disturbing, depressing, and disempowering ending for a woman.

Fifty Shades of Grey also seems very unfeminist on the surface, but one must break down the elements and examine them individually. Like Reage, James is a woman exploring her desire

and sexuality through writing. Her book has also inspired other women to examine their own sexualities and desires and made many fans very happy by providing not only entertainment but helping them reclaim their sexual desires in a society that tells women that desire is shameful and should be hidden. Along that line, James's book has sparked public conversation (albeit sometimes reductive and shallow) around women's sexuality, something that has long been ignored. The problems come in when one examines the book's content. It is very heteronormative, the central relationship romanticizes a man's abusive behaviors towards a woman, and the main female character displays little agency.

As seen above, *O* and *Fifty Shades* have many of the same "feminist" and "unfeminist" elements in common. At the same time, *O*'s age and more literary style make the book feel less shallow, a bias that must also be factored in when talking about the novels in comparison to one another. Looking at the novels one way, they have certainly fulfilled Helene Cixous's call for women to write themselves, but one issue that arises here is the "self" and the effect that society has on it. One could certainly say that these women have written themselves, and especially with James, the author has written a self that is very reflective of a patriarchal, heteronormative society. Yet as evidenced in her interviews, the books she has written makes herself and her fans happy.

I do not wish to speak too much on what Cixous would have wanted, but many feminists would probably say that *Fifty Shades* was not the book Cixous had in mind when she urged women to "write her self" and "bring women to writing" (3). Instead, *Fifty Shades* might be an example of "the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism" that Cixous says is holding women back from their strength. Maybe *Fifty Shades* has been so successful because it is the kind of novel that society is (mostly) okay with women having. It hints at the falsely subversive

while withholding from women a message that would be truly life-altering. Cixous goes on to say, “[L]et nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs . . . big bosses that don’t like the true texts of women—female-sexed texts. That kind scares them” (4). Throughout her essay, Cixous continuously asserts that “a feminine practice of writing” must “surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system” (11). But what happens when women’s writing falls short of that goal? Can women’s writing fall into the discourse of a phallogentric system, and what are the consequences if it does? Much mainstream writing does not do the kind of dismantling that Cixous, Irigaray, Gauthier and other feminists are calling out for. Capitalism is on the side of works like *Fifty Shades* and even *Story of O*, as book and movie ticket sales show. If the defining factor of “female-sexed texts” is that they tend to scare people, then James’s novel has widely failed on that front. From this perspective, James is simply buying into the broken and exploitative system that Cixous and others want women to break out of.

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