

Harmful Recurring Themes
in the Media:
The Cost of *Fifty Shades* and
Lovelace

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Ideologies and value systems are woven and inter-textualized into the fabric of society and everyday life that it becomes hard to differentiate fiction from reality, our own beliefs from someone else's, or an image from underlying associations. It is through repetition and media saturation that institutionalized hegemonic values take root, with or without conscious effort, to construct the social fabric that dominates our understanding. Literature and film support the continuing hegemonic stereotypes of men and women and have the power to impact our life and our perceptions of the reality created around us.

To illustrate: Pop-quiz! What happens when the average, awkward, book-loving, good girl meets the unobtainable, heart-stoppingly-beautiful Greek-god-type guy? She saves him from himself, no matter the cost to herself, and they live happily-ever-after. It's how it always happens, right? If you're one of the millions that have read *Fifty Shade of Grey*, E.L. James' romantic and erotic novel that has swept the minds and time of readers across multiple demographics and continents, or subscribe to popular plots of countless books and movies, this storyline is no different.

In her series, James ups the ante and has reworked the formula by including the risqué appeal of taboos—cuffs, cables ties, canes, whips, floggers, ropes—into the everyday life in the minds and bedrooms of her followers. Fans are captivated by the “unconventional” interactions of Anastasia (Ana) Steele and Christian Grey. It come as no surprise that the series popularity is due largely to James' elevated the formula appeal with the superficial inclusion of BDSM to drive the storyline. Some regard *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a beacon of women's sexuality and

freedom, but it has also sparked debate over the ever-changing role of women in society, while raising questions about the future of feminism.

After reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*, one is left to ponder how popular texts perpetuate existing patriarchal, hegemonic norms that shape our perceptions of reality regarding gender norms, accepted behaviors, and relationship standards. There are troubling themes, including the glorification of co-dependency, objectification of women through the male gaze, loss of agency, and problematic gender roles and expectations that run through *Fifty Shades*, all of which are present in many other popular texts.

To answer how harmful themes are preserved and remain prevalent, one can turn to other popular texts that superficially aim to disrupt hegemonic norms to find similar, problematic representations that raise questions about women's sexuality and agency. As an example, the movie *Lovelace*, released in 2013, is based on the "true story" of Linda Lovelace, star of 1972's *Deep Throat* and an adult film icon, will also be examined. The film portrays Linda as she is coerced into and abused by the porn industry before taking "control" of her life. Lastly, Disney's, *Beauty and the Beast*, will also be considered to demonstrate how texts perpetuate societal norms, as well as, offer an interesting juxtaposition to the "adult" texts explored.

PREVIEW

The hegemonic threads that are present, in the fictional story of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and in the "true" story of *Lovelace*, continue to depict gender roles that render to consumers the objectification of women through the use of the male gaze. This consumption can encourage harmful recurring topics, such as rape fantasies and co-dependent relationships that can lead to

domestic violence, while concurrently undermining the agency of the woman and simultaneously pitching her against the standards of the Madonna/whore complex.

For the purposes of exploring social constructions, such as these mentioned above, ideological and critical feminist approaches will be used to delve into the recurring themes portrayed in the media: the objectification of women through the male gaze, social constructions of gender, and the glorification of co-dependency. Through this approach, the goal is for one to gain helpful insight to understand dominant power structures and the values and ideologies are furthered, and also to recognize the marginalized group, in this case women, and to understand how and why their agency is lost; as well as, to uncover latent messages within the artifact articulating these ideologies.

SYNOPSIS: *Fifty Shades*

In the *Fifty Shades*, Ana, the virgin, falls in love with Christian Grey, the beautiful, haunted, successful billionaire. She expects love and romance; instead he gives her a contract to sign that outlines the parameters of their BDSM relationship. Ana in this text must be a virgin because another experienced woman would never give into BDSM willingly. As a virgin Christian can teach her his kind of sex, a kind of sex that is deviant, submissive, and offensive. Ana acts as a blank slate that Christian molds for his pleasure and because she doesn't know any better, she finds virtue and intrigue in the sex he offers her.

A pivotal point in the *Fifty Shades* occurs when Ana agrees to go to Christian's apartment, after 'coincidental' run-ins with the "heart-breakingly beautiful" billionaire for further insight on him, with whom she's now completely obsessed. He whisks her to his elite apartment building in his helicopter where he has Ana sign a nondisclosure agreement. She signs

and naively asks if Christian is going to “make love” to her, and he says he doesn't make love, he “fucks.” He leads her to a room in his apartment and tells her that she can leave at any time if she wants to because what he is going to show her may scare her away. She insists on seeing what's inside the room, so she goes inside to find that it is filled with all kinds of sex toys and bondage equipment. As a virgin, seeing this is a shock and she has a very brief notion to run, but with Christian's good looks and his ability to give a pulling sensation “deep in her belly,” her “inner Goddess” convinces her to stay (98-100).

Christian explains that he is a Dominant (Dom), and he wants Ana to be his Submissive (Sub). If she agrees to this, then there are rules she must follow, and she will surrender herself to him “in all ways.” If any rules are broken, she will be “punished.” Christian wants a BDSM (bondage dominance submission masochism) relationship where he can get off by controlling her, and she will be “happy” by pleasing him with her submission. They leave the room and discuss things further, with Christian being very business-like about everything and urging her to ask questions knowing it's a lot for her to take in. Ana reveals that she is a virgin, which shocks Christian. He feels foolish and just “assumed” she's been with men because she is so beautiful. He takes her to his bedroom to deflower her and “make love” by having “vanilla sex” (sex without toys) though he does tie her hands with a silver silk tie. She finds that she revels in being helpless.

Following these first sexual experiences Ana finds she needs more. After much avoidance, she gets out the BDSM contract and reads it. The contract is extremely business-like and outlines all the rules that Ana must obey, all the sexual acts that they may engage in (which may be negotiated), and exactly what is expected by both the Dom and the Sub. The Dom will financially provide for everything and make sure the Sub is in good emotional and physical

condition, and in return, the Sub will submit to every need and want the Dom has. Breaking any of the rules will result in punishment of the Dom's choosing, such as whipping or spanking.

Ana tells Christian that she wants “more” than just the BDSM stuff if they engage in any kind of relationship, which puzzles him but yet, he doesn't dismiss it. She then verbally agrees to “try” to engage in the relationship he wants, and he is thrilled. She admits that she is very uncomfortable with the idea of being punished, but he will not negotiate it saying, “it's all part of the deal,” effectively revoking her previously granted power of “choice”. Christian makes a deal with Ana that he will try to give her more beyond the BDSM, but he still isn't sure how it will work because he doesn't know any other way to have a relationship.

SYNOPSIS: *Lovelace*

“*Based on a true story,*” the tagline adorns many Hollywood hits and promises audiences an appealing “true” glimpse into a piece of history. This is also the case for *Lovelace*, starring Amanda Seyfried, as Linda Lovelace, and Peter Sarsgaard, as antagonist, Chuck Traynor. The movie follows good girl, Linda, from her innocent days laughing and squealing while roller-skating, to meeting Traynor, falling in love and finding that he was nothing that she expected. The non-linear plot portrays two types of relationships that Linda and Traynor had. In the first version of events, Linda and Traynor seem happy and there is no violence or force used, though Traynor exhibits signs of possessiveness that appears to revel in. The second version of the relationship portrays Linda without agency. Traynor controls her physical being and will, coercing her into prostitution and pornography.

Disclaimer: though, it is *based* on a “true story,” it is fairly safe for one to assume that the following plot in the film, described in detail later, is in an inaccurate and incomplete

portrayal of the actual events. As such, the purpose of this paper is not to debate the accuracy of Linda Lovelace's life events, though [I think] the depiction of a 'true' narrative holds value in connecting 'entertainment' to real life consequences, but rather to establish a common and connected thread of rhetoric that runs through themes in the media.

The movie opens with the film's non-linear plot jumping to Linda in a bathtub smoking a cigarette. She looks contemplative. A body-less female interviewer's voice overtakes the lyrics of Gladys Night's song playing in the background. The voice asks, "What is your name?" Linda replies, "Linda Lovelace." The voice presses, "I mean, what is your *real* name?" Linda insists, "That is my real name." The interviewer moves on, "And what did you do before you were the first ever porn star." A male voice overlays over the female interviewer's voice intertwining into the lines of questioning. "Deep Throat is the trendsetting film that brought pornography into pop culture," the male voice points out adding to the context of the scene. The screen cuts away to Johnny Carson on stage making a joke about *Deep Throat*. The first woman's voice cuts over again as the shot returns to Lovelace looking worn, asking, "So tell me, who *is* the *real* Linda Lovelace..." (*Lovelace*).

Choosing to start the movie with interview dialogue sets *Lovelace's* stage and gives a sneak peak into what is to come. The female interviewer's dialogue at the beginning of the movie also serves to frame a split character; Linda as a person, and Lovelace as a porn-star. The interviewer's lines of questioning don't allow for the co-existence of the two. The framing of the interviewer's questions primes the audience to think that there is a tipping point in which Linda morphed into Lovelace. The idolized storyline of "good girl gone bad" is popular and folded into many texts and can be harmful to the agency and psyche of society's women. One could argue

that a ‘trigger’ event is not necessary to tip a person into a lifestyle, but rather a lifetime of conditioning that can set one on a socially constructed course.

The DOMINANT MALE GAZE

According Laura Mulvey, film reflects the language of patriarchy by being bound up in the same story of sexual difference on which all patriarchy is founded. In film, woman is seen as the Other, as an object and not as a subject. In a way she represents the unconscious of the male because she is always the object he is looking at and never is able to speak for herself. There is a split between male, active gaze which looks and female passivity, which is looked upon. Women are always on display in film, seen as objects of sexual desire (8).

Examining the book and film from psychoanalytical view it becomes apparent that the image of a woman as a raw, (passive) material for the (active) gaze of the man takes a step into the structure of representation. This is a structure that is demanded by the patriarchal ideology (Mulvey 7). Mulvey’s views align with Freud’s ideas of phallogentrism, or a worldview in which sees the penis (symbolic and otherwise) as the defining center of meaning (6). Women stand in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through “linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (7). Within this worldview there is a central, stable meaning to things; that meaning is defined largely by men who associate their power to name, define, and control reality with their masculinity through the gaze.

This view influences the dominant roles of men and also sheds light on Christian’s need to be dominate, as well as *Lovelace*’s focus on male pleasure at the cost of female reputation. In both texts recurring themes of domination through the male gaze are apparent that act as

controlling devices for which to view women and for women to view themselves. The effects of the male gaze are seen in both Ana and Linda's everyday life from their insecurities to their sexual exploits in the bedroom.

The male gaze is present in the first pages of *Fifty Shades*. The book opens with virginal Ana, being frustrated with her unruly hair while she prepares to fill in for her best friend/roommate, Kate, to conduct an elusive interview with "some mega-industrial tycoon [she's] never heard of, for the student newspaper" (James 3). This "tycoon" is none other than the enigmatic Christian Grey, CEO of Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc., who is also a benefactor of the university. After contemplating her looks in the mirror and deciding that, though lacking, she looks "semi-presentable" Ana reluctantly heads to Seattle after checking on her sick roommate, only after mentally remarking that Kate still looks "gamine and gorgeous" even with her illness. This is the first of many shows of insecurities Ana displays. Throughout the book it becomes a recurring motif for Christian to encourage Ana or make her feel more comfortable through comments based on her physique.

Linda also shows signs of insecurity that are only placated when Traynor assures her he thinks she's a "fox." Later, Traynor insists on meeting her folks. Linda scoffs saying that they don't like anyone, including themselves. Traynor makes a bet with her that by the end of the night they will say, "What a pleasant young man," he wins a night with her. She laughs and asks if *she* wins? He replies with the same bet, "You get to spend the night at my house." Throughout the film Traynor makes many demands of Linda, who seems happy to comply. These lines establish the theme that Traynor will get what he wants in the end, and she will also "win" and be rewarded with a "night at [his] house" if she acquiesces.

In the next scenes themes of possessiveness are largely apparent and glorified and Linda is controlled through the male gaze. Traynor meets her parents and after dinner, Linda rolls her eyes while she is in the kitchen and her mother calls instructions to her from the living room, frustrating Linda. Traynor consoles her and sets her up on the countertop kissing her saying “Forget about them [...] Where are you with right now?” She looks at him and smiles, “I’m with you.” He takes her face in his hands, “Yeah, that’s my girl. You’re my girl, right? ... Say it.” Smiling in between breaths she says, “I’m your girl.” In these lines she gives up much of her agency willingly. She appears all too happy to be “his girl” and not her own, becoming an object that serves to please him.

They spend their first night together, Linda is naked and shy when she appears from the doorway and quickly jumps into the bed, she tries to cover stomach with her arms and is closed off because she thinks her scars from her pregnancy the year before are ugly. Traynor remains covered and tries to help her relax, assuring her that she’s beautiful. Only then does she relax and enjoy the moment.

Just as Linda is the immediate sexual desire of Traynor, Ana is the object of Christian’s desire from the moment he meets her. He repeatedly verbalizes this, telling her he can’t understand her surprise at her being wanted sexually because she is so beautiful.

These portrayals point to the power of the “Male Gaze.” According to Gibson and Wolske’s piece, “Disciplining Sex in Hollywood,” this insecurity comes from a part of a cultivated culture in which a woman’s worth is her “to be looked-at-ness.” Gibson and Wolske discuss the impact of the Male Gaze that portrays women as being passive objects with value being placed on appearance (80). This controlling male *ethos* recurs in pieces of literature and movies and thus, manifests in women’s opinions of themselves. According to this view, women

lead their daily lives well aware they stand under male “gaze and judgment, living in her body as seen by another” (81).

In the later scenes of *Lovelace*, after the porn, *Deep Throat* is shot, a glamorous party-filled-life is portrayed with interviews, photo shoots, magazine spreads, exclusive parties, etc. Lovelace meets Hugh Hefner and he tells her she can be a real star. During a photo shoot she is nervous but starts to open up and relax as the photographer starts to ask her questions. After the shoot, she gasps when she sees the shots and looks shocked. When he tries to reassure her they’ll look better after they’re developed she says through teary eyes, “It’s not that. You just, you just made me so beautiful.” Again, Lovelace gives up her agency when she attributes the photographer for making her beautiful. The power of the male gaze largely affects her perception of herself and it is apparent that she values her “to-be-looked-at-ness” highly. The scenes close with her taking a bow on stage after the premier at a Playboy party. Chuck looks at her menacingly from the crowd.

The hegemonic male gaze is present throughout *Fifty Shades* and, blatantly, in *Lovelace*. In *Fifty Shades*, the male gaze can be seen in many different aspects of the storyline, everything from Ana’s opinion of her looks, to the way in which she bases the value of herself in comparison to the looks of others, to the clothes Christian buys/instructs Ana to wear, to the list that all of Christian’s subs must adhere to that includes rules governing a strict diet, sleep habits, exercise regimens, and personal hygiene/beauty, to the manner in which they are intimate and have intercourse, etc. (James 105-6). In *Lovelace*, at first Linda enjoys pleasing Chuck and being his good girl, but later scenes reveal her as having no agency at all.

In all of Ana’s sexual experiences she only achieves an orgasm when Christian allows her to. When he is ready to climax he’ll whisper breathlessly, “Come for me, baby”, and [she]

unravels at his words, exploding around him as [she] climaxes” (118). These tendencies are displayed in other scenes as well where Ana revels in pleasing Christian at his bidding. It is only after she is aware that it something he also wants that she finds her own release. If Ana were not able to achieve an orgasm on command, would female readers be just as satisfied with Christian’s release? This then leads to the question, why do women fake orgasms at all? By doing so male pleasure is once again prioritized before the females. Are women so trained and content to not fulfill their own needs in order to satisfy that of their man?

Within her sexual experiences Ana always *appears* to be glorified but Gibson and Wolske would argue that she is constantly just an object of the male gaze. She is a means to bring him satisfaction and pleasure. Never in the book is there a scene where Christian pleasures Ana without receiving the same reward. While there are situations in the book where he pleasures her orally it coincides with traditional, phallogentric norms being an act of foreplay. The focus always returns to that of male penetration and pleasure (85). This can be seen from his aversion to condoms, to the sex acts, to his arousal at domination.

After examining the implications of the male gaze in text one is left to wonder why women so readily devour the content of *Fifty Shades*. What vast appeal does the text has to offer. What about the books do women relate with? Is it something truly “new” and “different” like the reviews claim? Is it the supposed taboo of the sex acts? Is it the appeal of a redemption story in which the guy can be “saved” by the “right” girl? Is it a love story? According to Sharon Stockton, “new fictions may, in fact, be satisfying a repressed desire in men *and* women for what may turn out to be a very old, and, in any case a very readable plot” (2).

While Mulvey asserts that “complex interaction of looks is specific to film,” and that “it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imagery, of recognition/misrecognition and

identification” (10). I believe it is also applicable to textual writing as well. When consuming a text it is left to the audience how he/she will ultimately interpret and imagine it. Film’s angles, timing, lighting, view, etc., as portrayed in *Lovelace*, for example, influences and trains viewers to visualize women through the male gaze effectively conditioning one’s visual imagination and schema. This priming works as a powerful, insidious means of furthering male domination in one’s mind. It can be detrimental to the female position when a books like *Fifty Shades* appears on the market and the audience happily and unknowingly reads it in a manner that promotes the male gaze that directly subjugates them. The acts in both texts would normally be considered taboo but they are considered acceptable and embraced by the audience. What does this say about women’s desires and sense of identity?

The MADONNA-WHORE COMPLEX and SEXUAL SUBMISSION

Another theme that recurs in both texts is the notion of the “Madonna-whore Complex.” The “good” and innocent aspects of Ana and Linda characters are important to establish in the storylines. Throughout history girls have been encouraged to stay virginal, not allowed to become aware of their sexuality, and once she does she becomes the whore (Hartman 115). This common theme can be explained by the social construction of gender roles and social desires: Sainly Madonnas or debased prostitutes. Men with this complex desire a sexual partner who has been degraded (the whore) while they cannot desire the respected partner (the Madonna). Uwe Hartmann, states that in sexual politics the view of women as either Madonnas or whores limits women's sexual expression, offering two mutually exclusive ways to construct a sexual identity (115).

Society is saturated with contradictory dichotomies such as the “Madonna-whore” complex, that demand that girls should be innocent yet sexy, virginal yet experienced. So which is it? Hartman observes that while boys are raised on porn, girls are raised on romance novels. When the two constructions meet, violence and dissonance develops. He expects the whore and she expects the gentle prince (116).

Ana and Linda are both portrayed as the ideal Madonna in the beginning of the pieces; innocent, sweet, virginal, and painfully *good*. Examples of this appear early on in both texts. In *Fifty-Shades*, it is quickly revealed that Ana is a virgin and would rather immerse herself in her studies and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* than concern herself with boys. Besides, she tells her roommate, Kate, she hasn't found anyone “special” or that makes her “insides turn.” Her innocence is portrayed in conversations with her roommate. Kate teases Ana often that she is so unconcerned with men even though she does get male attention.

Similarly, in *Lovelace*, Linda is quickly established as a good girl while she is sunbathing in her backyard with her best friend, Patsy. Patsy reaches over to untie her top to avoid tan lines and Linda rebukes her. Patsy rolls her eyes and replies with, “Jeez, Miss Holy-holy.” Patsy then questions if she's “slept with that guy yet.” Linda replies, “No,” while exhaling a cigarette. Patsy pushes on, “Don't be such a prude, you're 21 years old.” Linda counters, “Prude? How do you think I'm a prude? I think I learned my lesson that one time, thank you very much.” Revealing that she isn't completely innocent. However, Patsy pushes further, “There are other things that you can do,” and uses her hand and her mouth portraying the action of oral sex. Linda reacts with convulsion saying, “Ugh, I don't even know how to talk to you anymore. Seriously, that is disgusting.” This last statement becomes ironic later in the story line and is the first of many shy and “good” traits Linda shows.

A critical moment occurs in *Lovelace*, after Linda has moved in with Traynor and the irony of Linda and Patsy's original conversation while sunbathing sets in. Again, her innocence and naiveté is displayed again at a house party; Traynor later shows Linda her first porn, a home movie that he had filmed. When he asks her if she likes it, she replies, "Good girls don't do that stuff." He kisses her saying, "You're such a good girl, that's what I love about you. You're such a good girl."

While the theme of the Madonna-whore complex emerges again (highlighting the innocence and of Linda who falls in love with Traynor the older, more experienced man who values her 'good-ness' but also expects the opposite of her as well) another troubling theme appears. The next morning in bed they wake up and he tries to push her down in bed encouraging her to perform oral sex. She says she doesn't want to. He pressures her saying, "You'll love it." She does it. Even though she *explicitly* says she does not want to perform fellatio she eventually concedes under his pressure, wanting to please him.

Most would *not* find this scene overly alarming; even though the woman is being coerced into something she says she does not want to do. Why is this *not* troublesome? Is society conditioned to associate sex with submission? In the essay about "Social Dominance and Forceful Submission Fantasies: Feminine Pathology or Power?" Hawley and Hensly find that submission themes, characterized by aggressive sexual pursuit of the male, are favored by both men and women.

The piece states that, "force fantasies originate from men and have been purposefully woven into the fabric of society; women obligingly see themselves as weak and submissive as a response to men who wish to see themselves as agentic and dominant" (Hawley and Hensly

169). Socio-cultural explanations emphasize the lifelong learning of socially constructed gender norms that urge women to associate sex with submission and subordination to men (171).

Unlike Linda, Ana, in all except one of her sexual experiences, is a willing partner and does not tell Christian she doesn't want to do something because she also finds pleasure in being submissive to please him.

Throughout the course of the book Ana starts realizing her want and need for sexual exploration as well as the desire to visit what she calls the "Red Room of Pain." She admittedly dislikes some of the restrictions and vices imposed upon her but is always willing to go along, even when her conscious thoughts balk, and eventually finds pleasure in the end to her surprise. The "Red Room" acts as safe or comfort zone to both parties instead of a stage where social taboos are acted out. Is this separation enough to make the average reader comfortable with the scenarios played out? What appeals to the average reader to make this a tool of empowerment and comfort instead a place of withdrawal and taboo?

One explanation can be found in Karen Pitcher's works, "The Staging of Agency in *Girls Gone Wild*," in which she examines the theory of the carnival where types of "spectacle characterized by bodily pleasure in opposition to morality, discipline, and social control" where events are "deemed acceptable and constitutive features of the overall environment" (Pitcher 205). In her writings she finds that "cultural transgressions are fleeting moments in a liminal space", once the events are over then life returns to normal and the attitude of "what happens there, stays there" commences. Does the construction of the sex acts performed in the "Red Room" in an appropriate space/time for what would normally be unaccepted behavior help make it desirable? Is the separation of the room from the rest of reality enough to make readers feel comfortable with the acts that take place in it?

Where some would perceive Ana and Linda's choices to engage in the encouraged sexual acts as a form of empowerment, Pitcher would disagree. She finds that the appearance of "choice" is a common control tool; the emphasis on option suggests empowerment rather than a true exploitative motive (203).

Within the portrayal of their sexual experiences both Ana and Linda appear to be in control of their experiences but Gibson and Wolske would argue that she is constantly just an object of the male gaze. She is a means to bring him satisfaction and pleasure. The focus always returns to that of male penetration and pleasure (85). Sharon Stockton works coincide with these views. She writes, "the woman in contemporary metaphor continues to be defined through the general attribution of passivity, productivity (without agency), and penetrability" (2). In the texts the heroines appear to have power through choice but they are ultimately a means to an end serving as receptacles for male penetration and pleasure.

Throughout *Fifty Shades*, Christian constantly praises Ana for being beautiful and a "natural" in the bedroom. Likewise, Linda is repeatedly praised for her talents at being a receptacle, however in this case her intrinsic qualities, like being "good," that were praised in the beginning of the film quickly disappear. Chuck says he "loves" her but still purposefully hurts her and forces her into pornography. Both women become little more than play-objects for their men.

CODEPENDENCY:

Themes of codependency are also embedded into both texts. While *Fifty Shades* glorifies co-dependent relationships, *Lovelace* offers sad and dangerous consequences that codependency can breed.

As explained above, Linda Lovelace becomes the first mainstream porn star after she appeared in *Deep Throat*, doing just that. In an interview at then of the movie, Phil Donahue asks, “How did you end up there?” She answers, “I had the unfortunate opportunity of meeting Chuck Traynor...”

In the scenes prior to Linda auditioning for the porn producers, she is seen at home vacuuming, while a caption reveals that it is 6 months after Linda and Traynor have wed. She looks flustered and worn. The phone rings and she answers, Traynor is on the other end. “Where are you? I’ve been really worried about you,” she demands. He replies, “Get some money, come get me. I’m in jail.” She laughs like he’s joking but is cut short. In the next scene a buzzer sounds and Traynor is released from jail, she throws her arms around him.

The following scenes provide a text that cultivates a cultural value in which unflinching loyalty is prioritized at the expense of self-interest, self-growth, and self-esteem. At a diner, he eats and she is sitting far away from him with her arms crossed over her body. She asks what happened, saying, “This time it’s different.” He sighs and violently slams his fists down on the counter. The outburst startles others around him. She looks away, “You said never ask about your work, sorry” she says. He replies, “Yeah. Some girls were turning trick in the back.” She is shocked and asks, “What do you mean--Prostitution?” He confirms, head in hands. She looks confused and is concerned that the cops will ask her questions. He reassures her saying, “Wives can’t testify against husbands.” She looks dumbstruck and stares straight ahead. He shakes her shoulder and says, “All I need is money.” She says she only has \$32-33 after bailing him out. He tells her that it’s the Miami PD and Feds and he needs “real money.” She asks if he has enough, he replies emphasizing, “*We*, do *we* have enough, right?” Looking down she asks, “So what are

we going to do?” The emphasis on the inclusive language, “we,” turns Traynor’s problem into a mutual one. This is solidified when she acquiesces and asks, “What are *we* going to do?”

These scenes are an introduction into a codependent relationship between Traynor and Lovelace. In “A Critical Analysis of the Concept of Codependency,” Sandra Anderson defines codependency as a pattern of painful dependence on compulsive behaviors and on approval from others in an attempt to find safety, self-worth, and identity. This can also be described as the “enabling” behavior of the partner of someone with an addiction (677).

Furthermore, the “codependency label, on a political level, becomes simply another tool in the oppression of women, fostering denial of male accountability” (Anderson 681). In essence, when men are clearly impaired, their female partners must also be labeled as sick to maintain the balance of power in the relationship. In these scenes Linda enables Chuck by agreeing that it is *their shared* problem that she needs to find a solution for. She becomes responsible for his actions and places his needs above her own.

Likewise, similar patterns of behavior are exhibited throughout *Fifty Shades*, Ana also supports Christian’s needs forming a codependent relationship to maintain the “balance of power” (Anderson 681). Near the end of the book Christian agrees to try the “hearts and flowers” relationship Ana wants and she is thrilled. After Ana shows brief moments of independence, he tries to make an agreement that will satisfy his needs to control her as well as her insecurities. While discussing the contract Ana rolls her eyes, which is a rule-breaker for Christian.

She realizes what she’s done, and asks if he wants to spank her now, to which he agrees. However, she teases him by getting him to chase her around the kitchen. He playfully goes along with it and says that it’s almost as if she doesn’t want him to catch her, and she admits that’s exactly what it is. She wants to know why he needs to hurt her, and he says that if he tells her the

reason, she will run screaming from the room and will never want to return. He doesn't want to risk losing her because he couldn't bear it and starts kissing her and begging her not to ever leave him.

She senses in all of this, that Christian is lost in some private darkness, and she needs help. She decides to let him punish her. He is shocked and confused by this change of events, but she insists that he shows her "how much it hurts." She admits she is confused and not sure about going through with it, but at least they will both know, once and for all, if she can handle the extent of his need for control.

Christian leads Ana to the playroom and asks her to bend over a bench. Christian clarifies that he is going to hit her six times with a belt on the butt and that she will count each time. With each hit from the belt, Ana's pain becomes unbearable and cannot control tears streaming down her face despite wanting to control herself. After the sixth and final blow, he immediately embraces her lovingly; however, she pulls away and wants nothing to do with him. She calls him a "fucked-up son of a bitch" and leaves the playroom.

Christian is completely shocked and does not understand. Ana cries in the other room, sad that she's in love with "fifty shades of fucked up" and that this was all a wake-up call that there is no way she can be with him if she has to endure punishment like that. Christian joins her, he holds her and begs for her not to hate him, and she apologizes for the "terrible" things she said. She also states that she can't be everything he wants her to be, and he disagrees, saying that she is everything he wants. She doesn't understand, saying that she isn't obedient, and she is "sure as hell" not going to let him hit her ever again like he just did. With a sudden bleak expression, he says, "You're right. I should let you go. I'm not good for you." She doesn't want to go and finally confesses that she has fallen in love with him. Christian is horrified by this,

saying that she can't love him, that it is wrong and that he can't make her happy. She claims he does make her happy, but he says, "Not at the moment, not doing what I want to do." With that, she resolves to leave him. Once at her apartment, she curls up in her bed and cries (James 501-11).

The way in which Ana goes back and forth verbally and physically contradicting herself feeds the cycle of codependency. While she knows it is not best for her, she allows Christian draw her into his, self-proclaimed, "fifty-shades of fucked up" because he "needs" to physically harm her. *Fifty Shades* widely romanticizes notions of codependency, portraying it as a part of 'true love.'

This is exemplified in, what should have been the pivotal turning point, in the last chapter of the first book when Ana states, "I feel about punishment the way you feel about me touching you," Christian is immediately saddened and horrified by this. Ana says she lets him spank her because he needs it, and he admits that he does need to hurt her, but nothing that she couldn't take. Sensing that Christian is lost and needs help Ana decides to let him punish her. Ana is the enabling force that plays to Christian's dysfunctions. This reversal, while inconsequential in the plot, conforms within the traditional sex roles despite being framed within sexual transcendence and transgression (Skiles).

Lovelace, however, offers a more harsh reality. After Linda secures the role in as a starring lead in *Deep Throat*, the plot then follows her through the shooting of the film. It is in these first scenes we get a glimpse of the possibility of an alternate relation between Traynor and Lovelace. During the preparation for filming, a co-star is doing her make up when Traynor comes in. The co-star comments on how "intense" he is and notices bruises on Linda's leg. Linda

looks down and covers it up by saying, “I’m so clumsy.” The co-star nods knowingly replying, “I know sweetie. We all are.”

In the later scenes of *Lovelace*, the shot cuts back to the diner scene, the dialogue playing in Linda’s head. “*All I need is money [...] We’re in this together, right?*” After they leave the diner they get ready to go out. During these scenes Traynor forces Lovelace to sleep with a stranger for money. After this, she goes home and her mother opens the door and she asks if she can come home for a while. Her mom replies, “You know that’s not possible. How would it look for a married woman to move in with her parents apart from her husband?” Linda says, “He hits me, ma.” Her mother sighs and asks, “What did you do? What did you do to make him angry? He didn’t just hit you out of the blue. You took a very serious vow. Go home to Chuck, be a good wife, listen to him, and obey him.”

Given the rhetorical situation for the time, 1970, this response would have been common. The sentiment, “Stand by your man,” was more than a hit lyric, it literally meant just that, no matter if he abused you or not. It was the woman’s responsibility to see that the man was happy. Has the latter sentiment changed largely today?

Subsequent scenes are expanded and the film portrays a relationship of abuse, coercion, and extortion, including forced prostitution and gang rape, in which Linda is controlled through threats with a gun, physical, and psychological abuse by Traynor.

The codependent and enabling narratives that are portrayed in *Fifty Shades* and *Lovelace* can have tragic consequences that can perpetuate inter-gender violence, as well as the trivialization of self. These signs of codependency, if internalized, can be harmful. Both Ana and Linda give up their agency willingly to support their men at great expense to themselves. Despite the allure of entertainment, narratives such as these—if/when they are internalized by women

and/or men—provide “scripts” for people to perform in their minds and lives that can potentially be harmful to themselves and others.

RAPE as a FANTASY

The objectification of women through the dominant male gaze becomes common theme in both texts. As mentioned above, *Lovelace*, opens with Linda reflecting while interviewers question her. It is interesting to note that only the female interviewer directs questions that relate to Linda, as a person, vs. Lovelace, as the porn star. The male interviewers, Johnny Carson for example, use Lovelace for comic relief or combining Linda and *Lovelace* into a single object of referral.

Later in the film, after Chuck revealed that he is in trouble and turns to Linda to get them out of it, she auditions for porn producers reciting, “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Again, the Madonna-whore complex theme is played upon while the producers objectify women in the porn industry. The producers remark how she’s pretty, “the girl next door,” but not what the audience wants, asking, “Does she know what she’s auditioning for?” They call in a big-busted blonde secretary and emphasize her figure and features grabbing her physically. They tell Traynor, that’s what people really want, a hyper-sexualized piece of meat. The girl laughs and seems delighted at the “compliments.” This explicit objectification of the woman is especially concerning because she seems delighted in the fact.

This common line of rhetoric in movies can easily be translated into reality. When a subject is objectified, its unique qualities are reduced to a stereotype, which effectively de-humanizes it, turning it into a “thing.” This effectively trivializes violent acts against women as

well as the women themselves. Kahlor cites the objectification of women as the first step to domestic violence (215). She writes:

Nearly one in five women in the U.S. is the victim of a completed or attempted rape. Victimization results from a culture of violence towards women—one that is perpetuated by social-level influences that foster a systematic tolerance of violent acts such as rape. This culture of violence is manifest at the individual level, where it undermines the status and power of women, and at the individual level, where it reinforces harmful attitudes and beliefs about women and violence towards women (216).

According to Kahlor, the objectification of women occurs when women are “stripped of autonomy and agency,” and treated as lacking subjectivity, experience, or feeling. This “dominant-submissive, competitive, sex-role stereotyped culture” not only leads to disproportionate crimes against women, but also may lead men and women to internalize related norms (217).

In the first portion of the *Lovelace*, Linda is portrayed as a willing participant in Traynor’s dysfunctions; likewise, Ana is easily swayed to do Christian’s bidding in *Fifty Shades*. However, if these scenes (and the idea that when a woman says, “no,” she really means, “yes,”—that she must be *shown* what she wants) are embraced as “scripts” in society the consequent repercussions are dangerous and debilitating to women. Texts such as these can lead to an overestimation of false rape accusation and trivializes violent acts committed towards women, while effectively reducing a woman’s power over herself.

These alarming notions are portrayed through use of the popular media theme of Rape as a Fantasy, in which “no” really means “yes.” These themes are repeated in many forms of entertainment and the implications they are more than troublesome. In *Fifty Shades* there are a

few scenes where Ana balks at Christian requests but quickly concedes. However, in *Lovelace*, actual rape is portrayed.

The plot goes back in time to shed light on the Linda and Traynor's second version of the relationship that includes physical, emotional, and verbal abuse, rape, and coercion. Traynor throws Linda on a hotel bed after they have just been married. At first, she is laughing and happy with her new husband. As the scene unfolds he chokes her and she says to take it "easy" and that he's hurting her. He pays no attention though, saying, "I know, I know, I know," and carries on. He flips her onto her stomach and she cries out in pain and tells him to "stop." The scene ends with her crying out with a pained look on her face.

In the next scene, she sits in a chair in corner with her legs pulled up to her chest. She looks saddened and distant. He pours glasses of champagne and tries to talk to her. She looks at him and says, "You really hurt me Chuck." He shakes his head and caresses her face, "That was passion." She slowly starts to nod along with him. "I love you," he tells her. "Where's my girl? You're my girl, right?" he asks. "Say it. Say it," he demands. She shakes her head slightly, no trace of the smile that was in her eyes like when she had said it before, and reluctantly concedes, "I'm your girl." She looks away from him and he buries his face in her chest. Her hands slowly caress his head (*Lovelace*).

There are many other highly disconcerting scenes in the movie show that show Linda being raped or forced into sexual actions. Why is it scenes such as these are so prevalent in the media? Stockton, in the "The Economics of Fantasy: Rape in Twentieth Century Literature," examines the persistence and rape narrative in twentieth century literature—"the old story of male power and violence, female passivity and penetrability" (2). She asserts, "rape and rapability are central to the very construction of gender identity" (3).

Most would find Christian's and Traynor's tendencies towards sadism as taboo and unacceptable, but Stockton cites that "sadism is the one perversion most compatible with conventional heterosexuality in a culture for which, in utter disregard for western metaphysics, 'the true' or 'right' is heterosexual penetration" (6). Following Freud's logic, rape would serve, in fact, as a "normative emblem for heterosexuality" in which female masochism is an accepted 'normal' aspect of female subjectivity, while sadism and dominance are extensions of male sexuality (7). This possibly has greater social inference for the taboo, that it is not just men who feel the need to commit the act but women also desire the act to be committed to them. Stockton writes:

The spectacle of rape and a seductively aestheticized vision of staged for consumption is undermined from within. The sadism to which it gives free reign seems in the end false to the rapturous promise of absolute subjectivity, that position which would hypothetically enable the reduction of the body of the other to object, an instrument for the satisfaction and pleasure of the self ... it is the sadist himself who is in the position of the object-instrument, the executor of some 'radically heterogeneous will' ... It is that disembodied paternal will that established the tableau of violent heterosexuality, into which fantasy space males and females alike are interested in the process of identity formation (8).

Do women admit to this as being accurate? Is this a true desire? Or just another form of the male gaze to which women are conforming? Can the difference between the two be separated and extracted as such? Is it the fantastical rape that appeals to women's needs or are other factors at work as well? Do these factors make the act more socially acceptable? Is rape more acceptable given the right conditions?

GENDER NORMS and EXPECTATIONS

Fifty Shades also cultivates the idea that a woman's love can change a man. Women are conditioned to believe that they are supposed to be soft, innocent, and inherently maternal. Therefore, women should be able to change someone through emotions. Despite the ever-increasing social power of women, there are significant areas, such as these, that the movement has failed to break. It seems that society still desires the norm of men as dominant bread-winners and women as the passive nurturers. The text embodies the idea patience, compassion, love, forgiveness, etc., are enough to change someone, and that the man will then be altered by her love for him. By possessing these qualities it becomes the woman's responsibility to redeem the man from his past history and change his future.

Roles regarding gender expectations are complicated in more than just "adult" texts. In order to juxtapose "adult" texts to children's "entertainment" texts, the popular Disney movie, *Beauty and the Beast*, will be explored. Henry Giroux in, "Are Disney Movies Good for Your Kids?" refers to film important role in social construction, calling it "most persuasive role they play as the new 'teaching machines,' as producers of culture" (53). The effects of such texts, when internalized, are exemplified in the documentary, *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*. The documentary opens with an eight-year-old girl saying, "I think Disney makes movies because people like movies." Scholar, Elizabeth Hadley, being interviewed states, "Disney is dangerous because it is a sublime kind of education. It is absorbed by our young people's minds as entertainment."

Giroux uses *Beauty and the Beast* as an example of gender construction. In the popular children's movie, *Belle*, the heroine is viewed as odd because she always has her nose in a book.

She is pursued by the village “ideal” man but uncharacteristically (for her gender) refuses him. She then becomes the captive of the Beast. She “civilizes” him and she becomes the model of etiquette while she turns him into a “new” man. In the end, Belle “tames” the Beast and falls in love with him and they happily-ever-after, him in his new-Prince form (59). Giroux notes, “Whatever subversive qualities Belle personifies in the film, they seem to dissolve when focused on humbling male vanity” (59). Like Ana and Linda, Belle becomes less the focus of the film other than a prop by which to solve the Beast’s dilemma. In the end the heroines’ lives become valued simply for solving a man’s problems. This creates a culture in which female sacrifice is expected and praised, while the dysfunction of the male remains hidden in silence perpetuating the construction of gender norms.

Like *Fifty Shades*, some hailed Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* as breaking the mold because a “strong” female character (because she’s reading a book), takes control. However, Gail Dines, who is being shown interviewed, reflects, “In reality this is just pseudo-feminism because ultimately, in *Beauty and the Beast*, she ends up with a batterer.” In the movie the Beast separates Belle from her family, imprisons, yells, and threatens her. Yet the thrust of the story is that she socializes, excuses, and falls in love him. What values do movies such as these, that are often the first media texts that young children are exposed to regarding gender roles, encourage?

Nine-year-old girls being interviewed in the documentary give an answer. Abigail replies, “If Belle was my friend and I saw what happened to her, yelling and being romantic, I’d be happy for her because she found someone she liked, and I’d be happy for her that she liked the Beast and that she would stay with him. But I would also feel bad because she gets yelled at a lot.” Melina answers, “If Belle was my friend and I saw her go through this whole thing, I probably would say, ‘keep being nice and sweet like you are,’ and that probably will change him

like in the movies how [the Beast] does” (*Mickey Mouse Monopoly*). These examples of the internalization of an “entertaining” text relay a dangerous message.

This is a common thread to *Fifty Shades* and *Lovelace*. Like the Beast, Christian is also portrayed with binary attributes. Ana fondly refers to Christian as “fifty shades of fucked up.” In the story Ana uses his history as an excuse for his moody and dark side. She even lets him take it out on her physically as a way for him to mentally cope. Through her sacrifice Christian becomes the redeemed instead of the villain, because of the love Ana has for him. The text furthers the stereotype that women are self-sacrificing and virtuous by nature, willing to give up their needs and wants in order to appease their man. It is the same old “stand by your man” storyline, even if it means sacrificing yourself.

It is interesting that while E.L. James is a woman, she reinforces the erotic representation of women as hegemonic society would portray them. Men love the sweetness and innocence of women, but they also want to see that innocence turn to a dark and erotic form. *Fifty Shades* tells women that they want not only to be objectified, their bodies ravaged as objects, all in the name of pleasing their man, but also that they want to be dominated—in the bedroom and outside of it.

The romance that takes place in *Fifty Shades* reinforces an ideology that continues to place women beneath men—literally and symbolically. It shows how men perceive women, not how women perceive themselves. According to the works of Mulvey and Wolske, there is power in looking. The “male gaze” places woman’s worth in her body, not mind. Images of women are portrayed as raw, (passive) material for the (active) gaze of the man. This narrative view in which the woman is seen as the Other, as an object and not as a subject, can have dangerous ramifications when used as a structure for representation.

James, intentionally or not, contributes to enabling the industry of objectification and patriarchy, and indoctrinating the idea that women want to be subjugated for the sake of love. The objectification of a human has very real and dangerous implications, as portrayed in *Lovelace*. In the *Fifty Shades*, Ana is a willing participant in Christian's dysfunctions. However, if these scenes (and the idea that when a woman says, "no," she really means, "yes,"—that she must be *shown* what she wants) are embraced as "scripts" in society the consequent repercussions are dangerous and debilitating to women. This real danger is portrayed in the "true" story of *Lovelace*.

CONCLUSION

Encoded in media images and texts are ideologies about how we define belief systems and construct our reality. On the surface, it may seem that such text disrupt norms and taboos regarding women's sexuality; however, this is superficial and is ultimately re-absorbed and reconstituted to feed existing dominant hegemonic ideologies. Breaking down social conventions is harder than one might think. Societal discourse leads to stereotypes that help us construct and understand the world. These gender norms tell us that men should be dominant and protective, much like Christian Grey, while they tell women to be innocent and accepting, like Ana and Linda. Beliefs such as these are so woven and inter-textualized into the fabric of society and everyday life that it becomes hard to differentiate fiction from reality. *Fifty Shades*, *Lovelace*, and *Beauty and the Beast*'s original intent may have been to entertain, though if it not read with a critically aware mindset there are functional ramifications that can affect the lives of readers.

One must consider the health of today's society when narratives such as these are common-place. Texts such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Lovelace*, expose the dysfunction therein,

while simultaneously promoting and legitimizing their own continuance. The codes of the dominant male gaze, recurring rape fantasies, the objectification of women and romanticized themes of codependence, and must be broken down before mainstream entertainment and the pleasure it provides can be challenged. It is through fantasy that we “inhabit a culture, a time, and a mode of production” (Stockton 9). This being the case, we must be more aware and conscientious of the “fantasies” we consume. If not, then the \$14.95 cover price and \$12 movie ticket price are a small price to pay compared to the price that marginalized groups will have to suffer if these views and implications go unchallenged.

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At the end of *Fifty Shades of Grey*:

Ana and Christian live happily-ever-after.

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At the end of *Lovelace*:

The closing captions reveal: *Deep Throat* made over \$600 million worldwide, Linda earned only \$1,250. *Ordeal* went on to sell out three printings, and for 20 years, Linda spoke out against pornography and domestic violence. Traynor went on to marry Marilyn Chambers, the second most famous porn star of the time. Linda died at age 53 from injuries sustained in a car accident in 2002; Traynor suffered a fatal heart attack three months later.

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