

From *The Flame and the Flower* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Sex, Power and Desire in the Romance Novel

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Abstract

E.L. James's *Fifty Shades* trilogy has become a huge success and sold millions of copies. The novels' mix of romance and erotica has been described as something new. Reading these books mainly as romance, Nilson focuses on how James uses well known and established romance traits from, for example, the so-called "bodice-ripper" novel and chick lit, in order to create a hybrid. These traits are visible in both how James describes her protagonists and in how the relationship between them is portrayed. Nilson argues that the *Fifty Shades* trilogy is, rather than a new kind of romance, a compilation of well-established traits.

Keywords romance, "the bodice-ripper," chick lit, popular fiction, desire, sex.

Introduction

The Swedish newspaper *Expressen* published an article on the 15th of August 2013 explaining how one of the big chains of clothing stores, *Kappahl*, is currently working together with E.L. James, author of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, on a line of clothing, probably lingerie,

though the article does not specify. This is one of several examples I could discuss that show how popular the *Fifty Shades* trilogy has become. What started out as a piece of *Twilight* fan fiction, published on the web under the title “Master of the Universe,” is now three books that have sold millions of copies.

I have for a year now followed this success story, and I have tried to understand why these books, which almost everyone I meet describes as “badly written” but still have read, has become such a big deal. A few weeks ago, I was in Stockholm and listened to Agnes Ahlander Turner, a literary scout at Maria B. Campbell Associates in New York talking about what a scout does, and one of the questions she got from the audience was: “Why do you think that *Fifty Shades of Grey* has become so popular?” She answered: “Because it is something new.” Now, having read our Bakhtin or our Barthes, we know that texts are hardly ever completely new; and as an avid romance reader, my first impression of James’s novels was quite the opposite. To me these novels were almost too familiar, but having reread them a few times, I have been struck by how James mixes several different traits from the romance genre in order to create an interesting hybrid. I shall in this article try and explain how this is done.

Fifty Shades of Grey is usually labeled as erotic romance, and I will focus on this romance part. This is neither very original nor the only way to read the novel. In *Fifty Writers on Fifty Shades of Grey* from 2012, E.L. James’s trilogy is read as romance, as erotica, and as fan fiction. There are several articles that vote for reading the books as romance. D.L. King, for example, asks: “Is *Fifty Shades* Erotica?” and her answer is no. She writes:

These books are unabashedly romantic. They follow the tried-and-true formula for romance and the series end happily. And, as previously stated, this would hold true even if aliens came down and vacuumed all the sex out of all the copies in existence. With that in mind, there can be no denying that the *Fifty Shades* series is a romance. (p. 78)

One way to label James’s novel could be “romantica,” a term coined by the website Elllora’s Cave, where a great number of erotic romances are published (Frantz, 2010, p. 47). The label highlights the

romance part of the story, but it also indicates how the text has more erotic content than a romance novel.

But what does it mean to say that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is romance? Romance is a heterogeneous genre and, in academic circles, a rather invisible one. Before I turn to E.L. James's novels, let me say something about romance fiction research.

One part romance

Romance is a genre difficult to define. Barbara Fuchs (2004) writes in her introduction to romance that "the term is variously applied to everything from Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*, to Shakespeare's plays, to seventeenth-century French classicizing fictions, to Harlequin romances" (p. 4f). In this article, my main focus is, of course, on the modern romance novel, and I will try to trace a connection from the romances of the 1970s to *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

There are still relatively few studies on the romance novel, and the studies that are available tend to lean towards defending the genre. This generally leads to a need to focus on the "classical heritage" of the romance novel. Lynne Pearce writes in *Romance Writing* more about Samuel Richardson, Chrétien de Troyes, and Ann Radcliffe than about the current popular romance writers (Pearce, 2007). Pamela Regis does mention writers such as Jayne Ann Krentz and Nora Roberts in her study *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), but she spends a lot of pages discussing, for example, Jane Austen as a "master of the romance novel" (Regis, 2007, p. 75). My argument is not that it is in any way incorrect to discuss Austen, Richardson, or Radcliffe in a study of the romance novel, but due to the low status of the genre, most of the scholarly studies of the romance novel tends to focus on the classical heritage of the genre, but ignore or rush through the twentieth century development of the genre.

Studies of the romance novel also tend to focus more on the reader of the genre than on the texts themselves. Even if both Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) and Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) were in many ways groundbreaking, they have been critiqued not only for ignoring the texts of the genre but for the way they describe female consumers of romance. Radway, for example, says that even if the romance novels *are* traditional and even patriarchal, the readers interpret them in a different way. "The

traditionalism of romance fiction will not be denied here, but it is essential to point out that Dot [Dorothy Evans] and many of the writers and readers of romances interpret these stories as chronicles of female triumph" (Radway, 1991, p. 54). Modleski describes in her opening chapter how women tend to use popular literature as a kind of drug (echoing Adorno and Horkheimer) but also says that the popularity of these novels "suggests that they speak to very real problems and tensions in women's lives" (Modleski, 1982, p. 14).

Two studies that take a different approach to the romance novel are Carol Thurston's *The Romance Revolution* (1987) and Kay Mussell's *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romantic Fiction* (1984). Mussel is in her study critical of the romance genre and points out that the main theme of the genre has been the same for a long time:

The essential assumptions of romance formulas - belief in the primacy of love in a woman's life, female passivity in romantic relationships, support for monogamy in marriage, reinforcement of domestic value - have not faded or significantly altered. (Mussell, 1984, p. XII)

She argues that the main focus of the romance novel is the search for true love and sexual awakening. The female protagonist needs an "alpha male" to wake her desire and to fulfill her needs. The "alpha male," in turn, needs to be tamed and domesticated, but even after this has been accomplished, he is still in control of both their fates. He is, in a way, a "master of their universe."

Thurston focuses on the genre rather than on its readers, and she sees the genre as an advocate for a new and more liberating kind of female sexuality where women, finally, become sexual *subjects*. Defending the genre against the idea that it portrays old-fashioned patriarchal values, Thurston argues that a kind of feminist erotic revolution takes place in these books.

[I]t is somewhat paradoxical that it is to the most constrained form of genre writing, the series of category romance, with its publisher specified guidelines for authors, that the wand of evolutionary change and development passed in the early 1980s. (Thurston, 1987, p. 61)

She argues that it is in the romance novel that women for the first time are given both sexual freedom and sexual agency. This view of the romance novels is echoed in Jayne Ann Krentz's introduction to *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance* (1992), where she writes that "Romance novels invert power structures of a patriarchal society because they show women exerting enormous power over men" (p. 5). Krentz is not alone in saying that the heroine in a typical romance novel today is usually described as a strong and capable character whose function is not so much to be "saved" by the hero, but to change him and in so doing enables the happy ending. Regis, in her study, makes a point of how the heroine has changed in the modern romance novel. She writes that:

Heroines in twentieth-century romance novels are not wispy, ephemeral girls sitting around waiting for the hero so that their lives can begin. They are intelligent and strong. They have to be. They have to tame the hero. They have to heal him. Or they have to do both. (Regis, 2007, p. 206)

In James's trilogy, Ana may be the virginal heroine who is seduced by Christian, but as a romance heroine her function in the novel is not *just* to be the object of Christian's desire or to discover her own sexuality, but to *save* Christian. In romance, an alpha male like Christian is described as almost omnipotent, but he is also described as "lacking." Not only is he lonely, as he has yet to find his one true love, but he is also often "damaged" in some way and lives separate from society as a whole. He is often described as arrogant and condescending towards both employees and family members. In the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, Christian is emotionally scarred by childhood trauma caused by his mother who was a drug-addict, and his sexual preferences is explained as his only way to connect to people. He is unable to have a "normal" relationship until Ana comes along and saves him. She is the only woman he has ever met for whom he is willing to try to change. Several of the authors discussing the novels in *Fifty Writers on Fifty Shades of Grey* are very critical of how James describes BDSM as something Christian wants because he is "unable" to have any other kind of relationship. Even if James makes BDSM "mainstream," she is in the trilogy very ambivalent, and

Ana's longing for a more "traditional" relationship is described as not only "normal," but also "healthy."

For many readers, there is a comfort in romance novels because of the unavoidable outcome. With few exceptions, romance novels have happy endings. There is, for example, never any doubt that the protagonists of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, Ana and Christian, will find true love and happiness together. Even if *Fifty Shades of Grey* ends with Ana actually leaving Christian, in the second book, *Fifty Shades Darker*, it does not take long before they are a couple again. They are meant to be together. Instead of ending the trilogy with the almost inevitable wedding, this occurs at the end of book two. In book three, "happily ever after" is made complicated by Christian's enemies and by an unplanned pregnancy, but when James finally leaves Christian and Ana, they are a happily married couple with children and an adventurous sex life. To an experienced romance reader, this ending comes as no surprise. From the moment that Ana realizes that Christian is her one true love, there must be a happy ending.

Is the *Fifty Shades* trilogy romance? I would argue that it is, and that James has revisited a part of the romance tradition that today's contemporary romance has left behind, namely the "bodice-ripper."

One part "bodice-ripper"

In 1972, Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* started a new trend in romance literature. Thurston writes that:

The results was that what began as a small bushfire in 1972 with the publication of Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* quickly raged into a conflagration of passion, possession, piracy and rape, portraying high-spirited women who ultimately won not only love but more respect and independence than the times in which they lived commonly would have allowed their sex. (1987, p. 19)

Woodiwiss's novel became a model for the so-called "bodice-rippers." The label is, of course, a disparaging one. The "bodice-rippers" were generally placed in a historical setting, often the Regency era, and they were more sexually explicit than other romance novels. They sometimes included the "raping hero." A recurring theme

is that the hero in the beginning of the novel rapes the heroine, usually mistaking her for a prostitute. He is a dominant and often brooding Byronic hero, who fails to understand the word “no.” In *The Flame and the Flower*, the heroine Heather, who has just managed to avoid being raped by a distant relative, a repulsive older man, falls into the hero Brandon’s clutches. He thinks she is a prostitute, and she is too shocked after her earlier ordeal, in which she accidentally kills her uncle, to say anything. The rape itself is described as a painful and shameful experience for Heather:

A half gasp, half shriek escaped her and a burning pain seemed to spread through her loins [...] When he finally withdrew, she turned to the wall and lay softly sobbing with the corner of the blanket pulled over her head and her now used body left bare to his gaze. (Woodiwiss, 2003, p. 29f)

When Brandon realizes she is a virgin, he is gentle with her, but it is not until she is pregnant with his child and he is forced to marry her that he understands that she is an honorable woman. It then takes more than a year and a few hundred pages before the couple can overcome the start of their relationship and end up in bed again. This time, Heather enjoys herself fully, thus signaling the happy end of the book. One of the most important traits of modern romance is that the heroine must have at least one orgasm before the happy ending. Wendell and Tan write in *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches’ Guide to Romance Novels* (2009):

No other genre is as obsessed with the heroine (a) having excellent sex, and (b) not having sex at all unless it’s with the One True Love, who’s also usually the sole person who can make her come. Got orgasm? Got true love. (p. 37)

In these books, sex is important and quite often connected to violence. But even if the hero is “allowed” to abuse the heroine during the course of the novel, he must repent and make amends. Not before they have arrived at a point where they have mutually enjoyable sex is the story over.

Not all “bodice-rippers” included a “raping hero,” but a lot of them did, and while they became quite popular in the 1970s, they also met a lot of critique. Thurston shows in her study that as early as 1981 when RWA (Romance Writers of America) was founded, the general consensus was that the romance novel needed to change. The readers wanted older and more mature heroines and a hero that “no longer gets his ultimate thrill from being first, and no more rape” (Thurston, 1987, p. 22). Gradually the “bodice-rippers” disappeared. The heroine of the romance novel became more sexually experienced and the power balance between the hero and the heroine became more equal. For a while, the domineering hero who does not understand the word “no” disappeared.

It is all too easy to fall into the trap of reading “bodice-rippers” as one-dimensional texts. On one hand, the “bodice-rippers” portrayed men as sexual predators and women as passive victims, but on the other hand, these novels also gave detailed descriptions of female desire and showed women both initiating and enjoying sex.

The “bodice-ripper” novels are not just about rape and sex, they are also about obedience. The hero is described as a strong-willed man who is used to getting his own way and who needs to be in control. A very typical trait is that the hero is damaged in some way. In *The Flame and the Flower*, Brandon distrusts all women, engaged as he is to the unfaithful and manipulating Louisa. He is used to being obeyed: “You are mine now Heather. No one will have you but me. Only I shall taste your body’s joys. And when I snap my fingers, you will come” (Woodiwiss, 2003, p. 385). In James’s trilogy, Christian is badly damaged by his birthmother and her client, and has never really been able to trust anyone completely: “‘I’m used to getting my own way, Anastasia,’ he murmured. ‘In all things’” (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2012, p. 44).

The heroine is often defiant. She refuses to obey in the beginning and thus earns the hero’s respect. He is angered by her, but unlike other women who obey him without question, the heroine does not bore him. Usually there is a scene in the novel when the heroine “takes charge” and confronts the controlling hero. In *The Flame and the Flower*, Heather’s brave speech is a bit one-sided as Brandon is passed out drunk at the time: “You blithering ninny, I am a woman. What I had, I was holding for the man I’d have chosen and you stripped me of even that. I’m a living, breathing human being, and

I do have some pride” (Woodiwiss, 2003, p. 191). In *Fifty Shades Free*, Ana, being pregnant, finally tells Christian to stop being a tyrant: “But you’re an adult now - you need to grow up and smell the fucking coffee and stop behaving like a petulant adolescent” (James, *Fifty Shades Free*, 2012, p. 434). Ana is in a way empowered by her pregnancy that gives her a new kind of authority. She speaks not only for herself, but also for her unborn child. This does not mean that the hero stops being controlling, but these scenes are important in the novels. When the hero acknowledges that the heroine will not be a compliant slave, and that he has to change in order to keep her, this generally means that the happy ending is near.

Even if the “bodice-ripper” romance is born in the 1970s, there is, of course, a long tradition of these novels in popular literature, in which E.M. Hull’s famous novel, *The Sheik*, published in 1919 is an obvious example. James borrows heavily from this tradition in her trilogy. She reintroduces an old-fashioned version of the alpha male. Does this mean that we should interpret *Fifty Shades of Grey* as backlash? Is James’s recipe for success to go back to a formula that used to be popular and reinvent it? No, I would argue that she also uses current popular genres to make her own unique blend.

One part chick lit

When chick lit enters the scene of romance with the publication of Marian Keyes’s *The Water Melon* in 1995, Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones Diary* in 1996 and Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* in 1997, something happens. Chick lit quickly became very popular and even if the genre has been proclaimed dead on several occasions, there is still an abundance of chick lit novels in book stores and on bestseller lists. There are many themes in chick lit that firmly establishes the genre as “something other” than romance (Nilson 2008; Nilson 2013; Harzewski 2011). Not only is the heroine in chick lit allowed to have sex with more than one man during the course of the novel (in search of Mr. Right, she usually meets and falls into bed with several Mr. Wrongs), but the focus is different than in the romance novel. Even if finding true love and a stable heterosexual relationship is the aim of every chick lit heroine, this is not the only important theme. Achieving a satisfying career, building and maintaining close relationships with friends, and shopping are almost as important as finding true love in chick lit novels. Rocío Montoro

says in *Chick Lit: The Stylistics of the Cappuccino Fiction* (2012) that “a chick lit protagonist would, therefore, be interested in happily resolving her quest for a prince charming in the context of a consumer society which not only invites but even urges these protagonists to overspend” (p. 3). In the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, we find the same focus on the importance of labels and luxury goods that we see in chick lit. Christian entices Ana with expensive gifts from a Blackberry (so he can keep track of her) to an Audi.

If romance fiction focuses on “larger than life” scenarios with exotic milieus, intricate plots, and a great deal of “sturm und drang,” a typical chick lit novel is placed firmly in an ordinary and recognizable reality. One of the reasons behind Fielding’s success with *Bridget Jones’s Diary* was that readers felt they could identify with Bridget. She was a heroine one could relate to, laugh at, and laugh with, and her struggles with everything from cooking to weight loss/gain were familiar to many readers.

An important difference between chick lit and romance is the tone of the novel. Even if romance novels can be funny, they are seldom filled with the same kind of irony we can find in chick lit. In chick lit, there is usually an interesting ambiguity. Even if the story is about finding true love, in chick lit this is simultaneously mocked, and the “happily ever after” scenario is often challenged.

How to compare the way chick lit describes sex, then, to the “bodice-rippers”? In chick lit, the heroine often has a great deal of sex in her attempt to find Mr. Right, but it would be wrong to describe chick lit as an erotic genre. Actually, quite the opposite is true, and the genre is often called chaste (Nilson, 2008). The sex scenes are usually short and not very detailed; and even if the heroine has sex with different men, this sex is generally not very satisfactory until she meets her one true love. So how does the *Fifty Shades* trilogy relate to this? I would argue that after almost twenty years of chick lit, there was an almost desperate need for something else. E.L. James came at exactly the right moment. But she is actually not the first to bring sex back. From 2004 and onwards, an important part of popular fiction has been the so called “erotic memoirs” that continue to flood the market. Books like Abby Lee’s *Girl with a One-Track Mind* from 2006 and Suzanne Portnoy’s *The Butcher, the Baker, the Candlestick maker: An Erotic Memoir* from 2006 became very popular. Kay Mitchell points out in her article “Gender and Sexuality in

Popular Fiction” that these “true stories” have a close connection to chick lit: “evident again in their packaging but also in the deployment of similar motifs and concerns - romance, consumerism, ‘having it all’, the legacies of feminism/ the meanings of post-feminism” (2012, p. 135). In one way, these erotic memoirs combine the description of everyday life we see in chick lit with erotica, and in so doing paves the way for *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Is E.L. James’s trilogy chick lit? No, but it shares a few important traits with the genre. Ana is a kind of heroine many readers professed to being able to identify with. And even if the irony of, say, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is sorely lacking in the trilogy, there is humor in the books, especially in the email conversations between Ana and Christian. It is my firm belief that after more than a decade of funny, romantic, but not very sexy books, the public was ready for something more titillating.

A hybrid love story for a new century?

I started this article saying that I could not see James’s trilogy as something “new,” and I want to conclude by reflecting a bit on what she says about romance, relationships, and power. I have argued that James blends romance, the “bodice-ripper” novel, and chick lit, but what does the final product say about men, women, sex, and desire? In the “bodice-ripper” novel, there is a traditional and stereotypical description of power relations between the hero and the heroine. Mussell writes: “The man always unbends at the end to show his love and need for her, but he retains the mastery to be firmly in control of himself and the heroine” (1984, p. 126). When the romance genre changed, the relationship between the hero and the heroine also changed to become more equal. In chick lit, we see very few alpha males of Brandon’s or Christian’s character and a great deal more of modern men who willingly do the dishes. So is this a backlash? On one hand, E.L. James has in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy successfully meshed different traits from different kind of romance novels into something new. On the other hand, I would say, yes, this is a return to an old-fashioned way to describe heterosexual romance. I have spent a great deal of time talking about Ana and Christian with different teenage girls, and I must confess that I try to steer them in the direction of other kinds of both romance and erotica in which men and women have a more equal relationship.

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