

How manipulation
and obsession play a
part in fifty shades of
grey



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“ I just finished reading the most AMAZING book...” a woman whispers, leaning secretively to her friend’s ear beside her. “ Fifty Shades of Grey!” The friend gasps and blushes, turning towards her with wide eyes. “ You mean the one about the bondage?” The woman nods, grinning mischievously. Her friend begins to frown. “ But isn’t that also the one where he stalks her and controls her and lashes out on her?” The woman hesitates but continues to smile. “ Yes, but it’s so sexy and romantic!”

Despite what fans of the popular erotica novel claim, there is nothing sexy or romantic about manipulation and obsession, a common theme in E. L James’s Fifty Shades of Grey. The series is extremely problematic due to its normalization of abuse, antifeminist messages, and demonstration of unhealthy sexual practices including an improper portrayal of BDSM.

Anyone who has read the series is aware that Fifty Shades has a habit of romanticizing stalking and controlling behavior. In the novel, Christian Grey keeps a GPS on main character Anastasia Steele to track her at all times, making her more of a pet than a partner. Grey further demonstrates his boundary issues and clinginess by showing up when repeatedly asked not to, literally following her, and often not allowing her to drive or see friends. He is obsessive in nature and not only dictates where she can go and when, but what she eats and wears, policing her body as though he owns it and restricting her food intake like a prisoner. Christian uses emotional manipulation and physical intimidation to force Anastasia into sex, beats her with a belt when angered with her, and has said horrifying lines such as “ I may have to torture it out of you.” And “ I’m going to hit you six times, and

you will count with me.” These are all alarming signs of an abusive relationship.

Anastasia consistently expresses her fear throughout the novel of upsetting Christian, in fear of seeing his anger and getting beaten, just as any victim of domestic violence would. In fact, according to House Of Ruth, many signs of an abusive relationship include being scared of your partner’s temper, being hit or shoved by your partner, being disallowed to see family or friends due to your partner’s jealousy, being forced into having sex, being required to describe everything you do and everywhere you go to avoid your partner’s rage, and believing you cannot live without your partner. Anastasia says herself after being forced into sex, “ But now I feel like a receptacle – an empty vessel to be filled at his whim.” All of these symptoms are definite signs of abuse.

To make matters worse, the author asks the audience to forgive Grey for his irrational behavior due to his terrible childhood, which involved cases of physical and emotional abuse. His backstory is meant to justify Grey’s actions, and the main character is meant to pity him rather than realize she is in danger. This is not only detrimental to the mindset of the readers, as it implies these dangerous and abusive traits are not only desirable, but they are standard in a romantic relationship and can be looked over (especially if your abuser has a lot of money and abs). An abuser in a relationship will also manipulate their partner into believing that their actions are excusable and that their partner deserves the punishment.

Not only does *Fifty Shades* normalize abusive relationships and habits, it also strongly conveys an antifeminist message to the predominately female audience. The characters themselves reinforce gender stereotypes through Christian's hyper-masculine, overly aggressive and dominant character versus Anastasia's devastatingly weak and subordinate one. Christian often verbally abuses her, calling her a slut and insulting her. In one line, he says to Anastasia, "How could you be so stupid?" Anastasia is often left hurt by both his actions and words, and expresses herself by saying, "I have an overwhelming urge to cry, a sad and lonely melancholy grips and tightens round my heart." After being intimate with Christian, she was left feeling devastated, cried for days, and even starved herself.

Fifty Shades also illustrates an improper portrayal of BDSM (bondage, dominance and submission, sadomasochism). This fact is important because its false image further leads to society's distorted view on sex and the BDSM community in general. What makes this portrayal improper to BDSM, most importantly, is the lack of consent given. This is extremely alarming, for it implies rape and twists the audience's views on the subject, leading to the justification of sexual abuse and encourages readers to fetishize rape. In fact, one part of the book reads "'No,' I protest, trying to kick him off. He stops. 'If you struggle, I'll tie your feet too. If you make a noise, Anastasia, I will gag you.'" This quote sounds like something straight out a horror novel rather than a romantic erotica.

To further make the situation more terrifying and dangerous, Christian completely ignores any safe words used between them, which again goes against proper BDSM. The purpose of a safe word is to let your other partner

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know what feels good and what hurts, and it yelled out when you want your partner to stop. Ignoring your partner's safe word violates your partner's consent and is not only endangering the two of them physically, but also emotionally, as it demonstrates a lack of trust and again ties back to the emotional abuse mentioned earlier.

Fifty Shades manipulates readers into thinking the same way Christian influences Anastasia. The series encourages romanticizing mistreatment and refusing to see the danger of such situations, changing yourself to please your partner, and allowing yourself only to exist as a reciprocal for sexual frustration. In essence, if society wants to read something sexy, it is best to find another, better written novel that doesn't include disturbing abusive relationships, unrealistic expectations, and blatant sexism. There are plenty of other novels that focus on consensual sex and safe practices, as well as romances not based off of a poorly written teen vampire series.