

# Feminism in *Fifty Shades of Grey*

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## Abstract

The *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy is an interesting phenomenon we should study, because the responses it receives are contradictory. In this thesis James's works will be studied in light of feminism with the use of themes like women's writers/female writers, the pseudonym, author's identity and *Goodreads* reviews in order to understand the role feminism plays in popular fiction. This thesis concludes that even though authors play an important role in promoting their book, there is still a downside to this as well. E.L. James is belittled by critics when they dismiss her novels as "mommy porn". J.K. Rowling shows that even today female authors, like Charlotte Brontë 150 years ago, are liable to be looked on with prejudice and adopt a male or gender-neutral pseudonym in order to avoid this. Furthermore, the most important reason why readers like or dislike James's fiction can be found in the different mode of reading – feminism versus escapism – opponents and supporters perform. Positive reviewers see *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a means to escape their own life, whereas the negative reviewers read James's novel as a reflection of a sexist society that glorifies domestic violence. This difference in reading mode has sparked a discussion about patriarchal society, sexism, rape culture and ultimately feminism. James reveals important problems in our society through her works and readers have revived the discussions about these issues. They do so through the channels of the social reviewing web page *Goodreads*. These discussions show how *Fifty Shades of Grey* is related to feminism, not through its content or textuality, but through its effects and the meaning the readers themselves give it.

Keywords: *Fifty Shades of Grey*; feminism; escapism; *Goodreads*; pseudonym

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## 1. Introduction

“[My editor] said to me, ‘I don’t want this book on the back shelf of the bookstore in the erotic section. This needs to be on the front table at Barnes and Noble, because it is a cultural phenomenon.’” – E.L. James about her editor (Thomas)

And her editor was right. The trilogy of *Fifty Shades of Grey* is the fastest-selling series of all time and the three parts of the trilogy have shared the number one, two and three position of the New York Times e-book bestseller list (Nolan). It is commonly known that “sex sells” (Brooke 134), but in the past most of the sex advertisements and marketing strategies have targeted at and been focusing on a male audience. *Fifty Shades of Grey* tells the story of literature student Anastasia Steele and the powerful billionaire Christian Grey. The two immediately feel attracted to each other when Ana interviews Grey for her college graduation paper. Ana is mainly looking for love, but Grey cannot give it to her. Grey is into BDSM (bondage, domination, sadism, masochism) and wants Ana to be his submissive rather than his girlfriend. Ana needs to decide what she wants to do while exploring this new sexual world. The novels are described as “mommy porn” (McCann) by critics and it is the combination of romance and sex in the *Fifty Shades* series that attracts women, which has led in turn to “boosting sales of sex toys, driving women to hook-up sites and fueling [sic] a craze over sexual domination“ (Grinberg).

Yet, when someone is asked to give an example of bad writing often they will come up with *Fifty Shades of Grey* (McCann). E.L. James herself explained that she never really had the ambition to have a big writing career (James “Fifty Shades of Success”), but it just turned out this way. James wrote an erotic fan fiction based on the popular vampire series *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer for fun, which was well received by readers who encouraged her

to turn it into an original story (Bertrand). E.L. James uses plain and simple sentences in her writing, which makes her prose easy to understand. This also results in readers considering it badly written (Deller 941). Even though it cannot be considered high literature; it still is seen as canonical literature of popular culture. This dual position is one of the aspects I want to understand through this thesis. As E.L. James herself explained in an interview, she receives letters in which her fans claim they “haven’t read a book for 10 or 20 years and I read all of your books in just three days” (James, “Fifty Shades of Success”). Women have started book clubs and have told all their friends about the books (James, “Fifty Shades of Success”). Partly because they felt empowered and freed, partly because they were entertained. Her book “changed the way women globally perceive (and approach) sexuality” (“The Unassuming Author”). However, not every response to the series has been positive and not every (female) reader felt empowered reading it. Multiple feminists and critics have argued that James’s writing propagates male dominance and abuse (McCann).

### 1.1 Introducing themes and focus

So, how does *Fifty Shades of Grey* relate to the concept of feminism? Why do readers like or dislike James’s fiction? These questions will be explored and answered in this thesis. As explained earlier, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy is still an interesting phenomenon we should study, precisely because the responses it receives are contradictory. In this thesis James’s works will be studied in light of feminism with the use of themes like women’s writers/female writers, the pseudonym, author’s identity and *Goodreads* reviews in order to understand the role feminism plays in popular fiction.

*The Independent* published an article in 2011 in which they questioned the meaning and relevance of feminism for contemporary literature. They noted that feminism had left the field of fiction somewhere along the line. In this article the journalist wondered whether it would be redundant to revisit the debate on women’s writing and feminism, because the

1970's definition of "writing by women, about women, for women" is no longer applicable in "an age where books written by women extend across genres and jostle for literary prizes and front-of-store positioning" ("Is Feminism Relevant"). However, there are still differences and imbalances; not only among male and female writers, but among the views regarding emancipation and feminism as well. Examining *Fifty Shades of Grey* in light of feminism will not only tell us a lot about the novel series in itself, but also about the current attitude towards feminism among (female) readers and in popular culture in general.

## 1.2 Thesis structure

In order to be able to answer the research question, one needs to know what exactly is meant by the concept of feminism. Firstly, this will be explained and after that the rich history of feminism in fiction will be briefly explored. This will lead to the ongoing discussion whether a female writer is by definition a women writer, i.e. a writer for a female audience. Professor of literature, Toril Moi, is known for her prominence as a feminist literary critic, which is why her essay "I am not a woman writer" will be discussed.

After an understanding of feminism and women's fiction is provided, the reason why female writers decide to use a (gender neutral/male) pseudonym will be examined. E.L. James's actual name is Erika Mitchell. In this chapter James's reasons to write under a different, gender neutral, name and the consequences of this decision will be looked into. Studying the reasons female writers in the Victorian period used a pen name will put James's motivation in perspective. The literary critic Roland Barthes wrote an essay in which he declared "the death of the author". This text will be used and compared to E.L. James's persona and pseudonym in order to find out how the identity of the author plays a role in shaping reader's responses to contemporary fiction. To provide a further context for the concept of author's identity, a case study will be explored, which is the controversy around the pseudonym Elena Ferrante, who is a well-known author, but has kept her real identity

secret. Journalists have tried to find out who the person behind the pseudonym is; in my research I will focus on the relevance of knowing this and its consequences. I will try to answer the question about the importance of the author's identity by looking at the latest novel of E.L. James, *Grey*, which is a retelling of *Fifty Shades of Grey* from Christian Grey's point of view. In this part of the analysis I will focus on the conception that writers should write about what they know or are familiar with; this advice is given to aspiring writers, because "it will free you to write [...] in an engaging and authentic way, and in a original voice" (Campbell). This will be tested through a comparison between *Grey* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, because both novels are told from a first-person perspective. E.L. James pays much attention to Ana's inner thoughts in her first three novels, but is this also the case with her male main character? This will once again be linked to the case study of the anonymous author Elena Ferrante in order to conclude whether readers should be able to assess an author's work based on the author's identity or not.

The fourth chapter focuses on amateur reviews posted on the book recommendations website *Goodreads*, because it shows how people react to trends and marketing strategies due to the amount of users and their reviews. Everyone can post their review of a book on this website and some of them are quite elaborate. *Goodreads* shows the reviews with the most activity – i.e. reviews with the most likes and comments by other users – on the top of the review section of the book page. I have selected three positive and three negative reviews from the first two pages of the book's page; these reviews will be used to find out what the main reasons are readers like or dislike the novels and how the reviewers use feminism as a means for justifying these assessments. Through these reviews it becomes clear that the texts can be read from a feminist point of view and an escape reading point of view (Radway 88). Janice Radway wrote *Reading the Romance* in which she explains that escape readers are people who read novels for the mere reason of enjoyment and the ability to escape their own

life and daily problems (88). Supporters and opponents – of both the books and feminism in general – read the books in a different way. This shows a different attitude towards feminism in general and (anti)feminist aspects in fiction as well.

After these sub questions and chapters, a thesis conclusion can be provided. In this conclusion the question ‘How does *Fifty Shades of Grey* relate to the concept of feminism?’ will be answered. The conclusion will touch upon the role of the author and her chosen pseudonym, the writing style in both *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Grey* and the reviews of readers to serve as a base for the argument what role the trilogy plays in canonical popular literature and erotic fiction and how this relates to the concept of feminism.

At the end of this thesis, I will conclude that even though authors play an important role in promoting their book, there is still a downside to this as well. James is belittled by critics when they dismiss her novels as “mommy porn”. J.K. Rowling shows that even today female authors, like Charlotte Brontë 150 years ago, are liable to be looked on with prejudice and adopt a male or gender-neutral pseudonym in order to avoid this. Furthermore, the most important reason why readers like or dislike James’s fiction can be found in the different mode of reading – feminism versus escapism – opponents and supporters perform. Positive reviewers see *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a means to escape their own life, whereas the negative reviewers read James’s novel as a reflection of a sexist society that glorifies domestic violence. This difference in reading mode has sparked a discussion about patriarchal society, sexism, rape culture and ultimately feminism. James reveals important problems in our society through her works and readers have revived the discussions about these issues. They do so through the channels of the social reviewing web page *Goodreads*. These discussions show how *Fifty Shades of Grey* is related to feminism, not through its content or textuality, but through its effects and the meaning the readers give it themselves.



2. Women's writers and women's fiction: Writing about women is not always considered feminism, but does feminism always mean writing about women?

### 2.1 Feminism in fiction

In order to be able to understand *Fifty Shades of Grey*'s relation to feminism, one needs to know more about the role feminist theory has played in earlier fiction. Literature of a certain period gives an impression of how individuals experienced life in that age; although women's experiences have not always been taken seriously. This applies to female characters, and to female writers. Throughout the years, literature has enabled women to voice their opinions and explore their emotions. Even though the term *feminism* and label *feminist* were not commonly used until the 1970s, there is a long tradition of women who use literature in defence of their sex ("History and Theory of Feminism"). Charlotte Brontë is one female writer who used literature to fight sexism and voice her beliefs. I will not use Brontë as an example because she paved the way for other female writers, but because her novel *Jane Eyre* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* share some interesting similarities when it comes to plot and characters. *Jane Eyre* was shockingly explicit for Brontë's period of time, just like *Fifty Shades* is breaking taboos nowadays. Because it goes against the social norms of the time period, Brontë's novel is considered a classic, whereas James's series is considered pulp.

The novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë is seen as one of the first feminist novels (Sanders). *Jane Eyre* is described as plain, but her individualistic character and outspoken opinions resulted in a "powerful emotional influence" (Sanders). Brontë's work belongs to the Victorian period, which was eminently patriarchal. Sandra M. Gilbert describes the novel as "a distinctively female *Bildungsroman* in which the problems encountered by the protagonist [...] are symptomatic of difficulties Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome" (339). Brontë's plain heroine overcomes these difficulties by fighting against the fact that as a governess she is her master's "possession". Many contemporaries of

Brontë were shocked when they read *Jane Eyre* (Shuttleworth), because it clashed with their beliefs. Jane claims her own story and narration and Carla Kaplan states that through this it is “no wonder, then, that *Jane Eyre* has come to occupy a position of privilege in the feminist canon” (4). What does this mean in relation to *Fifty Shades of Grey*? Readers of the series are shocked as well, partly because it clashes with their beliefs and one could argue that James’s main character Anastasia Steele also claims her own story and narration. Through this comparison I am able to put James’s work in the larger context of women’s writing and feminist literature, which is why it is valuable to approach *Fifty Shades of Grey* in this way.

However, Sanders explains that feminists from later periods criticized *Jane Eyre* for being too narrow-minded and not inclusive enough. “For twenty-first-century feminist readers Jane has become unfashionably white, middle-class and selfish, trampling every man and woman in her way while succumbing to the most clichéd of masochistic fairytales [sic]” (Sanders). Whereas it used to be that *Jane Eyre* seemed to be role model for all women, this quote by Sanders shows that this is not necessarily the case anymore. The argument that feminism is too white and middle-class shows that a contemporary critical look on feminism is still necessary, because women’s equality is something concerning the whole world. Through globalization regional issues have expanded and became global issues, but as it turned out women in different parts of the world struggle with different kind of problems. In the Western world women fight for equal payment, but in the Arab world women are still fighting for their right to speak. Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj are Arab-American women in the American academy, dealing with a Eurocentric feminist movement. They started a project with their book *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers* in which they situate the discourse about Third World women in relation to transnational communication and the “liberatory promise of feminism” (2). Both scholars felt that “a historicization of the construction of Third World women and their texts in Western

context” (2) was missing, which is problematic for how Westerners read specific works and which works are translated and taught. Amireh and Suhair Majaj hope “that [*Going Global*] will contribute to a transnational feminist practice bringing women together through real cross-cultural dialogue” (20). This dialogue the two scholars want to start is happening through *Goodreads* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* as well, as will become evident in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

This broader exploration of feminism is of importance to my exploration of *Fifty Shades of Grey* because “Brontë repeatedly explored the conflict between an idealised view of romance and the mundane reality of what many women will accept as sufficient for their needs” (Sanders). However, this view of romance and mundane reality has changed since the Victorian period, along with the role literature plays in everyday life. In order to explain our contemporary world view, we must not only look at high literature like *Jane Eyre*, but at popular fiction as well. Given that *Jane Eyre* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are similar in controversy, underlying plot and characters, it would be short sighted to simply dismiss *Fifty Shades* as bad literature. James’s work is too much present in popular culture and at the same time too controversially received to ignore.

As Sanders explained, *Jane Eyre* is currently seen by some feminist critics as a cliché masochistic fairy tale, which corresponds with the critiques *Fifty Shades of Grey* receives. However, Brontë’s work is considered to be a masterpiece, a classic, whereas E.L. James is accused of anti-feminism and perpetuating rape culture (Nevassa). Studying feminism cannot only tell us a lot about *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a novel and a phenomenon, but it can enlighten us the other way around as well. *Fifty Shades* can tell us a lot about the long tradition of feminism, because it can show us what criteria are used to identify feminist literature and feminist values. Furthermore, discussions that arise because of the novels expose the attitude of readers towards feminism as well. One of the bigger discussions around *Fifty Shades of*

*Grey* is whether the character of Anastasia Steele can be considered feminist or not; this will be further explored in chapter four.

## 2.2 Toril Moi: 'Feminist, Female, Feminine'

Toril Moi is an important feminist literary critic and has amplified a distinction between some often used terms when talking about feminism. This essay has been published in *The Feminist Reader*, a collection of essays edited by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. Moi argues in this essay that “only a clear understanding of the differences between [*feminist*, *female* and *feminine*] can show what the crucial political and theoretical issues of contemporary feminist criticism really are” (117). Moi sees *feminism* as a political position, *femininity* as a concept culturally defined and *femaleness* as a matter of biology. Moi's discussion of these terms will inform my discussion of the debate over whether *Fifty Shades of Grey* can be considered feminist literature or not.

Moi explains that the words *feminist* and *feminism* are part of a political discourse, namely “a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism” (117). It is therefore the task of feminist critics to expose the presence of male dominance over females. Moi further explains that feminist criticism and theory can be formulated by a man or a woman and therefore “the very fact of being *female* [sic] does not necessarily guarantee a feminist approach” (120). This also applies to literature, meaning that “a female tradition in literature or criticism is not necessarily a feminist one” (Moi 120). Not every female experience or woman-centred writings can be considered feminist, because they do not always deal with patriarchal ideology (Moi 120). This also means that everyone can be feminist, men included, but not everyone can be or become female.

The last concepts introduced and explained by Moi are *being feminine* or *femininity*. Many feminists have used *feminine* and *masculine* to represent social constructs, which means patterns and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms, and used *male* and *female* to

indicate sexual differences on a biological level. In other words, “‘feminine’ represents nurture, and ‘female’ nature in this usage” (Moi 122). This means that one is not born a woman, but eventually becomes one, as the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir puts it. Moi complements this by stating that “feminists [...] must therefore always insist that though women undoubtedly are *female*, this in no way guarantees that they will be *feminine*” (123, italics in original). Furthermore, Moi wonders whether a clear definition or set of definitions, apart from “cultural construct”, for femininity is desirable. She concludes by saying that “patriarchy has developed a whole series of ‘feminine’ characteristics” (123) and feminists should not fall (back) into a patriarchal trap.

This exploration of frequently used terms in this thesis provides an unambiguous framework to discuss *Fifty Shades of Grey* in relation to feminism and it will help using the different terms correctly.

### 2.3 Toril Moi: ‘I am not a women writer’

After having established the differences between the meaning of the terms *feminist*, *female* and *feminine*, I will now focus on another article of Toril Moi, because she is also the author of an essay in *Feminist Theory* in which she questions why the woman writer disappeared from the feminist theoretical agenda around 1990. She turns this question into an analysis exploring whether women writers always have to write for women. This analysis revolves around her exploration of female authors who have felt compelled to make the statement “I am not a women writer”.

She begins by explaining that the interest in literature in feminist theory has decreased throughout the years, which logically resulted in a loss of interest regarding women and their creativity and aesthetics within feminist theory (Moi 259). According to Moi, “the decline of interest in literature is all the more striking given its central importance in the early years of feminist theory” (259). In the 1970’s-1980’s the definition of women’s writing was writing by

women, about women and for women. This was related to a feeling of liberation, because women were given the chance to voice their opinions. Before this development of *écriture féminine*, which promoted writing marked by femininity, the literary community was a male dominated world with writers who were mainly critical of women. Toril Moi justifies the joy women felt when *écriture féminine* became popular by stating: “Finally, women writers were going to fully express their own passions and desires in writing; finally, women readers would find their own passions reflected in books written with women in mind” (260).

Nevertheless, not everyone was pleased with this new development, because it still did not solve the problem of gender differences and inequality. During the flourishing of women’s writing, opinions already differed among female writers whether it should be considered a good development or not that their work was defined by their gender. Unfortunately, a clear-cut answer cannot be given until today, because “feminist theory stopped being concerned with women and writing” (Moi 261), allowing this issue to remain unanswered.

Moi provides two reasons why feminist theory lost interest in the question of women and writing. The first one involves the rise of poststructuralism, which brought Roland Barthes’s essay ‘The Death of the Author’. This essay and other new theories questioned the importance of the author’s identity all together and therefore the debate about the female author and women’s writing became irrelevant. The influence of Judith Butler’s book *Gender Trouble* is the second reason why theorists did not focus on the question of women and writing anymore. The philosopher challenges the category of ‘woman’ in this book and proposes we should speak about gender as a performative act instead. “By claiming that gender is performative, Butler basically meant to say that we create our gender by doing gendered things” (Moi 263). This view in combination with Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (330) resulted in feminist theory shifting away

from literature and literary criticism, because “feminist theorists became far less invested in discussing aesthetic questions” (263). Butler barely discussed literature in her theories and given that she was such an influential philosopher, it became more difficult for other theorists to develop a theory about women and writing.

These two theories that took away focus on women’s literature still trouble literary critics that work on women writers. Moi sketches the situation that arose after 1980 by saying that: “The result is a kind of intellectual schizophrenia, in which one half of the brain continues to read women writers, while the other continues to think that the author is dead, and that the very word ‘woman’ is theoretically dodgy” (264). The current theories block the way for new discussions about the role women and feminism play in literature. Moi therefore calls for more research and theories on the subject, which I can hopefully provide through discussing *Fifty Shades of Grey* in this thesis.

After this appeal to scholars, Moi turns to her main statement “I am not a woman writer”. She argues that this defensive speech act (Moi 265) stems from an imprisonment of gender, because indicating someone through their gender or race “cut[s] them off from what Beauvoir calls the ‘universal’” (Moi 265). Simone de Beauvoir explained in *The Second Sex* that man is seen as the universal and woman as the particular. Being male, or masculine is the norm in a sexist society and therefore “one can’t belittle a man by reminding him of his gender” (Moi 266). Men do not feel the need to stress or deny their sex or gender the way women often need to do. The reason why there is no single answer to the question whether female writers should be depicted as women’s writers is because on the one hand women writers do not want to be judged on the fact that they are female only, but on the other hand they also do not want to “write as a generic human being, since this opens up an alienating split between her gender and her humanity” (Moi 266). The writer Virginia Woolf argued in her essay *A Room of One’s Own* along the same line, because even though women appreciate

and value a female tradition, women write as women, but not as women conscious of being women (75).

In the end, Moi tries to steer away from the discussion on the role female writers should uptake in general by aiming for the individualistic approach. She explains through the words of Virginia Woolf that “literature arises when a human being tries to attend to reality with as much integrity and truth as she can muster, and then tries to communicate that vision to others” (268). In order to keep access to the vision of both male and female people, we need to strive for equality and prevent turning “women into second rate citizens in the realm of literature” (Moi 268), because through this one would basically “say that women’s experiences of existence and of the world are less important than men’s” (268). Yet there are today, as before, many women who adopt a male pseudonym for their novels. Motives for this will be further investigated in the next chapter.



### 3. E.L. James and use of the pseudonym: A women writer or just a female writer?

#### 3.1 Explanation of the pseudonym

As previously mentioned, Erika Mitchell is the woman behind the pseudonym E.L. James. Erika Mitchell is described as a modest, funny woman who is a little bit camera shy (“The Unassuming Author”) and has trouble coping with all the attention she is getting. And yet, as E.L. James, she has written very spicy and daring books. This contradiction in persona is intriguing and makes one wonder what the reason for choosing a pseudonym really was and whether this could stem from a feminist or sexist approach.

In an interview with *The Huffington Post* E.L. James revealed why she chose to write under a pen name. According to James, “it’s because I thought I would continue working at my other job” (James “Fifty Shades of Success”). She wanted to keep her two jobs separate, because she did not think the books would become so successful. As she explains it in her own words: “I thought I’d write some naughty stuff in the evening, and go to work during the day” (James “Fifty Shades of Success”). She also wanted to protect her children, because she did not want others to know that their mother was writing “quite a racy novel” (James “E.L. James Dishes”). Nevertheless, she told *Boston Globe* that she did not give her pen name a lot of thought: “In three minutes I thought of E.L. James” (James “E.L. James Dishes”). The pseudonym is a combination of her real name and the family name James.

According to James, she was not aware of the fact that the pen name that she chose was an androgynous one. The *Huffington Post* interviewer Marlo Thomas explains that she first thought *Fifty Shades of Grey* was written by a male author because of all the explicit sex scenes, but as the story went on she adjusted her assumption. James responds to this by saying that “it never occurred to me that people would think I was a bloke” (James “Fifty Shades of Success”).

E.L. James's reasoning for using a pseudonym is interesting for this thesis, because it differs from her predecessors. Many female writers used genderless or male pseudonyms to consciously hide their real gender, but E.L. James on the other hand did not give it much thought. I will look into other cases of female writers using a pseudonym in order to provide a frame of reference and background. Through the different cases I will explore two effects of using a pseudonym: whether writers are freed from the advice that "they should write about what they know" and whether the assessment on the quality of writing is free from prejudice based on gender.

### 3.2 Victorian female writers and their pseudonyms

I have discussed Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* already because of the similarities between the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy. Furthermore, the two cases are interesting to compare because Brontë published her work under a pen name, just like James did. *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* was published in 1847 under the name of Currer Bell. This pen name was necessary because she wanted her work to be taken seriously in the male dominantly Victorian world. Male dominance of the literary field is evident when at the beginning of her career Brontë had sent some of her poetry to the English poet Robert Southey and asked for his opinion. He responded with saying that even though her writing was not bad, "literature cannot be the business of a woman's life" (Southey). Therefore, Brontë and her writing sisters decided to use male pseudonyms to avoid sexism and prejudice.

Brontë's friend and biographer Elizabeth Gaskell noted in her biography that the need for a pseudonym resulted in a split life, because Charlotte Brontë, the woman, and Currer Bell, the author, had different duties. She explained that a man could become a writer anytime, because it was just a change of employment to him and somebody else would fill in his vacant place. A woman on the other hand, would not be as easily replaceable in her domestic charges and duties as a daughter, wife or mother (Gaskell in Brontë 459).

It was not until Brontë wrote a preface for new editions of her sisters' novels *Wuthering Heights* (Emily Brontë) and *Agnes Grey* (Anne Brontë) around 1850 that she revealed their true gender. At that time it was already widely discussed by critics and readers what the real identity of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell was. In this preface she states that they had chosen Christian names to sound masculine because they "did not like to declare ourselves women, because – without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine' – we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice" (Brontë).

Whereas E.L. James uses her pseudonym because she wanted to write in anonymity, the Brontë sisters used their pseudonyms because they had to write in anonymity. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century many female writers wrote critically engaged novels, but along with the Brontës they did so under a pen name in order to get the attention from readers and critics. However, James's reasons for writing under a pseudonym are as gendered as the Brontës' reason, because James was afraid that as a mother she would be condemned for writing sexually explicit material. She explains in an interview that she chose a pseudonym "mainly to protect my children" ("E.L. James Dishes"), which shows that the prejudice the Brontë sisters were confronted with is still present in our society.

### 3.3 Consequences of using a pseudonym: J.K. Rowling

Over 150 years later, female writers still adopt male pseudonyms. J.K. Rowling, the world famous writer of the *Harry Potter* series decided on a gender-ambiguous name when publishing her first book. Her publisher Barry Cunningham feared that little boys would not be interested in Harry Potter's story if Rowling used her actual name, Joanne, which is why he asked her to make her name less feminine (Robinson). It was Cunningham's idea to use initials, but *The Telegraph* later reported that Rowling does not even have a middle name (Savill). A Bristol newspaper published her birth certificate, through which it became clear

that her parents registered her as Joanne Rowling (Savill). However, the author's publicity agents have always stated that her full name is Joanne Kathleen Rowling (Savill). I think it is problematic to see that women are still unable to reveal their true and complete identity, because the male audience will be put off by a book written by a woman. Rowling remains phlegmatic on the situation, stating in an interview that "they could have called me Enid Snodgrass. I just wanted [the book] published" (Rowling in Savill).

Regardless of her publisher's earlier advice, Rowling decided to write her first novel after the *Harry Potter* series under a pen name as well. She chose the pseudonym Robert Galbraith first of all because she wanted "to work without hype or expectation and to receive totally unvarnished feedback" ("About"). However, on the Galbraith website she also writes that she wanted her "writing persona as far away as possible" ("About") from herself; a male pseudonym seemed more fit for this purpose. She recalls that her editor David Shelley told her that he "never would have thought a woman wrote that" ("About") after he found out Rowling was behind the pseudonym. Rowling declared she felt proud, because "she successfully channelled her inner bloke" ("About"), but I think it is worrisome that a female writer feels pride when she is told that she writes like a man. This attitude indicates that we are still living in a sexist society like the one described by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* where man is still seen as the universal and woman as the particular; "A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong" (Beauvoir in *Moi* 264). Men do not feel the need to deny or defend their gender, but a case like J.K. Rowling's shows that women still have to.

Apart from that, it is interesting to see that the reasons behind the pen names E.L. James, J.K. Rowling and Robert Galbraith all differ from each other. E.L. James just wanted to ensure anonymity, but J.K. Rowling had to alter her name in order to get her book published, just like the female writers in the Victorian period had to. Rowling's reasoning for

her second pseudonym, Robert Galbraith, was more in line with E.L. James's motivation, because she wanted anonymity to be able to "receive totally unvarnished feedback" ("About").

### 3.4 Roland Barthes: 'The death of the author'

In the previous chapter it was explained how the literary theorist and critic Roland Barthes silenced the discussion about women's writers and fiction with his claim that the author is dead. Right now, I will explore this claim further to see what this means for the tendency towards male or genderless pseudonyms and in order to use as a frame for my analysis.

The main claim of his essay is that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 148). With this he means that after an author has written a text, the destination is no longer a personal one. When writing begins, "the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death" (Barthes 142), because according to Barthes writing should be seen as a "neutral, composite, oblique space" (142), without identity in any sense. Readers often try to explain a work through the man or woman who produced it; through the author's person, life, tastes and passions. Barthes argues that it is only the language that 'performs', because the language speaks, not the author. Barthes states that "linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing" (145). After writing, the author needs to be removed from our understanding of the text, because otherwise a limit is imposed on that text. Literature should not have an ultimate meaning, according to Barthes (147), because texts can be and should be interpreted in multiple ways. Barthes therefore ends his essay stating that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148).

The multiple interviews E.L. James has given in which she is asked about the purpose of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and whether she meant to write a book that would cause such an explosive response around the world are interesting to read in light of Barthes's argument. Marlo Thomas, interviewer for *The Huffington Post*, explains that she wanted to talk to James,

in order to get an answer to questions like “Were the books really about womanhood? Or power?” (Thomas in “Fifty Shades of Success”). E.L. James responds to these kind of questions by stating that “it makes me kind of laugh, all this navel-gazing about this book. I wrote it for fun!” (“Fifty Shades of Success”). If it were up to Barthes, James would not have been interviewed about her works at all, but she would certainly not have answered in this way. James downgrades her reader’s opinions and experiences by stating that “many people are missing the point” (“Fifty Shades of Success”). Barthes knows that an author is still present through biographies of writers and interviews, but he explains that when it comes to text “the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost” (148). An author therefore needs to let a text speak for itself instead of trying to filter and alter the responses like James does.

When I compare Barthes ‘The Death of the Author’ to E.L. James’s persona and pseudonym I can conclude that the identity of the author plays an essential role in contemporary fiction, despite Barthes’s plea. Authors of bestsellers are frequent guests at talk shows and almost everyone has an online identity since the rise of social media. This trend corresponds with the kind of introductions interviews with E.L. James have and the kind of questions she gets when doing these interviews.

A pseudonym does not guarantee anonymity (anymore), as is proved by the story of Elena Ferrante. When it is known that an author’s name is actually a pseudonym, journalists and other curious people will want to figure out who is behind the name. The writer behind the pseudonym Elena Ferrante became the victim of one of these hunts. Ferrante is an Italian writer, who chose to write under a pseudonym because she believes that readers are too preoccupied with the writers, and too little with the text in itself (Donadio). Ferrante once explained in an interview that “the structural absence of the author affects the writing in a way that I’d like to continue to explore” (Ferrante in Donadio). Throughout the years, since

Ferrante's first novel in 1992, many readers have contributed to the speculation about the writer's real identity. The Italian journalist Claudio Gatti decided to end the mystery by doing a months-long investigation through real estate and financial data. According to Gatti, "the financial data not only suggest a solution to the long-running puzzle about the real Elena Ferrante but also assist us in gaining insight into her novels" (Gatti), but unfortunately for him Ferrante's fans are not as grateful as he expected them to be. Alexandra Schwartz, staff writer at *The New Yorker*, wrote in a response the day after Gatti's revelations that she "like many—maybe most—enthusiastic Ferrante readers, [has] no interest in knowing who the writer who publishes her novels under the name Elena Ferrante is. I don't care" (Schwartz). Gatti was fully aware of the fact that Ferrante did not want her real identity to be discovered, but as Schwartz explains that the debate is about "the question of an author's right not to be known, and the particular resonance of that question when the author concerned is, presumably, female" (Schwartz), one could wonder whether Gatti's search would have been as elaborate if it had been about a male author with a male pseudonym. It is therefore not Ferrante's secrecy that is problematic, but the fact that Gatti feels that he was entitled to exposing her because there was a "legitimate right for readers to know [...] as they have made her such a superstar" (Gatti in Kirchgaessner). Furthermore, in his article about his discoveries he eventually lays bare a deeper problem by claiming that his theory is the first to have been backed by evidence, unlike theories by previous so called *Ferrante truthers* – a group of fans who have tried "to compare the biographies of various Italian writers with what is known or inferred about Ferrante's life or to match their literary style with hers" (Schwartz) in order to discover her true identity, but nevertheless his findings are still "leaving open the possibility of some kind of unofficial collaboration with her husband, the writer Starnon" (Gatti). Even after extensive research, he still does not fully accept that this great literature is written by a woman. This shows that even when a female author decides upon a pseudonym, she is not

free from her real identity and not safe from sexism. Furthermore, this shows that readers still try to link the pen name and the author's real identity to the subject matter of the written works.

### 3.5 E.L. James's *Grey*: Write about what you know?

The exploration of the pseudonym and author's identity through the cases of Charlotte Brontë, J.K. Rowling and Elena Ferrante brings me to James's own works. These female authors have adopted pen names to disguise their real identity and gender, which is similar to James's reasoning of choosing a pseudonym. However, I will show that James's gender becomes evident through her bad writing of *Grey*. E.L. James fourth book *Grey* was published in 2015 and tells the same story as the first *Fifty Shades* novel, but from Christian Grey's point of view. James was "prompted to write the fourth book by fans who had asked her to tell Grey's side of the story of his erotic relationship with virginal college student Anastasia Steele" (Groves) and is therefore interesting to compare with the first novel when talking about the importance of the author's identity. The journalist Hannah Ellis-Petersen explains in an article for *The Guardian* that Hazel Cushion, marketing director of erotica publisher Xcite Books, had no doubts that *Grey* would prove as popular as its predecessors, and praised James's premise for the book by stating that "it's a brilliant idea ... I think we all want to know what men are thinking, and to retell the story but from his point of view is incredible publishing [sic]" (Cushion in Ellis-Petersen). E.L. James even announced in September that the second novel of the series, *Fifty Shades Darker*, will get a retelling from Grey's perspective as well (James "Good morning, all").

Because many readers wanted to read James's novel after the bad writing style made them curious (Deller 939), it is interesting to see whether James has been able to improve her writing. More importantly, the same story from a different, male, point of view written three years later can show us whether she can write from a perspective unknown to her. When



reading the two books right after each other, there was one thing that immediately stands out: the novel written from Ana's point of view is much more elaborate and descriptive than from Grey's point of view. The advice "write what you know" is most of the time connected to writing autobiographical fiction (Johnston). However, writer Nathan Englander explains that it is not about events, which "paralyzes aspiring authors into thinking that authenticity in fiction means thinly veiled autobiography" (Gots), but it is about emotions. Both explanations leave the question whether E.L. James was able to write from Christian Grey's point of view open. A good writer can write fiction "not to express [...] but to escape" (Johnston), which means that through emotional integrity and the fiction's narrative (Johnston) a writer can create anything. Thus, an author's identity and gender would not matter, because it is about creating new worlds and events. However, this is probably where James's writing skills and creativity fail her. It is commonly known that *Fifty Shades of Grey* has become archetypical for bad writing. Even Salman Rushdie, author of *Midnight's Children* and Booker Prize-winner, interferes in the discussion about the writing in *Fifty Shades of Grey* by stating that "I've never read anything so badly written that got published. It made *Twilight* look like *War and Peace*" (in Irvine). An example of this difference in extent is when Ana and Grey are getting breakfast at *IHOP* and the server asks them what they want. This is an excerpt from *Fifty Shades of Grey*:

"Hi, my name's Leandra. What can I get for you ... er ... folks ... er ... today, this mornin'?" Her voice trails off, stumbling over her words as she gets an eyeful of Mr. Beautiful opposite me. She flushes scarlet, and a small ounce of sympathy for her bubbles unwelcome into my consciousness because he still does that to me. Her presence allows me to escape briefly from his sensual glare.

“Anastasia?” he prompts me, ignoring her, and I don’t think anyone could squeeze as much carnality into my name as he does that moment.

I swallow, praying that I don’t turn the same color as poor Leandra.

“I told you, I want what you want.” I keep my voice soft, low, and he looks at me hungrily. *Jeez, my inner goddess swoons. Am I up to this game?*

Leandra looks from me to him and back again. She’s practically the same color as her shiny red hair.

“Shall I give you folks another minute to decide?”

“No. We know what we want.” Christian’s mouth twitches a small, sexy smile.

“We’ll have two portions of the original buttermilk pancakes with maple syrup and bacon on the side, two glasses of orange juice, one black coffee with skim milk, and one English breakfast tea, if you have it,” says Christian, not taking his eyes off me.

“Thank you, sir. Will that be all?” Leandra whispers, looking anywhere but at the two of us. We both turn to stare at her, and she flushes crimson again and scuttles away. (James 457-58)

This scene shows a dialogue between the waitress of IHOP, Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele in which Ana immediately describes and comments on the situation. She notices how the waitress stumbles over her words and makes this known to the reader. In *Grey E.L.* James writes the scene as the following:

“Hi, my name’s Leandra. What can I get for you ... er ... folks ... er ... today, this mornin’?”

*Oh, God.* I ignore the redheaded server.

“Anastasia?” I prompt her.

“I told you, I want what you want.”

*Hell.* She might as well be addressing my groin.

“Shall I give you folks another minute to decide?” the waitress asks.

“No. We know what we want.” I cannot tear my gaze from Ana’s.

“We’ll have two portions of the original buttermilk pancakes with maple syrup and bacon on the side, two glasses of orange juice, one black coffee with skim milk, and one English breakfast tea, if you have it.”

Ana smiles.

“Thank you, sir. Will that be all?” the waitress exclaims, all breathy and embarrassed. Tearing my attention away from Ana, I dismiss the waitress with a look and she scurries away.” (James *Grey* 447)

The scene in *Fifty Shades of Grey* takes up over a hundred words more than the *Grey* version. In *Grey*, E.L. James does not pay attention to the scenery or gives the reader insight in Grey’s mind. The dialogue is rather flat, one-dimensional. Journalist Jenny Colgan reviewed *Grey* for *The Guardian* and explains in her review that “it is as if every line of dialogue, [...] every email from the first volume has been cut and pasted in. We follow each scene in the same order, except this time we see it from Christian’s point of view” (n.p.). Whereas *Fifty Shades of Grey* had a funny and light-hearted undertone, *Grey* shows a darker, more twisted version of the story (Colgan), just like Christian Grey is portrayed in the initial book. Ana joked about Grey stalking her in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, because often their accidental encounters seemed too staged; in *Grey* the reader finds out that he actually acts like a “heavy-breathing murderer stalking his prey” (Colgan). In her announcement for the book’s release date, James explained

that “Christian is a complex character, and readers have always been fascinated by his desires and motivations” (in Groves). James’s fourth novel shows that Grey is as controlling and insensible as he was portrayed in Ana’s telling. Sometimes this difference in approach – Ana compassionate and Grey distant – works in the dualistic narrations, like in the scene in which Grey takes Ana to his BDSM-room because she wants him to show her how much the punishments can hurt. She asks for this because she wants to know whether she can live with it or not. Ana experiences the moment as following:

“Count, Anastasia!” he commands.

“One!” I shout at him, and it sounds like an expletive.

He hits me again, and the pain pulses and echoes along the line of the belt.

*Holy shit ... that smarts.*

“Two!” I scream. It feels so good to scream.

His breathing is ragged and harsh, whereas mine is almost non-existent as I desperately scabble around my psyche looking for some internal strength. The belt cuts into my flesh again.

“Three!” Tears spring unwelcome into my eyes. Jeez – this is harder than I thought – so much harder than the spanking. He’s not holding anything back.

“Four!” I yell as the belt bites me again, and now the tears are streaming down my face. I don’t want to cry. It angers me that I am crying. He hits me again.

“Five.” My voice is more a choked, strangled sob, and in this moment I think I hate him. One more, I can do one more. My backside feels as if it’s on fire.

“Six,” I whisper as the blistering pain cuts across me again, and I hear him drop the belt behind me, and he’s pulling me into his arms, all breathless and compassionate ... and I want none of him. (James 505-06)

James gives the reader an impression of the sensation Ana is feeling through Ana’s narration and use of words like “the belt cuts into my flesh” (505), “as if it’s on fire” (506) and “blistering pain” (506). Apart from that, the reader also gets an idea of Grey’s state of mind through Ana’s observation that “his breathing is ragged and harsh, whereas mine is almost non-existent” (James 505). Grey, who has also been a submissive when he was younger, associates belting merely with pleasure and not with pain. This could explain his difference in approach and narration in this scene:

“Count, Anastasia!” I demand.

“One!” she shouts.

*Okay ... no safe word.*

I hit her again.

“Two!” she screams.

*That’s right, let it out, baby.*

I hit her once more.

“Three!” She winces.

There are three stripes across her backside.

I make it four.

She shouts the number, loud and clear.

*There’s no one to hear you baby. Shout all you need.*

I belt her again.

“Five,” she sobs, and I pause, waiting for her to safe-word.

She doesn’t.

*And one for luck.*

“Six,” Ana whispers, her voice forced and hoarse.

I drop the belt, savouring my sweet, euphoric release. I’m punch-drunk, breathless, and finally replete. Oh, this beautiful girl, my beautiful girl. I want to kiss every inch of her body. We’re here. Where I want to be. I reach for her, pulling her into my arms. (James *Grey* 503)

Because Christian has a different understanding of what BDSM entails and means, he does not see the harm at first – especially because Ana asked for it herself. For him, whenever it is done with mutual consent and no safe-words are used, it is allowed. Ana on the other hand, tries to understand why the BDSM-aspect of the relationship is so important for Christian, but she cannot fully grasp it. This results in a difference in experience and reflection, which could be a deliberate style choice by E.L. James. However, this argument does not hold up for all parts of the book. Even though Ana and Grey have a different idea of what their relationship should look like, it is clear that they have started to care for each other. That is why it is improbable that Christian’s inner monologue lacks any feelings or emotional thoughts when Ana decides to leave him for good – especially when you compare it to Ana’s version. James is able to convey the feelings Ana and Grey have for each other in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but not through the point of view of Christian Grey. James’s gender becomes evident due to her bad writing of her latest book, because her gender limits her. In *Grey*, when Ana asks for the money Christian’s bodyguard, Taylor, got for her old car, James writes:

“Christian, I don’t want to fight – I just need that money.”

*Money. It always comes down to fucking money.*

“Will you take a check?” I snarl.

“Yes. I think you’re good for it.”

She wants money, I’ll give her money. I storm into my study, barely holding on to my temper. Sitting at my desk I call Taylor. (James *Grey* 512)

In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the pieces of dialogue are an almost exact same, just like Colgan said, but the scene is more elaborate:

“Christian, I don’t want to fight – I just need the money.”

He narrows his eyes, but I’m no longer intimidated by him. Well, only a little. I gaze impassively back, not blinking or backing down.

“Will you take a check?” he says acidly.

“Yes. I think you’re good for it.”

He doesn’t smile; he just turns on his heel and stalks into his study. I take a last, lingering look around his apartment – at the art on the walls – all abstracts, serene, cool ... cold, even. *Fitting*, I think absently. My eyes stray to the piano. Jeez – if I’d kept my mouth shut, we’d have made love on the piano. No, fucked, we would have fucked on the piano. Well, I would have made love. The thought lies heavy and sad in my mind and what’s left of my heart. He has never made love to me, has he? It’s always been fucking to him. (James *Fifty Shades of Grey* 512)

The reader learns from Ana that she feels intimidated and sad; *Grey* on the other hand, leaves the reader still guessing what Christian Grey thinks about the course of events. This indicates

an inability of E.L. James rather than a deliberate choice. This links back to the two questions proposed in this chapter, namely whether an author should hold on to writing about what they know; and whether E.L. James can be called a women's writer or rather a female writer.

I would argue that *Grey* is even worse written than the initial trilogy. From a commercial perspective, it is completely understandable that James decided to rewrite her bestselling book. However, from a creative point of view, it is a less successful choice. James wanted to give her readers an insight in the desires and motivations of their hero Christian Grey (Groves), but all we got was a stripped version of her first book. The comparison of the two novels by James – and taking into account that James is perceived as a kind-hearted, modest woman (“The Unassuming Author”) – shows that Ana's character is closer to James's own persona, thus emotions and experiences than Grey's character. James is able to imagine how Ana responds to different situations, because it is probably how she would respond as well. Although James has been able to create a character and a way of reacting for Christian Grey during the scenes of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, she cannot envision what his inner monologue would be during these scenes. In *Grey*, James has failed to identify with her main character, which is partly due to his different personality, as becomes evident in the above examples. However, it is also to a certain extent because he is male and therefore James is limited by her gender. I come to this conclusion, because James makes Grey talk about his penis as if it is a separately, living creature. For example, “my cock twitches in agreement” (114) and “my cock responds in appreciation” (James *Grey* 125). From the moment Ana and Grey meet, the only thing he can think about is sex and what he would do to her in his BDSM-room: “I wonder if all her skin is like that – flawless – and what it would look like pink and warmed from the bite of a cane” (James *Grey* 5). Whereas at first, readers might think that E.L. James was a man, I wonder whether this would still be the case after they have read *Grey*. James completely exploits the biggest cliché women have over men: that the only thing they can



think about is sex. Feminists try to fight off the prejudice and patriarchal definitions of femininity, but James is guilty of gender stereotyping as well. Even though James falls back on a male gender stereotype, I would still argue that James displays an attitude not corresponding with feminism in this. Through this short analysis I can conclude that knowing an author's identity does matter for a better understanding of a book and the choices – deliberate or not – made in it.

#### 4. *Goodreads* reviews: What do readers think?

The four books E.L. James has written so far are responsible for almost 3 million ratings on the review website *Goodreads*, which is a “a social network site based around books because it combines the friend relationship and communication elements of generic social network sites” (Thelwall 1). However, I will only focus on the first book *Fifty Shades of Grey*, because it is the most read and most controversial book of the series. Apart from the reviews on the original book page, I will also use the reviews from the entire trilogy book page. This will give some insight whether the pros and cons for *Fifty Shades of Grey* have changed when reviewers have read the entire series. And as such, whether the relation between *Fifty Shades* and feminism has shifted and whether the reader’s opinion about feminism has changed. Using the trilogy reviews allows me to include a review written by a male *Goodreads* user as well. This male reviewer, named Robert, thought the first novel was comical, but his wife warned him that it would go downhill from then on, so he claims that “I approach the finish line with trepidation, but I vow to make it all the way through, one way or another, and I shall do it all in the name of scientific research” (n.p.). Having only one male response in this research involves the risk of having a one-sided view, because normally “the social groups that make up the audience for popular fiction are diverse and overlapping” (McCracken 5). However, about three quarters of *Goodreads* members with a public profile are female and “a *Goodreads* analysis of their readers found that 90% of the 50 books most read by men were also written by men and 92% of the 50 books most read by women were also written by women” (Flood in Thelwall 2). Apart from that, the books were designed and marketed as a book women should read “to engage in public debate about female sexuality” (Deller 937), it is not surprising that the majority of readers is female. A debate whether men should read the book or not would be very interesting, but is not the main focus at this point. Nevertheless, Tom Paolangelì has written the satiric commentary *A Guy’s Secret Guide to*

*Fifty Shades of Grey* in which he highlights the sex scenes and provides a plot summary (6) so men can learn all the “important things” they need to know without having to plod “through the mind numbing boring stuff” (6), because “the ratio of tedious inner female monologue to sex scenes is about fifty shades of boring to one” (5). This indicates a certain attitude of men towards *Fifty Shades*, which is why it is interesting to point out that my chosen set of reviews on *Fifty Shades of Grey* includes a review written by a man, without further emphasising it.

On *Goodreads* amateur reviewers can indicate which books they have read and how much they liked them. Readers can use the website for a variety of purposes. Even though Thelwall describes *Goodreads* as “book-based social web services” (1), some users will only exploit the book cataloguing facilities (Thelwall 5). Every book can be rated from 1 to 5. Based on this, the website gives their users recommendations on the next book they should read. Users can also network with other readers and enter giveaways or book clubs. Anyone with an internet connection and an interest in books can become a *Goodreads* user, which makes it difficult for academics to determine the quality and liability of the site’s users. However, “*Goodreads* is of direct interest to book readers, who are targeted for its services, but, as a site with many readers, it has commercial value for publishers” (Thelwall 4), because it shows how people react to trends and marketing strategies due to the amount of users and their reviews.

*Fifty Shades of Grey* has received an average rating of 3.67 (based on 1,422,251 ratings on May 22, 2017), and the entire trilogy has received an average rating of 4.13 (based on 100,184 ratings on May 22, 2017). Both book pages show that on average 80% of the reviewers gave the first book or the trilogy a positive rating. However, most reviews on the *Goodreads* pages are not as positive as the rating statistics make it seem. In this chapter I will examine some of the positive reviews and some of the negative ones. I will use reviews from two different *Goodreads* pages, namely “Fifty Shades of Grey (Fifty Shades, #1)” and “Fifty

Shades Trilogy (Fifty Shades, #1-3)”. I have selected three positive and three negative reviews from the first two pages on which I will base my overall analysis of the reception of the book. *Goodreads* shows the reviews with the most activity – i.e. reviews with the most likes and comments by other users – on the top of the review section of the book page. I know that the reviews from the first two pages represent the opinion of a group of readers, because these readers have showed their support for the review by clicking on the ‘like’-button and as such this allows me to focus on a small, but representative amount of reviews.

Analysing *Goodreads* reviews enables me to explore how *Fifty Shades of Grey* intersects with people’s understanding of feminism and helps me to answer the second half of my research question, namely ‘why do readers like or dislike James’s fiction?’. Apart from the content of the reviews, it is also interesting to see that the negative reviews are more prominently visible than the positive ones at all three *Goodreads* pages about the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series. This is because *Goodreads* uses an algorithm that brings review posts with the most likes to the top of a page and the one-star reviews are given more likes by other *Goodreads* users than the five star ratings. Generally, the positive reviews are already elaborate, but the feminist, negative ones are even more extensive. This shows an engagement from both groups, but an even bigger urge from the reviewers with a feminist approach. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is criticised for its plot and content; E.L. James is criticised for her writing skills and style. I will analyse the reviews from female reviewers and this will be done from two different angles, namely writing style and content. Through this analysis another division will become evident, i.e. feminism versus escapism. Escapism is light reading that can easily be picked up and put down, that enables readers to dream and pretend that the fictional world is their life and thus is a means of escape (Radway 88).

#### 4.1 Reviewers on content

Whereas most five star reviewers stress the fact that they read it as a touching love story, the one star reviews describe the story in a completely different way. Many of those reviews start with a disclaimer in which they warn readers that their review contains swearing and discusses themes like sex and rape – an example of this being “\*Trigger Warning: This review contains strong themes, to include rape.\*” (Navessa). This shows an important difference in approach, because positive reviewers see *Fifty Shades of Grey* as any other novel as a way to escape their own life, whereas the negative reviewers read James’s novel as a reflection of a sexist, misogynistic society and a glorification of domestic violence (Wilkins), which I will explore further later on in this chapter.

##### 4.1.1 Reviewers on the characters

The *Goodreads* users who have given the first novel or the entire trilogy a five-star rating all seem to agree on one thing, which is that they loved the romance and the chemistry that the trilogy entails. Many women fell in love with Christian Grey: “He has all my favourite romance hero traits rolled up into one gorgeous gazillionaire package: the stuffed shirt, the alpha, the bossy bastard, the tortured, the gamma. You name him, he’s in there” (Grant). Even though the character of Christian Grey – a rich, young, handsome man – seems too good to be true and out of reach for many women, the *Fifty Shades* fans are moved by its authenticity. One reviewer explains this by stating that “their relationship [is] all so honestly and openly written and shown to us that there is no other way for me to feel” (Phillipa). And despite the fact that Grey is often portrayed by James and perceived by her readers as a mysterious, dark force, positive reviewers see him as “one of the most tender, tortured, and sensitive heroes I’ve ever read” (Phillipa), someone who “makes you weak in the knees for a romance such as theirs” (Jacquelynne) and as a character that “brought out such a mixed bag of emotions from me” (Lisa) because they disliked him and sympathized with him at the same time (Lisa).

However, negative reviewers see him as “a misogynistic, self-loathing, abusive piece of shit” (Lumsden). The *Goodreads* user Robert points out that “if Christian Grey were an unemployed garbage man with six pack abs and a washboard stomach, I can’t help but think this wouldn’t have been a phenomenon” (n.p.), which is interesting because it is one of the first reviews that suggests a reason and a basis for the hype and popularity. It is one of the more thought out and most direct answers to my research question why readers like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, because it corresponds with the idea of escape reading.

When it comes to Ana, reviewers stress the level of relatability and identification that they feel when reading her story. Fans view her as “one of the best heroines, because she felt so real and her reactions each and every time were so normal” (Phillipa), as “strong-willed” (Lisa), and as “a well-educated and insightful young lady who loves literature as much as myself” (Jacquelynn). On the other hand, one of the negative reviews see Ana as “the submissive, quiet person that society has taught her to be” (Navessa). The actress who portrays Anastasia Steele in the *Fifty Shades* films, Dakota Johnson, explained in an interview that she thinks Ana can be a great role model for women (Karlin). She perceives Anastasia as a feminist, because “everything she does is her choice” (Johnson in Karlin) and Johnson explains that this is also why she wanted to portray Ana’s character by stating that “if I can be an advocate for women to do what they want with their bodies and not be ashamed of what they want, then I’m all for that” (in Karlin).

#### 4.1.2 Reviewers on the plot

Katrina Passick Lumsden writes in her review that “the biggest issue I have with Fifty Shades of Shit is neither the sex nor the horrible writing. It’s the plot” (n.p). According to her the plot is too thin; “its core message being that, given enough time, you can change someone” (Lumsden), but both characters are trying too hard to change the other. One reviewer agrees that *Fifty Shades of Grey* lacks a plot and is quite merciless when comparing it to other books

she disliked, stating that “at least those books attempted to have a plot. *Fifty Shades of What the Fuck Grey* didn’t even do that” (Navessa). The lack of plot becomes evident through James’s attitude as well; as one reviewer remarks that “James is careful to point out [in an interview] that both Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele are changing throughout the story, but if the author has to tell you this herself, she’s not doing her job” (Lucy).

Although the sex scenes written by James annoyed many readers, those scenes are not the main focus of reviewers who want to point out why they think *Fifty Shades of Grey* is dangerous for society. Academics at Ohio State and Michigan State Universities have conducted research in which they studied data from 747 American women aged 18 to 24 (Flood). In this research, they “examined the association between having read the book and holding sexist beliefs” (Flood). As it turns out, “in our sample, college women who completed at least the first book in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy reported stronger ambivalent, hostile, and benevolent sexist attitudes than those who did not read books in the trilogy” (Altenburger et al. 460). However, this conclusion could be (partly) based upon causal interpretations, because it is unclear whether reading *Fifty Shades* cultivates sexist attitudes or *Fifty Shades of Grey* attracts readers with stronger sexist beliefs (Altenburger et al. 460).

At the beginning of her review, Navessa makes a clear statement, namely: “This book perpetuates the rape culture we were all raised in” (n.p.). She supports her claim by using two examples from James’s novel. The first one is at the beginning of the novel when Ana is working in a hardware store and the son of her boss walks in, hugs her overfamiliar – “Paul hugs me hard, taking me by surprise. [...] He grins as he examines me at arm’s length. Then he releases me but keeps a possessive arm draped over my shoulder. I shuffle from foot to foot, embarrassed. It’s good to see Paul, but he’s always been overfamiliar” (James *Fifty Shades of Grey* 30) – and asks her out – “Whenever he’s home he asks me on a date, and I always say no. It’s a ritual.” (James *Fifty Shades of Grey* 34). The second event is when she

goes out with friends to celebrate their graduation and her friend José tries to kiss her. During both scenes Ana does not speak out or voice her discomfort; she even tries to downplay both events. The day after José's sexual assault, Ana dismisses it by saying "José just got out of line" (James *Fifty Shades of Grey* 68) with a shrug. The reviewer is worried by this and explains that "[Ana] is the submissive, quiet person that society has taught her to be. And 70 million people have read about her and have had these dangerously passive behaviors reinforced, yet again, through her actions, behaviors and words (or lack thereof)" (Navessa). Lumsden agrees in her review with the fact that "potential rape is downplayed" (n.p.). Both reviewers are shocked by the fact that female readers are not bothered by the men in *Fifty Shades of Grey* who are trying to seduce Ana and do not stop when she tells no. This is true for Paul, José and certainly also Christian Grey. The fact that Ana stays with Grey is evidence for reviewers that "she obviously has no idea what the difference between romance and abuse is" (Brigid). A review about the entire series shows that opponents do not feel offended or disgusted because of the sex scenes, which I thought at first, but "because of the disgusting attitude toward women" (Ellie) in general. This shows a bigger, underlying problem – the patriarchal definitions of and attitude towards femininity – in society than just the erotic nature of the trilogy.

## 4.2 Reviewers on style

### 4.2.1 Reviewers on choice of words

Even though most of the fans mainly explain their feelings and thoughts about the story in itself in their reviews, some five-star ratings review James's writing style as well. I therefore conclude that the *Fifty Shades* readers are experienced readers in a way, because they know for themselves what they consider to be good and bad writing and base their opinion on the author's writing as well. One *Goodreads* reviewer explains that she loved the main characters point of view and voice, which became evident for herself because she "even found her 'inner



goddess' amusing" (Grant). The "inner goddess" Grant is referring to, is a technique E.L. James uses a lot in *Fifty Shades of Grey* to give the reader insight in Ana's conflicted emotions and thoughts. James uses this technique of the inner goddess so many times, *Cosmopolitan* dedicated an entire article to it named "57 Things Anastasia's Inner Goddess Does in *Fifty Shades of Grey*", ranging from "my inner goddess is jumping up and down, clapping her hands like a five-year-old" (James *Fifty Shades of Grey* 176) to "My inner goddess has a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the outside of her room" (James *Fifty Shades of Grey* 326). Nevertheless, Grant makes some points of criticism in her review about James's writing style, because she "could tell right from the first page that the author is British" (n.p.) through words and expressions only British natives use as well as the fact that she "noticed little things with the writing" (n.p.) which came across as "unpolished" (n.p.). The fact that readers noticed that the author is British bothers them, because *Fifty Shades of Grey* is situated in Seattle in the United States. An incorrect choice of words may affect the credibility of the story. An example of this being "His lips quirk up in a half smile" (James *Fifty Shades of Grey* 123), which is unclear for many readers because "quirk" is not commonly used as a verb (Paolangeli). However, readers explained in a survey conducted by professor in Media Ruth A Deller and Clarissa Smith that it was because of the critiques claiming it to be "badly written" and "ridiculous" that for many the key motivation of wanting to read the book was to "see what all the fuss was about" (Deller 939). This shows that even though the bad writing made people dislike the novel, it also caused more people to read the book and eventually to engage in the discussion about the importance of feminism.

When it comes to writing style, many reviewers were distracted by the repetition of words. Lumsden stated that "about halfway through, I wished I'd been keeping track of the word 'crap' because Ana is constantly saying/thinking it. Crap, Holy Crap, Double and Triple Crap, Oh Crap, This Crap, That Crap, any and all Crap" (n.p.). The first "double crap" and

“holy cow” taking place on page 7 already, when she trips and falls face first into Christian Grey’s office. Another reviewer did look it up in her e-book and counted a total of 164 times. She further explains that “this book is just written like the stream-of-consciousness of a 15-year-old. All Ana can seem to do in her narration is comment on how sexy Christian looks, and throw in a lot of ‘Holy shit!’/’Holy crap!’/’Holy fuck!’s” (Brigid). Even though my main research question focuses on the relation between *Fifty Shades of Grey* and feminism, this observation is of importance for the second half of the question. I also wonder why readers like or dislike James’s fiction, especially because it has become such an archetypical novel for popular fiction. What does it mean when a book is badly written, but still so influential in the literary world? Scott Pack, former head buyer for Waterstones and publisher for Harper Collins, explains that the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon, including books and films, has changed the way the publishing industry works: “For years, centuries even, the publishing industry and literary world’s definition of good was the only one that mattered. If we didn’t think something was good, it didn’t get agented, it didn’t get published, bookshops didn’t stock it and it didn’t sell” (Pack in Ellis-Petersen). Whereas before *Fifty Shades of Grey* the literary style and quality of writing was among the most important aspects of a novel, E.L. James’s work has redefined good literature because it “has proved is that readers can have a completely different definition of good” (Pack in Ellis-Petersen).

#### 4.3 Difference in approach: How should it be read?

The main reason why *Goodreads* users gave *Fifty Shades of Grey* a five-star rating is not (only) because of the sex scenes and erotica genre, but because it is seen as an honest and real love story. This ties in with James’s own idea of how the novels should be read (James “Fifty Shades of Success”). As a matter of fact, the sex scenes are hardly ever mentioned in the positive reviews. Many reviewers explained that even though they enjoyed the erotica read, they were mostly moved by the story. According to the reviewer Juliana Phillipa, the sex

scenes added something to the story because it showed how the characters were affected by each other and “it was not done as a space apart in the book where the writer could insert random hot sex scenes” (Phillipa). Another reviewer explains that the book was recommended to her and she “had no idea that it was an erotica read, so I was quite surprised, but the storyline already had me pulled in” (Ali).

The reviewer Tammy Walton Grant expresses the prevailing thought of most fans well by formulating her recommendation as follows: “If you love steamy, steamy stories with a strong romance and can handle a little bit of naughty sex, then YES, YES, YES!” (Grant).

If you compare the bad reviews with the good reviews, there are a few things that stand out. First of all, the *Goodreads* reviewers do not devote a lot of words to the sex scenes per se. This is remarkable when you consider that most people know about the books because of the explicit sex present in it. It is not without reason that the books are referred to as “mommy porn” (McCann). I thought at the beginning of my research that the sex scenes – a man dominating a woman – would be at the base of the fierce criticism by feminist critics, but it does not seem decisive. The five star reviews focus more on the love story and overall plot of the novels; the one star reviews emphasize the underlying problem of attitude towards women, and the bad writing style. Reviewer Navessa explains that she cannot even see it as “just fiction”, let alone “just a love story”. She immediately situates *Fifty Shades of Grey* in a broader field, claiming that “This book is not ‘just fiction’. This book has become a frigging phenomenon” (Navessa). Therefore, she does not condemn the people who like the book – because everyone should decide for themselves what to read or not, but the hype has become too big for her to let it go and neglect James’s work. She explains: “I can’t just read this and think of it like a fantasy, not when it’s become a reality for so many people, and not when I was so enraged by what I found within it” (Navessa). Therefore, she uses *Goodreads* to voice her own opinion, which has started an ongoing discussion between female readers; both fans

and critics. It is through this movement that the most important relation between feminism and *Fifty Shades of Grey* becomes evident.

Beside the differences in approach, it is clear that both sides are well aware of the other side and opinion, because many reviews situate themselves in the discussion by trying to refute the other's opinions. Sometimes, reviewers have even revised their text at a later stage to include an edit in which they further explain their beliefs and react to other people. A good example of a reviewer who is influenced by the ongoing discussion is Penny, who has problems formulating her opinion because everything, either good or bad, about the books has already been said before. This is why she ends her review stating that only people who can shut themselves off from the outside world and its discussions will be able to enjoy this series, but "if you are a person who cannot disconnect your mind, then you would probably find more bumps and problems with these books than satisfaction, because there sure are many" (Penny). Reviewer Juliana Philippa added three post scripts to her initial review in order to justify her views. She ends her latest post script by writing that "I wrote what I wrote; I was in my early 20s; I liked it" (Philippa). However, she also explains that she read the book before it became a phenomenon and she would not write the same review would she read the book today, because she has matured and sees things differently now. Philippa is therefore an excellent example of the two ways – from a feminist point of view or in an attitude of escapism – in which *Fifty Shades of Grey* can be read.

Whether *Fifty Shades of Grey* should be read as a love story or a perpetuation of rape culture, one thing is evident: Readers who are fans are able to see why others find it bad, but readers who are repelled by the book cannot empathize with fans. Lumsden exemplifies this by criticising James's fans in her review by saying that "women who defend this book are, however unwittingly, participating in some of the most blatant misogyny I've ever witnessed, giving the impression that some women enjoy being debased, abused, and controlled (outside

of a consensual Dom/sub relationship)” (n.p.). However, even though the feminist reviewers are more firm in their opinions, the reviews enact a kind of dialogue about the novels in itself and its representation of issues like sexism, misogyny and rape culture.

5. Conclusion: How does *Fifty Shades of Grey* relate to the concept of feminism? Why do readers like or dislike James's fiction?

For this thesis I wanted to find out how the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series relates to the concept of feminism and why readers like or dislike James's fiction. The *Goodreads* reviewer Juliana Phillipa wrote in her review on the novel: "Were these characters ones whom you could write grad school theses about? No" (n.p.). However, my research proves that there is enough to write about the characters, the novel and the role it plays in our contemporary society. This already becomes evident through the reviews on *Goodreads*, which has been of big importance to answering my second half of my research question. Through the report of survey conducted by Ruth A Deller and Clarissa Smith, I found out that most readers were triggered to read the book because of the critiques claiming it to be "badly written" and "ridiculous". E.L. James's writing style is also a recurring theme in the *Goodreads* reviews, because many readers claim the writing seems unpolished and many reviewers were disrupted by the repetition of words and sentences. Furthermore, the plot – or rather the lack of it – has been a reason for multiple reviewers to dislike the book. According to them, the plot is too thin and E.L. James has argued in an interview that Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele are changing throughout the story, but one reviewer points out that an author is not doing its job if a plot development has to be specifically indicated afterwards. The most important reason why readers like or dislike James's fiction can be found in the different mode of reading – feminism versus escapism – opponents and supporters perform. Positive reviewers see *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a means to escape their own life, whereas the negative reviewers read James's novel as a reflection of a sexist society that glorifies domestic violence. It is partly because of the disgusting attitude toward women in general that opponents dislike the *Fifty Shades* series. One of the reviewers I used in my research, Juliana Phillipa, exemplifies the two ways in which the novel can be read.

Moving on to the first part of my research question: the answer to this – the relation between *Fifty Shades of Grey* and feminism – can be divided in two parts. First of all, there is the role of the author and her chosen pseudonym and secondly, there is the role the novels play in canonical popular literature and its community.

Thus, E.L. James's use of the pseudonym can be placed in an extensive history of using male pseudonyms. I have discovered that James has a different motivation than other female writers to adopt a pen name. She claims she did not give much thought to it, which sets her apart from the long tradition of feminist writers. It seems like she is not aware of the trouble her female colleagues had to go through in order to get their novels published. She was just writing for fun, first in the form of fan fiction, later on in the form of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Through a comparison of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and James's last novel *Grey* the importance and role of an author's identity becomes evident. Awareness of the author and their background helps readers to identify with the author and their book. Apart from that, in this day and age authors play an important role in promoting their book; almost everyone has an online identity since the rise of social media and authors of bestsellers are frequently asked guests at talk shows. However, there is still a downside to this as well. Whereas a man cannot be belittled by reminding him of his gender, women are still vulnerable targets. James is belittled by critics when they dismiss her novels as "mommy porn". Charlotte Brontë already noted around 1850 that female authors are liable to be looked on with prejudice and the example of J.K. Rowling shows that even today female authors adopt a male or gender-neutral pseudonym in order to avoid this. It was Rowling's publisher who wanted her to make her name less feminine. The case study of Elena Ferrante demonstrates that even when a female author decides upon a pseudonym she is not free from her real identity and not safe from sexism.

And finally, the other relationship between *Fifty Shades* and feminism is that the novel has sparked a discussion about patriarchal society, sexism, rape culture and ultimately feminism. This refers back to the question proposed by *The Independent* whether feminism is still relevant in contemporary literature. In their article they noted that feminism had left the field of fiction somewhere along the line. Examining *Fifty Shades of Grey* in relation to feminism revealed the current tendency towards feminism in literature and in society. At least in literature, it has become a way of reading, just like escapism is a way of reading. Critiques on the writing style of E.L. James show that people still try to approach *Fifty Shades of Grey* as every other book, but the series is more than that. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is not only popular – or at least sold so many times – because of the way it is written or the story it tells, but because of the diversity in opinions and reader's experiences. When there is a controversy, people want to see for themselves and make up their own minds. This also applies to me, because I wanted to read *Fifty Shades of Grey* because so many of my teachers and fellow students propose the books by E.L. James when they need to come up with an example of bad writing or pulp fiction. However, it seems trivial to unravel *Fifty Shades of Grey* and James's writing skills when there is so much more going on when it comes to the phenomenon. Inadvertently or not, James reveals important problems in our society through her works and readers have revived the discussions about these issues. They do so through the channels of the social reviewing web page *Goodreads*. These discussions show how *Fifty Shades of Grey* is related to feminism, not through its content or textuality, but through its effects and the meaning the readers themselves give it. It is through *Goodreads* that *Fifty Shades of Grey* achieves the same goal as Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj have for their book *Going Global*, because they want to bring women together through cross-cultural dialogue. Therefore, it is problematic that James tries to interfere in the debate by making statements in which she says that the navel-gazing about this book makes her laugh, because “she wrote it



just for fun”. Moi pointed out that Barthes’s declaration of the death of the author caused the feminist dialogue about authorship to die out, but I propose a middle way in this. I think an author should set a text free after it is published and allow readers to find their own truth in it, but I also think that the identity of an author can help readers to understand the text and to find their own truth in the end. Knowing the identity of the author and their background creates unity between the author and readers. Thus, E.L. James’s motivation for writing the book and her incentive of the pseudonym is as important as the textuality of the novels.

The *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon has changed the way the publishing industry works. Whereas before *Fifty Shades* the literary style and quality of writing was among the most important aspects of a novel, James’s work has redefined the perception of good, because the literary world’s definition of good is not the only one that matters anymore. The books written by James have outgrown the label “just fiction” and have become a phenomenon, because it has sparked a discussion which exceeds average fiction. *Fifty Shades of Grey* should be seen as good literature, not because it is well-written, but because the engaging and on-going discussion is more important in this case. *Jane Eyre* caused a change and started a discussion at its time and James’s main character Anastasia Steele claims her own story and narration, just like Jane did. *Fifty Shades of Grey* has reopened the debate about feminism and its relevance in today’s society. Ana’s story enables people to talk about taboos, engage in a discussion and reevaluate their values, like most influential great literature. In my opinion, this is what good literature needs to aim for; if you use base evaluation on this argumentation, you have to conclude that *Fifty Shades of Grey* – partly due to its direct and indirect relation to feminism – should be considered good literature.

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