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**Behind Her Eyes: The Authorship and Literary
Representation of Women in Erotic Literature
Presented in Pauline Réage's *Story of O* and E.L.
James' *Fifty Shades of Grey***

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Abstract

This thesis explores women's authorship and literary representations within the realm of erotic literature. Through the examination of two erotic novels, *Story of O* (1954) by Pauline Réage and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) by E.L. James, I consider how the emergence of female authorship from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first century changes the dynamics in which women are seen, placed, and used within the erotic narrative. I approach this thesis using feminist literary criticism and draw on the scholarship of second-wave feminists, like Susan Sontag and Andrea Dworkin, to ground my understanding of the evolving landscape of female-authored erotic discourse. Given both scholars' diametrically opposing schools of thought on women's role in erotic discourse, I use this space to investigate women's involvement in erotic literature as its creators and characters. To do so, I appropriate the ideas espoused in Laura Mulvey's treatise on the *male gaze* and Rosalind Gill's *female sexual agency* to illuminate alternative ways of viewing women's representations presented in the works of Réage and James. As a result, this thesis seeks to renew interest in female-authored erotic discourse and to provide an alternative perspective on viewing Réage and James' respective heroines: one which brings awareness to O and Ana's subjectivity—proving that they can be seen as subjects of their narratives, rather than merely objects of male desire. Ultimately, by challenging how we view these women who occupy the erotic realm, this thesis furnishes us with the perspective from behind *her* eyes.

Key words: erotic literature, female authorship, women's representation, male gaze, female sexual agency, Réage, James

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Introduction

Erotic literature has traditionally held a precarious position within the western literary realm, particularly when examined alongside literary works of “highbrow” origin. By conveying sexual acts and desire (Brulotte and Phillips x), erotic literature tends to be seen as inferior to other classical forms of literature, both in form and intention (Sontag 72-73). This is largely due to the nature of erotic literature—the genre takes a step further in “eliciting sexual thoughts, feelings, and associations [that are] found to be arousing” (Kieran 32). This “arousal” that erotic literature elicits from its readership is met with criticism from western societies where the topic of sex (outside of matrimony) is met with “censorious judgment” (LeFranc 7), but nonetheless continues to be circulated and consumed. In essence, erotic literature creates the space for sex to take place, whether manifesting it into a reality or keeping it to one’s own thoughts is up to the reader.

A recurring line of inquiry for scholars and readers alike is the dichotomized representations of men and women within erotic literature. Historically speaking, works belonging to the erotic were that of a “male prerogative” (Hardy 1)—created and distributed for the sole pleasures of men. Over the centuries, this “prerogative” has dictated the way in which women are seen, placed, and used within works of erotic discourse. Often, erotic literature has traditionally subscribed to the paradigm of male dominance and female submissiveness in which men “produced...and consumed” erotic works¹ and “women played the props” (Gavera 3). By positioning women as “props” in erotic narratives, men have perpetually reinforced the role of women as the “receptacle for the desires of the male” (King 31)—a sexually inferior being that

¹ These works can be referred to as erotica or pornography depending on the scholar. Distinctions can be drawn between “erotic”, “erotica” and “pornographic”; however, for the sake of simplicity, any literary work mediating erotic discourse (i.e. implicit or explicit sexual subject matter) falls within the domain of erotic literature.

acquiesces male sexual appetites, ultimately limiting her mobility within the erotic realm to that of “representations by men” (Lutz 176). While the emergence of female authorship that swept through the twentieth century claimed several erotic works² under their domain, the world in which these writings have been constructed has always been male-dominated (Hardy 3).

Working with this understanding of men and women in erotic literature, I proffer the following line of questioning: With erotic literature traditionally deemed a “male prerogative”, how has the emergence of female authorship from the twentieth century to now changed the dynamics in which women are seen, placed, and used within the erotic narrative? This question comes to mind as considerable changes have occurred over the last half-century to now in terms of women entering what was once a traditionally male-dominated sector of literature. Where men traditionally held the pen, women are now the primary writers and consumers of erotic literature (Hardy 4) —thus, creating a shift in the intended audience, authorship, and characterization of women in the erotic realm. This shift, of course, did not occur overnight and instead is the product of decades of women taking up the pen and inserting themselves into the world of erotic literature—a phenomenon that is increasingly becoming more explored within discourses of feminist literary criticism and intriguing to explore within the scope of a thesis.

Feminist literary criticism not only “looks at literature assuming its production from a male-dominated perspective,” but also “examines (and often rediscovers) works by women for a possible alternative voice” (Spivak). I am working within this theoretical framework as it provides fertile ground for exploring the authorship and literary representations of women in erotic literature. Indeed, feminist literary criticism is rather broad in its scope (posing several

² Some notable erotic works are *Story of O* by Pauline Réage (1954); *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong; *Delta of Venus* by Anaïs Nin (1977); and *Bad Behaviours* by Mary Gaitskill (1988)

avenues for research); however, I use this to my advantage by drawing on the different ideas communicated by various feminist thinkers across time and fields. Given their polarizing schools of thought when it comes to women and erotic literature, I turn to the scholarly ideas of two second-wave feminists, namely Susan Sontag (“The Pornographic Imagination”) and Andrea Dworkin (*Pornography: Men Possessing Women*). On one end of the spectrum, Sontag’s scholarship looks at the “merits of pornography” (Hustvedt 37) and on the other end of the spectrum, Dworkin’s scholarship maintains that pornography is “the main conduit” (Brecher 145) for violence against women. Together, both scholars will be used to contextualize erotic literature’s placement within the western literary sphere and likewise provide a holistic view of how women, as creators and characters, are received in the erotic realm.

Within the space of Sontag and Dworkin’s contrasting views, I find that there is an opportunity to apply their respective debates to an examination of women in erotic literature and likewise, incorporate the scholarship of other feminist thinkers, namely Laura Mulvey (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”) and Rosalind Gill (“Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising”). With the former a film theorist and the latter a feminist cultural theorist, both scholars have made notable contributions to feminism. In Mulvey’s treatise on the ubiquitous *male gaze*, she draws on the tenets of psychoanalytic theory and scopophilia³ to support this idea of “sexual imbalance” (837) between men and women. Predicated on the paradigm of a man being the “bearer of the gaze, woman its object” (Devereaux 337), the concept of the male gaze will be used to help situate how women’s bodies are seen, placed, and used within erotic discourse. Similarly, Gill recognizes the ubiquity of the male gaze in the advertising world and focuses her investigations on *female sexual agency*—a

³ Freudian psychoanalytic theory, refers to taking erotic pleasure in looking (Stefanovic and Parać).

concept which “breaks in important ways with the sexual objectification and silencing of female desire” (Gill 55). Gill’s conception of agency will be used throughout this thesis and will be discussed in more detail later in this introduction.

In this thesis, I engage with two novels, each originating from a distinct point in erotic literature’s history: *Story of O* (1954) by Pauline Réage and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) by E.L. James. At face value, Réage and James’ works could not be more different: from their date of publication (1954 vs. 2011), to their country of origin (France vs. UK), or their literary merit (traditional prose vs. former fanfiction). While the chasm of differences between these erotic novels may appear to be too severe to justify their concurrent analysis in this thesis, I nevertheless contend that this is a worthwhile endeavor given the precedent set by scholars who have previously studied both works together.⁴ Indeed, both narratives orient around the lives of women in the erotic realm and portray women in erotic literature from a female perspective—but they also embody what I find as important turning points in women’s authorship and literary representation in erotic literature. Réage’s novel, *Story of O* (originally published as *Histoire d’O*), helped usher in a new era of erotic writing that not only debuted a woman’s name on the cover but also tested the waters of more daring forms of erotic literature (i.e., pornographic fiction). In turn, James’ novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (henceforth *Fifty Shades*), not only pushed the boundaries of erotica with its depictions of BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism), but also helped mainstream erotic literature—ultimately changing the way erotica is viewed and consumed by the public of the 21st century.

⁴ The scholars I refer to here are Angelika Tsaros’ “Consensual Non-consent: Comparing EL James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* and Pauline Réage’s *Story of O*” (2013) and Amber Jamilla Musser’s “BDSM and the Boundaries of Criticism: Feminism and Neoliberalism in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Story of O*” (2015). Their scholarship will be used in chapters two and three.

When examining Pauline Réage's *Story of O* and E.L. James' *Fifty Shades* alongside each other, the following question arises: what notable shifts have occurred in the way in which women operate within erotic literature—both in authorship and in characterization? This question not only allows me to explore the portrayal of women in erotic literature from two distinct points in time, but it also lays the groundwork for me to perform a close reading and comparative analysis of women in erotic literature. I endeavor to answer the following questions: how do Réage and James depict their respective heroines, O and Ana, as possessing their own desires, motivations, and agency? What does this shift in perspective communicate about the evolving representations of women in erotic literature? Why is it important to view O and Ana beyond their presumptive role as objects of male desire and as subjects of their own narratives? Here, I want to draw attention to the concept of subjectivity which I will be using to analyze O and Ana. Since both heroines are typically seen for their objectification, I challenge this viewpoint by working with female subjectivity—“the quality or condition of experiencing life through the mind and body of a woman” (Beesley 1). Assuming this position, I turn to scholars Patricia Beesley (“A Space of Her Own”) and Hatice Yurttas (*Female Subjectivity in Women's Writing*) to help mold an understanding of female subjectivity that can be applied to women of the erotic realm. Since both scholars evaluate female-authored texts with female protagonists, their composition of female subjectivity will relate well to my investigation of Réage and James' depictions of O and Ana's subjectivity. Naturally, I will further elaborate on this concept of female subjectivity in subsequent chapters, providing a more in-depth analysis of female subjectivity in respect to O and Ana.

Furthermore, the concept of agency I am positing here draws on the theoretical framing of female sexual agency Gill asserts in her article, “Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female

Sexual Agency in Contemporary", which examines "three bodies of scholarship" (40): "the 'midriff', the 'powerful/vengeful woman', and the 'hot lesbian'" (41). In this investigation, I am using Gill's 'midriff' school of thought as one of its components focuses on shifting women (and their bodies) from a state of "objectification to sexual subjectification" (41). Since I intend to demonstrate O and Ana's respective subjectivity, this concept of agency aptly aligns as it allows me to challenge their presumed status as objects, unearthing another way to view both heroines.

To address the aforementioned questions, this thesis is composed of three chapters: the first chapter, entitled "Literature Review & Methodology", provides the theoretical basis for my investigations. Before I examine Réage and James' novels, I delineate the existing academic debate on erotic literature with particular attention to how women are seen and heard in this discourse. This is done to furnish my investigation of Réage and James' writing with a scholarly foundation of concepts and ideas that can be applied in examining their respective authorship. The following chapter, "The Emergence of Female Authorship in Erotic Literature: From *Story of O* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*", explores notable turning points in female authorship. By comparing Réage and James in terms of their authorship and literary representations of women in their respective works, this chapter illustrates how these two erotic novels reflect the ever-changing landscape of women in erotic literature. The final chapter, "O & Ana: Viewing Réage & James' Heroines as Subjects, rather than Objects", uses close reading and comparative analysis to hone in on how heroines, O and Ana, can be viewed as willing participants of the "erotic science" (Frappier-Mazur 116) they engage in—further showing that they are subjects of their own stories, rather than mere objects of male desire.

Chapter 1: Literature and Methodology

1.1 Introduction

This first chapter examines the existing academic debate on erotic literature and how women are seen and heard within this discourse. I begin with providing some semblance of what erotic literature as a genre entails, how it is positioned within the larger western literary sphere and evaluate how women are traditionally positioned in the genre. I recognize that it is nearly impossible to define erotic literature in its entire capacity. To keep within the parameters of this thesis, I provide an insight into erotic literature and with that a glimpse into the reception, value and placement of this genre within the existing scholarship of second-wave feminist scholars, Susan Sontag and Andrea Dworkin. From there, I focus on the research conducted on women in erotic literature, particularly using Lucienne Frappier-Mazur's "Rewriting the Erotic" as the basis for showcasing how women are seen and used in the erotic literary realm. With reference to the western literary canon, Frappier-Mazur's treatise draws on the "marginal" status of erotic literature and women writers who participate in the genre. Following Frappier-Mazur's evaluation of women in erotic discourse, I segue into my evaluation of Laura Mulvey and Rosalind Gill's concepts of the *male gaze* and *female sexual agency* respectively. Recognizing these concepts originate from the domains of film and advertising respectively, I present how they can be appropriated within a literary context and used within my research of *Story of O* and *Fifty Shades*. Overall, this chapter aims to provide a theoretical understanding of ideas and concepts that will inform my investigation of Pauline Réage and E.L. James' erotic novels in chapters two and three.

1.2 An Insight into Erotic Literature

In *The Cambridge Companion to Erotic Literature*, Bradford K. Mudge asserts that “erotic literature pushes the boundaries of the acceptable and challenges the conventions of more mainstream literatures” (Mudge ii-iii). In other words, erotic literature goes against the grain, so to speak, and encourages scholars to question the “boundaries of the acceptable”—as in, where does one draw the line between the acceptable and the unacceptable? It is here that scholars⁵ tend to congregate on the discussion of erotic literature. For instance, from a historical standpoint, Mudge notes that scholars engaging with erotic literature—directly or indirectly—have often been “assumed to partake of the prurience attributed to the subject” (xi). According to Mudge, it is this “prurience” associated with erotic literature which has traditionally placed the subject matter on a low pedestal amongst scholars. Nonetheless, recent scholarship⁶ has moved away from this “prurience” fixation on erotic literature and instead views the content through a more critical lens, considering aspects of textual pleasure and pornography” (Mudge xiii).

Conversely, erotic literature has also been approached more severely as being completely unacceptable, with little to no redeeming value for either the reader or scholar. This outlook on erotic literature is made particularly apparent in Andrea Dworkin’s treatises on pornography. Recognized as a “polemical ... [and] radical voice of second-wave feminism” (Spongberg 3), Dworkin’s research centers around the politics of sex, pornography and sexual violence against women (Serisier 27). Dworkin’s discourse⁷ situates her within radical feminism and places her alongside anti-pornography feminists like Catherine Mackinnon and Gail Dines. In this thesis, I

⁵ Scholars I refer to here include, but are not limited to, Bradford K. Mudge, Susan Sontag, Andrea Dworkin, etc.

⁶ For example, Deborah Lutz. (“Erotic Bonds Among Women in Victorian Literature”), Amy Wyngaard (“Sade, Réage and Transcending the Obscene”), and Simon Hardy (“From Black Lace to Shades of Grey: The Interpellation of the ‘Female Subject’ into Erotic Discourse”)

⁷ Examples of Dworkin’s discourse: *Woman Hating* (1974) and *Intercourse* (1987)

turn to Dworkin as her radical stance on pornography provides one side of the academic debate regarding the genre's reception in the literary world. Moreover, I particularly engage with Dworkin's scholarship as her treatise on pornography includes an examination of *Story of O* and its depiction of women—her review, “Woman as Victim: Story of O”, will be used in subsequent chapters. In the meantime, I refer to Dworkin here for her stance that erotic literature (as a form of pornography) is unacceptable in any capacity since it is “one of the central means by which women are constructed as subordinate objects by depiction” (Bottomley et al. 52).

In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Dworkin asserts that, in addition to visual pornography, works mediating erotic discourse (erotica, pornography, etc.) are inherently harmful as it is a “cruel, violent...way our culture sees and treats women” (20). Published in 1981, Dworkin argues that, within the widely accepted “male sexual lexicon” (36) used throughout the western world, works of erotic literature, such as erotica, are essentially “high class pornography” in that they are “better produced, better conceived, better executed, better packaged, [and] designed for a better class of consumer” (36-37). For Dworkin, this betterment of production and consumption that erotic literature entailed is not enough to warrant a distinction from pornography. As a staunch anti-pornography feminist, Dworkin challenges feminist rhetoric that claimed that erotic literature and pornography are mutually exclusive, especially in terms of their intent. By divorcing erotica from pornography on the grounds that the former “involves mutuality and reciprocity” (Dworkin 36) and the latter “involves dominance and violence” (36), sex-positive feminists Ellen Willis and Carol Queen⁸ argued that a distinction can be drawn between erotic literature and pornography. And while Dworkin acknowledges this

⁸ See Ellen Willis' “FEMINISM, MORALISM, AND PORNOGRAPHY” (1993) and Carol Queen's “Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma” (2010).

attempt from countering feminists, she firmly stands by the belief that erotic literature, “a subcategory of pornography” (37), cannot be deemed acceptable when it solely serves a “male system” in which “women are [simply] sex” (224). Dworkin’s assertions have been deemed highly controversial within the feminist community, especially her “critical conception of pornography” (Ullen 148). Nevertheless, Dworkin’s treatise on erotica/pornography adds another layer to the debate on the acceptability of erotic literature, further grounding this genre’s placement within the literary sphere.

Another erotic literature facet debated in the scholarly community is its literary value. Although the genre has been derided by critics as “smut” (Hustvedt 42), it has also been lauded for its merits—Susan Sontag takes this position in her 1967 essay, “The Pornographic Imagination”. Unlike Dworkin’s anti-pornography stance, Sontag represents the other side of the academic debate on erotic literature, one which views erotic discourse for its artistic value. Hailed as a cultural critic (Locke 164), Sontag’s feminism does not fit into one category and instead can be recognized for her work as a polemicist and advocate (175). According to Richard Locke, Sontag’s discourse⁹ situates her as “part of the democratic, vernacular, unacademic tradition” (164) of cultural criticism and likens her contributions to the field to those of cultural critics Edmund Wilson and Virgil Thomson. I turn to Sontag here because her evaluation of pornography “from the standpoint of art” (67) provides another dimension to how erotic literature is received outside of the dialogue of (un)acceptability. “The Pornographic Imagination” explores how works belonging to erotic literature or “pornographic texts” (Sontag 67) can be viewed and valued for their artistic form. Here, Sontag provides an argumentation for how erotic/pornographic texts can be evaluated and acknowledged as a model of artistic

⁹ Examples of Sontag’s discourse: “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964) and *Against Interpretation* (1966).

expression. She intervenes in literary scholarship with her own thoughts on pornography and how it is evaluated amongst other works. Since erotic literature had not been “genuinely debated” (72) at the time of penning her essay, Sontag highlights pornography beyond its “trivial connection” (72) to printed fiction and instead as fertile ground for more deeper, profound literary exploration.

While her essay examines five French erotic works (including *Story of O*), Sontag acknowledges the literary dialogue of British and American critics of the time which viewed erotic discourse within the expertise of “psychologists, sociologists, historians, etc.” (69). Outside of these confinements of study, Sontag argues that the debate on pornography is simple: “it’s something one is for or against” (69). This outlook on pornography is akin to how one may approach artwork and further illustrates Sontag’s position that erotic discourse can be viewed for its artistic potential. Sontag defines art and its production as a “form of consciousness” in which “the materials of art are the variety of forms of consciousness” (84). This idea of imbued “consciousness” or awareness within a pornographic text further drives the argument that erotic literature can be seen as a mode of artistic expression of the human experience—in other words, works “transposing the human voice into prose narrative” (78) include those that belong to pornography. To this end, Sontag’s remarks earmark the “dubious label” (67) that pornography (and by extension, erotic literature) upholds in the literary world. Overall, Sontag’s pioneering discourse on pornography, and by extension erotic literature, illustrates that this subject matter can be viewed beyond the scope of (un)acceptability and as a testament of artistic expression.

Erotic literature holds a tenuous position when it comes to placing it amongst the classics or works that don the big ‘L’. Within the last half century, literary critics have disputed the placement of erotic literature in relation to other literatures that inhabit the western literary

canon. For instance, to better understand erotic literature's placement within the literary realm, Lucienne Frappier-Mazur's "Marginal Canons: Rewriting the Erotic" reveals some key insights about the literary canon and how "readers of noncanonic works even noncanonic writers may indirectly play a role in canon formation" (112). Beginning with the concept of canon, Frappier-Mazur illustrates the intimate relationship between erotic literature and the western literary canon. With the former, Frappier-Mazur acknowledges the pertinent part erotic literature plays in informing the works of canonic writers. Since canonic writers are also consumers of literature that lie on the periphery of the canon, Frappier-Mazur argues that these peripheral texts, such as those belonging to erotic literature, warrant their own classification within the larger literary canon—hence, he delineates erotic literary works as part of what he calls the "marginal canon" (113).

Although works belonging to the "marginal canon" are often "read by major writers", they do not belong to any "academic institution" (Frappier-Mazur 113), meaning that these works act as points of inspiration or influence, but are not formally acknowledged for their role in canon formation. Their lack of "academic institution" (113) as Frappier-Mazur puts it speaks to the historical tendency of erotic discourse to be deemed "lowbrow" quality and unfit for academic exploration. Nonetheless, Frappier-Mazur asserts that the historically shunned role of non-canonical writers is reemerging in academic discourse, especially when it comes to "the changing status of erotic and pornographic fiction" (112) which now calls for critical and scholarly investigation. By limiting his scope to the marginal works of the erotic and pornographic, Frappier-Mazur puts the spotlight on women, particularly identifying "turning points at which women have written erotic literature... and considering whether these texts have been instrumental, either directly or indirectly, in the evolution of the literary canon" (113). It is

through his findings that we learn that women—the ones who pen the narratives and the ones who star in them—are products of the male-dominated world they originate from, but nonetheless thrive within the sphere of ‘marginal’ canonicity. His ideas around “marginal canons” and the authors who partake in its creation provides a basis for grounding where women stand with the erotic. After all, Frappier-Mazur’s treatise on a “marginal corpus written by a marginal group” (113), or in other words erotic literature written by women, aptly aligns with the investigations of this thesis as it not only helps identify the literary placement of erotic literature, but also brings women to the front of the academic debate.

1.3 Women of the ‘Erotic’—Not Only Seen, But Heard

Perpetuating the patriarchal framework in which men dominate and women submit, erotic literature is heavily influenced by those who wield the pen¹⁰. Traditionally, men were the ones who held the pen, constructed the narrative, and inserted their representations of women as they deemed fit (Lutz 176). For a better part of history, these representations of women as objects of male desire prevailed (and still do) within works of erotic literature. Whether this is achieved by a male or female author, the continuous renewal of the abiding female form allows for consideration that this objectification of women is not entirely absolute. Indeed, the adage that women ‘are seen, not heard’ can be argued considering the physical objectification women undergo in works of erotic literature. However, it would be dismissive of us to not take into account that several notable works of erotic writings are constructed with a female point of view, essentially providing a window into *her* mind. This can be witnessed by erotic works dating as early as John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* (which is told from Fanny’s perspective) to as contemporary as E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades* (which is told from Anastasia’s perspective). Often, the erotic tale is

¹⁰ Male authors, such as Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Marquis de Sade, and John Cleland, are notable figureheads who have shaped erotic literature.

communicated through a female character—with her thoughts and feelings spearheading the narrative. Therefore, this next section will take a step further in not only examining the scholarship on how women are seen in relation to erotic literature, but also how they are heard within the erotic realm—this will help lay the foundation for exploring Réage and James' respective authorship in subsequent chapters.

According to Frappier-Mazur, works written by women face “marginalization or total exclusion” (112) when examined alongside the works created by their male counterparts—and even more so when it comes to works of erotic literature. Canonically or otherwise, the oeuvre of erotic texts under female authorship “have been instrumental, either directly or indirectly, in the evolution of the literary canon” (113). While this thesis does not examine literary canonicity, Frappier-Mazur's engagement with erotic literature does reverberate throughout the treatise and this text will, therefore, be mentioned to supplement the larger investigation of women authorship and literary representation in erotic literature. With that said, Frappier-Mazur highlights the distinguishing qualities between male and female authorship of erotic texts. For instance, female authors “respect the canon of motifs” (115) erotic literature houses but tend to take a different approach when applying them. Frappier-Mazur makes a point of noting the disparities in language use, where women authors “prefer the clinical term to the vulgar one...[and] rely a great deal on euphemisms, stylistic clichés and metaphors to describe sexual acts” (116). It is important to note here that Frappier-Mazur denotes these practices as part of the “enduring tradition in France” (116), with much of his examination focused on French female authors.

Since *Story of O* originates from France, Frappier-Mazur's remarks remain considerably relevant in showcasing how female authors were received in erotic discourses of the west. For

one, Frappier-Mazur claimed that a woman's adoption of a pseudonym was done for "obvious reasons" (117), insinuating that the erotic literary sphere was hostile to women, threatening their reputations. Nevertheless, Frappier-Mazur mentions the growing female authorship (dating as early as the 19th century) has always existed in the erotic literary space, but under more covert settings. Although women authors maintained the feminine voice using a female pseudonym, the true gender of their authorship came under question as many French male authors of erotic literature adopted female pseudonyms for their feminine mystique and "erotic value" (117). Frappier-Mazur turned to Pauline Réage as an example of readership questioning the identity behind the pseudonym with public speculation leaning towards a man behind the novel. While we now know that the identity of Réage was indeed a woman, the tradition to use a pseudonym to protect the identity of female authors of erotic literature continues in more contemporary works as seen with E.L. James. All in all, Frappier-Mazur's treatise on women of erotic literature not only demonstrates the long-standing writing tradition of women inserting their voices within the erotic realm, but also provides a springboard for further analysis of female authorship in subsequent chapters.

I now pivot to Laura Mulvey's article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), to foreground how women are perceived and presented in erotic discourse. While Mulvey's paper looked at visual depictions of women, such as those presented on film, her theory of the aptly named *male gaze* informs the investigations of this thesis where the optics of how women's bodies are seen, placed, and used in erotic literature is concerned. The ubiquity of the male gaze can be seen throughout all facets of literature. As a cornerstone feminist theory, the male gaze predicates on the belief that a "woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle... [by which] she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey 837). In

other words, the concept of the male gaze relies on the heterosexual scopophilic embrace of the female form that renders women to function on two levels, as Mulvey puts it: one “as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (838). Indeed, these notions are rooted in the visual representations of women on the silver screen, where *the gaze* befalls the female form from different perspectives—the same, of course, can be applied when thinking about how women operate within the realm of erotic literature— as representations “perform[ing] within the narrative” (838). By this logic, female characters in erotic literature belong to the same “world ordered by sexual imbalance” (837) in which there is a “split between [the] active/male and [the] passive/female” (837). This split denotes “an active/passive heterosexual division of labor” (837) which not only controls the narrative structure but also reinforces the distinct roles of man beholding woman and woman on display for man. According to Mulvey:

The spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. (Mulvey 838)

Here, the notion of the “screen surrogate” can also be witnessed in literature, where male readers live vicariously through the male protagonist of the erotic narrative, “participat[ing] in his power” (840) to possess the woman he desires. To that end, this thesis will explore examples of this power dynamic between male readers and female characters—with the intention of providing another perspective on how women can be seen within the erotic realm. Overall, the concept of the male gaze can be applied outside of the confines of film to works of erotic literature, providing us insight into how women are typically viewed in erotic literature.

In the wake of Laura Mulvey's treatise on the male gaze, Rosalind Gill's take on *female sexual agency* builds on the ubiquity of the male gaze and can also be used in examining women's representation in erotic literature. In her article, "Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising" (2008), Gill focuses her research on the "constructions of female sexual agency in media" (38). Even though Gill's investigations orient around the representations of women in western advertising, her concept of female sexual agency can be appropriated when looking at how women are represented in erotic literature. To accomplish this, I draw on Gill's argumentation:

There has been a significant shift in advertising representations of women in recent years, such that rather than being presented as passive objects of the male gaze, young women ... are now frequently depicted as active, independent and sexually powerful. (Gill 35)

Here, Gill's concept of female sexual agency looks outside of the limitations of the male gaze and allows for "neoliberal injunctions [like] to 'be free' and to 'choose'" (Gill 40) to be key pillars of female sexual agency. To support her argument, Gill outlines "three bodies of scholarship" (40), namely "the 'midriff', the 'powerful/vengeful woman', and the 'hot lesbian'" (41). In the interests of this thesis, I look at her commentary on the 'midriff' school of thought as applicable to contemporary representations of women in erotic narratives¹¹. According to Gill, 'midriff' advertising consists of four elements: "an emphasis upon the body, a shift from objectification to sexual subjectification, a pronounced discourse of choice and autonomy, and emphasis upon empowerment" (41)—all of which go against the premise of the male gaze which solely looks at women as objects of sexual desire. These four elements Gill mentions can be used

¹¹ By contemporary, I mean erotic works published in the twenty-first century. During this period, a renewed interest and mainstreaming of erotic literature took place, particularly through the publication of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy.

to view women of the erotic realm through a different lens—where women can be seen for their subjectivity, rather than only their objectivity. In the third chapter, I will further elaborate upon Gill’s concept of female sexual agency through my own investigation of Réage and James’ heroines, O and Ana, to illustrate the ever-changing landscape of how women are represented in works of erotic literature.

1.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I delineated the existing academic debate on erotic literature and how women are seen and heard within this discourse. I situated Andrea Dworkin and Susan Sontag in their respective fields of feminism and explained how their ideas concerning erotic discourse inform erotic literature’s reception within the literary world. From there, I drew on Lucienne Frappier-Mazur's treatise on erotic literature and how its “marginal” status amongst canonical works encourages further inquiry into its creators—namely women. Recognizing that women occupy a more niche space within erotic discourse, Frappier-Mazur's research illuminates the efforts of female authors from adopting writing styles to assuming pseudonyms so as to assert themselves within the erotic realm. Pivoting to Laura Mulvey and Rosalind Gill, I examined their concepts of the *male gaze* and *female sexual agency* in order to justify their appropriation within a literary context, providing me the means to examine Réage and James’ novels. Ultimately, I provided the foundational basis for further critical inquiry to take place in my investigation of Pauline Réage’s *Story of O* and E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades*. To this end, the following chapter, “The Emergence of Female Authorship in Erotic Literature: From *Story of O* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*”, will build on existing scholarship through an investigation of how both writers contributed to female authorship and women’s literary representation in erotic literature.

Chapter 2: The Emergence of Female Authorship in Erotic Literature: From *Story of O* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*

2.1 Introduction

In the following chapter, I examine the primary texts, Pauline Réage's *Story of O* (1954) and E.L. James' *Fifty Shades* (2011), through this line of questioning: with erotic literature traditionally deemed a "masculine prerogative" (Hardy 1), how has the emergence of female authorship from the twentieth century to now changed the dynamics in which women are seen, placed, and used within the erotic narrative? Furthermore, when examining the erotic works of *Story of O* and *Fifty Shades* alongside each other, what notable shifts have occurred in the way in which women operate within erotic literature—both in authorship and in characterization?

This chapter engages with scholars such as Simon Hardy and Esther Sonnet (to name a few) whose works not only recognize Réage and James' contributions to erotic literature but also how these contributions in turn have influenced the way women are represented in erotic narratives. I argue that Réage and James' novels can be recognized as key turning points for women's authorship and representation in erotic literature. By grounding my argumentation in the academic investigations of Hardy and Sonnet, I discuss the changing face of erotic literature from the traditionally recognized "masculine prerogative" (Hardy 1) to one that is more contemporarily established as "for women by women" (Sonnet 169). Therefore, the following chapter not only addresses the pertinent changes seen in the emergence of female authorship in erotic literature through the examination of Réage and James' novels, but also examines how this authorship influences the characterizations of women in their respective erotic narratives.

2.2 From “Masculine Prerogative” to “Woman’s Domain”: The Changing Face of Erotic Literature

Historically speaking, erotic discourse was written by men for men—with women assuming the role of “props” (Gavera 3) in these narratives. However, the twentieth century presented a notable shift in the production and consumption of erotic literature: what was once deemed a “masculine prerogative” (Hardy1) within the confinements of western literature is now recognized as predominately female, both in authorship and readership. Within the study of erotic discourse originating from the west, this phenomenon has become a point of interest amongst scholars. For instance, in the article, “From Black Lace to Shades of Grey: The Interpellation of the ‘Female Subject’ in Erotic Discourse” (2017), Simon Hardy comments upon the historicity of erotic literature, namely the masculine influences that permeated early erotic narratives, and works his way through to contemporary publications which recognize women as the primary producers and consumers of erotic works. According to Hardy, the rise of erotic fiction authored by women not only signifies women’s empowerment, but also “raises the question of whether female authors are producing new forms of erotica or simply assimilating the given patterns of erotic discourse established by the centuries-old tradition of male writers” (1). To this end, Hardy explores the possible interpellation of female authorship/readership with historically established erotic discourse, dating as early as John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* to more recent “female-authored material” (1), such as E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades* trilogy.

Since one of my aims for this chapter is to establish *Story of O* and *Fifty Shades* as key turning points for women’s authorship and representation, I use Hardy’s article to illustrate the condition of the erotic literary space, prior to women’s intervention. According to Hardy:

By the turn of the twentieth century pornographic writing had acquired certain quite common features: it was written by men of the upper and middle classes, who often assumed a female voice in order to make what they said about women's sexuality – namely, that women are essentially compliant and submissive – more convincing and therefore presumably more gratifying to their male readers. (3)

By recognizing pornography as an indisputable part of the masculine literary tradition, Hardy reflects on Cleland's eponymous *Fanny Hill* (formerly entitled, *Memoires of a Woman of Pleasure*) to pinpoint an early example of male authorship assuming the female narrative voice. With this practice widespread amongst male authors of erotic discourse, according to Hardy, the representation of women in every capacity was solely left in the hands of men to be explained and depicted (3). Indeed, Cleland's work predates the twentieth century by nearly two hundred fifty years. However, Hardy uses Cleland to establish the legacy of male erotic writing and to prove that the "implied female authorship" (2) inherent to male authors leads to the adoption and application of "deliberate stylistic devices" (2)—these devices will be further fleshed out later in this chapter. In the meantime, I use Hardy's commentary to establish the historical premise of the "male prerogative" entrenched in pornography and what would later become part of modern erotic discourse, particularly the cases of *Story of O* and *Fifty Shades*.

In respect to this thesis, Hardy's investigation of erotic discourse can be applied in one of two ways: first, his line of questioning can be used in establishing a timeline in which women entered the erotic realm as writers, rather than mere props; second, his mention of both Réage and James in respect to other female authors demonstrates their prominence in shaping the contemporary landscape of erotic discourse. With the former, Hardy argues the following:

The rise of vernacular photography and especially in the moving image, pornography found its defining medium. As Linda Williams (1999) has argued, visual documentation became in the twentieth century the ultimate means of recording the ‘truth’ of human sexuality. Yet, while the visual medium has largely diverted the attention of the male audience it has its own inherent limitations, especially its tendency to make the image occlude narrative and psychological complexity. Even after the coming of film, therefore, the written form has remained an important vehicle for erotic expression, and one that has increasingly been colonised by women as readers and as writers. (3-4)

Here, Hardy acknowledges the “masculine prerogative” that pornography inhabits and delineates the gradual change of delivery to become more visual than written in the twentieth century (Hardy 3-4). Nevertheless, this diverted attention from male audiences, and by extension male authorship, has paved the way for women to enter and participate in the erotic literary space. Through the written form, women have attempted to distinguish themselves in the genre as genuine female authors, both in voice and in gender. Hardy makes this point by drawing on the comments of early female erotic author, Anaïs Nin, who asserts that women attempting to write erotically tend to adopt the techniques and styles associated with their male counterparts (4). The question whether women’s writing of erotic discourse is truly a reflection of themselves or the employment of their predecessors’ writing form is an intriguing angle to springboard from as it helps establish the shift between the formerly masculine domain of literature to one that is generally accepted as part of women’s domain. Hardy’s sentiments are further supported in the shared research of Maria Kraxenberger, Christine A. Knoop and Winfried Menninghaus. In their article, “Who reads contemporary erotic novels and why?” (2021), all three scholars carry out an online survey to determine the contemporary readership of erotic novels and their reasons for

engagement (Kraxenberger et al. 2). With their data collection considering numerous factors, such as demographics, cultural preferences, and conception of erotic novels, Kraxenberger et al. find that the primary readership of erotic novels are “women who usually live in committed (heterosexual) relationships” (9). They also note that the commercial successes of novel series, like *Fifty Shades* and *After*, cater to female desires and in turn exclude male audiences as they have “far more choices of sexually explicit materials” (Kraxenberger et al. 10). As mentioned in Hardy’s article, the influx of visual pornography for men in the twentieth century continues to resonate in today’s consumption of erotic discourse, resulting in women becoming the focal point in an effort “towards equal opportunities for both sexes” (Kraxenberger et al. 10). Furthermore, the low volume of male respondents (5%) to the survey and the use of marketing tactics geared towards female readership, all speak to Hardy’s claim that women are now the dominant consumers of erotic discourse.

In addition to Anaïs Nin, Hardy makes mention of female writers who navigated the erotic literary space of the mid-twentieth century as well as the early twenty-first century to illustrate women’s gradual overtaking of the erotic literary space. In particular, I am interested in his findings on Pauline Réage and E.L. James—both of whom he cites as important figures in the development of women’s dominion in erotic literature. I echo these sentiments, placing further emphasis on how Réage and James (and their novels) represent two significant turning points in women’s domain of erotic literature. Engaging with Hardy and Kraxenberger’s research, it is safe to say that the concept of erotic literature being a woman’s domain is relatively new, with a majority of notable authors and works spanning the last seventy years. In the case of Réage, I posit that the 1954 publication of *Story of O* ushered in an era of erotic fiction that pushed the boundaries of what women could write within the erotic literary realm,

refuting the belief that female-authored erotic discourse is incomparable to male-authored.

For forty years post-publication, the identity of Réage remained a mystery (Hardy 4). Used as a pseudonym, the name Pauline Réage casted doubt on the genuine gender of the author as it not only met the tenets of typical male authorship found in erotic discourse but also “presented as written by a woman” (Wyngaard 982). By “featur[ing] a female protagonist complicit in her own sexual exploitation” (Wyngaard 982), the anonymity of Réage’s identity could not be definitively confirmed until an interview in 1994 in which the author revealed herself as Dominique Aury (b. Anne Desclos)—indeed a woman. The controversy the novel engendered alone is emblematic of the impact of female authorship on erotic discourse as it “breached the then-current fortress of puritanism” (Brulotte 1082) resonate with the west. Amy Wyngaard comments on the impact of Réage’s novel in her article, “The End of Pornography: The Story of Story of O” (2015), in which she maintains that Réage’s writing challenges the perceptions of who is (or rather was) capable of writing true pornography (982). Given the novel’s vivid descriptions of its heroine’s “tortures, deprivations, and caresses which gradually dispossess her of her sense of being” (Brulotte and Phillips 1080), Réage initiates a running dialogue between readers and writers as they attempt to reconcile a woman’s ability to produce erotic discourse of a highly pornographic nature. Réage’s enduring influence on erotic literature, nonetheless, is layered and requires additional analysis later in this chapter.

In respect to *Fifty Shades*, whose publication follows nearly sixty years after *Story of O*, I argue that James’ commercial success catapulted erotic literature into mainstream consumption, amplifying a generation of erotic literature dedicated “for women by women” (Sonnet 169). Although predating James' novel by a decade, Esther Sonnet’s article, ““Erotic Fiction by

Women for Women': The Pleasures of Post-Feminist Heterosexuality" (1999), speaks to the surge of erotic works in the late twentieth century maintaining the status 'for women by women' and can be used to explain the substantial success of James' work for women in the twenty-first century. Sonnet orients her research around Black Lace¹² and the impact this imprint had on creating a haven in the erotic literary sphere for female-authored erotic works. With their tagline, 'for women by women' at the forefront of its initiative, Black Lace sold over three million books (Hardy 7) by the turn of the twenty-first century and "provide[d] a woman-defined space for the enjoyment of sexually explicit material" (Sonnet 169). For Sonnet, she examines a "complex contemporary manifestation of fundamental shifts in both the positioning and meaning of written erotica in the late twentieth century" (169). To this end, Sonnet asserts that Black Lace's adoption of 'post-feminist' constructions of female heterosexuality led the way to women-centric erotic discourse, fully focused on sexual pleasure and female desire (170). With this in mind, it is no surprise that the debut of *Fifty Shades* in 2011 was a worldwide hit with sales projecting 15.2 million copies between 2010-2019 globally (Chojnacki). The difference, however, in the spiked interest in female-authored eroticism seen in Black Lace sales and James' publication of *Fifty Shades* is that James created waves in the erotic literary space that continue to be discussed today. With debates ranging from the novel's (lack of) literary value to usage of tired tropes to questions arising about sexual morality and legality (Case and Coventry 634), they all speak to the impact James' novel has on erotic literature. James' *Twilight* fanfiction turned BDSM

¹² Black Lace is an imprint from Virgin Publishing that specializes in the sole publication of female-authored erotic romances. According to Simon Hardy, "Black Lace fictions are stories of female sexual discovery, of women becoming active, pleasure seeking subjects" (7). The imprint commenced in 1993, ceased in 2010, and resumed in 2012.

narrative has been “discussed from nearly every angle that we can think of” according to Patricia Case and Barbara Thomas Coventry in their research, “Fifty Shades of Feminism: An Analysis of Feminist Attitudes and ‘Grey Behaviors’”. Therefore, building on the foundation set forth by Black Lace, *Fifty Shades* renews dialogue on the erotic literary genre by prompting readers and scholars to reconsider their own perceptions of female-authored erotic discourse—all making the novel a notable turning point in women’s contributions to the erotic literary realm.

So far, this chapter recognizes the stronghold male readership and authorship historically have on works of erotic discourse, in which this “masculine prerogative” (1) continues to reverberate throughout centuries of western literature. However, the turn of the twentieth century gave way to women entering the erotic literary space as producers, eventually becoming the primary consumers of erotic works. Using *Story of O* and *Fifty Shades*, I comment on their significance to women’s erotic literature and allow for more discussion on the novels’ respective authorship. In the subsequent section, I further elaborate on both Réage and James’ authorship and how each author contributed to the legacy of female authorship in erotic discourse, proving both authors signify key turning points in women’s contribution to erotic literature.

2.3 The Legacy of Female Authorship in Erotic Discourse: Pauline Réage & E.L. James

Continuing with Simon Hardy's commentary on the masculine literary tradition of erotic discourse, I set forth specific examples of how Réage and James' authorship contribute to establishing the distinct female voice and perspective that inhabits female-authored erotic works. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, male authors of erotic literature assumed the voice of the 'female subject' in their narratives to present their authorship as female rather than male. Dating back to the early work of John Cleland, Hardy claims that this practice of "implied female authorship" (2) has led to "a series of quite deliberate stylistic devices" (2) which includes the epistolary novel form, first-person perspective, and present tense narration (2). According to Hardy, the employment of these devices made Cleland's novel "function effectively as pornography" (2). The same, of course, can be said for women. These practices can be witnessed in female-authored texts (such as *Story of O* and *Fifty Shades*), thus amplifying Hardy's question as to whether this is inherited from previous generations of erotic texts, or the intentional authorship of women to mimic masculine techniques for their own benefit. While this can be debated extensively, I take the position that female authors of erotic literature employed the techniques and styles of their predecessors deliberately.

This is quite evident in Réage's writing. Received as highly controversial for its unabashed depictions of sex, *Story of O* is intentional in its form and address. Indeed, the novel does not fully present the devices Hardy outlines: the book is neither epistolary nor written in the first person. Réage opts to tell the story of her eponymous heroine O through third-person narration and in typical novel form, providing a clear beginning, middle, and end to her narrative. However, the absence of these devices does not diminish the caliber of eroticism communicated in the novel. As mentioned before, the identity of the novel's author remained

unconfirmed for forty years with many assuming only a man could pen such a narrative.

Speculation included Réage's own lover, Jean Paulhan, as the novel's true author. Although he composed the preface to the novel, Paulhan was its "privileged addressee" (Brulotte and Phillips 1080) as Réage penned the story for him after he purported that women could not write to the degree men could when it came to hardcore pornographic writing.¹³ In essence, the novel serves two purposes: it is a testament to women's capability to compose pornographic prose and a written form of erotic expression dedicated to the particular interests of her lover—a man who favored the works of Marquis de Sade.

In lieu of using the devices Hardy highlights in his research, Réage makes advances to adopt the sexual undertones present in Sade's writings. Amy Wyngaard comments on this adoption of style in "Sade, Réage and Transcending the Obscene" (2017) to which she claims the exploits presented in Réage's writing mirrors that of Sade as her heroine is "violated by multiple strangers: chained, whipped, branded and pierced in service to the men she loves" (Wyngaard 214). Likewise, Susan Sontag echoes this sentiment but adds that "what stands behind *Story of O* is not only Sade ... the book is also rooted in the conventions of libertine potboilers written in nineteenth-century France, typically situated in a fantasy England populated by brutal aristocrats with enormous sexual equipment and violent tastes" (96). Separated into four parts, the novel's first section, *The Lovers of Roissy*, proves Sontag's point and immediately immerses its (male) readership into the underbelly of the chateau Roissy's clandestine activities:

One of the men gripped her buttocks and sank himself into her womb. When he was done, he ceded his place to a second. The third wanted to drive his way into the narrower passage and, pushing hard, violently, wrung a scream from her lips. When at last he let go

¹³ By hardcore pornographic writing, I refer to the vivid descriptions of sadomasochistic sex acts presented throughout the novel.

of her, moaning and tears streaming down under her blindfold, she slipped sidewise to the floor only to discover by the pressure of two knees against her face that her mouth was not to be spared either. (Réage 18-19)

In this excerpt, O is subjected to a sexual initiation where she “willingly becomes a sexual slave and submits to a number of painful and degrading acts in a chateau on the outskirts of Paris” (Wyngaard 210). Implementing the proclivities found in Sade’s writing, Réage encompasses the ‘immediacy and realism’ Hardy refers to and in doing so, creates a space for her readership to participate in the reading through a form of “screen surrogacy” (Mulvey 838). In this case, the concept of “screen surrogacy” can be applied as Réage’s writing encourages readers, her lover particularly, to insert themselves in the text and assume the desired authority figure. In other words, embody the men who render O to complete submission. This not only demonstrates Réage’s mastery of adopting Sade’s style but indisputably places *Story of O* as “the first modern sadomasochistic novel written by a woman” (Wyngaard 210). It is safe to assume, then, that Réage’s writing pushes convention and can be seen as pivotal to the changing status of female-authored erotic works, proving women are capable of writing to the erotic depths of their male predecessors.

Another aspect of Réage’s writing that can be heralded as a turning point in women’s contribution to erotic literature is the surmounting influence it had socially. Given the “reputedly masculine dimension of the fantasies referred to” (1080) in the novel, Réage’s authorship disrupted the erotic literary realm by essentially putting an ‘end’ to pornography in the United States (Wyngaard). In “The End of Pornography: The Story of Story of O”, Amy Wyngaard attests to this dynamic change in pornography spurred by the American reception of *Story of O*. This is not to say that Réage’s novel led to the fall of pornography—it is alive and well in all

sectors of content consumption. But her novel disrupts the status quo of what pornography entails, making its contents *revolutionary* as it “broke the taboos surrounding women’s creation and consumption of sexual content” (Wyngaard 982). In doing so, Réage’s writing defies the traditional disposition of pornography, which worked against women, and instead led way to sexually explicit material by and about women to enter mainstream American culture (982-983). Here, Wyngaard’s assertions act as the linchpin for my argument of Réage’s novel being a key turning point in erotic literature.

In addition to composition and social impact, Réage inadvertently inspired subsequent works of erotic discourse, further proving the novel’s immense influence on women’s contributions to the erotic literary sphere. This is seen in the case of author Emmanuelle Arsan who credits the creation of her own 1967 erotic novel, *Emmanuelle*, to Réage (Brulotte and Phillips 1082). Citing that “*Story of O* was the opportunity for ‘intellectual and moral progress,’ as it asserted women’s long-oppressed freedom of expression” (Brulotte and Phillips 1082), Arsan challenges the novel’s supposed mentality as “‘passion for servitude’” (which Paulhan defended) and instead claims that Réage’s novel brought “‘a stronger taste for freedom’” (1082) for women. These various dimensions of Réage’s authorship speak to her value within the oeuvre of erotic literary works and arguably make *Story of O* a key turning point in women’s contributions to erotic discourse.

A similar impact can be ascertained with E.L. James and her publication of *Fifty Shades*. When looking at James’ international bestselling novel, Hardy’s devices are more apparent in her writing. Although she does not faithfully keep to the epistolary form, James’ writing incorporates first person narration and present tense articulation to situate readership in the immediate now. As a result, James’ authorship can be examined in two ways: one, for her implementation of

devices found traditionally in male-authored erotic works; and two, for her ability to cater to the heteronormative sexual appetites of her female readership by weaving the familiar (monogamy) with the unfamiliar (BDSM). Together, James' authorship can be credited for catapulting erotic literature into mainstream consumption of twenty-first century women, making her novel another key turning point in women's contributions to erotic literature.

Although it is by no means the first BDSM novel, *Fifty Shades* is perhaps one of the few contemporary erotic works that educates its readership within the novel itself. According to Dionne van Reenen in "Is this really what women want? An analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and modern feminist thought" (2014):

The author [James] makes clever use of Anastasia's naïveté to introduce the reader to the details of this sexual practice and lifestyle. Anastasia questions Christian as to the nature of contracts, safe words, hard limits, soft limits, and the use of all sorts of sexual and pain paraphernalia, relieving the (unknowing) reader of the inconvenience of having to do their own research. (227)

Here, van Reenen highlights a unique quality of James' authorship—James does not incorporate elements of BDSM for the sake of incorporating it; instead, she recognizes the gap of knowledge her readership most likely possesses and constructs her narrative with the familiar, meaning that the people and settings are all plausible and identifiable for her readership in the real world. James' heroine, the "virginal college graduate" (Tsaros 865) Ana, acts as a conduit for debuting BDSM to a predominate female readership who mostly likely have not encountered this area of sexual practice (Tsaros 865). By using first person narration, James allows readers into the mind of Ana and to experience her sexual journey firsthand. In doing so, this device echoes the sentiments of previous male-authored erotic texts (like *Fanny Hill*) that sought to

convey eroticism through the 'female subject'. The difference in this case, of course, being that a woman is penning the 'female subject' and therefore, provides what I maintain as a more faithful narration of a woman's sexual experience. An example of this more faithful narration (about a woman written by a woman) can be witnessed in the following passage:

He reaches between my legs and pulls on the blue string... What! —and gently pulls my tampon out and tosses it into the nearby toilet ... And then he's inside me... ah! ... Oh the sweet agony... his hands clasp my hips. He sets a punishing rhythm – in, out, and he reaches around and finds my clitoris, massaging me... oh jeez. I can feel myself quicken.
(James ch. 23)

In this excerpt, James evidently employs the supposedly masculine devices of first-person narration and present tense articulation to describe one of Ana's early sexual encounters with Christian. As shown in Réage's novel, the same sentiment of 'immediacy and realism' Hardy speaks of resonates in James' writing. Not only does James provide a direct line to Ana's thoughts and feelings, but she also communicates these actions in the present—encouraging readers to imagine themselves in the moment. Her depiction of 'period sex' highlights what I find to be an interesting facet of James' writing—she pushes the boundaries just enough for the shock factor but maintains the "heteronormativisation of [this] kink" (Musser 130). In essence, James' authorship can be seen as nuanced in that she shows awareness for her primary readership. This can also be seen in another aspect of James' writing, one in which the author is recognized for her ability to weave the familiar (monogamy) with the unfamiliar (BDSM)—therefore, changing the way contemporary readership engages with novels mediating erotic discourse. Using the defined readership presented by Kraxenberger et al., I postulate that James' success in the literary market is due to her "moderate exploration of BDSM while adhering to a

conventional romantic plot” (Musser 128). Compared to Réage’s writing, which explores BDSM dynamics through the heroine’s sexual submission to multiple men, James limits the novel’s BDSM exploration to two characters—Ana and Christian—a woman and a man who exclusively practice BDSM within the confines of monogamy. In doing so, James writes within the parameters that align with her predominately heterosexual female readership, many who are in committed relationships themselves (Kraxenberger et al. 9), and who can reconcile the foreignness of BDSM that James presents with the security of monogamy. In other words, by “shoring up normative models of intimacy and monogamy” (Musser 131) throughout her writing, James exercises a high degree of cognizance for her intended readership, making her authorship quite notable while mainstreaming erotic literature.

In a way, *Fifty Shades* renews interest in the debates *Story of O* first ignited concerning women and sex (Wyngaard 983)—thus proving to be pivotal to the changing status of female-authored erotic works. Amy Wyngaard makes this point by drawing parallels between both authors: despite being published approximately sixty years apart and in two different countries, both novels tend to be evaluated together for their daring depictions of “a young female BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadomasochism) slave” (Wyngaard 995). Likewise, *Fifty Shades* revisits the ongoing dialogue its predecessor (*Story of O*) started, noting the various critical assessments ranging from the troubling prevalence of female fantasies of submission to feminist victories found in an unashamed female protagonist (Wyngaard 995). Albeit the criticism James receives regarding the literary merit (van Reenen 226) of her writing, she continues to be analyzed with Réage for their respective efforts in introducing BDSM content into mainstream consumption. Contemporarily speaking, James’ novel is “hailed as a cultural event” (121), according to Amber Jamilla Musser, as it is emblematic of the acceptance BDSM narratives have within modern day

publishing markets—making *Fifty Shades* exceed beyond print and into domains of film and sex toys (Musser 121-122). All in all, *Story of O* may have sparked the debate for women and sex, but *Fifty Shades* continues to stoke its fires—making both authors' impact on erotic discourse immensely notable.

2.4 Women's Representation in Story of O and Fifty Shades of Grey

Now that I have established the impact Réage and James had on female authorship of erotic discourse, I turn to examine their respective representations of women in their novels to better gauge the extent of their influence on shaping the perception of women partaking in their “erotic science” (Frappier-Mazur 116). Authorship, naturally, influences how characters are created and represented in narratives; “the mediation between author's and reader's worlds is achieved through characters” (Tahir Wood 160). This continues to remain true in erotic narratives, where characters are shaped to fulfill the desires of the intended audience—evident enough in both Réage and James' novels.

In respect to Réage, *Story of O* primarily follows the story of a young woman who is simply referred to as O. While there are secondary female characters who undergo similar sexual exploitation as O, Réage solely focuses on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of O—after all, it is *her* story. Through the deliberate implementation of writing techniques and styles à la Sade, Réage's writing is recognized for the “virtue of its aesthetic and literary qualities” (982). While I support Wyngaard's viewpoint of Réage's writing, I equally recognize the questions that arise from looking at Réage's representation of women in the narrative itself. As mentioned throughout this thesis, Réage's writing and depictions of women are debated considerably. On one side of the spectrum, Réage's representation of women can be seen as harmful to women (as

argued in the scholarship of Andrea Dworkin¹⁴); and on the other side, these same representations can be viewed as liberating (as argued in the scholarship of Amy Wyngaard¹⁵). I believe Réage's representation of O as a willing participant "in her own abuse and degradation" (Wyngaard 993) is quite deliberate to both the intention of the narrative as well as to the reframing of women's participation in the "erotic science" (Frappier-Mazur 116) they choose to engage. In respect to the narrative, Réage's cultivation of O is purposefully composed from the start—the name alone is subject to scrutiny. O refers to her physical state of openness, her constant accessibility to submit to the men in her life. Despite her criticism of *Story of O*, Andrea Dworkin's comments on the construction of O provides a sketch of what the name O represents:

From the course of O's story emerges a clear mythological figure: she is woman, and to name her O, zero, emptiness, says it all. Her ideal state is one of complete passivity, nothingness, a submission so absolute that she transcends human form (in becoming an owl). Only the hole between her legs is left to define her, and the symbol of that hole must surely be O. (Dworkin 108)

Using Dworkin's assertion of the name O, one could argue that O is essentially nothing, and that Réage is condemning women to the same fate through this representation of women. And while I can understand a reading that sees O as nothing but a 'hole', I posit that Réage's construction of O goes beyond the physical exploits she endures. After all, O is "complicit in her own sexual exploitation" (Wyngaard 982). Her continued "wantonness" (Réage 129), or in other words, her willingness to consent to her own sexual exploitation speaks to Réage's representation of O as a woman who is fully capable of choice. Regardless of her body being rendered accessible for oral, vaginal, and anal penetration, O maintains her capacity to choose

¹⁴ See "Review: Woman as Victim: "Story of O" by Andrea Dworkin

¹⁵ See "The End of Pornography: The Story of Story of O" by Amy Wyngaard

for herself—even if that choice leads her to be completely submissive to her male counterparts. Through O, Réage offers a representation of women that goes against the norm and expands the repertoire of sexual behaviors women can be willing participants of, even at their own detriment.

While James' heroine, Anastasia (Ana) Steele, does not hold the same debate regarding her name, she is cultivated with the same principles that informs Réage's writing—the intention of the narrative and reframing women's participation in the “erotic science” (Frappier-Mazur 116) they choose to engage. Like Réage, James is cognizant of her intended audience (heterosexual women in committed relationships according to Kraxenberger et al.) and constructs Ana to embody the tenets of an ‘ordinary’ young woman with “pale, brown-haired girl with blue eyes too big for her face” (James ch. 1). Creating familiarity with her readership through Ana, James situates her heroine to be “perceived as admirably daring and curious and not as self-effacingly submissive [who] is ruled by the violent whims of her lover” (Kraxenberger et al. 10). Nevertheless, this cultivated image of an innocent young woman that Ana represents has been the subject of critical inquiry, especially when it comes to how this representation of women can be seen as more harmful than empowering. Patricia Case and Barbara Thomas Coventry, for example, bring up this argument in their own research and proffer the following:

Rather than viewing Anastasia as an empowered equal participant in a non-normative consensual relationship, we should view her as a vulnerable young woman that is abused and denigrated by a more powerful man. (635)

Indeed, a reading of *Fifty Shades* through this lens will absolutely present the shadow side of Ana's relationship to Christian. However, the key word here is consensual—Ana is capable of consent. Like Réage, James provides a representation of a woman who is capable of choice, regardless of whether these choices are per se “good” for them—a separate argument

altogether. Furthermore, Ana is presented as a ‘whole’ woman, meaning that her existence in the narrative is not merely contingent on the sexual relationship she has with Christian Grey. While O is said to be a Parisian fashion photographer (Réage 83), Ana is presented as a recent college graduate seeking a career in publishing. She is an avid reader who is surrounded by a close circle of friends and family. Essentially, Ana has a life outside of the “erotic science” (Frappier-Mazur 116) she explores in Christian’s “world of ‘dubious’ and ‘depraved’ desires” (Tsaros 865). Ultimately, James uses Ana to offer a representation of women that appeals to the contemporary, ‘ordinary’ woman—one where she can ‘have it all’: the friends, the career, and the daring sex life all wrapped into one.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I turned to Simon Hardy and Esther Sonnet’s respective treatises on erotic literature to better gauge how women not only entered the erotic literary space, but how they participated in the long withstanding tradition of male authored erotic discourse. By establishing the turn of the twentieth century as a defining moment for pornography changing its preferred medium from written to visual for men, I supported Hardy’s claim that women subsequently entered the fold as the genre’s primary readers and writers. This is further supported in the findings of Maria Kraxenberger and colleagues who conducted a survey to gauge modern reception and participation in the erotic literary space. I used their findings along with the sentiments of Hardy, Wyngaard, Sonnet, etc. to further support my argument that Réage and James’ works represent key turning points for women’s authorship and literary representation in the development of modern erotic discourse. In the following chapter, “O & Ana: Viewing Réage & James’ Heroines as Subjects, rather than Objects”, I pivot my investigation to hone in on specific examples of how Réage and James’ representations of women are not limited to

masculine reflections of how women are to be seen and heard in erotic discourse. Instead, I propose another way to view these women: as possessing their own desires, motivations, and agency.

Chapter 3: O & Ana: Viewing Réage & James' Heroines as Subjects, rather than Objects

3.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, I argue how Réage and James' authorship builds on women's representations in erotic literature and contributes to depicting women beyond their presumptive role of objectified bodies to subjects of their own stories. So far, I have oriented my research around women's placement in erotic literature, leading to an examination of both Réage and James' novels in terms of their authorship and literary representation of women. In the previous chapter, I proffered the following: when examining the erotic works of Pauline Réage's *Story of O* and E.L. James' *Fifty Shades* alongside each other, what notable shifts have occurred in the way in which women operate within erotic literature—both in authorship and in characterization? This line of questioning not only allows me to explore the portrayal of women in erotic literature from two distinct points in time, but it also lays the groundwork for me to perform a more critical analysis of specific women in erotic literature, namely how do Réage and James depict their respective heroines, O and Ana, as possessing their own independent desires, motivations, and agency? Furthermore, what does this shift in perspective communicate about the evolving representations of women in erotic literature—why is it important to view O and Ana beyond their presumptive role as objects of male desire and as subjects of their own narratives?

This chapter draws on in-text examples from both of Réage and James' novels to support my assertion that their heroines do indeed possess their own independent desires,

motivations, and agency—despite the notions that they are merely objects of male desire.¹⁶ By viewing these heroines as subjects of their own narratives, I return to the earlier discussed scholarship of Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, Laura Mulvey and Rosalind Gill to meld their ideas of women’s representation with my own argumentation for the importance of viewing women as subjects, rather than mere objects, in erotic narratives. In doing so, this chapter aims to present an alternative lens to view O and Ana through, one that predicates on viewing these heroines through subverting the *male* gaze and adopting constructions of female sexual agency which recognize women as “active, beautiful, smart, [and] powerful sexual subjects” (Gill). Through this perspective, I bring awareness to O and Ana’s subjectivity in female-authored erotic discourse to challenge our own perceptions on how we view women who occupy the erotic realm.

3.2 Defining Female Subjectivity in the Examination of O and Ana

There are several avenues one may take to define female subjectivity within the realm of erotic discourse. I turn to the field of writing and literature to ground my understanding of female subjectivity for the examination of O and Ana as subjects—opposing the tendency to view them as solely objects of male desire. Within this thesis, I frame female subjectivity using the ideas communicated in Patricia Beesley’s paper, “A Space of Her Own: Literary Representations of Female Subjectivity and Space-Time, 1868-1915” and the introduction chapter of Hatice Yurttaş’ book, “Female Subjectivity in Women’s Writing”. Despite both works pertaining to non-erotic narratives, they align well with my assertions for how women can be viewed for their subjectivity by focusing on female-authored narratives that demonstrate female subjectivity in

¹⁶ These notions I refer to here are the ideas communicated in Andrea Dworkin’s “Review: Woman as Victim: “Story of O”, and Amy E. Bonomi’s, ““Double Crap!” Abuse and Harmed Identity in Fifty Shades of Grey”, which both find Réage and James’ respective depictions of women as objectifying and harmful.

their own characters. Beesley contends that “for women to express their subjectivity they need a space they can call their own” (1). Focusing on the literary representations of women and female authorship, Beesley proffers a “re-working of evolutionary ideas of space and time to ensure that women not only survive, but succeed, in the fight for their own space” (2). While Beesley’s stance echoes the familiar sentiment of Virginia Woolf’s “a room of one’s own” (Woolf qtd. in Beesley 11), her argument diverts to “situating women in imaginary conceptual spaces with their own space-time” (1). Simply put, Beesley situates women in “elsewhere spaces” such as “the spirit world, the celestial spheres, [and] the fourth dimension” (1)—places outside the realm of convention and reality. Here, I relate to Beesley’s sentiments in that O and Ana are situated in their own non-conventional worlds of their chosen “erotic science” (Frappier-Mazur 116) and it is within these “spaces” of sexual exploration that both heroines can assert their subjectivity. Therefore, I identify with Beesley’s claim for women finding their “space” within “elsewhere spaces” (1) and incorporate this idea in my own evaluation of O and Ana’s respective subjectivity.

Likewise, I find Yurttas’ treatise on subjectivity to reverberate Beesley’s ideas on female subjectivity in women’s writing. Yurttas’ work extends further in carrying out individual studies on female-authored works¹⁷ which canvas postmodern theories and feminisms. Her study, while substantial in the scholarship covered, illuminates an interesting point in its introduction—this idea that female subjectivity can be the object of a woman’s quest (Yurttas 2) in a novel, meaning that women’s subjectivity is not necessarily inherent. This angle on female subjectivity can be applied to my examination of O and Ana as it recognizes that subjectivity is something women actively work towards, even as heroines in female-authored texts. Given that both

¹⁷ Yurttas examines the following postmodern works by women: Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*, and A.S. Byatt’s “Morpho Eugenia”.

heroines originate from erotic discourse, I recognize that their subjectivity is not as apparent and requires a more nuanced investigation to unearth their respective subjectivity. Bringing Beesley and Yurttas' ideas on female subjectivity together, I contend that O and Ana's subjectivity exists within the "spaces" of their chosen "erotic science" (Frappier-Mazur 116) and depicted through their desires, motivations, and agency. By carrying out a close reading and comparative analysis of Réage and James' works, female subjectivity can be identified in O and Ana.

3.3 Identifying Desire in the Depictions of O and Ana

Assuming the belief that female subjectivity is "the quality or condition of experiencing life through the mind and body of a woman" (Beesley 1), I posit that the heroines of both Réage and James' novels can be used to illustrate female subjectivity in erotic discourse and therefore, warrants closer attention to how these characters' desires, motivations, and agency uniquely molds their position as subjects of their respective narratives. By recognizing these traits in the depictions of O and Ana, I assert that both characters can be regarded for their subjectivity as opposed to their objectification, further supporting my argument that women's representations in erotic discourse are not limited to acquiescing male sexual appetites, but rather that they can be seen as active participants of the "erotic science" (Frappier-Mazur 116) they partake in. To this end, I begin with looking at how Réage and James depict O and Ana's desires, respectively.

Revisiting Lucienne Frappier-Mazur's treatise on "Rewriting the Erotic", I use desire as one of the traits for illustrating O and Ana's subjectivity within their respective stories.

According to Frappier-Mazur, "the penultimate stage in the evolution of erotic writings by women has been their representation of male dominance and female subjection—for the first time from the victim's standpoint" (123). I turn to Frappier-Mazur's words here as they highlight an interesting facet of female-authored erotic discourse: despite having been written by women

and starring a female protagonist, the relational dynamics of male dominance and female subjection prevail with the focus on male pleasure and desire. And indeed, this is evident in a cursory reading of Réage and James' respective works in which both their heroines communicate from the assumed "victim's standpoint" (Frappier-Mazur 123). However, these depictions of male dominance and female subjection do not necessarily signify desire as solely a masculine prerogative. Through a reading that focuses on female desire, one can witness desire in both O and Ana, further demonstrating their subjectivity in their respective narratives.

Starting with O, I propose that her steadfast "wantonness" (129) throughout the novel is a testament to her own desire to sexually satisfy the men in her life, namely her lover René and later her master Sir Stephen. The following passage demonstrates this:

Sir Stephen was a more demanding but a surer master, a safer one, than René ... What he [René] would ask of her she would also want immediately, solely because he asked it. But one would almost have thought that had inoculated her with his own admiration for Sir Stephen, his own respect for him. She obeyed Sir Stephen's order qua orders and was grateful to him for giving them to her. (Réage 150-151)

At face value, this passage focuses on what René and Sir Stephen desire of O. It describes the relationship dynamics at play in which O submits herself to Sir Stephen at the behest of René. Indeed, O's desires are not made as apparent, but this is done intentionally. O is designed to adhere to the sexual appetites of men—more specifically the sexual proclivities of Jean Paulhan—that is made clear in Réage's conception of her. However, this does not preclude O from experiencing desire as she is "grateful" (151) to explore her "erotic science" (Frappier-Mazur 116) with both men. This passage prompts us to reevaluate the meaning of desire as something not completely individually motivated but in the service of others. For O, her desire

lies in sexually satisfying René and Sir Stephen, in complying with the dynamics of male dominance and female subjection, so that she gets what she wants—which is René. She derives her desire from the approval of both men, but she does so with a high degree of consciousness for the implications that would arise from failing to satisfy them. This is illustrated early in the novel when O consents to her sexual subjection at the hands of both René and Sir Stephen:

O was happy René had had her whipped and prostituted because her impassioned submission would give her lover proof that she belonged to him ... And if despite all that, Sir Stephen was right? If her abasement, her abjection were sweet to her? If so, then the baser, the viler she was, the more merciful was René to consent to make O the instrument of his pleasure. (Réage 129)

Here, this passage not only emphasizes O's "wantonness" (129), but also helps frame desire within the context of O needing to be desired to feel desire. By being René's instrument of pleasure, O attains her desire through her sense of belonging and willingly accepts the conditions of being whipped and prostituted as evidence of her desire. Since she is "complicit in her own sexual exploitation" (Wyngaard 982), O maintains a high level of awareness for her purpose in the narrative, further supporting her subjectivity in the story. While her desires are intertwined with that of her lovers', O is an active participant in her chosen "erotic science" (Frappier-Mazur 116) and makes her desires known to the reader through her actions, rather than her words.

Like O, Ana demonstrates her desire through her actions. However, desire for Ana is far more apparent: from the moment she recognizes it within herself, she actively seeks it throughout the novel. This is clearly depicted during one of her earlier encounters with Christian:

Why is he so damned attractive? Right now I want to go and join him in the shower. I have never felt this way about anyone. My hormones are racing. My skin tingles where his thumb traced over my face and lower lip. I'm squirming with a needy, achy...discomfort. I don't understand this reaction. Hmm...Desire. This is desire. This is what it feels like. (James ch. 5)

In this passage, Ana not only identifies desire, but she also physically experiences it for the first time. Since desire is presented as something novel for Ana, and is communicated strictly from her perspective, she assumes a certain degree of subjectivity right from the outset—unlike O who requires more attentive reading to make meaning of her desires. In Ana's case, her desires are clearly vocalized and supported through descriptions of physical arousal—“a needy, achy discomfort” (ch. 5). At this juncture of the novel, Ana's desire is not completely contingent on the sexual satisfaction of Christian—that comes later—instead, James maintains Ana's subjectivity in the narrative through her own sexual cognizance—Ana wants Christian, rather than the other way around. Since “the female body remains central” (Frappier-Mazur 120) in female-authored writing, the reader is taken on Ana's quest for satiating her desires. Indeed, Ana's desires become intertwined with Christian's—a similar parallel witnessed in O's case. Nevertheless, Ana's gradual awareness of her own desires becomes more evident, with her eventually taking control of its trajectory.

The following passage illustrates Ana's understanding of her own desires morphing as she becomes more self-aware of her body:

He strolls slowly toward me. Confident, sexy, eyes blazing, and my heart begins to pound. My blood's pumping through my body. Desire, thick and hot, pools in my belly.

He stands in front of me, staring down into my eyes. (James ch. 8)

Initially, desire for Ana is described as a “needy, achy discomfort” (James ch. 5)—something foreign, yet intriguing. During this subsequent encounter with Christian, Ana’s desires become more actualized, and she begins to give shape to what she is feeling. These feelings of desire Ana presents are a testament to her subjectivity. While Ana prescribes to the paradigm of male dominance and female subjection in her relationship with Christian, the self-awareness for her own sexual pleasure indicates her very subjectivity in the story. From identifying desire as initially “discomfort” (ch.5) to “thick and hot” (ch. 8), Ana demonstrates that desire is not stagnant, but changing. This change does not cease here, but instead appears in different forms for Ana. Whether “desire pools down... *there*” (ch. 9) or “combust deep in [her] belly” (ch. 12), Ana uses this “space” of sexual exploration to assume subjectivity in the story. As a character, Ana not only acts as a conduit for debuting BDSM practices but also a conduit for communicating female desire. After all, since Ana was conceptualized to participate in sexual fantasies women are often ashamed about (Alter), she asserts her subjectivity in the story through her sexual education—with desire being a part of her sexual journey.

As seen in both novels, we cannot divorce authorial intention from character construction—O and Ana reflect what Réage and James desire to present on paper. While O is created with the sexual appetites of Réage’s lover in mind, she is shown to possess her own desires. Indeed, O’s desires are perhaps not made apparent at first read as they are inevitably influenced by René and Sir Stephen. Though, through a close reading focusing on female desire, I reevaluate how O positions her desire amongst the men in her life—she creates a “space”

within her sexual exploitation to assert her subjectivity. She is cognizant of what she wants—in fact, desires—and acts through her own submission to maintain the status quo of her lover, René’s affections. Ana, however, is not as aware of her desires at the start. She comes to learn what she wants and the moment she identifies with desire tangibly, her desires are made amply evident. Ana mirrors O by presenting her desire through her actions but differs in how she voices desire. For Ana, she does not shy away from describing her feelings of desire. Desire is like subjectivity—Ana is on a quest for both; however, she is fixated on the former. Desire manifests physically for Ana in sexual pleasure and becomes one of her objectives in the novel. Where desire is first identified as an “achy discomfort” (ch.5), it transforms to “combust[ing] deep in [Ana’s] belly” (ch.8), illustrating that her subjectivity lies in the developing awareness for her sexual desires. Therefore, a close reading focusing on female desire illuminates another way to identify O and Ana’s respective subjectivity.

3.4 Subverting the Male Gaze: Another Perspective of O and Ana

In addition to desire, motivation is another trait that O and Ana possess, thus amplifying their subjectivity in their respective narratives. For both heroines, their motivations are made known early on and continue to be a common thread throughout both stories. Before delving into specific examples of motivation, it is pertinent to reevaluate the method that will be applied to view these heroines’ respective motivations as evidence of their subjectivity. By revisiting Laura Mulvey’s treatise on the *male gaze*, I argue that a subversion of this theory’s tenets can help illuminate another way of viewing O and Ana as subjects. With O, for instance, it is easy to see how she is typically viewed for her objectified status. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Dworkin’s assertion of O’s name comes to mind as one of the critical critiques of O. She is essentially her name, physically a ‘hole’ to be used and abused on the whim of others (Dworkin

108). O's objectification is further magnified when viewing her through the scope of the male gaze, which predicates on the paradigm of a man being the "bearer of the gaze, woman its object" (Devereaux 337).

Simple subversion of these roles will not yield the results I intend to unearth when examining for testaments of O and Ana's respective subjectivity in their narratives. Moreover, I cannot completely ignore the masculine forces that influenced Réage and James' creation of their heroines—O was created for a man and likewise, Ana was created within a BDSM culture that predicates on the traditional role of a dominant male and submissive female. Instead, recognizing the fully realized development of O and Ana's characters can help expose another way of viewing them for their subjectivity. In addition to acknowledging their own desires, pinpointing their respective motivations can aid in creating a fuller understanding of the makeup of O and Ana's subjectivity within the confines of a literature that traditionally projects their objectification. Therefore, within the capacity of this thesis, I am not concerned with how O and Ana view the men in their lives through the female gaze¹⁸—while intriguing, that line of inquiry deviates from the intentions of this chapter. Rather, I focus on how O and Ana are seen for their subjectivity through a lens that subverts their objectified status in the text, essentially looking at how can we view them as subjects of their own stories.

It is important to note here that desire and motivation may be seen as one and the same given their interchangeable quality. However, within the context of reading *Story of O* and *Fifty Shades* alongside each other, I contend that desire resides within—innate in nature—and motivation is the driving force behind attaining desire. Where desire is exemplified in O's "wantonness" and Ana's discovery of sexual pleasure, motivation here refers to source(s) of O

¹⁸ See Teresa de Lauretis' article, "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema" (1985).

and Ana's exploration of their "erotic science" (Frappier-Mazur 116)—in both cases, it starts with the men in their lives. Thus, I continue with performing a close reading of *Story of O* and pivot to examine how O's motivations can illustrate her subjectivity.

O's primary source of motivation is René, particularly maintaining her relationship with him. Everything she does from the moment she steps into Roissy to surrendering her body to Sir Stephen has been motivated by her love for René. There are several moments within the novel which captures this, but I find the following passage to illustrate how O shows her love for René:

‘You acknowledge my and Sir Stephen’s right...’ said René, and, in as clear a voice she could muster, O responded: ‘I acknowledge my and Sir Stephen’s right...’ The right to dispose of her body as they saw fit, in whatever place and in whatever manner they pleased, the right to keep her in chains, the right to flog her as a slave is flogged or as one is sentenced to punishment, for whatever the cause or for none save that of their pleasure, the right to ignore her pleadings and outcries, if they were to make her cry out.
(Réage 101-102)

Here, O verbally consents to the disposal of her body by René and Sir Stephen. From her sexual initiation at Roissy, O aligns her motivations with René's desire for rendering her body sexually accessible to all. Although she struggles to fully embrace the absolute surrender of her body, O is motivated to keep René in her life. For most of the narrative, René remains the object of O's love and devotion—her continued mantra of 'I love you' and 'I am yours' furnishes readers with proof of her motivation to keep René, regardless of her own sexual exploitation. While this narrative thread holds strong, O becomes increasingly aware of her precarious place in René's affections and reevaluates her motivations throughout the story. After being given to Sir Stephen, O notices that her unwavering "wantonness" goes beyond her love for René:

But, objectively now, what was René next to Sir Stephen? Threads of paper, strings of straw—such in actual truth were the ties whereby he had bound her to him, and which he had so quickly severed; and that quick, that easy sunderance was what those so frail ties symbolized ... And, by way of final conclusion, O told herself that she had only loved René as a means for learning love and for finding out how to give herself better, as a slave, as an ecstatic slave, to Sir Stephen. (Réage 240)

This passage highlights O's reevaluation of her position in the story and in turn her motivations. Recognizing the "frail ties" (240) that bound her relationship with René, O shows her subjectivity through her ability to contemplate her circumstances and change the trajectory of her motivations accordingly. In this case, O reflects on her relationship with René as a necessity to learn love, but more importantly how to give herself better as a slave. This realization of who she is and what she needs to do to get what she wants arguably represents subjectivity—O finds her "space" within the confines of the slave/master relationship established with Sir Stephen which allows her subjectivity to thrive, albeit doing so in an unconventional manner.

Although O places the blame for the relationship ending on René, she acknowledges a "peaceful security [and] reassurance" (240) that comes from her submission to Sir Stephen that did not exist with René. According to O, "this iron ring which pierces flesh and weighs eternally" (240) is evidence of the prominent changes her character undergoes, particularly physically. The absolute marking of her body—the labial piercing and the "insignia on [her] buttocks" (207) all demonstrate O's change in devotion from René to Sir Stephen. Indeed, the physical disfigurements committed on O's body support her presumed status as an object in the novel. However, the realized self O purports through an awareness of herself and her desires challenges the notion that she is merely a reduced person, a passive object. According to Mulvey,

“women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle...she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire” (837). While a reading of this statement from Mulvey would provide an understanding of women’s objectified status within the male gaze, I interpret her meaning in another way to enable us to view O and Ana’s subjectivity. Essentially, we could read this as a statement of what a woman is capable of doing—not that she merely is, but rather what she is actively doing. She is capable of holding a man’s eye, of playing to and signifying his desire—she uses this power to control the narrative. Applying this outlook to O, I argue that O is not a silent, passive object, rather she uses her role as a sexual object to attain what she wants—to completely belong to someone.

Within a literary context, Mulvey’s words can be refocused on how O and Ana’s “visual presence” (838) disrupts the narrative and harnesses their power as an “erotic spectacle” to gain what they respectively want. Turning to Ana, her motivations are like O’s in that they are prompted by making and maintaining relationships, namely her connection to Christian. Ana is given every reason not to pursue a relationship with Christian, yet she actively chooses to be with him. She is motivated by the potential relationship that could bloom with Christian—in other words, Ana’s motivations lie in the balance of pushing her own boundaries to secure what she wants—Christian. The following passage aptly demonstrates this:

I want Christian Grey. I want him badly. Simple fact. For the first time in my life, I want to go to bed with a man. I want to feel his hands and his mouth on me. He said he likes his women sentient..... What’s he thinking? You’ve slept in his bed all night, and he’s not touched you, Ana. You do the math. My subconscious has reared her ugly, snide head. I ignore her. (James ch. 5)

Here, Ana outright declares her intentions and the extent she is willing to go at this juncture to attain her desires. She takes stock in his predilections—i.e. “He said he likes his women sentient” (ch. 5)—and is motivated by Christian’s inconclusive feelings towards her. Moreover, she positions Christian in relation to what she wants: to be with a man, to be touched, and to be the object of his desire. Ana recognizes that to get Christian she must change herself. In this case, Ana points to the unlikelihood of Christian being celibate and connects it back with her own desire “to go to bed with a man” (ch. 5) for the first time. This inner dialogue Ana has with herself highlights another aspect of her motivations—she is constantly trying to negotiate her sense of worth in the story.

While this may come across as a simple technique to show character perspective, it equally brings attention to Ana’s growing self-awareness and grounds her subjectivity in the story. She thinks, she grapples with her reality, and tries to make sense of the unknown—all proving that Ana does not passively exist in the narrative but is rather actively working towards a sense of self—a realized self that knows what it wants and advances to it. This particularly comes to light during the contract negotiation stage of Ana and Christian’s relationship in which she uses her power as an “erotic spectacle” to enter a relationship with Christian. Albeit the fact that Christian does not view his arrangement with Ana as a relationship (James ch.7), Ana uses the “space” of contract negotiations to assert her subjectivity and gain what she desires—to “know [Christian] sexually” (James ch. 22). For instance, during contract deliberations, Ana considers her boundaries and her willingness to go beyond the limits of her comfort to secure Christian:

‘Do you have to do it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Goes with the territory, Anastasia. It’s what I do. I can see you’re nervous. Let’s go through methods.’ He shows me the list. My subconscious runs, screaming, and hides behind the couch. • Spanking • Whipping • Biting • Genital clamps • Hot wax • Paddling • Caning • Nipple clamps • Ice • Other types/methods of pain ‘Well, you said no to genital clamps. That’s fine. It’s caning that hurts the most.’ (James ch. 15)

Recognizing that pain “goes with the territory” (ch. 15) of being with Christian, Ana is seen negotiating the boundaries of her comfort. Indeed, a relationship with Christian entails Ana to submit and uphold her place as an object of his desires—to be used for his pleasure.

Yet, her willingness to acquiesce to Christian’s demands is not permanent. Instead, Ana’s development does not stagnate, nor does it cease at the objectification of her body. Ana is motivated to be with Christian but she exhibits her ability to evaluate and recognize that her true desires extend beyond a relationship with Christian. This is further highlighted towards the end of the novel, in which Ana continues to reconcile what she wants with what Christian is willing to offer:

I want his love. I need Christian Grey to love me. This is why I am so reticent about our relationship—because on some basic, fundamental level, I recognize within me a deep-seated compulsion to be loved and cherished. And because of his fifty shades, I am holding myself back. The BDSM is a distraction from the real issue. The sex is amazing, he’s wealthy, he’s beautiful, but this is all meaningless without his love, and the real heart-fail is that I don’t know if he’s capable of love. (James ch. 25)

Here, Ana comes to a point of clarity where she voices exactly what she wants, without reservation or indication of doubt: Christian’s love. Where her motivation initially lies in just

getting Christian (in whatever capacity), it has manifested to Ana's need to be "loved and cherished" (ch. 25). She submits to the world of BDSM, negotiates her own boundaries, and ultimately recognizes that these changes to her life are meaningless without reciprocal love. Here, Ana's subjectivity in the story comes into full force as she reflects on her own needs independently of Christian's. In doing so, Ana can be seen as fully realized in her character development and that while her motivation to be with Christian remains constant, her desires have altered. Thus, Ana's subjectivity in the story can be witnessed through her motivations in which she is constantly negotiating new meaning from her encounters with Christian—Ana holds Christian's look, plays to and signifies his desire, but ultimately, she chooses her own desires.

Both O and Ana find motivation in either maintaining or building new relationships. In O's case, her motivation first lies in maintaining her relationship with René, who brings her into the sadistic worlds of Roissy and Sir Stephen. However, upon realizing René's precarious feelings towards her, O shifts her motivations to serving Sir Stephen better—essentially channeling her energy to become a better slave. Ana, on the other hand, finds motivation in her desire to be with Christian. Although the object of O's motivations changes during the novel, Ana's motivation to be with Christian remains relatively constant. Apart from the novel's conclusion, which saw the termination of their relationship, Ana actively seeks ways to be close to Christian, ultimately negotiating her boundaries as she goes. Evidence of this relationship-oriented motivation signifies O and Ana's placement in their respective novels as not passive objects, but active subjects. They are observant and cognizant of their life conditions and demonstrate their understanding of their world through the development of their own desires and motivations. This, of course, leads to a question of their ability to choose their paths—their ability to act as agents of their own bodies and minds.

3.5 Identifying Female Sexual Agency in the Depictions of O and Ana

Finally, I assert that recognizing O and Ana's agency is another trait that demonstrates their respective subjectivity. So far, I have established that desire and motivation are contributing factors that depict O and Ana's subjectivity. O and Ana have their own agendas—they both work towards achieving what they want within the capacity of their given circumstance. The tendency to view O and Ana as objects of their respective stories is completely feasible—given the choices they make, it is reasonable to see how the physical relinquishment of their bodies to sexual servitude at the behest of male desire feeds into this viewpoint. Nevertheless, I assert that the physical relinquishment of their bodies provides a skewed image of the whole story—the operative word here is choice. Both women participate in their respective “erotic science” (Frappier-Mazur 116) at their own will and are cognizant of their right and ability to leave if they so choose. Indeed, O and Ana enter relationships that come with the caveat that they meet the demands of their partners unconditionally—after all, these worlds they belong to are “ordered by sexual imbalance” (Mulvey 837). Therefore, I argue that O and Ana's subjectivity can be witnessed in their displays of agency over their bodies and their capacity to consent.

Returning to Rosalind Gill's scholarship, I suggest that appropriating aspects of her construction of *female sexual agency* can help ground O and Ana's respective subjectivity. Despite that fact that Gill's construction of female sexual agency is rooted in “advertising representations of women” (35), her feminist structuralist approach to (sexual) agency can be used in unearthing evidence of O and Ana's subjectivity. Here, it is important to note that I distinguish between these concepts of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘agency’—with the former referring to O and Ana's cognizance of the roles they assume in their texts and the latter relating to their capacity to choose what happens to their bodies. For instance, Gill's composition of female

sexual agency hones in on “neoliberal injunctions to ‘be free’ and to ‘choose’” (40)—both elements which are substantiated in a reading of *O* and *Ana* that focuses on consent, the ability to govern the physical course of their bodies. Here, I also incorporate the ideas espoused in Angelika Tsaros’ research on consensual non-consent to refocus the attention on *O* and *Ana*’s freedom to choose their “erotic science” (Frappier-Mazur 116) and support Gill’s assertion that women can be “presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their (implicitly ‘liberated’) interests” (42). Albeit the fact Gill’s neoliberal feminist scholarship comes about fifty years after *Story of O*, her construction of female sexual agency can still be applied to a reading of *O*—Réage explores these notions of women’s ability to be ‘free’ and to ‘choose’ within the confinements of the master/slave relationship her characters partake in. Thus, it is completely feasible to use Gill’s scholarship to surface examples of *O*’s agency.

Relating back to the power that can be found in Mulvey’s “erotic spectacle” (837), Gill’s assertion that women can embrace their objectified manner to suit their own interests resonates with earlier evidence of *O* and *Ana*’s subjectivity. Both women use their position in their respective novels to hold their man’s eye, play to and signify his desire for their own personal gain. This will be further underscored by my investigation of how *O* and *Ana* show their agency through their capacity to consent. Predicated on the “illusion of suspended consent in order to facilitate erotic power play” (864), Tsaros’ consensual non-consent aligns with my attempt to show how *O* and *Ana* are agents of their own bodies as it explains the circumstances in which we are viewing both women. Within the parameters of consensual non-consent, consent is established early on, but is not necessarily reiterated for subsequent sexual engagements to maintain the integrity of the participant’s erotic play, such as practices incorporated in BDSM

relationships. Consent is explicitly communicated in both *Story of O* and *Fifty Shades* and likewise maintains the tenets of “capacity, information and voluntariness” (Tsaros 867)—the establishment of O and Ana’s consent will furnish us with proof of their respective agency.

Rather than examining O and Ana separately to render examples of their respective agency, I modify my methodology here to compare both women together. Given the overlap in how they present their agency, a comparison of O and Ana from the outset draws attention to the running parallels between both women, illuminating another way to view them for their subjectivity. To this end, I present O and Ana through a lens which appropriates the tenets of Rosalind Gill’s midriff advertising. Returning to Gill’s ‘midriff’ school of thought, this outlook on agency is composed of four central themes: “an emphasis upon the body, a shift from objectification to sexual subjectification, a pronounced discourse of choice and autonomy, and an emphasis upon empowerment” (41).

Within a literary context, all four themes can be identified in the depictions of O and Ana and therefore, gives way to viewing both women for their subjectivity. For instance, “the emphasis upon the body” (Gill 41) resonates with the depictions of both women. After all, O and Ana are products of erotic discourse, their bodies naturally are the apex of eroticism—everything that happens in their respective stories orients around their bodies. From the moment O enters the chateau of Roissy, her physique is critiqued and honed to the appetites of her lovers. From reddening her (vaginal) lips and nipples (Réage 14) to corseting her figure (Réage 189), O’s body is the focal point of the story. The narrative does not deviate away from O’s body as it carries the story through every whip, assault, and marking that her lovers bestow upon her. In a way, the ‘story of O’ can be read on her body. Like O, Ana’s body is also the focus of the narrative as she undergoes the drastic physical changes of an innocent virgin (James ch. 8) to a

submissive in a Dom/sub relationship. At two ends of a spectrum, the innocent and the experienced, Ana's body communicates the boundary negotiations she endures to be with Christian. In both cases, O and Ana's bodies are the conduits for channeling their respective stories. While this 'emphasis on the body' tends to highlight O and Ana's objectification, it equally brings attention to the power their bodies inhabit. Essentially, their bodies are the site of their narratives and without them there would be no story.

"The shift from objectification to sexual subjectification" (41) that Gill posits is another theme that resonates in both erotic novels and supports my claim of viewing O and Ana for their respective subjectivity. O and Ana are simultaneously objects and subjects of their narratives. Indeed, claiming O and Ana's objectification in the respective stories appears to go against the efforts to showcase their subjectivity. However, I make this comment to reiterate that O and Ana's participation in their chosen "erotic science" (Frappier-Mazur 116) predicates on the assumed role of the object of male desire. Of course, this does not mean that their sole purpose in the narrative resides in their objectification. As discussed throughout this chapter, the depiction of O and Ana's desires and motivations yields an image of subjectivity for both women. Turning to agency, this trait plays a crucial role in shifting our focus from O and Ana's "objectification to their sexual subjectification" (Gill 41). For example, O and Ana use their status as objects to attain their 'implicitly liberated interests', ultimately asserting agency over their bodies. They are aware of the power structures at play: For O, the rules of Roissy and Sir Stephen's "expectations" (Réage 99) and for Ana, Christian's "fifty shades of fucked up" (James ch. 16). Both women want to attain the affections of the men in their lives and in doing so, work within the space of sexual exploration to impart those desires through acts of submission. At face value, O and Ana's interests may not appear particularly liberating. Yet, I argue that their ability to

choose their lover, to be loved, and to have their sexual journey molded to their specifications all indicate a form of liberation for O and Ana. In O's case, she finds liberation within the bonds of the master/slave dynamic she has with Sir Stephen as being a slave grants her "freedom wherewith he made use of her" (Réage 246). And likewise, Ana finds similar liberation in her relationship with Christian when she realizes the "extent of his depravity" (James ch. 26) leaves her feeling "strangely liberat[ed]" (ch. 26). Overall, O and Ana represent "sexual subjectification" in their respective narratives when the focus is placed on how both women use their objectified status to gain what they desire.

Pivoting to the third theme of "a pronounced discourse of choice and autonomy", I tie in Tsaros' concept of consensual non-consent to draw out examples of how O and Ana demonstrate their agency through their capacity to consent, be informed of the "erotic science" (Frappier-Mazur 116) they choose to engage in, and the complete voluntariness of their actions. For both women, they demonstrate their agency through their consistently given and uninhibited consent. From the moment O and Ana are introduced to the sexual appetites of their respective partners, they are asked verbally whether they agree to their sexual subjugation. Their respective subjectivity is solidified by the fact that both O and Ana are cognizant of the world around them. If they were merely objects of male desire, then both women would simply lie on the periphery of their narratives. Of course, that is not the case. Since O and Ana commandeer their respective narratives through a direct line into their thoughts and feelings, they assert their subjectivity through their words. This is evident when O consents to belonging to René and Sir Stephen: "I belong to both of you, I will be what both of you want me to be" (Réage 101). O is then informed by René and Sir Stephen of the role she assumes in the master-slave relationship and accepts her position as a slave to satiate her continued 'wantonness'. With every step further into

her own sexual abasement, O is educated on her enslavement and asserts her agency by choosing to remain in servitude. This is further demonstrated by the fact that O is not forced to pursue this arrangement with René and/or Sir Stephen, and this is reiterated to her throughout the narrative:

You know what I do to you, O, you know what I am going to keep doing to you as long as you're mine, and if you're mine you're not free to refuse; but, you also know that you are always free to refuse to be mine. (Réage 224)

The same is witnessed in Ana who consents to entering a dominate/submissive relationship of her own volition. Through a running dialogue between herself and Christian, Ana demonstrates her agency through her informed consent to explore the depths of BDSM. She not only negotiates her own boundaries, but also asserts a degree of bodily autonomy by drawing the line between “hard” and “soft” limits she is willing to explore. Similar to O, Ana voluntarily enters the Dom/Sub relationship with Christian with the understanding that she is free to leave at any moment:

You can leave at anytime. The helicopter is on standby to take you whenever you want to go; you can stay the night and go home in the morning. It's fine whatever you decide.
(James ch. 6)

While O and Ana's respective relationships are contingent on the prescribed dynamics of male dominance and female subjection, both women exhibit their agency through their well-informed and voluntary consent.

Finally, “the emphasis upon empowerment” that Gill speaks of can be interpreted as how O and Ana feel within their agreed arrangements. For both women, they find empowerment within the confines of their submission. O and Ana use this “space” within their submission to assert their subjectivity. Indeed, it is almost oxymoronic to suggest that a subjective self can exist

in tandem with submission. However, it has been demonstrated indubitably that O and Ana are active participants of their chosen “erotic science” (Frappier-Mazur 116) and demonstrates this empowerment through the exhibition of their desires and motivations. In fact, their submission does not denote their objectification—it can instead be seen as a sign of the erotic power they harness and use towards their own personal gain. O and Ana’s cognizant relinquishment of their bodies signifies their agency within their respective narratives—further supporting my argument that both heroines can be viewed as fully realized subjects, spearheading their own stories.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I used in-text examples from both of Réage and James’ novels to support my assertion that their heroines, O and Ana respectively, do indeed possess their own independent desires, motivations, and agency. By possessing these traits, I presented an alternative lens to view O and Ana through, one that recognizes them as subjects of their own stories, rather than merely objects of male desire. Assuming female subjectivity is “the quality or condition of experiencing life through the mind and body of a woman” (Beesley 1), I performed a close reading and comparative analysis to examine how O and Ana demonstrate their subjectivity in their respective narratives. In doing so, I proffered a perspective of O and Ana that recognizes both heroine’s ability to use their status as objects to attain what they want within their engaged “erotic science” (Frappier-Mazur 116). By implementing Frappier-Mazur’s ideas on female authorship, subverting the tenets of Mulvey’s male gaze, and adopting Gill’s constructions of female sexual agency, I brought awareness to O and Ana’s subjectivity in their narratives—therefore, challenging our own perceptions on how we view these women who occupy the erotic realm.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored women—their authorship and literary representation—within the realm of erotic literature. I investigated the respective female authorship and literary representation of the heroines present in two erotic novels: *Story of O* (1954) by Pauline Réage and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) by E.L. James. Through an examination of these two erotic novels, I focused my investigation on the scope of feminist literary criticism which not only “looks at literature assuming its production from a male-dominated perspective”, but also “examines (and often rediscovers) works by women for a possible alternative voice” (Spivak). Therefore, this thesis pivoted between an investigation of Réage and James’ authorship and their respective contributions to women’s literary representations in erotic discourse.

Drawing from a variety of disciplines, I grounded my findings in the feminist discourse communicated from second-wave feminists, namely Susan Sontag and Andrea Dworkin. Given their opposing schools of thought when it comes to women and their erotic representations, I used this space to explore the academic reception of women who write and appear in erotic writings. Sontag and Dworkin’s respective ideas on women and pornography (as a subset of erotic literature) circulated throughout this thesis to present a holistic image of how women are seen, placed, and used in erotic literature. This, of course, was supported by the academic scholarship of Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, Simon Hardy, and Patricia Beesley to name a few, who helped mold the argument that women of erotic narratives can be seen for their subjectivity, rather than merely as objects of male desire. To this end, I furnished my research with the ideas presented in other domains of feminist thought: Laura Mulvey’s treatise on the *male gaze* and Rosalind Gill’s construction of *female sexual agency*. In relation to the second-wave feminist discourses of Sontag and Dworkin, I used Mulvey and Gill’s scholarship in tandem to illuminate

facets of women's authorship and literary representation in erotic literature. Where Sontag and Dworkin's scholarship helped ground the genre's precarious placement within the literary sphere, Mulvey and Gill's research helped provide another lens in which we can view literary representations of women in the erotic realm—one which is predicated on subverting the male gaze and negotiating our understanding of female sexual agency to recognize that women can use their objectified status to gain what they want, ultimately asserting their subjectivity.

A series of questions arose from this investigation, particularly in regard to how the emergence of female authorship of the twentieth century to the present has changed the optics of how we view women who participate in the erotic realm—both as creators as well as characters. Limiting the scope of study to Réage and James' novels, I investigated how both authors reflect key turning points in women's development in erotic discourse. With Réage, this was shown by her endeavor to implement the writing techniques and styles à la Sade—proving women are capable of pornographic writing. Likewise, James' *Twilight* fanfiction-turned-BDSM-best-seller catapulted erotic literature into mainstream consumption of the 21st century—renewing public interest in the subject matter.

In addition to Réage and James' authorship, I performed a close reading and comparative analysis of their heroines, O and Ana, to illuminate another way of viewing these literary representations of women. By focusing on female subjectivity, I found that O and Ana's respective subjectivity can be witnessed through the acknowledgment of their depicted desires, motivations, and agency. When all three are demonstrated, we can recognize that their purpose in the text goes beyond their presumed status as objects of male desire. This was important to highlight in this investigation as it prompted critical inquiry into the literary representations of women in erotic literature, a genre that is typically not deemed in the same league of canonical

“highbrow” literature. Drawing attention to O and Ana’s subjectivity in their narratives creates a space to explore heroines of erotic discourse as fully realized characters with desires, motivations, and agency that is uniquely their own.

Overall, this thesis intended to prompt inquiry into women’s authorship and literary representation in the niche space of erotic literature. Through a close reading and comparative analysis of *Story of O* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* I identified Réage and James’ contributions to women’s erotic literature and likewise provided a lens through which we can view their heroines, O and Ana, as subjects of their own stories. Granted, this research’s scope was limited to the confines of two novels distinguished considerably by their publication, composition, and intention. While I found commonalities between both works that allowed comparative analysis, I recognize that there are other female-authored texts mediating erotic discourse that could have aptly applied to this investigation. For instance, Emmanulle Arsan’s novel *Emmanulle* was inspired by Réage and her work. Given the proximity of their publication date and participation in the French literary tradition, a case study on their respective contributions to erotic literature could be studied. Likewise, further research could be carried out on James’ subsequent *Fifty Shades* books (*Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*) to see if female subjectivity prevails in the evolution of Anastasia’s character, leading to a more nuanced understanding of how modern female characters build on women’s literary representation. Indeed, there are many opportunities to continue investigating women’s contributions to the erotic realm beyond the scope of the works I have discussed thus far. The breadth of erotic works by women holds no bounds and when we dig a little deeper into their literary representations, we can learn to see things from a different perspective—from behind *her* eyes.

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