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Breaking the Hard Limits: Romance, Pornography, and the Question of Genre in the Fifty Shades Trilogy

The *Fifty Shades* series has brought erotic fiction to a broader and more mainstream audience than ever before. In its wake, a number of erotic romance series have achieved unprecedented popularity, such as Sylvia Day's *Crossfire* series and Lisa Renee Jones' *Inside Out* series. These books do not fit comfortably into the genres of romance or pornography: rather, they fuse the romantic and pornographic together. This locates the multiple climaxes of pornography within the overarching emotional climax of romance and creates a structure that is both finite and infinite, allowing the books to create both instant and delayed gratification. This article examines *The Sheik* as a textual forebear to *Fifty Shades* before moving on to examine the ways in which romance and pornography are fused, overcoming the limits of serialization in romance, and creating a romantic "pornotopia."

key words: romance, pornography, *Fifty Shades*, erotic romance, genre.

"I thought you didn't make love. I thought you fucked – hard."
... 'I can make an exception, or maybe combine the two, we'll see.'
Fifty Shades of Grey

EL James' *Fifty Shades* series occupies a liminal space at the nexus of several genres. If we follow Northrop Frye, who argued that "the study of genres has to be founded on the study of conventions" (96), then it becomes clear that *Fifty Shades* contains conventions drawn from several different genres. Its original incarnation was as *Master of the Universe*, fan fiction of Stephenie Meyer's young adult saga *Twilight*, and *Twilight*'s protagonists Edward and Bella are clearly recognizable in *Fifty Shades*' Christian and Anastasia, in terms of both physical appearance and personality (albeit through an interpretive lens). However, while the characters are borrowed from young adult fiction, the conventions are not. Instead, *Fifty Shades* is an example of a modern form which draws on conventions from both pornography and the romance novel, despite the fact that these two forms are not particularly compatible. In many ways, *Fifty Shades* is, as one Amazon reviewer puts it, "Edward and Bella meet the story of O" (Iccilliyah), locating its romantic protagonists in a pornographic setting. This article will explore what it means to fuse the genres of romance and pornography, which have both conflicting structures and ideological underpinnings.

Fusing Romance and Pornography: *The Sheik* as precursor to *Fifty Shades*

Fifty Shades is not the first text of its type, nor is it the first text to attempt to co-opt pornographic tropes into a romantic narrative. EM Hull's 1919 blockbuster novel *The Sheik*, in which heroine Diana is captured, raped by, and eventually falls in love with sheik hero Ahmed, is a fascinating text to read alongside *Fifty Shades*. Like *Fifty Shades*, it was incredibly popular, and engendered considerable cultural panic about the effect it would have on the women reading it. Billie Melman writes that *The Sheik* was thought of as "pornographic literature, manufactured by female writers for the consumption of a sex-starved mass female audience" (92-93): something which is not dissimilar to the "mommy/mummy porn" moniker that has mockingly been applied to the *Fifty Shades* series. If we adopt this way of thinking about both texts, their romantic elements become a "cover." The implication is that their real attraction is the titillating content, with the romantic plotline offering a veneer of plausible deniability (apparently, in this mode of thinking, not a very good one).

This invocation of the "sex-starved mass female audience" is telling: *The Sheik* heralded and was a product of a discursive shift around sex. As Anna Clark has noted, a growing acceptance for heterosexual female pleasure in the early twentieth century was one of the hallmarks of sexual modernity (169-74). As the popularity of *The Sheik* and the response of female fans to Rudolph Valentino in the film adaptation shows, this was a text that spoke to this discursive change, in the same way that *Fifty Shades* has both sparked and been part of a growing critical discussion around female sexual agency, consent, and pleasure. The cultural conversations around *The Sheik* and *Fifty Shades* are, in fact, strikingly similar, worrying both that the texts will perpetuate negative ideas about women and sex and that women will seek to emulate the texts in their own romantic relationships, which might either lead them into dangerous relationships or make them unsatisfied with the ones that they have (concerns which speak to both the romantic and pornographic elements of both texts).

Both are texts that are intrinsically of their times, evident in the ways they seek to combine romantic narratives and pornographic ones. As Deborah Lutz writes, *The Sheik* "made fast the chain that links the erotic historical [romance] with pornography" (9). The heroine Diana's repeated rapes by Ahmed are reminiscent of nineteenth century pornographic texts like *The Lustful Turk*, in which white women were sexually enslaved by a racially othered hero (Lutz 9). However, unlike *The Lustful Turk*, *The Sheik* is recuperated into the romance plot. Diana and Ahmed fall in love, marry, and he is conveniently revealed to be European instead of Arabic, mitigating any fears of miscegenation (Teo 87-109). Karen Chow describes it as a "steamy book with a bourgeois ending" – words just as easily applied to *Fifty Shades* (76).

However, this is not to say that *Fifty Shades* is simply a revision of *The Sheik*. They are not simply the same cultural phenomenon, articulated one hundred years apart. While there are similarities – both, after all, are steamy books with bourgeois endings – there are key differences, both in the cultural conversation around the texts and the texts themselves. It is the latter in which I am most interested in this article. I agree with Lutz when she argues that *The Sheik* is essentially a romantic rewriting of *The Lustful Turk*: it is a romance novel which incorporates and romanticises pornographic tropes for a female audience. The *Fifty Shades* series, however, does something different. Instead of incorporating and rewriting tropes from one genre into the other, I contend that it attempts to fuse the two generic frameworks together.

Fifty Shades as Romance

Fifty Shades is often described as erotic romance. It contains elements of both the romantic and the erotic, with its focus on both the emotional and sexual components of Anastasia and Christian's relationship. It is hardly the first text in this mode, but it fits within the label. So, when discussing *Fifty Shades* and genre, why not just say that *Fifty Shades* is erotic romance and end there?

The reason why we cannot stop our discussion there is because *Fifty Shades* represents a different form of the erotic romance. Whether it solely drove this innovation in form is questionable: Sylvia Day's *Crossfire*, for example, follows the same narrative form, and the first instalment, *Bared to You*, was published on the same day as *Fifty Shades of Grey*. However, *Fifty Shades* has certainly popularized this new form, and has led to the publication of many texts in the same mode. *Fifty Shades*, *Crossfire*, and similar texts¹ are not simply romances with an unusually high number of sex scenes: rather, they represent a form of erotic romance in which the structures of romance and pornography are fused together.

There are key structural differences between the romance novel and pornographic texts, which makes this development somewhat remarkable. I will begin by exploring the structures of the romance novel.

There are multiple definitions of the romance novel extant, but there are two which are the most commonly cited. The first was formulated by the Romance Writers of America (RWA). RWA contends that a romance novel must contain two key elements: a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending (RWA). At first glance, *Fifty Shades* fulfils these requirements easily. The romantic relationship between Anastasia and Christian is central to the plot, and *Fifty Shades Freed*, the final book in the trilogy, ends with the pair happily married and Anastasia pregnant with their second child, which would surely seem to qualify as an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending. The series works less well within this definition if we consider them as an individual books: *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for example, does not have an optimistic ending (where "optimistic" is read as implying that the romantic relationship will survive and thrive), as it ends with Anastasia leaving Christian, apparently never to return. When considered as a single text, however, the series certainly seems to meet the requirements of the RWA definition.

The uneasiness with which *Fifty Shades* sits within the definition of a romance novel is exposed if we examine another, more detailed, definition.² Pamela Regis has identified eight elements of the romance novel. These are structural elements, and are flexible: some may occur off-stage, some may occur more than once, and some may be emphasized more than others, depending on the text. The elements are: society defined; the meeting between the protagonists; the attraction between the protagonists; the barrier between the protagonists; the declaration of love; the "point of ritual death," where it seems like the protagonists can never be together; the recognition of the means by which the barrier can be overcome; and the betrothal (Regis 30).

All these elements can be found in *Fifty Shades*. The society we are introduced to is contemporary America, where Christian is a billionaire tycoon and Anastasia is a college student. They meet when Anastasia interviews him for her college newspaper, and their attraction is

¹ Of which there are an enormous number: notable examples include Lisa Renee Jones' *Inside Out* series, Raine Miller's *The Blackstone Affair* series, and R.K. Lilley's *Up in the Air* series.

² It should be noted here that these definitions are not mutually exclusive.

instantaneous. However, Christian's interest in BDSM is a barrier between them, and the point of ritual death is reached when he beats her at the end of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and she leaves. However, their love is too strong to be defeated by their apparent sexual incompatibility, and it is the means by which this barrier is overcome. They are married between the second and the third book, and there appears to be no danger of them ever separating.

It is this last point that makes the *Fifty Shades* series sit a little uneasily within the definition of a romance novel. The romance arc is essentially complete within the first quarter of *Fifty Shades Darker*. Once Christian and Anastasia get back together in *Fifty Shades Darker*, the work of romance is essentially complete. What drives *Fifty Shades* from this point is the sex scenes. Romance has a finite structure: the defining characteristic of the genre is that it has a definitive and optimistic ending. *Fifty Shades*, however, artificially extends its romance plot, despite its apparent resolution, to include more sex scenes. This is the hallmark of the pornographic.

Fifty Shades is hardly the first series within the romance genre to continue after the romantic relationship of the central couple is solidified. An Gorus describes such series as "romance-based serials": they focus on a single couple, developing their romantic narrative over multiple instalments. The establishment of their relationship does not have to herald the end of the series: additional instalments can explore the couple's further adventures together, taking place in what Gorus calls the "post-HEA" [happily ever after]. Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* series, for example, sees its protagonists Claire and Jamie married in the first book, and while they are regularly separated, their romantic commitment to each other is never in doubt. The ongoing romantic suspense *In Death* series by JD Robb (a pseudonym of romance doyenne Nora Roberts) follows central couple Eve and Roarke through over forty instalments, their romance narrative providing a foil to the crime plot, although Eve and Roarke have been married since the fourth book. Gorus discusses the increased popularity of this kind of romantic serial:

Romance is a generic form defined by its happy ending, stakeholders across the board have argued. In a romance novel, the protagonists who meet, fall in love, and struggle to overcome the barriers between them are always rewarded with true love in the end. If this ending is a necessary feature of the genre, what does narrative serialization in a romance novel look like? ...Are there limits to the degree of serialization that the genre can handle, and if so what are they?

These are excellent questions to ask when reading *Fifty Shades* and other books in the same mode, such as Sylvia Day's *Crossfire* series and Lisa Renee Jones' *Inside Out* series. What are the limits of serialization in a genre like romance, which has a typically finite structure? What the existence of *Fifty Shades*, *Crossfire*, *Inside Out* and similar texts seems to indicate is that hybridization with another genre is a way of negotiating these limits: and in this case, the genre in question is pornography.

Pornography is not the only option for hybridization, as we can see by some of the texts mentioned above. The *In Death* series is hybridized with crime fiction, fusing a new "whodunit" mystery in every book with the ongoing romance narrative of Eve and Roarke. Similarly, the *Outlander* sequence, with its time-travelling heroine and eighteenth-century setting, draws on the conventions of historical fiction and fantasy as well as romance. But pornography is a particularly interesting choice for hybridization because, as I will discuss in the next section, in many ways, it stands in opposition to romance in terms of both structure and ideology.

Fifty Shades and Pornography

Infamously, there is no standard, agreed upon definition of pornography: one recalls here Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart's claim that "I know it when I see it." Brian McNair contends that pornography is a "cultural form defined by its content (sex), its intention (to sexually arouse), and its transgressive relationship to prevailing codes of sexual display and representation" (18), while Susanna Paasonen, Kaarina Nikunen and Laura Saarenmaa write that it has been "defined in terms of content (sexually explicit depictions of genitalia and sexual acts), lack thereof (materials without any redeeming artistic, cultural or social value) and effect (texts arousing their consumers)" (1). Both these definitions highlight the confusing cultural space in which pornography sits. Furthermore, as Clarissa Smith has noted, what constitutes "pornography" versus "erotica" is likewise fraught (15), with the former associated with men, the latter with women (Wilson-Kovacs 148).

This issue is one that deserves more space than I can give it here. However, for the purposes of this article, I must approach pornography from a structural standpoint. It seems relatively clear *what* is in pornography: sex of an explicit nature. (What constitutes "explicit" is another area in which there is much room for debate.) *Why* it exists likewise seems relatively clear: its purpose is to titillate, to arouse. But that leaves us with the question *how*: how are pornographic stories told?

Like many issues in relation to pornography, this is a matter of some contention. One of the ways in which scholars have grappled with this question is to consider the relationship of pornography to literature. Joel Feinberg notes three different academic approaches to the relationship between pornography and literature:

- 1) Pornography and literature are distinct.
- 2) Pornography is a perversion of literature.
- 3) There is some artistic merit to be found in pornography. (131-32)

Feinberg himself contends that pornography and literature are distinct, because one aims to titillate its audience, the other to explore a broader human condition (131-32). Bradford K Mudge explores this notion with more subtlety when he examines the intertwined literary history of the novel and pornography, arguing that the two forms evolved alongside each other, defining each other as they did themselves (14). He argues that "the novel's ascension to the hallowed halls of the 'literary' required a corresponding descent by a debased 'other' against whose shortcomings the virtues of the 'literary' could be measured" (29). This is almost a direct description of the approach Feinberg takes when he writes, "that 'high porn' is still porn, no matter how you slice it, is a point well making in reply to all the pretentious critical hogwash that would find some mysterious literary merit in the same old stuff served up by fashionable names" (131-32).

The word that is most of interest here – that offers the best clue to any generic guidelines for pornography beyond sexually explicit content – is "literary." If pornography is supposed to stand in direct opposition to literature, what does this mean?

If we think about this in generic terms, the obvious answer is a structured narrative. Although the romance novel is not generally considered to have much cultural capital in the world of literature, it is still a recognizable novel form, with a recognizable literary structure. Pornography, on the other hand, does not have this kind of structure. It is not interested in narrative progression or thematic exploration: it is interested in titillation.

The most useful description of pornography from a generic structure standpoint comes from Stephen Marcus. His work focuses primarily on nineteenth century pornographic literature,

but it can be extended to a broader corpus, and, given his focus on pornographic novels, is particularly useful when it comes to discussing *Fifty Shades of Grey*. He argues that the ideal pornographic novel is one that never ends. It has a flimsy excuse for a beginning, and, where a plot exists, it is an excuse for sex scenes, endless variations on the same theme. Pornography's defining characteristic is repetition – as Marcus puts it, the best words to describe the pornographic process are “again, again, again, and more, more, more” (279). While romance has a finite structure, pornography has an infinite one, based on cyclical repetition of sexual climaxes rather than on a journey towards an emotional climax and a happy ending.

This is certainly in evidence in *Fifty Shades*. While it takes several chapters to get to the first sex scene in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, once Christian deflowers Anastasia, they have sex frequently, repeatedly, and always orgasmically. In romance, sex scenes are generally used to move the plot forward – they might expose the vulnerability of one or both characters, or create a problematic aftermath. Some sex scenes in *Fifty Shades* do this, but the majority are simply repetitive. Where they expose a vulnerability, it is often a vulnerability already exposed – Christian's fear of being touched, for example, is tied to his troubled childhood. More regularly, the sex scenes in *Fifty Shades* fit into Marcus' characterization of pornography as “develop[ing] by unremitting repetition and minute mechanical variation” (279). This is where *Fifty Shades* differs from a text like *The Sheik*. *The Sheik* incorporates pornographic tropes into a romantic narrative. *Fifty Shades*, by contrast, fuses the two generic frameworks together: when the work of romance is done, the repetitive sex scenes continue to drive the narrative.

Other texts in the same mode – such as Day's *Crossfire* series and Jones' *Inside Out* series – arguably achieve this fusion with more success. In the latter text, an ongoing suspense plot sits alongside the romance and the pornographic elements, driving the plot even when it seems that the relationship of protagonists Sara and Chris is settled, and often threatening to part them. In the former, the ongoing success of the relationship between protagonists Eva and Gideon is also less settled, ensuring that the work of the romance narrative continues for longer than it does in *Fifty Shades*. Eva and Gideon continually repeat and recycle elements from Regis' eight elements of the romance novel, finding new barriers between them, new ways to surmount these barriers, and new points of ritual death, where it seems that their relationship is doomed. Both Eva and Gideon have significant personal demons to overcome in the form of childhood sexual abuse, and considerable obstacles to their continuing relationship, including ex-partners and Gideon's murder of Eva's abusive step-brother. Even though they marry in the third instalment, *Entwined in You*, which apparently solidifies their commitment to each other, their ongoing communication issues continue to threaten their relationship (it is noted several times that sex is the only way they can functionally communicate with each other). It is telling, however, that numerous readers have expressed frustration with the series feeling artificially extended, sex scenes added in to “pad” the books, turning what was originally intended to be a trilogy into a quintet. (The final instalment is yet to be published.) This, we can contend, represents the frustration of a reader who expects the finite structure of the romance finding themselves in the infinite structural loops of pornography.

Fifty Shades, however, is a particularly interesting text to study when looking at this fusion of romance and pornography. Unlike the *Crossfire* and *Inside Out* series, which were written as sequences of novels, the *Fifty Shades* series was originally published in serial form. EL James, under the moniker Snowqueens Icedragon, published what was then *Twilight* fan fiction *Master of the Universe* chapter by chapter online. Early readers read it in instalments, rather than as a cohesive whole, as they might with a novel. It is a reasonable assumption that they were thus

looking for gratification – including sexual gratification – in every chapter, as well as reading for the overarching romantic relationship. This is not dissimilar to the way that much pornography was consumed in the nineteenth century in the Anglosphere. In Britain, magazines like *The Pearl*, *The Oyster*, and *The Boudoir* published serialized pornography: each issue would include new instalments from several pornographic novels. Pornography is not a form that suits delayed gratification. Rather, readers expected gratification in every instalment – repeated, cyclical sexual climaxes, rather than a narrative climax. It is unsurprising, then, that *Master of the Universe* sought to fuse the romantic and pornographic genres in this way, incorporating the multiple sexual climaxes of pornography into the romantic narrative of *Twilight*.

What is perhaps more surprising is the fact that when the serialized *Master of the Universe* became the novelized *Fifty Shades* books, the resulting texts were so successful as novels. They were so successful that they ensured that this genre – the erotic serialized romance featuring a single couple in which a significant part of the narrative takes place in Goris’ “post-HEA” space – became extraordinarily popular. We can see this not just through the popularity of other series like *Crossfire* and *Inside Out*, but also because many other texts which began in the same way as *Fifty Shades* – as *Twilight* fan fiction – were “pulled to publish” and novelized. This includes Tara Sue Me’s *The Submissive* series, Sylvain Reynard’s *Gabriel* series, and Christina Lauren’s *Beautiful Bastard*, which, although they did not become cultural phenomena in the same way as *Fifty Shades*, enjoyed considerable popularity. Despite the fact that the two genres from which this new genre is hybridized seem startlingly structurally mismatched, the popularity of *Fifty Shades* and this new genre seem to signal that there is a hearty appetite among modern readers for texts which can provide cyclical explicit sexual climaxes within an ongoing emotional narrative.

The Demisexual Pornotopia

The two generic frameworks that *Fifty Shades* fuses together allow it to provide both instant and delayed gratification. For Anastasia and Christian, pleasure is infinite and infinity repeatable. There is no sense that their sex life slows down at the end of *Fifty Shades Freed*, even though they have achieved a narrative ending – the domestic happy ending of the marriage plot. Pornography is based on the repetition of sexual climaxes, while romance builds towards an emotional climax. *Fifty Shades* contains both. As noted above, we can argue that in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the first section of *Fifty Shades Darker*, it is the romance narrative that is most important, as the tension between Anastasia’s desire for a “vanilla” monogamous romantic relationship and Christian’s “kinky fuckery” drives the plot. Once this issue is effectively resolved early in *Fifty Shades Darker* (mirroring the way the romantic tension between Bella and Edward was resolved at the end of *New Moon*, the second book in the *Twilight* quartet), and there is little doubt that Anastasia and Christian are committed to each other for life, the romance is co-opted into the pornographic structure. Anastasia and Christian’s relationship is used to engender the repetitive climaxes on which pornography relies.

Effectively, this means that the romance plot is used to create what Stephen Marcus calls “pornotopia”: a world where “reality is conceived of as the scene of exclusively sexual activities and human and social institutions are understood to exist only insofar as they are conducive to further sexual play” (194-95). This means that the plot of the pornographic text, inasmuch as there is one, is structured to revolve around sex scenes, rather than sex scenes evolving out of the plot, as they would in the romance. This is certainly in evidence in *Fifty Shades* (and, indeed, is

one of the criticisms regularly levelled at the text from a literary standpoint). Nearly every place Anastasia and Christian go together becomes the site of a sex scene: whether it be a restaurant, a car, a boat, or one of his parents' properties. Their relationship creates pornotopia – Christian is always erect, Anastasia is always ready, and the sex is always fantastic. As Marcus puts it, pornotopia is also a pornocopia, where lovers are generous, men are potent, and women are inexhaustible (273).

This has not just structural, but ideological effects, because the genres of romance and pornography are not just structurally mismatched, but apparently ideologically opposed. Romance is a literature of emotion, sentiment, and feeling; whereas pornography is not. This is the key difference between Marcus' pornotopia and the one we find in *Fifty Shades*. The nineteenth century pornography Marcus discusses is rarely, if ever, monogamous. It might revolve around a central character, but it would be highly unusual for that character to have only one lover: it is not the pornography of a central *couple*. For example, in the pornographic novel *Sub-umbra*, which was serialized in *The Pearl* in 1879-1880, protagonist Walter sleeps with sex different women. While he appears to be fond of them, he does not love them, nor do they love him. The central concern of the text is physical, not emotional, pleasure: something that can be extrapolated onto most, if not all, works of pornography. The emotions of the characters are essentially irrelevant, and heightened emotion is not felt. As Marcus writes, "It is always summertime in pornotopia, and it is a summertime of the emotions as well – no one is ever jealous, possessive, or really angry. All our aggressions are perfectly fused with our sexuality, and the only rage is the rage of lust, a happy fury indeed" (273).

This is diametrically opposed to what we see in *Fifty Shades*, which is based on heightened levels of emotion. Anastasia and Christian are obsessed with each other emotionally as well as physically, and share an almost hysterical anxiety about their relationship. She is petrified that their relationship will not fulfil his sexual needs, and that he will leave her to resume an existence more closely resembling the world of pornography, where he has purely sexual contracts with a number of women who relate to him as a submissive, not as a girlfriend. He is worried that she will find some excuse to leave him, which makes him possessive, controlling, and emotionally demanding, to the point of extreme jealousy. Their relationship is positioned as different from Christian's other relationships – relationships which were contractual and based on mutual physical pleasure – by its heightened levels of emotionality. They fall in love with each other, and Christian learns a lesson that would never be learned in Marcus' pornotopia: that sex is better when romantic love is involved. This turns out to be so true for Christian that he is able to substitute romantic "vanilla" sex with Anastasia for the BDSM he once enjoyed (although he and Anastasia still do take occasional trips to his "red room of pain").

In my doctoral thesis, I contended that the governing paradigm of the romance novel is a cultural narrative I have termed "compulsory demisexuality" (McAlister). I am borrowing here from Adrienne Rich, who developed the discursive term "compulsory heterosexuality," referring to the notion that heterosexuality is natural and innate and to have other desires makes one abnormal and wrong (632). Similarly, I contend that, in modern sexual discourse, demisexuality is deemed mandatory for women. Someone who is demisexual only experiences sexual attraction to someone with whom they have an emotional bond. Thus, "compulsory demisexuality" refers to the notion that the only acceptable time for a woman to have sex is when she is in love. This link between sex and love is frequently expressed in the romance novel, where sex and love are deeply and inextricably bound together. While two characters might not be in love when they commence their sexual relationship, it is inevitable that they will become so, and once they sleep

with each other, it will become impossible for them to experience sexual pleasure with anyone else.

This paradigm is antithetical to pornography, but it is certainly in evidence in *Fifty Shades*. Anastasia and Christian's sexual relationship is predicated on their emotional bond: Christian's attempt to have a contractual, emotionless relationship with Anastasia fails almost before it begins. The repeated sex scenes can be read not only as expressions of love but of their anxieties over love – Christian uses sex to try to possess and control Anastasia, and Anastasia is powerless to resist his sexual charisma. Christian does not understand how Anastasia can love someone who is “fifty shades of fucked up,” and Anastasia exists in a state of permanent disbelief that someone as wonderful as she believes Christian to be can love her. They exist in mutual awe of each other. It is these impulses – impulses that may be commonly observed in the romance but almost never in pornography – that create the pornotopia and the pornocopia in which Anastasia and Christian exist. The tropes of romance are used to subvert as well as construct the pornographic here – instead of love having no place in pornotopia, it cannot exist without it. The emotional bond between Anastasia and Christian is crucial to their sexual pleasure. Theirs is a demisexual pornotopia.

Conclusion

The term “pornography for women” is often applied to the romance novel. Similarly, when *Fifty Shades* became a cultural phenomenon, the phrase “mommy/mummy porn” was frequently used about it. This notion is not, one suspects, relying on – like I have in this article – structural definitions of the two forms, because they are not especially generically compatible. It does, however, point to the pervasiveness of compulsory demisexuality as a discourse in modern Western culture. If we apply this discourse, for pornography – that is, a form which has explicit sex as its only content, and is designed purely to titillate – to be acceptable to women, the sex must be located within a romantic relationship. Pornography, which takes place in an emotionless pornotopia, thus cannot be pornography for women: if women are to access titillating literature, it must be embedded in a demisexual paradigm.

This is obviously not true at an individual level: clearly, not all women are demisexual, and many do consume pornography. However, the emergence of a semi-pornographic literature that is embedded in a romance narrative – texts like *Fifty Shades*, as well as *Crossfire* and *Inside Out* – shows the pervasiveness of compulsory demisexuality as a cultural narrative. The fusion of apparently incompatible generic forms allows female readers a covert access to explicit and titillating literature, because it is contained within the boundaries of the discourse: the sex might be cyclical, repetitive, and frequent, but it takes place within a romantic context.

This simplifies the issue somewhat – as the derisive attitudes towards *Fifty Shades* as its readers show, the idea of women reading explicit literature is not one with which there is a great deal of cultural comfort, even if it is embedded in a romantic narrative. This also speaks to the way the romance novel is frequently culturally devalued: emotions and romance are considered acceptably feminine domains, but because they *are* feminine, they automatically accrue less cultural capital in a patriarchal society. However, the emergence and consequent explosive popularity of this romance/pornography fusion serial genre points markedly to the fact that there is an appetite among female readers for the dual pleasures that it offers. It offers instant and delayed gratification, sexual and emotional pleasure, titillation in a “safe” discursive space. And – although *Fifty Shades* has received a considerable amount of criticism in regards to Anastasia's

mistreatment at the hands of Christian – it offers these pleasures in a world where women are treated not as sexual objects, but as sexual subjects, a world where their desires and feelings are treated and taken seriously (one of the key ways in which this new genre has markedly evolved since the publication of *The Sheik* in 1919). “I thought you didn’t make love. I thought you fucked – hard,” Anastasia tells Christian before they have sex for the first time. “I can make an exception, or maybe combine the two, we’ll see,” Christian replies – a phrase which might as well describe the entire book (and, indeed, this fusion genre) (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 110). It becomes more than a steamy book with a bourgeois ending: instead of borrowing pornographic tropes, *Fifty Shades* breaks the hard limits between the romance and pornographic genres, creating a discursive space in which women are permitted to access titillating materials while also enjoying the emotional arc of the romance narrative – a demisexual pornotopia. It melts the romantic and the pornographic together, combining making love and fucking hard, until it is not entirely clear what the difference is.

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