My Chemical Erotic Romance: A Deeper Look into Women’s Lustful Fantasies

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Alexis, Cassandra, Charlotte, Eloise, Mabel, Martha, and Poppy.
Helena sat up and grabbed Cameron’s belt, pulling him closer. She ripped off his belt and unloosened through every loop of his jeans, quickly, creating a snapping sound as she took it fully off. The snaps sent a tingle down her spine. Helena pulled down his pants as far as she could while on the counter, until Cameron took over and pulled them down. Cameron was naked, beside his boxers, in front of her and she couldn’t help but look at every small detail of his body. His curly brown hair was disheveled around his face, covering his almond-shaped eyes. His pupils dilating was slowly covering his bright blue color. He had incredibly distinct lined bones. His nose was slightly straighter than most and as she looked further down she saw his chiseled jaw that only had a little bit of hair at the moment. She wondered how the stubble would feel against her skin. Helena was pleased by the fact that Cameron’s body was toned yet not muscular. Too much muscle would often turn her off as if a man were trying to prove himself of something. No, Cameron had a broad and expansive chest that she wished to spread her hands across. He had hair on his body in all of the right places. Helena loved when a man had chest hair that led down to a happy trail that then led to whatever was to be revealed underneath his boxers. Small beads of sweat were forming on his forehead.

Cameron didn’t take off his boxers like she was hoping. Instead, he kissed her all over her body. His mouth enfolded itself onto one of her pink nipples teasing and taunting it with his tongue. As he went on, Helena's head threw back hitting his cabinets. She was happy that it didn’t hurt, but there was a slight sting. She was too distracted by his touch. He brought his hand down to the cleft between her legs and slid one finger inside of her, for now. She was growing wetter and gently tighter by the minute. He saw that her skirt was picked up enough that her juices were dripping onto his countertop. He inserted another finger in her and found her G-spot easily. Helena’s hand grasped into the edge of the counter relishing in every moment.

“What do you like, Elle? How do you want me to touch you?” Cameron asked.

“Any way you want to touch me, I’m yours.”
Easy enough. Cameron had heard her talk for years now about sexual scenarios she enjoyed, or when she talked about being with other men. Cameron brought her body further down that now her back laid across the cool tile. He saw that her back rejected the cold tile when she arched upwards. This was easy enough for Cameron to do. He had been fantasizing about her for years now.

“Cam, I want to touch you too.”

“No yet, it’s my turn first. I’ve waited longer for you.” She and Cameron had known each other for years. Of course, it was the same amount of time for each of them, but he had waited for this moment to happen much longer than she ever had, and he knew that for a fact. It wasn’t possible that she had. He remembered looking at her all those years ago in that little coffee shop.

Cameron teased inside of her for longer before implanting another finger. His other hand was locked onto her hip while his mouth lapped onto her clitoris. She tasted so sweet and smelled of apples. Helena gasped as soon as he brought his mouth down onto her. This was better than anything she had felt. Cameron had never seen her naked before or kissed her anywhere before, besides maybe her cheek. And yet, not a pore in her body told her to stop him or hide from him. His head was under her skirt and she wasn’t able to see the expressions on his face. Helena brought her head down once more onto the counter and bit her lip. She was getting closer to her climax with every lick and twirl he gave her.

Cameron trailed his nose along Helena’s inner thigh getting closer once again to the warm cleft between her legs. He enjoyed teasing her. As Cameron’s nose got closer to her cleft he noticed once again how she smelled of apples.

Cameron moaned. “You smell so sweet Elle. Just like a juicy apple. Like a pink lady apple.” As Cameron went down on her, Helena’s wetness caught in sections of his stubble and the edges of his mouth just like the first bite of a freshly picked apple. “I like that,” he said looking up at her watching her moan. “My pink lady.”

“Oh, God. Cam.”

It didn’t take Cameron too long going down on her to bring her to orgasm. He felt the muscles inside her tighten around his fingers and her clitoris throbbing in motion. The vulva between her legs was
turning redder as blood flowed to the surface. He looked up, still with fingers inside of her prolonging the orgasm, seeing that she was biting her lip.

“Be as loud as you want, Elle. I’m the only one who will hear.”

That was all the permission she needed. Helena moaned through pursed lips. Living with Tabitha made it difficult for Helena to ever make noise or have sex in their apartment. It felt so good to have her whole-body release. The energy that moved through her body with her noises made each sensation stronger and longer.

Helena couldn’t take it any longer. She lifted herself up, subsequently having Cameron’s fingers removed from her, propping herself up, finally removing his boxers, with his help.

_Appliances and Angel Wings_ by Kathryn Collier

Welcome reader to _My Chemical Erotic Romance_!

I just showed you a piece of my erotic romance fiction. It’s the best part of an erotic romance: the sex, the tension, the connection between two or more erotic romance characters. How did you feel about it? Go on, I’ll give you a minute to think about it. The graphic, sweaty, touching, intense, passionate, sex scenes are those erotic romance readers enjoy. Perhaps you didn’t like this particular piece, maybe it tickled your fancy or even inspired you to put down this paper and head off to find your own erotic romance. However, I do hope that I can keep your attention. Whatever the case, it’s important to remember that many people enjoy this form of writing _and_ that this scene certainly does not represent _all_ erotic romances. For instance, my scene specifically involves a scene between a man and a woman. Some sex scenes and erotic romance protagonists involve a man and a woman like the scene above, sometimes two men or two women, or could even involve three or more people in one sex scene. Some erotic romance
sex scenes haven’t been written yet and some are being written right now. These types of scenes help make an erotic romance book.

Erotic romance readers have different desires, and they seek different pleasures in fiction. It’s important to understand that my interviewees, whom you will meet soon in this introduction, may all have the common thread of enjoying romance and erotic romance, but what they want is different. To fulfill their pleasures is different. Different desires create a complexity to the erotic romance and an understanding that not all erotic romances are the same, just as each of my interviewees are not all the same. In this essay I strive to show you the differences that they feel and their different stories they each presented to me. Throughout this paper you will notice that I will make amusing comments in the footnotes or popular culture references because, to me, if you’re laughing, you are learning. In this introduction I will tell two stories about two feelings readers often get when it comes to reading the erotic romance. Sex scenes in a book often, create two different feelings for readers: pleasure and shame.
Introduction

A young thirteen-year-old girl moved to Massachusetts. Soon after moving to Massachusetts she went to Forbes Library in Northampton, with people who she wishes not to reveal. The people in her life enjoyed going to the library and she remembered people always telling her that reading was important; that she had to do it. She didn’t like reading. The school that she had attended in middle school made her read what they wanted her to read, but never what she wanted to read. Due to her refusal to ever read as a child, the school assumed that she needed to be put into a lower level for the English class she was in. The school’s assumption was the young girl couldn’t read or wasn’t as ahead as other students, didn’t exactly make her want to reach for a book. Nevertheless, she decided to go to the library.

Externally it was a magnificent Victorian building made out of stone and brick. She took in the way that each window was framed with burgundy colored bricks. The contrast of the grey stone and red brick was appealing. She walked up the steps into the library and took in the floor plan. In the center of the room she saw librarians hard at work, checking out people’s books or helping someone find what they needed.

One day, she begrudgingly started to look around. As a thirteen-year-old girl who hated reading, what could she possibly be interested in? She questioned why she even had gone there in the first place. In that moment, the young girl wondered if everyone around her was still trying to force her into something she didn’t enjoy. She had tried not to give away the fact that she was bored to the people she was with; she’d rather not disappoint them all. The fluorescent lights were bright above her and the people she came with were excited to find something new. She always hated how quiet libraries are. Any time it was too quiet it put her on edge, even today. She decided to venture on her own and go downstairs. Downstairs had brought the young girl to
the children and young adult sections. A part of her had been glad that she had made it there. It was a little louder, and she assumed the rest of the group wouldn’t go down here. It smelled more like the mild odors in a carpet rather than the volatile oils of the wooden floors upstairs. She decided to go into the young adult’s section. She searched for a while and took in the aroma of used books. She did enjoy the way the bindings of the books were fading and that there was dust on some of their jackets. Part of her problem was that she had a tendency to judge a book by its cover. What’s the old saying? Never judge a book by its cover? She had broken that a few times.

After a while she still hadn’t found anything, and it was getting to be that time when the whole party would meet upstairs. The young girl made her way upstairs and into the line where the rest of her friends and family were waiting for her. She greeted them kindly and told them she couldn’t find anything of interest. Then, it caught her eye. The thing that provoked her interest. There was a black metal spinning rack close to the counter. She found her way to it and picked up the book. The cover had a woman and a man on it. She noticed the woman’s long blonde hair, similar to her own, blowing in the wind. The woman was wearing a red dress that has a silver band around the top of it. The young girl could see her shoulders. She assumed her dress was that of royalty due to the castle in the background. The woman was kneeling with her head looking up, into the eyes of the man she longed for. He was holding her tight yet with ease. The young girl noticed the overly dramatic muscles on him and couldn’t help but take into account that his chest was just as accentuated as his lover’s. He had a band around his bicep and a sword at his side. The title was Master of Desire and the young girl couldn’t help but wonder if this strong, black haired man was the master of desire, perhaps her desire. She decided to take this book and give it a try. She had never seen such a passionate embrace and it had made her

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1 To this day, the girl finds these books on these types of racks.
curious. Before she could get in line, one of the people who came to the library with her took the book out of her hands and put it back on the rack. The older woman didn’t say anything. Just put it back. It was strange. The young girl had found something she wanted to read and yet couldn’t. Eleven years later she still hasn’t read that book.

This story is important to my work because most people who read erotic romance novels feel shame. Readers often feel shamed, humiliated, and guilted by strangers who make fun of them for reading the material. Shame is embedded in the erotic romance. When some people stare at the women reading erotic romance, there is a judgment. It’s one of the reasons Kindle is so popular, there is no cover to it. The young girl assumed she was unable to read such material at thirteen because it would have been too sexual for someone her age. In that moment, she hated reading even more than she used to. She had been encouraged and brought to a library to find a book for herself, but the one she wanted to read, she wasn’t allowed to.

Now I’m going to fast-forward four years later in this young girl’s life. In this story, she is seventeen years old. Someone knocked on the girl’s door and changed the way she viewed books forever. At this time, she was living with one of her other best friend’s mother. It was just her best friend, the best friend’s brother, mother, and herself.

The girl was sitting on her bed in her room. It was a nice full-sized bed that had her favorite sheets on it. They were a dark aubergine color. The comforter had patterns of peacock feathers all over it. The patterns were colors of gold, turquoise, and black. Her trunk sat below the window in the room. It was filled with her kitchen tools because she was too afraid that

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2 There is a meme that states: “Kindle: Enabling smart women to read trashy novels in public without shame since 2007.”
everyone in the house would destroy them. The room had hardwood floors that she loved.

However, the room had wallpaper, which she hated. The wallpaper was dark blue with little pink flowers all over it.

She actually doesn’t remember what she was doing on her bed if she was looking at her phone, working, or maybe playing solitaire. Someone knocked on her door and she told them that they could come in. It was her best friend’s mom and due to the hand behind her back, it looked like she had something for her. She sat up on the bed and asked her what she needed. Her best friend’s mom told her she had a book for her. She thought that the girl would enjoy the book and wanted to pass it off to someone else.

The cover was gray and had a silver tie on it. The title was *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The girl thanked her friend’s mother for the book and decided to read the back for its summary. She was surprised someone gave her a book that others considered dirty and suggestive. The synopsis mentioned two characters who long for each other, similar to the book she had looked at years ago. It used words such as “erotic,” “passionate,” “physical” and “desires.” The book was considered an erotic romance novel, meant for an “adult audience.” To her own, and many people’s surprise, she actually finished the book. It only took her a few days to finish that book. Someone had come into her life and given her the permission she needed to read the erotic romance genre. This moment in time had become a turning point for her, because this genre is what got the girl to love reading. She wondered what would have happened if her friend’s mother had never handed her that book. The girl may not have become the person she always was, and is, if it weren’t for that moment. Now, six years later, the girls’ copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (the one her best friend’s mom gave her) is worn, faded, and falling apart.
Why was the girl so surprised that she finished that book? Reading was always the bane of the girl’s existence. Then because of Fifty Shades, all of a sudden, all she read were erotic romance novels. She spent her nights staying up late, hidden under the covers reading her dirty novels. Throughout these books she noticed a number of common themes and began discovering why she loved them so much. She discovered that the romance genre is one of the best forms of literature to empower women in multiple ways. In this genre women are empowered to find a job they love and earn their own money, to find sexual pleasure in a relationship, or on their own, and even to have an inanimate object (the book) be a way to escape from reality and dive into fantasy. Yet, after all those years of people trying so hard to get her to read, all of a sudden, she was judged due to the genre of the books she was reading. Why? Well, the erotic romance novel is often not considered a “real” form of literature.

Fifty Shades of Grey accomplished quite a few things for the girl. Right after Fifty Shades another motherly figure came into her life and handed her another book that she told her was even better. She is known as “My Fairy Smutmother” (the girl’s boyfriend’s stepmother). The Fairy Smutmother let her borrow her copy of Outlander by Diana Gabaldon. The girl remembers plowing through this book just as quickly. At first, the book was intimidating to her. It is a long series and each book can be eight hundred pages to a thousand pages with the tiniest lettering imaginable. And yet, Gabaldon’s epic tale of a time traveling romance was thrilling for her.

If you haven’t yet guessed, the young girl is me and the stories are mine. I got hooked. I fell in love at first sentence when it came to the erotic romance genre. However, while I was off actually reading, and honestly reading more than quite a few of my family members who read consistently, I got some belittling rudeness from many friends, family and people who didn’t even know me. I think such reactions were due to the bad reputation the erotic romance novel
has in general. I believe it was also because these books show what female pleasure can look like. When I encountered these responses from my friends and family\(^3\), I also questioned if they had ever read a romance novel themselves. Why can a group of people judge an entire genre based on what they’ve heard? How could they judge an entire genre from the covers of the books that they see in grocery stores? Did they judge every person they saw reading a book with Fabio or a grey tie on the cover? While I understand if a particular genre just isn’t for someone\(^4\), what I don’t understand is disregarding a genre completely. I wondered who this audience was that were reading the erotic romance and what other options there were out there for the genre besides *Fifty Shades* and *Outlander*.

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3 I will say not *all* of my friends and family members.
4 I won’t exactly be grabbing a sci-fi novel.
Audience & Diversity

Romance is a real and valid literary tradition with its own tropes, conventions, goals and preoccupations that addresses real complexities in people’s lives.5

In the second season of the television show Stranger Things, there is a scene with Mrs. Wheeler, mother of one of the main characters. It represents the stereotypical romance reader. Stranger Things is based in the 1980s, a time when romance novels were on the rise, and Mrs. Wheeler is portrayed as the stereotypical housewife. Mrs. Wheeler is enjoying and indulging in reading a romance novel, Heart of Thunder by Johanna Lindsey,6 while in the bathtub, with candles all around her, and listening to the song “The Way We Were.” Her doorbell rings and she tries to get her husband to answer it, however he is asleep, and she ends up having to answer the door. At the door is a very handsome young man, with a mullet,7 who acts very charmingly towards her.

Mrs. Wheeler is a classic stereotype of the audience who reads romance novels. Stranger Things represents one such stereotype. Often when the media represents readers of the audience for romance novels, we see an older woman, a married housewife, who is not sexually satisfied in marriage.8 Mrs. Wheeler embodies this stereotype: a woman most likely in her late thirties or

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6 Fun fact! Heart of Thunder by Johanna Lindsey is a real book and Lindsey is a very famous romance author. However, the creators of Stranger Things decided to make the hero on the cover look like the character, Billy, who is the person ringing her doorbell. When Mrs. Wheeler is in her fantasy world while reading the novel, a beau who looks like the hero on the cover shows up at her doorstep and begins to flirt with her.
7 Sarah Wendell in her book Everything I Know About Love I Learned from Romance Novels states that to become a romance hero the first thing you need to do is “Acquire a Mullet” (56), which was a common hairstyle the hero had in the 1980s. In today’s erotic romances, I believe the hero now must require a suit that is tailored perfectly to him.
8 In Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan’s book Beyond Heaving Bosoms they create a character named Mavis who is the stereotypical romance reader, “But somehow, everyone has a very firm idea of what the average romance reader is like. We bet you already know her. She’s rather dim and kind of tubby – undereducated and undersexed – and she displays a distressing affinity for mom jeans and sweaters
early forties, a housewife with two children, and when it comes to the representation of her husband, he doesn’t even let her have a moment to herself to read and fantasize about romance. This stereotype is a *myth*.

The *fact* is that romance novels make up seventeen percent of popular fiction. Romance outsells suspense/thriller, mystery, fantasy, and even science fiction. Romance is the second largest category of fiction, just behind “general fiction.”

There are many subgenres of romance and erotic romance is the fifth most wanted subgenre just behind romantic suspense, contemporary, historical, and paranormal. What we can make of these numbers is that there are numerous readers of romance out there and they don’t all fit the “Mrs. Wheeler” stereotype.

The audience of romance novels consists primarily of women, because the romance novel is primarily written about women, for women, and by women. According to Romance Writers of America (RWA) and the 2014 Nielsen Romance Buyer Survey, eighty-four percent of the people reading romances are women and men make up the other sixteen percent. Fifty-nine percent are living with a spouse or significant other and seventy percent of romance readers discovered the genre between the ages of eleven and eighteen. With these numbers we can begin to break apart the stereotype. Yes, women are primarily the people who read the romance novel, but only a little over fifty percent are living with a significant other and a significant number of romance readers discovered the genre at a young age. As the authors of *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* articulated through their stereotyped romance reader, Mavis, the average romance reader is covered in puffy paint and appliqued kittens. So even though repeated surveys conducted by independent research reveal that an astonishingly diverse and often affluent population reads romance novels, in popular depictions, we’re all the same.”

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10 Ibid., 67.
11 Ibid., 92.
considered “undereducated.” But the truth is that “[…] 66 percent had achieved a bachelor’s degree or higher.”¹² Romance readers are therefore generally well educated, not necessarily living with a partner or married, and may well be younger than the stereotypical reader is assumed to be.

However, the RWA, Maya Rodale, Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan don’t specify readership when it comes to cisgender women versus transwomen. Nor do they discuss race, ethnicity and national origin among romance readers. So, it is difficult to fully characterize the eighty-four percent of romance readers who are women. The RWA does note that the most likely age group is from thirty to fifty-four, that romance books are primarily read in the South, and that a romance reader has an average income of $55,000. Other demographic information has yet to be studied.

In 2016 “The Ripped Bodice,” an exclusively romance bookstore in the U.S. sponsored by owners Bea and Leah Koch, examined the percentage of romance novels that are written by people of color.¹³ 2016 was the first year that The Ripped Bodice did this study. The Ripped Bodice researched twenty different publishers and discovered that, “For every 100 books published by the leading romance publishers in 2016, only 7.8 were written by people of color.” 7.8% is quite low. In their 2017 study, some publishers increased the diversity of authors, some remained stagnant, and others decreased. It is very unfortunate that the number from 2016, 7.8%, went down to 6.2% in 2017 in terms of the racial diversity of romance authors. In the words of the Ripped Bodice:

This is an urgent issue. The downward trend in the industry as a whole this year shows that simply noting and discussing the problem is not enough. We need action. It is not

¹² Rodale, Dangerous Books for Girls, 47
acceptable to take decades to reach the numbers that should have been standard years ago.

Do not mistake this data as evidence that books written by authors of color do not exist. The books ARE out there. They are being self-published due to publishers historic and current attitudes towards non-white authors.

We firmly believe that publishers need to take more ownership over what they are producing.\(^\text{14}\)

It is important to remember, however, that these numbers could misrepresent authors’ race because romance writers have a tendency to want to be anonymous, just as romance readers sometimes wish to remain anonymous. There is certainly room for error. In response to this study, some readers queried, “Why only race?”, to which they replied:

> While many groups are still woefully underrepresented in the romance genre including people with disabilities, marginalized religious groups, and members of the LGBTQ community, we had to start somewhere. This is a difficult subject to discuss, but racial discrimination is one of the largest to barriers to equality in any professional industry. Publishing, unfortunately, is not immune.\(^\text{15}\)

Research remains to be done on the diversity of romance writers, readers, and characters. In fact, The Ripped Bodice even responded to the question of “Why Not Examine the Content of the Books?”

Diverse characters and settings are extremely important. We learn about our world and each other through the media we consume. However, the fictional characters in these books aren’t being negatively impacted by discrimination in real life. Real people who write books are, as are the real readers who purchase them. We need marginalized creators getting paid to tell their own stories in publishing. If every creator is white, the default is a white lens.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.
My research demonstrates the fact that younger women read erotic romance. I decided to interview romance readers to help me understand the mindset of other romance readers, besides myself, and study female desire and fantasy more deeply.

When I began looking for people to interview, the only requirements were that they were cisgender (a person whose gender corresponds with their birth sex) women, who have had an experience or experiences with romance novels, and that they were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. I felt that due to the limited amount of time for the research I wouldn’t be able to separate trans-women’s and cis-women’s experiences properly. Hence, instead of generalizing women overall in this project, I specifically worked with cisgender women. My interviewees, who self-identified as “pro-romance feminists,” have a few things in common. They are young, cisgender, white and enjoy reading romance. Given the relatively limited population that I interviewed (largely students at a small historically private liberal arts college in New England), perhaps this lack of racial diversity is to be expected. However, I hope that future scholars will pursue further research in this important area.

The women with whom I discuss erotic romance novels are some of the most amusing, open, and honest people with whom I have spoken. These interviews were all one-on-one. Comments from interviews will be dispersed throughout the paper because not only does my argument benefit from scholars who discuss romance and the books themselves, but also from the people who read those books. These interviews represent what women think of the erotic romance in general, why they read romances, their thoughts on the hero and heroine, what turns them on, and more. Below, you will meet the amazing women I interviewed through their answers to several identity-based and introductory questions. The confidentiality of my interviewees is protected by their own chosen pseudonym:
Name: Cassandra
Age: 22
Sexual Orientation: Pansexual
Race: White
Occupation: College Student
Relationship Status: Boyfriend
Children: 0
Favorite Romance Novel: *Comfort Food* by Kitty Thomas or *The Warlord Wants Forever* by Kresley Cole
Favorite Hero: Rydstrom from *Kiss of a Demon King* by Kresley Cole
Favorite Heroine: Myst the Coveted or Region the Radient from the *Immortals After Dark* series by Kresley Cole.

Name: Alexis
Age: 22
Sexual Orientation: Bisexual
Race: White
Occupation: College Student
Relationship Status: Boyfriend
Children: 0
Favorite Romance Novel: *Comfort Food* by Kitty Thomas or *Lothaire* by Kresley Cole
Favorite Hero: Lothaire
Favorite Heroine: Undecided

Name: Martha
Age: 20
Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual
Race: White
Occupation: College Student and Teacher
Relationship Status: Boyfriend
Children: 0
Favorite Romance Novel: Wants to explore more novels
Favorite Hero: Wants to explore more novels
Favorite Heroine: Wants to explore more novels

Name: Poppy
Age: 19
Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual
Race: White
Occupation: College Student and Pastoral Farmer
Relationship Status: Single
Children: 0
Favorite Romance Novel: Undecided
Favorite Hero: Undecided
Favorite Heroine: Undecided. However, her favorite series includes the *Immortals After Dark* by Kresley Cole and *Psy-Changeling* by Nalini Singh.
Name: Charlotte
Age: 21
Sexual Orientation: Pansexual
Race: White
Occupation: College Student, Doula, and Teacher
Relationship Status: Single
Children: 0
Favorite Romance Novel: *After the Night* by Linda Howard
Favorite Hero: Undecided
Favorite Heroine: Faith from *After the Night* by Linda Howard

Name: Mabel
Age: 22
Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual
Race: White
Occupation: Previous college student. Currently a nurse.
Relationship Status: Boyfriend
Children: 0
Favorite Romance Novel: *The Coincidence of Callie & Kayden* by Jessica Sorensen
Favorite Hero: Wesley from *The Princess Bride* or Harry Potter from the *Harry Potter* series.
Favorite Heroine: Hermione from the *Harry Potter* series.

Name: Eloise
Age: 21
Sexual Orientation: Bisexual/Queer
Race: White
Occupation: College Student
Relationship Status: Single
Children: 0
Favorite Romance Novel: *The Lawrence Browne Affair* by Cat Sebastian
Favorite Hero: Jonas Grantham from *A Kiss for Midwinter* by Courtney Milan
Favorite Heroine: Phillippa Benning from *Revealed* by Kate Noble or Lydia Reeve from *True Pretenses* by Rose Lerner.

Instead of continuously representing the stereotype of romance novels in conversation and popular culture, as in the scene from *Stranger Things*, if someone doesn’t understand why readers read romance novels, curious people could follow the lead of Nick Birch from the television show *Big Mouth*. Rather than jumping to conclusions that perpetrate detrimental
stereotypes, Nick simply and plainly asks his older sister why girls like a romance novel he is reading:

“Lia?” [Nick]
“Hey, Nicky.” [Lia]
“I have some questions re: The Rock of Gibraltar [the romance book].”
“Are you up to the part where she grooms him with sweet almond oil?”
“Yeah, actually re: almond oil, girls don’t want to have sex with horses. That’s not what this book is about, right?”
“Ew! Of course not! The horse part isn’t what’s sexy. It’s the fact that they can’t have sex that’s so hot.”
“Okay, this is where you lose me. What’s so hot about not having sex?”
“See, you’re thinking like a guy. Women are different. Sometimes we think sex itself is sexy.”
“Great news.”
“But other times we imagine a faceless dude walking around with a baby in a Baby Bjorn, and that’s sexy.”
“So, babies and no faces are sexy?”
“No, you tiny dum-dum. It’s a lot of different things. Sometimes we think a smell is sexy, or sushi, or Dr. Drew Pinsky.”
“What?”
“Or like a million other incomprehensible things, you know what I mean? So, The Rock of Gibraltar, it’s about sex because it’s about everything around sex. See what I’m saying?”

[Parents eavesdropping]
[Nick and Lia's father speaking to his wife] “Look at that. Our inquisitive son, our wise daughter, working together to solve the mysteries of human desire.” – Father.

I enjoy that in the above scene from Big Mouth, Nick just simply asks his sister why the girls in his grade are reading The Rock of Gibraltar and why they like it, while at the same time not disregarding it. While I personally would never say that all women think a man holding a baby in a Baby Bjorn is sexy, the point is that there are many different parts, not just the act of sex, that

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17 Something that needs to be elaborated before you read this scene is when Nick says “Girls don’t want to have sex with horses. That’s not what this book is about, right?” In the story of The Rock of Gibraltar the romance protagonists Gustavo (the hero) and Fatima (heroine) fall in love, but their love is forbidden. However, since Gustavo needs to be with her more than anything, he finds the gypsy sorcerer El Colon who allows Gustavo to turn into a horse so that he may be with his love and no one will be the wiser. This isn’t an actual novel.

romance readers find erotic in the genre. Nick’s sister, Lia, specifically makes the point that sexual tension between romance protagonists is sexy and erotic.

Often the erotic romance genre is called “smut,” “trashy,” “bodice-ripping,” “guilty pleasure,” “brain candy,” “lady porn,” etc. Dominantly, it is the romance readers who consider this erotic romance real writing. Critics only consider classic such as *A Room with a View*, *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*, or even *Pamela* “real” romances. All of these books, and many others, are already considered classics and are taught in school settings. While books can take some time to become a classic form of literature, people can’t wait for them to just to teach more of the books that thousands of women are reading right now.

Since people are consistently debating whether *Fifty Shades* depicts an emotionally abusive relationship or not, why aren’t these questions being discussed, in a college setting? Sex is already a difficult thing for schools to talk about, which is why it makes it more difficult to discuss this genre. Erotic romance is about women’s pleasure and women’s desires. It can make it more difficult to talk about in a school setting, due to the fact that the books are about female pleasure. The covers on romances books can represent that pleasure.

The covers of these books in the 1980s often displayed a very fit, usually shirtless hero, and a heroine who is also displaying quite a bit of skin, either with her legs, her open back, or a corset that can’t contain her breasts, such as the one I looked at as a young girl. The covers of romance novels are completely shameless, filled with passion, longing, and shows that their relationship is forbidden. However, now in the twenty-first century, some of the most popular books have changed their appearance. The erotic romance books are often dark, shadowed, and display an object that is important to the hero and heroine’s relationship. I believe this may be

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because the image doesn’t bluntly say that it is an erotic romance novel. However, erotic romance bookworms know what lurks behind those covers.

There are other factors that come into play about why these books are considered less than other genres. Erotic romance labeling can go all the way down to the quality of writing, the fact that they’re always paperback, that they are smaller, and the covers as discussed earlier. However, aren’t there many forms of writing that have formulas to them as well? This includes other genres such as haikus, sonnets, and even other genres of literature. Not only are there certainly other forms of formulaic literature, but many readers aren’t there to be turned on by a perfectly crafted sentence. Rather, they crave a well-crafted story and a hero/heroine who will turn them on.

Not only will my work be discussing those who have examined this topic, such as Maya Rodale’s Dangerous Books for Girls, Pamela Regis’s A Natural History of the Romance Novel, Janice Radway’s Reading the Romance, and Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan’s Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches’ Guide to Romance Novels; I also discuss what happiness looks like through romance novels such as Sara Ahmed’s The Promise of Happiness. In addition, I address the boom in BDSM in the erotic romance novel today and its counter arguments. Such counter-texts include Margot Weiss’ Techniques of Pleasure and the anthology Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis. This paper will contextualize its arguments through scholarship but will also analyze the novels themselves. I also analyze quotes from women I interviewed about

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20 For example, the cover of Fifty Shades of Grey shows a gray tie that was used throughout the book to bind Anastasia (the heroine). Or with Sylvia Day’s Bared to You the cover shows a pair of cufflinks with golden X’s as the pattern on them. Not only do the cufflinks represent a male hero, the small X’s represent the gift that the hero, Gideon, gave to the heroine, Eva, of a ring with those same golden X’s as a commitment to her. In Reflected in You (the third book) Eva describes what it means to her: “I kept staring at my ring, remembering what we had said when he’d first given it to me: The X’s are me holding on to you” (Reflected in You, 306).

21 Such as murder mystery; the reader wants to know who the murderer or murderers were.
their experiences with the genre. No one can truly understand the erotic romance without discussing the books themselves and their readers.

There are many remaining questions to be answered with respect to the erotic romance novel. These include: how do men respond to the erotic romance? How do people of color respond to the erotic romance? How do transgender people respond to the erotic romance? These are important topics that need to be written about as well. One of the stereotypes that I am dismantling is that romance readers are all older women, which is why I interviewed younger women to learn more about their experiences.

This Division III thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One studies the outline and the structure of the romance novel. It discusses the differences between romance, erotica, erotic romance, and porn, as well as the elements and key components of an erotic romance. Chapter Two examines earlier influences of a particular hero, Prince Charming, and discusses how the Disney princess films are a G-rated version of a romantic story. This chapter also surveys each type of hero and whether this hero is romanticizing patriarchy. Chapter Three addresses how erotic romance can be used as a form of education, as a form of female pleasure and a discussion on consent and feminism. Finally, chapter Four investigates BDSM, Fifty Shades of Grey, and a common quote from erotic romance books “You. Are. Mine.” Please enjoy the journey of this Division III. I hope you will find the ending a happily ever after.
Chapter 1 - The Erotic Romance

Definitions: Is It Romance? Erotica? Porn?

In season seven of the hit television show *Friends* there is an episode where the character Joey finds Rachel’s erotic novel in her bedroom. Joey incorrectly calls her novel porn and Rachel calls it erotica. Rachel hides the book in her bed and enjoys reading it for her “expression of female sexuality.” In fact, there are multiple occasions in the series where Rachel expresses her joy in the romance novel. Such as when she mentions the author Danielle Steel and tries to write erotic romance. Rachel is understandably mad at Joey for going into her bedroom without her permission and finding the book. Here is the scene between Rachel and Joey:

[gasps] “You found my book?!” [Rachel]
“Yeah, I did!” [Joey]
“Joey, what – What are you doing going into my bedroom?!”
“Ok, look I’m sorry, I went in there to take a nap and I know I shouldn’t have, but you got porn!”
“Hey - hey, y’know what? I don’t care! I’m not ashamed of my book. There’s nothing wrong with a woman enjoying a little… erotica. It’s just a healthy expression of female sexuality, which by the way, is something you will never understand.” [Rachel goes into her room]
“You got porn!”

I chose this scene from *Friends* because it gets right to the point of one of my arguments. The language used to define romance, erotica, porn, and erotic romance relies on loose and debatable

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22 *Friends* became one of the most popular TV shows of television history. This sitcom ran from 1994-2004. From Joey’s catch phrase “How you doin’?” to Ross and Rachel’s “We were on a break!” the show will always be remembered. The last episode of *Friends* was viewed by 52.5 million viewers (myself included) the fifth most watched finale (just behind M*A*S*H, Cheers, The Fugitive, and Seinfeld (Top 10 Most Watched TV Finales Ever, Huffpost, 2015). The show’s popularity still continues with every episode on Netflix, watched and adored by Freddy Galvis (‘*Friends* the Sitcom That’s Still a Hit in Major League Baseball, NY Times, 2017), and has 19 million likes on Facebook (nearly four times as many as Seinfeld) (Friends’ Has New BFF’s: New York Teenagers, NY Times, 2015). The show created quite an impact and continues to do so.

elements. The definitions of romance, erotica, porn, and erotic romance need to be separated and understood. While it is difficult to say if Rachel’s book is erotica or erotic romance I can tell you plain and simply that it isn’t porn. There is a story: “Zelda looked at the chimney sweep. Her father the vicar wouldn’t be home for hours. Her loins were burning. She threw caution to the wind and reached out and grabbed his…” You can guess from there what Zelda was grabbing. The reason it is unknown if her book is erotic romance is because as watchers we have no idea if it ends with a happily ever after between Zelda and whoever the guy is.

This chapter address a set of definitions that will be used throughout my paper as a way to define these separate categories (romance, erotica, porn, and erotic romance) so that others aren’t mistaking calling someone’s erotic romance porn. It is common to mistake erotica and erotic romance for pornography. There are certain elements that make a novel a romance, an erotic romance, erotica, or pornography. This paper will specifically address the erotic romance novel, but before we can talk more about the erotic romance we need to define each of these genres.

The Romance

The romance is a genre of books that are largely written by women, about women, and for women. In *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis describes the romance novel as “…a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines.”24 The courtship and love between two characters is the whole point of the

24 Pamela Regis. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 19. Regis states “heroines” here, but heroine doesn’t always mean woman. Heroes and heroines have particular personality traits. If we remove the body parts that make us assign gender to people, what stereotypes would we be left with? In Maya Rodale’s, *Dangerous Books for Girls*, she has a sub-chapter that is titled “Who said an alpha always has
romance. Regis mentions heroines and not heroes here. This is because the story is about the heroine and the fact that the heroine will always win at the end of the book with her happily ever after.

The romance is known for its happily ever afters, or HEA. The hero and heroine meet, have their obstacles that create their journey together, and then once the hero and heroine have overcome all the obstacles they finally get their HEA, however that looks for the couple. Some might categorize Shakespeare (Romeo & Juliet) or Nicolas Sparks (The Notebook and A Walk to Remember) as romance, but a romance needs to have its HEA therefore I would argue against this. These works end in tragedy rather than happily. That doesn’t mean that these stories don’t have romantic elements in them. Romance is important for almost every genre. Where would King Aurthur be without his Guinevere? In The Great Gatsby, where would Gatsby be without his Daisy? Each of these novels may have romance in their plot, but they don’t have the HEA that the readers of the romance novel are seeking.

The Romance Writers of America (RWA), a national writers’ association that advocates for the seriousness of the romance genre, states that there are two basic elements to romance novel. The first is that there is a “central love story: The main plot centers around individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work. A writer can include as many subplots as he/she wants as long as the love story is the main focus of the novel.” Struggling to

to have a penis?” Rodale directs a quote from Cindy Rizzo, an author of lesbian romance, stating, “You have the more tough character and the softer character. Even the softer character, who in straight romance is often the woman, ends up incredibly smart and incredibly clever. In the end, she is the one who steers the ships” (125). Everything depends on who the character is and their relationship. In this paper, I will be using the terms “hero” and “heroine.” I will be using she for heroine and he for hero because that is the correct pronoun for each fiction book I am discussing. However, I don’t want to fall into the pigeonhole of thinking every erotic romance protagonist couple there is one who is considered the “woman” and one considered the “man.” Romance couples can be two heroes or two heroines. “Hero” and “heroine” have some fluidity.
make the relationship work and dealing with the multiple subplots are part of that love story and is commonly referred to as the journey. The second is that the romance has an “emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending: In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love.” Readers want to have that rush of falling in love over and over again when they pick up a new romance book. That rush happens thanks to the protagonists’ relationship and unconditional love. Not only do they want that rush, the first point from RWA, but the reader also wants to know that everything the characters went through was worth it and they will stay together. Sex is one of the things that erotic romance protagonists do together and quite often too. Romance is tamer and doesn’t go into as much detail with sex compared to an erotic romance. Due to the sexual context of the erotic romance the genre is commonly mistaken as pornography. Romance and erotic romance books are not erotica or pornographic and here’s why.

**Pornography & Erotica**

The characters that are created in traditional pornographic films are there to have sex. They don’t care if they see each other at the end of the day, have a future together, find a home together, think about having kids, and other elements of a “traditional” relationship. Porn doesn’t have deep conversations between the characters with how they are feeling. The protagonist’s relationship doesn’t grow and become more complex. When it comes to plot, character development, and romance it is not crucial to the story in pornography, if there even is one. Erotic romance isn’t porn due to the fact that it is more complex than just its sex scenes.

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The difference between pornography and erotic romance is that people use porn for sexual gratification. Pornography is created for erotic satisfaction. Porn is designed for titillation. Don’t get me wrong, women do enjoy reading erotic romance for sexual gratification. Sylvia Day, the writer of the erotic romance the *Crossfire* series, describes these differences between the terms erotica and porn. Day describes pornography as multiple stories written for getting sexual gratification at the end. Unlike the erotic romance, traditional porn isn’t something people use to get invested in characters. People who are watching porn, compared to those who read the erotic romance, aren’t just *dying* to know what happens next or are telling their friends “no spoilers!”

Some may argue that there are some pornographic films that have plot to them. For example, there is porn for every single movie or TV show out there and it keeps the characters and plot. There are also pornographic films that are being created by feminists to have affection, love, and are created for gender equality. In these films the story isn’t really that relevant. The plot drives you from sex scene to sex scene to help it make sense, but that isn’t its focus. In erotic romance the *narrative* focuses on what the journey is like between the hero and heroine. In erotic romance and romance there are even times where hero and heroine are separated from each other for a long time, which means *no* physically affectionate moments or sex scenes. In porn, there is a constant need to have physical moments. In the romance and erotic romance, by contrast sex scenes generally end with cuddling and falling asleep together. The after-sex affection can be just as crucial as the incredibly hot sex. Erotic romance focuses on the love in the relationship as well as great sex scenes, while pornography focuses primarily on the act of sex.

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One of my interviewees discussed her opinion on the difference between pornography and erotic romance. I had asked her if she thought there was a difference between pornography and erotic romance. She states, “I do. Erotic romance oftentimes has more of a plot and you read it until the story is over. Pornography is definitely more so just for the purposes of masturbation. And I feel like people stop reading the story after they’ve orgasmed, without needing to finish the story” (Alexis, 22). Here, Alexis is stating that pornography is strictly for the act of masturbation. This is not to say that porn shouldn’t be taken seriously, rather it’s just another form of pleasure.

Erotica is separate from porn because erotica still has a journey and a story. Erotica doesn’t need to have a HEA, nor any type of romance expansion between hero and heroine. Instead erotica typically involves short stories focusing on sex scenes between characters. The story of erotica is centered around sex between protagonists. As Day states, it’s only about their sexual journey.27 The characters aren’t really meant to be together or “fated” together like in the romance or erotic romance. There usually isn’t the progression of characters falling in love with each other. In erotica the characters can go their separate ways, but never in the erotic romance. The biggest separation erotica has from the other genres is that erotica doesn’t focus on a development of a romantic relationship, but it can have romance in it if the author so chooses.

Erotic Romance

Erotic romance is a subgenre of romance. Other examples of romance subgenres are contemporary, historical, paranormal, fantasy, and so on. The erotic romance has all of the

27 Sylvia Day, “What is Erotic Romance?”
combinations of romance, erotica, and porn. The books have a hero, a heroine, a story, an obstacle, sex scenes, an HEA, and you can certainly use it for sexual gratification. Erotic romance has a little taste of everything. Just like romance, erotic romance books are written about women, by women, and for women. The romance can have sex scenes, but erotic romances often are more graphic in language and detail. The hero and heroine can never keep their hands off of each other. Erotic romance is still erotic. Thanks to these explicit scenes it is one of the reasons people can confuse erotic romance with pornography.

Erotic romance books have no fear in being more vulgar during sex scenes compared to traditional romance fiction. Words such as “cunt,” “pussy,” “fuck,” or “penis” are used quite frequently. Yes, at one point in time penis was a word in romance books that could have given someone the vapors. The writers of an erotic romance novel have more fluidity about what the characters can get away with in terms of sexual acts. In Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches’ Guide to Romance Novels, Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan state this point: “It’s not just the language; most erotic romances aren’t afraid to explore area previously considered taboo in romance.” Wendell and Tan mention “taboo,” or out of the “norm,” acts such as anal sex, bondage, toys, non-monogamy, and group sex.

Since women can have a way of obtaining sexual pleasure through these books and the sex scenes in them, they can have a rush of sexual pleasure by themselves. People may or may not be masturbating while reading these books, but I’d be amazed if the readers don’t get turned on. Masturbation isn’t the sole reason someone reads an erotic romance and it may not even be

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28 Luckily, it’s fantasy and no one is getting a UTI after how many times they have sex in one day.
30 Ibid.
31 Just like how they have a rush of falling in love again.
the reason someone reads erotic romance. There is a difference though with how those sex
scenes will be written, such as the language and acts that are considered “taboo.”

In the book *Entwined with You*, Sylvia Day shows the heroine stimulating the hero’s
prostate. I have read one hundred or more erotic romance novels, however a scene with the
heroine stimulating the hero’s prostate is something I have never come across before. One of
Gideon’s (the hero) hard limits\(^{32}\) is anal play. When Gideon was a child he was raped by his
therapist and the therapist made him feel pleasure through their sexual encounters. Eva, Gideon’s
heroine, is trying to help him let go of his past and feel pleasure through prostate stimulation,
rather than fear and pain. This scene is from Eva’s point of view:

> The sound that rattled from him then was like nothing I’d ever heard. It was the cry of a
wounded animal, but filled with soul-deep pain. He froze against me, breathing hard
against my sex, his finger buried deep, his hard body quivering.
   I pulled my mouth off him and crooned, “I’m in you now, baby. You’re doing so
good. I’m going to make you feel so good.”
   He gasped when I slid a little deeper, my fingertip gliding over his prostate.

> “Eva.”\(^{33}\)

I’m sure there are examples of pornography where someone is stimulating the prostate. The
difference is that the sex scenes in erotic romance novels compared to erotica don’t only clearly
describe exactly what the hero and heroine are doing in their sexual act(s), but the scenes also
give a depth of love, affection, and intimacy, characteristics of the traditional romance. Eva is
telling Gideon that everything will be all right because they love each other. What’s also
different is the hero, Gideon, has a past. The erotic romance creates a multi-dimensional
character. What the romance lacks is the explicit detail of sexual encounters like erotica and
porn.

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\(^{32}\) A “hard limit” is when you are unwilling to do something, specifically in a sexual situation. This is
often associated with BDSM. Don’t worry though; this scene is 100% consensual.

Blush by Cherry Adair is an example of an erotic romance book that someone could confuse with porn. Mia, the heroine, and Cruz, the hero, start out their relationship like any traditional porn could. Cruz is a hired assassin who is given the job to kill Mia. Mia knows that there is a hit on her and she decides to hide out in a cottage in the middle of nowhere to lay low for a while. Since Mia has time off from work, she decides to create a bucket list. One item on there is to have sex with a stranger. Mia decides to hire a sex worker. What Mia ends up getting at her doorstep is the man who is there to kill her.

Cruz enjoys “to see the whites of their eyes as he told them why, just before he killed them.”34 He knocks on Mia’s door and Mia believes him to be the sex worker she hired. Cruz has never had sex with a mark (Cruz’s words) before and that’s what screws him.35 It is rare to find an erotic romance book that starts out with a sex scene. It isn’t rare to find porn that starts out this way. Classic porn and the way it’s ridiculed, starts out with the pizza guy or the plumber showing up at the door and the characters have sex right away.

The difference with this novel, and what makes it erotic romance, is that not only is Cruz incredibly attracted to Mia, but also he talks about her personality by describing the look in her eyes: “Sharp blue eyes tracked him from head to boots and back again, coolly sizing him up. Her gaze was intelligent, unafraid, and seemed to see directly into his skull.”36 The two of them even agree to not kiss each other during their sexual encounter, but Cruz is so captivated by her he can’t help wanting to know what her lips feels like on his. “Gripping her hair in his fist, he sank into the kiss, although kissing wasn’t his thing either. He liked to fuck. He didn’t like to cuddle

35 Pun definitely intended.
or kiss. But kissing her felt… good. Which was bullshit. Kissing her felt like the prelude to fucking her. That was all.”

These scenes reveal the emotional journey and connection between the hero and heroine. In the erotic romance readers get to have the perspective of what Cruz is thinking when he lays eyes on Mia. Cruz mentions Mia’s “sharp blue eyes” and just by looking in those eyes he already sees she is “intelligent,” “unafraid” and already has an effect on him since she can see “directly into his skull.” Cruz isn’t just describing how “sexy” she is; rather, even though he barely knows her, he is describing who she is as a person. And even though Cruz has his own rule, and discovers Mia has the same rule of never kissing, Cruz is unable to contain himself and kisses her anyway. The line states: “he liked to fuck.” As readers, we know from that description that Cruz only cares about having sex with a woman and doesn’t enjoy cuddling or kissing. However, instead of only having sex with her and leaving right away (or killing her which he was supposed to do) he is attracted to who she is and wants to know what it’s like to kiss her lips. To Cruz, kissing her felt good. The narrative of erotic romance expresses these emotions a hero has, compared to the visual representation of porn. The fact that it felt good to him means the readers know they are our hero and heroine.

In the erotic romance, the readers get to have sweeping emotions from the first time the hero and heroine kiss, the chemistry they have together, the anticipation when the hero/heroine are together again after being separated, and every time they have sex. Readers wait for these moments not only to be turned on, but also for the gratification in knowing the hero and heroine are meant to be together even before the characters do. This means the first time they kiss, the

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37 Ibid., 17.
chemistry, the anticipation is not only meant for being aroused but for the feeling of love. Thanks to the erotic romance novel readers can have the plot, romance, sex scenes, and pleasure.

When women read the erotic romance book they want to read about the hero and heroine’s relationship and experience their “open bedroom.”\(^{38}\) In other words, this “open bedroom” is a window for the reader to have a deeper understanding of the hero and heroine’s relationship. Readers have a deeper understanding of whom Cruz is when he looks at Mia. Readers also know what Cruz is like sexually and how he strives to make Mia feel good. Sex scenes, or the “open bedroom,” in the erotic romance provide readers with another layer of the characters’ identities. Through the sex scenes the writer gets to express the hero being playful, affectionate, as well as the “beastly” side of him. The romance novel does give many layers of the hero and heroine’s feelings, but the erotic romance novel gives an extra layer. These scenes create the erotic romance due to more graphic scenes \textit{and} the key elements of the romance.

In \textit{Blush}, Cruz is unable to kill Mia because he develops feelings for her. The romance is blooming between the two of them. Cherry Adair provides twelve to thirteen pages of foreplay between Cruz and Mia. These pages provide lines such as Cruz saying to Mia:

“\textit{You don’t like being the one taking orders, do you?”} He sounded mildly amused. \textit{“You like to be the boss. But here’s a revelation. Your skin’s flushed. Your eyes are shining, and your pussy’s swollen and wet. For me. You’re angry because you’re enjoying this. Which pisses you off even more.”}\(^{39}\)

Notice that the word “pussy” is used here and that Cruz is being quite dominant towards her. Those are elements of the erotic romance. This is the first time Cruz has ever met Mia and yet he already knows what she wants. Mia didn’t even realize she wanted someone to act dominant towards her. He says to her “\textit{you don’t like being the one taking orders, do you?”} which

\(^{38}\) Sylvia Day, \textit{“What is Erotic Romance?”}\(^{39}\) Cherry Adair, \textit{Blush}, 23.
expresses the fact that he is leading how they have sex and Mia is enjoying his dominance. Heroes always know what the heroine wants even before she does.

Next, I will be discussing the history of the romance novel to further understand where this form of literature, erotic romance, came from. The history will give a further comprehension of the essential elements that makes up the structure to the erotic romance. Part of the reason people consider erotic romance not a real form of literature is due to it having a formulaic structure and a predictable ending. The rest of this chapter will discuss how the romance was created.

History

The generic attributes in the romance novel have been around for hundreds of years. To clarify, I mention the history of the romance novel because the erotic romance still has the same structure. The difference is that erotic romance has that open bedroom. The history of the romance novel will also tell us why we should take the genre as a serious form of literature. According to Pamela Regis, the romance genre started with Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded by the English author Samuel Richardson in 1740. England in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was a significant moment in history for the romance novel. Regis provides us with other classic romance novels throughout history such as Pride & Prejudice by Jane Austen (1813), Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë (1847), Framley Parsonage by Anthony Trollope (1861), and A Room with a View by E.M. Forster (1908). Each of these books has the two elements that the RWA specify as well as Regis’ essential eight elements, which I will discuss shortly. “The courtship story would become a major force shaping the novel in English, and with Pamela Richardson brings the courtship plot, which is to say the romance novel, into more than prominence. He makes it
famous.”⁴⁰ Here, Regis is telling us that (thanks to Samuel Richardson and his story *Pamela*) he is the start to the famous elements readers know and love today in the romance novel.

The story of *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* is about “the courtship, betrothal, wedding, and triumph of lady’s maid Pamela Andrews to Mr. B, the master for whom she works.”⁴¹ *Pamela* was an immediate sensation and led to many subsequent generic initiations and reworking’s.⁴² Important parts of the structure are the understanding of the heroine’s desires, her journey with the hero, and their courtship together. The difference is that each of these classic books is considered a real form of literature and are taught in schools. Professors, scholars, and universities have courses about the romance novel, but only focus on the classics. The romance and the erotic romance written today is considered not a real form of literature by most academics and scholars, even though the same structure is used.

**The Elements of an Erotic Romance**

The HEA (Happily Ever After) is the key to the erotic romance and romance story. Sometimes, that is the only reason that someone reads an erotic romance. Some women will even skip to the end of the book just to make sure that the story *does* end with the hero and heroine as a couple.⁴³ This is a common theme, similar to that of women reading the same romance book over and over again. Janice Radway, the author of *Reading the Romance*, states, “Although Dot’s customers know well that most romances end happily, when their own needs seem unusually

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⁴¹ Ibid.
⁴² Ibid.
pressing they often refuse even the relatively safe gamble of beginning a new romance.\footnote{Ibid, 63.} There is a comfort in knowing how the romance will end, but there is a certainty when readers have already read it or read the ending first. In real life we don’t know who the good guy is, the bad guy, the hero, the heroine, or any of the characters created in an erotic romance novel are. We can’t skip to the end and make sure we will have a great life and that entire struggle was worth the wait. Life doesn’t make narrative sense. No, as humans and in reality, we just have to trust our gut in that moment. There is no reading the end of our story or reading our story over and over again, which is why the romance and erotic romance being a comfort to the people who read them. No matter what the HEA is when we as readers are feeling down an HEA is wanted and there.

Not only does Regis talk about the courtship and betrothal of a romance novel, she describes what the ending of the romance novel has to be like, “In romance novels from the last quarter of the twentieth century marriage is not necessary as long as it is clear that heroine and hero will end up together.”\footnote{Pamela Regis, \textit{A Natural History of the Romance Novel}, 37-38.} Regis and the RWA underscore the importance of the hero and heroine ending up together. Or, another way to state this, is that the erotic romance protagonists will end up together and stay together. Otherwise, what was the whole point of the book? Why did readers even get hooked on this couple in the first place if they don’t stay together? It must be clear that the hero and heroine will end up together.

As previously mentioned, I will be describing Regis’s structure, of the romance and erotic romance novel as defined through these eight elements: \textit{society defined, the meeting, the barrier, attraction, the declaration, point of ritual death, recognition, and finally the betrothal}. I will describe each of these elements that Regis mentions using the romance novel \textit{Outlander} by
Diana Gabaldon as an example. *Outlander* is a series of eight books that started in 1991 and the series is still continuing.\(^4\)

*Outlander* is about a heroine, Claire, from the twentieth century right after World War II. Claire was a nurse in the war and her current husband worked for MI6 as an intelligence agent. After five years of being separated from each other Claire and her husband decide to go on a second honeymoon in Scotland to get reacquainted. Her husband is a history professor doing research on his family in Scotland. Claire ventures on her own to the standing stones on a hill that she and her husband had been to the night before. At the standing stones, called Craigh na Dun, Claire begins collecting plants and faints when she starts to inspect what the buzzing noise is around her. When she wakes up eventually she learns that she is in 1743 in Scotland, 200 years in the past.

**Society Defined**

Society is an important part of the erotic romance and romance novel. The society is related to the hero of the story and his status. The society between the hero and heroine is defined to understand how their future in courtship will be represented. “Near the beginning of the novel, the society that the heroine and hero will confront in their courtship is defined for the reader. This society is in some ways flawed; it may be incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt. It always oppresses the hero and heroine”. Regis uses *Pride and Prejudice* as an example to explain *society defined*. “[…] Austen sketches this society in her first chapter in which Mrs. Bennet tells her husband that Darcy and Bingley, the novels heroes, have moved into

\(^4\) The series premiered on TV in 2014.
neighboring estate.\textsuperscript{47} The \textit{society} is vastly different between the hero and heroine of \textit{Outlander}. Claire is a married English woman, at least in the twentieth century, and Jamie, the hero, is a young Scotsman who is the Laird to his home Lallybroch in the eighteenth century. There is a high suspicion that Claire is an English spy. Since she is suspected of this by the villain of the story, Captain Black Jack Randall, he wants to take her. Jack Randall is very suspicious of Claire and orders the MacKenzies [Jamie’s Clan] to deliver Claire to Fort William, the local prison, for questioning. Jamie’s uncle, Dougal, decides that Claire and Jamie must wed. Once she is wed, Redcoat Jack Randall is now unable to take Claire in for questioning. This makes Claire a Scottish citizen \textit{and} the Lady of Lallybroch. Regis describes the \textit{society defined} as something that oppresses the hero and heroine. However, their \textit{society defined}, or being Lord and Lady of Lallybroch, is unable to be fulfilled since Jamie has a price on his head. Meaning, Jamie and Claire can’t openly be Lord and Lady, or else Jamie will get sent to prison. Estate is important to the \textit{Pride & Prejudice} story and \textit{society}. Jamie’s estate is his home Lallybroch that Claire is now Lady to.

\textit{The Meeting}

Every great hero and heroine must meet; otherwise there would be no love story. This meeting usually happens quite early in the book, so the readers can start their adventure and journey with them quickly. During the meeting there is sometimes a representation of immediate attraction between them, even if it goes unrecognized quite yet (Such as Cruz and Mia). “Usually near the beginning of the novel, but also sometimes presented in flashback, the heroine and hero

\textsuperscript{47} Pamela Regis, \textit{A Natural History of the Romance} Novel, 31.
meet for the first time.”

When Claire is sent back through time the first man that she encounters is the villain, Captain Black Jack Randall. He is a relative to her husband in the twentieth century and looks strikingly similar to him, thus Claire at first confuses Jack for her husband. When Randall grabs Claire and attempts to rape her, a Scottish Gael saves her, knocks her out, and then takes her to the rest of his Clan. The Clan is currently tending to Jamie, the hero, who has a dislocated shoulder. Claire notices that the Clan is going to attempt to put his shoulder back in place in a way that would break his arm. She speaks up and uses her twentieth century nursing skills to care for him properly. Claire tending to his wounds is common throughout the series and this is the first time she does so. This is when the heroine and hero meet and the connection between them is felt immediately.

The Barrier

All great love stories have to have one or more barriers. If it were quick and easy for the hero and heroine to be together, or even get married, readers would get bored very quickly. Stories can’t be wrapped up in a nice bow right away. Their past, people, whatever it is, something needs to stand in their way from being happy and being together. There can be quite a few of them in the erotic romance and romance to keep readers hooked and wanting us to turn that next page.

A series of scenes often scattered throughout the novel establishes for the reader the reasons that this heroine and hero cannot marry. The romance novel’s conflict often consists entirely of this barrier between the heroine and hero. The elements of the barrier can be external, a circumstance that exists outside of a heroine or hero’s mind, or internal, a circumstance that comes from within either or both.49


49 Ibid., 32.
Once they meet eventually a barrier comes along to make things seem hopeless. Regis here describes the barrier as reasons why the hero and heroine cannot marry. In romance and erotic romance not every couple gets married, rather it’s about overcoming their barrier’s to be together and stay together. One of Jamie and Claire’s barriers is making the marriage between them work. This barrier could be external and internal. Currently, Claire and Jamie are in the eighteenth century and there are laws that make women property to men. This is an external barrier that neither Claire nor Jamie has any control over. The internal barrier for Claire is the fact that she went back in time when women don’t have as many rights. Rather than their marriage feeling like a partnership, Jamie controls it. Claire doesn’t tell Jamie for a while that she is from another century. Claire must become accustomed to the gender roles of women in the eighteenth century and Jamie tries to understand often why his wife is so stubborn, brave, wants a job of her own (having patients to heal) and believes in equality for women.

Jamie and Claire have a heated argument about the fact that she has to do everything Jamie tells her to. Their argument began because Jamie is angry that Claire ventured out on her own. Jamie had informed Claire to stay put while he went out to take care of some business. Claire doesn’t listen to him and decides to venture off on her own. Claire is trying to find her way back to the twenty-first century and this is one of the first times she is by herself and has a chance to escape. While Claire ventures on her own she is captured and taken to Captain Black Jack Randall where she is once again almost raped by him. Jamie and the rest of the Clan find her and save her. The book is in first person from Claire’s point of view. Here is part of their argument:

“It is your fault! Did ye stay put where I ordered ye to stay this mornin’, this would never have happened! But no, ye won’t listen to me, I’m no but your husband, why mind me? You take it into your mind to do as ye damn please, and next I ken, I find ye flat on your back wi’ your skirts up, an’ the worst scum in the land between your legs, on the point of taken’ ye before my eyes!” [Jamie] […]
“It’s your own fault, for ignoring me and suspecting me all the time! I told you the truth about who I am! And I told you there was no danger in my going with you, but would you listen to me? No! I’m only a woman, why should you pay any attention to what I say? Women are only fit to do as they’re told, and follow order, and sit meekly around with their hands folded, waiting for the men to come back and tell them what to do!” [Claire] […]

“Aye! Ye think I should ha’ been able to protect ye there, an’ you’re right. But I couldna do it; you had to do it yourself, and now you’re trying’ to make me pay for it by deliberately putting yourself, my wife, in the hands of a man that’s shed my blood!”

“You’re wife! Your wife! You don’t care a thing about me! I’m just your property; it only matters to you because you think I belong to you, and you can’t stand to have someone take something that belongs to you!”

“Ye do belong to me,” he roared, digging his fingers into my shoulders like spikes. “And you are my wife, whether ye like it or no!”

“I don’t like it! I don’t like it a bit! But that doesn’t matter either, does it? As long as I’m there to warm your bed, you don’t care what I think or how I feel! That’s all a wife is to you – something to stick your cock into when you feel the urge!”

A significant amount happens in this scene. But, you can tell at multiple points when Claire is sick of being treated like a stereotyped female and property. She expresses it quite freely multiple times in this scene. Claire still wants to get out of this century as quick as possible. Claire knows what it’s like to not be considered property to a husband, to not be only used to have sex with whenever her husband feels the urge, the right to vote, and even to have a higher education.

This is Claire’s internal barrier. She feels like she could never express to someone whom she really is and where and when she is from. The chances of someone believing her are quite slim. Jamie here is very plainly telling Claire he believes she is his property and that she belongs to him. Jamie gives the orders and he expects his wife to obey to them. That is the century and the laws he knows and understands. Jamie’s pride as a man and a husband are also wounded in this scene. Jamie is upset with himself that earlier in the book he couldn’t save Claire and instead she saved them from being killed by a few Red Coats. She was the one to protect them.

Protection is something that many young men are told as something that makes them a man. The

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understanding of what is “expected” of a man or a woman in the eighteenth century is an ongoing barrier. Once he saves her from Jack Randall he is frustrated that they keep getting put into very dangerous situations and Jamie promised and vowed that he would always protect Claire because that is a husband’s duty in this century. Due to these laws it is one of their external barriers. There is a barrier between Jamie and Claire due to Claire’s understanding of women’s rights in the 1940s and Jamie’s understandings of them in the 1740s.

While there are multiple barriers, making their marriage work through gender roles and the fact that they weren’t in love when they wed are main ones in the first book. Not only are gender roles an example of a barrier, but so is the villain, Captain Jack Randall. Jack Randall is always trying to kidnap one of them. Just as Regis describes that there are multiple scenes for the barrier, there are a series of scenes similar to this.

Attraction

The hero and heroine have to be attracted to each other. It’s one of the biggest reasons they can’t keep their hands off each other. Attraction creates the tension between romance protagonists. In the erotic romance and romance the author is always describing how attracted they are to each other and the hero and heroine love telling each other how desirable they are. It’s always a deep attraction. Cassandra (22), an interviewee, describes how much she loves the attraction and desirability the heroine has. She states:

[…] as someone who like, ya know, has maybe insecurities and a bunch of other things and was like bullied, it would really be really really sexy to know if someone once thought that I was that attractive and that desirable to like violate social norms and laws and like, like within a novel, and to take that character.
Cassandra is specifically stating here that she loves it when a hero is so attracted to the heroine and desires her so much that he decides to capture her and make her his. Cassandra loves this on a fantasy level. The hero is the character to express the most how attracted he is to his heroine. “The attraction keeps the heroine and hero involved long enough to surmount the barrier. Attraction can be based on a combination of sexual chemistry, friendship, shared goals, or feelings, society’s expectations, and economic issues.” However, attraction can be so much more than that. Not only does the attraction need to stay there long enough to surmount the barrier, but also it needs to be there in the erotic romance throughout the whole novel or series.

If the hero and heroine aren’t consistently attracted to each other that sexual chemistry in those great sex scenes disappear.

The attraction between Jamie and Claire happens very fast. While their marriage happened fast through the marriage of convenience trope, we see quite quickly how attracted Jamie is to Claire. This scene is when Jamie describes Claire hair:

“Rather a dull color, brown, I’ve always thought,” I [Claire] said practically, trying to delay things a bit. I kept having the feeling of being whirled along much faster than I indented.

Jamie shook his head smiling.

“No, I’d not say that, Sassenach. Not dull at all.” He [Jamie] lifted the mass of hair with both hands and fanned it out. “It’s like the water in a burn, where it ruffles over the stones. Dark in the wavy spots, with bits of silver on the surface where the sun catches it.”

This scene represents quite a bit of physical attraction. Claire thinks her hair is quite plain and dull, that there isn’t anything particularly special about it, especially because Jamie has thick red locks. Jamie though? Instead of only saying he loves brown hair or that brown hair is his favorite hair color he describes her hair. Claire has very curly brown hair that she often has trouble with

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52 Diana Gabaldon, *Outlander*, 313.
taming and keeping well groomed. Not only does Jamie describe her hair while their inside, but he describes its complexity when her hair is in the sun. Jamie elaborates on the details her hair rather than a sexual body part such as her breasts. He is vividly unfolding exactly what her hair looks like; a thing on the body that not everyone pays that much attention to. He even tells her earlier how other women strive to have that kind of hair that takes them hours to create. Jamie even calls her in Gaelic mo duinne (my brown one) and mo nighean donn (my brown-haired lass). So, not only does he tell her why he loves her hair, but he also gives her nicknames about her lovely hair.

There are two scenes other scenes I want to show in Outlander when Jamie and Claire express their attraction:

“I do not wish to…that is…I do not mean to imply…” He [Jamie] looked up suddenly and smiled, with a helpless gesture. “I dinna want to insult you by sounding as though I think you’ve vast experience of men, is all. But it would be foolish to pretend that ye don’t know more than I do about such matters. What I meant to ask is, is this… usual? What it is between us, when I touch you, when you… lie with me? It is always so between a man and a woman?” […]

“There’s often something like it,” I said, and had to stop and clear my throat. “But no. No, it isn’t – usual. I have no idea why, but no. This is… different.”

Both Claire and Jamie recognize that their attraction for each other is unlike any other. Jamie has only ever had sex with one woman, Claire, but has touched or kissed other women. Claire was with her husband in the twentieth century for many years before she was with Jamie, which is why Jamie asked her if their attraction and tension was “usual”. Jamie says, “What it is between us, when I touch you”, which creates an understanding for the reader that Jamie and Claire are meant to be together even though they can’t explain their feelings and attraction. The hero and heroine are fated for each other. Claire is more attracted to Jamie than her husband in the

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53 Diana Gabadon, Outlander, 320-321.
twentieth century, which makes her feel quite guilty. And yet, she still tells him that she has never felt anything like this before.

Regis mentions that the *attraction* between hero and heroine are the reasons that the couple must marry. Again, it’s not only about marriage, it’s about being a couple. Claire and Jamie are already married. These scenes create an *attraction* about why they have to stay married. Here is a scene between Jamie and Claire having sex and Jamie expressing physical *attraction* to Claire:

> “Does it ever stop? The wanting you?” His hands came around to caress my breast. “Even when I’ve just left ye, I want you so much my chest feels tight and my fingers ache with wanting to touch ye again.”

> He cupped my face in the dark, thumbs stroking the arcs of my eyebrows. “When I hold ye between my two hands and feel you quiver like that, waitin’ for me to take you… Lord, I want to pleasure you ‘till ye cry out under me and open yourself to me. And when I take my own pleasure from you, I feel as though I’ve given ye my soul along with my cock.”

> He rolled above me and I opened my legs, wincing slightly as he entered me. He laughed softly. “Aye, I’m a bit sore, too. Do ye want me to stop?” I wrapped my legs around his hips in answer and pulled him closer. 

> “Would you stop?” I asked.

> “No, I can’t.”

Not only does Jamie mention the way he feels about her and wondering if their *attraction* is usual, but he also can’t help wanting that feeling over and over again. Jamie says, “Even when I’ve just left ye, I want you so much my chest feels tight and my fingers ache with wanting to touch ye again”. It hurts Jamie to have her away from him and he aches to feel her over and over again. He shows tenderness towards Claire when he cups her face, strokes the arcs of her eyebrows, and stares into her eyes. He doesn’t *only* want to touch her because he is a “stereotyped” male who wants to touch a woman and have sex; he wants their emotional connection all the time. It’s about the emotion, not just being with her physically.

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54 Diana Gabaldon, *Outlander*, 328.
**Declaration**

The readers of erotic romance and romance novels want to read the moment when the hero and heroine tell each other that they love each other. It’s often important that the hero does first. Usually because the reader is picturing themselves and the heroine, plus many of these novels are written in first person from the heroine’s point of view. Readers would already know how she is feeling and not exactly what he is feeling. The feeling of falling in love is one of the best parts about these books. “The scene or scenes in which the hero declares his love for the heroine, and the heroine her love for the hero can occur anywhere in the narrative.” I don’t agree with Regis when she says anywhere in the narrative. I think readers want to be teased and have the protagonist’s take their time until the *declaration* happens. An “I love you” can’t happen in the beginning. She mentions two moments when the *declaration* can happen. If it happens close to the beginning, it’s more of a love at first sight romance and if it happens closer to the end of the book it often means the hero and heroine have overcome their *barrier*. The hero and heroine may have love at first sight (in fact many do), but that doesn’t mean they should tell each other quite yet. For Jamie and Claire, the *declaration* happens later. This is how Claire and Jamie declare their love for each other:

> “Ye know,” he observed, letting go at least, “you’ve never said it.”
> “Neither have you.”
> “I have. The day after we came. I said I wanted you more than anything.”
> “And I said that loving and wanting weren’t necessarily the same thing,” I countered.
> He laughed. “Perhaps you’re right, Sassenach.” He smoothed the hair from my face and kissed my brow. “I wanted ye from the first I saw ye – but I loved ye when you wept in my arms and let me comfort you, that first time at Leoch.” […]
> “You first”
> “No, you.”
> “Why?”
> “I’m afraid.”

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55 Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 34.
“Of what, my Sassenach?” […]
“I’m afraid if I start I shall never stop,”
He cast a glance at the horizon, where the sickle moon hung low and rising. “It’s nearly winter, and the nights are long, mo duinne.” He leaned across the fence, reaching and I stepped into his arms, feeling the heat of his body and the beat of his heart.
“I love you.”

It takes time and bravery for Jamie and Claire here to admit that they love each other. Jamie fell in love with Claire before they were married. Jamie did have a love at first sight with Claire. When Claire cried in his arms, they had only known each other a few days to a week. It was a very quick love-at-first-sight for him, but he doesn’t tell her till much later. They often show they love each other through actions, such as saving each other’s lives, throughout the book before they admit they love each other. Jamie and Claire have a playful moment here with who will say they love the other first. Jamie and Claire declare their love for each other in a way that resonates with Regis’ theory of the declaration happening later in the novel. “…often enough, the barrier was their inability or unwillingness to declare for each other, and the declaration scene marks the end of this barrier.” Both Claire and Jamie were unwilling to tell each other for quite some time and they have gone through many barriers to get to this point.

Ritual of Death

In the erotic romance and romance there is always the moment where readers think for a moment that the hero and heroine won’t be able to be together. Perhaps the hero fucked up with the heroine and she ran away, perhaps the heroine was captured, or maybe one of them thinks the other is dead, such as The Princess Bride. “The point of ritual death marks the moment in the

56 Diana Gabaldon, Outlander, 650-651.
57 It took 650 pages for Jamie and Claire to get there.
58 Pamela Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 34.
narrative when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain, more substantial than ever. The happy ending is most in jeopardy at this point."\(^{59}\) Jamie and Claire’s HEA is in jeopardy because of Jack Randall. Their point of ritual death, or the moment where you think all is lost, is the occasion where Jamie is captured by Black Jack Randall and tortures him.\(^{60}\) Randall is in love with Jamie, in his own twisted and demented way, who has flogged him twice (each time was one hundred lashes), rapes him, leaves him to rot in a prison, nails his hand to a table, and a lot of other unspeakable things. Jamie is currently in the prison that Randall has locked him in. Here is a little snippet of what’s happening to Jamie. Claire is currently with him:

> “What has he done to you?” I asked, keeping my voice low for fear of Randall’s return.
>
> Jamie swayed where he sat, eyes closed, the sweat beading in hundreds of tiny pearls on his skin. Plainly he was near to fainting, but opened his eyes for a moment at my voice. Moving with exquisite care, he used his left hand to lift the object he had been cradling in his lap. It was his right hand, almost unrecognizable as a human appendage. Grotesquely swollen, it was now a bloated bag, blotched with red and purple, the fingers dangling at crazy angles. A white shard of bone poked through the torn skin of his middle finger, and a trickle of blood stained the knuckles, puffed into shapeless dimples.\(^{61}\)

In this scene, Randall catches Claire. In exchange for letting Claire get out of Fort William safely, Jamie agrees to do anything that Randall says. Randall does keep his word and let’s Claire out and then he gets back to Jamie. Black Jack Randall is torturing Jamie once more for his own pleasure. In this piece we understand how mangled his hand is and that one of the bones is poking out. This is the moment where Claire must save the love of her life, Jamie, so that they can have their happy ending. Regis mentions that it is often the heroine who is the target of the ritual death, but in Outlander it is Jamie who is at risk. It is Claire who makes sure they have

\(^{59}\) Ibid, 35.

\(^{60}\) At least in the first novel.

\(^{61}\) Diana Gabaldon, Outlander, 711.
their HEA and won’t let any ritual of death get in her way. The ritual of death is a way to express how far the protagonists are willing to go for their love and to keep their love. No Black Jack Randall will get in their way no matter how many times he comes back to fuck them over.

Recognition

Once the hero and heroine have the moment of downfall, the recognition needs to take place. The recognition is the information that will tell us something that will help overcome the barrier. Remember, there can be multiple barriers and they can happen at multiple times throughout the story. Claire saves Jamie’s life from Black Jack Randall in their recognition scene. Claire recruits all of Jamie’s friends and family members who are willing to help and create a plan to help him escape from the hands of Captain Black Jack Randall. Regis describes the recognition scene as “In either case the protagonist is recognized for who he or she truly is, and this recognition fells the barrier and permits the betrothal to go forward.” Jamie thought he was never going to see her again. Here is a conversation between Claire and Jamie after she has rescued him and has been tending to all of his wounds:

“Come here,” he said “I want to hold ye a moment.”
“But I’m covered with blood and vomit,” I protested, making a vain effort to tidy my hair […]
“Mother of God, Sassanach, it’s my blood and vomit. Come here.” […] “I did not think ever to see ye again, Sassenach,” His voice was low and a bit hoarse from whiskey and screaming. “I’m glad you’re here.”
I sat up. “Not see me again! Why? Did you think I wouldn’t get you out?”
He smiled, one-sided. “Weel, no, I didn’t expect ye would. I thought if I said so, though, ye might get stubborn and refuse to go.”
“Me get stubborn!” I said indignantly. “Look who’s talking!”

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63 Ibid.
64 Diana Gabaldon, *Outlander*, 757.
Claire always knew that she would get Jamie out of that situation. They save each other’s lives multiple times throughout the book and the rest of them. While their betrothal and marriage have already happened, Claire certainly proves who she is when she saves Jamie. Claire didn’t want to marry Jamie and Claire tried to escape from this marriage multiple times (such as in the barrier scene I showed). But, by the end of the book, Claire loves Jamie more than her other husband and more than any other man she has met. She defeats the man who tried to rape her on multiple occasions and has tortured Jamie. Claire allows their marriage and journey to go forward.

The Betrothal

The eighth and final element in the romance novel is the betrothal. Regis describes the betrothal as the scene when the hero asks the heroine to marry him and she accepts. Not every great love story needs a betrothal though. Many readers just want it to be known at the end of the book that the hero and heroine will stay together and that their obstacles have been accomplished. However, Regis also says that “If the betrothal is split into a proposal scene and an acceptance scene, the novel’s focus often turns inward, to confront the internal barrier that prevents the proposal scene from also being an acceptance scene.” In Outlander they have the marriage of convenience trope. Jamie and Claire are told they will get married, by Jamie’s Uncle Dougal McKenzie, creating a different type of betrothal. Dougal has been instructed to take Claire to Fort William for questioning. Dougal must do this because Claire is English and a subject of the English crown. The readers know how cruel and twisted Jack Randall is and the only way they can think to protect Claire from him is to turn her from and Englishwoman into a Scot. Dougal and Claire have a long conversation about this and about Dougal’s experience when he witnessed Jamie being flogged. Here is the most important part between them:
“Aye, I have. I thought it might come to this, ye ken. And what he told me is what I thought myself; the only way I can legally refuse to give ye up to Randall is to change ye from an Englishwoman into a Scot.” [Dougal]

“Into a Scot?” I said, the dazed feeling quickly being replaced by a horrible suspicion.

“Aye,” he said, nodding at my expression. “Ye must marry a Scot. Young Jamie.”

“I couldn’t do that!”

This is the scene when Claire is told it’s the only way to escape from being taken to Fort William and handed over to Jack Randall. I would argue that Claire and Jamie accept their marriage when they have their declaration scene. However, not only does the betrothal tell the reader that they will be getting married, but it also tells the reader that the hero and heroine will stay and be together. We know Jamie and Claire will be together at the end of the first book because for one they are together, but also because they are on their way to France to live a new life together and Claire is now pregnant.

One of my interviewees, Eloise (21), describes a few of the eight elements just described and the fact that the HEA of a romance is reliable and is comforting to readers:

Eloise – “First of all it’s [romance] reliable. Like you know what you’re going to get. Again, you know you’re going to get a happy ending, you know kind of the basic structure also, of like, they meet, there’s some sort of an attraction, there’s something that pulls them apart and then they consummated somehow, and then there’s another conflict, and then they’re back together. There’s like a basic structure. There are tropes and things that you can, um…”
Interviewer - “It’s comforting.”
Eloise - “Yeah, it’s comforting and just like any sort of love story to me is comforting.”

The HEA in an erotic romance novel is important. It’s still a romance! Just with more raunchy sex scenes. Wendell and Tan tell us “[…] the Happily Ever After definitely marks the end of the story arc for the hero and heroine, since the focus of the romance novel is overwhelmingly the discovery and securing of romantic love.”

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and writer is the “securing of romantic love” as Wendell and Tan describe here. The HEA tells readers “yes, every obstacle that they went through, every big misunderstanding, every kidnapping, every attempted rape, etc. it was all worth it because the protagonists overcame all of it.” *Love Between the Covers* is a documentary about the women who write, read, and love the romance novel and part of their discussion is the HEA. Deborah Chappel Traylor states, “We don’t see Ernest Hemingway as formulaic, but every single one of his novels ends exactly the same way.” Ernest Hemingway is a very well-respected writer, who is also a man, and yet even though all of his books end the same way they are real forms of literature. Yes, the HEA is formulaic, but that doesn’t make it bad writing.

**The Plot we all Know and Love**

I used *Outlander*, written in 1991, and Regis used *Pride & Prejudice*, written in 1813, as example for these classic eight elements. One hundred and seventy-eight years apart and we are still using the same structure. Not matter what year the romance, or erotic romance, was written, they have these same eight elements and yet some of the books are still considered more serious forms of literature than others. Indeed, it is the structure and predictability that people claim is the reason romance and erotic romance books are poorly written. However, that isn’t true. While the erotic romance and romance may have a structure to it that doesn’t mean that every author is pumping out the exact same book over and over again. Erotic romance stories are not all the same. Wendell and Tan describe how the romance novel isn’t always the same even though all

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68 Just like the erotic romance!
romances have similar plot; “There’s a structure, a foundation of common element to each novel, but the variation in how those elements are woven together into a delicious narrative is the art, not the product, of each author.” Each of these elements may appear in every erotic romance, but every author has their own twist on how they do it or location of the element in the novel. The twists are the journey and they are different in each erotic romance.

Where did the love for this plot come from? What made romance readers want to read romantic stories in the first place? In the next chapter I look at the Walt Disney princess film. The Disney princess film, to me, is a G-rated version of the erotic romance. In Chapter Two I observe the similarities between the erotic romance and the Disney princess film.

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69 Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, 122.
If you’ve ever watched a Disney princess movie, you may have felt happy and comfortable at the end of the film. You watched as the characters went through all of their trials and errors, they overcame their barriers and now the protagonists can have the happiness they deserve. There is a joy of seeing the villains defeated, good enduring and seeing the main romantic pair become a couple. The Disney princess movie always has an HEA. People who watch Disney princess films know what’s coming at the end of the story just as erotic romance readers do, because of the relief they each bring from their HEA. The dominant way in which Disney presents an HEA is through the courtship of the romance protagonists. This is true for Snow White (1937), Cinderella (1950), Sleeping Beauty (1959), The Little Mermaid (1989), Beauty & The Beast (1991), Aladdin (1992), Princess & The Frog (2009), Tangled (2010), and Frozen (2013). For example, in Walt Disney’s version of Beauty & The Beast the moment when the HEA can finally begin is when Belle kisses Beast and tells him she loves him. The final scene of Prince Adam (who is no longer Beast) and Belle in her iconic golden dress dancing together in the castle as one displays their happy ending.

The Disney princess film and the erotic romance novel have similar narrative structures. The formulaic trope of both Disney princess films and erotic romances are that they end with an HEA. However, the roots of their resemblances go much deeper than that. Disney movies, specifically the Disney princess genre, share many of the same elements, tropes, and characters of the erotic romance. I question whether for some erotic romance readers, after watching the Disney princess films, there was a need for a continuation of the romance story as they got older. Hence, the pursuit of the erotic romance novel. A romance or erotic romance novel can be seen
as a reimagined version of the Disney movie when you look at the structure of it. These classic stories from Disney give a lot of people hope and comfort, just as the romance can. Since Disney princess movies are G-rated and are often movies that parents are comfortable with showing their children, it is possible that this is a way the love of the romance or erotic romance novel began. A main difference is the “open bedroom” that the erotic romance has. The erotic romance is the adult version of a fairy tale:

Although many people associate fairy tales with children’s literature, fairy tales have never been intended only for young audiences. Fairy tales, like romance novels, target an adult audience and address adult concerns. They invoke a fictional, fantasy realm and express a collective fantasy for their audience.⁷⁰

The first section of this chapter will articulate the structure of the Disney princess film in relation to the eight elements that Pamela Regis described, then analyzes the similarities between the Disney princess film and erotic romance through the heroine, the HEA and the Prince/hero.

The Story

In Chapter One I articulated the elements of a romance novel, the romance’s similarities to the erotic romance, and what makes the erotic romance different from other genres. Many Disney princess films have all of the elements of the romance novel. Briefly I will describe the comparisons between the Disney princess film Beauty and the Beast (1991) with the elements discussed in the first chapter. Remember the elements are society defined, the meeting, the barrier, attraction, declaration, ritual of death, recognition, and the betrothal.

Society defined comes very quickly in the film Beauty and the Beast. Right away we know that Adam/the Beast is a prince and that Belle is from a simple town and wants much more

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than her “provincial life.” Beast’s and Belle’s meeting happen when she discovers her father was taken. Her father’s horse, Philippe, takes her to the castle where Beast captured him. Belle decides to trade places with her father. Her father is then set free and Belle has now become prisoner to Beast’s home. There are multiple reasons why Beast and Belle cannot marry, creating the barrier. First, Beast believes he can never find love due to the fact that he is a beast and was told by the Enchantress that he has no love in his heart. Secondly, to break Beast’s spell is to fall in love and have someone reciprocate that love. However, Belle is consistently being shown the Beast’s cruel side. Finally, Gaston [antagonist], the man who wants to marry Belle, tries to kill the Beast and steal Belle from him for his own selfish reasons. Attraction sparks between the two of them after Beast saves her from a pack of wolves when she tries to escape. Attraction is fully developed during their duet “Something There.” Declaration comes in two different ways during the film. In fact, I believe that declaration and the ritual of death go hand in hand in the film. Beast finally admits to himself that he loves Belle when he lets her go. When Belle is finally set free that is one example of the ritual of death. It’s a moment where viewers think that Belle would never want to return to such a man and viewers don’t know if she loves him or not. The second ritual of death is when the entire town decides to go kill Beast. During this moment of the film Gaston shoots Beast and viewers are afraid he has died before Belle ever got a chance to tell him she loves him. A moment when ritual of death and declaration come hand in hand. Belle tells Beast she loves him as he is dying, and the spell is lifted. The recognition finally happens at this moment. The antagonist, Gaston, has been defeated, Belle and Beast are in love, Beast is now Prince Adam once more and their true love’s kiss restores the castle. They have now overcome all barriers. While there is never an official proposal, or betrothal, from Beast we know that a courtship has happened in their dance scene at the end of the film. In the live action
version, starring Emma Watson and Dan Stevens, we see a large celebration, similar to the animated version, but Belle is wearing a white dress compared to the iconic golden dress. Other Disney films share a similar pattern of romance elements.

Beast/Adam is the hero in Disney’s classic, Beauty & the Beast. When it comes to the hero in an erotic romance story the characterization of “beast” is primarily meant as symbolic. As Linda Lee notes, “In the romance novel, the change from Beast to prince is usually metaphorical.”71 The heroine is a main reason why an HEA happens. She is the one who changes the perspective of the hero in the story. She helps him learn the error of his ways. A heroine reshapes a hero’s thoughts on love, relationships and sex. Maya Rodale argues that the heroine (or Princess) of the story doesn’t necessarily give a bad message, citing Maddie Caldwell: “But in a romance novel, oh, the heroine doesn’t just make him see her point… she makes him believe in her as a person and she does this without changing herself to be more like a man. She must become a stronger version of herself to start effecting change.”72 Rodale is not the only one to elaborate on the heroine’s relationship to the hero or the story. Janice Radway describes exactly what the heroine in the romance novel (which can also include the Disney princess) needs which is, “they expect and, indeed, rely upon certain events, characters, and progressions to provide desired experience.”73 A hero may first start off cold-hearted, cruel or have an expression of a lot of anger, but she thaws that.

In Disney’s Beauty and the Beast, Belle is a tougher character than people let on. In the scene where Belle is tending to the Beast’s wounds you can tell that she knows exactly who she is and that she doesn’t put up with the Beast’s behavior at any moment:

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72 Rodale, Dangerous Books for Girls, 124.
73 Radway, Reading the Romance, 63.
“Here now, don’t do that.” [Beast growls and pulls his wounded arm away] “Just hold still.” [Belle] [Belle applies washed cloth on Beast’s arm and he yells] “That hurts!” [Beast]
“If you’d hold still it wouldn’t hurt as much!” “If you hadn’t have run away this wouldn’t have happened!” “If you hadn’t have frightened me I wouldn’t have run away!” “Well, you shouldn’t have been in the West Wing!” [The one place he told her never to go]
“Well, you should learn to control your temper! Now, hold still. This might sting a little.” [Belle dresses Beast’s wound] “By the way, thank you. For saving my life.” “You’re welcome.”

Belle does not cower, she does not run away again, and she doesn’t care what Beast really thinks of her. She already knows who she is and is slowly becoming a “stronger version of herself.” The heroine in the story, one that many women may look up to or resonate with, doesn’t change who she is just because of the man she met and fell in love with. Rather, she and the hero grow and change together and will always get to with their HEA.

A comparison of children’s fairy tales in relation to the erotic romance could be between a scene from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* and Sylvia Day’s *Bared to You*:

“I’ve never seen a human this close before. Oh, he’s very handsome, isn’t he?”

“He was the kind of guy that made a woman want to rip his shirt open and watch the buttons scatter along with her inhibitions.”

Each of the main female characters, Ariel and Eva, are observing a handsome man they can’t help but notice; through the descriptions a reader or watcher can know that this will be their hero. Ariel’s description is much tamer while she is looking at Prince Eric. Ariel may be asking the question, “He’s very handsome, isn’t he?” to her friends, however she isn’t looking for

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affirmation. Ariel’s statement is rhetorical. Ariel likes him because he is handsome, and he is different from her. Eva’s description in her head when she is looking at her hero, Gideon, represents an older version of sexuality. Eva isn’t only noticing that Gideon is handsome, but she wants to act upon how attractive he is. Eva wants to rip open his shirt and see what’s beneath it.\(^7\)

The fantasy of a romance evolves as someone gets older. Eva’s description of Gideon is a more mature version of Ariel’s. There is an innocence to “Isn’t he handsome” compared to Eva’s desire to rip open Gideon’s shirt. In Eva’s inner thoughts readers notice how she is lusting after Gideon. The actions of Ariel and Eva are the same, staring at an attractive man, but the intent is different. The audience for both Ariel and Eva are catered towards different ages groups for women. Ariel’s story, or the Disney princess film is created for the audience of young girls, and Eva’s story, or the erotic romance, is designed for older women.

One of my interviewees, Charlotte (21), did express her adoration for the love story between Ariel and Eric:

Yeah, I was definitely a Disney princess fan. Mainly Ariel – she was a spitfire heroine, and I found that’s the type of heroine I’m still drawn toward. [...] I liked the tension of Eric being a mystery that she was in love with from afar and couldn’t be with him.

Charlotte describes why she likes Ariel, Eric and their relationship together: she values the heroine and the narrative tension that keeps the two protagonists apart. A common trope, or barrier, in both Disney princess films and erotic romance novels is that the hero and heroine cannot be together. That is where part of the tension comes from. Eric and Ariel cannot be together because he is human, and she is a mermaid. Eva and Gideon are consistently battling with being together because of their past troubles. Eva even goes on to express her feelings about Gideon and compares it to fairy tales: “I never really thought of myself as romantic. I mean, I

\(^7\) I bet that Eva isn’t only thinking about what’s under Gideon’s shirt.
like romance and grand gestures and that tipsy feeling you get when you’re crushing hard on someone. But the whole Prince Charming fantasy and marrying the love of your life wasn’t my thing.”78 In Day’s series it is discussing a heroine who has lost all hope of being with the man she loves. Of course, Eva does end up with Gideon and she finds her HEA. In reality, many people find the right person that is for them, creating their own HEA. However, it won’t look as idealized as the romance story because life doesn’t make narrative sense and these stories are fantasy.

The famous romance author, Eloisa James, created her own version of famous fairy tale stories into a romance series creating a type of hybrid. James’s romance series is called *Fairy Tales*. In fact, the spark for these books by James was reading fairy tales to her daughter, which inspired her to ask questions such as, “What on earth was Cinderella’s prince thinking when he set up the infamous ball? How did Beauty feel about getting that particular nickname? And what would the princess in *The Princess and the Pea* think of her future mother-in-law, once she learned of the tests?”79 The way James answered these questions was through her series including *A Kiss at Midnight* (2010), *When Beauty Tamed the Beast* (2011), *The Duke is Mine* (2011) *The Ugly Duchess* (2012), and *Once Upon a Tower* (2013). James incorporates many of the similar themes from *Cinderella* into *A Kiss at Midnight*. She has a heroine with a good and loving heart, a dead mother, an absent father, the evil stepmother, and the thing we all sometimes wonder, which is how Cinderella’s shoe only fits her.80 What changes though in James’s novel is

80 It’s because of magic! She had a fairy Godmother. Of course, it wouldn’t fit anyone else. At least, that’s my theory.
that the hero has more of a personality. The book also includes more explicit feminist representation in it because rather than him saving her, she saves herself. James’s heroine shows that while the hero is able to break the heroine’s heart, she can live on her own if he makes the wrong choice. James reinvents the classic *Beauty and the Beast* with *When Beauty Tamed the Beast*, the classic story *The Princess and the Pea* with *The Duke is Mine*, takes it even further in her series with *The Ugly Duchess* that is based off of *The Ugly Duckling*, and finally *Once Upon a Tower* is based off of *Rapunzel*.

Not only can romance readers have an adult version of a romance story, they can have a sexier version of the fairy tales they grew up on to cater towards their age group. James was having an open dialogue with her daughter about the classic fairy tales that many children grow up on. Her daughter asked quizzical questions about sections to the fairy tales that were not elaborated on, such as creating a deeper relationship between the characters in fairy tales, like James’ question of the Princess from *The Princess and the Pea* discovering her mother-in-law was giving her a test to see how feminine she was. James’ *Fairy Tales* series took the elements of the princes/hero, the princess/heroine, the villain/antagonist, and the HEA of the stories she read to her daughter, but she made the stories go deeper, become more complex, have richer character development and allowed for a new taste to a romance story.

There is a graduation that happens here when as a child you read or watch fairy tales, then you read a romance novel, then it can lead a reader into the erotic romance for the most explicit version of the Disney fairy tale princess. In other words, there is a narrative progression...

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81 Do you remember how dull the personalities of the first wave Disney princess movies were? In *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, they didn’t even have names in the film. If you’re interested, the hero’s names are Ferdinand (*Snow White*), Henry, Henri, or Alto August Ferdinand (*Cinderella*), and Phillip (*Sleeping Beauty*).
from watching Disney princess films as a child; as readers get older they want some more catered towards their age group, thus the erotic romance.

Disney princess films are commonly watched by children, especially young girls. These films could be used instead as a teachable moment that they are a form of fantasy and that as they get older they catch watch for the structures of a romance and have further comprehension of what a fairy tale, or make-believe, is. The best part of reading these books or watching the films is that there is a sense of comfort to them. While the reader or watcher may not know the new journey they are about to embark on, they know it will have the hero, heroine, and an ending they want, need, and love. These stories soften our heart, give us hope, and show us one version of an HEA that many people love and look for. As the fictional character Belle says in the popular TV show Once Upon A Time, “Now go, find your love. Find your hope. Find your dreams.”

Belle here mentions finding your love. Predominantly, the Disney princess film and erotic romance follow the story of a heroine finding her love, which is the hero. A majority of the Disney princess films have a prince-hero and every erotic romance has a hero. The prince/hero is a large part of the HEA and the heroine’s journey. These heroes are often represented a strong, handsome, protective, and sensitive. “Rather than being ‘domesticated’ by marriage, the heroine tames her arrogant, domineering, ruthless mate.” The next chapter will examine types of heroes, their representation, and why they’re important to the story. Again, I am specifically looking at romance stories and novels that are heterosexual relationships; more research needs to be done on different types of relationships and create a normality for them. And in the honor of

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going to “find your love” the next part of this chapter will examine heroes and their importance to romance stories. The hero of the Disney princess movie has many similar characteristics and traits to the romance/erotic romance novel. There is a wildness to him that the heroine must tame, a mystery to be uncovered by the heroine, and an intensity to him. The hero is deserving of love, he is brave and gentle, flawed yet physically perfect to the heroine, he can appear dangerous, but underneath is more developed than the other men around the heroine, and most of all he is loyal.

**Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! A Hero after Midnight**

“He’s very driven, controlling, arrogant – scary, but very charismatic. I can understand the fascination.”

– 50 Shades of Grey by E.L. James

“The freckles that lightly covered his face showed innocence, but his eyes said he was someone else, someone she got to know quite well recently.”

– Apples and Angel Wings by Kathryn Collier

You (the erotic romance reader) know him, you love him, and you just can’t seem to get enough of him. He is sexy, dangerous, powerful, and dominant. However, he is also sweet, sensitive, and completely loveable. Here we have one of the best parts of the erotic romance novel, the hero. He is the epic man of our tale who only has eyes for the heroine. He is determined, confident, and someone the heroine at first is wary of. When he kisses you it’s so deep and aggressive that it leaves your lips plump, bruised, and wanting more. As Wendell and

84 To start of this section of the chapter right away, I will be echoing the words of Sarah Wendell: “Note: I am speaking specifically about men in this chapter, but by no means are all romance fans heterosexual. Many are lesbian or gay individuals. By writing about male heroes, I do not mean to imply that only heterosexual people read romance, nor that romance can only take place between heterosexual couples. Heroism exists in both genders […]” (Everything I Know About Love, 58-59). In this chapter, through my interviews, and the erotic romance novels that I analyze the specific heroes I will be talking about are cisgender men. Not all of my interviewees are heterosexual. This is also true to how I portray the heroine.
Tan describe the hero in their dictionary, “he who gets the milk for free only to find he must have
the cow as well, for he cannot get it up for any of the other dairy maids.”85 In other words, once
he meets the woman of the story he doesn’t want to have any other one because he is so
mesmerized by her.86 This hero will make the heroine have intense, choir-screaming, mind-
blowing orgasms that will rock her world. The hero is the one that will sexually awaken the
heroine, even if she has had great sex in the past. Because while the heroine has had great sex in
the past, it is nothing compared to the hero. Sylvia Day depicts the way the hero craves the
heroine in the third book of the Crossfire series:

“What the hell was I supposed to do, Eva? I didn’t know you existed.” Gideon’s voice
depended, roughened. “If I’d known you were out there, I would’ve hunted you down. I
wouldn’t have waited a second to find you. But I didn’t know, and I settled for less. So
did you. We both wasted ourselves on the wrong people.”87

Gideon, the hero from the Crossfire series, is most certainly an uber-alpha hero. In the scene
above he expresses the connection romance protagonists have together. Wendell and Tan
describe these types of heroes that are often represented in the romance novel. They describe the
uber-alpha hero, alpha hero, beta hero, rogue/omega hero, and the alphole. I will be representing
each type of hero Wendell and Tan mention, but there are other types of heroes out in the
romance world.

85 Wendell and Tan, Beyond Heaving Bosoms, 26.
86 Ibid., 45.
87 Day, Entwined with You, 22.
Uber-Alfa Hero

Wendell and Tan describe the uber-alpha hero as someone who would most likely gnaw on parked cars. Another way to describe this hero is that he is half-man and half-beast. If you are looking for a hero who is often in billion-dollar deals, chases some of the most dangerous villains, has epic scars, fights in fighting rings, goes to exclusive clubs, and is the most definitive primal male then look no further than the uber-alpha male. This hero is like the predator. Once he has his prey, he will never let her go. Some good examples of the uber-alpha hero, are Gideon from The Crossfire Series by Sylvia Day, Søren from The Original Sinner Series by Tiffany Reisz, Lincoln from Flight Risk by Alexa Riley, and Nykyrian from The League Series by Sherrilyn Kenyon. While this particular hero may seem like he’d be one to physically and emotionally harm the heroine, he still has a side to him that makes him a really good guy. Just like the alpha hero, the uber-alpha hero will only show his sweet and sensitive side to his heroine.

Alexis (22) chose her favorite hero, describing him as the half-man/ half-beast type of uber-alpha hero. Her personal favorite is Lothaire from Kresley Coles’ Immortals After Dark series. Alexis enjoys this character, Lothaire, because he is the ultimate bad. Alexis described his character as someone who was a part of the series for quite some time and is considered “evil.” But, Lothaire finally gets his own story and heroine:

Lothaire is like this all-powerful evil vampire who like ends up, like his true mate being like this human, which is totally against his thing cause he’s this strong, powerful, violent person and this puny human is his mate like “What am I going to do with this?” [laughs]. Alexis enjoys a hero who is confident, brooding, sexy, dark, dangerous, and even a little unpredictable:

I definitely like the dominant man, that’s where my preferences lie. Dominant, um, you know, I do kind of like scary people in this book at least he does scare the heroine a little
bit, but like even in life I have a tendency to like, not people who scare me, but who if you looked at him you might think “Oh, he looks like he could kill someone.” [laughs].

Alexis thinks that Lothaire is different from other heroes because he is considered too far gone and he couldn’t possibly be loved. In the end though, Lothaire finds his true mate, and heroine who tames him.

My all-time favorite hero, at least at the moment, is Reeve Sallis from the series First and Last by Laurelin Paige. Reeve is one of the ultimate uber-alpha heroes with speckles of a rogue hero. He is a billionaire, known for the many shady dealings he is in and is well known for being a play boy. He is a hero you should be wary of, is dominating, but you can’t just help to be drawn to. You want to hate him because of all the secrets he keeps from his heroine Emily, but it works throughout the story. And that’s why I love him. He is intense, assertive and says exactly what he means.

“I don’t know what it is about you.” His voice was strained, the only sign that he wasn’t completely in control. “But I can’t get you out of my mind. You contaminate my thoughts. I keep remembering your body under my hands as I touched you. The parts of you I didn’t touch. The sounds you made. The look in your eyes. You haunt me, Emily.”

**Alpha Hero**

Now, let’s move onto the alpha hero. Wendell and Tan describe him as “[a]…strong, dominating, confident man, often isolated, who holds a tortured, tender element within themselves that they rarely let anyone see.” The alpha hero isn’t nearly as intense or aggressive as the uber-alpha hero. These heroes often have a tortured past that they finally express to the heroine. Due to the hero’s anguish in his past it makes him appear like he is a hard, cold man.

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89 Wendell and Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, 77.
However, the heroine breaks that, and he shows her his tender side. The alpha hero also isn’t part-man and part-beast. Rather, he is everything a male specimen is stereotyped as; he would be called dominant rather than a beast. Examples include Christian from the *Fifty Shades* trilogy by E.L. James, Wrath\(^90\) from the *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series by J.R. Ward, and Travis from the *Beautiful* series by Jamie McGuire.

Martha (20) likes a hero who is willing compromise, is funny, caring, hardworking, and protective. Martha mainly described the character Christian Grey in her interview:

I like him [Christian] as a hero because he compromised. And because you can’t be a hero without listening to the people around you. And he listened and compromised. So, that was cool. […] I think he’s genuinely a really nice guy like I think deep down like he loves his family, he really cares about Anastasia, um, he works hard, you know? I think he’s genuinely a good guy and you get to see that more throughout the books.

Martha feels that it is quite important that a hero has the quality of compromising. Christian in *Fifty Shades* compromised on a few occasions, because of how much he wanted to be with Anastasia and he was falling in love with her. With Anastasia it was different; Christian listened to her and compromised with her to make their relationship work instead of it being one-sided with Christian in power. Martha wants to explore more erotic romance novels and I am thrilled to hear that!

Charlotte, described a type of alpha male from one of her favorite books *After the Night* by Linda Howard:

Interviewer - “What was he like? As a hero?”
Charlotte - “He’s like the tall, dark and handsome type. Like, um, and he’s portrayed as like a really kind person, um, kind and loyal. And that’s why he has that like strong aversion to her because he’s so loyal to his father and so loyal to his family and she like ruined his family. […] And he’s like very like disciplined but then like she takes away his discipline, which is part of the tension and like, yeah. He’s like a really good business person he’s also really sexy and he’s also a little bit older than her which I thought was really hot.”
Interviewer - “Why is he sexy?”

\(^{90}\) I mean, just look at his name. He has some extreme anger.
Charlotte - “Um, I think because he’s taller. He’s also described as like sexy. But, also, he’s taller, he’s a little bit older, he’s got like a lot of power. Um and he’s got, you know he’s very successful. And um, and loyal and kind.”

There is a repetition with a significant amount of my interviewees stating that a hero must be 
loyal. Here Charlotte describes an alpha hero who is tall, dark, handsome, sexy and certainly has an essence of power in him. The power is portrayed by him being older, taller and his status.

**Beta / Omega Hero**

Going down the list, the next is the beta hero (or also known as Omega, but that sounds like a supplement). The beta hero is quite different from the uber-alpha and the alpha hero. He isn’t controlling and dominant the way the alpha heroes are. Wendell and Tan talk about the alpha hero being the “buddy hero.” This hero is the best friend, the nice guy, and is much gentler than the others. He isn’t the hero that the heroine has no romantic interest for. He is someone that has been there for the heroine, but the two don’t get together till much later. Beta heroes are classified as the classic trope of friends to lovers. Something that needs to be put into perspective though, this hero is *not* a “pussy” as Wendell and Tan explain. Essentially, while he is considered the most feminine and sensitive out of all the heroes, that doesn’t mean he isn’t tough, determined, and strong. The beta hero just isn’t as threatening and dangerous and the uber-alpha and alpha hero. Two of my all-time favorite beta heroes are Wesley and Michael from the *Original Sinner* Series by Tiffany Reisz. Other good examples of the beta hero (according to Goodreads) are Colin from the *Bridgerton* series by Julia Quinn, Peeta from the *Hunger Games* series, and Matthew from the *Wallflowers* series by Lisa Kleypas.

Mabel described a beta hero from one of her favorite books *The Coincidence of Callie & Kayden* by Jessica Sorensen. From the way Mabel described the story, the hero and heroine,
Kayden and Callie, went through the classic friends to lover’s trope. This is a common theme for the beta hero:

[…] because the way that I pictured the character is like is how they had it on the cover of the book. He was more of like a stronger kind of person, kind of like a little more muscually built […] I believe he also played sports as well, which is also kind of something that I wanted. Cause I played sports growing up, so it was something like I could see myself with in another person. […] But yeah, I like, just like physical physique from the cover and also the fact that he was loyal.

Mabel pictures the hero from *The Coincidence of Callie & Kayden* the same way he is portrayed on the cover. She likes that he is an athletic character, because Mabel as a person can relate to that. She could picture herself with someone who is athletic, a thing that they could bond over.

Mabel also mentions the fact that Kayden is a loyal hero.

Eloise mentioned that the type of hero she is usually attracted to is the beta hero:

Interviewer - “What kinds of personality traits do you like in heroes?”
Eloise - “Oh my gosh. I don’t know if I can pinpoint, cause I say that I tend to prefer beta heroes, which is like mostly true. […]”
Interviewer - “So, for you is the beta usually the more sweet, sensitive kind of guy?”
Eloise - “Yeah.”

The beta hero is often depicted as someone who isn’t as scary, asserting or dominant as the alpha. He is already sweet, sensitive and kind, but a beta hero can have a disturbing past that makes it complicated for the hero and heroine.

*Rogue Hero*

Wendell and Tan explain as follows: “Rogues are usually happy to fade into the background, largely because their activates are more than a little shady and too much scrutiny could make things uncomfortable.”91 This particular type of hero isn’t considered the beta

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91 Wendell and Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, 80.
because they have moments of being self-centered. The rogue hero also isn’t quite the uber-alpha or alpha hero because he isn’t as burly or primal. He is someone that you can’t quite trust, but deep down there is goodness in him (there is goodness in all heroes). He may do things behind the heroine’s back that she doesn’t quite understand yet, but it is all to protect her. That is why Reeve Sallis has moments of being a rogue hero. The rogue is often a troublemaker, breaks the law, and defies norms. In popular culture there are some well-written rogue heroes, such as Captain Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Han Solo from *Star Wars*, Hook from the TV Series *Once Upon A Time* and Wesley from *The Princess Bride*. He is someone that just disappears for a while because there is “business” that he needs to take care of.

*Alphole*

Finally, we have the alphole. This word is a hybrid of asshole and alpha. These are heroes that should never be written in romance or erotic romance stories. Assholes in erotic romance and romance are ok, but they aren’t meant to be the one who ends up with the heroine. As Wendell and Tan note, such a figure is: “he’s not merely strong and confident in his power, he’s brutal and cruel in his use of it.” ⁹² Imagine each of these types of heroes without that sensitive side. There isn’t anything redeemable about this type of hero. All heroes are strong and confident, but the alphole is much more brutal. He would torment her physically and emotionally until she submits and becomes exactly whom he wants. This would be the type of hero that would want to change the heroine. But a hero must love his heroine for who she is.

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⁹² Ibid., 77.
One example of the alphole is Brandon from *The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen Woodwiss. However, one person could consider an alpha hero as an alphole. It often depends on the reader’s taste in heroes whether he is a alphole or not. This is not to say that a hero can’t act like an asshole. Many heroes have moments of acting that way, but alpholes are cruel in the power they have over others.

Cassandra never expressed her personal favorite hero, but she did describe what she likes in a hero and why she adores the hero in a story. To me, Cassandra described a hero in one of the most perfect ways, “[…] I don’t want him to be evil. He can be fucked up.” Cassandra doesn’t want an author to create an evil (alphole!) character, but that doesn’t mean the hero can’t be “fucked up” and have emotional problems. Cassandra enjoys a hero that puts the heroine in subjection or captures her. “[…] Like beyond the kidnapping and everything, like you have to fall in love with him.” So, while for Cassandra the hero is engaging in illegal activity by kidnapping the heroine, an author can create a “fucked up” and loveable hero, despite his actions. Cassandra really enjoys *Comfort Food* by Kitty Thomas and *Captured by the SS* by Gail Starbright.

Poppy also describes the way in which it’s okay if a hero acts like an asshole sometimes, because it gives a little sense of reality:

> I think it comes down to that sense of realness and sometimes I need like an injection of reality in like these very fantastical books where it’s like “Oh, he’s so lovely and wonderful.” It’s like sometimes I want him to be an asshole. So, you can realize like “Oh, he’s a dick.” And I think that’s why I like this, um, *Dark Skye* so much. Cause it’s like Thronos is an asshole sometimes.

Again, the hero isn’t *always* an asshole, that would be an alphole. Rather, some erotic romance readers feel that there can be moments where he does like an asshole because it’s more relatable.

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93 Wendell and Tan also think he is an alphole. To be honest, I couldn’t finish the book because I couldn’t stand him.
to how a relationship can be. Heroes are flawed. This is not to say that you should romanticize such behaviors, which will be discussed later in the chapter about how there is the difference between reality and fantasy males, rather it shows that their characters are complicated and multi-dimensional.

*He Oozes Sex from his Appearance*

Even though there are many different types of heroes that are represented in the erotic romance novel, these heroes are all very attractive and stereotypically masculine. Heroes are damn good looking, often the tallest character, the character with the broadest shoulders, the thickest hair, and, yes, quite well endowed – always well endowed. A quick understanding of these heroes and people who are reading about these heroes must be mentioned:

It is true that sometimes the male characters are idealized, and the sex is sometimes – okay, frequently – idealized. More importantly, the male depicted on the cover more often than not bears no resemblance to the hero of the story itself. But readers can tell the difference between fantasy and reality when it comes to actual human males – and they’re smart enough to know how the fantasy can educate and inform their own reality. Nowhere is this more obvious than with the men.94

Erotic romance readers are smart enough to know the difference between an idealized make-believe male hero and a male in reality. While there are different types of heroes, heroes also have a few things in common. There is always a sensitive and compassionate side to him. As Cassandra states, he needs to be loveable. The hero also must put everything aside due to his love for the heroine. Each hero also has their own way of being tough and strong and while it has been thirty-three years since Janice Radway wrote *Reading the Romance* the hero’s qualities are still ever present:

The hero of the romantic fantasy is always characterized by spectacular masculinity. Indeed, it is insufficient for the author to remark in passing that the romantic hero has a

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94 Wendell, *Everything I Know About Love I Learned from Romance Novels*, 57.
muscular physique. The reader must be told, instead, that every aspect of his being, whether his body, his face, or his general demeanor, is informed by the purity of his maleness. Almost everything about him is hard, angular, and dark.\textsuperscript{95}

Janice Radway mentions things such as “spectacular masculinity,” “muscular physique,” “purity of his maleness,” “dark,” and “hard.” While the hero must be “dark” on many occasions, there must be light there too. For example, there are multiple heroes who have dark black hair with bright blue eyes. These adjectives give us a full look for what the hero looks like and how an author needs to make a memorable hero. Ever hear of the phrase tall, dark, and handsome? Even though there are many themes that make them look and act the same way, there is individuality between them. No other genre quite describes how attractive a character is like the erotic romance. “Romance readers do. They are interested in the physical detail of the fantasy world. They want to know what the characters look like; they want clothes and rooms described.”\textsuperscript{96}

Romance readers want to know every little scruff on the hero, how he presents himself, what clothes he is wearing that day, and readers want to be reminded of his thick hair and intense eyes.

The description that is given when the heroine firsts sees her hero is a very vivid scene. Once he is described the readers know exactly who he is and begins to fall in love with him. Readers know who he is because more details are given to him compared to other characters in the novel. He is dark, dangerous, strong, muscular, toned, tall, cut, chiseled, powerful, and he screams sex. While he is all of these characteristics, to the heroine (and most likely every single character in the book), he needs to be “hot”\textsuperscript{97} due to the fact that there is just something about him. Not only does he need to look “hot” to the heroine, he must act and talk in a certain way.

\textsuperscript{95} Radway, \textit{Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature}, 128.
\textsuperscript{97} I put this in quotations, because everybody finds different things hot and/or sexy.
No hero ever stumbles and falls to the floor. When the hero says the heroine’s name a tingle goes up her spine due to his power.

When Anastasia first meets Christian in *Fifty Shades of Grey* she instantly feels overwhelmed by his attraction. In this scene she has fallen on the ground and Christian comes to see if she is all right: 98

So young – and attractive, very attractive. He’s tall, dressed in a fine grey suit, white shirt, and black tie with unruly dark copper-colored hair and intense bright gray eyes that regard me shrewdly. It takes a moment for me to find my voice. 99

Anastasia needs to take a breath, a moment, to collect her thoughts. Not only does his demeanor overwhelm her, but also, she finds it to be irresistible. There is a very quick chemistry they have together once they touch hands. Anastasia describes him as very attractive, tall, young, and intense. Christian has *dark* copper-colored hair, but intense *bright* grey eyes. There is almost always some type of polarity. Not only are the heroes described as perfectly fit when it comes to their chiseled body, but the clothing they wear always perfectly accentuates their physical appearance.

In *Her Halloween Treat* by Tiffany Reisz, the heroine meets the hero once more. Joey, the heroine, after ten years of not seeing Chris, the hero, sees the way he has changed over the years and at first doesn’t even recognize him:

He had dirty-blond hair cut neat and a close-trimmed nearly blond beard. […] He wore jeans, neither tight nor baggy but perfectly fitted, and a red-and-navy flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, with a fitted white T-shirt underneath […] He grinned again, a boyish eager grin. She couldn’t see anything else in the world because that bright white toothy smile took over his face and her entire field of vision. 100

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98 It is OK for the heroine to trip every once in a while, but it needs to work with her character.
Once again, the heroine can’t help at first noticing how young this man who came into her life is. The hero’s youthfulness is a key quality to his presence. Not only does he look youthful, such as Joey’s description of “boyish,” but to counteract that you know he is a man and no child. Reisz still describes him as “solid” and “strong.” These descriptions will come back into the writing all the time. The heroine is never able to get over how stunning the hero is. But that first time a heroine sees a hero? Oh, you better believe the heroine is going to notice every detail about that hero and realize her attraction to him (even if the heroine dislikes the hero’s personality at first).

In Alice Clayton’s *Wallbanger* she creates a heroine who dislikes the hero for a little while in the book. Caroline, the heroine, hates the fact that the hero, Simon, is having very loud sex in the apartment next to her (they live in an apartment complex and are neighbors) and when she first gets a look at him he is mostly naked:

He had jet-black hair that stood straight up, likely from Giggler’s hands buried in it as he plowed into her. His eyes were piercing blue, and cheekbones just as strong as the jaw. Completing the package? Kiss-swollen lips and what looked like about three days’ worth of scruff.

[...] He was tan, but not premeditated tan – outdoorsy tan, weathered tan, manly tan. His chest rose and fell as he panted, his skin coated in a thin sheen of sex sweat. As my eyes traveled down farther I saw a smattering of dark hair low on his torso, which led below the sheet. Below the six-pack. Below that V that some men have, and which on him didn’t look weird or Bowflexed.

He was stunning. Of course he was stunning. And why did there have to be scruff?

Clayton creates a long description here about what the heroine notices when she meets Simon.

What you may also notice is that the page numbers are quite early into a book. Writers know that the readers enjoy meeting the hero quickly so that the relationship and development between the hero and heroine can get going. Every hero, uber-alpha, alpha, beta, and yes even alphhole, and sometimes the villain is very attractive.

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101 Caroline describes the woman who is at Simon’s apartment having sex with him the “Giggler” because she giggles while they’re having sex.

A reason for the hero’s seductive looks is because that is what “beauty standards” look like. In “The Purity of His Maleness: Masculinity in Popular Romance Novels,” Jonathan Allan examines what men and masculinities are popular in romance: “More particularly, the romance novel, I contend, proselytizes an ideology of masculinity that is worthy of consideration, particularly because the genre is, by and large, written by women.”103 The adjectives described in the section “He Oozes Sex from his Appearance,” create an idolized type of man that romance readers want to picture over and over again. A hero can never have just “black hair” or just “blue eyes.” No, that’s too plain. A hero, or a character with masculine traits, needs to be described in other ways. Their eyes are piercing, their hair is thick and luscious, and their jaw is strong. The more adjectives the better! Yes, we need to hear about the color of their hair, but the readers need to know why their black hair is so much better than other people with black hair.

In many ways women can be seen as making men into sex objects and objectifying them due to the covers of these books and the way they are described. The covers could be a representation of a gender role-reversal when it comes to the usual gender dynamics of objectification. The covers of these books make people wonder sometimes if someone could actually make their body look that way. Obviously, this is all fantasy, just as a mentioned at the beginning of this chapter with Wendell and Tan. Just as the heroine never shaves her legs in the shower, but her skin is always smooth. Or just how Wendell, and other scholars and my

interviewees, *tell us* that romance readers know the difference between what’s real and what’s not. What Allan is trying the get across is that there are ways writers create attitudes and behaviors that are considered masculine and this is the way men are supposed to be, otherwise you’re not a “man.” Allan argues that many romance novels follow David and Brannon’s definition of masculinity:

1.) “No Sissy Stuff!” One may never do anything that even remotely suggests femininity. Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of the feminine.

2.) “Be a Big Wheel” Masculinity is measured by power, success, wealth, and status. As the current saying goes, ‘He who has the most toys when he dies wins.”

3.) “Be a Sturdy Oak” Masculinity depends on remaining calm and reliable in a crisis holding emotions in check. In fact, proving you’re a man depends on never showing your emotions at all. Boys don’t cry.

4.) “Give ‘em Hell” Exude an aura of manly daring aggression. Go for it. Take risks.\(^\text{104}\)

I would argue *against* this. Heroes and heroines have a mix of feminine and masculine traits. They are never solidly one or the other. Each of these definitions of what people consider masculinity may be true in how men think they need to act in life. However, how the media tells men to act, behave, and look in everyday life as a male could be a completely different paper. Allan is specifically arguing these definitions when it comes to the romance novel and the hero in romance novels are manly. But remember, he has the tender side he expresses to his heroine. Women wouldn’t read a book where the hero is overly masculine that we can ever get to know any other emotion than anger and power. It would drive readers up a wall. In other words, while

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 27.
the hero may be portrayed as someone who is “hard,” he can never be just that. He must never only be hard-hearted.

**No Sissy Stuff!**

The first statement, “no sissy stuff!” says the hero can’t act feminine. He can’t be a “sissy” or a “pussy,” but this is far from the truth. The hero acts supposedly like a “sissy” when he is always telling the heroine that he loves her, only ever wants her, wants to be with her for the rest of her life, wants to have children with her, spends time with her without only having sex, and ditches everything that he is going through to care for her needs. I would argue that the hero expressing his true feelings, the act of opening up and being vulnerable to the heroine is considered a “feminine” act. If that part of an erotic romance story is taken out, there is no romance.

For example, in the film adaptation of *Fifty Shades Darker* there is a scene where Christian is scared that Ana will leave him. In the scene where he puts himself in the submissive position that he would make Ana stay in, he tells her everything, so she doesn’t run away. Not only does he put himself in the sub position, he allows her to touch his chest, the area he never allows anyone to touch because he was burned there with cigarettes as a child:

> “I’m not a dominant. I’m not... I. The right term is a sadist. I get off on punishing women, women who look like you –”
> “Like your mother.”
> “Yes. And I know how fucked up that is. When you left, I swore I would stop it if that what it took to get you back, but I am done with it. You mean more to me than anything else.”
> “I wanna believe you, I do. But I can’t –”
> “Ana, give me your hand.” [Christian put her hand on his chest] “This is me. All of me.”
> “Christian”
Christian puts himself in a submissive position, he expresses his fears, he allows Ana to touch him, and he communicates who he is in this scene. He is scared to lose her and instead of acting like a brick wall that has no emotions, he tells her everything. Christian is not acting with the “purity of this maleness” here. Heroes can be feminine, or as Allen says, a “sissy.” However, I wouldn’t want to label a protagonist as a “sissy.”

Be a Big Wheel

“Be a Big Wheel” is the next argument made for masculinity in romance novels. There are many romance novels where the hero is a billionaire and owns almost every single building in the city they live in. This can definitely be a common theme, for a number of reasons, and I do elaborate on the billionaire fantasy later in this chapter. Series such as Fifty Shades and Crossfire the hero is a billionaire. This definition is not in every single erotic romance or romance novel. In the book Outlander by Diana Gabaldon the hero Jamie is often a runaway and at one point, for seven years, lives in a cave. In Her Halloween Treat by Tiffany Reisz he makes a living by being a contractor. In the Original Sinner series by Tiffany Reisz one of the heroes is a priest, who makes very little. In Finding It by Cora Carmack the hero is a professor. In Nuts by Alice Clayton he is a farmer promoting local food. None of these heroes are insanely rich, instead they make a good living and have a stable job and the heroine has her own career to take care of herself. What’s wrong with having a good career in a romance novel that makes you happy and gives a roof over your head and makes sure you have food on your table? Nothing. The point is

that not all heroes are billionaires or are in the 0.1%. Having a hero who is a billionaire, is not every reader’s fantasy.

**Be a Sturdy Oak**

“Be a Sturdy Oak” is the third point given. The hero not only gets emotional at some points, but when he is scared for the heroine’s safety or that she will be gone from his life forever. Heroes can cry and express all forms of emotion. There are two scenes in *Entwined with You* by Sylvia Day when the hero, Gideon, cries. The first scene is when Eva is stimulating Gideon’s prostate. Gideon has a past of rape in his childhood with his male therapist. Gideon’s hard limit is any type of anal play. However, thanks to the heroine, she can give him pleasure rather than harm through anal play. Due to his haunted past, Gideon cries after receiving anal and prostate pleasure from Eva. “Gideon buried his damp face between my [Eva] breasts and cried.”

Gideon at another point in the novel wakes up from a nightmare. Gideon has frequent nightmares due to his past. Eva comforts him when he wakes up from his nightmare. “I [Eva] spooned behind him, wrapping one arm around his waist. ‘Shh, baby,’ I whispered. ‘I’ve got you. I’m here.’ I rocked him [Gideon] as he cried in his sleep, my tears wetting his shirt.” So, yes, heroes aren’t always “sturdy as an oak.” There are many moments where they have feelings and share them with their heroine. Heroes don’t need to act like a sturdy oak for the heroine at all time. Yes, sometimes heroes are portrayed as the stronger of the two, but they are just as in touch with their emotions.

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107 Ibid, 335, Emphasis added.
Finally, there is “Give em’ Hell!” Something that is forgotten here is the fact that on multiple occasions the heroine acts this way as well. It’s not only the hero that acts out of aggression, fear, or for the fun of it. This particular type of “daring” and “aggression” that is mentioned often comes about when it’s in reference to the heroine. The aura of the male hero that the heroine notices does use adjectives such as “dark” and “dangerous.” Often the heroine has a fear for the hero at first due to his aura. However, it is unable to be claimed that the hero is only like this and that he acts like this all the time. In *Outlander* series, *Fifty Shades* series, *Crossfire* series, and the *Original Sinner* series there are many moments in the story where the heroine takes risks.

In *Fifty Shades Freed* the character Mia Grey, Christian’s sister, is captured by Jack Hyde. Jack Hyde is Anastasia’s former boss and knows Christian from his past. Hyde turns quite dark in the previous book, *Fifty Shades Darker*, and seeks revenge on both Anastasia and Christian. When Anastasia discovers that Mia has been kidnapped she has been instructed that she will bring Hyde five million dollars and to tell no one or he will kill Mia. As instructed, Anastasia goes to the bank to get the cash, but unfortunately, she stills needs Christian’s permission to get the money. While Anastasia is Mrs. Grey now, the bank calls Christian due to suspicion. Anastasia instead informs him that she will be breaking up with him and taking this money for herself to raise their baby alone. Hyde also tells her to get rid of her phone, but she tricks him by taking the bank managers phone and throwing that one in the trash instead. She lied to the love of her life to save his sister. Next, Anastasia meets Hyde to make the trade and eventually gets into a struggle with Hyde. In the struggle, Anastasia gets hit quite often and then
she shoots Hyde in the leg. When Ana begins to black out she hears her name called by Christian.

There are multiple occasions when the not only the hero, but the heroine “goes for it” or “takes risks.” Each of these characters is always taking risks for each other so that they can be together. Those risks are part of the journey. Otherwise as readers we may question how far they would go for each other for love. There wouldn’t be a story if there were no occasions when the characters need to take risks or when all hope seems lost in the story. The characters need to take risks, even if it seems like on some of those occasions the reader might think “the character didn’t need to do that.” But, yes, they did. Sometimes the hero takes risks and sometimes the heroine does. Authors don’t usually just add a random scene or chapter that has nothing to do with the rest of the story. So, while the hero may have an “aura of manly daring and aggression” or he “takes risks” and just decides to “go for it,” not only does he do it for one reasons or another, his heroine does it for him as well. The hero isn’t always aggressive in his aura. Just as the scenes discussed above, it shows a time when his wall is down, and he doesn’t need to appear like he always has self-control.

Heroes are incredibly important to the erotic romance novel. Authors need to write a memorable hero. He is strong, confident, tortured, brooding, solid, attractive, sexy, sweet, loving, sensitive, tender, and yes, so well-endowed it makes the heroine wonder if he can even fit. When it comes to the erotic romance hero, there are many times where others can become concerned. Often this type of aggression, dominance, and assertiveness that is amplified by the hero, as well as the classic marriage at the end of the story, makes people question about social norms, gender roles, or if the hero may be romanticizing patriarchy.
Wait! Is the Hero Romanticizing Patriarchy?

The hero is the embodiment of the patriarchy and the heroine is the embodiment of feminism and these two must figure out how to bring out the best in each other and find common ground in order to live happily ever after.

- Dangerous Books for Girls by Maya Rodale

The last section of this chapter examined the hero’s appearance, his personality, and the fact that a hero has feminine and masculine qualities. Often when people hear about such a character it makes them alarmed. It is questioned if women are being aroused by being the submissive of the story and want a man like this in real life. People can’t help but think “What woman in her right mind would want a man like this?” Anti-romance feminists are often concerned about the way the hero is represented as a partner and that the erotic romance promotes and romanticizes a form patriarchy. The hero is often represented as the superior of the two protagonists. This may be because of his title; perhaps he’s a duke, a prince, a billionaire, etc. Or it may be because his personality is the one who wants to take it all and he will do whatever it takes to keep and protect his heroine, giving off a very domineering presence. Maya Rodale discusses even how calling the hero an “alpha” is how we perceive the idea of who the hero is supposed to be: “But ever since Alan Boon of Mills & Boon decided that romances should adhere to ‘nature’s’ law,’ which is the rules of the Alpha Man, who is ‘strong, brave, mentally and physically tough, intelligent, tall and dark,’ the romance genre has celebrated, romanticized, and even fetishized the idea of the alpha male hero.”

On the narrative level, there is quite a bit of the celebration, romanticism, and fetishized man that women gravitate towards and book sales prove that.

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As the quote in the beginning of this section from Rodale explains is how the hero is the embodiment of patriarchy and the heroine is the embodiment of feminism. The tension between patriarchy and feminism creates a power struggle, intense sex scenes, a male who is always in power until he is not because she always wins at the end creating an equality between the erotic romance protagonists. I argue that the heroine subdues not the hero, but what the hero symbolizes: patriarchy.

**The Problems with the Hero**

There is always something about the hero that is considered a problem. When a reader first meets the hero, we get this perspective from the heroine that she either can’t stand him, or she is very scared of him. The hero, for one reason or another, is unattainable. At first, he appears to be a man that no one should be around. While the book is usually (certainly not always) from the perspective of the heroine and the book is all about the heroine, the hero is one of the biggest parts of the heroine’s life. More likely than not, the heroine dislike or loathes the hero at first. While she finds him incredibly sexy and irresistible, there is a tension there between the two of them at first where she just can’t stand him.

In Alice Clayton’s *Wallbanger*, the heroine isn’t too fond of the hero because he is having extraordinarily loud sex in his apartment and it is keeping her up at night. Not only do the hero and heroine share a wall in an apartment complex but also, the hero has a new woman over each night. This supposed “hatred” for each other could happen for quite a few reasons. Radway describes; “Hero and heroine are shown to despise each other overtly, even though they are ‘in love,’ primarily because each is jealous or suspicious of the other’s motives and consequently
fails to trust the other.”\textsuperscript{109} While Radway makes a great point about this there is another reason that authors create this tension between the hero and heroine: “Physical contact elicits both sexual desire and a sense of physical danger.”\textsuperscript{110} If the hero and heroine get into fights, arguments, and disputes often throughout the book it is a way to create some of the most passionate scenes between the hero and heroine.

More often than not the tension has to do with the fact that the hero and heroine are \textit{extraordinarily} attracted to each other. These visual stimuli influence theses sex scenes between them and thanks to these scenes, readers get to understand the aggressive, passionate, intensity of the hero. As we understand the hero, is often controlling, powerful, and quite dominant. Readers aren’t going to go for a hero who is only wimpish and shy:

\begin{quote}
In good romances, that overly aggressive masculine behavior is exposed as a false or defensive façade that, when removed, as it inevitably is, reveals the true male personality to be kind and tender. In bad romances, the hero’s masculine behavior is never transformed totally. As a consequence, it continues to be presented to the reader as a natural and inevitable fact of social relations.\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

Don’t get me wrong; there are certainly scenes in the erotic romance where we get to see the hero be gentler and loving towards the heroine. But, it’s when the hero is a little more aggressive towards the heroine that people think about being concerned. It very well could make it sound like it’s an abusive relationship. These scenes are very passionate though. Readers are in their fantasy world and their erotic \textit{romance} story and through the narrative readers understand that no matter who the hero is, he is the one who is meant to be with the heroine.

So, the readers of the erotic romance can enjoy this type of hero in their fantasies, but in real life they would most likely break-up or divorce this type of character. Not only do the

\textsuperscript{109} Radway, \textit{Reading the Romance}, 65.
\textsuperscript{110} Lee, “Guilty Pleasures,” 60.
\textsuperscript{111} Radway, \textit{Reading the Romance}, 168.
women I talk with discuss this, but other scholars talk about how us readers would dump these heroes in real life:

My husband, ever the logical lawyer, is fond of saying that if once behaved the way the heroes do in my books I’d serve him with separation papers the same day. And he’s right – Because we, for better or worse, are inhabiting reality.\textsuperscript{112}

This is the point where many sigh, throw up their hands, and say “it’s just fiction!”\textsuperscript{113}

Why is it that romance readers can tolerate any number of crazed behaviors from a romance hero, whereas if a real-life dude did one-tenth of a hero’s dastardly deeds, not the least of which is raping the heroine, she’d be calling 911 faster than you can say “restraining order”?\textsuperscript{114}

Interviewer - “That’s really common like the heroes in stories their like ‘I don’t actually want that in real life, but in my fantasy it’s nice.’”
Poppy - “Yeah, cause when I’m reading it I can put it down and that’s great. But, I don’t want it physically going out right in front of me.”

Interviewer – Are they [heroes] realistic to those in real life? [Pilot Questionnaire]
Cassandra - No, of course not! If someone was that obsessed with me in real life I would probably feel like I should call the police, maybe get a restraining order... Usually in real life, there are so many other factors that occupy your time, including making money, having a job, friend commitments, etc.

The hero is very much so a character that wants to make sure that he can take care of things. So, yes, us readers would fucking dump these heroes faster than you can say “restraining order.” But, that’s where the fantasy and the relief of stress come in. The hero might be dominating, but he does a lot of it in a nurturing way. Radway discusses that these types of heroes are perfect for the Smithton women she interviews. Many of these women are housewives caring for their home and family. The Smithton women often describe that the romance book is a way for them to be cared for because they are often caring for everyone else in their life. They are caring for their husband, their children, and their home every single day. Radway’s \textit{Reading the Romance} was

\textsuperscript{112} Krentz, \textit{Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women}, 79.
\textsuperscript{113} Rodale, \textit{Dangerous Books for Girls}, 120.
\textsuperscript{114} Wendell and Tan, \textit{Beyond Heaving Bosoms}, 72.
published in 1984 and here I am interviewing women in 2017-2018. This is thirty-three years later and the romance novels, plus the hero of the story, are used as a way for the readers to escape everyday life bullshit that they don’t want to deal with.

Today is different for women than it was in the 1980s. There are fewer women who are “expected” to be housewives and are finding their own careers. Not that women didn’t have careers in the 1980; rather the women Radway talked to were housewives and this was their full-time job, instead of a full-time job and caring for their family. Women today often have the same or different types of stress, tasks, and ways of caring for other people instead of themselves today. The women I talked to were from the ages of eighteen to twenty-four, going to college, and living life as a woman in the twenty-first century. Some of my interviewees expressed such concerns with the hero of the romance novel.

Well, there certainly is that question of like the very domineering – in a like, in a [...] patriarchal way. I don’t like that, and I don’t see it as much as anymore cause I don’t like books like that. It just doesn’t work for me. Um, he needs to have like the element of power in the relationship. Not because he is a man, but because he is the stronger individual.[...] It has to be about… like in a dom/sub relationship anyone can be a dom and anyone can be a sub it’s just that you’re naturally gravitating towards, um, a person who’s more dominant, controlling, or like vocalizes what – like they want the submissive to act a certain way. [...] So, I don’t read books that rely on the patriarchal thing or demean women in the sense that because they’re a woman, ya know? (Cassandra, 22)

It’s weird for me cause I like I said sort of like, with something like Comfort Food you know my feminist things should be tingling or something, but like, I feel like if you make it like fantastical enough you can kind of dispel some of that. Be like ‘Ok, well, this is clearly just a fantasy.’ As supposed to like when it’s something more realistic and something problematic is happening and your like ‘Well, ok, I don’t want everyone to read this’, and be like ‘Oh, this is ok!’ Cause it’s clearly not (laughs). You know that kind of thing. (Alexis, 22)

And I feel like, obviously this is like a broad generalization, like that women put up with a lot of shit in relationships. Of like varying kinds. And are taught that like ‘Oh, you have to find a partner’ and like ‘You have to have a man love you and you have to put up with all of these things, because you’re ultimately unlovable.’ This is taking it to an extreme, but like ‘You just have to accept who ever will love you. Because you’re lucky that someone does.’ I feel like that’s kind of like a societal message and maybe it’s getting less so. But like this idea that marriage is what you should be reaching for I feel like society does imply those things and romance doesn’t. (Eloise, 21)
Many contemporary readers have full time jobs, care for their families, care for their partner(s), and have a lot of emotional labor that they deal with daily. This is the imbalance that happens to women all the time and is one of the main reasons we pick up an erotic romance book. No longer do we need to think about a partner’s socks on the floor, we don’t need to think about schedules, we don’t need to think about cleaning our house, and we don’t even need to think about only pleasing someone sexually in the bedroom. Rather, erotic romance writers have created a hero that takes care of these things with his dominance, demeanor, money, and power to do these things for us. Yes, we have a male character who is caring for the female financially in every way and if she didn’t have to work she wouldn’t need to (such as Fifty Shades and Crossfire), but the women still have their own job in the book because of their love for it, not because she is miserable and needs the money.

In the erotic romance, the hero takes care of the heroine. There are multiple ways that he may provide this care. Some heroes have a great job making him a billionaire that way the heroine is financially cared for, a hero sometimes make sure that the heroine eats well, sometimes he chooses her clothing, a hero often saves the heroine’s life, a hero either has a maid or cleans up after himself, makes sure the heroine is very sexually satisfied, etc. Being cared for so that you aren’t stressed is what also makes the appeal for the billionaire hero. When the hero is a billionaire this means that the heroine no longer has to care about making sure the bills are paid on time, a reader doesn’t have to budget, and doesn’t even have to pick out their clothing. On multiple occasions, the hero knows a heroine’s exact size with each article of clothing and has a full closet filled with beautiful clothing. This theme for a hero has been going on for years.

This is not to say that the heroine is a fully passive character; just the opposite. Who do you think tames this dominant and controlling man? It’s the heroine, of course. “As soon as the
hero gets over himself and recognizes his own false pride and personal flaws, he can achieve his happy ending. The heroine’s role in the taming is often one of strength and self-assurance – ‘You can try that crap with anyone else, but it is not going to fly with me.’” How is that not breaking the patriarchy? We shouldn’t be sending messages to young women that they’re the ones who need to change men and make them realize why they were wrong about so many things. If romance readers don’t want this portrayal of a male in the first place, why would they try to change them? However, many heroes in the erotic romance novel begin to realize on their own that they need to change their ways, for example: “[…] he must choose between life as it was, or a chance at a better life with her.”

In Alice Clayton’s Cocktail series, the heroine will stop at nothing to make sure that her career is the most important thing to her and that she will excel and succeed in it. In Wallbanger, the first book of the Cocktail series, Caroline and Simon are not yet a couple, but Simon came to her apartment as a concerned friend concerned because he heard commotion between Caroline and her ex-boyfriend James. Caroline was about to have sex with James, but then she changed her mind due to the way he acted towards her. This scene comes after Caroline has kicked James out of her apartment:

“You’re not here to rescue me, are you?” I [Caroline] bit back, air-quoting the rescue.

He [Simon] backed away as I crawled off the bed, seeming scared of my impending explosion. Even I knew this was going to be ugly.

“Why do all men seem to think they need to rescue a woman? Are we not capable of rescuing our damn selves? Why do I need to be rescued? I don’t need a man to rescue me, and I certainly don’t need to wall-banging, Purina-fucking, listening-at-my-wall-like-a-goddamn-psycho [Simon] coming over here to rescue me! You got that, mister?”

I was pointing and waving my arms around like someone was going to take them away from me. He had every right to look scared.

115 Wendell and Tan, Beyond Heaving Bosoms, 82.
116 Ibid.
“I mean, what the hell is with you men? I’ve got one who wants me back [her ex-boyfriend], and one who doesn’t want anything to do with me [Simon]! One who wants to be my boyfriend but can’t even remember that I’m an interior designer [ex-boyfriend]. Designer! Not a fucking decorator!”

The scene above represents a moment of independence from Caroline. First, we know that Caroline is frustrated with her ex-boyfriend because he called her a “decorator” and not a “designer.” Caroline’s career is more important than any other man in her life. Caroline wants to find someone to be with that understands how important her job is to her and, understandably, wants to find one who knows what she does in the first place. In the scene the readers also know that Caroline doesn’t need anyone to help her get out of a bad situation. As soon as Simon is in her apartment she questions him by asking, “You’re not here to rescue me, are you?” Caroline is taking all of her anger out on Simon, because not only is she angry at her choices with her ex-boyfriend (for letting him in her apartment in the first place), but she is angry that Simon doesn’t seem to want her either even though he shows a lot of affection towards her. Hence, the hero needs to let his heroine be exactly who she is, and he can’t change that. The heroine won’t just settle for anyone. She needs to find the right hero, the hero who will accept her just as she is, the hero who will adapt, change, and compromise, and will be there for her. Heroes don’t hold the power in a romance novel, the heroine does. Erotic romance readers know their worth. Erotic romance books can teach women to find the right partner for them, be exactly who they are, and go on the path that they choose in life.

Erotic romance isn’t romanticizing patriarchy because the women who read these books don’t want these things to happen in real life. The women reading these books aren’t actively trying to search for a time portal, trying to find a mythological creature partner, breaking up with

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117 Clayton, Wallbanger, 234.
every single partner they have to find that one book boyfriend they need, they’re not letting their partner take away her job and her own money, and aren’t trying to be captured by some stranger to live a whole new life. Romance readers know not to simulate actions from the romance novel that can be considered problematic. Rather, the readers are so stressed with life that they find a romance, erotic romance, or erotic book with their perfect hero who takes care of her in every way. This isn’t the case with every erotic romance book that’s out there. But, there is certainly a sense of dominance with the hero. The control is expressed in multiple ways with the hero.

These books can express feminism and don’t romanticize patriarchy. Sex and free agency are empowering. Choosing the person you want to marry is liberating, because in some cultures marrying for love is still a taboo. The heroine falls in love with a hero who doesn’t make her weaker and there are a thousand different ways that we get to read this because of the thousands of books out there. Romance novels would be less likely to sell if it had the same type of hero and life that they are currently in. Women already deal with that daily in whatever form that may be. The erotic romance, through the hero and heroine, create a demonstration of how one could subdue patriarchy with feminism.

The erotic romance novel has a great deal of sex scenes and the scenes, instead of being focused on the man’s pleasure, are focused on the woman’s. This is not to say the hero isn’t sexually satisfied, far from it in fact. The hero often feels pleasure because the heroine is sexually satisfied and is having a great deal of orgasms. The heroine, of course, has moments where she is focusing on the hero’s pleasure and that makes her feel pleased. There is reciprocity and equivalence in sex scenes in the erotic romance. The next chapter will examine ways in which women readers can learn through the erotic romance novel, primarily with sex scenes, verbal and non-verbal cues, as well as female sexual agency.
Chapter 3 - Romantica Education  
Erotic Romance as Sex Education

In early October of 2017 Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was accused of sexual harassment and sexual assault by at least thirty women. Since the allegations against Weinstein, about seventy more men in power have been accused of similar acts in the United States. Weinstein created a ripple effect of hundreds of women coming out to state that they were sexually harassed or assaulted, primarily by someone in power. This certainly isn’t news. For hundreds of years women have been telling their stories of being harassed and assaulted by men. The difference is, today people are beginning to listen and believe their stories. After one story came out, another did, and then another, until the numbers were so overwhelming that people couldn’t possibly ignore such a message. Once one woman feels brave enough to tell her story, and have that story be acknowledged and at the same time have the assaulter be held accountable for their actions, more women can come out in hopes that people will finally believe them. It is an ongoing act of misogyny that women have continuously been oppressed from expressing their stories.

Due to these accusations, and the fact that people are beginning to listen, a significant movement has begun. The #MeToo movement and “time’s up!” have been spreading quickly and effectively among women. The beginning of the #MeToo movement started with Black activist, Tarana Burke in 2006, and in October of 2017 this campaign boomed by Alyssa Milano on social media. The conversations that have resulted address topics such as verbal and non-verbal cues, what sexual assault is, what sexual harassment is, trying to create a place where harassment isn’t the norm in conversation and interactions, and more.
One place where readers can learn about assault, harassment, pleasure, and more is the erotic romance novel. Anti-romance feminists’ responses to erotic romance novels are similar to how they discuss these accusations being made in the #MeToo and “time’s up!” movements. Anti-romance feminists believe that the sex scenes in erotic romance novels between the hero and heroine are nonconsensual and promote harassment and assault. However, I would argue that this reductive view of erotic romance closes down or denies the radical possibility of the genre. Women can use the erotic romance genre to own their pleasure, because women are done having their sexual lives dictated by anything else but themselves. Not only this, but also these books create a way to understand the blurred lines and gray areas of sex, relationships, and consent.

In a response to an interview by Jonathan Capehart, Hillary Clinton stated that the entire romance novel industry was about “women being grabbed and thrown on a horse and ridden off into the distance.” Clinton felt that men’s aggressive behaviors may have come from the romance novel industry. Clinton claimed that the entire romance genre is just a collection of abusive attitudes and acts. Nevertheless, her comment was out of context. The male behaviors in romance novels, which were discussed in Chapter Two, are certainly not always aggressive, and many male characters who act aggressive towards the women are the antagonists or villains. If a hero does act in a manner that many would consider abusive, this may be a representation of the fantasy level for readers.

Hillary Clinton isn’t the only one to claim that romance novels are anti-feminist. The erotic romance and romance are often debated, particularly how feminist they are and whether they are helping or not helping the world become equal. While I will not claim that every erotic

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romance novel is a representation of feminism, what I do believe is that erotic romance can do feminist work. Perhaps reading and having an open dialogue about what relationships are like in the erotic romance could help us move forward in the #MeToo movement.

Recently, an online commentator gave a review to the final chapter of the Fifty Shades films, *Fifty Shades Freed*. TK, as he\(^{119}\) refers to himself, titled his review as “Review: ‘50 Shades Freed’ Is an Ignorant, Poisonous Anti-Feminist Hate Anthem.” TK gives his readers a very harsh review of this movie and the plot stating:\(^{120}\)

No, it’s insulting to every single relationship on this planet. It’s not just that it’s badly made, badly acted, horrifically written and lazily directed. It’s that it’s actively bad for people. It’s a blight on humanity.\(^{121}\)

In his comments, TK isn’t taking into account the actual people who read these novels and watch the films. He ends his review with, “Enjoy your god damn shitwaffle, America. You deserve it.”\(^{122}\) Obviously, TK believes that this movie isn’t good for audiences. However, what if we used *Fifty Shades* as a way to show the ways in which Christian Grey displays verbal and non-verbal cues about why their relationship was unhealthy?\(^{123}\) Part of the reason people can become concerned with the erotic romance genre is that women enjoy the fantasy of male heroes, like Christian Grey, in their fantasies, but not in their life. TK states that this film, and the story, insults every single relationship as a result of the fact that it is badly made, “horrifically” written, and so on. This is the language that people use about the erotic romance genre. I use Clinton and

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\(^{119}\) Yes, he is a he. As he refers to himself, “[…] Being a fifty-something man […]”

\(^{120}\) This review came from the site, *Pajiba*, a movie, TV, and book review site. The commentators on this site, also called Eloquents, are known for their snark.


\(^{122}\) “Shitwaffle.” That is “horrifically written.”

\(^{123}\) I will elaborate further in this chapter, but one of my interviewees, Martha, told me how her relationship changed with an ex-boyfriend partly because of the novel *Fifty Shades*. 

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TK as examples, because it shows how two very different people will express their opinions on this genre. Clinton as the First Lady of the U.S. from 1993-2001 and the Senator of New York, represents a mainstream feminist perspective, and TK, representing amateur film critics, together embody, a span of people who talk about the romance and erotic romance genre.

TK claims that why the Fifty Shades Freed movie, and story, is poorly written. As I explored earlier, “poorly written” was often associated with the generalization that erotic romances are formulaic and therefore devalued. According to such critics women shouldn’t be reading or watching these types of stories because they are promoting binary gender roles, patriarchy, and toxic masculinity. However, as my interviewees show, romance readers enjoy these stories in their fantasies and that is a way of embracing their sexual agency.

The #MeToo and “time’s up!” movement and the feminist approach to sexual agency got me thinking about the erotic romance books that women read. Here is an entire genre of novels that could be part of the answer about what sexual harassment and assault looks like. As a solution to this problem, rather than denying the romance and the sex, we could embrace it. Readers could have open dialogue about what consent looks like and the fact that it’s okay if they enjoy these sexual scenarios in their fantasies. This chapter examines how women learn and educate themselves on pleasure, relationships, and how erotic romance could serve as a link between the demands of the #MeToo movement and women voicing their desires. Whenever romance readers pick up an erotic romance book they find common themes such as fantasy versus reality, educational aspects, a feminist “guilty pleasure,” and more.¹²⁴ There is a long real, not fantastical, history of women being oppressed for many reasons and one aspect of the

¹²⁴ In other words, many women who read these books are feminists and they feel guilty in the pleasure they receive from reading these novels.
struggle has been being able to be a sexual woman, getting pleasure from sex, and finding pleasure on their own through the erotic romance genre.

As I conducted my interviews I noticed a pattern with some of the women’s answers. Pro-romance feminists were telling me that erotic romance was a way for them to learn about relationships, healthy and unhealthy verbal and non-verbal cues, sex, and pleasure. By examining the erotic romance, itself such as scenes in these stories, and citing quotes from my interviews, I will show why and how the erotic romance novel can be used as a way to help women learn and educate themselves about sexual agency and pleasure.

In 2018, Jennifer Weiner wrote a New York Times article about this subject titled “We Need Bodice-Ripper Sex Ed.”[125] Weiner discusses common themes in romance novels such as birth control, consent, and other difficult topics people take up before or during sex. Weiner reviews the fact that she got sex education primarily through the romance novel, with a minor amount from a health class or a parental figure. Ten percent of what she learned about sex from her parents, was that sex is for marriage and only “for a committed, loving, monogamous relationship.”[126] Another ten percent she got was from health classes in school and she described them as the famous scene from Mean Girls: “Don’t have sex, because you will get pregnant, and die.” This kind of sexual education (or lack thereof) is common for many of women in America. Since sex education is still inadequate in America, many people learn through friends and popular culture. Is it truly the romance books that are the problem, or the lack of productive sex education? Since sex education and parents are more often than not informing pre-teens and

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[126] Ibid.
teens about these important topics, one solution to the challenges they face may be found in the erotic romance novel.

Sarah Wendell’s *Everything I Know about Love I Learned from Romance Novels* analyzes why and how the romance novel can be used as a form of education. Wendell states: “Let’s be honest: there are not many venues through which women can learn about sex and sexuality with judgment-free and honest communication.”¹²⁷ But when it comes to a romance and an erotic romance novel? You bet that the genre can provide a space for women to learn about their sexual agency without any type of judgment. Romance readers are not passive readers; they know not to replicate particular scenes from this genre. Rather, erotic romance readers can learn the bad parts of fantasy, while at the same time understanding what consent, pleasure, sexual agency, and empowerment look like. Not only this, but readers can also learn that those fantasies women have that hold value but need not replicate reality.

One of Wendell and Tan’s chapters has a subtitle asking, “Aren’t Romances All the Same?” in which they respond by saying “Short answer: Yes. Also, no. But in asking, you reveal how little you know about this genre.”¹²⁸ Erotic romances are most certainly not all the same. Erotic romance books have layers, complexities, and sometimes more intense plotlines compared to other genres I have read. In analyzing the beginnings of the genre in the late 1700s, I found that both eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels and modern erotic romance have the same elements and structure, and yet novels written by Jane Austen are taught and discussed, but not today’s erotic romances. Maya Rodale argues that we need to make sure we use the correct language when we talk about erotic romance novels and their readers: “But when we say only stupid women read these books, we are telling young girls that they are foolish for believing that

¹²⁷ Wendell, *Everything I Know About Love I Learned from Romance Novels*, 117.
¹²⁸ Wendell and Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, 121.
they can be beautiful and loveable just the way they are.”

Heroes in romance novels fall in love with the heroines because they are “beautiful and loveable just the way they are.” Erotic romance novels have something to offer, challenge patriarchy, and stimulate women’s pleasure.

Textual Analysis

Conversation and dialogue between the protagonists is necessary in the erotic romance genre. The hero and heroine often have open dialogue. This is one of the ways in which erotic romance novels can be used as a form of sex education. Expressing your voice, your wants, and your needs are a struggle for many readers. Erotic romance novels can reveal ways to put the words and questions that we couldn’t formulate ourselves. For example, in a recent novel, The Ones Who Got Away by Roni Loren, there is a scene between the two romance protagonists having sex for the first time in which they discuss birth control/STD protection:

“Shit.” [Finn]
Her muscles tensed. “What?” [Olivia]
“Condoms.” He moved his hand away. “Dammit. I haven’t done this in so long, I don’t have any. I didn’t think —”
“My purse is on the side table. I have one.”
Relief flooded his features. “Thank God. You are the best girl ever.”

Here writers are remembering the fact that while erotic romance novels are fantasy, bits of reality need to be taken into account. Moments such as this can help a reader relate to the text. This scene from The Ones Who Got Away reminds readers that characters can still get pregnant and get STI’s and STD’s. A common message is that talking about subjects such as protection isn’t

130 Check out “Smart Bitches, Trashy Books” cite by going to their shop. They have a mug affirming, “Disrupt the patriarchy, read romance.”
sexy, but there are ways to make it work if people are taught in sex education, or in a romance book, about communication and verbal and non-verbal cues.

Some argue that since erotic romances are fantasy, readers aren’t really learning anything in the scene because the protagonists can be put into a perfect moment. However, as Weiner describes, books cover many different scenarios, relationships, and interactions: “The books not only cover blissful sex but also describe a whole range of intimate moments, from the awkward to the funny to the very bad, including rape of both the stranger and intimate-partner variety.”

As readers see common themes that show negative relationships, they can begin to make sure their needs are met, and educate themselves on their partners about consensual relationships.

Another scene in *The Ones Who Got Away* describes a scene when the main protagonist, Olivia, also known as Liv, is arguing with her boss. Her boss, Preston, assumes that Olivia will work long days and weekends for weeks on end with no vacation. There were a few times in the past they had sex, and, in this scene, he harasses her:

“Olivia, what the hell is going on with you? You’re my partner in crime when shit hits the fan here. I’m telling you I need you, and you’re threatening to bail? This isn’t you.” [Preston]

“Maybe you don’t know me then.” [Olivia]

He scoffed. “Don’t know you? Come on.” He got up from behind the desk and stepped around it to perch on the front, facing off with her. He gave her a confident smirk, the one the interns got all doe-eyed over. “I’d say we know each other pretty well. I know you have a cute birthmark on your inner right thigh.”

Her nails curled into her palms. “That’s not knowing me. That’s fucking me.”

Here, Olivia’s boss is telling her that he knows her just because he knows what her body looks like. Preston doesn’t know Olivia the way that Finn does. Preston is using this knowledge to perhaps get Olivia back into bed, antagonize her, persuade her to stay at work because he wants her around, we don’t really know because there isn’t an interior monologue for the antagonist,

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132 Weiner, “We Need Bodice Ripper Sex Ed.”
Preston. In any case, it’s a scene that show the ways in which men should no longer be allowed to act. Due to the long hours Olivia has at work, no weekends off, no vacations, and the fact that Preston gave her all of the work, in this passage she decides to quit her job and pursue the job she has always wanted, photography. This passage between Olivia and Preston describes a form of sexual harassment between the heroine and an antagonist. Women who are reading erotic romance books can examine scenes like this one, think about what they would do in such a situation, catch these cues, and learn that it is sexual harassment. Readers can also learn how to create better sexual relationships through claiming and practicing the cues of consent.

The “open bedroom” differentiates the erotic romance from a romance novel. While having sex, or masturbataing, people begin to learn naturally about themselves and their partner(s) when it comes to pleasure. Erotic romance books are different from romance due to their explicit language and their vivid details of sex scenes. I am going to elaborate on the scene between Finn and Olivia from above to analyze one example of sex scenes from these novels.\textsuperscript{134} I won’t illustrate the entire scene, only a snippet:\textsuperscript{135}

\begin{quote}
“Still with me, Livvy?” [Finn]
She sighed. “So very with you.” [Olivia]
“Tell me you want this.”
She opened her eyes, finding him staring down at her, his jaw set, barely banked desire all over his face. That look said he’d die if she told him to stop. That look said he’d stop anyway.
“I want you.”
“Thank God.” He tore open the condom with quick fingers and rolled it on, his attention staying on her. “Tell me which position works best for you.”
She blinked, her breath still coming in pants and her mind scattered. She’d never had a guy ask that before. They always just… did their thing unless she made a suggestion. “Hands and knees.”
He hissed out a breath, clearly in full approval. “Flip over, gorgeous. I’m going to make you do that again.”\textsuperscript{136}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{134} The plot and the hero thicken!
\textsuperscript{135} Erotic romance books have a tendency to have pages worth on just one sexual encounter. There is foreplay, dirty talk, sex, and then the aftermath with cuddling together.
\textsuperscript{136} Loren, \textit{The Ones Who Got Away}, 209.
This particular scene lasted for twelve pages if you count from when they first kiss to their snuggling in bed afterwards. There are a few examples of asking for consent throughout this scene and taking into account Olivia’s desires and pleasure. Finn and Olivia have been performing foreplay for quite some time, and Finn decides to ask her again before they have sex to make sure Olivia still wants to. The hero is checking in with the heroine about how she is feeling and that she’s comfortable. Olivia verbally tells him that she still wants him, and he is of course overjoyed. Finn also has non-verbal cues here. Olivia notices ways he looks. Finn would “die”\(^{137}\) if she said stop, but he would most certainly stop if she told him to. Erotic romance protagonists frequently show such narrative examples of consent.

Finn also asks Olivia what position works best for her. Not only is the quote “Tell me which position works best for you” for the permission of giving and receiving pleasure, but it also shows one way in which a protagonist, or a person, can make sure that the other partner is consenting and having fun. He is asking her what position that she enjoys the most and gets most stimulation out of to achieve having an orgasm. As Finn states, “I’m going to make you do that again,” Olivia has already had one orgasm and he’s going to continue with that stimulation. Not only do erotic romance novels provide a form of sex education through understanding what sexual harassment looks like and how to ask for consent, they also describe the best part of sex, which is that it’s pleasurable. The protagonists’ emphasis on pleasure, and mutual satisfaction, send a message about sexual equality that sex feels good. Feminism, of course, is founded on equality, and in the erotic romance part of that equality can be that the partner(s) who are having sex together are all enjoying themselves and having orgasms. This powerful message suggests how women can control their sex lives and not have it dominated by anyone else.

\(^{137}\) Hyperbole!
Erotic romance books can go even further than just how protagonists and antagonists interact with each other. There are moments when the romance protagonists are with their friends and family and the books depict how they communicate together. In another scene from *The Ones Who Got Away*, Olivia has just kissed Finn and from what her friend, Kincaid, can tell Olivia may be planning on having sex with Finn. Olivia hasn’t seen Finn in many years and he was her high school crush. Kincaid notices that Olivia could be in a situation that she may regret due to the fact that she has been drinking quite a bit. As romance readers we know that Finn isn’t a bad guy, but this scene allows for an awareness of reality:

“Um, can we have a minute, please?” Liv said finally.
[...] But Kincaid smiled a smile that could cut right through a person, her Southern belle accent like a sugarcoated knife. “Sure. A minute. And Finn, it’s great to see you, but our dear Liv here has had a lot to drink tonight, so I’m sure you’ll understand that after I give you a few minutes to say goodnight, I’ll be walking her to her room.”

Finn stared at Kincaid for a moment and then nodded, keeping his expression smooth and feeling like a world-class dick. “Of course.”

Erotic romance books can even depict ways to *prevent* sexual assault or harassment. The scene above, shows how one friend can help another get out of a situation that she may regret. Kincaid is concerned for Olivia because she has been drinking and she sees her kissing and flirting with someone. Erotic romance readers can learn from these scenes about when a friend may be not in the right frame of mind because they have been drinking, and they offer a dialogue about how to get someone out of a potentially dangerous situation.

*Women’s Pleasure*

Not only can I show you scenes from erotic romance books to prove that they help women learn about sexual agency and consent, but I can show you through the people who were

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interviewed, who emphasized how they learned and grew because of them. One of my interviewees, Poppy (19), mentions in the interview why she wanted to talk about erotic romance books and be a part of this project:

Interviewer: “All right, so I was curious what brought you to me or why you wanted to talk about erotic romance?”
Poppy: […] “Knowing yourself and honoring your own sexuality and your own pleasure is very important to relationships and preventing any abusive or manipulative relationships. And you can learn a lot of behaviors by reading. Cause I know I’m the biggest book devourer there is and I know, especially being younger and not even reading erotica when you’re younger or a romance novel you pick off themes and tropes from that. And especially when they’re repeated you learn what you deem to be normal, which of course is different for everyone.”

Here Poppy describes the ways in which she has learned through reading and is specifies what she learned in erotic romance books. Given that she is a “devourer” of books, especially romance, she feels that the genre helps her educate herself regarding what people think is normal and healthy in relationships, what negative relationships look like, honoring your sexuality, and getting to know your likes and dislikes. Poppy even goes on to express that she is able to better understand what harassment and abuse looks like in her emphasis on how to avoid abusive or manipulative relationships.” Women can get to know what their pleasure looks like, feel confident in that, and help that guide a healthy relationship. Poppy is telling us that romance novels can be a way for women to learn how to prevent abusive relationships in reality as well as honoring your sexual self-knowledge.

Poppy also discusses the ways in which men are highly praised for their sexuality. She observes that female sexuality gets a really bad reputation, which it most certainly does, and for some reason when a woman is in tune with her own sexuality all of a sudden, she is labeled as some sort of “temptress.” A woman who enjoys sex, or enjoys reading her “smutty” novels, gets labeled as something negative. Young women are being negatively labeled, such as “slut” or
“temptress,” when they are confident about their sexuality. A place where women can be in tune with their female sexuality is in their fantasies, thanks to the romance and erotic romance novel. The erotic romance is a private way to learn.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the hero is someone that a woman enjoys reading about and having in her fantasy but does not necessarily want him in reality. She can pick up the book and have him as her fantasy boyfriend and then put the book down. One of my interviewees, Martha (20), discusses the ways in which her ex-boyfriend (Bob) acted like Christian Grey from Fifty Shades of Grey in negative ways: 139

Martha: “[chuckles], When I was reading the Fifty Shades of Grey I was with Bob [ex-boyfriend] …So, I would pinpoint certain things and be like ‘Oh, that’s like Bob’, ‘Oh, he’s being controlling’ in that way. It actually made me realize how controlling Bob is. Seeing certain things that Christian would do, I’d be like ‘Oh, Bob does those things.’ But then he also does other things that are worse.”
Interviewer: “Do you remember what? I mean, if you don’t mind me asking.”
Martha: “About Bob?”
Interviewer: “Yeah, that compared you to the erotic romances.”
Martha: “Christian would pick out outfits for Ana and be like ‘Oh, I want you to wear this this looks nice on you.’ But, Bob would literally say ‘Oh, how are you going to go wear that to this party?’ He would try to control what I wore all the time.”

Interestingly, Martha enjoyed Christian Grey as a hero:

Interviewer: “Did you like Christian as a hero?”
Martha: “Yeah.”
Interviewer: “Do you know why?”
Martha: “I like him as a hero because he compromised. And because you can’t be a hero without listening to the people around you. And he listened and compromised. So, that was cool.”
Interviewer: “Is there anything else about him?”
Martha: “Um. [takes her a moment]. I think he’s genuinely a really nice guy I think deep down he loves his family, he really cares about Anastasia, he works hard, you know? I think he’s genuinely a good guy and you get to see that more throughout the books.”

Martha and I discuss the similarities and comparisons to her previous relationship to specifically Fifty Shades of Grey. This is one of the only erotic series that she has read and remembers. She

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139 Everyone seems to have an opinion on the book Fifty Shades, even people who have never read it. This book will be discussed in greater length in Chapter 4.
mentions a paranormal romance series she read but doesn’t remember it in detail. In other words, you can read just one book, or one trilogy, and still get to know unhealthy cues from partners. Martha specifically talks about the way Christian chooses clothes for her because he wants to see her in it. In the novel Christian is thinking about his own pleasure about what he wants to see Anastasia in, just as Bob is thinking about himself to what Martha is wearing. Martha was with Bob for a few years and didn’t see him change, grow, or compromise. Rather, she talks about how Bob was unmotivated and controlling during the whole relationship. The reason that she liked Christian as a hero was because he listened, genuinely compromised, and honestly cares for Anastasia. This is not to say that Anastasia didn’t change or develop. In fact, as you read the books you see how they help and guide each other. Martha broke up with Bob and part of what helped guide her was Christian Grey as a romance hero.

An erotic romance reader can begin to think critically about the characters, the plot, the messages and every little detail of the story. Erotic romance readers read fantasy, knowing it’s fantasy, but begin to pick up on common themes. Charlotte (21) discusses the ways in which the romance novel enables her to ask important questions about society:

Charlotte: “Yeah, I’d say it’s changing like how I look at romance a little bit. […] I went to a school that – a high school that was very about critical thinking, so every time I read something I like critically engage with how I am engaging with it. If that makes sense. Like being critical of what I am thinking and what I am getting out of this book. […] Cause I like to read it and think like ‘How is this feminist?’ ‘How is this not feminist?’ ‘What does this say about social norms?’ ‘What does this say about people’s desires?’[…]’

Interviewer: “Okay. So, do you think there is a separation that you have with fantasy versus reality?”
Charlotte: “Yes!”

Mabel (22) talks about how through the erotic romance novel she learns about her desires, her pleasure, what she likes and what she doesn’t like. She specifies with Fifty Shades about what she doesn’t like in reality, which is how dominating Christian Grey is. However, she enjoys how
loyal a hero can be. When it would come to finding a partner, she knows she doesn’t want someone who is controlling, but she does want loyalty:

Interviewer: “Do you ever feel like you learn from romance books? Do you ever feel like they educate you about something?”
Mabel: “Um, I think that they like, a lot of them they will tell me not only what I want in a mate but also what I don’t want in a mate. Cause like, with the whole *Fifty Shades* thing like I like confidence and stuff, but when it becomes more of a like ‘Oh, look at all of these things that I have.’ Like more super dominating that’s when it becomes ‘Eh, I don’t know.’ Um, but I do really like the loyalness too with people. So, when reading the books, it’s just like ‘Oh, this is what I want, and this is what I like, and this is what I don’t like.’”
Interviewer: “So, it sounds like, um, what you like and what you don’t like with a partner.”
Mabel: “Yeah.”
Interviewer: “Or a mate. However, you wish to phrase it.”
Mabel: “Right, exactly.”

Eloise (21) expands on how she feels that erotic romance and romance novels aren’t necessarily realistic to the mechanics of how sex work in reality, but that readers can learn about sexual desires and different types of relationships. According to Eloise, a romance reader can learn about what they are and aren’t willing to tolerate in a relationship and find the right person to have a relationship with:

Interviewer: “Do you think romances are educational, ever?”
[…]
Eloise: “I would say yes. And I think they have been for me – and not necessarily about like the mechanics of sex, cause they’re not always super realistic in that regard. But, like about like what’s possible when it comes to sex I think and about like knowing your own like desires and like being able to articulate more clearly what you want I feel like. They’re educational in like knowing – like having all of these like different like, um ways a relationship can work basically. And seeing what you like and don’t like I think can be really educational for like your own relationships and like knowing like what you will and won’t tolerate. […] But like this idea that marriage is what you should be reaching for I feel like society does imply those things and romance doesn’t. Yes, a woman always ends up with a man, but it’s like – and sometimes it’s like a heroine who is like ‘I don’t need a man!’ and end up with a man at the end – but it’s not like because they’ve settled for someone just like because that person is attracted to them. It’s like they found someone who actually fulfills their needs. I think that that’s really useful. It’s like seeing what that can look like and maybe realizing like what your own needs are and like why they’re important. And I think that that’s a feminist use of romance. Or like a way that romance can be feminist.”
Erotic romance novels can help women get out of relationships that they are unhappy in or notice are unhealthy for them. Wendell confirms this finding: “Reading about different types of people and different and sometimes impossible situations gives romance readers a better understanding of what they want in a relationship.” Erotic romance readers, and my interviewees, learn quite a bit about themselves through these books. So, instead of signaling the demise of feminism, we could talk about the fact that for a few hours a woman can read an erotic romance book and get to know herself beyond who she is already. She can escape for a few hours into a realm that is all her own, take that information into reality, and stand up for herself. That, to me, is a win for feminism.

One of the ways in which someone can express their sexuality is telling their partner what they enjoy. Not only do women learn about healthy versus unhealthy relationships in reading the erotic romance, erotic romance readers learn what they find sexy and pleasurable or want to try out in the bedroom. One of the interviewees, Alexis (22), tells me the way she uses erotic romance novels as a way to change her sex life with her boyfriend. Alexis is conversing about the popular quote from erotic romance books “You. Are. Mine.” For clarification, this is a common quote heroes will say to heroines:

Alexis: “I’ve noticed that in the real world. I’ll read things and it’ll be like ‘You’re mine’ and I’ll be like [excited tone] ‘Oh, alright’. But, then if in real life someone was like ‘Tell me you’re mine’ I’m like [grossed out voice] ‘Alright. I mean I will, but it’s not the same’. [Laughs].”
Interviewer: “So, you don’t think that would change your own sex life then?”
Alexis: “No, I mean it does. It does. … Cause my boyfriend will say something sometimes to me like ‘Tell me you’re mine’ or ‘Tell me you belong to me’ and I’m like ‘I don’t know, I mean I like that, but for some reason you saying it to me is somehow more intense.’”

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140 Wendell, *Everything I Know About Love I Learned from Romance Novels*, 74.
141 This quote will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Four.
Alexis expresses the fact that she enjoys it when a romance hero or her boyfriend says, “You’re mine”. She says that while she likes and will tell her boyfriend she is his, she prefers when he tells her rather than asks her. Erotic romance heroes are known for their intensity, possessiveness, and domineering nature, as discussed in Chapter Two. Here, Alexis has learned through erotic romance that one version of dirty talk is more pleasurable for her than another. She would rather her boyfriend say, “You’re mine” rather than “Tell me you’re mine.” She says that her boyfriend telling her makes the experience more intense. Here, an erotic romance book reader has learned something about her female sexual pleasure. Theses quotes are really similar in nature because “You’re mine” and “Tell me you’re mine” are both a way to show a form of dominance in the bedroom.  

Several other interviewees discussed how erotic romance books help them understand their own sexuality whether that be in reality or in their fantasy.

Cassandra: “I don’t know if true love is a thing and I think there’s a big part of me that doesn’t believe it’s real, or not true love, I don’t know what that is, I actually don’t think true love is a thing. I think being interested in someone so much that you want to be around them forever, I think that probably comes from my own insecurities. Yeah, I think I’m not that interesting of a person physically or mentally. To hold someone’s interest forever, the fact that in a perfect novel, that it is, yes they are still together forever because they care that much about each other. That’s really sexy to me. And that doesn’t mean that there can’t be other people because I don’t care about that. Cause that’s fun too. But, that their interest in one another is so, it is real and it’s forever. I think I worry that there’s a part of me that doesn’t think attraction and the desire to be with a person lasts forever, so, because I might believe that, I don’t know, I don’t necessarily need them to be together forever although I would like it.”

Interviewer: “Yeah, so it doesn’t really have to end in a way where they stay together forever and marriage sounds like it would practically bore you.”

Cassandra: “Oh yeah!”

Interviewer: “So, you probably gravitate or prefer a book that does still end with them in their relationship?”

Cassandra: “Cause I think – yeah, the biggest thing for me is it would be really cool if that it’s true, that I could be important enough for someone to care about forever and they don’t get bored of me. But, I don’t know if that’s true or if it’s a real concept to demand

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142 That isn’t bad! Some people enjoy being dominated consensually. BDSM will be discussed in a Chapter Four.
Cassandra expresses quite a few interests here about the relationship between the hero and heroine of a romance story. Cassandra tells me that she thinks it’s sexy when a hero in an erotic romance story is so enthralled, attracted, and dedicated to the heroine that no one else could possibly compare to her. The hero could never find someone else so captivating. This is not to say that the hero and heroine need to be monogamous with one another. In fact, Cassandra states, “That doesn’t mean that there can’t be other people.” There can be other people who are having sex with the hero and heroine outside of each other, but the important part is that the heroine is so desirable to the hero because of who she is that he will always want and need her forever.

Romance protagonists are often like this; they are meant for each other and there is something intense about their connection. Due to Cassandra’s own insecurities and her question of whether or not such a relationship could really exist, she would find it really sexy if in real life someone desired her more than anyone else because of how she looks and who she is. So, for Cassandra, it’s nice to escape into a book where it is known that the hero will want the heroine and can’t stop thinking about anyone else but her. However, in life it would be a little creepy. In life, people don’t know what the future looks like, but in a romance book it’s written in the stars that the hero will never be the same once he finds his heroine. For a few hours, Cassandra can picture herself as this desirable female figure in an erotic romance book and feel good.

The erotic romance novel has always been a way to show female pleasure and sexuality. It has been the one genre where it is female (gynocentric) central, compared to male (androcentric) central, when it comes to making sure that both partners are satisfied. Erotic romance books are a way for women to understand what they like and don’t like in the bedroom and then they can express that to their partner(s). Female pleasure is rarely mentioned or talked
about in popular culture and it’s one of the main reasons women as readers enjoy these novels. How is that not a win for feminism when women learn what they enjoy sexually and pleurably, express it to their partner(s) and then can have a great sex life? Women have a place where they can express themselves and feel satisfied on their own. Perhaps the reluctance to embrace and celebrate the genre is rooted in patriarchy and fear of female sexual agency.

**Feminism & Consent**

Since there are many sex scenes and non-platonic interactions between characters in the erotic romance novel, the topic of consent is likely to come up. Consent is important for many reasons. I will specifically be discussing the consent needed between two or more partners in the erotic romance novel when it comes to having sex. This could be oral sex, vaginal sex, anal sex, and other sexually intimate ways people are together, as well as non-consensual scenes and the fantasy around those experiences. First, consent specifically refers to the agreement or permission between people when doing something. There can be many gray areas when it comes to consent between the protagonists in the erotic romance novel, and to be sure, I am referring specifically to consent between the hero and heroine. The hero or heroine being raped by an antagonist in the novel is quite common and readers know it’s not the character the heroine will have her HEA with; indeed, it is unclear that this is a violation of the heroine’s desires and wishes.

The question of whether a sexual act was consensual or not, or could be considered rape, often has to do with how the hero acts. The question as framed by romance writers is, “How does

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143 Or use it for their own pleasure through masturbation and fantasy.
one provide a space to explore sometimes darker fantasies without propagating unhealthy ideas about relationships?" Erotic romance books do have moments between the hero and heroine that can be non-consensual, hence the rape fantasy. At the same time the inform people in the real world that romance writers aren’t trying to propagate “unhealthy ideas about relationships.”

In bodice-ripper novels, primarily written in the 1970’s and 1980’s, readers will notice a common interaction between hero and heroine. Bodice-rippers are romantic novels often with a historical setting, and in them the hero often has sex with the heroine non-consensually. The hero will keep having sex with the heroine until she begins to like it since romance novels are predominantly written from the heroine’s point of view, readers understand how she doesn’t want him, but she just can’t help how enjoyable this sexy and domineering man feels. This was a very common theme in romance novels and was clearly rape and not consensual. Wendell and Tan argue that, “…rape scenes gave the heroines permission to explore their sexuality without appearing to be a slut.” One of the only ways that women felt they could “explore their sexuality” was thanks to a romance novel, where the character could have sex with a man, even though she wasn’t married.

Some women enjoy reading a story, going into a fantasy, where a man wants and craves her so much that he just can’t help himself around her. In fantasies it could be enjoyable to have a sex scene that is primal, aggressive, a little ugly, sweaty, where the protagonists groan,

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145 A very famous example of a bodice ripper is the book The Flower and the Flame by Kathleen E. Woodiwiss. This book was written in 1972. Captain Brandon Birmingham is a bodice ripper hero.
146 Wendell and Tan. Beyond Heaving Bosoms, 140.
147 Another theme being that a woman could only ever want sex as long as she were married and had sex with one man.
148 Think about the ways in which Cassandra wanted to be that desirable to one person.
grab, and grope each other all the time. But where do we draw the line between pleasurable sex and rape? Rodale asks this very question:

But still: Why, why, why in the era of no means no, yes means yes, and society actively fighting rape culture, are we still laughingly using a phrase [bodice-ripper] that implies women need to be forced into sex or enjoy rapey sex – and love to read about it for entertainment? The reason is that as a culture, women’s desire and sexuality still freaks us out.\(^149\)

Rape fantasies are such an underground type of fantasy and yet they are very common. While women read erotic romance novels they can feel safe and completely worry-free because it’s in a book they can live out a fantasy without it having to be in their real life. Certainly not all romance readers have this fantasy; the rape fantasy is one of many.

Some feminists, such as anti-romance and anti-sadomasochistic feminists, argue that women aren’t really consenting to events such as marriage, children, or the BDSM that can appear in the erotic romance. In the book *Against Sadomasochism* several writers describe consent as a way of allowing a woman’s life to be lived and controlled by a man because it’s an easier path. Feminists here describe the “easier life” as having the comfort of a man taking care of her for the rest of her life because of his success. However, as Maryel Norris notes, “I am convinced that to use violence against another woman, with or without her ‘consent,’ is not the way to reach Nirvana.”\(^150\) Consenting to an easy life with a man who will provide for you isn’t the way to have pure happiness in life.

However, not every heroine takes the easy path to get to her HEA. The journey is often a difficult path for the heroine to gets what she wants; she takes the more difficult paths to find the happiness that she deserves. Throughout the entire book, *Against Sadomasochism*, the word

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\(^{149}\) Rodale, *Dangerous Books for Girls*, 94.  
consent is put into quotations; implying that the authors believe these women aren’t really consenting to things that they believe were created to enslave women. But in this definition the word consent is limited to the concept of the word acceptance. Consent, quite literally translated, is giving your permission to do something, such as acting as a submissive during a sexual encounter. However, acceptance is tolerating a situation someone has been put into, without really feeling completely comfortable.

As the authors of *Against Sadomasochism* suggest, they would be uncomfortable consensual non-consent, which signals a more evolved version of “rape” scenes in the erotic romance novel. Consensual non-consent enables readers to live out the rape fantasy, while everything remains completely consensual in the sexual act in books or in reality. For example, in the series * Asking for It* by Lilah Pace, it follows erotic romance protagonists, Vivienne and Jonah, on their journey of fulfilling their consensual non-consent sexual fantasy, known as a “rape” fantasy. This is the description of the novel:

Graduate student Vivienne Charles is afraid of her own desires—ashamed to admit that she fantasizes about being taken by force, by a man who will claim her completely and without mercy. When the magnetic, mysterious Jonah Marks learns her secret, he makes an offer that stuns her: they will remain near-strangers to each other, and meet in secret so that he can fulfill her fantasy.

Their arrangement is twisted. The sex is incredible. And—despite their attempts to stay apart—soon their emotions are bound together as tightly as the rope around Vivienne’s wrists. But the secrets in their pasts threaten to turn their affair even darker...

The author of the story even goes into detail to let a potential reader know this type of fantasy is not for everyone:

Reader Advisory: * Asking for It* deals explicitly with fantasies of non-consensual sex. Readers sensitive to portrayals of non-consensual sex should be advised.

Consent isn’t always a part of the erotic novel that women enjoy. Two of the women I talked to discussed a book they connect over and really adore. They both were quick to say how it is one of their favorite books. *Comfort Food* by Kitty Thomas is about a woman, Emily Vargas, who has been captured. The man who has captured her refuses to talk to her, because he knows how much she wants human contact. The entire book is from the perspective of Emily. The reader never gets to know what will happen next because they aren’t in the mind of the man who has captured her. Readers live the fantasy through the eyes of Emily. This story isn’t consensual. This book isn’t for everyone. So, why do women love it so much? What woman in her right mind would ever want to be captured by a dominant man who is doing non-consensual things to her and leaves her in a basement?

First, many women are drawn to the fantasy elements of such novels. Cassandra describes the types of fantasy worlds and the type of hero that she gravitates towards. She recounts:

So if I’m really stressed I notice that I tend to gravitate towards like really BDSM erotic novellas that are short and that are just kind of like other romance novels. I’m definitely into the capture subjugation kind of thing. Just cause for who I am and how I manage stress it would be, on a fantasy level, really nice to be able to, you know on a fantasy level because I wouldn’t actually want this to happen and I’m not advocating it for other people, it would be really nice to just wake up one day and get kidnapped and you have this whole new life that you have to adjust to but someone else is telling you what to do.

On multiple occasions Cassandra mentions the fact that this is on a “fantasy level.” There is hesitancy here in Cassandra’s voice. She is often interrupting her own thoughts and it could be because she is afraid of being judged for her fantasy. It is difficult for her to just state her fantasy and there is a need to qualify her statements. Cassandra talks about the fact that she is stressed and needs to have a character take care of her instead of her having to care for herself every single day like she does in real life. She also emphasizes that she *doesn’t* want this to actually
happen in real life. Someone caring for you in every single way is appealing to these readers. Cassandra appreciates the idea that she could forget about looking good according to society, choosing her clothes, making sure she prepares foods and eats, taking care of her bills, and writing all the assignments and finals due in college. Depending on the escapism a woman is looking for, she may gravitate towards a rape fantasy or a fantasy that explores consensual sex between hero and heroine.

The other woman who enjoyed the book, Alexis, says that *Comfort Food* is the exception to the rule of consensual versus nonconsensual. She enjoys a man, in her fantasy, who is dominant and a little scary. Alexis wants a hero that the heroine could be alarmed by. Alexis doesn’t want the “fluffy” types of romances:

> Yeah, see I’m not one for like the fluffy romance novels where it’s going to be [sarcastic tone] “Oh, ya know I’m a cowboy who like wants to give you babies.” Like, no, like I want you to be a little scary [laughs][…]For me it is especially - it’s one of those things where it is a dominant man or something so, I’ll be like, maybe he’ll like pull her closer to the edge of the bed aggressively and say you know like “open your legs for me” or something like that and where there’s an added layer of like “Oh, this is not just like really vanilla sex, like there’s something going on here.”

Alexis states that she likes the aggressiveness that the hero takes on in telling her exactly what to do. A hero who guides their sexual act and is turned on because he’s with her appeals to Alexis, as does a heroine who can just relax and doesn’t have to think about how to please the hero and what to do next, rather she follows the order given. This is part of the subjection fantasy.

Part of the conversation I had with Alexis involved asking her why *Comfort Food* was so attractive and arousing. What about this book made non-consensual sex erotic to read about?

Interviewer: “What is it about that one then? What is it that’s so, I guess alluring or attractive or…”
Alexis: “I think it goes back to that it’s definitely a way to work out a fantasy. Obviously you don’t actually, or maybe not obviously, I don’t actually want to be like kidnapped and held in a basement. And then even if you did it as a role-play like it wouldn’t be the same. You know like if you just role-played the entire scene of getting kidnapped that can be fun, but it’s not real. So, it’s kind of a way to work out a fantasy where you can kind of get into the role of the woman and be experiencing it and with *Comfort Food* you don’t know what’s going on. Like none of it’s
from his point of view so you’re as lost as she is and so you’re kind of figuring it out as you go, as she is. You know that kind of thing.”
Interviewer: “So, do you identify with the heroine then while you’re reading this?”
Alexis: “Yeah.”
Interviewer: “Or like the woman who has been captured.”
Alexis: “Right.”

In such cases, the scenes between hero and heroine when he is telling her what to do succeed because he knows the heroine better than she knows herself. The hero often knows every detail about the heroine and uses that to his advantage to make sure she is cared for perfectly. This is not the case for every hero, but it is a common theme throughout the erotic romance. When the heroine is cared for, while the reader is picturing herself as the heroine, it means that both heroine and reader can relax and just fall into the world of the fantasy. Both Cassandra and Alexis clearly state that they don’t want to be captured and put into a basement in real life. Nor do they want people in reality to feel like they could ever do that to someone. But, if people can have a book where they can live a fantasy that is unpredictable, can take their stress away, and feel aroused, what’s wrong with that? Women who read these books realize that it’s fiction and the point of this fiction is to escape the reality they are currently and always in.

But, the thing is, that these novels are just that. They are fiction and they are a narrative. Readers don’t actually want the heroes represented in the erotic romance books we read. If some random guy captured a reader in real life she would be scared to death. But, in a book? We can sit back and enjoy the ride of our fantasies. If people are going to tell readers that they want a man like this in their life, then we could say the people who love to read “thrillers, westerns, and detective fiction, enjoy being beaten up, tortured, shot, stabbed, dragged by galloping horses, and thrown out of moving vehicles” long for those expectations themselves. For quite some time,

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152 Krentz, Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women, 69.
zombies were a huge hit and people claimed they “wanted” a zombie apocalypse to happen. Really, it was just about living the fantasy of that type of post-apocalyptic world. Readers can visualize themselves as the protagonist(s), instead of living it in reality.

It may be wishful thinking, but someday I would want it to be common knowledge that the women who read romance, erotic romance, and erotic novellas are pro-romance feminists and that they don’t want everything that happens in these stories to be a part of their reality. I hope more and more people come out stating that they can have these dark fantasies while at the same time having people know they’re fictional narratives. Through the insights gleaned from my interviews, the scholars who study the genre, readers, and writers of the ever-popular genres, erotic romance and romance, I know that we are not passive readers. We think critically, we learn, we grow, and we change for ourselves.

Many darker fantasies are tied into BDSM and recently BDSM has become a mainstream theme in the erotic romance novel. In the next chapter I explore what BDSM is and what it looks like, examine the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series and its intense popularity, and finally the quote that no one seems to ever talk about or explore but appears in so many erotic romances: “You. Are. Mine.” This will be the final chapter of my paper and it will go deeper into women’s lustful fantasies.
Chapter Four: Bind You. Tease You. Love You. The Boom of BDSM
Fifty Shades of Grey - The Cover Girl

“Why don’t you like to be touched?” I whisper, staring up into his soft gray eyes.
“Because I’m fifty shades of fucked up, Anastasia.”
- Fifty Shades of Grey by EL James

In 2011 Fifty Shades of Grey by EL James was published. As the title of this chapter suggests, the Fifty Shades series has become the face of the erotic romance genre. Indeed, whether people have read it or not, many have opinions. The series has been discussed by feminists, BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadism, Masochism) communities, men who wonder if they need to act like Christian Grey, couples who want to and did change their sex lives, and more. “This latter series has enjoyed spectacular success, with the first novel becoming the fastest-selling book of all time and the trilogy selling more than 100 million copies.” The book is a top best seller all over the world. Fifty Shades of Grey has sold worldwide and even in 2018, the popularity of this novel hasn’t declined.

153 Are you looking for a good parody? Try Fifty Shames of Earl Grey by Fanny Merkin (Andrew Shaffer). The BDSM stands for Bards, Dungeons, Sorcery, and Magic!
158 Emily Harris, Michael Thai, and Kate Barlow, “Fifty Shades Flipped: Effects of Reading Erotica Depicting a Sexually Dominant Woman Compared to a Sexually Dominant Man,” Journal of Sex Research no. 54 (2017): 386.
Fifty Shades grew out of fan fiction based on Stephenie Myer’s Twilight series.\(^{159}\) A number of EL James’ characters are based on a character from Twilight: Christian Grey is Edward Cullen, Anastasia Steele is Bella Swan, Jose Rodriguez Jr. is Jacob Black and others. Each novel is based in Washington State, Fifty Shades in Seattle and Twilight in Forks. Both Anastasia and Bella worked at a home improvement supply store. EL James’\(^{160}\) novel became so popular so fast because it was originally an online fan fiction of Twilight titled Master of the Universe\(^{161}\) by Snowqueens Icedragon, EL James’ pen name. Twilight was already a very popular young adult romance book and James created an erotic adult version of it. James put Meyer’s characters in the “open bedroom” and readers who were already fans of Twilight got to read more about the protagonists, Edward and Bella, in sex scenes. This is due to the fact that Master of the Universe originally had the same names of the characters from Twilight until James changed them and made a book. EL James also didn’t make Fifty Shades a vampire fantasy, rather, all characters are human. It may not be the writing style of EL James that had her become so popular, but rather a gap that Fifty Shades fills\(^{162}\) with its erotic sex scenes:

As Masters of the Universe, it explored and reworked Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight series, adding more sexually explicit content and investigating the power dynamics of Bella and Edward’s relationship in Twilight through the context of a fictional BDSM relationship. Later, as the commercially sold Fifty Shades series, the same content was repacked with new character names and sold as a boundary pushing erotic romance.\(^{163}\)

\(^{159}\) I believe it is also a fan fiction of the movie Secretary. His name from Secretary is Edward Grey; Edward, from Twilight and Grey for Christian’s last name.

\(^{160}\) P.S. EL James is the pen name of Erika Mitchell.

\(^{161}\) We interrupt this chapter for a fun fact! This original title, Master of the Universe, was still used in the book Fifty Shades of Grey: “He waits, staring out the window, master of his universe, looking down at the little people below from this castle in the sky” (170).

\(^{162}\) That was intended.

James’ fan fiction originally began in 2009 and the demand for more *Fifty Shades* from the fans\(^{164}\) is staggering. *Master of the Universe* was published online three years before it became an erotic romance book. Now James’ work has exploded:

- *Master of the Universe* – FanFiction.net, 2009-2011
- *Fifty Shades Darker* - novel, 2012
- *Fifty Shades Freed* – novel, 2012
- *Fifty Shades of Grey* – movie, 2015
- *Fifty Shades Darker* – movie, 2017
- *Darker: Fifty Shades Darker as Told by Christian* – novel, 2017
- *Fifty Shades Freed* – movie, 2018

This only marks the books and films currently developed from this, which is a craved story by millions of fans\(^{165}\). EL James hasn’t announced anything yet, but it is likely she will write at least one more novel titled: *Freed: Fifty Shades Freed as Told by Christian Grey*. Each book has its own line of sex toys made by Love Honey: toys in this line include nipple clamps, vibrators, butt plugs, cock rings, lubricant, floggers, riding crops, rope, and more. The *Fifty Shades* line includes toys that weren’t even used in the novels. While people may have varying options regarding the series, there is a need for analysis and an understanding of the text due to its reputation. As Katherine Morrissey notes, “*Fifty Shades* invites analysis from the perspectives of both fan and popular romance studies.”\(^{166}\)

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\(^{164}\) The fans of *Fifty Shades of Grey* are also known as “Greysessed”.

\(^{165}\) Movies about *Fifty Shades* are coming into light too. In May of 2018 the movie *Book Club*, starring Diane Keaton, Jane Fonda, Candice Bergen, and Mary Steenburgen, is about four older women who read the book *Fifty Shades* together and begin to explore their sexuality and realize that it isn’t too late to spark up their love life. I find it quite amusing that Don Johnson will star in this movie; he is the father of Dakota Johnson, who played Anastasia Steele in the 2015 film.

\(^{166}\) Morrissey, “Fifty Shades of Remix,” 8.
This chapter will explore three positive aspects of the love of one of the most popular fictional couples, Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey.\(^{167}\) The first section of this chapter will examine why *Fifty Shades of Grey* became so popular. Next, it will explore how EL James got her information on the BDSM communities. Not only will I explore two different perspectives, EL James and those of BDSM communities, but also the frequent theme of fantasy versus reality. From these perspectives, I will elaborate the three positive influences of *Fifty Shades of Grey* for the readers of erotic romance: 1, *Fifty Shades* created an open dialogue about what BDSM is and what it isn’t; 2, reading erotic romance has become less of a dirty little secret; and 3, women started writing more in the erotic romance genre.

Not only will these three points be made, but I will refer to how my interviewees felt about the series within these three arguments. This chapter will end with a commonly used line in erotic romances, “You are mine,” exploring overall what it means to readers. I argue that while EL James’ series isn’t the best point of reference when it comes to BDSM and the erotic romance genre, *Fifty Shades* doesn’t deserve that vast amount of cruel criticism it gets. *Fifty Shades* is just the cherry on top of the mountain of ice cream that is the thousands of erotic romance novels that are out there, and I believe that it created quite a few positive influences and perspectives for the genre.

\(^{167}\) I want to use this footnote to quickly make one point. While each of these three positive points to the book *Fifty Shades of Grey* is true and I believe them, it does bother me that this is the book that people feel frame every erotic romance overall. I don’t think that it was well written, just like others believe, but the problem is people make fun of the fan base. The enjoyment of reading erotic romance novels isn’t the only part, rather it is the fans and readers of romance novels, because these books feel female. Part of the problem is whom the erotic romance books are popular with that people have a tendency to tease. A lot of popular culture is silly or excellent brain candy, like *Fifty Shades*. Just remember, there are a lot of erotic romances that are much better written, and that *Fifty Shades* is not the only type of erotic romance. This series shouldn’t be the only point of reference to erotic romance.
Fifty Shades, We Get It

*Fifty Shades of Grey* is a story about a naïve young woman, Anastasia, who meets billionaire Christian Grey. Anastasia is a virgin who is portrayed as a woman who doesn’t know a lot about sex. Her hero, Christian, is more experienced when it comes to sex and is a little older, giving him an authoritative position. However, there is a darker and kinkier side to Christian Grey. Christian has a very troubled past and doesn’t allow Anastasia, or any woman, to touch him in areas where he has cigarette burns.\(^{168}\) Christian is a man who will “[…] exercise control in all things […].”\(^{169}\) In other words, not only is Christian powerful, rich, not to mention that he owns multiple buildings in Seattle, he is a Dominant in the bedroom with common instruments used in the BDSM communities.

Part of the reason that this book became so widespread was that of the plot itself. It has sex, kink, a very handsome hero who is a billionaire who cares for his heroine, a blank slate heroine who eventually becomes a woman who sticks up for herself and has confidence, and of course an HEA. While Christian Grey had his fifteen other submissives, Anastasia is the one who sweeps him off his feet, encourages him to become the man he is underneath and only has eyes for him.\(^{170}\)

While many erotic romance books are like this, *Fifty Shades of Grey* had luck on its side. James even agrees that she was fortunate with the popularity of her story. It was a fanfiction of an already popular novel, it had the kink feature, which was rarely seen and talked about, and it

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\(^{168}\) The cigarette burns on Christian’s chest and back came from the man who raised him for the first few years of his life.

\(^{169}\) James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, 10.

\(^{170}\) This is a common trope in erotic romance and romance novels. Often a heroine brings out the man behind the beast.
was on the Internet where women could read it freely. The Internet, E-Books, Kindle, and other media offered a space for romance readers to read without feeling shamed.

Zoe Williams discusses why Fifty Shades became such a big hit:

People who like to trace all new trends back to new technology have offered this explanation – the women who wouldn’t be seen dead reading smut on the tube could read it on their Kindle, and this launched a whole world of sales. The unexpected element is that the shame of erotic fiction is largely in the imagination, and once people had read it, they felt happy to discuss it openly. It was word of mouth that launched the paperback version on the back of the ebook.  

Women began reading Fifty Shades of Grey on their phone, Kindle, or other device, which then led to word-of-mouth fame. A big part of Fifty Shades’ popularity was due to the fan base. The fact that “once people had read it, they felt happy to discuss it openly” means it helped the popularity of this book. Discussing the novel openly created this type of open dialogue for many topics, including women’s sexuality, fantasies, dominant heroes and of course, BDSM.

**BDSM - An Open Dialogue**

The fans of Fifty Shades are known as “Greysessed.” Part of what “Greysessed” fans were discussing was the explicit erotic sex scenes as well as Christian’s fetish in BDSM. The part that a lot of people were having an open dialogue about was the BDSM layer to Fifty Shades. “That Fifty Shades has the potential to open readers’ pathways to being more comfortable talking about sex with friends and asking for what they want from partners is perhaps one of the most important reasons to ground its cultural meanings with the actual

Erotic romance books have been around for quite some time and women have discussed the books with each other in the past, but it was nothing quite like this where people in their lives had either read it or wanted to read it.

BDSM has appeared in older forms of literature. For example, *Venus in Furs*, written in 1870 by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch is a novel with themes of female dominance and sadomasochism. *Story of O*, written in 1954 by Pauline Réage is about a young woman named O who is taught to always be available for sex to any man who is a part of the same secret society as her lover. Anne Rice, who is best known for her series *The Vampire Chronicles*, wrote a *Sleeping Beauty* series where instead of Beauty awakening with true love’s kiss she is awakened by a Prince through sex and an orgasm and trained as a love slave. In fact, EL James made several references in *Fifty Shades* to the famous novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy in 1892: “The story’s [*Fifty Shades*] regular references to *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* also remind the reader of traces of even older texts and literacy traditions.” Quite specifically, *Fifty Shades* explored older fictions that had to do with sexuality and readers felt like they could not only connect with the text, but also think about how it related to other pieces of literature engaging sexuality in an open way. As Melissa Click notes, “In fact, the experience of the readers I interviewed suggest that *Fifty Shades*’ popularity, like other popular texts before it (e.g., *The Joy of Sex, Sex in the City*) has altered cultural perceptions about women’s sexuality and encouraged readers to talk more openly about sex with others.”

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173 Due to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s work the term “masochism” was derived from his name.
In this part of the chapter, I consider EL James’ perspective on her exploration of how and why she added this element to her erotic story. It is also important to hear from the BDSM community members and learn their view on this novel, thus creating an open dialogue about BDSM and what is right and wrong in the book about BDSM. Finally, I will argue that *Fifty Shades of Grey* was never meant to be a beginners’ guide to BDSM. Yes, many couples’ sex lives changed because of this book and that’s great, however, it’s important to know where the line is drawn between fiction and non-fiction and reality versus fantasy.

**EL James’ Side**

> “Why am I doing this [about to spank Anastasia], Anastasia?” He [Christian] asks.
> “Because I rolled my eyes at you,” I [Anastasia] can barely speak.
> “Do you think that’s polite?”
> “No.”
> “Will you do it again?”
> “No.”
> “I will spank you each time you do it, do you understand?”

Something that needs to be understood from the scene above is that Anastasia could safeword out of this experience at any time.177 Anastasia could say “Red” and everything would stop. “Red” is Anastasia’s safe word that Christian gave her right away. This scene is only one example of what the BDSM in *Fifty Shades of Grey* looks like. Christian is the Dominant, informing his submissive (Anastasia) that she acted rudely towards him and she needs to be punished for rolling her eyes at him. EL James got her inspiration from quite a few places to

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177 What’s a safeword? A safeword is a word that is used to communicate between partners that they want their scene, play, sexual act, etc. to cease from continuing. Many people enjoy saying “No”, “Don’t”, “Stop”, etc. during play because it’s a part of the erotic play. There aren’t only safewords. People can have safe gestures, such as snapping, or putting an item in someone’s hand that they can drop to inform the other partner(s) they want to stop. Gestures are important when someone’s mouth is being covered.
write scenes like this one and her series overall. Part of her inspiration was *Twilight* and
Stephenie Meyer, part it involved reading books or watching movies about BDSM, and part was
an inspiration to just write.

In an interview with Elizabeth Vargas on ABC News, EL James explains where she got
the inspiration for her series. 178 This interview took place in April of 2012 when the final book
of the trilogy came out, *Fifty Shades Freed*:

James: “I just sat on my sofa and I just read them and read them and read them and read
them [Twilight series]. And I love them. And then I sat down and wrote a novel.”
Vargas: “Where did this come from?”
James: “Just… I was inspired by Stephenie Meyer. She just – she just flipped this
switch.”
Vargas: “This is different from the *Twilight* series in that –”
James: “Yes.”
Vargas: “There’s a lot of sex.”
James: “Yes.”
Vargas: “Graphic sex.”
James: “Yes. [Both laugh] Well, it’s a love story, you know? People who fall in love
have a lot of sex. Don’t they?”

James and Vargas express what separates *Fifty Shades of Grey* from *Twilight: Fifty Shades* has a
lot of graphic sex scenes, or an “open bedroom.” James created her own fantasy about a couple
that is active in the bedroom (or other spaces). In Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series her romance
protagonists, Edward and Bella, didn’t have sex until they are married. EL James had read all of
the *Twilight* books and she just decided to sit down and write her own version and spin on the
love story between Edward and Bella. *Fifty Shades of Grey* combined *Twilight* and EL James’
fantasies all in one: “[…] I just wrote it as a – it’s sort of my mid-life crisis. It has all my
fantasies in one […]”

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fpm_1iERyoUt=421s
James’ books were a story of things she loved and desired in one place. Part of the fantasy for EL James, her fans, and many romance readers involves the thought of someone, the hero, taking care of the heroine. As women read erotic romance novels they often picture themselves as the heroine. EL James states:

Vargas: “Why is this such a fantasy to have somebody take care of them? And control them?”
James: “We [women] have everything and it’s just hard work. Doing everything – getting – make sure that dinners on the table and the laundry is done and the - your boss is happy. And just sometimes it’s just nice to let just switch off and let somebody else take care of stuff for a while.”

Here, James describes the binary gender roles that have traditionally placed women as the keepers of the home and family. James is a housewife and mother of two sons. In her view, there is an appeal to the fantasy of a hero who takes care of everything. Christian protects Anastasia and thinks of her safety all the time, he is a billionaire, and he, or his help, take care of the stresses in life. This fantasy continues to be very vigorous. Fifty Shades of Grey can help readers escape into an imagined world where they don’t need to think about their bills or getting everyday tasks done. According to a recent study in the Journal of Sex Research, “Research has shown that one of the most common sexual fantasies among women is that of being sexually dominated and overpowered by a man.” 179 Christian Grey uses his dominance and power to be the common hero his telling his heroine, “Don’t worry about a thing, I’ve got this.”

However, where did EL James get her inspiration for the BDSM side of her story?

Vargas asks how James did research for her book:

James: “I’d read a couple of, um, things about, um, BDSM and I was thinking ‘What if you met someone and you didn’t want to do this?’ What would happen?”
Vargas: “How did you do your research for this?”
James: “I trolled the internet. I have this huge fear that, um, social services is going to find my computer and my children are going to get taken away from me.”
Vargas: “Did you watch movies?”
James: “Maybe.”

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179 Harris, Thai, and Barlow, “Fifty Shades Flipped,” 388.
Vargas: “Really?”
James: [laughs] “Maybe.”
Vargas: “By yourself?”
James: “Maybe. [Laughs] [Vargas laughs] You’re just going to make me blush now.”
Vargas: “Did your husband know you were doing this?”
James: “Oh, God yes. No, cause I’d go and say ‘Can we try this?’ and he would sort of look at me and roll his eyes ‘Okay, if we have to’ sort of thing.”

James wondered what would happen if she put two characters together: one who wants a submissive to control (Christian), and the other who doesn’t want to be that for anyone, but rather enjoys exploring BDSM in their sex life or, as Anastasia states, to have more than “vanilla” sex.

James never expected this vast audience for one of the first things she ever wrote, which means that she never thought she would be interviewed about her book that has a lot of sex in it. James found her information on BDSM through the Internet, watched movies, and had some help from her husband. It is difficult to say if the information she got on BDSM was accurate in the view of community members themselves, which is why I decided to find pieces on people in BDSM communities who talk about what EL James got right and wrong in Fifty Shades of Grey.

BDSM Communities

BDSM has become a common theme in erotic romance over the past decade. While there have been many pieces of literature that illustrate stories of couples and people in a BDSM relationship (Venus in Furs and Story of O), thanks to the Fifty Shades books BDSM became more well known and sought out by couples and writers. Today in Western culture, some women are enjoying the theme of female erotic submission. Women can explore BDSM much more freely today due to the acceptance and popularity of Fifty Shades as a novel that millions of people read.
BDSM has a wide range of fetishism, erotic practices, and role-play. The communities of BDSM are known for being safe, sane, and consensual (SSC). In Margot Weiss’ *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, she elaborates on SSC: “One primary way that BDSM practitioners create this framework of set-apartness is by imaging the SM scene as a ‘safe’ and separate space, ‘safe, sane, and consensual,’ the motto of contemporary SM, becomes ‘safe’ from social reality.”¹⁸⁰ The motto of the BDSM communities is to make sure that every play, act, sex, and all of the above is safe for each partner involved, that the activities each partner does are in a good frame of mind, or sane, and that everyone involved has expressed their consent.

BDSM can really range from what types of erotic practices two or more people are doing. Perhaps there is bondage with rope and cuffs, roleplaying of different characters such as a rape fantasy, using equipment such as whips, paddles, and feathers, and much more. People in the BDSM communities often have their own role(s). They could be a Top/Dominant, a bottom/submissive, or even a switch.¹⁸¹ A Top/Dominant, sometimes given a higher power role name such as Master, Mistress, Daddy, King, Professor, is the person(s) who are controlling the scene at play. A bottom/submissive, sometimes called slave, pet, slut, toy, is the person(s) who are receiving the control from their Dom.¹⁸² What should be understood is that BDSM doesn’t have to involve sex, but it can. Sometimes the experience of BDSM is just about creating an experience between people that is intense and sensual.

¹⁸¹ A switch is someone who switches between roles of Top/bottom.
¹⁸² You may have noticed that I capitalized the Dominants titles and lowercased the submissive titles. It is not D/S or d/s, it is D/s. While not every D/s couple does this, some Dom’s feel that having their titles capitalized gives more authority to their roles.
*Fifty Shades of Grey* created an open dialogue about what BDSM is and what it isn’t. According to the some BDSM practitioners, they don’t feel *Fifty Shades of Grey* is the right representation of what it is they really do. There are varied reasons behind this. In an article from *The Guardian* titled “Fifty Shades of Grey: What BDSM Enthusiasts Think,” a few discuss what they didn’t like about the books and movies. One, Emily Sarah, explains that the scenes are too “vanilla,” that the sex scenes had more to do with sensation rather than any hard play, that Christian is unhealthy and abusive towards Anastasia and that real sex is messier and not as “pretty” as they make it out to be. Emily states, “In real BDSM relationships, there’s a lot more connection, a lot more talking, a lot more ritual.” Emily felt that the scenes she read and watched from *Fifty Shades* were not authentic to the communities for these reasons.

Another person, Ronald Elliston, talks mostly about Christian Grey as a character. Elliston thinks it is realistic to Christian’s age, twenty-seven, because it takes a lot of time to collect the information and expertise needed to be a Dominant. Elliston found unrealistic how quickly Christian introduced everything to Anastasia at once compared to talking “over a period of time,” that Anastasia’s storyline of understanding BDSM while falling in love with Christian wasn’t convincing, and that he fears men taking advice from the books. Elliston states, “People like Anastasia usually get into the scene on their own in small steps. If the story had been about her discovering BDSM, then meeting someone like him, it would tie in… but someone that’s fallen in love, finds out the guys is basically a sadist, then engages in that world – it’s not realistic.”

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184 Ibid.
Finally, Jon Blue expresses his concern with Christian Grey as well. Blue says that he would never allow his daughter anywhere near someone like Christian and that he is very controlling, manipulative, and has all the characteristics of a psychopath. Blue states, “Christian has lots of red flags, including low empathy. The way he manipulates has no place in BDSM.” Blue tells us that Christian is someone who shouldn’t be in the BDSM community because BDSM relationships take a lot more time and communication between partners; he also notes that Christian is much too controlling in his relationship with Anastasia and she doesn’t get a lot of say. BDSM relationships demonstrate some of the most open and communicative partnerships bonds and Blue feels that the books violate this commitment in BDSM.

Quite a few people in the articles I found and even my interviewees always mentioned the hero, Christian Grey. Christian is one of the most common types of heroes in erotic romance. He is an alpha hero who is powerful and dominating. This is not new when it comes to the erotic romance novel and women’s fantasies. While Christian Grey may have moments that are considered cold-hearted, emotionless, abusive, and controlling, this isn’t new to how erotic romance heroes are. As Katherine Morrissey notes, “In each text, the hero presents some danger to the heroine and this threat becomes a part of the novel’s sexual charge.” Christian Grey is a character type and part of the struggle and tension that happen between Christian and Anastasia is that danger he emits. Kristen Phillips’ study of erotic fiction texts and readership supports this view: “Christian is the typical damaged alpha male of romantic fiction, who will be saved through the narrative arc of his relationship with the heroine.” Hence, he has moments that may appear cruel.

I have argued that the erotic romance depicts a fantasized revision of masculinity that differs from the male partner readers may want in real life. People began taking notice as soon as *Fifty Shades* came out and more heroes like Christian Grey started thriving. The important part to remember is the fans of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and dominating alpha heroes, do not celebrate female submission in reality and in all cases. As Elana Levine argues, “[...] *Fifty Shades* readers suggest that in their interest in the series has less to do with wanting to be in a dominating sexual relationship, and more to do with wanting to reflect on their perspectives on sex and their experiences in romantic relationships with men.”

Christian Grey can be used as a tool for erotic romance readers to think about their own experiences with men as discussed in Chapter Three.

Martha (20) talks about why she doesn’t like Christian Grey in the first novel. Eventually, she begins to enjoy his character arc and him as a hero, as mentioned in Chapter Two. Martha is my interviewee who learned from Christian Grey’s character and broke up with her boyfriend. Martha had watched the movie before she read the books. She did not finish the third novel:

> And it’s interesting because in the first book I was like “Oh my God, this guy [Christian] is abusive, he straight up just hits women for pleasure who don’t actually want it.” And then they kind of do want it. You know, they’d sign it [the non-disclosure agreement and contract], but then they don’t like - - a lot of the subs I feel sign it because they want Christian Grey, not because they wanted the hitting and the, you know?

Martha believes the female characters don’t really want to be in a D/s relationship with Christian Grey, rather they want him and only him. This is most likely due to his status, his wealth, and the fact that he is *very* attractive.

Dr. Charley Ferrer also expressed this concern about *Fifty Shades* being a representation of an abusive relationship, compared to an authentic BDSM relationship. In the article “What

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‘Fifty Shades’ Gets Right & Wrong about BDSM, According to An Expert”\textsuperscript{188} by Jamie Kravitz, Kravitz interviews Dr. Charley Ferrer. Dr. Charley Ferrer, whom I’ve met, is an intimacy and sex expert, BDSM educator, and founder of the BDSM Writers Convention. Ferrer discusses \textit{Fifty Shades}, treatment of vanilla sex, the red room of pain, pain in general, dominants, and abuse.

First things first, what is “vanilla” sex? Ferrer mentions that Anastasia and Christian make fun of “vanilla” relationships. However, according to Ferrer, “In BDSM culture, the term vanilla is subjective but in general refers to a person or behavior that is ‘normal,’ bland, or without kink.”\textsuperscript{189} People in BDSM communities often have ways of engaging in their lives that are considered “vanilla” and don’t always need to be Dominant/submissive at all times. Christian and Anastasia do engage in what is considered “vanilla” sex; however, according to Ferrer, instead of these erotic romance protagonists engaging in vanilla sex and enjoying it and \textit{not} rolling their eyes at it, \textit{Fifty Shades} becomes unrealistic to some members of BDSM communities.

Christian and Anastasia do not literally roll their eyes at vanilla sex. Rather, Anastasia is wanting to have moments of a more traditional relationship where they go out as a couple or have sex that doesn’t involve a Dom/sub relationship or any type of instrument. When Anastasia proposes this to Christian, he tells her he doesn’t partake in romance or the act of “making love.” Rather, as Christian Grey describes it, he “fucks hard.” But Christian begin to enjoy and love his “vanilla” sex with Anastasia. It’s even his first time having vanilla sex with someone and it becomes part of their list of firsts together. This is a representation of Christian’s healing by having different kind of sexual and emotional relationship with Anastasia.

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid.
Secondly, Ferrer mentions the “red room of pain” in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. To get a picture in your head about what the “red room of pain” (as Anastasia refers to it) looks like I will give part of El James’ description of framed in Anastasia’s first perspective:

The first thing I notice is the smell: leather, wood, polish with a faint citrus smell. It’s very pleasant, and the lighting is soft, subtle. In fact, I can’t see the source, but it’s around the cornice in the room, emitting an ambient glow. The walls and ceiling are deep, dark burgundy, giving a womb-like effect to the spacious room, and the floor is old, old varnished wood. There is a large wooden cross like an X fastened to the wall facing the door. It’s made of high-polished mahogany, and there are restraining cuffs on each corner. Above it is an expansive iron grid suspended from the ceiling, eight-foot square at least, and from it hang all manner of ropes, chains, and glinting shackles. By the door, two long, polished, ornately carved poles, like spindles from a banister but longer, hang like curtain rods across the wall. From them swing a startling assortment of paddles, whips, riding crops, and funny-looking feathery implements. […]

But what dominates the room is a bed. It’s bigger than king sized, an ornately carved rococo four-poster with a flat top. It looks late nineteenth century. Under the canopy, I can see more gleaming chains and cuffs. There is no bedding…just a mattress covered in red leather and red satin cushions piled at one end.190

The room is quite extravagant and has almost every BDSM instrument that you could think of. It is a separate spot that Christian and Anastasia can go to that can be used for BDSM play.

According to Ferrer, “As far as the room is concerned, Ferrer says typical spaces are not so elaborate. Most couples do designate a place to play, and some people do have the luxury of a separate room. But more often, partners play in common areas such as the living room, bedroom, or kitchen.”191 Christian Grey is a fortunate hero because he is a billionaire and can afford such a room with some of the highest quality toys.192 This is of course not true to every BDSM couple, nor does every couple want a room like that in the first place. Not only this, but sometimes couples in BDSM relationships want to change up where they have sex. Anastasia and Christian do this quite often in the novels.

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191 Kravitz, “BDSM Expert Weighs in on What Fifty Shades Gets Right – and Wrong – About the Lifestyle.”
192 While watching the films I remember seeing high quality sex toys lines such as Lelo and Njoy.
Thirdly, Ferrer mentions that pain is not the only part of a BDSM relationship. “In the first film, Ana asks Christian to punish her to show her how bad it can get. ‘There’s pain involved in some play, but we’re not there to injure you. We’re not disconnected from the feeling,’ says Ferrer. She describes it as a dichotomy; without tenderness and vulnerability, there can’t be discipline or control.”\(^{193}\) So, while the spectrum between pleasure and pain is certainly a part of BDSM communities because certain types of pain can feel good and pleasurable, because BDSM relationships take so much communication, honesty, and vulnerability between partners, BDSM can also be tender and loving.

Ferrer’s fourth point is that dominants don’t lack emotion. Christian Grey is considered cold by nature. Ferrer mentions two scenes from the film *Fifty Shades Freed* when Christian acted unkindly towards Anastasia and doesn’t show her the affection she needs. One was when Anastasia was almost abducted at knifepoint. Instead of comforting Anastasia, Christian is mad at her for disobeying him by going out with friends rather than staying at home like he told her to. The second scene was when Anastasia accidentally gets pregnant and he practically yells at her for making such a mistake. “Ferrer says that when your submissive does something that displeases you, you may punish or restrict them, but you aren't unnecessarily cruel.”\(^{194}\) A Dominant could perhaps punish his submissive for going against their wishes *later*, but at that moment a Dominant needs to care for their submissive.

Finally, Ferrer says that BDSM is never about abuse. Abuse is the most common theme that comes up when people talk about *Fifty Shades of Grey* and whether it is or isn’t an abusive relationship. This point is brought back to Christian’s cold behavior towards Anastasia. Ferrer

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193 Kravitz, “BDSM Expert Weighs in on What Fifty Shades Gets Right – and Wrong – About the Lifestyle.”
194 Ibid.
argues, “In the books and movies, Christian’s cold behavior is traced back to a traumatic childhood and early sexual relationship with a much older woman, but these ‘explanations’ are problematic as well.”

Ferrer is saying that it is problematic for people to believe that in BDSM relationships, Dominants act as a stereotype of being “cold” due to their past and forget how to be human towards someone. Instead, “love and affection” is something that BDSM relationships do have and according to Ferrer Fifty Shades of Grey failed to represent this well.

Some people in the BDSM communities have expressed their concerns with Fifty Shades of Grey but also choose to remember what the series got right too. EL James created a story about a couple in a BDSM relationship and the BDSM communities responded in kind to her book. I am overjoyed that the Fifty Shades series created this communication and gave out important information about BDSM communities. I think it is also important to remember that Fifty Shades is another fantasy and wasn’t created by EL James as a beginner’s guide to BDSM. It wasn’t even James’ intention for it to be a novel in the first place. Yes, Anastasia gets introduced to the BDSM world very quickly, but perhaps that’s what readers wanted. Readers may have wanted to get right to the kinky sex scenes.

Kravitz writes that, “While Ferrer believes that Fifty Shades illustrates BDSM in a better light than older films such as 8mm, she also thinks that ‘a lot of reality was lost’ in both the books and the movies”. I don’t think that this statement is fair. Erotic romance fiction books aren’t always used as a way to reflect reality. The readers are using the series Fifty Shades to escape their reality. That is why I have mentioned EL James’ perspective, BDSM perspectives, and also the understanding that Fifty Shades of Grey is a work of fiction. If someone wants to pursue being a part of the BDSM communities, it is important to get to know them as people.

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195 Ibid.
196 Ibid.
rather than from a work of fiction. On the flip side of that, if someone wants to write a piece of fiction that involves their fantasies, as EL James did, they should be able to. Fiction authors can always put at the beginning of the novel that they “don’t condone” a particular act if they so choose as well. Tiffany Reisz explains EL James’ process beautifully:

And so she begins to write. Unlike Réage, who wrote in pencil in school exercise books in the dark, this woman writes on a Blackberry during her commute. She has children and must steal the time from everyday life to lose herself in this fantasy that will never come true. It is a child’s fantasy – a girl with nothing special about her except her incredible ordinariness captures the heart of a beautiful man flush with wealth and power. Unlike Réage’s, her story isn’t written to be published for profit. It’s put online, given away to other who, like her, love the same Unattainable. An editor finds the book, changes it, publishes it. The ordinary wife and mother has, without trying, become an author, garnered an audience, fame, millions of dollars, and the adoration of legions. Some women burn the book. Other women read it and burn.¹⁹⁷

A few of my interviewees did enjoy Fifty Shades and “burned” for it for varied reasons.

Charlotte (21) enjoyed Christian’s character development and appreciated that Anastasia was the person to help him look at the world in better way. Charlotte enjoys the tension and irresistibility that erotic romance protagonists have together:

Interviewer: “[…] Out of curiosity, did you um, you said you enjoyed Fifty Shades.”
Charlotte: “Yeah.”
Interviewer: “Can I ask why?”
Charlotte: “[…] I liked the – I think what I liked about it was that he was so used to just having a sub and like that was it. They were just like Dom/sub. But, all of a sudden, she comes in and she’s like changing all of his – like he’s inexplicably in love with her despite, his nasty cruel ways. Not nasty cruel, but you know like, cold-hearted. And I think it’s like that idea of people being irresistible to each other. Like for example, in the After the Night […] Like they hated each other for some reason they couldn’t, it was like that basic instinct of like [whispered voice] ‘This person. This person.’ It’s like a magnetic. Even though they were trying desperately to fight against it. Like, I think that’s what I liked about Fifty Shades of Grey that she was like – there was just something about her that was different and new and exciting and um, made him rethink things. You know, like changed his whole perspective or whatever.”

The two main characters in erotic romance are drawn to each other and *Fifty Shades* shows the ways in which heroes and heroines express this love and need to be together. Charlotte mentions a common theme in romance where the two of them can’t be together and they try to resist each other, but they overcome all of their obstacles so that they can be together. Christian consistently tells Anastasia that she shouldn’t be anywhere near him, but eventually he gives into his love for her.

Another interviewee, Mabel (22), explains that she enjoyed the sex scenes in *Fifty Shades*, mainly due to Jamie Dornan, but that the character of Christian Grey certainly had some issues. She references the scene when Christian hits Anastasia with a belt:

Interviewer: “So, you said that you didn’t read *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but you watched it. I kind of want to know what you thought of *Fifty Shades.*”
Mabel: “I liked it. I like Jamie Dornan, but I don’t know – I feel like I couldn’t really connect a lot with their relationship. And I don’t know if it was her, or if it was him or if it was just the way that it was written. But, I like the sex scenes. [both laugh]”
Interviewer: “So, why did you enjoy the sex scenes? Was it just Jamie Dornan?”
Mabel: “Pretty much.”
Interviewer: “Did you think he was abusive?”
Mabel: “Um, I think the only part that I really think so is at the end of the first movie where she like was really hurt by him.”

Mabel tried to read the novels but didn’t enjoy the writing style; her experience with the story is from the film adaptations. Christian does hit Anastasia with a belt at the end of the first book and movie. Anastasia asks him to “show her the worst.” Dr. Charley Ferrer mentions this scene as well. The sex scenes in erotic romance is one of the main pieces that people love in erotic romance. It’s one of the best parts and for Mabel, Jamie Dornan made them just a little better.

Cassandra (22) also hasn’t read the *Fifty Shades* novels. She states that the writing style and the female protagonist, Anastasia, are both too juvenile for her tastes:

Interviewer: “Um, out of curiosity have you read *Fifty Shades*?”
Cassandra: “No. No, I’ve read enough excerpts where like as soon as I have a heroine who talks in like a very fifteen-year-old, like internal dialogue and calls like her feminine anatomy a like “my flowing goddess” [my inner goddess] or whatever the terminology she uses… I find that very pretentious and it like, ugh, it just makes my teeth grit and I can’t
read that… I can’t do it. It’s like I’m fifteen again. And the thing is that I know like I know if I were imagining myself as her like there’s no way in hell I would be having this internal dialogue about like – and using like ‘internal goddess’. Yeah, I don’t do that. I don’t need that, yeah. I just… I’ve heard that she’s a very immature character and I don’t want that, you know?”

Cassandra wants a heroine that is much more mature and developed compared to Anastasia. A heroine who could refer to her sexual anatomy bluntly. Cassandra would prefer a heroine who acted more to her age as well as the fact that Cassandra would never have an internal dialogue the way Anastasia does. Cassandra pictures herself as the heroine and Anastasia is a heroine that she can’t picture herself in her shoes. Not only this, but in her view EL James depicts Anastasia as too naïve in her use of phrases like “my flowing goddess.” “My internal goddess,” which is the phrase that Anastasia uses, is not how Anastasia refers to her genitals. Anastasia’s “inner goddess” is rather a voice in her head that encourages her to be adventurous, brave and sensual. Anastasia often refers to her vagina as “down there,” which does support Cassandra’s view that she is younger and uncomfortable with naming her sexuality.

Poppy (19) talks about the BDSM communities as well and her frustrations towards the story, the characters, and its representation. Poppy and I begin discussing BDSM due to a novel she had read (Dark Duet series by C.J. Roberts). Poppy states:

[…] BDSM is something that like ever since Fifty Shades of Grey there’s been like a pretty negative reaction from like the BDSM community, um, like towards it. […] I don’t particularly like Fifty Shades of Grey. Like, honestly, I was pleasantly surprised cause I thought the writing was going to be much worse than it was. I don’t think it’s particularly good, but it wasn’t as dreadful as I was afraid it was going to be.

Poppy didn’t enjoy Fifty Shades however, due to a vast amount of people talking about Fifty Shades being considered poorly written, she ended up being surprised by the level of writing by EL James. Poppy, as an erotic romance reader, recognizes the fact that the BDSM community and Fifty Shades are two separate things and she is not the only one.
Alexis (22) hasn’t read the *Fifty Shades* books, nor does she want to. Alexis mentions how *Fifty Shades of Grey* shouldn’t be used as a “point of reference” when it comes to the BDSM community. Alexis even had an open dialogue about erotic romance and BDSM with her mother:

Alexis: “Yeah. And then, you know of course my mom and her book club a few years ago and they read *Fifty Shades* and they all had like this big discussion about how BDSM is abuse and blah, blah, blah. And I’m like ‘Yeah, well, if you’re going to base it off that maybe you might think that.’ You know like.”
Interviewer: “Well, yeah. EL James didn’t actually know anything about the community at all.”
Alexis: “No.”
Interviewer: “In any way.”
Alexis: “Let’s not use that as our point of reference here people.”

Alexis doesn’t think that BDSM is abusive like her mother does, rather Alexis points out that *Fifty Shades of Grey* isn’t a book that people should be reading if they are seeking to be in a realistic BDSM relationship. Alexis’ mother, due to *Fifty Shades*, received the impression that all BDSM is abusive, which it is not.

Eloise (21) is completely turned off by the series *Fifty Shades*. Her experience of it is reading the first chapter, watching one scene from the first movie when Anastasia and Christian are negotiating the contract, and from an author Jenny Trout, who writes BDSM under the name Abigail Barnette who did chapter by chapter recaps on the novels. Eloise states:

[…] how unromantic just like the opposite of romance I find it. And I know that it’s based off of *Twilight*. I know it’s a fanfiction and I uh, recently like last year started thinking about *Twilight* again. […] But basically, *Fifty Shades* took everything that’s already bad about *Twilight*. Like the stalking and the emotional manipulation and made it twenty times worse I think.

Eloise feels that *Fifty Shades* is completely unromantic and a representation of emotional abuse. She also feels that it isn’t what BDSM looks like or how it should be represented. She also correlates it to its origin, *Twilight*, by mentioning the ways in which Edward acted towards Bella, finding that the Christian and Anastasia relationship is even worse.
This is not to say that a writer can’t make a great book or series that is fiction and involve characters in a more realistic BDSM relationship. One of my favorite series that my Fairy Smut Mother introduced me to is *The Original Sinner Series* by Tiffany Reisz (pronounced rice). This series is currently an eight-book series with other collections and novellas. *The Original Sinner Series* has many protagonists, but mainly follows a beautiful and tough female Dominatrix and her numerous lovers, one of whom is a Catholic priest, as well as the clients she sees. In a scene from the eighth book in the series, *The Queen* we see the female Dominatrix, Nora, submit to the Catholic priest Søren:

“My dungeon,” he said. “My rules.”

Søren squeezed her wrists to the point of pain. With Kingsley she would have fought the pain and her urge to cry out. But not with Søren. He needed her pain and she gave it to him freely. His thumbs pushed into the tendon of her wrists and the pain was unbearable. She bore it anyway. The relief when he released her was almost as intense as the pain has been. He opened his pants and nudged her thighs wide-open with his knees. With a slow thrust he entered her. Once inside her, he gently wrapped his fingers around her throat. One hand on her throat…one hand over her mouth, muffling her moans. She could still safe out if she needed to by snapping her fingers in his ear. This wasn’t the first time he’d used his own hand to gag her while he fucked her.

Nora lifted her hips to take him deeper. Søren’s eyes were closed as he moved in her, the fingers on her neck pressing in with each thrust, relaxing with each retreat. Not once did he choke her, cut off her air supply or even push hard enough to scare her. His hand wasn’t there to hurt her or choke her. No… he’d made a collar of his own fingers.

He moved slowly, every movement deliberate.

“You miss this,” he said, punctuating his words with a hard sharp thrust. She bit his hand, a signal she wanted to speak, and he uncovered her mouth.

“I can have sex whenever I want it with whoever I want.”

“It wasn’t sex I was talking about. You miss being dominated.”

“Not enough to come back to you.”

“But you will… eventually you will.”

This scene shows a few moments of being safe, sane, and consensual (SSC). Here Søren is the Dominant and Nora is the submissive. Since Søren is covering her mouth, Nora is unable to say her safe word, “Jabberwocky.” Readers can notice themes such as the fact that Nora has other

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ways of safing out, or stopping what they’re doing, by snapping her fingers or biting his hand. Søren and Nora’s relationship has been developing for a long time and Nora even has a way to tell Søren that she wishes to speak when her mouth is covered. This makes the play they’re doing safe because the Dominant, Søren, is making sure his submissive is comfortable. It is consensual because Reisz has shown us that Nora gives her pain “freely” to Søren. It is safe and sane because while Søren is displaying dominance and pain partly by having his hand on her throat and the other on her mouth, readers know that he isn’t cutting off her air supply or scaring her. While Nora is telling Søren that she is free to have sex with anyone she likes, their connection and relationship is different from others and they both know it.

Furthermore, in this series Reisz shows scenes between a man and a woman, between two women, between two men, and times where there are three or more people together. Not only this, but she has Dominant women and submissive men. Reisz tackles stereotypes and creates stimulating and erotic scenes between many different types of characters, introducing more diversity into the erotic romance genre.

Dirty Little Secret

Erotic romance books went from being a dirty little secret to every person having to read Fifty Shades of Grey. “[…] Fifty Shades became the books you must have read and/or have an opinion on during the summer of 2012.”199 While there are varying opinions on Fifty Shades, the fact that erotic romance is less of a dirty little secret is one of the reasons I am happy Fifty Shades became so well known. Thanks to this story and its content, people became unafraid to

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read their romance in public, to explore their sexuality, and to ripen their sex lives. Erotic romance is known as a genre that shouldn’t be discussed and should be kept hidden under the bed. The public view of sex as a taboo topic, even though millions of people participate in reading erotic romance, creates a message that books with sex scenes in them are aimed at being shameful. But ever since *Fifty Shades of Grey*, women have been less afraid to express the fact that they read erotic romance by talking about it or reading it in public. This is revolutionary for the erotic romance genre. Several of my interviewees expressed their feeling of shame while reading or watching something with sexual content:

I think because I obviously was looking at things that would be “classified as porn,” maybe the shame came from that it was an improper use of my time and then that I was actively supporting something she [her mother] had told me since I learned about sex that porn is exploitative. That it’s demeaning. And I think it was also the fact that I liked it and I wanted to watch those videos or read stories of different scenarios that would happen to someone like me. (Cassandra, 22)

Martha: “Um, I also like I kind of enjoy talking about sex because like I feel like people don’t talk about it enough. It’s just like awkward and it’s totally not awkward when I’m talking about sex with you especially. Like ‘Alright, let’s do it.’”
Interviewer: (Laughs) “I know, I feel like it’s one of those taboo…”
Martha: “Yeah. Well, like, ‘I don’t want to talk about my body cause it’s embarrassing.’ And I don’t talk about sex with anybody else […]” (Martha, 20)

Interviewer: “Do you and your boyfriend ever bond over romance novels?”
Alexis: “Oh, no. No. He [her boyfriend] definitely is in the mind that they [romance novels] are a lesser genre. Unfortunately, … He’s really into historical sword fighting dynamics so he’ll read books about foraging and non-fiction. And he’ll read *Dante’s Inferno* and *Plato* and that kind of stuff. And I’ve read stuff like that for classes and I find it interesting, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to sit up till 2 am reading Plato. [laughs]…But, I definitely need to have a talk with him with like ‘Ok, I don’t need you to be the hugest fan, I just need you to not disrespect it cause this is something I’m interested in.’” (Alexis, 22)

Interviewer: “I was curious. Do you ever feel like shame for reading romance or erotic romance books? Like do you ever get it from the outside or feel like you don’t want to tell anyone?”
Mabel: “I think it depends on who I’m reading the book in front of. Because I don’t mind being like ‘Oh, I’m reading such and such book’, but sometimes like he will be like ‘Oh, you’re reading your smut book.’ And my dad will start making fun of things too if I mention something to him. But, other people are usually like ‘Oh, that sounds interesting.’ Cause most of the time when I tell people it’s my mom or my friends or something like that. I don’t really feel much shame.”
Interviewer - “Well, that’s good. But, you get teased for it?”
Mabel: “Yeah.”
Interviewer: “And teased from men it sounds like.”
Mabel: “Yeah, most of the time.”
Interviewer: “Does it ever make you feel shitty that they make fun of your books?”
Mabel: “Not really, cause I know they’re joking. If it was just some random person who was like ‘Oh, you’re reading your smut book’ then at that point I’d be like ‘Okay. Why are you being mean to me? I’m just trying to tell you I’m reading this book.’” (Mabel, 22)

Many of my interviewees and erotic romance readers express a feeling of shame. My story of my own childhood reading experience in my introduction was based on a moment in my life when I felt shame for wanting to read erotic romance novels. Before I even got to read a romance novel I discovered that it wasn’t the right form of writing to engage in. Erotic romance readers learn shame from the label that romance novels are given. In most cases, the feeling of embarrassment is from the men in their lives. Alexis mentions how her boyfriend feels that the genre is a “lesser” one, giving a type of shame through the supposed bad quality of erotic romance. Mabel mentions how people label her books as “smut,” which creates a picture in people’s mind that erotic romance is an unworthy or subordinate form of writing. Cassandra ponders the fact that erotic romance and erotica is considered “porn” due to the explicit sex scenes. Her time reading or watching erotic romances was and is considered a waste. For Martha the discussion of sex in general is difficult to broach with others. Bringing up the topic of sex is a struggle for many because as children and adolescents are often taught that it’s a dirty subject. EL James even felt embarrassed while she was being interviewed because she wrote a narrative with explicit sexual content.

What if we counteracted this shame though? What would happen if we allowed women to enjoy their erotic romance in public settings? The genre is a real form of literature and sex is a part of everyday life for millions of people. Martha had mentioned how sex as a topic is embarrassing to discuss and there are few people that she feels she can discuss sex with. If an
erotic romance reader can learn this type of shame, then they can unlearn it. Or, they could embrace their books and learn pleasure instead, which would then surpass this shame. If the label of erotic romance novels is considered shameful, we could instead have them be considered a form of psychological gratification of the need for pleasure and fun, even *Fifty Shades*, and perhaps it would give more of any understanding for the genre. Erotic romance writers and readers are advocating, even if it’s in secret, a form of literature that embraces sexual freedom.

*Women Writers & Readers*

*Twilight* sparked EL James’ love for writing and fan fiction, *Fifty Shades of Grey* then inspired Sylvia Day’s *Crossfire* series, and erotic romance has boomed since. The female authors of these and other series have now shown a different side to self-published authors, that women are seeking books similar to *Fifty Shades* with its explicit sex scenes, and there are more women writers now. The romance and erotic romance genre is undervalued and isn’t studied to the full extent that it should be. Since erotic romance is underrated, publishers may react negatively towards an author of the genre who may not get the credit they deserve. Thanks to self-publishing and online fanfiction there is no need to go through a middleman. Due to *Fifty Shades* becoming a form of literature that was widely sought, publishers began to understand that erotic romance is a genre that women want. Self-published women writers are on the rise and that’s incredible as a part of owning their female sexuality. Two articles elaborate on how *Fifty Shades* created such a big statement about the erotic romance business:

Harlequin’s official position on self-publishing is that anything bringing more attention to romance fiction in general is in their best interests. In fact, it’s quick to capitalize on the success of the *Grey* books. In July, Harlequin will release *The Siren*, the first book in Tiffany Reisz’s trilogy of BDSM novels. [2012] […] In 2009 Reisz finally took her friends’ advice, dropped out of school, and started pitching her stories. One of them was picked up by Harlequin. *The Siren* will be marketed by the company as a direct
comparison with *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Like James, Reisz found infamy online by writing X-rated fiction starring pop-culture figures. [...] Both writers include explicit sex scenes in their novels, the kind that would normally be excised from modern romance fiction. Reisz is getting a big marketing push for a first-time novelist, which is a direct result of James’s infamy.\textsuperscript{200}

James has become arguably the richest of self-published authors through her “mummy porn” but, while the prose and storylines have won mass audiences, they have also attracted scorn. There is a belief, according to Baverstock, that self-publishers are doing so as a last resort, as vanity publishers, and may not have much formal education. However, she said, James was an example of how self-publishers “really know their audiences, she is pretty sophisticated … she had self-belief. The books people really want to share are fiction”.\textsuperscript{201}

Erotic romance fiction is wanted. Erotic romance readers tend to read quickly and frequently, so the demand for new stories and new authors is high and on the rise. In fact, one of my interviewees, Alexis, will read an erotic romance book in a night, from about 8 pm until 2am. Reisz tells her story here about how she dropped out of school and became an erotic writer. *The Siren* is the first book to her *Original Sinner Series*. This series that began in 2009 is still continuing. *The Chateau* will be her ninth novel of this series in June 2018. Resiz’s and James’ career due to their erotic romance stories is continuing their career. Self-published writers know their audience better than most publishers do. Erotic romance writers *know* what erotic romance readers want. Women inspire women to seek a passion. The women who write erotic romance, the protagonists who readers follow and fall in love with, the women we talk to and ourselves. As you read in the very beginning, I practice erotic romance writing and have been working on a novel for quite some time now. Two of my interviewees also enjoy writing:


In fact, like I’ll get angry at the book for a little bit like ‘Damn it! I liked them.’ But, I like it when somebody does – like I’m a writer so like I like to put like my characters into situations where this is what’s going to happen and if they can’t deal, they can’t deal. Like, like I like to put them in situations where it’s not the like ‘Aw, I’ll just cast a spell or whatever and get out of it.’ It’s like no I want them actually to struggle. (Poppy)

Charlotte: “That’s another one that I’ve been toying with writing is like pirate romance.”
Interviewer: “I feel like that was popular for a while. That was a big thing.”
Charlotte: “Dude, I need to find some of those. I wish I had more time to write.”

Erotic romance and romance writers are creating a fantasy of their own and publishing it, showing to friends and families and talking about it with each other. If it’s one person’s fantasy, it could be another’s. Both Poppy and Charlotte have been creating their own stories and just like EL James, they felt inspired to write and write what they yearn for.

Women writers have been using a very common line throughout romance and erotic romance. The quote “You are mine” is constantly being used throughout the novels between erotic romance protagonists. In the final section of this chapter, I explore moments in the erotic romance novel of the quote “You’re mine” through textual analysis and if my interviewees have seen this quote and if so how they react to it.


Mine. It is a word that is claiming something; we know that. Someone tells the person near them that this thing belongs to themselves. It’s often a word that we learn very early in life while we’re learning to share. A child grabs the toy close to them and tells the child who tried to take it “Mine!” As we get older the notion of the holiday Valentine’s Day puts pressure on us as pre-teens to find a valentine, even into adulthood. Some of us ask a person we have a crush on “Will you be mine?” or perhaps we give them a little candy heart that says, “Be mine.” The recipient may say yes and may say no. As I got older and began reading the erotic romance
novels I saw the word “mine” used in a similar way to the candy heart “Be mine.” My first experience with this quote was from the book Fifty Shades of Grey, but EL James obviously didn’t coin this phrase.

The heroes in the erotic romance, as well as in some romance and young adult novels enjoy telling the heroine she is his. It became quite popular in novels that the hero would tell the heroine “You. Are. Mine,” “You’re mine,” “Did you forget that you’re mine?” and other variations of this line. Christian says this to Anastasia in Fifty Shades, Bill to Sookie in the Sookie Stackhouse series, Søren to Nora in the Original Sinner series, Gideon to Eva in the Crossfire series, and countless other heroes and heroines. Not only is the quote something that the hero will say but also the titles of erotic romance novels are ever present. The Nine Circles series by Jackie Ashenden have the word “mine” in their titles. The series includes, Mine to Take, Make You Mine, and You Are Mine.

When I first began my research on this quote I came across nothing. I began to wonder if I was the only one doing research on this popular quote and I have a feeling I may be. Due to this, this quote needs to be explored by scholars, readers and writers of erotic romance. While I am unsure if I am the first one to be talking about it, it is clear that it isn’t talked about openly and often.

Thus, began the search and understanding of what this phrase might mean. The fact that the phrase appears in so many romances and erotic romances meant that women, or readers, sought it. It wouldn’t be in the novels if some romance readers, such as some of my interviewees and myself included, didn’t want it. Part of the research involved looking at the scenes when the quote was said and what the common themes were between all of the novels. The other part was

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202 This is especially true to uber-alpha and alpha heroes.
203 Well, unless it’s discussed between erotic romance readers.
asking the people I interviewed if they ever noticed common quotes or phrases in the erotic romance. I asked my interviewees if they noticed any common lines in the books they read, and if they mentioned this particular quote, what they thought about it.

This section of the chapter will analyze moments when the hero says, “You’re mine” to his heroine, when the heroine says these words to her hero, and pro-romance feminist responses to the quote. Part of what I will use to back up my argument is Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan’s creation of the “The Magic Hoo Hoo” and “The Heroic Wang of Mighty Lovin.” However, I will use Wendell and Tan’s conception, but put an erotic romance twist on them. Instead of the “Magic Hoo-Hoo” I will call it the “Magic Pussy” and the “The Hero’s Wang of Mighty Lovin” will be called “Heroic Cock of Mighty Lovin’.” “Pussy” and “Cock” are euphemisms erotic romance are more likely to have. I conclude that “You’re mine” offers another layer of something that is very erotic to the experiences and functions of women’s sexual agency.

**The Hero to the Heroine**

As mentioned in Chapter Two, when it comes to having a hero in an erotic romance novel, as Wendell and Tan describe, “The role of the Heroic Wang of Mighty Lovin’ is a crucial one in romance novels. The entire fate of the relationship, the heroine’s future as a sexually awakened being, and possibly the future of all mankind hang on the turgid strength of the hero’s man root.” In other words, when it comes to the male of an erotic romance novel he has the Heroic Cock that will make the partner he is meant to be with feel like never before due to their intense connection.

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204 Wendell and Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms.*
205 Ibid., 83.
When the hero says, “You’re mine” to the heroine, it often happens when they are having sex or right before they’re about to have sex and predominantly when they’re alone. Telling the heroine she is his and only his became quite popular in twentieth century erotic romance: As G. Genevieve Patthey-Chavez et al. note, “Men are explorers and women are explored. Men also claim women and, in a parallel vein, women are often described as being possessed by men, both willingly and unwillingly.” While it is not always true that men are the explorers and women are explored, this is still one of the most dominate themes of heterosexual erotic romance. Being pursued is part of the titillating fantasy for many readers. Here are a few quotes from these novels that demonstrate how the hero expresses his possession of the heroine:

“Made for you,” I [Eva] gasped, my breath fogging the glass. I was on fire for him, my desire pouring out from the inside, from the well of love I couldn’t contain.

“Did you forget that tonight?” [Gideon] His hand left my sex to reach between us and yanked open his fly. “When other men were touching you, rubbing against you? Did you forget you’re mine?”

“Never. I never forget.”

“So, you’d feel obliged to fight them?” [Sookie]

“Of course. You are mine.” [Bill]

Holding her against me, I [Christian] see that she’s [Anastasia] panting as I slip my hand through her pubic hair and slide my middle finger inside her. I hear a low, sexy hum of appreciation in her throat. She’s so ready.

“This is mine. All mine. Do you understand?” I slip my finger in and out of her, holding her, as her lips part with shock and desire.

“Yes, yours.” She whispers.

Yes. Mine. And I won’t let you forget it, Ana.

“Your pussy is mine.” [Crow] He pressed his forehead to mine and thrust into me.

“Tell me.”

My pussy took his cock over and over, growing wetter when an orgasm approached in the distance. I felt it start deep inside me and slowly creep everywhere

207 Day, Entwined with You, 132.
208 Charlaine Harris, Dead Until Dark (Ace Books, 2001), 172.
else. An avalanche had started deep in the mountains, and the snow was slowly falling
my way.

He pressed his pelvic bone against me as he thrust, rubbing my clit violently.

“Tell me.”

I wasn’t his, and I never would be. But he took control over my body. He owned
my reaction. He owned the way he made me come around his dick. “My pussy is
yours.” [Pearl]

My submission made him moan deep from the back of his throat. “All mine.”

“Realized what?” [Emily]

He pinned his eyes to mine. “She wasn’t you.” [Reeve]

“What?”

“Amber wasn’t you. I could kill someone if they took my whole life away. But
he [antagonist] didn’t. Because he didn’t take away you.”

The only reason I wasn’t already running to him was because I was too stunned
and overwhelmed with emotion.

“I came back here to get you back, Emily. I came here to get what’s mine.”

There are a few similarities between all of these texts. First, these are moments in an erotic
romance when the hero is telling his heroine “mine.” Another one that comes about quite often
is a theme of him telling her that he owns her pussy. Why? Because he is the one to make her
have the most incredible mind-shattering orgasms that she has ever had, and their link is almost
like a drug between them.

The hero can use his Heroic Cock of Lovin’ as a part of the way that he claims his
heroine. This is not to say that he controls her or that he actually owns her. Instead, it is the
hero’s way of telling the heroine that she is important and while he can make her feel like she
never has before, she has bewitched him just as much.

There certainly are times that erotic romances can go further than needed when it comes
to “You’re mine.” Women and Erotic Fiction: Critical Essays on Genres, Markets and Readers,
Naomi Booth discusses Christians’ claim over Ana’s body in the Fifty Shades trilogy. Booth

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211 Laurelin Paige, Last Kiss, (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2016) 350.
212 Pun!
states, “That both Grey and Ana see her body as his property is emphasized and eroticized everywhere in the novels.”\(^{213}\) Ana changes her body quite a bit throughout the book because he claims her body as his. Ana grooms herself more, exercises, eats food that Christian tells her to, and eventually Christian chooses birth control for her because of how much he hates condoms. In the quote above from Christian’s point of view where he states, “This is mine. All mine. Do you understand?” like many other heroes, Christian makes claim on the sexual parts of her body. How do the heroines feel about this though? Anastasia would often respond to Christian by telling him she was his. She often stated “Yes, yours” or “I’m yours,” acknowledging and giving reciprocity to his statement.

Laurelin Paige’s *Last Kiss* offers a detailed occurrence of how one heroine (Emily) felt when her hero (Reeve) made her realize that she is his:

> “I will,” I assured him. Then I frowned. “What do I tell her exactly?”
> He cocked his head at me. “You know. *You* tell me.”
> It was a challenge, a test, and for half a second I was afraid that I’d fail because I didn’t know what the correct answer was.
> And then I did. “That I’m yours.”
> His features barely changed and yet his entire face lit up. “You’re mine,” he confirmed, pride thick in his tone.
> I bathed in that pride. Let his words lick at my skin like the rough washing of a cat’s tongue. I felt like I’d been remade. Claimed. Newly wedded. Though my declaration and his acknowledgment were far from marriage vows, it was the strongest vow I’d ever made.
> Well. Besides the one I’d made to Amber.
> But this moment wasn’t about her – it was about me and Reeve and this bond between us that she had no part of.
> If there was any chance of letting her slip farther into my thoughts, it was gone a second later when Reeve yanked me to the bed and flipped me to my stomach.
> “You’re mine,” he said again, this time with a growl as he jerked the towel away from my body. “And now I’m going to fuck you like I own you. On your knees. Ass up.”\(^{214}\)

\(^{214}\) Paige, *Last Kiss*, 102-103.
Here the heroine, Emily, feels pride in knowing that she belongs to Reeve. Emily even says that she feels “claimed” and “newly wedded” to Reeve from the declaration of realizing and telling him that she is his.

While many anti-romance or anti-sadomasochist feminists will claim that the quote “You’re mine” is a way to romanticize women’s bodies as property, I would disagree. Every woman I interviewed believes they are a feminist and felt that erotic romance novels should make their feminist side tingle. For a few of my interviewees, in their view, their feminist side does not go awry because of the fantasy of these books. Every one of those quotes above is said when they’re together as a couple and other people aren’t around them. A hero could become too possessive if he pushes another man in her life away from her, telling him that she is his. One of my interviewees, Mabel explains how a hero could go too far with the “You’re mine” quote giving, *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades* as examples.

It also depends on how someone says it, if it’s more of a controlling thing than it’s not sexy at all. If it’s more in a compassionate way or even lustful way, then I think it’s sexy. – I mean controlling in the sense of using the words to dictate what a person can to can’t do in a relationship. Like someone using the words to say, “You’re mine” so you can’t do this or that and the way the author describes the person saying the words and the tone they use. Take *Twilight* or *Fifty Shades* for example. When the male lead uses the words and then feels that they can control whatever the female lead can do, that’s when I don’t like it. I prefer the words when the person saying it is saying it with more compassion and doesn’t feel that with saying the words that he or she can actually control what their significant other can or can’t do.

Alexis also addresses ho the “You’re mine” quote can become “illogical jealousy”:

For me like a certain level of possessiveness for me is sexy. It’s just when it turns in illogical jealousy it’s annoying, but if it’s like – it’s not that I don’t trust you it’s that like I’m possessive over you and I don’t want this guy like saying shit to you I’m gonna like stake my claim, or something like that. You know I’m okay with that. But, I don’t know, the 'you are mine' thing is fun. […] I think it’s sexy whenever it’s said. For me, it’s the possessiveness of the hero that I’m into. In fact, if there’s a villain obsessed with the heroine, even if he says it I think it’s sexy.
Mabel mentions *Fifty Shades* and how Christian has moments of going too far. Alexis talks about the trait in the hero of being “possessive.” To Alexis the hero telling her she is his isn’t “illogical jealousy.” The hero isn’t saying with this quote that she is only his and she can never be with anyone else. That would be too far for a hero to go if he doesn’t let her around anyone else in a romance story. She is still her own person and the hero loves his heroine that way. Plus, the hero must learn to trust his heroine.

A good balance of possessiveness is sometimes needed in an erotic romance to show what the hero wants and that the heroine is important to him. Let’s just remember that women aren’t any less feminist if they enjoy being submissive, like BDSM, enjoy wearing makeup, shave, wear dresses, etc. Someone is not less of a feminist if they enjoy reading about a hero who says “You’re mine” or enjoys a partner telling them in real life. It does make someone less of a feminist if they don’t allow a woman to be who she is.

Part of the reason I believe these quotes are in the book is because the hero of the story is the one fated for his heroine. He was meant for her just as she was meant for him. It's a part of the love and the fantasy as has been discussed. The heroines of these stories have had some sexual and romantic experiences before meeting their Prince Charmings. Just like all of these stories they were never quite the right person though and they never quite understood who she was. A hero must understand every part of a heroine, even the parts that she doesn't even know about yet or is just discovering. The hero is even making sure that she knows not to think or be with anyone else but him. While there are many books that have the main character, often a heroine, who has multiple partners, the hero is the one that is the most special or the one that knows her best.

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215 Remember in chapter three Alexis is the interviewee who expressed her pleasure in the “You’re mine” saying.
The Heroine to the Hero

While the dominant theme in erotic romance novels is that the hero claims the heroine, sometimes there is reciprocity in this dynamic. One way of understanding the “You’re mine” quote is knowing that the hero and heroine of a romance novel are each other’s. No one else will ever compare for either of them:

“But jealous Myst [heroine] didn’t want her sisters to see Wroth [hero], all hard and magnificent. As she rose, she yanked his shirttail down. That’s mine, she thought irrationally.” 216

“You want them to watch. You want them to see me fuck my cock into your greedy little cunt until you’re dripping in cum. You want me to prove you’re mine.” His teeth sank into the top of my shoulder. “Make you feel it.” [Gideon]

“I want to prove that you’re mine,” I shot back, shoving my hands into the pockets of his jeans to feel his hard ass flex. “I want everyone to know it.” [Eva] 217

“My memories of seduction in my office don’t include anyone else,” he [Gideon] said dryly.

“Listen, ace.” I sat on the coffee table. “It was a spontaneous thought that came to me because I was worried about you.” [Eva]

Gideon’s face softened. “Angels rush in. I get it.”

“Do you?” Leaning forward, I put my hands on his knees. “I’m always going to be possessive, Gideon. You’re mine. I wish I could put a sign on you that says it.” 218

A heroine can claim her hero just as much as the hero claims her, because she has the Magic Pussy. “However, part of the fantasy of romance novels is that the hero is equally floored when he encounters the heroine, and sexually unaware men are in extremely short supply in Romancelandia.” 219

Wendell and Tan describe how the heroine has just as much power as the

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218 Sylvia Day One with You. (St. Martin’s Griffin: 2016), 235.
219 Wendell and Tan, Beyond Heaving Bosoms, 45.
hero does over each other. So, not only can the hero tell the heroine that she is his, but she can
tell him. A few of the heroes above, such as Christian and Crow, mentioned the sexual body parts
of their partners being “theirs.” However, as in the scene with Myst and Wroth from A Warlord
Wants Forever, an erotic romance reader can tell that a heroine enjoys thinking that she is the
only one who gets to claim the hero’s penis. Some erotic romance novels give this sense of
inequality when it comes to the “You’re mine” quote and most readers are not looking for that.
In Morrissey’s view, “[…] romance is often working to bring its characters from a place of
inequality and misunderstanding into greater intimacy and connection.” In its place, this
intimacy and connection between the main characters in erotic romance novels are that they are
meant for each other; they are each other’s and in many ways are fated to be together. Jayne
Krentz argues that the heroine, “forms a spiritual union with the hero, sharing his masculine
erotic and aggressive energy, becoming one with him – his other half, his soul mate.”

_Each Other’s - Fated_

There is a strong and intense bond between a hero and heroine and when the hero and
heroine say, “You’re mine” it amplifies this feeling and connection between erotic romance
protagonists. Eva and Gideon from the Crossfire series, as mentioned above, are a great example
of the ways in which the protagonists can express their connection. Eva and Gideon are certainly
not the only couple to show their desire possess one another. Two other couples I provide for

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examples are Dean and Allison from the She Asked for It series and Miranda and Archer from the Darkest London series:

“You’re mine,” I [Dean] say the words reverently, our gaze heating with raw vulnerability. “No one else will ever touch you.” My heart beats hard and heavy, but slowly. “I’ll take it all away.”

“And you’re mine,” she [Allison] murmurs and runs her fingers through my hair. Her gentle touch, but possessive. And I love it.

He smiled again. “God, you’re lovely.” He [Benjamin] exhaled with a shudder and softly kissed below her ear. The smile returned, the rough grain of his cheek caressing her jaw. “And mine.”

“She asked for it,” she [Miranda] said between soft, gentle, kisses. “Ben.” She caught his face in her hands, one cheek warm, the other cool.

His beautiful gray eyes locked onto hers, and his lips curled into a smile. “I have not been Ben to anyone,” he [Benjamin] said, his voice rough with emotion.

She brushed a kiss over his high, clean cheekbone and then on the corner of his mouth. “That is because Ben belongs to me.” Her lips fitted over his, opening his soft mouth with her own, and he sighed. “You are mine.”

He pulled her closer. “I have always been yours, Miranda Fair. Just as you have been the only one for me. Only you. Always.”

These quotes demonstrate the importance of female sexual agency through erotic romance. The quotes above depict couples who embrace in the fact that they belong to one another. Some of the women I talked to express their pleasure for this common quote when it came to the reciprocity between couples:

I think it’s sexy as long as the other partner says it back – reciprocity is key. (Poppy)

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222 This footnote is going to be used for a quick lesson in erotic romance. The genre has covers and titles that make even readers giggle. While the title of this book and series may cause someone to be concerned, I can assure you there is a reason behind many titles. Willow Winters the author of this series explains her reasoning: “I hope that you enjoy this book, that it speaks to you and that you feel what I felt as I wrote it. We give so much power to four small words, she asked for it. I hate the power they have. I hate what those words have done to so many women. And I hate that the saying even exists. But if it must, it will have a different meaning for me. I hope after reading this book, those four words mean something different to you than they did before.” Never judge an erotic romance novel by its cover or its title.


224 Kristen Callihan, Firelight, (Mass Market Paperback: 2012), 300.

225 Ibid., 307.
Interviewer: “[…] But, it showed itself a lot in Fifty Shades of Grey, but he kept saying ‘You’re mine’ or ‘You. Are. Mine’. Like he kept saying that. And I wanted to know how you felt about that.”
Charlotte: “I like that when it is reciprocated. You know I like that –”
Interviewer: “They’re each other’s?”
Charlotte: “Yeah, like and I do like when you have those roles, like a Dom and a sub, I like the Dom being like ‘You are mine.’ I like the control. But I don’t like that outside of the bedroom. Like I don’t like the way that he said that to her just in general. Like a ‘You’re mine and you have to do what I say.’ Like I don’t like that. But, in the bedroom obviously that’s really hot. […] I also really like ‘I’m yours’. That’s a good one.”
Interviewer - “Yeah, I think she [Anastasia] said that a couple of times.”
Charlotte: “Mhmm.”
Interviewer: “If I remember correctly.”
Charlotte: “But, I also like the man saying it [I’m yours] to the woman too. Because you know like, that creates a little bit more tension as well in that usually you’d expect it to be the other way around based on what gender roles look like. But, she’s just so different and so new and exciting that he is like taken aback and like completely taken in. Like he can’t control it. He’s hers. Yeah, I like that. [both laugh].”

The “You are mine” quote works, and it works well in the erotic romance when readers know that erotic romance protagonists belong together, and they express how they belong to each other. As my interviewees mentioned, there are moments when it goes too far and one of the protagonists, often the hero, show too much power. Erotic romance couples do not own one another. They are each other’s equals. They work together, and they meld together. I believe that this quote should be taken seriously because it names, acknowledges, and values female desire.

Some of my interviewees, such as Alexis, even enjoy the “You’re mine” in reality and not just in her fantasies. This quote can work on two different levels when it comes to women’s sexual enjoyment. From textual analysis and my interviews I conclude that due to the fact that erotic romance pairs are more often than not fated for each other, when they tell each other “You’re mine” they are intensifying this notion that no one else will ever compare to that one person. In other words, one of the ways that the characters can express their desire and need by saying “You’re mine.”
Conclusion

A woman is sitting on a beach chair in the sand. There is an umbrella above her and she has created the perfect spot for herself to rest. The noises around her fade into the background. She pays no attention to the calling of the seagulls, the children playing, the sound of the waves, or her friends who want her to join in their fun. For her pleasure is in reading her book with the sun beaming down on her. Her legs slightly rub against each other, she turns the page, and she forgets everything else but the heroine she is imagining.

Perhaps her book has taken her into a paranormal fantasy where a vampire longs to taste her, a historical romance where she falls in love with a Duke, an interview with a billionaire who owns every bar in town, a person who binds her wrists to the bedframe, or a person who longed for her so much that they captured her and took her all for themselves. She is in her fantasy world, a place where she can be herself.

The people around her? They pay no attention. All they see is a woman reading a novel. The book has a captivating title and a picture of two people who long for each other that tells them exactly what that story is about. However, they turn the other way, shrugging. There is no judgment from them about a person reading their erotic romance on the beach. The woman herself could care less about anyone who shames her for reading such material in public. She loves her genre and engages in it whenever she can. She learns from her book.

She is smiling as she reads sex scenes that thrill and arouse her. They are detailed, intense, and most of all sensual. She is unashamed. She is bare. For she is truly her own sexually awakened woman.
Romance Reading List

What’s better than an entire list of all of the romance series I mentioned?! Here is a reading list in case any of the books and series mentioned sparked your interest! And perhaps, didn’t just spark your interest. No, I have not read them all.

*Asking for It* Series by Lilah Pace

*Beautiful* Series by Jamie McGuire

*Black Dagger Brotherhood* Series by J.R. Ward

*Blush* by Cherry Adair

*Bridgertons* Series by Julia Quinn

*Captured by the SS* Series by Gail Starbright

*Cocktail* Series by Alice Clayton

*Comfort Food* by Kitty Thomas

*Crossfire* Series by Sylvia Day

*Fairy Tales* Series by Eloisa James

*Fifty Shades* Series by EL James

*Fifty Shades: As Told by Christian Grey* Series by EL James

*Fifty Shames of Earl Grey* by Fanny Merkin

*First and Last* Series by Laurelin Paige

*Flight Risk* by Alexa Riley

*Hudson Valley* Series by Alice Clayton

*Immortals After Dark* Series by Kresley Cole

*Losing It* Series by Cora Carmack

*Men at Work* Series by Tiffany Reisz
Original Sinner Series by Tiffany Reisz

Outlander Series by Diana Gabaldon

The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins

The Immortals Series by Alyson Noel

The Ones Who Got Away Series by Roni Loren

Twilight Series by Stephenie Meyer

Wallflowers by Lisa Kleypas


Harris, Emily; Thai, Michael; and Barlow, Kate, “Fifty Shades Flipped: Effects of Reading Erotica Depicting a Sexually Dominant Woman Compared to a Sexually Dominant Man,” *Journal of Sex Research* no. 54 (2017): 386-397.


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