



FIFTY SHADES OF MISGUIDED: A PLAYFUL KINKY REVIEW OF A BDSM SHAM

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I've never wrote before about the *Fifty Shades of Grey* hodgepodge as it seems redundant. I've mocked it since the first book came out, because it is mock-worthy and the "fifty shades of" collocation lends itself to some good puns. A few days ago, though, something triggered my playful ranting.

My musical tastes are unapologetically eclectic depending on moods. Among things, I enjoy listening to some selected tracks by the Weeknd but I know almost nothing about him, nor I care much about his lyrics. I declare myself guilty of superficiality on the matter. I've always thought they fall into that realm of occasionally witty, tentatively cryptic, wannabe damned pop lyrics. By random chance, I discovered something you all surely knew already: his "Earned It" is the theme of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film (2015). I've even had the "explicit" official video in one of my mixes for ages, apparently. Upon the realization, I though fit to actually listen to the lyrics in perspective and—despite the Weeknd singing that he is "never confused"—they come across as fifty shades of pastiche. First I assumed this was the voice of the female protagonist—"so used to being used" by someone who calls "unexpected"—but then the refrain revolves around one of the constructions I find most problematic when it comes to the representation of romantic relationships: "Ima (sic) care for you [...] cause girl you earned it." By then I was in rant mode already.

Let's start off with a little discourse analysis on the use of "care," in particular in usual "romantic" collocations "I want / am going to care for / take care of you." The dictionary talks about regard, interest, liking, concern, affection, consideration, or attachment. I would add trust and respect to that. Personal relationships of any kind aimed at mutual enjoyment, support, wellbeing, whether romantic, friendly, or sexual, involve a few—or all—such things that fall into the definition of "caring." Leaving out mafia threats, to take care of someone means to oversee and protect, to look after, or support someone. I am sure that sometimes "I want / am going to take care of you" is



a well-meaning declaration of one's caring indeed, but in many cases it reveals a condescending attitude at best.

On to context and a critical analysis of it. Any personal relationship is a power relationship, but not all of them are symmetrical in the application of such power. Relationships can be asymmetrical for many reasons, they can evolve and transform due to contextual factors, and the power imbalance doesn't imply abusive patterns. This being said, *Fifty Shades of Grey* relies on representing a quite trite "romantic" narrative, led by a preposterously powerful character entitled to do whatever he wants just because he is rich, White, male, and oh-so-not-like-the-others. The assumedly innovative take on it is the exploitation of a jumble of misinterpreted BDSM notions and features to titillate mainstream audiences and stir up some usefully marketable controversy. I have honestly wondered if the author of the novels—and then the film production—considered that since the mainstream public wouldn't know much about BDSM, they could just wing it and throw some googled stuff in for its depiction. It feels like Wikipedia was a main source here, but just the first paragraph of each topic's page.

We all know the story. Rich entrepreneur—no clear details, he just makes lots of money wearing a suit—Christian Grey (Jamie Dornan) seduces virgin Anastasia Steele (Dakota Johnson) by being a conceited prick from minute one, dishing out what I suppose are meant to be BDSM innuendos. Since their very first dialogue, the main characters' dynamic begins to build. Supposedly kinky hints signal that the eroticism is on the rise, in form of allegedly meaningful frowns and smirks by him, pencil sucking and lip biting by her. Then the stalking and creeping out start. He uses his power to trace her, appear at her workplace, force a meeting. By minute 18 he's already threateningly asking about this or that guy being her boyfriends or what. By minute 23 he is upset to know that she's drunk at a bar having fun, traces her again, takes her to his hotel room, has his chauffeur get new clothes for her, brings her breakfast. His advances are of the cheesy kind and the declaration comes quick: he is "unable of leaving [her] alone." From there it is, frankly, a downward spiral. He flies helicopters, you see, and she needs someone even to fasten her seatbelts apparently. She's still a virgin, after all. A detail that seems to arouse Grey even more, whereas an experienced BDSM practitioner would have probably evaluated more responsibly the path implied.

If Ana—and I can't help but thinking the novels' author thought this as a sort of dirty pun—is infantilized, his misguided BDSM mansplaining is ludicrous. He has already a Master/slave contract ready and wants her to sign it right after she lost her virginity. This kind of contracts are usually agreed between people who have a very deep affective connection and share a consolidated BDSM practice. As she refuses at first, Grey tries to convince Ana to sign by revealing that he was a submissive himself. He's not a Dominant as he self-describes but rather a switch, and let me get the math right: he is 27, he's been "doing this" for 12 years, 6 of which as a monogamous sub,



then he's had 15 women as his subs, and now proposes a slave contract to someone he's met four times in all and had sex with once. What a life. Moreover, he picks someone who knows absolutely nothing about sex in general, let alone BDSM practices or relationships.

Dom/sub relationships establish a power role-play revolving around control and discipline that consenting participants can take to complex extents. The agreement on specific—at times very detailed—rules allows the practice to be kept within boundaries of safety and mutual enjoyment. The experience with and knowledge of a partner is fundamental to draft such kind of contracts, which must be shaped thoughtfully in order to avoid non-consensual or actually unpleasant practices. BDSM practices are not necessarily connected to a romantic relationship, but they are necessarily based on trust. Can Ana trust Grey? I doubt so. He made her sign a written consent and non-disclosure agreement, he says that she can leave at any time and yet he appears out of nowhere all the time, whatever she is doing and wherever she is. Then sends her the contract via email—thoughtful touch—and it is a document so long and detailed one cannot but marvel at his fast drafting skills. What Grey really proposes in it is a total power exchange, 24/7 Master/slave relationship rather than what is usually intended as a D/s relationship. It is a quite fundamental and defined difference, but in the film the terminology is used at random. Furthermore, a Master/slave relationship is usually articulated as a long-term relationship and it deeply influences the participants' lifestyle. Not quite something you pull together on a whim upon meeting someone all you know about is data collected on the internet over the weekend. If BDSM in general is not for everyone, an M/s relationship is for even less. Even among those who enjoy BDSM practices and extreme D/s play, a total power exchange can be seen as far too much and surely not something you impose on an unwitting stranger with zero sexual experience. Maybe Ana was made for this kind of relationship, or maybe not. We see her trying to go about her everyday life upset, uneasy, and unhappy, the opposite of what a consensual slave would feel when fulfilling her agreed duties. As paradoxical as it might sound to the unknowledgeable public, respect, equality, and mutual caring are key in BDSM. And yet, are Ana and Grey's dynamics based on them?

In fact, another critical issue is definitely the total absence of aftercare. Grey is constructed as if being a Dominant (or a Master) implied a lack of affection, empathy, tenderness, or capability to show such emotions. In particular in extreme D/s play and M/s relationships, aftercare is an integral part of the sexual practice. Again, we're talking about "care" and how it is pivotal even in a sexual relationship. The use of "taking care" in BDSM relationships is deeply connected to mutual care and it is far from infantilizing. Especially when the practice is intense, aftercare is a moment much needed by both Doms and subs. And yet Grey abandons Ana upon sexual encounters. Sending her expensive presents, occasionally telling her that she's beautiful, proposing a



weekly date “just like a normal couple,” and treating her to random flights: none of it is aftercare. Furthermore, their relationship is dominated by the evident socio-economic gap existing between them. A difference that is not an issue per se, clearly. Grey ostentatiously offers Ana glimpses of a life so luxurious she couldn’t even dream of. To support this, most of her description poorly boils down to the fact that she works at a hardware store and inexplicably uses a flip phone in 2015. After she refuses to go ahead with the contract, he breaks in her apartment, but we are bound by the narrative to think it’s ok because he brought champagne.

After he denies any manifestation of affection she seems to wish for, she decides to negotiate and sign the contract. Classic strategy of emotional blackmail he seems to master quite well in all its facets. Suddenly she is confident and plays brat, although it is not clear how she can even discuss such contract as they are usually based on shared experience and well, knowing what it is about. Her *Cosmopolitan*-powered knowledge of sexual practice is on par with Grey’s dubious concoction of the contract itself. At some point among soft limits, vaginal fisting appears incongruously next to fellatio, and I wonder if they just picked something out of Wikipedia graphic enough to shake and thrill the viewers. Grey seems to think that fisting and an impromptu blowjob fit on a same page; someone should tell him that it might take months to fist a vagina you’ve had vanilla sex with once and even then, my friend, it is no breezy feat. But we’re good, because Ana crossed that out before we could even say lube.

When he eventually gets to “show her” what BDSM sex is about, they go skipping from one bondage method to the other, none of which leaves the slightest mark on her skin. And to be fair, not much more happens. Grey’s abode features a secret BDSM room full of patently expensive tools and toys, surely soundproof and with nice flooring. Something many a practitioner would love to have the possibility to set up, partly because it draws a clear boundary between everyday life and BDSM play. A fun dungeon. A heterotopic place where you play what you love to play, that is real but not quite. And yet, his room seems a bit redundant and display-ish. Do his housecleaning employees go through it a couple of times a week? Maybe it is my allergic soul judging, but I doubt anyone likes a dusty spanker around. Even less an unclean toy, and the man sure doesn’t seem one to handle the literally dirty aspects of it. Whenever Grey tries to mansplain how pain is so close to pleasure, I hear it in Freddy Mercury’s falsetto. I truly liked Jamie Dornan in *The Fall* (2013-2016), but I can’t possibly stand Grey’s caught-by-surprise “sexy” frown or creepy smirk. Aside from the misguided representation of BDSM, eroticism is built in such a stereotyped manner that there is no seductive tension whatsoever building up. I cannot find one engaging, intriguing conversation between the two, let alone complicity.

It is very evident that Ana does not understand D/s play, nor she enjoys it; that is the reason she thinks Grey is a wacko, whereas his stalking habits don’t trouble her



much after all. The psychoanalytical jumble about Grey being adopted is a topic better left for another rant, as it seems to connect even more strongly “perversion” to abuse and justify both with the fact that he endured a harsh childhood—a construction that will be exploited in the following installments. He ends up saying that he enjoys BDSM because he is “fifty shades of fucked up,” overlapping abuse and BDSM overtly as if it were the norm. Despite being critical, some have praised the *Fifty Shades* saga for bringing BDSM to the mainstream public, but I wonder if they actually watched the film. It constructs the notion that BDSM might seem intriguing at first glance, but those who enjoy it are necessarily mentally unstable and generally violent—paired with a romantic normalization of abusive patterns. Undeniably, some people use BDSM practices to channel their abusive behavior patterns; most do not, because that is not the point of it. Grey’s imposition of a high level of power play on an unwitting person is far removed from the usual path this kind of relationships take. Exploring BDSM and in general more or less “transgressive” sexual practices with someone knowledgeable should be an advantage, as a responsible practitioner knows how to tackle and measure the matter at hand. If something, s/he should be a good guide on a path that not necessarily will lead to structured BDSM practices, but sure it is meant to be enjoyable and leading to stimulating mutual connection and exploration. BDSM has far more than fifty shades, and guess what... they are all safe, sane, and consensual.

[If you want to learn more but you don’t know anyone knowledgeable on BDSM-related topics, please try Google Scholars and some good essays first, leaving *Cosmopolitan* and *GQ* alone.]

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