

## ***Fifty Shades* of “Mommy Porn”: A Post-GFC Renegotiation of Paternal Law**

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**Abstract:** Circulating as “Mommy Porn” in mass culture, E.L. James’s phenomenally popular *Fifty Shades* trilogy (2011) (*Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, and *Fifty Shades Freed*, respectively) has generated significant media attention for its appeal as an edgy and sexually provocative set of texts, purportedly legitimising women’s foray into BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism) in their own bedrooms. The figure of the mother certainly goes to the heart of the widespread cultural appeal of these texts, though not, perhaps, for its function as sexually liberating, but rather for the way in which this figure is used to rehabilitate a “wounded” version of white masculinity. In rereading some seminal critiques of the popular romance, this paper will suggest that anxieties around heterosexuality and gender are managed in these texts through a reconfiguration of the popular romance in ways that foreground the mothering function of the heroine in relation to a wounded hero. The use of BDSM as a thematic construct becomes a means to ritualise the abjection of the “mother” and play out the tension between maternal semiotic authority and paternal symbolic law in late-capitalist culture. *Fifty Shades* thus becomes a particularly contemporary variant on the romance novel, with the texts performing significant cultural work for white masculinity in the fallout of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), while the interplay of wounded masculinity with BDSM themes re-fixes the terms of the gender binary in service of a return to a more regressive depiction of paternalism.

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*“My mind drifts. Christian the sadist. Christian the submissive. Christian the untouchable. Christian’s Oedipal impulses... Can I really marry this man?”* (E.L. James’s *Fifty Shades Darker*, 314).

Dubbed “Mommy Porn” in the mass media, E.L. James’s phenomenally popular [1] *Fifty Shades* trilogy (2011) (*Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, and *Fifty Shades Freed*, respectively) has subsequently carried connotations of being an edgy and sexually provocative set of texts that have purportedly legitimised women’s foray into BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism) in their own bedrooms. As one fan wrote, the books certainly “made me blush” and while she “loved the book – all three,” she ultimately considered it “pretty hard-core porn” (Donaldson James). This advent of “Mommy Porn” fandom carries an underlying assumption that these texts promote a kind of sexual liberation for women, a seemingly illicit permissibility for mothers to be sexually adventurous. However, as the journalist interviewing this particular fan goes on to note, “Christian Grey ... is a badly damaged man – with big-time mommy issues,” and it is the contention here that indeed, the configuration of Christian Grey is centred on those “mommy-issues,” issues which possibly go to the heart of the widespread cultural appeal of these texts, though not, perhaps, for their appeal as sexually liberating, but rather for how those “mommy-issues” promote a conservative configuration of gender relations through the legitimisation of contempt for women. The construction of Christian as subject in relation to the “mother” drives the action in the narrative, action that speaks to wider cultural anxieties around the function of the mother, especially in relation to the development and maintenance of conceptions of white masculinity.

*Fifty Shades* is, for the most part, taken from heroine Anastasia Steele’s first person point of view, and the subject of her story is an investigation into Christian’s background in order to understand why he is unable to have a “normal” heterosexual relationship. The exception here is when the narrative shifts to Christian’s point of view as a wounded little boy. Through these narrative strategies, it is revealed that Christian’s emotional detachment began with the biological mother and persists as the women in his life can be read as, to varying degrees, figures of the mother. The biological mother was a neglectful addict who committed suicide, leaving the four-year-old Christian to sit by her dead body for four days; she is the woman he holds responsible for his inability to have emotionally fulfilling romantic relationships (*Darker*38). The adopted mother, Dr Grace Trevelyan-Grey, is an affluent and accomplished woman whom Christian reveres but keeps at a distance (*Grey* 305). Indeed, for the first two years with the Trevelyan-Grey family, Christian’s refusal to speak indicates an initial and literal refusal to engage in the symbolic (paternal) order. Later, this disengagement transforms into delinquent tendencies in adolescence (which he attributes to childhood trauma and his feeling that it’s “very hard to grow up in a perfect family when you’re not perfect” (*Grey* 372)), tendencies which were successfully managed and rechanneled by becoming the submissive in a BDSM relationship with an older woman, Elena, or “Mrs Robinson,” as Ana nicknames her. Following Mrs Robinson’s tutelage and an education at Seattle BDSM clubs, Christian transforms from submissive to Dominant and begins enlisting submissives who look like his biological mother:

He takes a deep breath and swallows.

“I’m a sadist, Ana. I like to whip little brown-haired girls like you because you all look like the crack whore – my birth mother. I’m sure you can guess why.”  
(*Darker* 287)

This traumatic background is offered, at least within the diegetic world of the texts, as a satisfactory explanatory context for Christian’s predilection for BDSM and, more specifically, his inability to have a “normal” girlfriend, his need to control the pain/pleasure of sexual encounters, and his insistence that he remain untouched. Once Ana uncovers the reason for Christian’s refusal to be touched, that is, his mother was a crack whore who died when he was four (*Grey* 311-18), the narrative shifts to a characterisation of Christian as a boy: “I imagine a small, dirty, gray-eyed boy lost and lonely beside the body of his dead mother” (*Darker* 38), and Ana is positioned as mother: “But as I say the words, I imagine him as a small child. Maybe fear was all he knew then. Sorrow grips and squeezes my heart at the thought” (*Grey* 331). Moreover, it sets up a characterisation of masculinity that is centred on these relationships with four mother figures and the role of Dominant as a means to reconcile boyhood trauma suffered because of the biological mother; reverence and detachment toward women because of the “perfect” mother; BDSM as a coping mechanism that is later construed as molestation because of the female Domme mother; and finally the performance of all three on the new mother figure, Ana, Christian’s sixteenth submissive and doppelgänger of the dead mother.

Given the text’s preoccupation with the function of the maternal in relation to a wounded masculinity, *Fifty Shades* arguably speaks to cultural anxieties around traditional gender roles, heterosexuality, and the function of the “mother” in contemporary Western society. In substituting BDSM for the paranormal, James’s fan-fiction of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilightsaga* brings to the surface the underlying gender inequalities of heterosexuality, where the symbolic meanings of those gender positions are literalised in a way that centralises a wounded white male as the subject in relation to the mother(s). The texts do this through a reworking of the traditional romance heroine into the role of the mother, while the depiction of the hero fluctuates between wounded boy and paternal Dom. Through these generic shifts, the texts register an intensification of anxieties around maternal authority and paternal law in the wider culture. In this way, the use of BDSM themes allows for a kind of ritualised abjection of maternal authority in order to reinstate paternal law. This ritualised aspect of the process of abjection parallels Barbara Creed’s application of Julia Kristeva’s theory to the horror film. Drawing on the work of Creed and Kristeva, this paper will show how the representation of Christian as the wounded Dominant abjecting the “mother” generates significant symbolic currency for the patriarchy in late-capitalism. For as surface gives way to more surface, “originals” become fan-fictions and underlying Oedipal dramas become actual narratives, texts such as James’s reveal an intensification of the need to shore up the paternal signifier in an era marked by crisis. In this way, *Fifty Shades* functions to reassure cultural anxieties around masculinity in crisis by recentralising white masculinity at a time when it is being marked, quite appropriately, for actual social sanction – as the figure associated with creating the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) – and marks it instead as wounded. The immense popularity of the *Twilight* saga initiates from a similar desire to reassure the cultural imaginary in a time of perceived crisis. Much of the action throughout those four novels is motivated and justified by the protection of Bella and the Cullen family from the incursions of an

indisputable evil Other. If we read the paternalistic vampire family as metonymic of the US and the West at large, then these ongoing battles become emblematic of the wider cultural need to reassure who was “in” and who was “out” in a post-9/11 climate of uncertainty (McGuire and Buchbinder 300). In reworking that evil Other of the *Twilight* saga into “Other mothers,” *Fifty Shades* delves into the underlying struggles of the symbolic order – the increasingly blurred boundary between maternal authority and paternal law – and revives paternal symbolic law through a ritualised abjection of the “mother.”

## White Masculinity in Decline: Generic Transformations in the Popular Romance

*Fifty Shades* literalises the patriarchal gender relations that were already present in the *Twilight* saga by displacing the figure of the vampire into the figure of the Dominant white male and thus tapping into a broader regressive trend within gender relations in Western culture[2]. In substituting BDSM for the supernatural, these texts make visible what was latent in *Twilight* – a seemingly aberrant romance underpinned by traditional gender roles in service of the biological, nuclear family. In recentralising the paternal signifier through the representation of a heterosexual relationship that plays out a key characteristic of the heterosexual dynamic, that is, it “relates heterosexuality not only to gender difference but also to sexual inequality and power; gender inequality and power difference in fact become the *sin qua non* of heterosexual desire” (Chodorow 54), *Fifty Shades* articulates a scenario that was already established in *Twilight*. As Anthea Taylor has argued, the *Twilight* saga centralises “an adolescent romantic relationship that appears in many ways masochistic” (32), where the configuration of Bella’s relationship with Edward is “predicated upon her submission instead of mutuality” (36). *Fifty Shades* arguably takes this latent position and manifests it by adding sexual content centred on BDSM.

However, such a literalising of patriarchal gender relations does not explain why these texts in particular would be so popular[3]. In manifesting the dominance and submission that characterises “normal” heterosexual relationships (Chodorow 51), in establishing a central romantic relationship that serves the hegemony of patriarchal marriage in ways similar to other popular romance fiction, the sheer popularity of *Fifty Shades* seems unwarranted. For the texts certainly accord with Janice Radway’s assertion that the popular romance works by teaching female readers that if they successfully read male behaviour they will have their “needs for fatherly protection, motherly care, and passionate adult love ... satisfied perfectly,” while simultaneously encouraging women to read male indifference as the concealment of genuine affection, thus performing the cultural work of insuring the patriarchy against any demands to change (149-51). Ana is certainly characterised by her ongoing emotional labour in relation to Christian, and Christian undeniably exhibits the indifference and domineering behaviour which would make him a near perfect male romantic hero in accordance with Radway’s definition (128). Yet, while Ana exhibits key character traits of the “ideal heroine” such as inexperience, innocence, and a “fiery disposition,” Radway’s assertion that the latter is an “impulse toward individuation and autonomy, a step that must be taken, at least within patriarchy *against* the mother, that is, *against women*” (italics in orig, 123-4), both for the

heroine and vicariously the reader, has shifted. A closer examination of the texts suggests that this positioning of women has arguably changed in the current context.

The emphasis in *Fifty Shades* is not on the heroine's breaking away from her mother, and thus making the step required within patriarchal culture toward individuation and autonomy by breaking away from the mother/women and behaving in a more masculine way (the "fiery disposition"). Rather, the novel's emphasis is on Ana's more explicitly *becoming* the mother. Ana does reject a particular version of femininity, namely the "monstrous mother," in the figure of Mrs Robinson; however, this is in service of her becoming the mother, rather than achieving autonomy. Indeed this representation of Ana is akin to Diane Negra's analysis of the heroines of post-9/11, postfeminist chick flicks, where the "female subjectivity is sketched so superficially ... narrative space is freed up to narrate (perhaps unconsciously) other interests" (51). In this lack of a depiction of a "fully-fledged female subjectivity," these heroines become overly preoccupied with rehabilitating masculinity (Negra 62). Within such a context, it is the romantic hero that becomes the focus of both the violent reaction against the mother and the intense desire to regress into the primary love offered by the mother. In order to shift the focus in the texts from the "ideal heroine's journey toward female selfhood as a chronicle of her efforts to both reject and regain her mother" (Radway 124), the narrative dramatises one of the ways in which women become sex objects to men by eroticising the Freudian precept that a "marriage is not made secure until the wife has succeeded in making her husband her child as well and in acting as a mother to him" (qtd. in Chodorow 22). Thus it is male individuation and autonomy that are at stake in these texts, a position played out through a sexualisation of *his* journey toward selfhood as the subject in relation to the mother.

A key difference in *Fifty Shades* from both the successful romance described by Radway and other seminal critiques of the popular romance such as Tania Modleski's and Ann Barr Snitow's (as well as from the *Twilight* saga) is this centralising of Christian as a (hyper) masculine romance hero *and* a wounded boy; this is arguably a Christian Grey bildungsroman, not an Anastasia Steele tale. This is not to say that the deciphering and domesticating of the male hero as a central feature of the traditional romance novel is radically revised in *Fifty Shades*; it is to say, however, that this particular representation of the wounded yet dominant hero has undergone significant deviations from the features outlined by the earlier critics in ways that change the cultural work this particular version of the romance hero performs in the current context. In its anxiety to explain the brutality of the hero, in its feminisation of this figure by remaking the wounded hero a little boy as well as a dominant male, these texts depict a romantic hero that is different from its predecessors in so far as it evinces a great deal of anxiety around traditional conceptions of masculinity and the place of the dominant male in heterosexual relationships.

This representation of Christian as the hero in need of rehabilitation from his heroine can be read as part of a broader response to the wider cultural decline in the capital of white masculinity since the 1990s and the anxieties this generates for both sexes invested in traditional conceptions of heterosexuality. While the violent tendencies of the romantic hero remain in this context, it is no longer possible to accept a kind of "phallic worship" where male "is good, male is exciting, *without further points of reference*" (emphasis mine, Snitow 248), nor is it possible that the hero's abrupt transformation from cruel and indifferent into a caring and tender lover can go without some sort of structural explanation (Radway 147). Furthermore, why the hero is so often angry with the heroine

as well as his recognition that she is not a “scheming little adventuress” is no longer such an enigma in its resolution (Modleski 39); on the contrary, a large portion of the narrative is dedicated to explaining this anger (directed toward the biological mother) and the recognition that the heroine is unlike other women (not like the “Other” mothers – previous submissives, the biological mother, and Mrs Robinson). This focus on providing further points of reference for the hero is in keeping with J. Jack Halberstam’s observation that with the decentring in importance of the traditional nuclear family and the necessity of men in this configuration becoming questionable, some sort of structural explanation for the presence of men is arguably required. Halberstam notes that with the increasing presence of highly capable women in both the domestic and public sphere and the role of the dominant white male as the father figure – as the disciplinarian and financial provider – less central, an explanation for the presence of the male in the nuclear family would thus seem imperative (31-61). *Fifty Shades* is instructive in this regard, for it manoeuvres around questions of the necessity of the white male by reworking the fantasy of the romance into a kind of displacement fantasy, where the focus shifts to the problematic nature of particular mother figures while another mother figure (the heroine) is idealised as she rehabilitates the hero into his paternal function.

The figure of the mother is thus readily available for the diffusion of these anxieties around the symbolic castration of the white male. In Tania Modleski’s analysis of Harlequin romances, she noted that castration “generally plays no part in typical female revenge fantasies, which depend upon the man’s retaining all his potency while loving and suffering desperately” (46), and yet the representation of Ana and Christian reworks this by staging a castration of Christian at the hands of the neglectful, biological mother’s pimp, and later through his being pegged by the “molester” “Mrs. Bitch Troll Robinson” when he was fifteen (*Freed* 375), thus displacing Ana’s revenge fantasy onto these other mother figures, most especially, Mrs Robinson. The longing for power and revenge as articulated by the revenge fantasy, where the heroine is avenged once the hero realises that he has lost her, is not central to the configuration of the heroine in these texts – it does occur, Ana leaves Christian at the conclusion of *Grey*, and the “self-subversion” outlined by Modleski is in evidence when Ana is captured and beaten into a coma by Jack Hyde and then rescued by Christian in *Freed* (403-407) – however, the emphasis is on the heroine getting actual (read: visible) revenge on the abusive mother(s) and in the process rehabilitating her hero. This “self-subversion,” where the heroine gets her revenge by disappearing, is focused more on the disappearance of the biological mother than the heroine. It is the “self-subversion” of this original maternal figure that haunts these texts and functions as a kind of displaced revenge: that she could not be what Christian needed and that he loved her in spite of his resentment echoes throughout the trilogy in ways that speak to an underlying rage toward maternal power. In fact, when Christian is literally “brought to his knees” (Modleski 45) by Ana, when he assumes the position of submissive in an effort to stop her leaving him again in *Darker* (282), this act is configured as repulsive to Ana. Moreover, it is linked to a fear of abandonment by the biological mother through its duplication of Leila’s submission earlier in this second book and to the monstrous mother Elena’s method of bringing Christian under control by teaching him submission when he was an adolescent. It also rewrites that initial walkout in *Grey* as Ana walking away from the abused product of two inadequate mothers, rather than Christian, per se. In a way, what is so noteworthy about *Fifty Shades* is that the central conventions of the popular romance outlined by

earlier critics are still present, but the heroine's role here has been pushed into the background of an unfolding Oedipal drama that privileges the hero as the wounded son: seeking revenge, seeking visibility.

The Oedipal drama at the heart of the texts thus privilege a wounded white male breaking away from inadequate mothers, "paedophiles," and welfare mothers, and repeatedly returns, with erotic domination, to this rather violent break from the mother. However, once Ana remakes Christian, allowing him to assimilate his love for his biological mother and thus leave behind the ritualised aspect of BDSM, the narrative concludes. We are still reminded of the boy at the centre of this drama, however, as the trilogy concludes with an epilogue, "Fifty's First Christmas," of four-year-old Christian transitioning into the new home of his adopted parents: "My new mommy is not cold. Not like ... not like... And my bad dreams go when she is there asleep with me" (484 *Freed*). It is this slippage between wounded white boy and paternal Dominant that allows white masculinity to be recentralised in a time of perceived crisis, but in order to stage this centralisation, the texts engage in a repeated ritualization of the abjection of the figure of the mother through the use of BDSM themes.

## **Between Maternal Authority and Paternal Law: "Mothering" in the Twenty-First Century**

Underpinning these generic shifts is an anxiety around the maternal figure, the fear of slipping back into her pre-symbolic domain, constantly managed and displaced through an excessive display of paternal dominance and reflections on a wounded boyhood. Much of the drama in the narrative is underpinned by anxieties around the reappearance of this maternal power, as well as the attempts to repress it. The conclusion of the second book, *Fifty Shades Darker*, is exemplary in this regard. It brings together several narrative threads which suggest this story is about the development of Christian's sexual identity, the investments of this in BDSM, and the underpinnings of this in relation to the "mother." Following Ana's walkout in *Grey*, Ana and Christian have not returned to the BDSM playroom. On the day following Christian's suspected death – here a reversal of Modleski's "disappearing act" (46), for it is Christian who disappears and Ana's "true love" which is realised – and the day following her consent to marry him, they return, signalling a return to the ritualised space of abjecting the maternal. Shortly after this, at Christian's birthday celebration-come-wedding-announcement, there is a confrontation that brings into play the four mother figures. Once Christian announces the impending nuptials, Elena corners Ana and informs her that she will never be able to satisfy Christian's "lifestyle" needs. Outraged, Ana confronts Mrs Robinson on her "paedophilic" tendencies, suggesting she knows nothing about his "needs" (453). Once Christian enters the room and berates Elena for her interference, the exchange elaborates on those "needs," with Elena assuming a Domme posture and taking credit for Christian's success:

"I was the best thing that ever happened to you ... Look at you now. One of the richest, most successful entrepreneurs in the United States – controlled, driven – you need nothing. You are master of your universe ... You were on

the road to self-destruction, and I saved you from that, saved you from a life behind bars ... I taught you everything you know, everything you need.” (*Darker* 454)

Taken aback by this outburst, Christian shifts from a commanding response, “You taught me how to fuck, Elena. But it’s empty, like you,” to a childish one, “You never once held me ... You never once said you loved me” (455). Elena retaliates, “Love is for fools,” and the idealised mother, Grace, enters: “Take your filthy paws of my son, you whore, and get out of my house” (455). Ana then retreats to Christian’s childhood bedroom and locates the picture of his biological mother: “I think of the spectacle I’ve just witnessed between him and Mrs. Robinson. And there in the corner is the small black-and-white photo – his mother, the crack whore” (456). This scene is the final conflict of the second book, and it situates the central tension of the narrative around Christian’s sexual identity and the relationship of this to four mother figures. It also, significantly, reverses Modleski’s assertion that the hero must “need her [the heroine] in spite of all his strength rather than because of his weakness” (46), for clearly Christian’s strength is attributed to the monstrous mother, while it is his perceived weakness, the need for the mother, which Ana fulfils.

The texts, therefore, bring to the surface the erotic impulses for the pre-Oedipal mother, both the desire for her and the threat she presents, aptly encapsulated in the aforementioned conclusion to *Darker*. When Ana looks at the picture of the biological mother, she searches it for its resemblance to herself and to Christian; it is the “unheimlich” of Freud’s analysis she is unconsciously searching for, “for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old – established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression” (12-13). What has clearly been repressed here is the conflicting desire for the mother with the overwhelming need to avoid being taken over by that mother (as well as, in the case of Ana, the need to both identify as Christian’s mother and not identify with his previous mother(s)). In centring this drama on the incursion of the mother figure(s) onto a characterisation of masculinity that is at once dominant yet wounded, the texts unearth the erotic element of incestuous desire for the mother and bring to the surface both the attractive and the repulsive element of that desire and therefore the need the subject has to abject it in order to remain in the symbolic realm. BDSM becomes a structure within the narrative that allows for a diffusion of this abjection, where the playroom functions as a ritualised space for this abjection, and the heterosexual underpinnings of s/D work as a set of preconfigured sexual identities within which the characters shift – actually or symbolically – and in the process play out the underlying anxieties and fears over the repression of maternal authority. It is the representation of Christian that is centralised in this process of abjection through his “addiction” to BDSM (*Darker* 338). In this way, the texts bring to the fore the erotic impulses that underpin the generic shifts of the popular romance outlined earlier, and it is the characterisation of Christian’s excessive masculinity that is simultaneously displaced and dispersed through the process of abjection. Thus, these texts are situated in between an attempt to escape maternal semiotic authority and an attempt to *be* the paternal symbolic law.

In order to deal with this subjective excess, an excess characterised by both the impossibility of the masculine subject position (a point that will be explored more fully in the next section) and the trauma which marks his character and is linked to and blamed on

the deceased mother (the feminine), Christian repeatedly engages in abjection of the figure of the mother. In this sense these texts use sex with the mother figure in place of the monstrous of the horror film to point to the border where the abject lurks, and BDSM as an attempt to ward off that abject element. Barbara Creed has argued that the function of the monstrous is “to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability” (67). Drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva, Creed examines how “defilement rites ... point to the ‘boundary’ between the maternal semiotic authority and the paternal symbolic law” (71) and how the horror film in particular functions as a “modern defilement rite” as it “works to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies. In Kristeva’s terms, this means separating out the maternal authority from paternal law” (72). In their displacement of the supernatural for the world of BDSM – with its attendant protracted contracts and negotiations, pre-planned “scenes,” and designated spaces – *Fifty Shades* similarly creates a “modern defilement rite” that functions to separate out the maternal authority from the paternal law. Indeed, upon viewing Christian’s “playroom” (his BDSM room, which Ana later dubs the “Red Room of Pain”), Ana emphasises the “womb-like” quality of the space: “... the lighting is soft, subtle. I can’t see the source, but it’s around the cornice in the room, emitting an ambient glow. The walls and ceiling are a deep, dark burgundy, giving a womb-like effect to the spacious room” (*Grey* 89). Given that the defining moment for Christian is a moment that drives the story – sitting by the corpse of his “crack-whore” mother – the womb then literally becomes the place where Christian goes to “renew... [his] initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element” (Creed 64). That this characterisation of Christian is driven by his relation to the mother(s) and the corpse suggests these texts are overly concerned with abjection, considering the corpse is, according to Kristeva:

...the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (Kristeva 4)

In playing out BDSM scenarios where he is Dominant – in control, obeyed, the deliverer of the ultimate pain and the ultimate pleasure – Christian represents not only abjection of the mother in terms of warding off “his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother” (Kristeva 64), but also a perceived intensification of that threat through a characterisation marked especially by the relationship with the corpse of the biological mother. Adding to this sense of intensification is the representation of Christian as the Dominant; an excessive illustration of paternal authority, itself an attempt to stave off the threat posed by abjection[4]. Yet behind this performance of (hyper) masculinity the texts remain infused with the spectre of the mother and both the pleasure and pain with which she has been culturally invested.

On the one hand, “mother” signifies an original, oceanic pleasure: “for a time after its birth, the child does not differentiate between itself and the mother ... Its libidinal flow is directed toward the complete assimilation of everything which is experienced as pleasurable ...” (Silverman 155). And yet on the other, the mother represents a contempt for women which originates in childhood realisations around castration and culminates in

“the defensiveness and fear of women and things feminine that characterize many of the most normal heterosexual men in our society” (Chodorow 45). If the core objective of the romance novel is, as Radway has argued, to return to the mother, to realise fully the self as the self-in-relation with an “other” and indulge in “the reestablishment of that original, blissful symbiotic union between mother and child that is the goal of all romances” (155-6), then this would explain why the texts include a literal representation of this fusion – Ana’s orgasms are constructed as mindless “explosions” around Christian twenty-five times throughout the course of the trilogy, a representation of erotic symbiosis that carries similar overtones to the wholeness and oceanic pleasure enjoyed with the mother in infancy. However, why these texts focus so insistently on Christian’s need for pleasure in punishing that mother as well is indicative of deeper cultural anxieties around what it means to be a mother at the beginning of the twenty-first century and, perhaps more crucially, what it means to be a man.

It seems that in an attempt to redefine these gendered positions, the trilogy plays in the space between the paternal symbolic law and the maternal semiotic authority. The term “play” is used here quite deliberately, for Christian certainly has no issue taking pleasure “in ‘playing’ with the body and its wastes,” the elements of abjection, an act which points back to a time when the mother-child relationship was marked by such pleasures (Creed 70). This is exemplified by his comfort with menstrual blood and sex—“He’s standing there, naked, gloriously naked, with my blood on him ...” (*Grey* 371)—and later with his sexual pleasure in the pregnant body—“And I’m looking forward to the taste of breast milk again” (*Freed* 470). Yet given that Christian is also characterised as a boy, then Dominant Christian in the playroom would seem an attempt to break free from this maternal authority, as Creed explains:

With the subject’s entry into the symbolic, which separates the child from the mother, the maternal figure and the authority she signifies are repressed. Kristeva argues that it is the function of defilement rites, particularly those relating to menstrual and excremental objects, to point to the ‘boundary’ between maternal semiotic authority and paternal symbolic law. (Creed 71)

In late-capitalism, this fear of being subsumed by a pleasure that is characterised as maternal is exacerbated by the tension set up between the subject demanded of late-capitalism and the more softened subject of consumer capitalism. Mark Fisher relates the latter to the late-capitalist impulse toward “postmodernity’s permissive hedonism,” a problem he characterises through traditional assumptions around the maternal and paternal:

The problem is that late capitalism insists and relies upon the very equation of desire with interests that parenting used to be based on rejecting. In a culture in which the ‘paternal’ concept of duty has been subsumed into the ‘maternal’ imperative to enjoy, it can seem that the parent is *failing* in their duty if they in any way impede their children’s absolute right to enjoyment. (italics in org. Fisher 71-2)

Part of the appeal of *Fifty Shades* perhaps lies in its staging and literalising of both the pleasure and pain of this absolute need and sense of entitlement to pleasure coupled with an (eroticised and paternal) punishment. The drama of the trilogy cycles from Christian the Dominant abusing Ana to his boyish remorse to her acceptance and nurturance of his behaviour. They do this through a construction of Christian as the boy/Man in relation to the mother and in the process stage how, in Creed's formulation of Kristeva, the "maternal body becomes the site of conflicting desires (the semiotic chora) ... the subject's fear of being alone, of being separate from the mother, and the threat of annihilation – often through reincorporation ... it both repels and attracts" (83). In doing so, they relegitimise the paternal signifier, but they do so via a ritualised and designated space for the mother, for the pleasure – the "womb" (playroom) and the indulgence in the abject is acceptable, but only under the conditions that it is in keeping with a paternal agenda.

These texts therefore stage a resolution of the Oedipal drama for the male and female subject and placate the cultural imaginary through an establishment of a new (paternal) order. Firstly, they illustrate how both "sexes develop contempt for women" (Chodorow 8), where for Ana this is expressed in her contempt for the "molester" Mrs Robinson and for Christian it is arguably a central theme of the novels. Secondly, the representation of Christian is so similar to an understanding of "defensive masculinity," it could be considered exemplary:

Benjamin shows us how males develop a 'false differentiation' from their mother, resting on denial of the mother's subjectivity and objectification of her. Objectification and the difficulties faced by the boy who wants recognition and response from his mother, on whom he at the same time does not want to be dependent, twist into a need to dominate women, into erotization of domination in the normal case and into erotic violence in the abnormal. (Chodorow 58-9)

And finally Ana becomes the mother, yet she does not "reciprocate her husband's setting her up as an *asexual* mother" (emphasis mine, Chodorow 22); however, she does reciprocate being set up as the mother who is dominated through erotic violence and performs a significant amount of emotional labour for Christian in the process. Much of the cultural work in these texts revolves around what the characterisation of Ana is attempting to resolve, that men

... split women symbolically and erotically into mothers ... on the one hand, and prostitutes on the other... As long as a woman symbolizes mother, she is a forbidden oedipal object, an indication of an attachment carried on too long. (Chodorow 22)

These texts attempt to negotiate the taboo around the sexual desirability of the mother. However, the texts are able to reconcile the cultural anxieties around this taboo by displacing the sexually available woman back into the possession of the male.

Christian's desire to own, command, and parent Ana, demonstrated through his monosyllable declarations and instructions, "Mine," "Come," "Eat," are not only transparent representations of the parenting appeal of the romance, as outlined by Radway (149), they

are also suggestive of cultural anxieties around the one thing we cannot own in late-capitalist corporate culture – the Other. However, ultimately these texts placate this anxiety by remaking the heroine as the mother rather than the mothered. Christian owns Ana by becoming both her son and her father. The price for this ownership is an excess of masculinity that can never be reconciled with the constructed nature of the categories of gender – a point repeatedly demonstrated in these texts through the representation of Christian the abused boy and Christian the wounded Dominant. In order to deal with this excess, which frustrates conceptions of masculinity, the texts legitimise the punishment of the mother (the feminine) and do so in the guise of intense pleasure. It is a strategy that performs a dual function: it shores up masculinity in the (repeated) performance of Dominance, and it shifts blame through the interplay of boyhood innocence and wounded (white, male) adulthood to the mother. The texts do this by subtly shifting the characterisation of Christian as the victimiser of Ana to the victim of the mother, a technique which, as we shall now see, performs a significant amount of cultural work for white masculinity within the context of the (Global Financial Crisis) GFC.

## **Wounded White Billionaires: Identity Politics of the Dominant**

A narrative of white masculinity in crisis began in post-60s American culture as discourses of liberation decentralised the importance of the white male and began to overturn assumptions regarding this groups' connection with normativity (Robinson 2). This decentring of the white male has been attributed to the economic shift to a post-industrial/late-capitalist/post-Fordist culture as well as the new and increasing visibility of women, ethnically and racially diverse peoples, gays, and African Americans since the 1960s. This perceived crisis creates an excess around the concept of masculinity that needs to be rechanneled or at least accounted for, as in the Lacanian position on the self-reflexive subject, which posits that there can be no self-reflexivity without an excess, a remainder which must be projected elsewhere. That is, the relations and unconscious desires that are out of the subject's control, and thus exceed the social position with which he identifies, he must abject (Faulkner 114). Masculinity is a subject position which cannot ever really be achieved. The subsequent excess that impossibility produces returns to haunt the subject, a situation that arguably intensifies in times of crises. Yet the manufacturing of crisis[5] not only allows the white male to displace this excess, but also functions to recentralise white masculinity in times of crisis.

This recentralising is frequently articulated in popular cultural texts and in the media, both helping to create and perpetuate a discourse of white masculinity in crisis, and it is done so against the backdrop of a variety of crises. For example, following the terror attacks of 9/11, Susan Faludi noted in *The Terror Dream* that the sense of "impotence" many men felt at having nothing to fight was rechanneled into representations of virile, hyper-masculine fire fighters and the shoring up of direct, tough-talking (male) leaders. Furthermore, in the fallout from the 2008 GFC, several films have emerged that focus on (predominantly) male reactions to the situation; most memorable in the context of what to do with an excess of masculinity is the characterisation of up and coming trader Seth Bregman (Penn Badgley) in the 2011 film *Margin Call*. Once the full impact of the oncoming

financial crisis hits him, he cries and laments the dissolution of his identity, his sense of self effectively exiled and adrift along with the oncoming economic crisis. A harbinger of the anxieties around the feminisation of men in late-capitalist culture, the 1999 film *Fight Club* has drawn substantial attention for its resonances with the crisis of masculinity (Buchbinder 1-3). That film's emphasis on corporeal experience as a means to deal with those anxieties was like a portent for how this would be similarly managed within popular culture following a crisis such as the GFC. While these texts are not generically affiliated with the popular romance, focused as it is on the domestic sphere and written by women about women's experiences of heterosexuality, they are nonetheless further evidence of how these cultural anxieties around white masculinity are being displaced into popular culture through a range of genres. What this cumulatively suggests is that an excess of masculinity in the face of perceived crisis can be rewritten from a narrative of political crisis into one of personal trauma. Terrorism and the subsequent (American-West, white, and predominantly male's) "War on Terror," the GFC and the "victimised" banker, and the disenchanted white male raised by women and softened by corporate culture transforms the culprit (patriarchy, late-capitalism) into the individual victim (personalised narrative of a male). It is this excess and the manufacturing of the crisis as a crisis of masculinity that is displaced into the rhetoric of wounding and victimisation, a move which, as Sally Robinson has argued, recentralises white masculinity through the appropriation of identity politics by using the similar technique of visibility used by marginalised groups since the 1960s.

The representation of Christian is an emblematic model of the wounded white male reaping the symbolic power of being the "subject-in-crisis" and of how this perception of crisis can be rearticulated in such a way that it sets up the white male character as the victim, rather than the victimiser, in crisis situations. The texts literalise such a position to the point that it becomes exemplary; consider, for instance, Sally Robinson's argument that:

...white masculinity can most fully and convincingly represent itself as victimized by inhabiting a wounded body... such a move draws not only on the persuasive force of corporeal pain but also on the identity politics of the dominant. (emphasis mine, Robinson 20)

As the *Fifty Shades* trilogy shifts its emphasis to Christian from Ana, thus becoming a narrative about his physical and personal pain, they perform the cultural work of allowing Christian, as the "white male victim – personally, individually targeted – ... the emblem of the current crisis in white masculinity" (Robinson 5), to reap the symbolic currency that comes from "occupying the social and discursive position of subject-in-crisis" (Robinson 9). By marking the white, male body, it is rendered visible, and through this visibility "white men renegotiate their position by exploring pain" (Robinson 200). The central theme of *Fifty Shades* is arguably an exploration of Christian's pain:

After a while, he sighs, and in a soft voice he says, "I had a horrific childhood. One of the crack whore's pimps..." His voice trails off, and his body tenses as he recalls some unimaginable horror. "I can remember that," he whispers, shuddering.

Abruptly, my heart constricts as I remember the burn scars marring his skin. *Oh Christian*. I tighten my arms around his neck. (*Darker* 38)

Such a representation functions to “*personalize* the crisis of white masculinity and, thus, erase its social and political causes and effects” (italics in orig. Robinson 8). Certainly the potential causes of such a situation for a mother to become a prostitute with an addiction have been erased beneath the spectacle of (masculine) corporate fantasy – the billionaire who feeds the poor[6], flies a helicopter, and marshals large scale surveillance resembling James Bond, who is so excessively handsome he renders women speechless, and has an unparalleled sexual appetite – this image of white masculinity is a Baudrillardian display of the image completely liberated from its referent, masculinity in wholesale, Hollywood hyperreality.

Nevertheless, this staging of male (sexual) violence is legitimised by the wider contexts of crisis and masculinity, where the

... language of crises carries with it a vocabulary of blockage and release, sometimes explicitly, sometimes only implicitly: like the dominant model of (male) sexual pleasure as based on building tension and the relief of discharge, so too do representations of crisis draw on the image of a pent-up force seeking relief through release. (Robinson 12)

Through this doubling of the meaning implicit in male sexuality and crisis, the image of the Dominant “whipping and fucking” a woman who looks like his mother is perhaps less confronting. And yet it is the characterisation of Christian as a wounded little boy as well which allows these texts to slip almost imperceptibly from male victimiser to male victim. Perhaps this punishment of the feminine is considered acceptable, indeed popular, since it is enacted on the body of the “mother”; a point which will be considered in more detail in the conclusion, for now it is worth considering exactly how the representation of Christian shifts from this Dominant gaining control over his trauma through his own victimising of the heroine, Ana, into himself becoming the personalised victim.

The representation of Christian demonstrates how the wounded white male, rendered visible through his pain, reaps the symbolic currency of being the subject in crisis – and more than this, here accesses the domain of childhood innocence – for as he becomes the boy, Ana becomes the mother, and the dynamics of victimisation shift, but not the dynamics of power. If we consider the transition from the first book, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, to the second, *Fifty Shades Darker*, we can see how the inscription of Christian as the boy allows the subtle shift of victim/victimiser to play out. At the conclusion of the first book, Ana has left Christian after he demonstrates the full force of one of his punishments – an unrestrained beating of Ana over his lap with a belt. Early in the second book, the blame for the break-up, caused by this beating, is rapidly displaced to Ana for her failure to use her “safeword” during this “punishment.” However, before this occurs, the second book opens with a prologue, a brief flashback into Christian’s life as a boy with his biological mother, framed as a nightmare in the present. The narrative is taken from the first person and the tone is distinctly childlike as it shifts to Christian’s point of view as a four-year-old. As Christian watches from his hiding place under the kitchen table, a man we assume to be his mother’s “pimp” viciously beats his comatose “Mommy with a belt” while repeating the

mantra: “You are one fucked-up bitch” (*Darker* 9). Once he finishes with “Mommy,” he finds Christian, “There you are you little shit.” This configuration of Christian as a boy, a neglected and abused boy, therefore excuses and legitimises his (paternal) brutality as an adult male, a position which culminated with Christian beating Ana with a belt in an almost trance like state, but was nonetheless evident throughout the first book. It is also a point reiterated throughout the texts, such as the following depiction of Ana’s musings toward the end of the second book: “The image of a powerful man who’s really still a little boy, who was horrifically abused and neglected, who feels unworthy of love ... my lost boy ... it’s heartbreaking” (*Darker* 282). Furthermore, because he is the victim of his mother’s neglect, a point which is emphasised – as Christian describes his mother to Ana, “She was neglectful. She didn’t protect me from her pimp” (*Darker* 38) – his own victimising of Ana slips beneath his new visibility as the wounded little boy. Meanwhile, Ana’s acceptance is demonstrated as she assumes the role of the forgiving, understanding mother: “Then, after I left, it dawned on me that the physical pain you inflicted was not as bad as the pain of losing you. I do want to please you, but it’s hard” (*Darker* 37). This prologue underpins the representation of Christian’s brutality throughout all three books and infuses the characterisation of masculinity in these texts with boyhood trauma, a narrative strategy that legitimises the unleashing of physical and emotional violence on the body of the figure of the mother.

## **Conclusion: Refixing the Gender Binary, Remaking the Mother, and the Retreat from Crisis**

Representations of alpha males with abusive tendencies in romance fiction are certainly nothing new, nor, of course, is the presence of a female heroine willing to assume a mothering role in relation to this type of romantic hero. Yet in its depiction of boyhood, in its representation of this figure’s desperate need to be mothered as well as dominate the heroine, these texts are indicative, in their phenomenal cultural appeal, of the displacement of anxieties around white masculinity into popular culture. Indeed, the lack of sophistication in narrative style and prose works to this end: the repetition and unrefined nature of the writing promotes a pleasurable and compulsive reading experience, beneath which is a highly sexualised re-enactment of the Oedipal drama, a refixing of the mother and the son, where the stripping back of the writing itself allows for a kind of ritualised re-enactment of this abjection. The configuration of Christian represents an eroticised and idealised masculinity through the representation of the Dominant within this relationship; and yet the centralising of the narrative on the wounding of this Man/boy suggests that representations of excessive masculinity are no longer enough. In order for masculinity to secure itself, the (hyper) masculine image needs to be hidden behind innocence, victimisation, and, most significantly, the mother.

If these texts occupy the space between maternal semiotic authority and paternal symbolic law, then part of their cultural appeal arguably lies in the pleasure offered by this in-between space. That is, through the configuration of a ritualised, heterosexual romance structured around BDSM themes, the texts seem an attempt to access the Real – where the Real is the mother, the semiotic chora, the pre-Symbolic[7]. The desire to access this primal

space of symbiotic wholeness within the mother functions as a desire to retreat into the pleasure she once harboured as the primary love object; and yet at the same time the desire is also to punish her for what we despise at this cultural moment – this very need for retreat. In a wider socio-cultural sense, the texts seem to be registering the tension between the subject of a (feminised) consumer culture and the (masculinised) subject demanded of late-capitalist, corporate culture.

Furthermore, in their remaking of the mother through an excessive performance of both dominant and wounded masculinity, the texts evince a considerable amount of cultural anxiety around refixing the gender binary at this time. The reason for this is possibly the same reason the texts focus so explicitly on the figure of the mother – her place in the gender binary would seem to solidify the perception that traditional gender roles are valid, a position which is testament to the certainty and security that stable and knowable conceptions of gender are supposed to offer. For in a culture which has lived beyond the end – 9/11, the GFC, multiple environmental crises – the shoring up of the gender binary functions to reassure the cultural imaginary of the West that its social, political, and economic systems still stand, that they remain *theright* ideology. In a culture whose wider systems remain entrenched in the gendering of the structures that support them – nature/culture, private/public, and beneath them woman/man, feminine/masculine – the legitimisation of what can be done to the feminine side of that binary relies upon the equation of submission/Dominance within that binary. Late-capitalism and its foundational supports, such as environmental abuse and the nuclear family, have as their underlying social justification the clear demarcation of gender. The popularity of texts such as *Fifty Shades* is significant because it may be indicative of what is culturally so important at this historical juncture – reassuring the cultural imaginary in times of crisis through the invoking of the gender binary – but also to what is at stake if we attempt to dismantle it – the sense of security and certainty upon which late-capitalism, democracy, and the ideal of the West assures itself.

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[1] The popularity of the texts is evident not only in the media attention they have received, but also in the numbers. Since its print release in May 2011, the first instalment, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, has become the fastest selling paperback in history, with 16 million copies sold in the US and the kindle eBooks of that first book so far selling six times more than the print version (Acuna). Worldwide, the trilogy has sold over 60 million copies (Sunley) and at the time of writing, *Fifty Shades of Grey* had been on *The New York Times* “Best Sellers List” for 34 weeks, with the second and third books both at 31 weeks.

[2] Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Western culture has become increasingly defined by its response to explicit traumas such as 9/11 and the GFC. These cultural anxieties have been displaced into the domestic and familial sphere, with several popular cultural texts registering this changed cultural climate by refocusing on representations of the nuclear family. See, for example, Susan Faludi’s discussion of how television shows such as *Friends* and *Sex and the City* shifted from a focus on single life prior to 9/11 to centralise marriage and the family in the seasons following the terror attacks (121); Mathias Nilges’s suggestion that the reinstatement of a knowable and stable structure of paternalism explains part of the enjoyment of the destruction film post-9/11 (31); and Diane Negra’s assertion that the post-9/11 chick flick has shifted to focus on the

female protagonist in the process of rehabilitating a masculine hero into his social and familial responsibilities.

[3] Significant media attention has focused on the rise of the eBook as an explanatory context for the immense popularity of these texts. However, that (predominantly women) can read “porn in secret” as sufficient explanation seems to ignore the sheer popularity of these texts in particular. The *New York Times Best Seller List* has been dominated by other “indies” (independently published online erotic fiction) over the Northern summer of 2012; see, for example Keri English’s blog, “It’s Not the Size of the Book, It’s the Motion in the Ocean: Filthy Novels, Rated” on *Jezebel* for a list of nine bestselling erotic fiction novels that emerged as indies before being published in print (there is certainly another argument to be made about female writers bypassing a powerful institution such as the publishing industry and effectively hijacking a recession-proof industry: romance fiction). Yet when compared to *Fifty Shades*, none of these other texts seem to have received as much currency, not financially or culturally, and, therefore, the distinct cultural appeal of James’s trilogy calls for wider analysis.

[4] For wider contextual evidence of this shift see *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* by Jeff Lindsay. Serial killer Dexter Morgan is similarly marked by the moment of sitting by the corpse of his dead mother, “Two and a half days of sitting in the stuff [mother’s blood and mother’s drug dealer associates’ blood]” (Lindsay 263). The characterisation of a serial killer (who only kills bad people, but assumes a similarly dominant, paternal authority as he shifts from resembling an emotionally blank boy to a controlled, focused murderer) is, as with Christian, invested in the mother’s death and the mother’s life beforehand: “This would change everything, would pay back Mommy, would show her what she had done. Because Mommy should have saved us...” (Lindsay 269). Dexter’s predicament, his life as a soulless murderer, is blamed on the corpse of his mother, where the corpse “signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution – the body without a soul” (Creed 66). That Dexter, like Christian, believes he is damaged to the point of being “soulless” is blamed on the mother, a position which is intensified by this presence of the mother’s corpse. While *Dexter* is not generically affiliated with the popular romance, its emphasis on the biological mother and the cultural meaning associated with the corpse of that mother is configured so similarly it would seem to suggest that these anxieties are being felt across a range of popular cultural texts.

[5] The contention here is that the crisis is manufactured and this manufacturing of crisis itself allows for a staging of the eradication of the excess and a displacement of responsibility in crisis situations. As David Buchbinder has noted, “Crisis (whether real or only perceived) and masculinity, it would appear, have gone hand in hand historically ... the growing cultural anxiety towards the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first about a crisis in masculinity can be connected to other anxieties about the waning of masculine power” (21-22).

[6] The parallel this characterisation of Christian forms with Slavoj Žižek’s theorisations of “liberal communists” is suggestive of how entrenched assumptions around the goodness of neoliberal capitalists have become, indeed, how desirable the subjective position is. When Christian, who earns “roughly one hundred thousand dollars an hour” (*Darker* 252), informs Ana with a paternal, philanthropic reprimand, “We can’t eat money, Miss Steele, and there are too many people on this planet who don’t have enough to eat” (*Grey* 34), the resonances with the liberal communist agenda to solve “concrete problems”

obscures the fact that, “in order to give, first you have to take,” a position which supports privatisation and creates the poverty (see Žižek’s *Violence*, 16-17).

[7] The Real here is the mother of the pre-Oedipal phase, existing in relation to the family and the symbolic order – the chora is the space from which the pre-Oedipal child must escape in order to become a subject, to apprehend signs in service of the symbolic order; but it must also resist the pull of an “eternal return,” characterised by the threat of the drives to pull us back into the “receptacle” of the mother. This is the state that threatens to undo the stability of the child’s identity, and it reveals the instability of the symbolic order (see Kristeva 13-14; Creed 68).

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