

**“Only I shall taste your body’s joys:” The Erotic Function
of Female Corporeality in *The Flame and the Flower* and
*Fifty Shades of Grey***

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Master's Thesis

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Spring 2021

Abstract

Denne oppgaven tar for seg hvordan de kroppslige kvalitetene til heltinnene i *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) av Kathleen E. Woodiwiss og *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) av E.L. James blir representert og tillagt en erotisk funksjon. Begge romanene tilhører sjangeren erotiske romanser, som markedsføres mot et kvinnelig publikum. Til tross for enorme salgstall og popularitet blir begge verkene ofte regnet som kiosklitteratur med manglende litterær kvalitet. *The Flame and the Flower* anses å være forløperen til den moderne erotiske romansen, mens utgivelsen av *Fifty Shades of Grey* satte i gang en bred debatt rundt kvinnelig seksualitet og samtykke. Likevel er det heller sjelden at kritisk analyse gjør et dypdykk i bøkens narrativ og ser på hvordan begjær og tilfredsstillelse fungerer i selve teksten. Målet med denne oppgaven er å skape et nytt perspektiv på fantasiene som blir kommunisert gjennom de to bøkene ved å plassere sexscenene i et rammeverk som tar for seg de egenskapene, funksjonene og verdiene som heltinnens kropp blir konstruert til å uttrykke. Hvert kapittel omhandler et aspekt av hvordan kvinnekroppen blir presentert i *The Flame and the Flower* og *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Måten den sexy kroppen, den jomfruelige kroppen og den imaginære kroppen fremstilles på viser hvordan disse elementene fungerer for å erotisere et eksplisitt kvinnelig legeme. En sammenligning av bøkens utforming av, og fokus på, heltinnens fysiske uttrykk med representasjoner funnet i andre produkter fra populærkulturen, blant annet pornografiske nettsteder, vitner om store likhetstrekk. Dette viser at *The Flame and the Flower* og *Fifty Shades of Grey* er en del av en større kultur hvor kvinnekroppen blir gjort betydningsbærende og et sted hvor fantasier blir innskrevet.

Acknowledgements

A big thanks to my supervisor Randi Koppen for the support throughout this process. I am really grateful for the precise and thorough feedback, and the always amazingly quick replies.

I would also like to thank my fellow students; it has been so rewarding and a lot of fun working with everyone.

All the appreciation in the world goes out to Julie for taking the time to read everything I have written all through six years of studies. Your help and encouragement have been invaluable.

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Introduction

This is not making love, this is fucking – and I love it. I groan. It’s so raw, so carnal, making me so wanton. I revel in his possession, his lust slaking mine. He moves with ease, luxuriating in me, enjoying me, his lips slightly parted as his breathing increases. He twists his hips from side to side, and the feeling is exquisite.

(James 372)

‘Mommy porn’, referring to “sexually explicit or pornographic books, photos, videos, etc., that appeal to women, especially middle-aged women” (Dictionary.com) is rarely perceived as a badge of honour for any creative work. Less slang-like and more genre specific, the term ‘women’s erotic romances’ is equally loaded, with connotations of texts with commercially designed formulas, cringy sexual euphemisms, and altogether low literary merit. It is within this realm we find Kathleen E. Woodiwiss’ *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) and E.L James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011). Erotic romances may constitute the “least respected literary genre” (Regis xi), but they are certainly not among the least discussed; their popularity has made them a hot topic. Statistics from the U.S publishing market reveal that in 2020 the romance/erotica section generated sales for a total of 1.4 billion dollars (Herold). While it is a misconception that the audience behind these numbers is entirely made up of middle-aged women, studies show that 86 % of romance readers identify as female (Nielsenbookscan). Eva Illouz states that the great sale of erotic romance novels “reveal a genre that has perfected the art of offering to its (mostly) female readers what nourishes their fantasies” (13). With female sexuality’s long history of repression (Bass 430), it is perhaps no wonder that critics have jumped at the opportunity to read erotic romances to uncover what they reveal about women’s sexual and romantic fantasies. From the 1970s and onwards, scholars have engaged with what has been rendered a “female fantasy world” (Greer 173) and debated the significance of women consuming tales of innocent heroines being seduced by powerful men. Germaine Greer famously denounced romance readers as “women cherishing the chains of their bondage” (180), while in Catherine Roach’s argument readers of erotic fiction seek a fantasy antidote to patriarchy, where love levels the playing field for women (181).

Moving away from efforts to theorise the reader’s pleasure in the erotic romance, this thesis will approach “the most female of all popular genres” (Regis xii) through a different

lens. Using *The Flame and the Flower* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it suggests a new mode of access to the fantasies that are being conveyed by the novels, and a way to conceptualise their erotic function without making judgements about the sexual preferences or ideological positions of actual readers. Being less concerned with the ‘mommies’ and more interested in the ‘porn,’ the focal point of my analysis will be how each text constructs its eroticism around the corporeality of the heroine. I argue that in both *The Flame and the Flower* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the heroine’s body is the site on which her identity is written, and where the novels’ fantasies are produced and revealed. Through its representation, the female body expresses the system of value, power, and desire the novels rely on in order for their eroticism to function. Pamela Regis posits that the romantic heroine appeals to a female audience by a process of identification (xiii). Yet, as Janice Radway writes in her study of romance readers: “it must be kept in mind that the people who read romance novels are *not* attending to stories they themselves have created to interpret their own experiences” (49). Following on from Radway’s insight, I read the depiction of the heroine as an appeal to the text’s intended or implied reader. The role the heroine’s corporeality plays in the sex scenes, how it becomes a physical expression of pleasure and admiration, speaks of the position (of erotic fantasy and identification) the narratives invite the ideal reader to occupy.

The thesis will examine how the erotic function of female corporeality is represented in *The Flame and the Flower* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (hereby referred to as *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*). I argue that the heroines’ bodies are made erotic through the male gaze of desire, and the way in which their corporeality serves to confirm phallic potency and power. Through its specific materiality, the female body is portrayed as a body meant for sex and a body that produces pleasure. Simultaneously, it is by being susceptible to the hero’s control that the heroine gains her own powers. Her value is determined by the extent to which her body is craved and its physical ability to serve male sexual gratification. My reading of these mechanisms touches on issues of gender, sex, and the power dynamic between heroine and hero, but the aim is not to produce an argument as to whether or not these erotic romances can be considered feminist, by determining if *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* conform to, or subvert, patriarchal power structures. Instead, my analysis explores how the male/female power structure is reflected in the novels’ depiction of the female body, and how this system is negotiated within the narratives to make the female figure into something erotic.

Bodies are never just bodies, never just matter and biology. This is the argument of Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), which informs this thesis’ reading of *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* in a corporeal framework. Grosz questions

the tendency to exclude the body from feminist discourse and claims the relevance of focusing on bodies in their various social, cultural, and physical forms (vii). What bodies look like, how they are presented and positioned, the zones and surfaces that are given special significance, are all part of, and inherently shaped by, “knowledge systems [and] regimes of representation” (19). Following this argument, the construction of female physicality in the novels reveal the cultural discourses and hierarchies the narratives engage to make the heroine’s body recognised as an erotic entity. I aim to demonstrate that an obsessive focus on the female figure is something that is shared between *The Flame*, *Fifty Shades*, and products from the male-oriented pornographic industry. This comparison speaks of pornography’s influence on the type of body that is given meanings of desirability. Additionally, it shows how ‘erotic’ products targeted at an either male or female audience are produced by the same knowledge systems and regimes of representation that have persisted throughout history.

The first chapter will engage with the scholarship on sex in the romance novel and ask how the increased publishing of erotic romances is connected to the mainstreaming of pornography. I will propose that the two genres coincide not only by the intensification of sexual content in the erotic romance, but through a similar idolisation of the sexually enticing female body. The second chapter demonstrates how *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* both use physically manifested virginity to make their heroines into desired objects. This will develop the argument that the novels’ method of marking the female body as sexually attractive are similar to those seen in male-oriented porn. The last chapter will treat sexual difference, and the imaginary within which the female body is produced. It will also address the issue of violent possession in the novels and show how this functions to emphasise the desirable qualities of the sexed body. In sum, each chapter will argue that *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* do not express a ‘female fantasy world’ created and inhabited by women, but a shared cultural fantasy of erotic female corporeality.

It should be noted that *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* both present love, sexuality, and gender according to a hetero and cis-normative model. Therefore, the discussion of female corporeality and sexuality in the texts will tend to conform to this binary. The thesis will not problematise the notion of a ‘female’ body outside of the gender binary, as it is specifically a female cisgender identity that is portrayed and eroticised by the narratives. I also want to specify that rape is not sex and that treating violent assault as a form of virginity loss, as discussed in Chapter Two, is problematic. My analysis of this scene in *The Flame* is concerned to demonstrate how rape and virginity loss are connected by the narrative.

Romance novels, erotica, and pornography: navigating the terms

Pamela Regis defines the romance novel as “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (19). As the literary terms “romance” and “novel” each have their own critical history, Regis argues for the importance of conceptualising the modern-day romance novel in a straightforward manner (20). Her definition focuses on the essential narrative elements of the genre – and Regis calls it a shift from a definition based on themes, such as love and happy endings – to one resting on actual narrative events. As she states: “If the narrative elements are present, a given work is a romance novel” (22). I have chosen to rely on Regis’ definition of the romance novel and position both *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* within the genre. I will use the terms romance novel and romantic fiction side by side, with both referring to works adhering to the essential genre elements as outlined by Regis. The primary reason for choosing Regis’ definition is that it allows for the process of an overall genre determination to be conducted in one sentence; both texts feature the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines, and so they are romance novels. It also steers away from the discussion as to whether either of the novels are too romantic to be labelled erotica, or too erotic to be classic romance novels. Admittedly, there is a slight complication in that *Fifty Shades of Grey* strictly speaking does not include a betrothal. However, as the novel is the first in a trilogy and the hero and heroine do get engaged in book number two, *Fifty Shades Darker* (2012), I will also treat the first book as a romance novel, as it is part of the same storyline. Considering that other critics, such as Jodi McAlister, have also conducted analyses of *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a romance novel based on Regis’ definition, this is hardly a radical choice.

The erotic romance complies with the genre requirements of a romance novel as posited by Regis, but specifically treats “the development of a romantic relationship through sexual interaction” (Day). Thus, in the erotic romance, sex is an essential part of the story. This rings true for both *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, as the developing relationship between heroine and hero is portrayed through sexual interaction and desire. Each work is therefore a romance novel, and more specifically an erotic one. In the thesis I will discuss *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* using romance novel scholarship, while also including writings on, and direct examples from, the realm of pornography. The distinction between the erotic and the pornographic is not clear-cut. Consulting the Cambridge dictionary, erotica is defined as “books, pictures, etc. that produce sexual desire and pleasure” (CambridgeDictionary). On the other hand, pornography is described as “books, magazines, films, etc. (...) intended to be

sexually exciting” but with the difference of having “no artistic value” (Cambridge Dictionary). This illustrates that the difference between erotica and pornography is highly susceptible, and relies on judgements of value, personal preference, and social acceptability. One could therefore argue that a distinction based on content is arbitrary. The notion important for this thesis will be that erotic romances are regarded as being for and by women (McAlister 177), while pornography is commonly understood to be the “quintessential male genre” (Williams 4). The ground for analysis will be how the female body is represented in each genre. Through mapping out the similarities I aim to demonstrate that in erotic romances *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, as well as in pornographic media, the female figure is constructed to confirm male potency and eroticise sexual difference.

The selected texts

The novels are chosen as they each represent a landmark in the history of erotic romances. *The Flame* was Woodiwiss’ first novel and sold over 2.3 million copies within four years of its publication (Barnes&Noble). James’ debut *Fifty Shades* boasts even more impressive numbers, being the best-selling book of the past decade with 15.2 million copies sold in the U.S (NPD). However, it is not the novels’ popularity that set the stage for my analysis. Released in 1972 and 2011, *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* belong to different times and cultural contexts. In critical discourse, they are each treated as representative of their contemporary moment and thought to signify both the developments within the romance novel genre as well as larger cultural shifts. While engaging with the novels’ particular contexts and influences, I will argue that the fantasy conveyed by the narratives has principally remained the same. In her writings, Regis criticises the practice of making generalised statements about the romance novel based on a limited selection of texts (6-7). It is thus important to assert that *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* are only two novels and any statements made about them should not be mistaken for the characteristics of the whole of any genre. Furthermore, any similarities found between the narratives are not indicative of a trend that has run through romance novel publishing in the forty-year interval between them. What I will posit is that the novels’ shared fixation on their heroines’ bodies and the significance awarded to specific corporeal sites are saying something about how eroticism is constructed by means of the female body. *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* will be treated as romance novels, but also as influential and widely consumed cultural products that sell an erotic fantasy. In this way, the time span between the novels’ time of publication is useful to reveal that while society, attitudes to female sexuality, and the romance novel genre are changing, the mode of

representing the female body as pleasure-producing has persisted.

Woodiwiss' *The Flame* is widely recognised as the first erotic historical romance and made its mark by being significantly more explicit than its predecessors (McAlister 192). Maria Nilson writes that the novel "started a new trend in romance literature" (124) and became a model for the following "bodice rippers;" a derogatory term for historical romances featuring the eroticisation of violence (Merriamwebster). *The Flame* is set in 1799 English countryside, where the orphaned Heather Simmons lives with her guardian uncle and tyrannical in-law Aunt Fanny. After being led to London by the deceitful William Guild, Heather soon discovers the dangers of male lust and barely escapes an attempted rape, before running straight into the clutches of captain Brandon Birmingham who does rape and abuse her. As Heather becomes pregnant, the two are forced to marry against their will. The story continues with the pair's journey to Brandon's native America and their domestic life in the Birmingham mansion where Heather also gives birth to their son. After struggling with jealousy, repressed passions, and several more rape-threats coming from both Brandon and other characters in the novel, the pair are finally able to express the love they have developed for each other. Thus, they begin a life where "their love gave them greater strength and courage than was believable" (Woodiwiss 484).

Though Heather is initially abused by the hero Brandon, their relationship ends up becoming one that is both loving and sexually fulfilling. This is consistent with the typical bodice ripper formula, where the hero undergoes a change from violent brute to a loving and devoted husband who offers the heroine mutual sexual pleasure (Nilson 125). This genre convention is why Carol Thurston argues that the scenes of rape and possession featured in bodice rippers are part of the heroines' journey "to discover their own sexuality" (19). Thurston further posits that the 1970s popularity of bodice rippers, starting with *The Flame*, grew out of women's interest in "erotic stories about heroines who tried and often succeeded in challenging the male-female power structure" (19). That Brandon at last renders himself a "helpless male" in Heather's presence could be used to strengthen Thurston's claims about how the novel challenges male power (Woodiwiss 395). However, by drawing attention to the narrative's representation of Heather's corporeality, I aim to show that the novel's emphasis on brutality is integral to its erotic function even before the hero is transformed. Brandon uses force because Heather is too tempting to resist, while it is also the singular pleasures of her body that in the end makes him so 'helpless.' In this way, the hero's brutality and his redemption are both induced by Heather's figure. In *The Flame*, the heroine gains her power because she is in the possession of a body that the hero wants to possess. Thus, the dynamic

of male dominance does not become erotic by being reversed but rather by how it affirms the status of her body. Heather gains her appeal through her feminine corporeality, which is privileged exactly because of its position within the male/female system of power.

While frequently positioned as the inspiration for later erotic romances, Woodiwiss' novel is often restricted to a brief mention in critical writing. The novel is usually located within a larger argument about whether or not bodice rippers have been fairly treated in critical discourse and if it can be aligned with a feminist project. This shows how, as Selinger writes, "romance novels have rarely, if ever, been treated by scholars as *aesthetic* objects" (313). The narrative themes and events, such as love, commitment, desire, and rape are made the discussion points of the novel and its genre. Such an analysis is likely to omit the aesthetic qualities of the text; the symbols, images, and language through which the story is told and given its appeal. I will posit that in *The Flame*, female corporeality is the driving force of the novel's eroticism. While arguing that the representation of the heroine Heather's body discloses the narrative's system of value, more important to my analysis is *how* these values are being conveyed and by what means a hierarchy of power is created and negotiated.

James' *Fifty Shades* is the first novel in a trilogy that would become a cultural phenomenon. The novel is the fastest selling paperback of all time and its immense popularity sparked a discussion of women, sex, and BDSM in media all over the world (McAlister 227). Nilson writes that the novel's success is often explained with the notion that it is "doing something new" (120). However, as Nilson also remarks, *Fifty Shades* reproduces the tropes from a long tradition of erotic romances such as *The Flame*, and chick lit like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (124-129). *Fifty Shades* tells the story of the inexperienced and clumsy literature student Anastasia Steel who stumbles head-first into the office of powerful business mogul Christian Grey. From their first meeting and onwards, Anastasia experiences new and unfamiliar feelings of desire, and she is drawn towards Christian, who is described as a "dark knight" (James 67). As it turns out, Christian's troubled childhood has left him unable to connect with women unless they are gagged and handcuffed. The novel primarily treats Anastasia's entrance into a world of sexual pleasure and difficult romance, as she tries to steer her relationship with Christian into one that is fulfilling both her emotional and her sexual needs.

From these narrative themes, *Fifty Shades* can be read as a classical romance, "in which the female protagonist ostensibly 'tames' the wild, dangerous hero" (Downing 93). What really brought the novel into mainstream attention was its depiction of BDSM sex, which caused responses from the BDSM community, as well as feminist activists both

condemning and celebrating the novel (93). A peek into the blogosphere reveals opinions ranging from viewing the novel as “an ode to female sexuality” (Bentley) to “violence dressed up as erotica” (Tyler). Thus, the 70s and late 80s positions of Greer and Thurston, who each held opposing views as to whether the romance novel was promoting female passivity or celebrating female power, have followed the genre into more recent debates. This is not to say that the whole discussion surrounding *Fifty Shades* is divided into two camps of ‘pro’ or ‘anti’. Critics such as Lisa Downing and Eva Illouz have analysed the novel in less loaded terms, looking at the ideologies and cultural values that have shaped the narrative. They both argue that the novel has mastered the art of delivering what appears as transgressive content, namely ‘kinky sex,’ within a conservative literary form that ultimately promotes traditional marriage values (Downing 96/ Illouz 33). For my reading of *Fifty Shades*, I will use critical work that treats the novel specifically, as well as writings on the larger tradition of sex in the romance novel. However, my focus will not be on how *Fifty Shades*’ status as a romance novel plays a part in making it a work that “enacts contemporary women’s fantasies” (Illouz 32). Neither will I place any emphasis on the novel’s featuring of BDSM. Instead, I am interested in the way the novel enacts cultural fantasies that are not restricted to the lives of women.

Fifty Shades is, to put it plainly, a novel with lots of sex in it. It features a heroine who expresses sexual desire and experiences a substantial amount of sexual pleasure. Yet I argue that this alone is not enough to account for how the novel constructs its eroticism, or how it relates to questions of gender and female sexuality. As illustrated by this introduction’s opening quote, the sexual interaction between Anastasia and Christian is depicted as “so carnal” and he “luxuriates” in her body (James 372). In the novel, both the heroine’s and the hero’s lust are expressed in relation to Anastasia’s corporeality. Her body betrays her desire through seeping liquids while the material qualities of her vagina make it designed to express Christian’s possession of it, both by being “soaking” (274) and “tight” (117). As Downing states, *Fifty Shades* is “undeniably tritely written” (Downing 93). This might be a reason why analyses of the novel tend to treat the larger plot lines and not dwell too much on the actual textual workings. I posit that a focus on the narrative’s representation of the female body, with all its soaking and tightness, reveals how it is constructed to make desire visible and femininity tangible. This broadens the discourse in which *Fifty Shades* can be discussed, and how its depiction of sex can be theorised. Additionally, it discloses another point of continuity between *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* that goes beyond the genre tropes of an erotic romance,

namely, the erotic function of female corporeality. As I aim to show, this is not a phenomenon restricted to the erotic romance and can thus not be understood as an explicitly female fantasy.

Pornography as it relates to *The Flame and Fifty Shades*

In *Porning of America*, Carmine Sarracino and Kevin M. Scott write that pornography has become the dominant influence shaping our culture (x). As discussed, defining pornography is no straight-forward task. However, there are some commonalities in the renderings of what should be considered porn; it works with the stated intention to arouse, and little to no focus on story and plot beyond that which concerns sexual action (McNair, *Striptease* 19). While Brian McNair posits that “*pornography is always about sex*” (18), Linda Williams argues that porn is a genre that wants to be about sex, but consistently turns out to be about gender (Williams qtd. by Brown 116). For this thesis, it is Williams’ definition that will be used. The analysis will treat porn as a “representational practice” (McNair, “Teaching Porn” 558) and be concerned with how it depicts gender, and specifically female corporeality, during the sexual act. Porn is inherently obsessed with exposing, styling, and positioning the female body (Purcell 137). As an example of how pornography has made its way into mainstream culture, Sarracino and Scott use the Bratz Doll, a series of toys marketed to young girls. They write that with “thigh-high fishnets and stiletto heels,” the Bratz Dolls “look remarkably like prostitutes,” as stilettos are, according to the authors, “popularly called fuck-me pumps” (ix-xi). Sarracino and Scott demonstrate the influence of pornography’s representation of the female figure in two ways. Firstly, by their own example of how the pornographic image of the sexualised woman has made it into the mainstream, even children’s, market. Additionally, and perhaps even more striking, the authors display how their own reading of the female body is influenced by the pornographic sensibility, where stilettos mean ‘fuck-me’ and fishnet stockings signify a sex worker.

I am interested in the way the female body is marked as erotic in heterosexual male pornography, and how similar forms of representation are used by *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*. This is not to be a discussion of the novels as pornography for women, or on what either genre says about male or female sexuality. Instead, the following chapter will treat how the expansion of the pornographic industry in the 1970s can be positioned alongside the representation of the female body in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*. In the novels, the ideal of woman as sexually enticing, and the methods used to present her body as such, conform to that commonly found in male-oriented porn. Therefore, I will treat my chosen erotic romances

and pornography as modes of representation that illustrate the cultural fantasies and obsessions imposed on the female figure.

CHAPTER 1: THE SEXY BODY

Do *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* fulfil a romantic or a sexual fantasy? In this chapter I will engage with the critical discourse on the fantasies performed in a genre regarded as being “for women, by women [and] about women” (McAlister 177). This discourse speaks of the culture that has engaged with the form of explicit content that erotic romances are offering. In the discussion of *The Flame* (1972) I will use the contemporary work of Jodi McAlister, as well as the late 1980s criticism of Janice Radway and Carol Thurston. These scholars show how the romance novel assumes a form that is socially acceptable for women’s consumption. In this strand of criticism, the romance novel is regarded as a space where the female reader can explore her own “personal needs, desires, and pleasure” (Radway 61). It is especially the love story in an erotic romance that is made to be women’s point of access to sexually explicit material, as well as the force that legitimises and makes them enjoyable. In more recent writings on the cultural reception of erotic romances, *Fifty Shades* is often thought to signify a new moment in history, where sexual fantasies in novels targeted at a female audience are no longer in need of legitimisation. Catherine Roach considers the increasingly explicit nature of present-day romances to be part of a liberating trend where consumers are now unapologetic about their desire for titillating material (78). On the other hand, Eva Illouz argues that *Fifty Shades* is essentially conveying a fantasy of romance and not kinky sex (35). Therefore, *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* can be positioned within a critical framework that explores how cultural shifts, women’s sexual freedom, and the generic conventions of the romance novel all shape the reader’s meeting with an erotic romance.

To add to the conversation on sexually explicit material in the romance novel, I aim to show how the fantasy offered by *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* can be linked to the expansion and cultural influence of the pornographic industry. At the time of *The Flame*’s publication in 1972, the reach of pornographic material was rapidly expanding. Pornography was by no means invented in the 70s and the history of modern Western pornography can be traced back to the Enlightenment (Jenkins). However, technological developments allowing for the mass production of images and films, as well as changing societal attitudes to sex, meant that pornography’s mode of representation became present in the larger sphere of popular culture. By examining how *The Flame*’s narrative uses clothing to mark its heroine with meanings of desirability and comparing this to other popular media texts of the same period, I will demonstrate that the novel relies on predominant cultural representations of the female body to construct its eroticism. *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* both portray the asset of a sexy body as

a desirable female identity, which I argue is connected to the cultural prominence of images where the female body is marked with sexual meaning. In *Fifty Shades*, the novel's sex scenes are clearly influenced by the style and explicitness of 2000s pornography. The claims about *Fifty Shades*' transgressive nature can be countered by recognising the novel as part of a myriad of advertisements and magazines that flirt with pornographic conventions. Therefore, this chapter will consider the representations and inscriptions of the female body in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shade* in relation to porn as a cultural trend that impacts the novels' construction of their heroines.

The function and legitimisation of sex in the romance novel

“Sexual fantasies are particularly important because they constitute the expression of our sexual ‘habitus’ free from hesitation, personal conflicts and unencumbered by the rules imposed by the environment” (Boncinelli et al. 17).

These are the words of a group of clinical psychologists, working on a system to classify sexual fantasies in order to develop better therapeutic methods for women suffering from low sex drive (16). The notion that sexual fantasies are a path to the innermost desires of the self, free from judgement and social regulations, could potentially be applicable to personal reports delivered to a trusted psychologist. However, what this statement seems negligent of, is how “all individuals internalize their culture” (Person 31). This is to say that sexual fantasies, however intimately confessed, are shaped by the very ‘rules imposed by the environment’ that the individual is part of. As stressed earlier, this thesis will not treat the erotic romance novel as an insight into the sexual fantasies of its female readership. The discussion of women and sex, or women and their sexual fantasies, has been informed by cultural conventions of what women should be wanting (Person 11). Such norms can be understood as influencing the way women experience and express their sexuality and desires (31). More important for the present discussion, however, is the manner in which these conventions determine how the erotic romance is marketed and approached in critical discourse. The social environment regulates what is deemed to be the appropriate content of sexually explicit material targeted at a female audience and it determines women's access to this material (Juffer 3). To Jane Juffer, this is where the distinction between erotica and pornography becomes important. She posits that “something that is marketed as erotica circulate[s] differently than something marketed as pornography, even when the content sometimes seems quite similar” (4). Erotic romances are, according to Juffer, one of the ways in which sex has been “brought in from the wild,” and made to fit within a form that appeals

to a female readership (3).

If cultural conventions and norms impact the construction of sexual fantasies aimed at women, the way sex is portrayed in the erotic romance could be used to map out the governing societal paradigms of female sexuality. In her research, mainly focused on the representation of virginity loss, McAlister demonstrates that romance novels tend to ascribe a “compulsory demisexuality” to their heroines, meaning that for the women in these novels sex is always tied to an emotional connection (178). Without the romance the heroine will not enjoy sex, and so the erotic intent of the narrative is both justified and dependent on love and the formation of a normative heterosexual relationship. Recalling Regis’ definition of the genre as the story of “courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (19), we see that a narrative resolution in the form of a long-term, monogamous relationship is the essential characteristic of the romance novel. McAlister posits that this established traditional ending is why romance novels provide a “safe space” where sexual fantasies can be enjoyed, because the erotic always happens within “socially permissible boundaries” (McAlister 192). The boundaries are those of a domestic unit drawn from a long cultural tradition of women’s role as the preservers of the family (Dimulescu 506). The fantasy conveyed within the ‘safe space’ of the romance novel can thus be argued to be that of a woman exploring the world of sexual gratification while simultaneously fulfilling traditional gender roles.

The notion that marriage is what makes erotic romance novels’ depiction of sex legitimate indicates a cultural climate in which women can aspire towards romantic but not erotic fantasies. This perception is strengthened by Radway’s 1984 study, which shows how romance novel criticism, as much as the genre itself, is influenced by societal norms and values. Based on interviews with romance novel readers and writers, Radway concludes that “detailed reports about sexual encounters” are of “relative unimportance” to the genre (66). Instead, it is a successful marriage based on mutual love and respect that is positioned as “the goal of all romance reading experiences” (71). I argue that the devaluation of the sex scenes performed by Radway becomes a defence of the romance genre and its readership. On a larger scale, the need for such a defence is telling of what is, at least at Radway’s time of publication, socially accepted in terms of female fantasies. Considering McAlister’s findings, it also seems that the romance novels themselves are enforcing these boundaries. The reader and the heroine are both made to be ‘compulsory demisexual,’ and uninterested in sex unless it happens within a romantic framework. In this way, the novels can indulge in explicit scenery as they do not challenge traditional family constellations or gender norms. Additionally, Radway can maintain that the literary preference of her interviewees does not

include “pornographic trash” (Radway 70).

Carol Thurston’s *The Romance Revolution* from 1987 assumes a different position on the appeal of the erotic romance novel. According to Thurston, the socio-political changes during the 1960s broadened the discussion on female sexuality and sparked a growing demand for explicit material that reflected the needs of women and not men (16-18). Thurston states: “It did not take most women very long to decide that what was widely reputed to be sexually stimulating to men – particularly pictures of women’s bodies – was not stimulating to them” (18). Instead, the bodice-ripper offered the opportunity for women to explore their sexuality on their own terms (19). While Thurston is, unlike Radway, adamant that the readers seek sexually stimulating content, both authors are locating the romance, and the erotic romance, as an opposite to pornography. Juffer notes how the distinction between erotica and pornography determines women’s access to explicit material. Thurston and Radway are, each in their own way, proposing that the distinction also determines women’s pleasure in reading sex and that the contrasting pleasure is due to the form it appears in and the values that are being portrayed. To add to the discussion, I will propose that the erotic romance *The Flame* is not best understood in opposition to the world of visual pornography. Somewhat contrary to Thurston, I aim to show that pornography’s preoccupation with women’s bodies is matched by *The Flame*. While the novel is not a visual medium, the narrative is obsessed with making the physicality of its heroine visible. In other words, it is consumed with the image of woman that is ‘widely reputed to be stimulating to men.’ Therefore, sex in the erotic romance can also be conceptualised in terms of the governing societal paradigms on the female body, and how being a sexually enticing figure is made a desirable female identity.

The role of the body in the construction of female identity is culturally constituted. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz argues for an understanding of the body as a cultural product and a surface on which social meaning is inscribed (23). She writes that the body is a “pliable entity” whose determinate form is provided by “modes of psychical and physical inscription” (187). This means that a body is more than its ‘naturally given’ biology and capabilities; how it looks, with its physical attributes and attire, is shaped by cultural values and representations (vii-xii). The way in which the body is represented is linked to what the body is known as and what society deems its proper function to be. Economical, ideological, and structural changes through history have impacted the cultural representation of women’s bodies (Dimulescu 507). Venera Dimulescu posits that the last century and a half has seen a significant change in the way female bodies are regarded, with physical beauty becoming a new female gender identity (506). The beauty norm is enforced by capitalist consumer culture and the rise of

mass-media. Dimulescu writes that “the mechanical reproduction of images, videos and words has fastened the diffusion of the dominant discourses and transformed them into implicit symbolic laws” (505). The image of the beautiful woman, promoted by market forces that sell various cosmetic and lifestyle products, has by continuous exposure ingrained itself in the cultural consciousness as the ideal female identity rather than a merchandise (508). The erotic romance and pornography are both part of the mass-market production of popular entertainment (McAlister 177). Their representations of the female body, whether through words or visual images, express not only the beauty norm, but also incorporate the notion of woman as sexually attractive body as part of a desired female identity.

The cultural representation of the erotic female body can be linked to how the ‘sexual revolution’ saw the expansion of the pornography industry in the 1970s, which brought “sexually explicit material closer to the mainstream of America” (Bronstein 64). Adult movies and magazines with undressed women on the cover did no longer belong to dark alleys and became accessible to the larger public (64). In 1972, *Time* magazine, “long a bastion of middle-class values,” dedicated a whole page to the promotion of the pornographic film *Deep Throat* (63). The representation of women in pornography faced much retribution from second wave feminists and was not well received amongst all groups in society. However, the “free flow of pornography” (64) meant that the representation of the sexually enticing woman gained tremendous exposure (Dimulescu 507). The impact of the porn industry is proposed by Ann Douglas in her article ‘Soft-Porn Culture’ (1980). Douglas writes that the depictions found in pornographic media are “disturbingly evident, if more discreetly packaged, in popular entertainment dealing with sex roles and mass-market paperback love stories” (Douglas 25). Douglas’s analysis, which might be more accurately termed a criticism, focuses on how the portrayal of women as subordinate and debased is carried on from hard-core pornography and further eroticised in commercial entertainment. Be that as it may, I would like to propose that the biggest impact of the mainstreaming of sexually explicit material is the societal “obsessive preoccupation with the body” (Gill 149), and the female body in particular. As Rosalind Gill writes, in modern media “it is the possession of a *sexy body* that is presented as women’s key (if not sole) source of identity” (149). If, as mentioned, “all individuals internalise their culture” (Person 31), the prominence of representations of women where certain qualities of the body are exhibited and valued can be thought to affect the way female identity is constructed, also in the more conservative spaces of society.

The sexual revolution was a popular movement in which a more permissive sexual climate was championed as the road to self-fulfilment, free of the constrictive bonds of traditional marriage values and ideals of chastity (Bronstein 25). However, whilst challenging conservative family constellations, these new attitudes did not only promote sex as something that was allowed outside of marriage, sexual pleasure also became regarded as an essential ingredient to a happy union (25). Thus, the long-established role of the housewife was given a new “domestic burden,” to be both the preserver of the family *and* the sensual seducer of her husband (35). This gave birth to a new genre of self-help literature that urged married women to keep their sex-life inventive and interesting. The techniques proposed often included the presentation and ornamentation of the body. Marabel Morgan’s *The Total Woman* (1972), published the same year as *The Flame*, recommended that “wives thrill their husbands at the front door every evening wearing something seductive,” such as “see through lingerie” or a “French maid’s uniform” (qtd. in Bronstein 35). Fashioning the body in this manner was presented as a method to keep the husband faithful and secure the family unit. Thus, Morgan’s work becomes an example of cultural developments where “the body is presented as women’s source of power” (Gill 149). Another such instance is illustrated by the 1972 August issue of *Cosmopolitan*. On the cover, a blond woman poses in a black lace negligee next to the headline “how to cope with a sexless marriage” (*Cosmopolitan*). This shows how the female body gains its powers from its capacity to be erotic, which in turn is incorporated into traditional heterosexual marriage values.

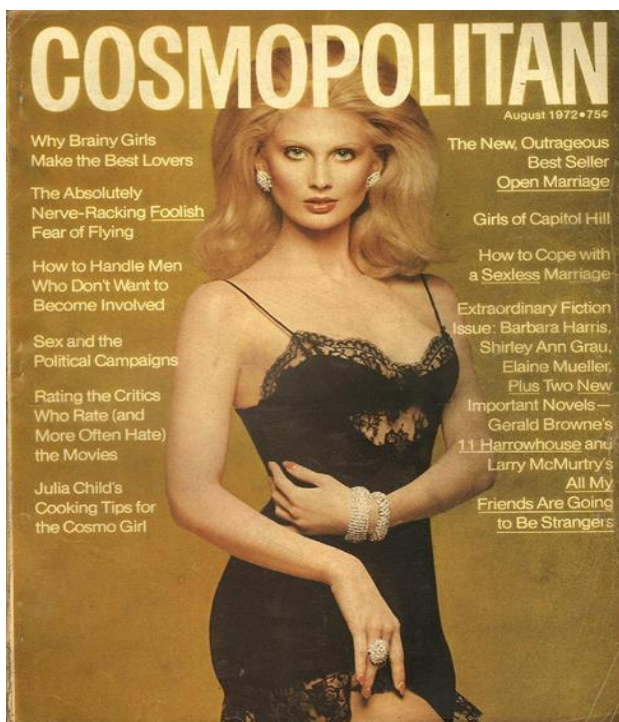


Figure 1. *Cosmopolitan* Cover 1972 from Pinterest.

“She has the look of sweet innocence (..) yet she is a temptress:” Bodily inscription in *The Flame*

Through examining *The Flame*'s representation of the heroine Heather's body, I will argue that within the covers of its “sweepingly romantic” (*The Flame*, blurb) safe space, the novel constructs an erotic fantasy that revolves around the ideal of woman as sexually attractive figure. In order to present Heather as a woman with sensual powers, *The Flame* employs methods of “bodily inscription;” markers that encode the body's surface with social significance and value (Grosz 142). Grosz argues that clothing, makeup, and ornamentation are some of the ways in which the female body is marked. These methods of bodily inscription happen both voluntary and involuntarily, and while they function at a surface level and have no permanent effect, they are nonetheless essential to how we socially read the body and what meanings we derive from it (141-144). In *The Flame*, clothing is one of the narrative's primary modes of inscription. Through low cut dresses and tight-fitting bodices, Heather is “made into a particular type of body;” a body that is meant to be watched and fantasised about (142). To achieve this effect, *The Flame*'s narrative initially presents clothing as a form of oppression. The novel's first antagonist is Heather's Aunt Fanny, whose primary crime is trying to make Heather into an undesirable woman. Aunt Fanny has sold the “fancy gowns” Heather once owned and dressed her in “old rags” that hang around Heather like a “sack,” for the purpose of hiding her figure (Woodiwiss 4). When Fanny threatens Heather that: “You'll be buried a spinster when you die – and a virgin, too, that I'll see too” (4), it shows how it is in the narrative antagonist's interest to fix Heather in the social category of the ‘spinster.’ Aunt Fanny achieves this by denying Heather the opportunity to show her body. Therefore, the later sexualisation of Heather's body is presented as a pleasurable rebellion to the jealous aunt, as it rectifies Heather as a powerful figure by displaying her bodily features.

Just as Aunt Fanny uses the inscriptive qualities of clothing to conceal, the narrative puts Heather in attire meant to reveal. When, in private, Heather slips on the last of her old dresses still in her possession, the narrative dwells on the visual features of Heather's body: “The fabric was tight across her breasts, and she pondered on her growth and considered the daring swell above the low décolletage” (Woodiwiss 7). The way the description underscores the visibility of Heather's growing breasts suggests that her body demands to be seen. Furthermore, Heather's cleavage is called a *daring* swell, indicating that the body itself challenges action. To dress Heather in clothing that threatens the exposure of her breasts is a narrative preoccupation that runs throughout the novel. She is gifted a beige gown that “barely

concealed her bosom” (17) and later attends a ball wearing yet another garment in which “the shallow bodice pressed her bosom upward until she was precariously close to overflowing its bounds” (370). In this manner, Heather’s clothing always draws attention to that which is ‘barely’ hidden underneath. Through the change of dress, Heather’s “alluring” (153) physicality is allowed its expression, and her body is reinscribed as the one of a “temptress” (155).

I would like to compare the narrative’s inscription of Heather’s figure to a *Playboy* magazine cover from December 1972. The issue features a drawing of a woman dressed in a Santa Claus costume that is unbuttoned at the front. Most of her breasts, except the nipples, are visible. The woman is holding the open frock right where her breasts are, implying that she is about to pull it further apart and fully expose her bosom (*Playboy Magazine*). This image, while relatively modest compared to the ones found in the magazine’s centrefold, illustrates how clothing can function to mark the female body with erotic significance (Bronstein 4). *The Flame*’s Heather is dressed in lavish 18th century gowns and not Santa Claus costumes, yet the method of bodily inscription functions in largely the same way. The positioning of the clothing works to guide the eyes of the observer to the feminine markers of the body. The clothing conceals, but only just so, and captures the gaze of the onlooker by the possibility of the body being fully uncovered. When Heather descends from the stairwell in the dress that presses her breasts upwards until they are “close to overflowing its bounds”, all men in the room “seemed to hold their breaths in anticipation of the event [that her boobs fall out]” (Woodiwiss 370). A similar event, namely that the Santa Claus frock is pulled completely open, is anticipated by the December issue of *Playboy*.



Figure 2 *Playboy Magazine* from: *Librarything*

Pamela Regis writes that the heroine's desires are the most central in the romance novel (29). In this way, it could be argued that love and impending marriage are the essential ingredients to *The Flame*'s sexual scenery, as Heather needs romance to experience desire. Heather fits McAlister's script of 'compulsory demisexuality.' She is both frightened and repulsed by the hero Brandon, until their relationship develops into a loving one. When Brandon forces their first kiss, she experiences "a vague feeling of pleasure" and the narrative states that "had the circumstances been different, she might have enjoyed [it]" (Woodiwiss 28). When the circumstances are at last 'different,' after almost a year of marriage and character redemption on Brandon's part, Heather states how kissing him "filled her with desire, leaving every muscle in her body weak and pliable" (Woodiwiss 360). Thus, Heather's character is not consciously looking for sexual recognition and unlike the drawing on the cover of *Playboy*, Heather herself is not teasing to pull her gown open. However, Heather's desires are not the only ones treated by the novel. The reader is given frequent depictions of the sexual fantasies of almost every male character in the book, in which Heather's cleavage is always the source of inspiration. I posit that the way Heather's body is sexualised, and how her sexualised body is received by men she will not develop a romantic relationship to, show that in *The Flame*, sex happens, and stays, outside of the romance.

The bodily inscription performed by Heather's clothing functions to make her a site of collective sexual fantasy. While the only person Heather has sex with is Brandon, the narrative repeatedly emphasises that she is the fantasy of so many others, like Brandon's brother Jeff, who says of Heather "I'll try not to look at her too hard" (371). When Heather dines with William Court, a man who is presented as gruesome and predatory, the narrative still focuses on the pleasure he gets from her clothing, as: "his devouring stare remained momentarily upon the décolletage where the higher curves of her breasts swelled above the gown (18). I argue that this look of desire is also a form of sexual imagery, and therefore evidence that sex occurs outside of the romance. The desiring gaze is given narrative weight even when it belongs to a man who either will have nothing to do with the heroine's romance, like Jeff, or poses as a threat to her safety, like William. In this way, while Heather might be demisexual, the novel's portrayal of sexual fantasies is not governed by the notion that sex needs romance. Instead, it is the recognised value of the *sexy body* that rules the narrative. The attention Heather receives suggests that her attractive body does not only belong within a romantic framework, as it acquires its powers from being widely socially recognised through the hungry eyes of the on-looker. If the 70's housewife encouraged by Marabel Morgan to dress in "see through lingerie" (qtd. in Bronstein 35), also picked up a copy of *The Flame*, the

novel presents an argument about just how enticing a body inscribed with this form of clothing would be. The legitimisation of the novel's sexual content thus relies on a societal tendency to be "obsessively preoccupied with the body" (Gill 149), in which the body's physicality and presentation is made to determine the value and capacities of the person inhabiting it.

In *The Flame*, the seductive body belongs to the story's heroine and is therefore always at the centre of the narrative's attention. The comparison between the representation of Heather and the woman decorating the cover of *Playboy* demonstrates the centrality of the erotic female body in both media, despite *The Flame* being directed towards women and *Playboy* towards men. In both texts, clothes function to construct the female body as a site for sexual fantasies to be inscribed. This serves my argument that *The Flame* can be read in terms of a culture where the feminine ideal of woman as sexually attractive body is shared between pornographic works and more conservative, female-oriented cultural forms. Through employing a corporeal framework, I have aimed to demonstrate an additional way to conceptualise sex in the romance novel, that is not only linked to the cultural attitudes concerning women and sexual fantasies but also the prevailing cultural representations of the female body. However, it is also apparent that these two are largely interconnected. I now want to employ this reading to James' *Fifty Shades* to show that a focus on the heroine's body continues into a more recent era of the erotic romance novel, and that the discussion of what fantasies are conveyed in women's erotic fiction, as well as the mainstreaming of porn, are also highly relevant in this context.

New sexual attitudes and *Fifty Shades* as porn for women

Published in 2011, *Fifty Shades* is distinguishably more direct in its explicit scenery than *The Flame*, including lengthy and detailed descriptions of sexual acts and a prominent focus on the heroine's arousal. If the expression of sexual fantasies is indeed shaped by 'the rules imposed by the environment,' this difference could be considered a testimony to how the rules are changing. Writing on the development of the romance novel in 2016, Catherine Roach posits that changes in the cultural climate are expressed by the increased publication of erotic romances, as well as in their "intensification of sexual content" (79). Both Woodiwiss' and James' novels can be positioned within this development, with *The Flame* perhaps best placed somewhere in the early stages and *Fifty Shades* as the most famous example of romantic erotica as the genre stands today. *The Flame* is mentioned, albeit briefly, by both Radway and Thurston in their portrayal of the romance novel as the female antithesis to

pornography. *Fifty Shades*, on the other hand, is by critics such as Illouz considered a symptom of the growing consumption of pornography amongst women (Illouz 33). This shows how more recent romance novel scholarship is still concerned with women's access to sexually explicit material and what women now want or are socially permitted to be wanting. Through focusing on the representation of the heroine Anastasia's body, I will propose that *Fifty Shades'* relationship to pornography is also tied to the ideal of woman as a sexually enticing figure. My argument is that the novel neither creates nor expresses a new liberal female sexual identity, but rather constructs the sexy body using increasingly pornographic tropes. Instead of treating the novel as porn for women, I consider the novel as "porno chic;" a text that reproduces the styles and representations commonly found in pornography to mark its heroine's body as desirable (McNair, *Porno* 36).

Fifty Shades is often regarded as a result of developments throughout what Ethel Person terms "the sexual century," characterised by the "liberalization of sexual practices" and changes in the way we think about sex (12). The notion that sex only belongs within a heterosexual marriage, that practices such as masturbation, homosexuality, and BDSM are deviant, and that women are and should be passive recipients of male sexual advances, have been replaced by more liberal attitudes in Western culture (Person 13). Esther Sonnet posits that the emergence of romance novels that are deliberately marketed as erotic material for women are part of this wider process, "through which a new female heterosexual identity is articulated around the active consumption of erotica" (170). Thus, placing *Fifty Shades* within this context, the novel's immense popularity and explicit content can be attributed to a culture in which the erotic romance novel does not need legitimisation, as female sexual gratification is positioned as liberating and empowering (176). As one review of *Fifty Shades* puts it, the erotic scenery is "empowering women to embrace their bodies and their sexualities" (Clark). To Roach, our present-day "sex-positive culture" manifests itself in how women are permitted to read erotic fiction, "attend home-sale sex toy parties," and "take pole-dancing classes at the local gym" (78). In her 1984 study, Radway was concerned with establishing the character of her romance readers, stating that they were 'every-day' women with conventional jobs and marriages (Radway 50). In the 2010s, at least according to Roach, this attitude has been replaced: "contrary to traditional notions that 'good girls don't do things like that,' today's good girls do" (Roach 78). The legitimisation of the erotic romance therefore relies on more liberal attitudes to female sexuality in the larger culture and a new identity amongst the readers.

This leads to the question of the identity of *Fifty Shades* heroine Anastasia, and

whether she also expresses these new liberal attitudes. To McAlister and Illouz, the novel's depiction of its heroine is where the more conservative qualities of the fantasy are revealed. McAlister posits that Anastasia, while able to experience sexual gratification outside of a romantic relationship, is still following the script of 'compulsory demisexuality' (230). Anastasia expresses active desire from the moment she meets the hero Christian, and their first sexual encounter is, as McAlister puts it, "multi-orgasmic" (230). Nevertheless, Anastasia's main incentive throughout is still to negotiate a conventional "hearts and flowers" relationship (James 244). Therefore, in *Fifty Shades*, love is not required for sexual pleasure, but the heroine's uttermost desire is to have both, and she is willing to abandon Christian if they cannot also have a romantic relationship. Anastasia is adamant that she wants "more" (244), and so even through the graphic sex scenes, the reader is not consuming a tale of a sexually liberal woman. This introduces Illouz' position, who writes that the traditional romance, signified by a safe and intimate relation, is the true fantasy of *Fifty Shades*. Illouz suggests that the novel is a commentary on what women feel they are lacking in a society where sexual freedom is championed at the expense of the craving for love and marriage, which has become the new obscenity (35). Again, Illouz uses Anastasia's identity to support her claims, and notes how the heroine's "ordinariness" makes the novel "the victory of old-fashioned 'character' over beauty and sexiness" (53). Thus, according to Illouz, the novel's success stems from its ability to pose as fashionably sex-positive, while de facto portraying the triumph of a traditional heterosexual female identity.

In my discussion of *Fifty Shades*, I will not try and locate the key to the novel's success but rather engage with how the narrative reveals the impact of the "pornification of culture" (Illouz 33). The critical discourse outlined above illustrates some of the differing ways contemporary sexual culture can be connected to the novel and how it depicts its heroine. Unlike Illouz, I argue that in *Fifty Shades*, Anastasia's character is shaped by how her "Miss Everybody" (Illouz 53) look is made into something sexy by the narrative's employment of a "porno chic" mode of representation (McNair 36). In determining pornography's influence on society, Brian McNair posits that the first wave happened through how porn migrated into the mainstream during the 1970s, and the second as it came to inspire other cultural artifacts that impersonated the "sexually graphic [and] explicit qualities" of porn (40-43). These cultural products are described by McNair under the umbrella term porno chic (36). Treating *Fifty Shades'* explicit sex scenes as part of the porno chic aesthetic recognises that that the celebration of women's sexual fantasies is promoted by commercial forces that are trying to create a new market for explicit material targeted at a female audience

(Sonnet 171). Additionally, it positions the mainstreaming of pornography not in terms of wider consumption, though that is also an important factor, but connects it to pornography's wider exposure. As Sarracino and Scott write, the pornification of society is not "so much that porn has become mainstream (...), as that the mainstream has become porn" (xi-xii). I aim to show that there is a continuity from *The Flame* to *Fifty Shades*, in that they both employ bodily inscription to make their heroine's identity into that of a sexual figure. Thus, the construction of the fantasy has remained largely the same but with changing methods, as *Fifty Shades* demonstrates how the *sexy body* in 2011 is forged through an explicitly pornographic imagery.

An example of the porno chic style in advertisement is found in the Diesel Jeans 2010 campaign titled "Sex sells* Unfortunately we sell jeans" (DieselWiki). The campaign features images of topless men and women, wearing Diesel jeans and posing in various sexual positions. A screen grab from Diesel's website shows a woman leaning back on a leather coach, drawing one hand through her hair and partially covering her breasts with the other. The image is clad by the words: "What's your fantasy: missionary, reverse spoon, lazy doggie (..) [or] reverse cowgirl" (Barro). This shows how, as Gill writes, porno chic "has become a dominant representational practice" in advertising and magazines (148). The porno chic is not necessarily promoting porn but capitalising on how the pornographic is still considered "edgy and rebellious" (McNair 39). It works on the assumption that pornography is "fascinating" and "attractive" to a mainstream audience (37). In this way, the prevalence of porno chic representations becomes a measure of pornography's visibility and influence (36). Anthony Comstock once wrote that "a single book or a single picture, may taint forever the soul of the person who reads it" (qtd. in Sarracino and Scott 169). If we replace the word 'taint' with influence, and think about not only one but a series of pictures, it is not hard to imagine how the representational mode of porno chic has shaped popular consciousness.

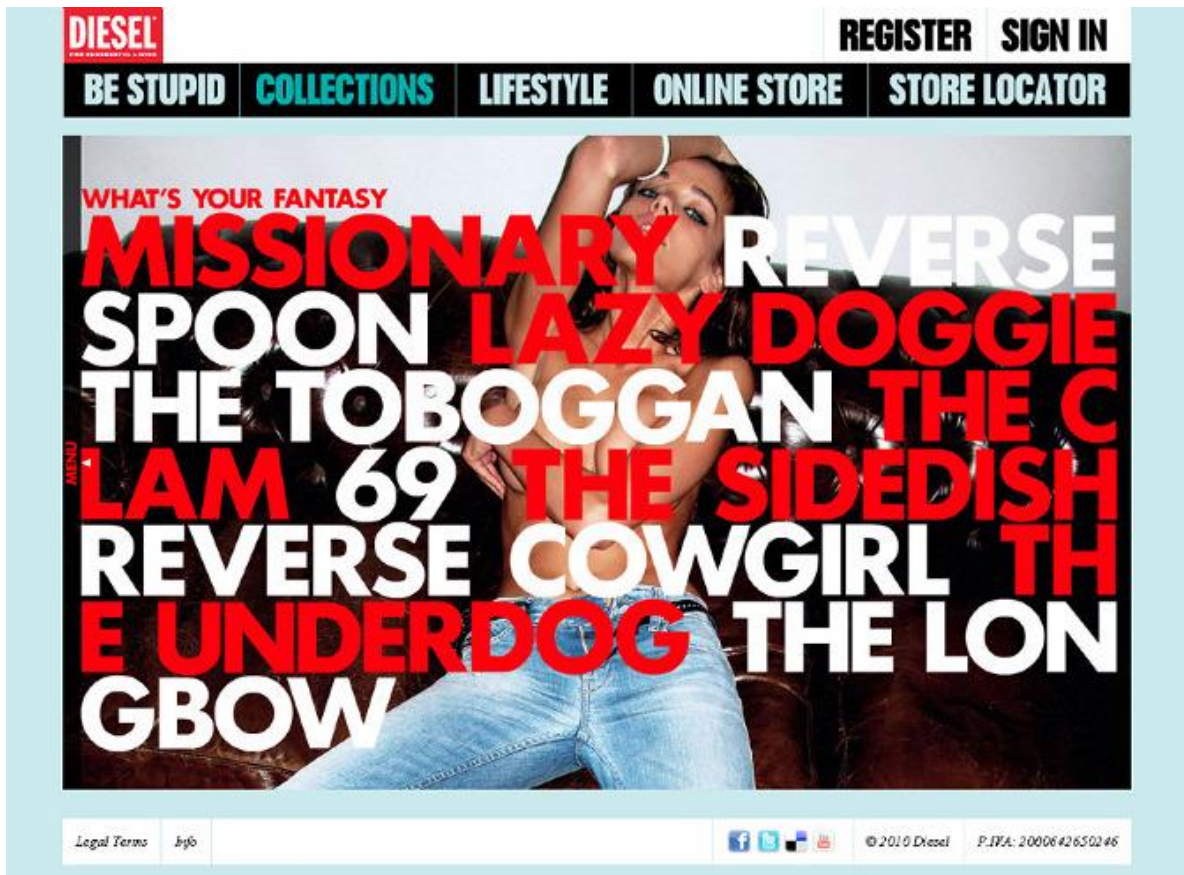


Figure 3. Diesel 2010 Campaign from: Barro, Andre. "How can we sell jeans in an original way?" CargoCollective



Figure 4. Diesel 2010 campaign from: DieselWiki



Figure 5. Diesel 2010 campaign from: DieselWiki

Porno chic is inspired by the way in which female bodies are fashioned in pornography. In my discussion of the mainstreaming of porn in the 1970s, a *Cosmopolitan* cover was used to argue that the ideal of the sexually enticing woman had made its way into more conservative spaces of society. The porno chic aesthetic can be viewed as a continuation of the same trend, as the “increasingly frequent erotic representations” of women’s bodies in popular culture have strengthened the power of identifying with a sexy body (Gill 150). The nature of the erotic representations in mass-media has changed with the developing content of pornography itself. Since its “golden age” in the 60s and 70s, both the porn industry and the products it offers have changed significantly. 2000s porn films are “nearly always hard-core,” meaning that they show the act of penetration and contain shots of genital organs (Forrester). While the Diesel ad depicts its models with the lower half of their bodies covered, I argue that the mainstreaming of hard-core porn is still evident. The models are positioned either on top of or behind each other, simulating the sexual positions listed by the screen grab. Thus, they do not only hint at but imitate penetrative sex. In her study of developments within the pornography genre, Natalie Purcell locates aesthetic and sexual elements standard to porn in the 2000s (115). She writes that “performers’ bodies are arranged to facilitate explicit close ups” and that clothing is positioned and removed to achieve maximum exposure of the female body (115-118). The sensibility of hard-core porn is to build erotic intensity by making specific areas of the female body visible (116-118). As I aim to show, this is the same method of inscription employed by *Fifty Shades*.

Awakening the “inner goddess:” Bodily inscription in *Fifty Shades*

Fifty Shades employs underwear to mark Anastasia’s body as sexual, by positioning the garments to reveal sites of erotic significance. While *The Flame* uses Aunt Fanny to figure as the repression of the body’s seductive qualities, in *Fifty Shades* it is Anastasia herself who discredits her own appearance. The novel opens with Anastasia looking herself in the mirror, scowling with “frustration” at her own reflection (James 3). Through the frequent feature of denoting self-description, the narrative establishes Anastasia’s insistence that her body is devoid of any sexual meaning. She renders it “too pale [and] too skinny” (51) to be desirable, and describes herself as nothing but “uncoordinated” and “scruffy” (15). When Anastasia meets Christian this image starts to change, and through their sexual encounters the narrative presents Anastasia’s body as one that is meant to be sexually recognised. This does not only happen through Christian’s displays of desire. To mark Anastasia’s body as one with sensual qualities, Christian buys Anastasia underwear, which is “exquisitely designed fancy European

lingerie,” and to her surprise the “blue lace and finery” turns out to “fit perfectly” (70). This shows how Anastasia’s body, despite her own displeasure with it, is depicted as a surface that easily lends itself to erotic inscription.

During the novel’s first sex scene, the same bra is used to display corporeal sites of importance. Anastasia describes how:

[Christian] dips his index finger into the cup of my bra and gently yanks it down, freeing my breast, but the underwire and fabric of the cup force it upward. His finger moves to my other breast and repeats the process. My breasts swell, and my nipples harden under his steady gaze. I am trussed up by my own bra.
(James 115).

Comparing this action to Purcell’s writings on how the female body is presented in pornography reveals that Anastasia is styled using the same methods of bodily inscription. Christian is arranging Anastasia’s body to promote specific areas of it and exposes how the heroine’s breasts react to sexual stimuli. If one types ‘boobs trussed up by bra’ into the Google search engine, the results offered further support the link between *Fifty Shades*’ presentation of the female body and pornography (Google Search). Notably, Christian does not remove Anastasia’s bra to expose her breasts, instead he pulls the bra under them. In this fashion, the underwire contributes to an almost forceful display of the heroine’s features. The positioning of the bra becomes a bodily marking, not unlike the ones described by Alphonso Lingis in his work *Excesses: Eros and Culture*. In a study of what Lingis terms the ‘primitive subject,’ an ethnocentric description of people in non-Western tribes, Lingis notes how bodily markings are made to increase the erotic importance of specific areas on the body’s surface (qtd. in Grosz 138). This happens through inscribing the body with “welts, scars, tattoos, [and] perforations,” which makes a map of how the body should be read (qtd. in Grosz 139). As posited by Grosz, Lingis’ study neglects the fact that Western culture also uses forms of body writing. *Fifty Shades* demonstrates the inscription of the modern subject, and how everyday garments, such as a bra, also function to increase the erotic significance of the body. The way Anastasia’s breasts are forced upward shows how “libidinal and erotogenic intensity” is inscribed on the female body by making its features visible and available to the hero’s gaze (Grosz 138). The narrative emphasis rests on accentuating areas of Anastasia’s body that in their prominence offer more than gratification; they become a form of alteration by changing the meaning of the body itself.

Anastasia’s conversion into a sexual body can be read in terms of her body image, which is “the mental representation an individual creates of themselves” (Psychologytoday).

From regarding herself as a person with a body not worthy of notice, Anastasia comes to see herself as “erotic” (James 322). Maintaining that *Fifty Shades* is chiefly performing a romantic fantasy, Illouz suggests that Anastasia’s transformation reveals that the novel’s message is how “our ordinariness can become our uniqueness when our inner worth is affirmed through love” (55). Conversely, I claim that the novel’s fantasy is enacted by making Anastasia recognise her body as a source of erotic power by affirming it through porno chic representations. *Fifty Shades*’ use of artifacts belonging to BDSM practice, such as chains, leather crops, and the saltire cross, can be read as an expression of how the porno chic borrows from “the styles and iconography of the pornographic” (McNair 36). In the hands of Christian, Anastasia is made to engage in practices that are still somewhat taboo in mainstream culture (Downing 92), and thus the novel is imitating the assumed “fascinating” and potentially transgressive style of pornography (McNair 39). Anastasia’s body image is altered by observing herself in practices formerly unknown to her, that she finds shocking but also “HOT” (James 186). In the “playroom” (318), a room designed for BDSM sex, Christian “points with the riding crop to where [a] large wooden X is on the wall” and shackles Anastasia to it (322). While assuming the position, Anastasia has an out-of-body experience: “I oblige immediately, feeling like I’m exiting my body – a casual observer of events as they unfold around me” (322). Seeing herself from the outside she states: “This is beyond fascinating, beyond erotic” (322). Thus, the arranging of her body has a transformative effect, and the self-proclaimed “mousey” (86) Anastasia starts perceiving herself differently.

In the novel, the power of identifying with a sexy body is demonstrated through Anastasia’s developing self-awareness and agency. While suffering from both low self-esteem and limited capacity for action, Anastasia is empowered by her newfound sexual recognition. The bodily inscriptions performed through the dressing, un-dressing, and tying up of her body gives Anastasia new agency. After learning that her body can be sexually recognised, Anastasia begins actively marking it herself to achieve certain effects. She tells Christian “Oh ... by the way, I’m wearing your underwear,” and feels a sense of accomplishment when his “mouth drops open, shocked” (158). Anastasia also starts dressing up before their meetings, revealing a new awareness of how she presents herself: “I shower, shave my legs and underarms, wash my hair, and then spend a good half hour drying it so that it falls in soft waves to my breasts and down my back” (213). This new hairdo contrasts the opening scene, where she tries to brush her “wayward hair” under control without success (3). Through negotiating the reading of her body Anastasia has a new sense of control and becomes a different figure than the shy and reserved worshipper of classic British literature she was

originally presented as. Anastasia's transformation can therefore be linked to a cultural celebration of the agency and power of a *sexy body* (Gill 149). The influence and positive effect of this change is continuously emphasised through how Anastasia's "inner goddess" is awakened. This goddess is a subconscious figure that does "the merengue with some salsa moves" or other forms of dancing whenever Anastasia is sexually asserting herself (James 137). The notion of a 'goddess' is telling; this is what *Fifty Shades* presents the sexually recognised woman as. Anastasia decides that in the choice between embracing a new sexual identity or "*end up alone with lots of cats*" (176), the goddess is the more favourable position to assume.

I argue that Anastasia is made to fit the ideal of woman as sexually attractive figure by methods of bodily inscription similar to the ones found in the sphere of pornography. Unlike *The Flame's* Heather, Anastasia is not depicted as a woman with an universally recognised jaw-dropping physique. As mentioned, Illouz therefore argues that *Fifty Shades* depicts an ordinary woman's triumph over ideals of "beauty and sexiness" (53). This statement seems not to account for the narrative's preoccupation with marking Anastasia's body as sexual. Nevertheless, the heroine's "Miss everybody" (53) look is relevant to the fantasy conveyed by *Fifty Shades*. In her study of 2000s pornography, Purcell writes of the common and "crafted 'look'" of the porn star. This is "a look that performers achieve and maintain through fastidious grooming, waxing, tanning, professional makeup, exercise and (often) plastic surgery" (Purcell 115). Compared to this type of bodily expression, Anastasia is far from resembling the women that feature in pornography. In fact, the narrative seems to engage with, and contradict, contemporary pornography's recurrent depiction of waxed women without pubic hair (115). In the contract that stipulates the relationship between a dominant and a submissive that Christian gives Anastasia, it is stated that "the submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times" (James 172). However, during intercourse, Christian "gently tugs at [Anastasia's] pubic hair" and says, "I like this" and "perhaps we'll keep this" (141). My suggestion that *Fifty Shades'* heroine is represented in a porno chic fashion is not to say that she is modelled after the conventional look of a porn star. Rather, the narrative shows how Anastasia's 'ordinariness' can be made 'sexy' and is thus presenting the fantasy that 'beauty and sexiness' is available to everyone. Furthermore, the novel shows how the enticing woman is constructed through modes of representation; it is not about how the body looks naturally but how the body is presented and styled.

Conclusion

Examining *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*' representation of their heroines suggests that the question as to whether these novels fulfil a romantic or a sexual fantasy is not the only inquiry worth undertaking. Heather and Anastasia each star in their own love story, while the novels also feature explicit scenes and a heavy focus on sexual desire. The heroines are thus both romantic and sexual actors, but I argue that above all the narratives aim to depict them as attractive and erotic bodies. This fantasy persists through the changes in societal attitudes to women's consumption of explicit material that have developed from the publication of *The Flame* to the appearance of *Fifty Shades*. Therefore, I posit that there are other cultural workings the novels can be read in relation to, namely the mainstreaming of pornography and the prominence of images where the female body is marked with sexual meaning in popular media. Such a comparison displays how the body gains its significance through modes of bodily inscription. The type, positioning, or lack of clothing makes the body be perceived in a certain manner; it makes it into "a particular type of body" (Grosz 142). In each novel, the heroine gains her powers through how her body is inscribed with meanings of desirability, showing how Heather and Anastasia both are constructed around the fantasy of the sexy body.

This chapter has focused on how the heroines' bodies are styled in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* and argued that this mode of representation is an expression of the pornification of society. Heather and Anastasia are fashioned to make their bodies signal sex; however, this does not only happen through clothing and sexual artifacts. The next chapter will look at how the material qualities of the heroines' corporeality are constructed to create eroticism. By recounting parts of the medical discourse and history on female virginity I aim to show how the notion that women's virginity is physically manifested is used by *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* to further inscribe the female body with erotic meaning. Similar methods are used in the genre of virginity porn, to make the virginal body be inherently connected to heterosexual intercourse and phallic penetration. In this way, the erotic function of female corporeality as constructed in the novels draws from a long history of assumptions about the female body that have inspired erotic romances and porn sites alike. Thus, the likeness in the representation of the female body in these two genres cannot only be attributed to pornography's influence, but can be read as an expression of how they ascribe to a similar system of sexual value.

CHAPTER 2: THE VIRGINAL BODY

This chapter will establish that corporeal virginity forms a central part of the erotic function in both *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*. The novels' heroines, Heather and Anastasia, are both virgins until they encounter their male love interest, so the preliminary sex scene in each novel is also a virginity loss scene. In the texts, being a virgin means occupying a body that will reveal its sexual status upon first penetration. Through a ruptured hymen and bloody sheets, *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* present virginity as physically manifested. The way in which virginity is corporeally constructed in the novels is part of a long-standing tradition in Western culture. While the socio-symbolic category of virginity has been subject to continual change, the depictions of female virginity in medical discourse through history show that virginity has continuously been treated as a bodily identity. The notion that a woman's virginity can be detected by the material qualities of her vaginal space creates a fantasy of the virgin as a sealed entity that is opened by phallic penetration. In *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, the opening of the virginal heroine is eroticised through how the physical proof of virginity loss makes phallic potency and possession visible. The narrative weight lies on the sexual gratification the heroes Brandon and Christian receive when seeing the evidence that they were the first men to enter their heroine's body. Therefore, I will argue that the novels make the virginal body into a sexual body by imagining it as the source of male desire.

Examining how female virginity is represented on the pornographic website Defloration.tv demonstrates that the tradition of a physically signified virginity paves the way for sexual objectification of the female virginal body. A comparative analysis of Defloration.tv, *The Flame*, and *Fifty Shades* reveals several similarities in how virginity is treated. This strengthens the thesis' overarching assertion that *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* ascribe to the same sexual system as portrayed in male-oriented pornographic media. I aim to show that this sexual system is not only preoccupied with constructing the material qualities of the virginal body, but also imagines a specific version of male sexuality that elevates the status of the virgin. In this way, *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* eroticise the virgin as an object that men want to possess and I therefore argue that, ultimately, the heroines' virginal bodies perform a desirability fantasy.

The sealed virgin

The introduction to Anke Bernau's *Virgins: a cultural history* states that "virgins have haunted the Western imagination for centuries" (ii). As the discourse on virginity has always been highly gendered, women and their bodies have been placed at centre stage of this imagination. Bonnie McLachlan posits that virginity is both a "social category" (8) and a "cultural artifact" (3) to which varying significance has been ascribed. Similarly, Kathleen Kelly stresses that virginity is dependent on cultural criteria and standards (ix). It is thus important to note that female virginity, despite its persistent cultural importance, has never been a fixed category with one universally accepted meaning (Bernau 2). Nevertheless, I will argue that throughout history one can trace a continuous belief in virginity as a physical feature that can be discovered on the female body. This chapter's preoccupation with virginity's physicality is not meant to undermine the importance of virginity as a social category. Instead, it will emphasize how the two are intrinsically connected; the cultural connotations to female virginity are reproduced through the qualities assigned to the body itself (Kelly ix). Medical discourse has not been consistent in its depiction of the factors that determine physical virginity, yet a seeming constant is the portrayal of the virginal body as one with narrow and sealed openings. Whether it is regarded as a dangerous or a virtuous state, the sealed virgin demonstrates a tendency to let a woman's body determine her value.

From as early as the second century AD, medical discourse on virginity has focused on establishing the difference between a virginal and a non-virginal female body (Kelly 21). The Hippocratic Corpus, a collection of Classical Greek medical texts, placed the *parthenos*, a young, virginal woman, in a liminal position on the verge of maturity and womanhood (MacLachlan 7). The Hippocratic Corpus conveyed a medical perception of the girl-child's body as being 'blocked;' the lack of menstruation in young girls was understood to result from the child's inner passageways being so narrow that they inhibited the processing of the fluids associated with womanhood (Hanson 41-43). The body of the *parthenos* therefore required to be "broken down and opened up;" a process which started with internal changes but required intercourse, and a following pregnancy, in order to be completed (43). The Hippocratic Corpus' construction of the virginal body reflects Greek society's preoccupation with women fulfilling their role as mothers (Hanson 46-47). Delays in the *parthenos'* pubescent transition from child to mother was thought to harm her body, as the menstrual blood would then be trapped inside of her. One of the prescribed remedies for such a condition involved vaginal fumigation distributed through a long-necked jar. The girl was to

sit over the jar, so that the neck penetrated her vaginal opening and reached into her uterus (47). This treatment conveys the notion that the sealed body requires to be opened, and thus virginity is inherently linked to the penetration that will remove it. Furthermore, it shows how the penetration deemed necessary for young women's well-being was a result of medical standards complying with social regulation.

This trend has continued into more contemporary discourses on female virginity. Today, the most prominent difference between a virginal and non-virginal body is given "literal representation" through the idea of the hymen (McAlister 45). The hymen is described to be "a thin piece of skin that partly covers the opening to a girl's or woman's vagina and breaks when she has sex for the first time" (Cambridge Dictionary). Breaking the hymen is generally believed to result in vaginal bleeding, making blood on the sheets after intercourse a common signifier of virginity (van Moorst et. al 94). The idea of the hymen as a virginal membrane that is removed through penetration was not common in medical writings before the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "at which point its existence (or absence) was hotly debated" (Bernau 2). The existence of a hymen was foreign to, or depreciated by, earlier medical texts, such as the Hippocratic Corpus (Hanson 56). The late thirteenth century text *Women's Secrets*, drew from, among others, Hippocratic medical knowledge, and suggested other corporeal signs of female virginity. Among these was "the heightened hissing noise produced when [a woman] urinated," presumed to be "a result of higher pressure caused by her closed vagina" (Bernau 7). The practice of determining virginity based on the sound of urine might appear comical to modern day readers. However, the hymen is an equally invented signifier of female virginity (World Health Organization 4). Treating the hymen as proof of virginity cannot be attributed to modern anatomical knowledge, as current medical writings on the hymen all emphasize that "the appearance of a hymen is not a reliable indication of intercourse" (4). The vaginal tissue the word hymen conceptualises varies in shape and size, and might not even be present at all, regardless of whether the body is virginal or not (Bernau 2). Therefore, the "faith in the myth that an intact hymen proves virginity" is a continuation of the same cultural obsession with interpreting the female body (van Moorst et. al 94).

A 2012 study from the *The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care* states that there are growing numbers of women "requesting hymen reconstruction or a 'certificate of virginity'" (van Moorst et. al 94). The study shows that women applying for this medical procedure did so based on concerns that they would not bleed or be "tight" enough during first intercourse (93). This is a testimony to how female

virginity is made to decide women's "virtue, honour, and social value" (World Health Organization 5). The World Health Organization has made a call to eliminate virginity testing as it is a harmful and degrading breach of human rights (4). While this thesis will not be discussing it in further detail, the practice of virginity testing is alluded to in order to demonstrate that the idea that penetration alters the virginal body is a dated but still prevalent belief (Bernau 2). In *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, these widespread myths about female virginity are reproduced to emphasise the opening of the virgin. Heather and Anastasia bleed after sex, and the latter is also told that her vagina is strikingly "tight" (James 117). Both novels depict the verified virginal body as one with increased value. The worth obtained by the heroine through the physical proof of her virginity is not only connected to her virtue and honour; in both narratives, the female virginal body is a body of *sexual* value.

Opening the virgin in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*

A historical romance novel set in late eighteenth century Britain, *The Flame* features several of the epoch's societal norms concerning gender, marriage, and virginity. In Pamela Regis' proposition of the eight narrative elements that always feature in a romance novel, the first one on the list is "the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court" (30). Regis writes that the romance novel defines for the reader the society in which the romance will take place and the challenges that society's conventions pose for the heroine (31). In *The Flame*, the narrative conveys the worth placed on an unmarried woman's virginity in the society where its story unfolds. William Court, before attempting to rape Heather, states: "your husband will be a bit disappointed when he takes you to his bed" (Woodiwiss 21), and Brandon, after having raped Heather, chimes in with: "you could have gotten a king's ransom for what you lost to me" (36). In this way, *The Flame* engages with the history of women's bodies being considered objects whose value are "quantifiable by their 'purity'" (World Health Organization 5) and depicts the commercial value of virginity prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, as McAlister posits, "while the society defined (...) within the novel is historical, the governing paradigm is modern" (194). This means that *The Flame's* treatment of virginity cannot only be attributed to the narrative's aim for historical accuracy. As Juliet Flesch argues, the historical romance uses the past as the setting where its fantasies unfold, but with the aim of creating a space where contemporary readers can partake in them (qtd. by McAlister 196). I will therefore argue that the novel's portrayal of virginity as a social category serves as a backdrop for the novel's primary obsession with the sexual significance of female virginity.

The Flame's representation of virginity can be related to the tradition of the virginal body being medically constructed as 'physically sealed' and the belief that penetration leads to a form of opening. Addressing Heather, Brandon wonders why she did not disclose herself as a virgin and a woman "still intact" (Woodiwiss 36). Brandon's choice of words corresponds to the Hippocratic convention that the virginal body is closed off, though to Brandon this condition is deemed valuable, as Heather is a "fresh young thing for his pleasure" (33). That Heather's virginity means her body is 'intact' presents it as sealed and undamaged, until Brandon rapes her and through penetration becomes the first man to break Heather open: "He thrust deep within her (...) It seemed with each moment now she would be split asunder" (30). Whilst Brandon takes pleasure in the event, Heather experiences her virginity loss as both painful and humiliating, it is a "burning pain" (29) that leaves her "shamed to her very bone" (36). The power Brandon now holds over Heather makes her compare herself to a bird on a platter, waiting while he sharpens "his knife for the carving" (41). This comparison underlines the power held by the man who opens the virginal body, and a language of dominance is used by Heather and Brandon both; she is "taken" (40), "snatched" (45), and "tried" (45). Heather's virginity loss leaves her pregnant and sets in motion a chain of events that lead to a forced marriage between her and Brandon. Thus, the first 'opening' of Heather's virginal body is the start of a further and more encompassing possession of her body, recognised by the couple; Heather knows that she will "never again belong to herself" (99) and Brandon states "what is *mine*, I *keep*" (140). This shows how *The Flame* relies on a construction of the virginal body as physically sealed in order to assert the possession held by the man who opens it.

While *The Flame* does not include any mention of a hymen, Heather's virginity loss is manifested by vaginal bleeding. Heather and Brandon first meet after Heather has fled from William Court. Brandon's men find her wandering the streets and bring her to their captain, assuming she is a sex worker. This impression is shared by Brandon, even as Heather resists his advances and he forces her into intercourse. It is not until they both see the blood stains on the sheets that Heather finally has convincing "proof of virginity" (45). *The Flame* uses the notion of virginity being physically verifiable to authenticate Heather's sexual status. Just how conclusive this evidence is, becomes clear when Heather's reputation is rectified amongst Brandon's men because the manservant George: "saw the stains of [her] virginity when he carried the bedclothes from [Brandon's] cabin that day" (144). Heather is embarrassed that others have seen the blood specks, but Brandon assures her that it is "certainly nothing to be ashamed of," as "there are many women who wish they could offer

such proof of purity to their husbands” (145). This recalls Regis’ understanding of “society defined” as a narrative element (31). Brandon’s reference to virginity as increasing marital value speaks of the social norms of the period in which the novel is set. However, *The Flame* makes it clear that the figure of Brandon is not one to subscribe to these norms himself. Before meeting Heather, he was set to marry Louisa Welsh, a woman “well known by other men” (Woodiwiss 33). Brandon was not troubled by this, as Louisa’s “experience in bed did prove entertaining” (32). This establishes that Brandon’s preference in marriage is primarily guided by sexual gratification. Therefore, Heather’s virginal body obtains its worth by being sexually gratifying rather than socially valued. As Brandon states: “when I forced her maidenhood, she served my pleasure well, more than any woman ever” (311). Thus, the virginal body’s seal functions to confirm the hero’s possession as well as giving him singular sexual pleasures.

In James’ *Fifty Shades*, virginity’s physicality performs similar functions to *The Flame* in a modern framework. The novel’s story is set in 2011, the same year as its publication. Returning to Regis’ eight narrative elements, *Fifty Shades* is a romance where the “society defined” is “barely sketched” (Regis 31), and arguably relies on its readers’ familiarity with the scene. My earlier claim that the representation of virginity in *The Flame* can be analysed beyond the historical society in which the narrative is set is supported by how the novel’s representation of virginity corresponds with that of *Fifty Shades*. The physical markers of the virginal body, and the male possession of it, are also heavily featured in James’ novel. While societal concerns regarding the commercial value of virginity are not treated in *Fifty Shades*, the novel follows *The Flame*’s preoccupation with the pleasures held by the closed virginal body. As *Fifty Shades* is even more graphic and direct in its depiction of its characters’ sexual relations, virginity’s relation to male sexual pleasure is arguably even more evident.

To illustrate the virginal body’s visceral seal, *Fifty Shades* relies on a “literal representation” of the hymen (McAlister 45). Anastasia’s virginity loss is pinned to one specific moment and is portrayed as a consciously felt bodily experience: ““Aargh!” I cry as I feel a weird pinching sensation deep inside me as he rips through my virginity” (James 117). The notion that something ‘rips’ speaks of the presence of a hymen and the description suggests that the hymen and Anastasia’s virginity is one and the same thing. *Fifty Shades* thus positions Anastasia’s virginity as a physical entity within her body; a barrier that tears when vaginally penetrated. However, the final verification of Anastasia’s virginity is the presence of blood after sex. Echoing the words of Heather, Anastasia looks at the bed where she just had intercourse and states: “There’s blood on the sheets – evidence of my lost virginity”

(123). The opening of the virginal body is thus felt by its owner but only verified when it is made visible to the surroundings. As mentioned, the hymen is a cultural myth. However, through reproducing the qualities commonly assigned to the hymen, *Fifty Shades* makes virginity into a tangible and visible condition which in turn serves to confirm male gratification.

Fifty Shades portrays the opening of the virginal body as an arousing act of male possession. Whilst Anastasia feels the rupturing of her hymen as “a weird pinching sensation,” Christian is described to be groaning, “his eyes bright with ecstatic triumph” (James 117). Breaking the physical barrier of Anastasia’s virginity is treated as a form of victory to Christian and as he whispers, “you are mine, (..) Only mine” (119), the ownership of her body seems to be the reward of his achievement. Stripped of the notions of social regulation that feature in *The Flame*, *Fifty Shades*’ main concern is the bodily occupancy Christian now holds. He tells Anastasia: “I want you sore” and “every time you move tomorrow, I want you to be reminded that I’ve been here” (121). As Christian’s expression of these desires are followed by his second assertion to Anastasia that “you are mine” (121), it prompts the notion of bodily possession to be specifically tied to the act of phallic penetration. The prominence of the penis’ role in opening the virginal body is accentuated by the fact that Anastasia is penetrated by Christian prior to the moment she is described to lose her virginity: “He thrusts his finger inside me, and I cry out as he does it again and again. (..) He pushes inside me harder and harder still” (116). However, Anastasia’s hymen does not rip until Christian “positions the head of his erection at the entrance of [her] sex” (117) and inserts his penis. Thus, *Fifty Shades* suggests that the virginal body’s seal, represented by the hymen, can only be broken by being penetrated by the male genital.¹

Writing on psychoanalytic analysis of spatial metaphors and phallic fantasy, Jill Gentile posits that “it is only by recognizing the sexual “somethingness” of vaginal space that we appreciate how vital it is to phallic potency” (21). *Fifty Shades* shows how the notion that the virginal body is ‘sealed’ assigns a specific set of characteristics to the vaginal space. These traits all readily signify the impression of a penis. In the novel, the ‘somethingness’ of the vaginal space includes the presence of the hymen, which is given erotic significance as its rupture becomes a manifestation of phallic potency. The constitution of the vaginal space is directly addressed when Anastasia, looking at Christian’s “considerable length,” becomes concerned whether or not it will ‘fit’ inside of her: “*Oh no ... Will it? How?*” (116). Christian

¹ Male genital is here referring to the penis.

assures her by saying: “Don’t worry, (..) You expand too” (116). However, when penetrating Anastasia, Christian states that her vagina is “so tight” (117). This suggests that the physical make-up of the vaginal space is somewhat resistant to being opened and requires a certain phallic capability. In consequence, the blood on the sheets that figures in both *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, becomes not only the “proof” (Woodiwiss 45) and “evidence” (James 123) of lost virginity, but also a testimony to the victorious phallus.

The Flame and *Fifty Shades* emphasize the physical qualities assigned to the virginal body and place them within a system of sexual value. The virginity loss scenes in the two novels portray the opening of the virgin as sexually gratifying to the man, due to how the bodily constitution of the virgin underlines his possession. Yet, as earlier touched upon, social and physiological elements are connected in the making of the virginal body. As Brandon and Christian both express, the appeal of their virginal women stems from how they are the first men to make an imprint. This would suggest that after the heroine’s virginity is taken her body is altered and conquered. However, the narrative in the novels proves that the powers of virginity extend beyond its physical expression. As a corporeally constructed virginity assigns a specific set of qualities to the body itself, the virginal body in turn rewards its inhabitant with a chaste and innocent character. This is revealed through how *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* rely on the tradition of physically determined virginity in order to establish the purity of their heroines.

The sensual powers of purity and innocence

The idolization of the Virgin Mary, perhaps the best-known virgin in European tradition, and her status as a social icon, exemplifies the power associated with the ‘purity’ of the virgin (McLachlan 5). While some feminist scholars have found Mary’s virginity to be an expression of misogynistic values and men claiming ownership of the female body, others see her virginity to represent “female autonomy and power” (Foskett 2). There is, however, no doubt that the virginal conception of Jesus is central to Christian fate. Whether one understands Mary’s virginal body to be regulated or autonomous, it is still her body, with its unique ability to conceive a child while remaining virginal, that serves as proof of her divine nature. Thus, the Virgin Mary can also be positioned within a reading concerned with virginity’s physicality. Mary is given life-long virginal status, her body is untouched by man and unpossessed by sin, and this distinguishes and elevates her from other mortals (McLachlan 5). That she has never engaged in sexual relations proves the powers bestowed upon the virginal body, as “only virgins can give birth to Christ” (Cooper 100).

Mary's saintly status rests on the assurance that her body is unpenetrated. If one understands this as an expression of female autonomy, that would imply that the autonomy, as well as the purity, of a virginal woman relies on her maintaining control of who gets to enter her body. In *The Flame*, Heather expresses similar sentiments after Brandon rapes her: "'Please. (...) Aren't you satisfied that you've taken the one thing that was only mine to give'" (Woodiwiss 40). Following her sexual assault, Heather deems her body "used" (30) and powerless, it is no longer solely hers now that a man has violently taken it to fulfil his "base desires" (42). This shows how both the virginal state and its undoing is grounded in the corporeal. However, *The Flame* implies that despite being raped, Heather's virginity is still intact. Though she is physically traumatised and pregnant, the narrative continues to emphasize her bodily innocence, and the power this holds over her involuntary betrothed. Looking at Heather, Brandon states: "and here before me sits the queen of virgins, poised upon her throne of ice and surrounded by a moat of purity" (188). On that account, we see how *The Flame* presents a premise for virginity that adheres to Heather's earlier plea that it is "only [hers] to give" (40). Brandon reluctantly concludes that Heather is different from any other woman he has known as she is an "innocent whose virginity he had taken by force" (166). Because Heather was unwilling the first time he entered her, the purity of her character and her status as a virgin remains.

In *The Flame*, Heather's virginity reveals itself to Brandon when he sees "the flecks of blood that stained the sheet of his bunk" (Woodiwiss 30). The testimony to her virginity is written in bodily fluids, yet there is a duality to this form of authentication; the bloody sheets show that Heather *was* a virgin but also state that she is no longer is. From this duplexity springs *The Flame's* depiction of virginity as something that is grounded in the body, while its powers extend beyond the physiological realm. There is proof that Heather's body is no longer virginal, yet the fact that she had not engaged in any sexual activity until the present shows that she is chaste in spirit. Thus, the novel constructs virginity in a manner that makes Heather, similarly to Virgin Mary, able to maintain her virginal status even during pregnancy. The strength held by the somewhat contradictory bodily state of both women is revealed in their power of inspiring devotion. In Christian faith this devotion is grounded in religious beliefs, while in *The Flame* the devotion is a romantic, and, more importantly for this discussion, a sexual one.

The sensual influence of virginity is affirmed by Brandon, when he articulates: "I find myself so stricken with the innocence of that one, that I cannot rouse myself to seek relief in someone else's bed" (311). While Brandon's earlier conquests "had all been willing and eager

partners in the games of love” (166), Heather’s initial aversion against sleeping with him elevates her above the rest and makes her the only woman he desires. Heather’s purity does not make her non-sexual to Brandon, it rather inspires a stronger lust. The novel places continuous weight on how aroused Brandon is by his wife’s virginal character, proven by her unwillingness to have sex with him; both on their first meeting and through the beginning of their marriage. This narrative emphasis can be used to argue that throughout *The Flame*, Heather’s virginity does not serve as proof of her autonomy, instead it functions to highlight her erotic singularity in the eyes of Brandon. Before Heather, he “bade the most haughty spread their thighs and gladly they complied” (310), but now her closed virginal body has made him a “prisoner” that is “caught in [her] spell” (45). Accordingly, *The Flame* depicts one of the primary qualities of virginity as the power to entice a man.

In a similar vein to *The Flame*, James’ *Fifty Shades* equates virginity with innocence. Before Anastasia’s virginal status is explicitly revealed, her roommate Kate states that Christian is dangerous to “an innocent like you, Ana,” followed by the insistence that “you know what I mean” (39). This shows how virginity is linked to innocence and draws a parallel from the symbol of the pure Virgin Mary and Heather in *The Flame*. Still, the premise for *Fifty Shades*’ virginity loss differs from that of *The Flame*, as Anastasia’s own virginity is not something she is reluctant to part with when she meets the attractive and powerful Christian Grey. Within the novel’s first hundred pages she finds herself “squirming with a needy, achy ... discomfort” (68), which she recognises as desire, and so she expresses her readiness to engage in sexual activity for the first time: “Tonight’s the night!” (86). Yet, after having slept with Christian, Anastasia ponders her actions: “So you’ve just slept with him, given him your virginity” (126). Like Heather, Anastasia defines her virginity as a thing in her possession that is given over to the man through intercourse. Thus, both novels invoke the “virginity-as-gift” economy, where virginity is a precious thing in a woman’s custody that should only be rewarded a worthy recipient (McAlister 215-216). In *The Flame*, Heather’s virginal status transcends beyond intercourse because she did not give away her virginity willingly. By contrast, *Fifty Shades*’ Anastasia ‘gives’ her virginity away eagerly and enjoys the experience. Regardless, the narrative shows how innocence and inexperience remains the signifying traits of her character and these features continue to be eroticised in the plentiful sex scenes throughout the novel.

Upon learning that Anastasia has never previously had sex, Christian exclaims “I knew you were inexperienced, but a *virgin!*” using the term virgin as if it was “a really dirty word” (109). This seems to indicate that to *Fifty Shades*’ male protagonist, virginity does not

hold the same captivating appeal as for Brandon in *The Flame*. Nevertheless, despite his initial apprehension, the narrative soon reveals how Christian alters his behaviour in order to seduce Anastasia and claim her virginity. When Ana first asks him “does this mean you’re going to make love to me tonight?” Christian’s answer is decisive: “No, (...) I don’t make love. I fuck ... hard” (96). Yet soon after Ana’s sexual status is revealed, his tone changes significantly, and he pleads: “Please, Ana, let me make love to you” (111). This shows how *Fifty Shades* also conveys the conception of virginity as holding transformative powers, and grants Anastasia to be the first woman Christian treats with “vanilla” and “straightforward sex” in his own bed (153). As mentioned, the primary implication of Anastasia’s virginity is her sexual inexperience, which the novel uses to label her as an innocent. During one of their sexual encounters, Christian states: “Your innocence and enthusiasm is very disarming” (266), showing how Anastasia’s lack of experience holds seductive qualities. Though Anastasia’s virginity is not treated as a moral virtue, it still affords her unique treatment and positions her above the women that came before her.

Defloration.tv and the fantasy of the objectified body

In *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, the heroine’s physically manifested virginity derives its erotic function from the system of sexual value created by the narratives. In this system, the material qualities of the unpossessed body heighten “the force of erotic energy” in the sexual act, as it makes virginity loss discernible in a way that confirms phallic potency and ownership (McLachlan 4). However, to enforce the value of the virgin the novels also rely on a specific representation of male sexual desire, that revolves around the need to possess and claim the female body. In an opinion piece titled ‘Like a Virgin,’ Emily Maguire brings attention to the phenomena of “virgin porn,” and how certain pornographic websites advertise content allegedly showing women engaging in sexual intercourse for the first time (Maguire). An example of such a site is Defloration.tv, a porn site targeted at heterosexual men which claims to be, albeit speculatively, “the first and largest website about virginity in the world” (defloration.tv). Through a comparative reading of the website’s textual material, I aim to show that Defloration.tv is marketing its content by producing the same system of sexual value that is found in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*.

The home page of Defloration.tv contains a text that probes: “How many men have ever actually seen a hymen?” (defloration.tv). The question seems to argue that the hymen is a rare sight amongst men and because of its limited exposure should be something men would want to see. To be one of the few men to have actually witnessed a hymen is presented as

worth paying for, and the website promises to deliver “unique high definition videos” of “the HYMEN itself” (defloaration.tv). It is not only the unbroken hymen that is sold as a sight to be sought after, Defloration.tv is particularly concerned with its ability to show “how the hymen is ruptured” when a woman first has intercourse. It conveys a notion of virginity’s physicality that rings eerily like the one found in *Fifty Shades*. In determining the hymen’s durability, the website states that “usually a finger can be introduced through the opening without breaking [it],” however, during intercourse, “the hymen is stretched and ruptured by the erect penis” (defloration.tv). Like James’ novel, the website constructs the physical features of the virginal body and vaginal space in a way that is inherently connected to penetration and penis size complex. This rendering marks the virginal body as a place where phallic potency is proven. Additionally, it suggests that phallic potency *ought* to be proven and labels it a pleasurable experience. Thus, the fantasy offered to the addressed male audience is for the man to imagine himself in the role of the conqueror; to sexually use the virginal body to confirm his potency.

Defloration.tv shows that the sexual fantasy that eroticises virginity loss is about power. The power to break open the hymen is a fantasy of possession, which extends beyond the anatomical implications of virginity and into the social realm. In a similar vein to *The Flame*, the homepage text on Defloration.tv is clearly influenced by the cultural tradition of placing marital value on female virginity. It states: “In many societies, a girl’s virginity is considered a great virtue. For a girl who possesses such chastity, getting married becomes easy” (defloration.tv). Thus, the site establishes the meaning of virginity as a social category to heighten the significance of virginity loss. It underscores that a lot is at stake for the woman in question, which in turn emphasizes the power held by the man who is to ‘deflower’ her. On the free tour of the website one can click on the pictures of a selection of women, all in their late teens or early twenties (the site explicitly states that all women are above the age of eighteen). Before buying access to the video where the woman in question will ‘lose her virginity,’ there is a short introduction written from her perspective. One of these is from “Cili Kocsonya” who opens her section by stating: “I have saved my virginity until now, because my mother used to say, that only respectable girls do so in life” (defloration.tv). Like *The Flame*’s Heather, Cili treats virginity as something that is “only [hers] to give” (Woodiwiss 40), and implies that maintaining one’s chastity warrants respect. This shows how linking virginity with purposeful and valuable abstinence is part in the construction of a power fantasy; the penetrating penis is given the capacity to change the social standing of the virginal woman.

The representation of female virginity on Defloration.tv can be considered an example of how objectification looks and works in the genre of pornography. Objectification, “to treat something, or someone, as a thing” (Langton 225), is a concept prominently discussed in feminist writings, arguing that it is central to the patriarchal power structures ensuring the subordination of women. In this discourse, objectification entails dissociating women from personhood, by treating them as a something that can be owned; a tool that has no subjectivity or agency on its own (225-226). As initially posited by Simone de Beauvoir, the feminist outlook on objectification makes central how women are reduced to their materiality, always “confined to the world of flesh” (Cahill 2). The woman, or the object, is identified with its body only, and thus also reduced to appearance, in being treated in terms of how the body looks and appeals to the senses. Therefore, objectification also entails a “*reduction to body*” (Langton 229). The women presented on Defloration.tv are all identified as virgins based on their physicality. In addition to the text that states their innocence, the profile of each woman also contains a close-up picture of her vaginal opening, which is covered by a thin layer of what looks like cling film. This layer is made to represent the hymen and serves a visual proof of the woman’s virginal status. While being given both a name and a backstory, the defining feature of each woman is her physically manifested virginity, which is why I posit that she is represented as an object rather than a person. It is the condition of the body, as a material object, that determines the woman’s identity, which in turn becomes not so much an identity as a classification, the arrangement of the object in its proper category.

To sell the videos of virginity loss scenes as sexually gratifying, Defloration.tv relies on the tradition established by the medical discourse on virginity, as outlined in the preceding discussion. This discourse can be considered objectifying in itself. Texts such as the Hippocratic Corpus and *Women’s Secrets*, in their explorations and debates on how virginity can be determined, perform a “*reduction to body*” (Langton 229), where the virginal woman is defined solely by her physicality. The socio-symbolic identity of a virgin rests on the qualities assigned to the body itself and does not allow for the subjectivity of the woman in question. This tells of another feature of objectification; silencing, where the object is considered as lacking the ability to speak (229). The physical signifiers ascribed to the female virginal body render it readable, though not through the words of the owner. It is the body alone that will speak of the imprint of a penis, whether it is through vaginal bleeding or a ruptured hymen. Thus, the virginal body has always been a site on which the regulation of women’s bodies is revealed. The medical discourse that treats virginity as physically manifested is objectifying in its very nature, while simultaneously providing the tools for an

explicitly sexual objectification of the virginal body in modern day pornography.

The concept of objectification treats how modes of representing the female body ascribes a set of characteristics, or rather the lack thereof, to the woman that is being portrayed. Drawing on the work of de Beauvoir, Ann J. Cahill writes that “to be a sex object is to participate in the inherent passivity of materiality and is thus necessary to be inferior to the transcendent, active, acting male” (4). However, the marketing of the objectified virginal body as seen on Defloration.tv also constructs a version of male sexual desire that promotes the fantasy of being the active and conquering male. Thus, male fantasies and female bodies are both imagined in a specific manner for the fantasy the website is selling to function. While arguing that Defloration.tv is objectifying the female body, the purpose of discussing virginity porn is not to categorize objectification as an expression of male sentiments and desires. Instead, I posit that the website demonstrates how objectification informs the pornographic sensibility and is essential to a system of sexual value where bodies are privileged by their function to confirm male power. The point of interest is thus how objectification works to implement worth and meanings of desirability on the female virginal body. As stated, *The Flame*, *Fifty Shades*, and Defloration.tv all invoke a similar system of sexual value. The novels’ treatment of physically manifested virginity can also be regarded as a form of objectification, where the heroines’ virginal bodies are treated as material commodities to be possessed and used. In this way, the depiction of what inspires male sexual enjoyment in the novels coincides with the fantasies portrayed in male-oriented pornographic media. This shows that novels marketed for heterosexual female pleasure are also obsessed with heterosexual male pleasure and model their own fantasies after the same order of sexual worth.

In *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, the erotic function of virginity stems from how sexually desirable the virginal body is made out to be. The fantasy created by the novels draws from cultural practices and ways of treating the female body that are often, and convincingly, argued to be repressive. However, I posit that the narratives’ obsessive focus on corporeal virginity does not produce a fantasy of regulation or inferiority, nor a fantasy of being a virgin by definition. Instead, they negotiate predominant cultural representations and understandings of corporeal virginity to further develop the eroticism of the *sexy body*, as treated in the thesis’ first chapter. I have previously asserted that this thesis will not implement an analysis of the erotic romance novels’ readership. Nevertheless, the discussion on the eroticism of the virginal body in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* needs to include the position the narratives invite the ideal reader to occupy. Pamela Regis posits that the reason

why romantic fiction is popular amongst women rather than men is that women can identify themselves with the heroine (xii). It is through this process of identification I argue that *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* sets out to entice the reader into their erotic daydream. As Radway's interviewees put it, a romance novel does not only tell a love story, but it also conveys "what is *feels like* to be the *object* of one" (Radway 64). In a similar manner, I argue that *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* invites the reader to imagine themselves in the place of the heroine and feel the force of the desire that the virginal body inspires.

The narrative weight placed on the sexual gratification the hero earns from corporeal signifiers of female virginity shows how the heroine's body is depicted through "the male gaze" (Mulvey 62). In the essay 'Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema,' Laura Mulvey writes: "The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (62). What Mulvey here describes relates to the objectification of the female virgin as demonstrated on Defloration.tv, where the female figure is made an object of visual pleasure determined by the male subjectivity. The male gaze conceptualises the satisfaction in looking at an object that confirms one's superiority and place in the world (57). However, as Mulvey also writes, there is pleasure both in looking and in being looked at (59). In *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, this pleasure is produced by how the heroine's virginal body makes her singular in the eyes of men. The way in which both novels employ the male gaze can be understood as a form of reversal of Mulvey's concept. It is the narratives' ideal of the sexy body that projects itself onto the male gaze. Just as bloody sheets confirm the heroines' status as virgins, the fantasy of the male gaze confirms their status as desirable. As *Fifty Shades*' Anastasia puts it: "My stomach somersaults – he wants me" (James 104). Thus, the male gaze and the phallogocentric construction of corporeal virginity serve a fantasy of being wanted, of being the ideal object as modelled by the male gaze. It confirms not only the superiority of the on-looker, but also the eminence of the body that is being looked at.

If objectifying the woman is about a sense of power, the construction of the virginal body in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* reveals how this power holds the potential to be inverted. In the same manner as the heroines' bodies, largely by virtue of their virginity, are defined to be sexually used, they are also depicted as wholly irresistible. The objectification of their bodies, signified by their physically manifested virginity, makes them a source of pleasure for the man. However, within the realm of the narrative, this is not reducing but enhancing their status. The effect the virginal body has on the hero eroticises both the body and the male gaze. The power of the object is the power that lies in being desired, and in order to achieve this effect the novels rely on a specific construction of the virginal body and male sexuality.

Within the texts, male sexual desire is constructed around the hero's need for the heroine's body and the wish to conquer it and make it his own. Therefore, the woman who has a body that is so gratifying to him also has a form of power. The anti-pornography, second wave-feminist scholars see the objectified female body depicted as being made for man's dominion. The novels, however, depict the hero *wanting* to take dominion over the body, and it is in this insistent want that the gain of power so integral to the fantasy happens. The fantasy conveyed through the construction of the virginal body becomes a fantasy of being a powerful object of desire and a sexual unicum. The suggestion is not that *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* eroticises corporeal virginity as an act of female empowerment that rebel against the historical treatment of virginity and its place in the cultural consciousness. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the novels conform to the dominant modes of representing the female virginal body. However, by reproducing the conventions of medical discourse and the sexual objectification of pornography, *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* embrace the cultural connotations of female virginity and present bodies that are thriving within its system of value.

Conclusion

The Flame and *Fifty Shades* eroticise virginity through the bodily constitution of their heroines. Throughout history, medical discourse has concerned itself with the ways in which female virginity can be physically manifested; revealing an ongoing concern with making an elusive category into a tangible condition. By reproducing the prevalent cultural myths of the virginal body, the novels make the hero's possession of the heroine visible and mark her as an object that serves male sexual gratification. This depiction draws on the same fantasies that are prevalent in the genre of virginity porn, as exemplified by a comparison with the website Defloration.tv. Thus, the methods used to represent the virginal body as erotic is shared between the novels and visual pornography. The previous chapter argued that the styling of the heroines' bodies in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* reveals pornography's influence on mainstream culture. However, the discourse on virginity demonstrates that cultural conceptions on the female body are not made within the pornographic sensibility, they can be traced through an ongoing discourse obsessed with making the female body readable. *The Flame*, *Fifty Shades*, and Defloration.tv show how the material qualities assigned to the female virgin can be used to determine her body's value as a sex object. The objectification of the virginal body is linked to male sexual desire, yet the novels ultimately sell the fantasy of identifying with the valuable sexy body.

The fixation on tangible signifiers of womanhood can be read as symbols of meaning that structure the perception of the body. To further unpack the fantasies disclosed by the novels' construction of female corporeality, the final chapter will delve into the *imaginary* that is produced by the narratives. So far, this thesis has aimed to show how a discussion of gender and female-oriented fantasies in the romance novel should include the representation of the heroine's body. Having treated the cultural traditions and climate that have influenced this depiction, it will now look at what theorists such as Luce Irigaray posit is the underlying condition to all these practices, namely a hierarchy of sexual difference.

Chapter 3: The Imaginary Body

In *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, the heroines' bodies gain their value through their corporeal manifestation. While the heroes are described as "physically magnificent" (Woodiwiss 42) and with the countenance of a "Greek god" (James 78), it is the female body that is made to be the bearer of meaning. This representation is contingent on a system of sexual difference that determines what the markers of the feminine body are imagined as, and the significance ascribed to them. In both novels, the sexy body is the *sexed* body; the body that makes femininity and "womanliness" palpable (Young 77). Therefore, the way in which *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* negotiate and construct the erotic function of female corporeality can be connected to the hierarchy of sexual difference as introduced by Luce Irigaray. By emphasising the "bodily zones" that mark the heroine's body as different to that of a man, the narratives use the 'otherness' of the female body to impress it as desirable (Grosz 203). In Woodiwiss' *The Flame* this is demonstrated by the narrative's preoccupation with Heather's breasts, which are made to manifest both her womanhood and her sex appeal. In James' *Fifty Shades*, vaginal fluids are used to emphasise how Anastasia's subjectivity is overruled by her feminine physicality and that her body is under Christian's control, serving his gratification.

In the novels' imaginary, sexual difference is cast as a symbol of womanliness, but also of the desire and pleasure that can be derived from an explicitly female corporeality. The narratives portray the pleasure-producing power of the sexed body by showing how it stimulates a desire so powerful it becomes brutal. Comparing the way in which the narratives arrange male and female bodies to "maximize the contrast between them" draws another parallel between the erotic romances and the realm of male-oriented pornography (Purcell 136). This suggests that these cultural products rely on the same imaginary to convey and sell pleasure. *The Flame*, *Fifty Shades*, and the pornographic website Backroomcastingcouch.com all construct a gendered subject within their narratives and manufacture a fantasy aimed at a gendered consumer. The prominence of female physicality in both genres is suggestive of how ingrained this body is in the imaginary of our culture. Therefore, I argue that it is this imaginary, rather than the consumers' subjectivity, that is demonstrated through the representation of the female figure in gendered industries.

The sexed body

“Sexual difference is the difference between men and women, male and female, as it is imagined, fantasized, and symbolized in Western culture” (Stone 2).

The concept of sexual difference has roots in psychoanalytical thought, with theories developed by Sigmund Freud and later Jaques Lacan. Originally belonging to Lacan’s school of thought, Luce Irigaray’s version of sexual difference theory became influential to a large strand of feminist criticism. Irigaray posits that Western thought is structured around a binary opposition between male and female, in which the latter is defined as lacking and of less value. Like mind/body and culture/nature, the male/female binary is part of the ruling symbolic order, where the body, nature and women are all treated as connected to each other and lesser than their binary (Stone 2-9). To Irigaray, sexual difference is then really a sexual hierarchy, and she argues that being female is experienced as the opposite of being a subjective identity (Irigaray 13). Sexual difference theory is concerned with how gender identity is constructed and suggests that it is moulded by symbolic and psychical processes. However, what I find appealing about sexual difference theory in relation to this thesis is how it relates the construction and representation of the female body to a system of value that has persisted throughout history. Sexual difference theory evokes the imaginary in which bodies exist and how the female body has been made “the body of the other” (Irigaray 13). Further, it positions this structure not as a bias of specific time periods or traditions, but as the governing paradigm in our perception of the female body (Gatens vii). As Moira Gatens asks, drawing on the work of Irigaray, “what are the unacknowledged philosophical underpinnings of dominant representations of sexual difference?” (vii). Sexual difference theory is, within feminist thinking, a criticism of how sexed bodies are regarded and treated. Nevertheless, in the discussion of *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, sexual difference theory is useful to avoid definite judgements about the apparent misogyny in the novels’ representations and rather discover how they comply with, and negotiate, an ingrained system of thought.

The female body has long been defined by its distinction from the male body, and cultural representations have focused on the “bodily zones that serve to emphasize both women’s difference from and otherness to men” (Grosz 203). These ‘bodily zones’ have been made “secondary sexual characteristics;” the proof of how women are defined by their bodies’ materiality and should be treated as such. Markers of sexual difference form the imaginary where the female body resides. Gatens uses the term ‘imaginary’ as referring to “those ready-

made images and symbols through which we make sense of social bodies and which determine, in part, their value, their status, and what will be deemed their appropriate treatment” (viii). In *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, two of the most prominent symbols of femininity are breasts (*The Flame*) and vaginal fluids (*Fifty Shades*). These corporeal sites and processes make the heroines’ womanliness into a bodily condition and play a significant role in their sexual relations. Alongside the erotic inscription of the female figure, and physically manifested virginity, the sexed body constructs the novels’ imaginary, where the hierarchy of sexual difference is made into an erotic fantasy.

“Their pale roundness gleamed tantalizingly in the night:” Breasts in *The Flame*

In *The Flame*, Heather’s “daring” (Woodiwiss 7) cleavage is emphasised during the whole of the novel’s narrative, and admittedly also through large portions of this thesis. I have previously argued that dressing Heather in clothing that reveals the contours of her breasts is one of the ways in which *The Flame* inscribes the body of its heroine with erotic meaning. Treating it as a given that visible breasts are a sexually enticing expression is symptomatic of how, in a culture that “focuses to the extreme” on this part of the female body, social connotations become ingrained in our perception (Young 76). Marilyn Yalom posits that the changing cultural meaning of breasts can be connected to specific historical moments that impacted the forthcoming representations and understandings of the female body (Yalom 139). One such hallmark was Jean Fouquet’s painting of Agnès Sorel, mistress of the French king in the 1400s, portrayed with one boob falling out of her gown and a toddler sitting on her lap that was not nursing (Yalom 51). Yalom writes that the painting of Agnès Sorel marked a transition from the ideal of the holy breast connected to motherhood to the image of the eroticised breast meant for sexual enjoyment, which prevailed through the 1500s (53). The work of Agnolo Firenzuola, *On the Beauty of Women* (1548) described breasts as moving temptations waiting to jump out of a woman’s dress, and so charming the eye is involuntarily forced to dwell on them (Firenzuola qtd. by Yalom 56). A later important moment, as suggested by Yalom, was Freud’s works within the field of psychoanalysis that positioned the child’s memories of sucking on its mother’s breast as the basis of adult sexual behaviours. Freud believed that sexual development began by the mother’s chest, and interpreted his male patients’ dreams about round fruits and objects as an unchanging desire for the nursing breast (140). As we can see from Firenzuola to Freud, breasts have been treated as stimulus for man’s desire. Further, I would suggest that this desire is structured around that which marks

the female body as explicitly *female*. Depicted as central to both ‘the beauty of women’ and the role of the mother, breasts become signifiers of the sexed body; the body that belongs to a woman.

In Woodiwiss’ *The Flame*, Heather’s boobs are treated as synonymous with her womanhood. In a dress that exposes her cleavage, the narrative clearly states that she “no longer looked the young girl but a woman full grown” (Woodiwiss 17). Breasts are thus depicted as a visible sign of femininity and sexual maturity, making the body signal that it is ready for sex. According to Grosz, the fantasy of sexual difference between man and woman is a way of making the female body “containable within [the] imagination,” while also making it “a mystery (...) to master” (Grosz 191). As the male body has been construed as “the subject par excellence,” the characteristics of the female body have not only been regarded as secondary but also a riddle; a secret to be mastered and a source of fascination (191). Developing during puberty, the growth of a woman’s breasts becomes “a measure of womanhood” that is both visible and tangible (203). In *The Flame*, then, it is in fact Heather’s womanliness that is constantly under the “devouring gaze” of men (Woodiwiss 374). During one of Brandon’s examinations of her body, Heather covers her breasts to “shield her womanhood from him” (38). Breasts and womanliness are thus made to be one and the same thing and it is how they specify Heather’s body as a woman’s that makes her breasts so “sensuous” (385). If sexual difference is, as Grosz writes, man’s fantasy to make woman containable within his imagination, *The Flame* seems set on validating this fantasy through the fascinating qualities of its heroine’s chest. From descriptions of “rosy breasts agleam as with a morning dew” (235) to breasts shining “tantalizingly in the night” (385), Heather’s boobs are something quite out of the ordinary. As her chest signals “the mature fullness of womanhood” (365), the narrative’s rationale makes Heather the ‘subject par excellence.’ She is not set against the man but against other women who lack the same attractive markers of sexual difference as she has. Heather stands in favourable opposition to those women with “broad, heavy hips and narrow shoulders” who “bore no resemblance to the gentler sex whatsoever” (279). In this way, *The Flame* does not challenge ideas of sexual difference and the materiality of womanhood. Instead, it constructs its fantasy of the heroine’s desirability specifically around the ‘otherness’ of the female body, with breasts as one of its primary expressions.

Iris Marion Young argues that treating boobs as a “signifier of womanliness” is a symptom of the constant objectification of the female body (77). Breasts are represented as something to be handled, squeezed, and measured; as objects that can become property (78).

As they are made into objects of male desire, Young considers the power over the breasts to be with those who are desiring them. Breasts are ‘mastered’ in that their representation promotes “one perfect shape and proportion” (79), and as shown in French author Clément Marot’s “Blason of the Beautiful Tit” (1535) it is the “plump,” “full,” and “firm” breast that has been celebrated through the ages (Marot, qtd. by Johnson). Young posits that the image of the ideal breast is shaped by the objectifying gaze in that the boobs’ value are gained by being object-like; firm and easy to handle (Young 78). In the narrative of *The Flame*, the tangible quality of breasts, through their shape, feel, and colour, features in every single scene where sexual desire or sexual activity is portrayed. Their shape and proportion are as if taken straight from Marot’s poem; Heather’s breasts are “full,” “round” (Woodiwiss 28), and “tempting” (379). Further, the heroine’s “sweet, young breasts” are subjected to “cupping” (374) and “crushing” (379), showing how they are made to engage with the touch of a man’s hand. Irigaray writes of the masculine language of sex that is produced by the hierarchy of sexual difference and detectable in the majority of Western philosophy. In this vocabulary, the “carnal relationship” between man and woman, or man and the other, only produces pleasure when man can appropriate the female body. This happens when the subjectivity of the woman is made part of the body’s surface so that her being consists of that which can be seen and touched (Irigaray 5-14). Young argues that treating breasts as something to be owned and commodified denies female subjectivity and urges the need of a new feminine epistemology that privileges the feminine experience of having breasts (81). In a similar vein, Irigaray posits that “women almost always privilege the relationship between subjects,” while men are caught up in a subject-object relation (13).

In its representation of Heather’s body, *The Flame* does not seem to speak ‘the language of women,’ as presented by Irigaray. Rather, the narrative depicts its heroine with an explicitly sexed body that fulfils the function of a subject-object relation in men’s encounter with it. This shows how the novel’s imaginary is based on the male/female binary and ideas of sexual difference, where the markers of the feminine body are that which gives it value. As Young posits that a woman “often feels herself judged and evaluated according to the size and contours of her breasts,” Heather is judged to be extremely attractive due to how her boobs “fit a man’s hand perfectly” (Woodiwiss 157). In the discourse on objectification, to imagine woman as thing is to imagine her as “a means for others’ ends” (Cahill 4). *The Flame* does not invert this notion, but rather exploits it to serve its own fantasy. As Simone de Beauvoir recognised in her own criticism of the patriarchal structure objectifying women: “Man wants woman to be object, she *makes* herself object” (Beauvoir qtd. by Cahill 4). Thus,

objectification does not exclude female agency, as “in order to be object, woman must choose to do so” (4). While Heather’s character arguably displays limited agency, this approach is important as it reveals that objectification and the assigned sexed body is not always imposed by a distant force. In *The Flame*, these concepts are created and negotiated from within the narrative as part of a ruling order that favours the physical countenance of the heroine. As Young convincingly argues, having the body determine one’s value is anything but empowering in the real world, but in *The Flame* this is the imaginary that is relied on. That is not to say that the novel is best understood when treated as a fantasy removed from reality. Rather, the novel constructs its own eroticism within a prevalent system of thought, where breasts are imagined as markers of attractive womanliness.

“A very moist and integral part of me:” Bodily fluids in *Fifty Shades*

The body of *Fifty Shades*’ Anastasia is marked as explicitly female by her bodily fluids. Of the corporeal qualities and functions that are used to affirm how a woman’s body differs from that of a man, female bodily fluids are perhaps the most distinct. The cultural significance attributed to the flows of an essentially ‘female’ biology, such as breast milk, the blood that follows virginity loss, and menstruation, speak of a fixation on the “irreducible materiality” of the female body (Grosz 194). In addition to their cultural representation, Grosz draws from the work of, among others, Mary Douglas and Irigaray to present a more metaphysical approach to how we understand fluids and what they symbolize. Grosz posits that fluids attest to a “horror of the unknown” in that they are without a fixed form and cannot be consciously controlled (194). Therefore, they are part of what Douglas terms “dirt,” not because the fluids are necessarily polluting in themselves but because they represent disorder (Douglas 2). As Douglas argues in her work *Purity and Danger*, ideas about dirt and pollution carry a “symbolic load” that relates to social life and can be used as “analogies for expressing a general view of the social order” (3). She is particularly interested in how “sexual fluids” can be interpreted as symbols that mirror the hierarchy between the sexes in larger social systems (4). Irigaray posits that in an order structured around a mind/body division, fluids are representative of the subordinate body, the opposition to the reasoning and solid mind. Within the symbolic order of the West, fluids are then also inherently associated with the feminine body and female sexuality and corporeality (Irigaray as qtd. by Grosz 195).

In *Fifty Shades*, the presence of female bodily fluids during intercourse is signalled through how Christian constantly refers to how ‘wet’ Anastasia is. The erotic function of vaginal fluids happens through how “they demonstrate the limits of subjectivity in the body” (Grosz 194). In the novel, fluids symbolise that Anastasia is ready for and wants sex despite her own conflicted feelings. Christian states: “See how much your body likes this, Anastasia. You’re soaking just for me” (James, 274). Without getting too much into the physiological functioning of the vagina, the ‘soaking’ that *Fifty Shades*’ hero is so eagerly appealing to is probably meant to be the lubrication produced by the cervix and Bartholin glands that can happen when a woman is aroused (Arizona OBGYN Affiliates). The representation of vaginal fluids in the narrative can be linked to Irigaray’s hierarchy of sexual difference, as they make the heroine’s desires and subjectivity to be readable on her body. Anastasia’s desire is depicted as tangible; something to be seen and even tasted, as Christian makes Anastasia lick his finger after it has been inside of her: “See how you taste” (120). Anastasia is then obliged to: “taste the saltiness on his thumb” (120). *Fifty Shades* treats vaginal fluids as the body’s betrayal of its innermost wants, overruling the heroine’s own reports of being “paralyzed” and “afraid” (James 273). Anastasia states: “My insides practically contort with potent, needy, liquid, desire” (273). This liquid desire seeps through Anastasia and leaves her body ‘soaking,’ blurring the divisions between its inside and outside (Grosz 193). The process happens outside of the heroine’s conscious control. This is emphasised by the narrative through Anastasia’s surprise at her own state, as she wonders: “No, Surely not,” when Christian once again brings attention to her wetness (James 275). In this way, *Fifty Shades* eroticises fluids not only as signs of femininity but as symbols of an explicitly material body whose true state is exposed through its flows and liquidity.

Mary Douglas’ work introduces the notion that the body functions to disclose both fantasies and hierarchies (Grosz 193). Douglas poses the question as to why “saliva and genital exertions are more pollution-worthy than tears” and theorises that the social favouring of tears is due to how the material qualities and movements of teardrops lend themselves to “the symbolism of washing” (Douglas 126). However, in *Fifty Shades*, vaginal fluids lend themselves to symbolism just as easily as tears, and I posit that this is not due to their “saltiness” (James 120). Thus, if one is to interpret the narrative’s preoccupation with sexual fluids as symbols of hierarchy this analysis cannot rest on the consistency of the fluids alone, or what rituals specific flows might resemble. As Douglas herself writes, dirt is disorder, and in the novel, the hierarchy between the hero and heroine is born from how the ‘disorder’ of fluids are mastered. Christian tells Anastasia: “I love that you’re so wet for me” (James 142,

emphasis added). By giving Anastasia's corporeal flows a specific meaning, namely the hero's power over her body, the narrative makes the materiality of Anastasia's female corporeality fall into order. If bodily fluids are a danger to the subjective self, as Irigaray argues, determining their meaning becomes an exercise of power and self-affirmation. In *Fifty Shades*, this self-affirmation belongs to Christian as it is he that both controls and brings attention to the process: "see how wet you are for this, Anastasia" (323). Thus, the novel eroticises bodily fluids as the language of biology that overrules the subjectivity of its heroine while being controlled by the hero.

Fifty Shades' representation of vaginal fluids makes them sexy in their relation to the man. As a marker of sexual difference, they trigger Christian's fascination with Anastasia, and thus her 'soaking' body becomes a symbol of male desire, fantasy, and command. This is similar to what Mulvey describes in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' Here, Mulvey suggests that women's appearance on screen is coded to signify man's fantasies and obsessions, and so the female figure becomes a corporeal expression of male lust (62). According to Mulvey, cinematic representations rely on a "socially established interpretation of sexual difference," where man is the active on-looker and the woman a silent and passive "bearer of meaning" (57-58). However, as discussed, *Fifty Shades'* narrative also makes the vaginal fluids symbolise Anastasia's own desire. They flow from her sexual organ, which Anastasia describes to be: "a very moist and integral part of me" (James 186). This integral part is one she has "only become acquainted with very recently," meaning after she met Christian (186). Anastasia's sexual fluids therefore also signify a body that has started actively producing meaning; a body responding to the presence of a desirable man by betraying its own liquid sexuality. The element of sexual difference that is eroticised is then not the role of the man and the role of the woman, but how the materiality of the female body is made to signify the desires of both.

While the characteristics of fluids, as seeping and uncontrollable, render them different from Heather's firm breasts, the narrative weight placed on vaginal fluids in *Fifty Shades* can also be linked to the concept of objectification. Markers of sexual difference do not only make the female body object-like, they also confine it to the corporeal realm. Unlike Christian, Anastasia's sexuality is controlled by her corporeality, and her vagina is presented as both an "integral" and the "most private" part of herself (James 186/135). By contrast, Christian introduces his penis as the "favourite and most cherished part of [his] body," a description which conveys a stronger degree of command and knowledge (135). In the work *Overcoming Objectification*, Ann J. Cahill inserts the idea of Linda LeMoncheck and writes that

objectification entails more than handling a person as any other inanimate object. According to this view, woman can be treated as a body while her capacity for feelings and action is recognised. The process of objectification does therefore not rely on a complete denial of personhood but happens when a woman becomes “sexy by becoming less-than-man” (Cahill 10). In *Fifty Shades*, Anastasia is depicted not as less-than, but more material than man. This makes her more susceptible to the hero’s control, as it is Christian and not she that commands the manifestation of her desire. In this way, the narrative imagines vaginal fluids as the markers of an explicitly female and unruly sexuality, while also making them signifiers of pleasure. In *Fifty Shades*, the physiological functions of the female body comply with an “established interpretation of sexual difference” (Mulvey 57), where the otherness of the female body is accentuated in its relation to the hero. However, the symbolism of fluids exists within an imaginary where the hierarchy between the sexes is pleasure producing and the ‘soaking’ Anastasia is a desirable body.

Violent possession and making pleasure visible

In *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, the erotic function of sexual difference relies on the relationship between an explicitly female materiality and male desire. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the scenes that feature a violent possession of the heroine’s body. While not characteristic of the whole and varied genre of erotic romance novels, the featuring of rape and sexual assault have been presented as the most conclusive piece of evidence of the genre’s internalised misogyny amongst critics. Ann Douglas has stated that the romance novel is naturalising relationships where the hero is a sexual aggressor and the heroine an innocent virgin to be raped (25). However, the politics of representation is not the issue up for discussion here. Instead, I will analyse both novels’ use of brutality in the context of their imaginary and demonstrate how the featuring of sexual aggression serves the same desirability fantasy as bodies marked by sexual difference. From Mulvey’s writings on cinematic visual pleasure originates the idea that the female figure is an embodiment of man’s desire that is styled by the male gaze (Mulvey 62). Naturally, considering the topic of Mulvey’s essay, this approach concerns watching from a distance and the scopophilic pleasure in looking. However, the markers of sexual difference, as depicted by *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, are inherently material. The heroine’s femininity and sex appeal are tangible entities; made to be touched and felt. To illustrate this reality, the narratives of Woodiwiss’ and James’ novels depict how their heroines’ bodies are physically

claimed and possessed. Thus, in each novel, the heroine is made to be a figure of man's desire through how the markers of her feminine body are used.

Woodiwiss' *The Flame* seems to intently blur the lines between violence and passion. The first encounter between Heather and Brandon consists of a series of rapes, until Heather finally manages to escape. The abuse is depicted as deeply traumatising to Heather, who experiences "horror" and "panic" (Woodiwiss 29), all the while struggling and pleading for the abuse to end: "No. Please, no. Not again. Don't hurt me again" (35). However, the portrayal of Heather's horror is also accompanied by a narrative eroticisation of the events. This happens through a focus on how Brandon observes Heather's corporeal womanliness. The narrative assumes Brandon's gaze and lingers by the figure of a "small woman, gracefully slender" with, yet again, "breasts full and round, generously and temptingly swelling above her gown" (28). That *The Flame* conveys an erotic rape fantasy is illustrated by how forced penetration is preceded by what is best described as foreplay. The narrative depicts how Brandon engages with Heather's 'tempting' breasts in a sensual manner, as "he pressed his bearded mouth to the pink crest of her breast and lightly teased it with his tongue" (35). Brandon is possessing Heather and doing things with her body against her will. Simultaneously, the narrative demonstrates that breasts are made a signifier of Heather's sexuality, as the heroine is "horrified" by the treatment, while also feeling it "sending shivers down her spine" (35). Throughout the rape scene, Heather's body is portrayed as violated, inferior, and pleasure-producing at the same time. Brandon is holding her down "easily" with only "one of his hands", while the other "cupped a breast and (...) played with it to his pleasure" (35). In this way, the rape scene functions to move the sexed body from the far-away gaze and literally into the hands of the man, and the narrative depicts the gratification the sexed body offers when its materiality is engaged with.

I propose that *The Flame*'s narrative draws the erotic function of the rape scenes not from the eroticisation of non-consent but from the nature of Heather's body and how it inspires a desire so powerful it becomes violent. To some extent, this reading corresponds with one of the explanation models for women's rape fantasies discussed in a study by psychologists Joseph Critelli and Jenny Bivona. This model claims that the rape fantasy performs the function of strengthening the fantasiser's self-esteem as "the rape becomes a testimony to [the woman's] sexual power" (Critelli and Bivona 64). The woman's attractiveness makes the man lose control and act forcefully. I do not wish to speculate on the plausibility of this theory in relation to the psychology of real-life rape fantasies. However, the notion of desirability proves useful in relation to *The Flame*, where

the men who notice Heather's attractive figure use violent means to "have" her (Woodiwiss 21). Brandon is the only man to rape Heather, but the novel also introduces several other men attempting to do the same. These instances of sexual assault always involve Heather's body being admired to the point where the man "can't help [himself]" and is placed "in a fit of madness" (384). The men chasing Heather, except for Brandon, are all depicted as unattractive and desperate, like William Court with his "pudgy face" (9) and "greasy fingers" (19). While the men are portrayed as undesirable, their actions become erotised through how they reveal Heather's physical reality; a sexed body that is constantly made to be touched and exposed. Mr. Bartlett claps his hand "crudely (...) between her buttocks" (328) and Matthew Bishop is the one "intent upon cupping her sweet young breasts" (384). In a struggle with the novel's biggest perpetrator, Thomas Hint, who acts "like a hungry dog over a bone" when attacking Heather, she is undressed "until not a thread remained to cover her" (464). This allows Hint's eyes to "roam greedily over her thighs and buttocks" (471). These acts of harassment acknowledge Heather's attractiveness and while her dignity is threatened her body gains recognition.

I have chosen to use the terms 'violent possession,' and 'sexual aggression' to express what will be the focal points of my analysis. While assault is a fitting description of what happens in Woodiwiss' *The Flame*, which features straightforward rape and attempted rape, the question of what should be deemed sexual violence in *Fifty Shades* is somewhat more problematic. The novel's incorporation of BDSM practices in the sexual relationship between Anastasia and Christian has been largely debated. Critics have claimed that *Fifty Shades* presents an inaccurate and stigmatised version of BDSM that harms the community of actual practitioners, and that the novel portrays an abusive and non-consensual relationship (Tripodi 94). For my analysis of violent possession in *Fifty Shades*, I will exclude any discussion of the BDSM trope. The point of comparison to *The Flame* will rather be how the notion of 'possession' is present in the physical relationship between heroine and hero, without any bondage tools or similar artifacts being used.

In *Fifty Shades*, near every bodily encounter between Anastasia and Christian are portrayed as acts of violent possession. When omitting the infamous scenes that feature BDSM practices this becomes even more noticeable. Touching, kissing, and penetration, even during what the novel itself terms 'vanilla' intercourse, are all frequently described in a language that signifies aggression. Anastasia experiences their first kiss as an erotic sensation that leaves her wits "thoroughly and royally scattered all over the floor" (James 79). Before their lips lock, Anastasia describes how Christian have "both of [her] hands in one of

his in a vicelike grip above [her] head,” while using the other to grab her hair (78). This action mirrors how Brandon holds Heather when raping her; he clutches both Heather’s hands above her head, using one hand only. While *Fifty Shades*’ first kiss should not be equated with *The Flame*’s rape scene, both instances demonstrate how the hero takes control over the heroine’s body and secures his access to it. Anastasia is given an inferior position during the kissing scene and Christian is physically in command. The kiss is felt by Anastasia as “only just not painful,” and with her “hands pinned” and “face held” she is completely “helpless” (78). However, it is through being bodily restrained that Anastasia comes to the revelation that: “Christian Grey, Greek god, wants me” (78). The narrative thus employs force to manifest attraction and depicts the body that is wanted as the body that is physically obtained. Anastasia and Christian’s kisses are dramatized to be more than displays of affection, as demonstrated by Anastasia’s statement: “his tongue is in my mouth, claiming and possessing me” (191). Christian’s physical engagement with Anastasia is thus a way to claim her and, in the novel’s imaginary, being claimed is the same as being desired.

Anastasia is not opposed to the feeling of being possessed by Christian, in fact she is repeatedly described to ‘revel’ in it. Anastasia does not only “revel in the force he uses” (191) when kissing, but also “revel[s] in the fullness of his possession” (349) when Christian penetrates her. That the narrative depicts Anastasia as being in Christian’s possession when she is penetrated, or when she has his tongue inside her mouth, can be linked to the hierarchy of sexual difference. If Anastasia is her body, she can also be obtained through the body’s orifices; they become a point of access to the whole of her being. Nevertheless, the heroine’s revelling in Christian’s possession of her can be read as more than, or even the opposite of, a submissive fantasy in which she wishes to be controlled. As Christian states, Anastasia does not seem to have “a submissive bone in [her] delectable body” (226). Instead, the bodily command exercised by Christian, the “assault” (328) of his entering penis, is understood by Anastasia as proof of her influence. She states: “this is my power, this is what I do to him, and it’s a hedonistic, triumphant feeling” (349-350). In this way, Christian’s brutality as he pushes Anastasia down and dictates her motions: “hands on your head” (349), is depicted as the triumph of her influence. The heroine’s “trapped” and “almost suffocating body” becomes a symbol of passion and a testimony to the power of a woman occupying a body that men want to possess.

In *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, female corporeality is used to signify the interplay between power and pleasure. Violent possession, or attempts at it, is used to expose and claim the heroines’ bodies. Both novels depict how the heroine is being treated in terms of her

physicality, which is often rendered weaker and subjected to the will of the hero. According to Purcell, “imbalance in the exchange” between man and woman is also “built into the technical and aesthetic conventions” of pornography (127). Purcell argues that the constant exposure of female physicality in porn is a way of marking the woman performing as vulnerable, and to illustrate this point Purcell uses gonzo pornography (127). Its name deriving from gonzo journalism, gonzo porn refers to a style in which the viewer is made to assume the position of a participant in the scene. The point of view is usually that of the man, while the woman is placed in front of the camera which follows the man’s gaze (Definitions.net). A typical scenario for the ‘realistic encounters’ performed in gonzo porn is a woman being interviewed for a modelling job (Purcell 126). The website Backroomcastingcouch.com is based on delivering this form of content. The nature of the material on the website might at first seem to contrast the romantic plot and purple prose of *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*. However, I argue that the novels’ portrayal of the sexed body and how it is engaged with, shows that they share their imaginary with Backroomcastingcouch.com.

The novels and the website are all exhibiting the feminine markers of sexual difference and show how, as Purcell writes, “male and female bodies are arranged to maximise the contrast between them” (136). One randomly selected sample from Backroomcastingcouch’s videos shows a woman titled “young babe Rachel” being interviewed on a couch. There are also two men in the room whose presence is only revealed by the sound of their voices. After Rachel has introduced herself, one of the men states “I can’t just hire a pretty face, I need to see what you look like naked” (Backroomcastingcouch 2.15 – 2.22). From there on, Rachel is told to undress; first taking of her top and bra, at which point the camera moves closer to her breasts and the men start discussing their size and guessing what Rachel’s bra size might be (4.31). Rachel is then ordered to remove her pants and bend over, while the camera zooms in on her genitalia (5.04). Like Heather and Anastasia, Rachel is subjected to the male gaze of control and desire. The men in the room with Rachel, Brandon, and Christian are all admiring and assessing the women’s physicality. In a similar manner to *The Flame*, the video shows how the quality and measure of breasts are given special significance before the gaze turns into physical action. Rachel’s movements are dictated by the men in the room who tells her, “Face me” (4.22) and “face down” (7.42). This is also what happens in *Fifty Shades*, when Anastasia is ordered and handled by Christian who “pull[s] and tug[s] her body into place” (Purcell 128). The contrast between the male and the female body is signified through how the latter is uncovered and made the focal point of sexual action. Purcell argues that this “code that

contrast as a division in power and strength” (128). It seems that Purcell is problematising how pornography imagines sexual difference and uses it to enforce a hierarchy in which women are placed at the bottom; powerless and vulnerable. As demonstrated, *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* invoke the same hierarchy to realize a specific variant of femininity that gains its acknowledgment in its relation to the man (129). The question then becomes whether it is possible to read pornography’s, and the novels’, fixation on the sexed body as anything other than a construction meant to repress.

In her work *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*, Linda Williams offers a perspective that differs quite significantly from many other feminist writings on pornography. Williams states that in her study of pornographic films, largely from the 1980s and 90s, she expected to find a genre solely occupied with portraying the female body as an object of male desire. Instead, Williams claims, she discovered that what signifies hard-core pornography is “uncertainty and instability” (Williams xvi). Drawing from Foucault’s volumes *The History of Sexuality*, Williams posits that pornography tries to convey not only pleasure, but the pleasure in knowing pleasure; its appeal coming from the Western compulsion to understand and control sexuality (3). She therefore argues that the real incentive of pornographic representations is to make pleasure visible. Hard-core pornography’s use of violence and coercion, as well as its focus on sexual difference are all means to serve this end. Williams posits that since women’s pleasure and sexual knowledge have been made ‘other’ throughout history, pornography suffers a crisis of making female pleasure visible (4). While male gratification can be captured through the “money-shot,” the scene where the male actor ejaculates, finding an equivalent symbol for the female orgasm is more difficult (Purcell 154). Pornography’s obsessive focus on female figures, by undressing them, zooming in on their body parts, and making women the focal point of the sexual act is then a way to “convert their hidden inner truths into visible, external facts” (154). This is why Williams terms pornography a “frenzy of the visible” that promises to give women’s sexual pleasure a visual representation.

The markers of sexual difference that are imagined to make up an explicitly female corporeality, as seen in *The Flame*, *Fifty Shades*, and pornographic media can be interpreted as symbols of knowing. Breasts and vaginal fluids speak the ‘truth’ about the female body and determines both its status and its meaning. In the novels, the sexed female body is presented as an object that men want to have and possess, but also as a body that men want to see and *know*. Purcell argues that Williams’ positivist reading of hard-core porn is challenged by more recent developments within the genre, where the pursuit of heterosexual female

pleasure has been abandoned in favour of humiliating female bodies (155).

Nevertheless, Williams' position offers a way to conceptualise how the violent possession of the sexed body in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* functions to convey pleasure through knowing. Within the narratives, knowledge takes on different forms that produce different kinds of pleasure. The hero is gratified by knowing the heroine's body, by detecting and possessing her "body's joys" (Woodiwiss 359). The body is also producing knowledge when the heroine is assured of the hero's lust through his physical interaction with her. It is the sexed body that makes desire into "visible" and "external facts" (Purcell 154). Furthermore, the hero's claim on the heroine's body also means that he is the one who knows how to satisfy her. In Woodiwiss' novel, Heather's sexual fulfilment is attributed to how Brandon: "knew [Heather's] body better than she did herself, and he used that knowledge to heighten her pleasure" (Woodiwiss 409). Whereas Williams claims pornography suffers a crisis of making female pleasure visible, the novels do not seem to encounter the same issue. The heroines' pleasure is depicted as the disintegration of their bodies. The pleasure Heather feels come in "shivers of delight" that "shattered every nerve in her body" (409). Anastasia portrays a similar ecstasy, where her orgasm makes her "fall apart" and "shatter (...) into tiny fragments" (James 196). Later, her body is made to "explode" in another "body-shattering orgasm" (276). Notably, Brandon and Christian seem to take pleasure in the object-like female body, but when the heroine herself is gratified, her body completely falls apart. However, in both cases, the female body is the site where pleasure is known.

Gendered industries and configurations of power

"To love conventionality is not only to love something that constrains someone or some condition of possibility: it is another way of talking about negotiating belonging to a world" (Berlant 3).

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the novels negotiate, or even exploit, existing hierarchies and systems of value to construct their own fantasy of desirability. Admittedly, the notion of the novels' 'own fantasies' opens up for another set of questions of which the most prominent seems to be: Whose fantasy is that really? Is it the fantasy of the reader or the author? Linda J. Lee writes that the romance novel is a "dynamic cultural form" and that "publishers and writers respond to readers' interests and cultural changes in a way that is unmatched by most other types of publishing and popular media" (54). But besides being predominately white and heterosexual women between the ages of 18 and 54 (Nielsenbookscan), what do we really know about the romance reader? In *The Female*

Complaint, Lauren Berlant writes of how the female reader is constructed around an idea of sameness and posits that with regard to the “contemporary consumer public (...), all sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience” (vi). To Berlant, this is the signifying trait of works that belong to “women’s intimate public;” the market of texts and products that are assigned an explicitly female profile and claim to express women’s “core interest and desires” (5). The mass-market romance industry, to which *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* belong, embodies the rationale of the intimate public which works on the assumption, and enforces the idea of, a shared female experience and collective pleasures. Therefore, I argue that the novels’ fantasies belong to an imagined female identity that is given “permission to thrive” within a space built on cultural conventions and conceptions of gender (3).

The Flame and *Fifty Shades*’ representation of the sexed body makes it a site of power, knowledge, and pleasure for both the novels’ heroes and the ideal female recipient the narratives are constructing. If the hierarchy that gives the female body its meaning is, as Irigaray argues, imbedded in all Western thought, this system is not only hierarchical but also normative. Accordingly, sexual difference creates a bodily identity that fits within a conventional framework and matches prevalent cultural representations (Berlant 236). In this manner, the narratives’ eroticisation of the sexed body serves both a desirability fantasy and a fantasy of what is generally believed about the nature of female corporeality. Gatens writes that “anyone and anything can become an object of desire” when the context is one where the conjunction with that object is made to signify power or gratification (131-132). The depiction of the sexed body in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* thus speaks of how the novels negotiate their heroine and their ideal reader into an established imaginary where she is identified as the desired object. The novels’ fantasy is that of a body which complies with and is acknowledged by existing power structures. As Williams argues, again heavily drawing on Foucault: “The pleasures of the body do not exist in immutable opposition to a controlling and repressive power but instead are produced within configurations of power that put pleasures to particular use” (3). While depicting the violent possession and regulation of the sexed female body, the novels compose a version of this power-assertion that is rendered beneficial to the heroine’s knowledge of pleasure and experience of success.

When constructing their eroticism around the bodily constitution of their heroines, the novels are also casting a version of the female reader and her desires. Following the position of Berlant, I argue that *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* are not so much responding to readers’ interests as they are presuming an intimacy with them (Berlant vii). As Berlant writes,

gendered industries, such as the mass-market romance, make the consumer feel as if they are participating in a shared experience that existed “even before there was a market addressed to them” (5). To assume this familiarity, the novels reproduce a rendition of the female body and its value that aligns with predominant cultural representations. By emulating what is known, the narratives mediate female pleasure around the cultural fetishism of the female body (237). Erotic romance publishing is not the only industry that both depicts and appeals to gendered subjects. As discussed, male-oriented heterosexual pornography’s imaginary is obsessed with exposing and visualising sexual difference by means of the female body. Some have claimed that sexual and bodily difference means that “men and women have their own specific sensualities” (Gatens 130). However, the shared focus on women’s bodies in different forms of popular culture can be used to argue that it is through female corporeality that we have learned to identify knowledge, desire, and eroticism (Berlant 261). The role of the female body in the cultural imaginary, and so also the imaginary of its participants, is determined by how the body is perceived to affect the spectator’s power of acting and whether it is thought to cause “pleasure or pain” (Gatens 146). Woodwiss and James’ novels, and the pornographic websites discussed in this thesis, show how the female body is presented as the object through which female and male audiences alike are to experience a fantasy of power and pleasure.

Conclusion

The chapter introduction states that the female body is made to be a bearer of meaning in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*. The narratives’ representation of sexual difference demonstrates how the female body is given its meaning by the material qualities that differ from those of a man. Furthermore, the interplay between male and female bodies is used to emphasise both the otherness and the significance of female corporeality. I argue that to unpack the function of this form of representation it is necessary to read the novels’ portrayal of their heroines in light of their imaginary; uncovering what the corporeal sites and processes the narratives fixate on are made to symbolise. Breasts and vaginal fluids signify Heather and Anastasia’s womanhood, materiality, and sex appeal. However, the overarching function of these markers of sexual difference is to construct a body that convey a message, a body that lends itself to and generates knowledge. In the novels, and on Backroomcastingcouch.com, the sexed body is pleasure producing when its features are made visible and when its materiality is confirmed by the touch of a man’s hand. The imaginary that makes sense of and

determines the value of bodies is not invented by the novels nor designed to match readers' pre-existing interests. Instead, I maintain that the representation of the imaginary body in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* is part of a larger cultural fantasy.

Conclusion

What does the erotic romance genre reveal about what turns us on, about our actual or desired sex lives, about our innermost fantasies, and what we want or feel we are lacking? This thesis answers none of these questions. Instead, it has examined how two erotic romances, namely *The Flame and the Flower* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, represent female corporeality and what these representations may reveal about societal preoccupations, cultural values, and the construction of a female bodily identity. In both novels, the heroines' bodies are given their sex appeal by way of bodily inscription. This happens through the decoration and positioning of the body, the corporeal zones and qualities that are drawn attention to and awarded special significance. Moreover, the heroines' bodies are inscribed with meaning through the narratives' construction of them, where physiological and anatomical understandings of female corporeal matter work to connect the body to the sexual act, specifically phallic penetration and male handling. The objective of my analysis has not been to present a normative argument about how erotic romances *should* be treated but rather to show how they *can* be analysed when placed in a corporeal framework which reveals their connections to other prevalent modes of representation. *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* each convey a set of normative structures concerning conventional heterosexual relationships and gender roles in the sexual act. I have aimed to show that these structures are enacted and eroticised through the physical manifestation of the female body. In this way, the novels' portrayal of sex does not only express their values but also their aesthetic; the symbolic conventions that they rely upon in order to achieve their desired effect. Therefore, the erotic function of the narratives is not so much dependent on the reader's desires as it is contingent on its representations resonating with a cultural imaginary, and the degree to which the connotations of specific bodies and their desirability are recognised.

The three chapters show how *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* construct the sexy body, the virginal body, and the imaginary body. Comparing the novels' representations to other cultural products and discourses is a testimony to Gatens claim that: "Women are thoroughly inscribed in the imagination of our culture and its history" (135). Juxtaposing different source material, like the visual representations found on magazine covers and in advertisements, with the heroines' bodies as presented in the texts, demonstrates that each medium is fixated on making female physicality reveal itself to, and impact on, the observing gaze. The erotic function of female corporeality is thus also represented through its communication with the

on-looker. Comparing the written body with the visual body shows that making female physicality visible is not only about stimulus for the eyes, but also a way to make the body produce knowledge and inscribe it with meaning. This claim is supported by the fact that medical discourse is similarly obsessed with making virginity into something that is physically detectable. Clothing, virginity, breasts, and vaginal fluids are not preoccupations and methods of inscription reserved for *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* and their narratives, they are cultural symbols of meaning that speak of how the female body has been, and continues to be, imagined.

I have chosen to highlight the presentation of women in pornography to exemplify how female bodily characteristics work to create an erotic fantasy. In heterosexual male-oriented porn, the female body is depicted as an entity that invites and is altered by the penetrating penis. While reviewing some of the feminist criticism of pornography's sexual objectification of women, the thesis' discussion has predominantly been concerned with the wider cultural power and influence this form of representation holds. Not unlike the genre of erotic romances, pornography is commonly analysed in terms of its effects on readers and viewers, and the degree to which its fantasies impact or reflect the lives and desires of its consumers. Thus, porn is either condemned or celebrated as an ideology and a conveyor of values. Treating pornography as a representational practice and a cultural trend does not evade the discussion of the genre's ideals and messages. However, by focusing on the significance placed on an explicitly female corporeality, it is possible to draw a comparison between the world of porn and other popular media that do not share its graphic nature but invokes a similar system of value. Thus, I have placed Woodiwiss' and James' works alongside the porn sites Defloration.tv and Backroomcastingcouch.com, not to prove that the novels are porn, but to argue that the erotic function of female corporeality is ingrained in our culture's imaginary.

Regis' notion that the romance novel is "the most female of all popular genres" (xii) can be understood in several ways. It does, however, seem to suggest that it is a genre where female interests are communicated and especially taken care of. Recalling Ethel Person's statement that "all individuals internalize their culture" (31), the view that one genre is somehow governed by different values than another becomes more problematic. Works belonging to gendered industries, such as romance novels and pornography, all internalise and negotiate their culture to create a fantasy of sex, desire, and pleasure. In short, they belong to and express the same culture. While the distinction in themes, narrative, style, and distribution of *The Flame*, *Fifty Shades*, and sites such as Defloration.tv should not

be underplayed, I have aimed to demonstrate that each product evokes the same imaginary. The fact that the targeted audience and the position the consumer is invited to occupy in each case are contradistinctive does not take away from the reality that in their representation of female corporeality, the two novels and mainstream porn rely on shared symbols and values. The fact that the imaginary can be turned to different ends and sustain fantasies intended for different audiences most of all speak of its strength.

The representation, construction, and erotic function of female corporeality throughout Western history and in contemporary popular culture is a complex and considerable topic that cannot be given justice within the scope of this thesis. However, I suggest that the erotic romances *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* can be read as microcosms of these larger cultural workings and imaginaries. This thesis is born out of the belief that the novels, while they are often considered subliterate, can still tell us something important. My analysis seeks to contribute to the field of romance novel scholarship by approaching the novels alongside other cultural products and thus broadening the range of discourses romantic fiction can be related to. It reads the narratives' representations outside the confines of their form and suggests that *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades* are not only romance novels but also cultural constructions. In this way, the thesis has one foot, or maybe just a toe, inside romance novel scholarship, while also performing a cultural analysis. That the form and conception of a body disclose power structures is not a new argument, it is found in the works of, among others, Elizabeth Grosz, Luce Irigaray, and feminist scholars writing on sexual objectification, all of which have been used in my discussion. By applying these theories to *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, I have aimed to show how the hierarchy of bodies can be negotiated with the intention of affording pleasure to women. This speaks of the multiplex function of power and how it is configured in the representations found in various popular media.

When writing about the representation of the heroines' bodies in *The Flame* and *Fifty Shades*, there are several more aspects than the ones addressed in this thesis that are worth considering. Particularly, in both novels each heroine's whiteness and thinness are presented as indications of attractiveness that give pleasure to the man. Additionally, while discussing how the narratives construct male sexual desire around the need to possess the female body, this thesis' argument could also benefit from inquiries into the depiction of masculinity and the ideal man as imagined through the hero. The introduction mentions that romance novels are rarely treated as aesthetic objects (Selinger 313). Whilst dealing with the power of symbols and cultural resonance when it comes to the body, the aesthetic value of sex in the novels, and in relation to pornography, also holds potential for further exploration. Romana

Byrne's *Aesthetic Sexuality: A literary history of Sadomasochism* is an interesting work in this regard. Similarly, Berlant's *The Female Complaint* is a work I would like to engage with further.

The Flame and *Fifty Shades* are both widely read but are only two erotic romances in a broad and varied genre. As stated, the time interval between them cannot alone account for a trend within romance novel publishing. A future research project could undertake the process of filling in the gaps by looking at a broader selection of erotic romances and how the erotic function of female corporeality is represented. Moreover, the findings presented in this thesis are applicable to a wide range of cultural forms. I am interested in the ways in which prevalent representations of the female body can be used not only to detect and criticise oppressive structures but also say something about how these structures are negotiated into what is labelled an 'empowering' female identity. As sexual difference feminists urge the need for a "woman-centred experience" of the body and "an epistemology spoken from a feminine subjectivity," it is worthwhile examining the products that either claim themselves or have been said to express women's power and sexual liberation (Young 80-81). What does an empowered feminine subjectivity look like, and does it come in the form of novels like *Fifty Shades*, the music video to female rap artist Cardi B's *Wet Ass Pussy*, or the rocketing sales figures of the 'Womanizer' vibrator? Whilst these phenomena are popularly discussed, I argue that the discourse on the construction of female identities needs to include and, as Grosz would put it, lean towards a corporeal feminism.

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