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What's Love Got to Do with It?

Romance, Capitalism, and Cruel Optimism from *Pamela* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*

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Abstract

The term “romance novel” might bring to mind a novel being half-heartedly shielded by a reader on a train, its cover bearing a man with long hair caressing a half-dressed woman. They are vulgar, atrociously written, an emblem of a culture that has become over-sexed and under-appreciative of good literature. Romance novels have been around for nearly as long as novels themselves, however; Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) is an early example of the qualities every romance has to have—a meeting between the heroine and hero, an account of their attraction to each other, an obstacle that threatens their ability to be together, a moment when their union seems impossible, an overcoming of the barrier, a declaration of love, and betrothal or implied betrothal. All romance novels, from beloved classics like *Pamela* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) to recent bestsellers like Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005) and E.L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), also push a narrative of consumption—physically, financially, and emotionally. Only when consuming can the hero and heroine achieve their happy ending, which is a physical and financial union that cements a lifetime of comfort. The linear, proscriptive romances described in these novels are both a reflection and a product of capitalism, making similarly unachievable and irresistible promises of economic and personal gains,

manufacturing a set of feelings that Lauren Berlant refers to as “cruel optimism.” These novels generate desires they can never fulfill. As time goes on, cruel optimism evolves, and the promises these novels make come to reflect the present ideals of capitalism, maintaining a constant appeal throughout the ages and the promise of a better life, just out of reach. Historically tracing the romance novel from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries, this essay shows how the romance novel tracks the evolution of capitalism itself.

Keywords: romance, romance novels, capitalism, Twilight, Jane Eyre, Fifty Shades of Grey, Cruel Optimism, Berlant

Love hurts, and romance is cruel. Romance novels have become paragons of what society considers romance, but have very little to do with either the literary genre of romance or romantic love. Romance novels pretend to be about romantic love, but in fact, they are not stories of love as a human experience, but of consumption. The genre became irrevocably entwined with capitalism in the eighteenth-century, with novels such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*¹ (1740). *Pamela* sold the fantasy of a romance that leads to complete capitalistic fulfillment; promising happiness, fulfillment, and possession. *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë (1847), the *Twilight* saga (2005) by Stephanie Meyer, and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* saga (2012) by E.L James demonstrate the development of neoliberal capitalism and the construction of

¹ Though not the first novel to tell the story of romance, Samuel Richardson moved from the shorter, courtly-romanced focused novels before him into a longer, more involved story. As Ian Watt theorized, the rise of capitalism intersected with the rise of the novel form we recognize today. *Pamela*’s focus on the wedding of its characters also characterized romantic love as marital, which became a defining feature of the genre. Pamela and Mr. B’s relationship does not revolve around chivalry and nobility like courtly love; rather, *Pamela* is about (at least appears to be about) Pamela and Mr. B’s passion for each other.

romance.² A trans-historic approach to the romance novel affords not only a look at the evolution of both capitalism and romance, but the ways in which they merge throughout time. Theorist Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism provides a space in which to read these texts together, as romance novels and roadmaps of the linear narrative of capitalism. The cruel optimism of these stories perpetuates the joint myth of romance and capitalism, rendering it impossible to separate the all-consuming passion depicted in these novels from the desire to consume wealth.

Cruel optimism refers to the attachment a person forms to an object of desire that is not sustainable. Berlant defines an object of desire as a "cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us" (23). Romance novels can be read as a cluster of promises; they offer lust, love, and happiness in a way that is almost tangible. Cruel optimism compels readers to remain attached, because the promise of love and the hope of connecting with those feelings again in a novel (or, ideally, in a lived experience) is inescapable. This hope, though, is ultimately unobtainable—the promise of romance novels is powerful, but the attachments formed to the characters and even to the novels themselves are impossible. Berlant argues that the one doing the desiring, women in her case, refuses to acknowledge the possibility of the loss (21). With romance novels, the attachment is always there; the pages can always be reopened.

² According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "romance" comes from the Latin word "Romanorum," meaning "book." Further, the French word for novel is "roman"—not just "book," "novel." Romance is tied to the novel form.

Cruel attachment to romance novels proliferates in a space Berlant identifies as the women's "intimate public" (Berlant 3). The women's intimate public is the culture of texts, films, and other media that either explicitly or implicitly claim to express women's interior lives to a public sphere of other women. The intimate public promises women that they understand each other, that they are literate in each other's desires, that there is a shared and mutual experience of womanhood that is inevitably tied to consumption. One of the most common desires expressed in this space is the desire to be recognized and appreciated in a world where it is so easy for women to feel invisible. Women "hold tightly to some versions of the imaginable conventional good life in love" (Berlant 4). They feel as though the intimate public "expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions" (Berlant 5). Romance novels cultivate a sense of shared belonging for women—shared with the characters in the novels, but also with each other, in that women become emotionally vulnerable with the same figures in the same texts.

The ultimate and most pervasive fantasy of romance novels is that the events that occur within their pages are possible and attainable for women in real life, no matter how toxic or complicated or completely impossible the stories may be. These novels "survive because [their] central fantasy...is the constantly emplotted desire of a complex person to rework the details of her history to become a vague or simpler version of herself, usually in the vicinity of a love plot" (Berlant 7). By the end of a romance novel, everything is resolved; they promise a simpler reality, one that lacks the messiness of human attachment.

That simpler reality keeps readers coming back to romance novels, with increasing voracity every year. According to a study from the nonprofit Romance Writers of America,

romance was the second-best-selling fiction category in 2016, with twenty-three percent of overall US fiction market sales, just behind general fiction. Romance novels invoke elation at the initial meeting, disappointment when the couple is separated, relief when they reconcile, and disappointment, once again, when the novel is closed and the story is over; the narrative of cruel optimism, investment in something one can never have, is mirrored in the act of reading romance. As Berlant says, the hope that “‘tomorrow is another day’ in which fantasies of the good life can be lived” is echoed in the permanent nature of a story (2). Readers can open romance novels time and again and be met with the ideal man with the security of knowing a story can be returned to echoed in the enduring promises these heroes make to the heroines—to love and support them forever.

According to scholar Pamela Regis, in order to be a romance novel, a novel must offer certain promises: a meeting between the heroine and hero, an account of their attraction to each other, an obstacle that threatens their ability to be together, a moment (or several) when their union seems impossible, an overcoming of the barrier, a declaration of love, and betrothal or implied betrothal (Regis 30). These seven elements not only proscribe romantic life but also demonstrate cruel optimism in action; that heart-wrenching moment, when it seems the hero and heroine will never be together, never comes to fruition. In the end, wealth and love are always achieved in tandem, however impossible that reality may be.

Readers contribute massive amounts of wealth to the romance industry every year, in search of stories depicting the narrative Regis determined. The romance novel industry is worth about 1.08 billion dollars a year, which is about the worth of the mystery novel and science fiction genres combined (Costanza, “Why Do Modern Women Love Romance Novels? Call It

The 'Fifty Shades of Grey' Syndrome,” 1). When readers buy a romance novel, they are participating in the production of romance. Both elements of this double-production (of the tangible object and of the) of romance are capitalistic. The central promise of white, protestant capitalism that if you are austere, good, and work hard within a defined linear paradigm, you can find success, is incredibly difficult when considered in the actual world. Capitalism’s promises entice people to believe they can achieve what is systemically impossible. Capitalism asks consumers to purchase the idea of romance, even if said romance is fantastic, impossible, or toxic. Women read these novels as a cluster of promises, promises that we will someday escape the continued disappointment of real-life romance (and men), into wealth and love.

Womanhood has clearly defined social parameters to achieve “good womanhood.” However, reaching the end goal of perfect womanhood is as difficult to achieve as going from destitute to absurdly wealthy under the promise of capitalism. Womanhood itself is a form of cruel optimism, irrevocably entwined with capitalism and the production of romance. When the real world feels impossible, one can always escape into fiction, where one can at least “postpone” harm, and explore fantasy.

Samuel Richardson wrote *Pamela* in England in 1740, giving way to the form of the novel as we know it today, as well as the form of the romance novel, during a time of immense acquisition for the country.³ In *The Rise of the Novel*, theorist Ian Watt writes that novels, like

³ Beaud writes in *A History of Capitalism*: “the eighteenth century is . . . a century of expanding trade, especially world trade, and of increasing market, agricultural, and manufacturing production . . . all of this was most evident in the second half of the century, accompanied by vastly increasing wealth and worsening poverty” (44).

any other product, gained popularity in tandem with a rise in capitalistic ideals (34). Novels could not have come into existence without capitalism; sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in *The Field of Cultural Production* wrote that novels, like capitalism, must be “situated relative to other positions...every position, even the dominant one, depends [on others] for its very existence” (31). As novels depended on capitalism, capitalist success depended on the bourgeoisie’s position in relation to the proletariat. At this time, historian Michel Beaud writes in *A History of Capitalism* that England was recovering from wars of the early 18th century and establishing the “power of manufacturing capitalism” in order to assert itself as the most powerful country in the world (78). This transition created a tension between those who had been in power during the feudal period, like landowners, and those who had more recently gained power in capitalism, that is through the ownership of production systems.

Mass-production meant that the power of aristocrats was waning, and by the eighteenth-century, Samuel Richardson’s era, the move from feudalism to capitalism was complete, and England was “transformed” (Beaud 70). The rise of capitalism also clearly established two social classes: the industrial capitalist and the waged worker. The waged workers lost all autonomy, control, and craftsmanship—“their struggles multiplied”—while the overseers made money doing very little work (Beaud 74). Pamela and her love interest, Mr. B, are a perfect example of this early capitalist relationship. Mr. B was a landowner, who made his money from waged workers operating the land he owned. Pamela was a house servant and firmly working class nonetheless. The master/servant dynamic was not a new one, but the rise of capitalism unsettled this dynamic (Beaud 20). New forms of agricultural production would have allowed Mr. B to be

home more frequently, as his workers were doing all of his manual labor, and thus interact with Pamela more often.

Readers crave that interaction: they grow deeply attached to the object of their desire and the thing they believe that object is promising, and as a result, cling to the promise, refusing to acknowledge the possibility of its loss. Romance novels exemplify the ultimate optimism; in their world, nothing is hopeless, and the impossible seems possible. A teenage maid can capture the heart of a rich, powerful older man. They can marry, and she can have all the wealth and happiness she wants. In her final letter to her parents, Pamela writes that she is “all ecstasy,” because she is perfectly in love with her “best and fondest of husbands,” his peers in society finally accept her as one of them, and she has birthed many happy and healthy children (499). All of this “success” happens for Pamela, seemingly because she was beautiful, virtuous, chaste, and undeniably good of heart—she possesses all of the qualities capitalism promises will lead to happiness.

Samuel Richardson helped establish the story Berlant argues compounds cruel optimism: Pamela’s traits—fierce devotion to her family, to her virginity, and to God, which are richly detailed in an almost instructional manner—lead her directly to her ultimate dream. She is in love with her husband, oversees a beautiful home, and gives birth to healthy and well-developed children—a fantasy that continues to dominate normative culture, echoed in *Jane Eyre*, *Twilight*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Pamela’s desire to be “in love,” though, remains subordinate to her dream of financial success. In these narratives, love exists not in lived emotional experience but rather in the Lacanian sense of “giving something one doesn’t have to someone who doesn’t want it” (Lacan, *Le Seminaire, Livre VIII*, 23). Romance novels depict love as a

transaction. Pamela is trading Mr. B her purity—she delivers Mr. B from temptation, restoring him to the piety and decorum that was otherwise hers. She rebukes his advances for most of the novel, even when he attempts (multiple times) to physically take her. She manages to do all of this while powerless—working as his maid, with no physical nor financial hold over him, and no means by which to escape his grasp.

Yet *Pamela* ends in perfection; the couple is happily married and wealthier than ever.

The novel is not *about* cruel optimism: Pamela achieves, in the words of Richardson, “the Reward of her Virtue, Piety and Charity; exceedingly beloved by both Sexes, and by all Degrees; and was look’d upon as the Mirror of her Age and Sex” (499). She achieves everything for which she has hoped, because she did exactly what was prescribed for her. She defended her virginity at all costs, almost risking her life, in order to remain a virgin until marriage. She never failed in her devotion to God. She was beautiful without pretense and unfailingly kind. Pamela has been widely criticized as an unrealistic character, with good reason—no woman could be as perfect as she is—and yet the cruel optimism of the novel works to make readers believe otherwise.

In this way, *Pamela* seemingly provides an escape from the cruel optimism of the outside world. Yet, while the novel’s content may not represent cruel optimism, Pamela herself has become cruelly optimistic for female readers. By turning to her story of humble origins to economic security and happiness, readers might pause the cruelty of the real world and return to it hopeful. The bonds readers might form with Pamela and Mr. B are nonetheless unattainable; *Pamela* is cruelly optimistic, because the text does its best to convince readers otherwise.

Pamela and Mr. B’s wedding exemplifies the unlikeliness of their relationship, marking the establishment of their love and Pamela’s social ascendancy. Historian Stephanie Coontz’

Marriage: A History is vital for understanding the impact capitalism had on marriage traditions; she wrote that, in *Pamela's* time, “a harmonious, well-functioning marriage was a business necessity as well as a personal pleasure,” as a married couple was “more prominent” in society (128). Their marriage was not only a significant marker of Pamela’s feelings for Mr. B, but for her social status. Pamela was aware of the significance of this event; on the day of their wedding, Pamela is overcome by nerves. In a letter to her parents detailing the day, she writes of her fears that their marriage is a sham, Mr. B does not truly love her and is terrified of losing her virginity, even within the bonds of matrimony. She is mute with fear during the actual ceremony: She does accept, however; their desire for what the other has to offer is so strong, Pamela’s “heart was readier than [her] speech, and answered to every article of obey, serve, love, and honor” (345). This moment creates great sympathy for Pamela. She cannot even verbalize her feelings, and Mr. B shows no frustration at her timidity. Mr. B, in a display of respect that would be completely unimaginable for his pre-marriage self, allows Pamela hours upon hours of seclusion, respecting her nerves and her desire to speak with her beloved parents. Mr. B interrupts her briefly to remind her that it is he, a wealthy, handsome man of considerable power, who is unworthy of her, a teenage maid.

This reassurance calms Pamela, who receives him in her bedroom later with worshipful enthusiasm, for the “happy, yet awful moment” of losing her virginity (348). The fantasy of *Pamela* is thus nearly complete; not only has Pamela convinced a womanizing, wealthy, older man to marry her, he aims to provide everything for her. She has everything for which she has ever hoped. For much of the novel, Mr. B treats Pamela as his subordinate. He was forthcoming about his desire to rape her and only wanted her for her beauty and virginity. He mocked her

defense of her body, and later offered to pay her to be his mistress. By the end of this letter, though, Pamela has completed one of the ultimate promises of romance: she has completely changed a man through the sheer power of her love.

In the basic plot structure of *Pamela*, Pamela meets a would-be rapist and transforms him into a doting, kind, maybe even feminist husband. Pamela's success promises that if one follows her path, one will be able to either meet or mold the perfect man. Yet critics recognized the unlikelihood of that proposition: Henry Fielding famously wrote *Shamela*, his satire of Richardson's novel, to emphasize the completely unrealistic plot of *Pamela*. *Pamela* is vicious, concluding on a note of such impossible hope. When members of the intimate public are unable to achieve Pamela's love and happiness, or the "feeling of a "a life" that adds up to something," they return "other forms of fantasy improvisation, perhaps with less conventional objects, so long as she can feel in a general sense that she has known the feeling of love and carries the memory of having been affectively recognized and emotionally important" (Berlant 7). Romance novels demonstrate that feeling of love, and as readers turn to them over and over, the cycle of cruel optimism continues.

Pamela sparked a literary revolution; its publication opened up a market for stories of love, in particular for the genre of the modern romance novel (Watt 135). Years later, Charlotte Brontë set out to write her own romance novel. 100 years passed between the two novels, and in this time, the middle class became firmer and more jobs became available to women, who became "more hesitant to marry" in the 19th century; "rates of lifelong singlehood rose again as the [nineteenth century] wore on," as it was easier than ever for a woman to support herself (Coontz 179). Brontë's titular heroine, Jane, acted on that newfound independence; without the

social status required to marry at a young age, after attending school (something Pamela would have been unable to do), she obtains a job with a wealthy, powerful older man named Edward Rochester. Like Mr. B to Pamela, Rochester becomes intrigued by her, and she rejects his advances. She attempts to leave him, for her own sake, but finds she cannot live without him. Ultimately, the two fall in love and end the novel as “equals.” The finale of the novel diverts from the fantasy of romance anticipated in *Pamela*. While *Pamela* ends in literal perfection, Brontë also acknowledges that these social paradigms are cruelly optimistic and unattainable, bringing her characters back to reality. Jane and Mr. Rochester are together, yes, but both have undergone difficult changes and lessons—and had some external transformations—to make their ultimate union a little less make-believe.

Like Pamela, Jane understands the social process of becoming a woman. When she is only ten years old, she is shipped off by her Aunt to the austere and abusive Lowood School, where she has social ideals of womanhood literally beaten into her. Her aunt, Diana Reed, remarks upon sending her away that Jane “has not quite the character and disposition [she] could wish” (20). In other words, she is not the right little girl and has no hope of becoming a good woman without strict training. Mr. Brocklehurst, the vicious and pious owner of the Lowood school, makes good on Diana Reed’s request to alter Jane’s character; he vows to train her in “conformity,” so that she may be more like his ideal of a quiet, pious, wealthy woman (21).

By the time Jane leaves Lowood, , a shift has occurred. She is still strong willed, but she has become more even-tempered, intelligent, pious, and responsible. Though she is still not beautiful, she has all the other markings of a “good woman.” Part of this transformation is due to one of Jane’s teachers, the aptly named Miss Temple. Jane believes Miss Temple to be the ideal

of femininity; she is beautiful, temperate, unfailingly kind, and humble—she is “full of goodness” (35). In Miss Temple, Jane finds a clear model of woman to follow. Furthermore, because of her lucky and rare access to education, Jane now has the social standing to obtain a position as a governess, which was a respectable career for a single, educated woman.⁴ Jane has, thus far, been a success within capitalism’s system; she was fortunate to receive an education, and she has used that education to find a career, which will earn her money. Jane seems perfectly poised to continue along the linear narratives of womanhood and capitalism, making money and behaving properly.

Lowood worked hard to beat Jane’s strong will and sense of independence out of her—her biggest, most “unwomanly” flaws. Though she did indeed leave Lowood exemplifying demure and subservient womanhood, Jane’s will and temper remained inside her. When she meets Mr. Rochester, his passion for her ignites her own, and she has difficulty controlling her tendency for wit and argument. Instead of frightening Rochester off, her fire—and her ability to put out fire—is what draws him to her; he prefers her when heated and passionate rather than quietly attending to her duties. This preference both gives Jane more agency and forces her into more contortions to keep his affection, as Jane is hired to be the governess for Adele, Mr. Rochester’s ward and likely bastard child. As his employee, Rochester and Jane both expected her to be quiet, subservient, and attentive, but her independence and well-developed sense of self entrances him.

⁴ “The only possibility open to [ladies] who still needed to work was to get a job as a teacher, either in a small girls’ school or in someone else’s home” (Katherine Hughes, “The Figure of the Governess,” 1).

Jane, who is, in her own words, “poor, obscure, plain, and little,” attracts a man of immense power and wealth. She attracts him so much, in fact, that he says being apart from her may kill him:

I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you—especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous Channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapped; and then I’ve a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly. (160)

Rochester is literally unable to live without Jane, this woman who has absolutely no social or physical power over him. His feelings for her are “queer,” or strange, in that he has never felt that kind of desire before. The words “string” and “chord” imply that Rochester is viewing Jane as a sort of puppet master, or that she has him on a leash. She physically controls his heart and body, and if she chooses not to—in the greater context of this quote, Rochester knows it is she who may leave him—Rochester would die. The power here is all Jane’s, when previously she has deferred to Rochester. The use of “communion” echoes this message of empowerment. Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “The action or fact of sharing or holding something in common with others,” the word “communion” here describes the cord which holds Jane to Rochester, which he suggests is something *she* is doing to *him*. The unavoidable religious connotation implies that he is taking her body into his, that she is Jesus and he is the one receiving communion. She is no longer a small, insignificant girl; she is now his savior. Because Rochester desires her, Jane rises instantly in status. When she addresses him in a moment of passion, remarking, “I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if we had passed through the grave and stood at God’s feet, equal, as we are,” he agrees, responding,

“and so we are” (161). Rochester and Jane, two people of immensely different backgrounds and social stratospheres, have achieved spiritual equality.

Though the two claim to have equal feelings for one another, the financial imbalance remains a hurdle in their relationship; Jane, though she desires modesty and humility, cannot escape the economic narrative that is returned to her life when she becomes betrothed to a wealthy man. Rochester desires to transform her and “make the world acknowledge [her] a beauty” (165). He touts his wealth and his ability to purchase Jane anything she desires: “I will myself put the diamond chain around your neck, and the circlet around your forehead . . . I will clasp bracelets on those fine wrists, and load those fairy-like fingers with rings” (165). Rochester has reached the end of the linear process of capitalism; he has everything he could ever want, in excess. He is made of possessions and worked shrewdly to attain them. Jane abhors Rochester’s desire to force jewels and riches upon her, as she knows they do not suit her personality. Rochester listens to her; he, bossy and arrogant, obeys the wishes of quiet, steadfast Jane. However, his possessions do not stop at jewelry—Jane cannot force away Bertha Mason, Rochester’s mentally ill ex-wife, whom he keeps locked away in an attic and pays a servant to attend. She envisions herself a kept woman, another possession mad and trapped like Bertha. Jane leaves Rochester, citing that there is “no room for her” at Thornfield as long as she is possessed (191).

While Jane is separated from Rochester, two vital changes occur. First, Jane is left a great sum of money from a distant Uncle—20,000 pounds, enough to split the money with her three cousins and still come away comfortable (245). She is “independent . . . as well as rich” and able to leave her modest school-teacher’s job (279). She finally gives into the urge to return, however

briefly, to Rochester's side. What she finds is that Thornfield has burned down in her absence. Rochester was disabled while rescuing Bertha from the flames; he is blind in both eyes and has lost the use of one arm. Jane remarks that it is "a pity" to see him in his diminished state, and yet, she remains "in danger of loving [him] too well for all this" (280). Rochester is shaken; not only has Jane returned to him, a wealthy woman capable of sustaining herself if he rejects her, but she loves him even more for his financial and physical shortcomings.

Jane finally feels comfortable in their union, because Rochester no longer has the upper hand in wealth, social status, and physical power. Rochester has also gained humility; he cannot imagine that Jane might love him, broken as he is. His self-consciousness stirs something in Jane; not only has Rochester changed physically, but she has changed him mentally. He has become more tender to her, and more honest in his views of himself. His elation when Jane confirms she will marry him proves to her that he needs her just as she needs him, more than language about strings or cords ever could. By promoting Jane socially and demoting Rochester, Brontë has made their union less cruelly optimistic than it might have been if their power dynamic had stayed the same. However, Jane still has participated in one of the classic fantasies of romance novels, that women can change men through the force of their love alone.

The novel ends as romantic novels do, with a marriage and complete social, financial, and romantic happiness; there is not a thing left to be desired. Throughout the story, Jane openly addresses the reader, allowing a sense of intimacy. By addressing the reader, she is bringing them into the equation, seeming to say "look, I did it, you can too." As Jane followed Miss Temple, readers can follow her. Except, of course, *Jane Eyre* is fiction, selling a fantasy that ultimately remains unobtainable in the real world.

Pamela and *Jane Eyre* enforced a social narrative that has women creating secret spaces and languages, the majority of people lusting after people and things they will never have. These novels are why romance is capital, rather than a human experience. Scholar Franco Moretti speculates on capitalism as a form of vampirism in his essay, "The Dialectic of Fear." Quoting Marx, he writes, "Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks" (Moretti 1). In this passage, Moretti is discussing *Dracula*, the great 19th century vampire novel that Moretti argues is really about capitalism. Capitalism has changed a great deal since Moretti identified its life-sucking capabilities. Scholar Fredrick Jameson's *Postmodernism* identified the period after the 1970's to be "late capitalism," a "pervasive condition of our own age, a condition that speaks both to economic and cultural structures," that brings "the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization" (Jameson 21). If *Dracula* is the great capitalism vampire novel, the great late-capitalism vampire novel is Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*.

200 years after Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre*, Stephanie Meyer published the *Twilight* series. In *Twilight*, the protagonist's favorite novel is *Wuthering Heights*, the novel by Charlotte Brontë's sister Emily, but *Twilight* is in more direct conversation with *Jane Eyre*. In both works, a young girl, somewhat adrift, meets a powerful older man (in *Twilight*'s case, older by about 100 years). They fall in love. They are separated by the realities of their relationship. Instead of being merely controlling or idiosyncratic, like other romance heroes (though he is both of those), Edward is also a vampire—a 108-year-old vampire, destined to look seventeen forever, repeating

high school and generally wanting to escape the purgatory that is living eternally with no romantic love. His worries are eased when he meets Bella, a seventeen-year-old human, who falls desperately in love with him even as he tries to conceal his fantasies about murdering her and drinking her blood. Edward and Bella first confront the reality of their interspecies love while sequestered in the forest; for the first time, the two are completely alone, with no hope for Bella if Edward is unable to control himself. Edward demonstrates, yet again, that he is unlike Bella's conception of the fantastical "vampire,"

As he sparkles in the sunlight and does not sleep in a coffin. Bella is far from frightened of him; she is obsessed. She has never seen anything more beautiful. When Edward asks if she is frightened, she replies "no more than usual" (260). Edward is mystified by Bella's lack of fear. His desire to drink her blood is almost equal to his desire to protect her at all costs, and reconciling the two drives proves very difficult when all Bella wants to do is kiss him. In a last-ditch effort to strike some fear into her—to convince her to run away, so that he cannot hurt her—he goes on a rampage throughout the meadow. To demonstrate his power, he rips a tree from the ground and hurls it across the clearing.

Just as Bella cannot tear herself from Edward, he also craves being around her, not only because he harbors romantic feelings for her, but also because her blood calls to him like nothing else he has ever experienced. He likens himself to a recovering alcoholic, locked in a room with a glass of potent "hundred-year-old brandy, the rarest, finest cognac" (267). Ordinary Bella is unlike anyone else to exist in a hundred years. For all her temptations—her lack of fear, her beauty in his eyes, her scent, her kindness—she is "the most important thing to [him] ever"

(273). The lion has fallen in love with the lamb, against all logic and laws of normalcy (274).

Meyer's use of Christian language (the language of white, Anglo-Saxon capitalism) reflects the way Edward and Bella view each other as holy.

Edward and Bella's flouting of danger in response to their physical and emotional instincts elevates *Twilight* from a fantasy novel into a fantasy of the women's intimate public. Nothing is more unsustainable than a romance with a man whose every fiber is telling him to kill you—not to mention the added impossibility of this man being a vampire. *Twilight* invoked female desire for a man that could never exist, even more so than other unrealistic romance heroes. Edward's vampiric status is part of what makes him so uniquely appealing, in a way that (at least to Bella) no "real" man ever has been. He is extraordinarily, beyond-model-beautiful. He clings to his twentieth-century chivalry, opening doors for Bella, carrying her over puddles, and making sure the two do not do anything to risk her "virtue" before marriage. He smells amazing. He plays the piano better than any virtuoso. He is impossibly smart, thanks to 100 years of college education. He is also, crucially, immortal. Edward, and all other vampires, can only be killed by one of their kind, and even that is incredibly difficult. He is impervious to human weapons, drowning, and suffocation. He will remain seventeen and perfect forever, while Bella ages on without him, a fact that never ceases to panic her. Though Bella will never technically outlive Edward—Bella is unlikely become a centenarian—her being significantly older than him would upset the trend cemented by the previous two novels of an older, more powerful man protecting a younger woman.

Bella's aging and her desire for Edward to change her into a vampire, drives the conflict of the remaining three novels. She moves from begging him to change her, to demanding him, to

removing him from the picture altogether in favor of having Carlisle, Edward's vampire "father" do the deed. When Bella reveals this plan, Edward, desperate to postpone Bella's transformation into what he believes to be a soulless, damned creature, offers a compromise. He will turn her himself if she agrees to marry him beforehand. Romance novels sell women a story that feels good, so they give themselves into bondage willingly; once Bella has agreed with Edward's conditions, she becomes not only his wife but also, in a sense, his creation. His venom will flow through her veins. She is bonded to him by law, yes, but she is also physically, chemically, and, as his wife, financially connected to him, forever. They are beyond connected; their bodies are the same, in the way two human bodies could never be. They share the same set of impossible and specific traits, a sort of Adam and Eve of their own unique species.

The fully realized fantasy of late, neoliberal capitalism is one of sameness and uniformity; those at the top of the socioeconomic ladder end up looking startlingly similar. They are white, wealthy males, like our heroes. Edward was already there, but, for the first three novels in the *Twilight* saga, the key conflict is his physical difference from Bella, in strength, beauty, and immortality. Of course, this imbalance must be remedied: Bella is transformed into a vampire. When Bella changes, she finally feels equal to Edward. The fourth book of the *Twilight* saga reads like it was ripped from the collective mind of the intimate public—everything works out perfectly and to the highest degree of fantasy. As a human, Bella had always thought of herself as plain at best. As a vampire, though, she is "indisputably beautiful" (607). She has achieved a godlike status, "nothing could ever separate him from me now. I was too strong to be torn from his side" (730). Physical issues that could break up a mortal couple, like injury or

death have no impact on them. Bella can finally hold on to Edward as hard as he holds on to her; their transactions have finally reached equilibrium.

Bella is both aware of the otherworldliness of their relationship and completely unphased by it. Because of Edward, Bella has been lifted from ordinariness. Her fantasy throughout the series, that someday she will be “equal” to Edward in physical beauty and prowess, has come true. Of their physical relationship, she remarks “we could love together—both active participants now. Finally equals” (632). Her life is “a fairy tale,” and Edward her prince (743). *Twilight* is forthcoming about its fulfillment of every fantasy of the intimate public; as Bella acknowledges, her life is a fairytale, there is no gesture of attainability for the reader. Fairytales are presumably unrealistic, filled with magical turns of events; readers can hope for such magic in their own lives, but these narratives tend to be stored with childhood, replaced in adulthood by more complicated fantasies. By intertwining both the magic of a fairytale and the complicated emotional plot of a romance, *Twilight* becomes completely fantastical, even riding on the edge of losing its appeal because of the sheer impossibility of the plot; the cruel optimism almost goes too far. Yet the moments of reality in the novel, such as Edward and Bella taking a bath or playing with their daughter—link their lives back to the classic milestones readers expect from a romance.

Bella and Edward love impossibly; vampires together, the two experience a feeling that is continuously characterized as being somehow more than human love, with Bella telling Edward “nobody has ever loved anybody as much as I love you,” after realizing her love for him has grown as she’s transformed into a vampire (753). The final scene of *Breaking Dawn*, the final novel in the *Twilight* saga, is a culmination of cruel optimism. Bella has everything, because

she's no longer human. She and Edward stroll back to their cottage, "a place of perfect peace" (748). Esme, Edward's vampire mother, has built their fairy-tale cottage as a respite from the Cullen's massive modern home.

The cottage is a space of privacy, where Bella and Edward can be completely alone and themselves—a desire frequently expressed in the intimate public. The women's intimate public is a space where women fantasize about healing men, about men "surrendering to their love;" the man has some trauma the woman must unearth and heal, in order that every barrier in their way can be overcome (Illouz 44). Edward cannot read Bella's mind like he can everyone else on the planet—because of this inability, he constantly wonders if Bella, the most good and pure thing on Earth, can love him, a monster, as much as he loves her.

Bella's vampire power is a culmination of this fantasy; she has a shield, a protective barrier in her mind that she can use to protect herself from the psychological powers of other vampires. By the end of the series, she realizes she can take down her shield, allowing Edward to read her mind for the very first time. In doing so, she finally proves to him how much she loves him, and she sells the fantasy of removing the most steadfast barrier between a man and woman, allowing love to grow even deeper. Bella is left wanting nothing.

Vampirism is consumption; but capitalism is vampirism; in neo-capitalist society, power comes from taking everything from another person. The blood the Cullens suck is a gory stand-in for the power they drain from the lower classes. Power that is all encompassing and that allows one to have everything in the world. The kind of power that comes with reaching the end goal of capitalism. *Twilight* is uniquely cruel in that the end result of the novels will never be attainable, even by the standards of capitalist fantasy.

Having those hopes and dreams—fantasies—with no outlet can be frustrating. Some readers felt the four *Twilight* books and the five subsequent movies were not enough of Edward and Bella; they wanted more. *Twilight* was published in 2005, and the recently flourishing internet brought with it new opportunities for readers. There were *Twilight* message boards, *Twilight* forums, and, most importantly, *Twilight* fanfiction. The most famous *Twilight* fanfiction—the most famous fanfiction in the world, at that—was called “Master of the Universe,” by FanFiction.net user SnowqueensIcedragon. Before the novel now known as *Fifty Shades* opened up a new marketplace for BDSM, the fanfiction it began as, “Master of the Universe,” stormed the internet, eventually moving from fanfiction websites to E.L James’ own website. Fans followed; the works published on both fanfiction.net and James’ website were subject to comments, suggestions, and praise from fans in real-time, chapter by chapter. After moving onto James’ website, “Master of the Universe” was picked up by The Writer’s Coffee Shop, an online publishing house that “specializes in publishing fan fiction that has been removed from the Web, has character names and descriptions changed, and is published commercially as original fiction,” wrote Bethan Jones in her essay “Fifty Shades of Fan Labor: Exploitation and Fifty Shades of Grey” (1). Years later, the story was snapped up by Penguin Random House, published under the name *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L James.

In “Master of the Universe,” Bella is a clumsy, awkward, virginal literature major in Seattle. Her roommate, Rosalie (Edward’s sister in the canon novels), gives her the laborious task by to interview the young, eccentric billionaire Edward Cullen for their university’s newspaper. Edward is controlling, detached, and emotionally damaged, even more so than Stephanie Meyer’s version of him. “Master of the Universe” turned Edward Cullen into a

powerful, BDSM practicing CEO, while leaving Bella's character mostly intact, just moving her to university-age. Only when the fanfiction was pulled to publish did James change the names of her characters, turning Edward Cullen into Christian Grey and Bella Swan into Anastasia Steele. A story was born, independent of *Twilight*, because the intimate public wanted more "believable" content that the original novels were not providing.

The heroine of *Fifty Shades*, henceforth known as Anastasia Steele, is completely intimidated by rich, aloof CEO Christian Grey. Ana views Christian's wealth and power with Bella Swan-like awe. At the beginning of their romance, Christian whisks Ana off in his helicopter.

The helicopter itself is just as much of a character in this scene as Christian and Ana. *Charlie Tango*, a EuroCopter EC 130, is "one of the safest in its class" (James 89), valued at about 3.3 million dollars.⁵ *Charlie Tango* clearly stands in for Christian's immense wealth as well as his masculinity.⁶ Helicopters require complete control and mastery, which are, again, two skills prized by Western masculinity. Passengers are harnessed in; there's no escaping unless one knows exactly how to disarm the harness and doors. One is fully restrained, not unlike BDSM bondage. Christian says of the flight: "When you fly at night, you fly blind. You have to trust the instrumentation," (90). Yes, passengers must trust the instruments, but they must also trust the assuredly capable pilot. Further, helicopters are designed to be able to rise straight up into the air. In this manner, *Charlie Tango* is an underscore for Christian's sexual virility: ready to go at a

⁵ Arkin, W. and L.R. Dubrofsky. "Military Socialization and Masculinity." *Journal of Social Issues* vol. 34, no. 1, 1978, pp. 151–168.

⁶ Ocean, Justin. "Every Expensive Thing in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Explained." *Bloomberg.com*, Bloomberg, 11 Feb. 2015.

moment's notice. Ana herself makes this association, noting that her mind wanders after she sees Christian setting up the dashboard: "'How long will the flight be?' I manage breathlessly. I wasn't thinking about sex at all, no, no way" (90). The conception of Christian and Ana's physical relationship mirrors the sharp and aggressive ascent of the helicopter. For them, there is no slow glide through the sky, no traditional linear structure of dates and holding hands and getting to know each other. They waste no time sleeping together right after this initial flight, demonstrating to the reader that they are uncontrollably attracted to each other.. Ana is so attracted to Christian that her previous pattern of ignoring male affection is broken; in the act of sleeping with Christian so early in their relationship, she establishes both that Christian is different from all other men, and vaults herself upward on the socioeconomic ladder by her mere association with him.

Ana is, like many romance heroines, quiet, bookish, and deferential. Until that helicopter flight she was also a virgin, something she could forget whenever she felt a jolt of attraction toward Christian, who is not. He is a lothario of near-mythological status. Their imbalanced familiarity with sex is one of the power plays at the heart of the first book in the four-book series, *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The novel begins with Ana forced onto her hands and knees before Christian; she trips and falls walking into his office, where she instantly notes that Christian is an "Adonis" (9). This is but one of many mentions of Christian's Godlike status. The rest of the novel continues in much the same way, with Christian standing high and proud, and Ana supplicating beneath him—sexually, yes, but also outside of the bedroom.

In many ways, this adventure is the first that puts the two on truly equal footing. Christian brings Ana with him up into the sky; when Ana remarks that Seattle is merely "bright spot" in

the distance, she and Christian are both looking down on the world. The helicopter is also only the second space in which Christian and Ana are completely alone, which allows both of them to let down barriers they have been working to maintain. Ana, for the first time in her life, feels powerful—all thanks to Christian and his affluence. She is emboldened with adrenaline, and asks him “do you always impress women this way?” (90). His response marks another turning point in the novel—she is the first woman he has ever flown in *Charlie Tango*. This realization is vital for Ana; not only is she beginning to understand a famously enigmatic man, she is beginning to change him. One of the most pervasive and storied myths of female existence—that a woman can heal or change a man for the better—has just become apparent, and now Ana is hooked. She sees, for even the briefest moment, her power over Christian, the fantasy that, in this transaction, she has something real and valuable she can give him.

One of the other key fantasies of the book, and of the female public reading it, is that sexual power can be consistently and evenly traded; that whenever Ana wants to, she can stop making decisions and let Christian control her. He literally straps her into his helicopter, and as he is doing so, Ana thinks “I can hardly move . . . I’m fastened into my seat and effectively immobile” (88). Christian remarks, “there’s no escaping” (88). Yes, he means that there is no escaping from the seat, but this moment is also when he sells Ana on the fantasy of being with him, helicopters and emotional damage included. The final thing he offers her in this moment, though, is a complete release of her control and stress—however flawed that promise may ultimately be. All she has to do, in being with him, is sit back, relax, and observe his complete mastery of the world around him. “My fate is in his hands,” she thinks (90). For an overworked

university student, the idea of not only redeeming a man but finding the sliver of space where you can do so whilst he physically and monetarily provides for you, is the ultimate fantasy.

Fifty Shades of Grey was a verifiable phenomenon, with the first novel alone selling 125 million copies, cracking its way into the top 25 highest-selling books of all time (Kosnik, "Fifty Shades and the Archive of Women's Culture," 116). With four movies, countless fan clubs, and international discussion about just how sexy Christian Grey is, the series has worked its way into the intimate public. More so than *Pamela*, *Jane Eyre*, or *Twilight*, though, *Fifty Shades* speaks to readers because of its self-positioning as a guidebook to sexual satisfaction. *Fifty Shades* is a triumph of the women's intimate public, a novel so concerned with breaking and maintaining power structures that it seems sprung directly from the confines of the women's intimate public. Sexual practice here functions as a method of exploring social hierarchies and power dynamics. Christian represents women's complicated perception of modern masculinity: he is highly ambiguous, ambivalent, both caring and menacing, vulnerable and powerful. Ana's personality does not matter so much; what matters is that she, in all the world, can understand Christian.

Illouz identifies a key fantasy of the women's intimate public, which is that women desire to see powerful men surrender to their love. This trope is reiterated time and time again in narratives as old as *Pamela*; the fantasy that emotion can change reality is unending. For women, sex is a tool on the way to love, while men view sex as detached from love (Illouz 40). Under the influence of Ana's love, Christian heals, becomes whole, and learns to view sex as a physical act of love rather than a hobby. He gains generosity, kindness, and empathy, which were not just underdeveloped traits but qualities he completely lacked. In *Fifty Shades*, sadomasochistic sex is a way for Christian and Ana to both perform their gender identities and reaffirm their

differences. He desires to hurt her, and she wants to give him whatever he desires. He controls her physically and mentally, and she finds pleasure in the release of power. What keeps this novel firmly in the fantasy zone, though, is that her pleasure is always key—Christian reiterates time and time again that she will enjoy everything he does to her. Christian’s overly domineering and borderline abusive tendencies become acceptable because Ana gains sexual pleasure from his behavior. Illouz writes that sadism is the natural extension of the romantic heroine’s fantasy; the heroine wants the man of her desire to bend to her will, but he must also remain a subject, and have autonomous will and desire, because only a subject can give women the feeling of being truly desired (Illouz 48). He needs to have the option to not want women, to hurt them in some way, because the choice of his wanting gives the heroine power. His wanting her clarifies to the reader that the heroine is not pursuing the hero in desperate pursuit of fortune; if he wants her back, the narrative promises, the fortune and mutual profit at the end is a happy accident.

Fifty Shades of Grey profits off of sexual fantasy by using sex as a framework and backbone for Christian and Ana’s relationship and personal development. BDSM requires consent, narrative, description, and open conversation, which is partly why it lends itself well to literature. The descriptions of the tools and props Christian and Ana use rival the details of Christian’s helicopter:

Fifty Shades tells women how exactly to enact their fantasies in a clear way, from the types of helicopters, cars, boats, and bottles of wine to lust over to how to take sex from mundane to life-changing. *Fifty Shades* is written with a partner in mind, someone with whom readers can enact the sex described in the novel, to bring themselves one step closer to the end of the self-help

narrative. Countless books are dedicated to tips and tricks of finding capitalistic success; *Fifty Shades* is not generally thought of as one of them. The self-help qualities of the novels are two-fold, though—not only does Ana’s internal narration teach readers how to have great sex, it teaches them how to acquire capital. Yet the novel is painting its own portrait of capitalistic achievement through the dominant/submissive relationship. This type of relationship validates a power struggle and makes bonds seem pleasurable; Christian is the bourgeoisie, and has convinced Ana that the fetters of capitalism are not only bearable, they are enjoyable.

Capitalistic success, which was seemingly overnight for James, is not always pleasing for those at the bottom of the ladder; James’ profit did not come to the excitement of fans of her original fanfiction—or *Twilight* fans, for that matter.

E.L James was a member of the collaborative enclave of fan culture; women’s fan spaces—women overwhelmingly make up *Twilight*’s fan community—embody the sense of shared understanding and experience promised within the intimate public. Hypothetically, this space is equal; this space is for all. Women brought *Twilight*, a one-billion-dollar enterprise, into the free market. The story became free to all, designed by no one person. Instead, fanfiction was a product of the collective mind—a sort of reversal of capitalism. That is, until E.L James removed “Master of the Universe” from the internet, giving it a mini makeover and publishing her fanfiction as a standalone novel. She is the sole writer credited for *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but fans say this authorship is far from the truth.

In other words, James turning her fan work into a for-profit series betrays the collaborative and horizontal nature of the fan economy. James used fan culture as a step up, resisting the utopian

free market ideals of fan fiction in favor of personal economic advancement. Her success only perpetuates the cruel optimism of *Fifty Shades*; the dark undertone is that, even if the end goal of capitalism is reached, even if one achieves the ultimate success (like the characters in her novels), they stepped on a great number of people to get there.

Pamela, Jane Eyre, Twilight, and Fifty Shades of Grey are all romance novels, but their function in society expands far beyond providing a bit of entertainment. They are a roadmap, not for good sex or ways to fall in love, but for how to stay on the cutting-edge of a constantly evolving capitalism. Each of these novels center around middle-class white women in heterosexual marriages, though marriage no longer looks like the shaky union between Pamela and Mr. B. Women in the 21st century have resources of their own, and the freedom to marry for love and passion. Still, the women in these novels do not marry for love; they marry for the Lacanian exchange Berlant highlights. Is there still freedom in these stories? When *Fifty Shades of Grey* came out, women were suddenly talking about sex. They were celebrating the reading of an explicit book and the way it made them feel, the way it understood their desires. This feeling is, of course, cruel optimism, but cruel optimism and feminism are not exclusive, although hoping for a feminist story to emerge from these normative tales of marriage may just be another cruel optimism.

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