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# 50 DIFFERENCES OF GREY

The great contradictions between the book & movie





# Introduction

An old joke goes that two mice are eating celluloid in the warehouse of a film studio. When they finish their appetizing meal, one asks the other: “Did you like it?” And the other replies: “I liked the book better.”

Comparing a novel with its film adaptation is always a complicated task, and often a quite unfair one. Having direct contact with a book implies, in the first instance, an encounter with certain aspects of the story itself as readers’ imagination travel to personal places, which will always be missing in films.

Nevertheless, the adaptation of a book to the big screen is invariably an amazing thing, and often reveals interpretations that we had not even imagined.

The tremendous worldwide success of the novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, by E. L. James, has been taken to the cinema less than three years after its publication. The film was directed by British director Sam Taylor-Johnson and stars Dakota Johnson and Jamie Dornan. The screenplay was written by Kelly Marcel, an English screenwriter responsible for writing the screenplay for *Saving Mr. Banks*, which depicts the relationship between Walt Disney and P.L. Travers during the shooting of the movie *Mary Poppins*.

*Fifty Shades of Grey* was one of the most anticipated films in recent decades because of the novel’s media impact. As is frequently the case, its reception by critics has not been too favorable.

In this review, we will dive through the keys of this adaptation, focusing on the essential characteristics of film language in contrast to literary language.





## The Whimsical Charm of Anticipation

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the inhabitants of Milan, who were fans of opera, were humming Verdi melodies before the plays to which they belonged were premiered. There was no Internet back then. The miracle stemmed from curiosity and fanaticism, with the help of an orchestra musician, who would rehearse the operas and secretly spread the scores among his friends.

For his opera *Rigoletto*, Verdi hid the aria “La Donna é mobile” (The Woman is Fickle) until the premiere day, afraid that his fans would sing it on the streets and cause it to become public before its opening. The composer believed that, removed from its general context, “La Donna é mobile” could mistakenly suggest that he was an incurable misogynist.

In the following 150 years, the history of art has undergone similar situations. Bridging the gaps, in terms of time and artistic value, we have witnessed an unprecedented countdown. However, the anxious expectation was not due to the arrival of a superhero or Hollywood star. Nor was it related to some digital super production or by the premiere of a new concert of a famous rock star. The euphoria comes from the release of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the film adaptation of the first installment of the already famous erotic trilogy, which has sold more than 100 million copies worldwide.

According to Universal Pictures, in at least 40 markets of the 58 countries that premiered the film, it pre-sold over four million tickets. The unsuccessful attempts to access a copy via the Internet set a new record. Official trailers have been released and shared in thousands of websites and marked a record number of visits.

This outburst resulted in a rush to buy tickets, not only by fans but also by those who didn't even know the book. In this way, the main marketing strategy of the film, whose sales multiplied even before being premiered through the famous word of mouth, was established. Simultaneously, adverse reactions generated. A group of activists reacted against the sadomasochist concept of the film, creating the hashtag *#50dollarsnot50shades* and starting a campaign that suggested viewers donate their \$50 to the victims of any type of abuse, instead of buying tickets for the movie.

Indeed, some people oppose this film because they consider sadomasochism a cover for abuse and gender violence. They believe that real women don't end up married to a loving magnate

like the protagonist of the novel, but in shelters for women, trying to escape from prostitution, or directly dead. Some countries, such as Malaysia, have directly banned the film.

However, if we analyze the book and even the movie, it appears that their reaction is a bit disproportionate.





## Jump to the Cinema

Anastasia Steele is a simple, clumsy, young woman who, much to her own dismay displays all the traits of an adolescent that has been slow to finish. An accidental situation leads her to meet a young magnate. When everything seems to indicate it is a simple romance novel, the sadistic, exotic tastes of the young man -- practiced not under threat but with full consent of his lover -- suddenly emerge.

This detail has led the novel, otherwise repetitive and with a light prose, to treat a worrisome issue for the first time outside of pornographic language. Perhaps it is a novelty to blur the boundaries between the erotic and the pornographic.

The adaptation of a literary text to the big screen may be problematic. However, a good screenplay may be based on a modest novel, as is the case of *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo, a novel practically conceived and developed as a film. In turn, it often occurs that a good literary text becomes disappointing when adapted to cinema.

Nevertheless, in a case like this, in which the novel contains varied and numerous sex scenes, its adaptation presents a complex challenge. How can you explore the issue of sadomasochism while avoiding explicit sex?

It should also be noted that this is a lightweight literary work which, despite its massive success, has an airy and fragile poetic style. That lightness allows the author to explore sexuality with an impudence that brings her close to pornography while narrating a complex story that takes her away from this genre.

In order to promote a correlation between both languages, we propose 50 keys to analyze them.



## **Effective narration**

The film may be more attractive than the book for those who loathe the fragile prose, full of platitudes, which focuses on the “what” more than on the “how.” On the contrary, the novel may be more attractive than the film for those readers who crave simple literary ornamentation, with a progression full of enigmas whose predictability does not prevent it from being intriguing. In broad terms, the narration is effective in both cases; at times, it resembles the endings of some of the most iconic soap operas episodes. The differences between both narrations do not appear to be substantial, perhaps due to the exhaustive creative control E.L. James demanded when she sold the rights to the book.

