

Review: Fifty Shades of Grey (Sam Taylor-Johnson, 2015)



Echoed breaths and riding crops; stylish nudity and a submissive woman – the caustic ingredients for Sam Taylor-Johnson’s cinematic adaptation of E.L. James’ Fifty Shades of Grey. Let’s not pretend we had terribly high hopes for it. The source material was, of course, a twisted and renamed version of an eroticised Twilight fan fiction. In its translation to the screen, it bares resemblance to the gaunt, unfulfilling nature of its inspiration. Fifty Shades of Grey feels more fantasy than erotica. The result of Taylor-Johnson’s hard work? A two hour, tame insight into a relationship that seems more degrading than appealing.

When a student of literature approaches a wealthy businessman for an interview, she wasn’t entirely sure what to expect from him. As an attraction grows, the man unveils the sexual vulnerability in her and she is shaped into the woman she didn’t think she was capable of being.

There’s a major, pressing issue at the centre of Fifty Shades of Grey: the manner in which it degrades women. Outside the bedroom, protagonist Anastasia Steele (a woman majoring in English lit, for Christ’s sake) is reduced to a babbling, socially awkward HBO-like creation. When Anastasia is inside the bedroom, she’s ceaselessly stripped, bound and spanked like some sort of animal in a manner that’s presented as titillating. It’s nonreciprocal, entirely objectifying and uncomfortable to watch. She’s a grotesquely created character – the epitome of backwards progression for women in cinema. That’s not the only questionable moral instance of the film – we’re treated to the revelation that our leading man’s obsession with BDSM comes from his abuse as a teenager at the

hands of his mother's friend. It's brushed off as a succeeded childhood fantasy; not an act of paedophilia.

She's one dimensionally performed by Dakota Johnson – an actress who manages to stumble her way through the film's overlong run time, thinking constantly about her perverted suitor. Jamie Dornan plays the elusive Christian Grey with a little more understanding of his role. Their paired screen time is rarely enjoyable – with one small exception. A scene in which they meet to discuss amendments to a contract that lists what the Dominant (Grey) is permitted to do to the Submissive (Steele). It displays strong willed femininity with glimmers of hope that Fifty Shades turns itself around in a moment of great screenwriting and commendable performances. It doesn't.

Credit can go to the Irish great Seamus McGarvey, for making the film at least look great. Wide shots of expensive penthouses and admittedly well edited 'play room' scenes make it visually appealing. The score by Danny Elfman, is accompanied by a plethora of modern music's most interesting names lending their sound to the film. The rearrangements of Crazy in Love and Haunted by Beyoncé make the senseless sex scenes a little more sumptuous, whilst R&B artist The Weeknd's smooth vocals seem destined for this sort of story.

It's a shame that E.L. James' stringent hand over the film's production results in a visual interpretation of her absurd, sexist story that doesn't dare to try anything different. In the end behind its glossy, sumptuous setting, Fifty Shades of Grey acts as some sort of gross metaphor for domestic violence. Conceptually tired, insensitive and poorly scripted, this could be 2015's highest grossing dud.



Fifty Shades of Grey is released in UK cinemas nationwide on February 13th