

BEATEN, BROKEN AND BURNT–VIOLENCE AGAINST THE BODIES  
OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN THREE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
BESTSELLERS WRITTEN BY WOMEN

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**Abstract**

Three bestsellers published in the last ten years—*Twilight* (2005), *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011)—present an impressive deal of violence against the female body, a fact that demands investigation considering it may shape their readers' views on this. Therefore, this work aims at analyzing the discourses on violence against the female protagonist's body through the study of linguistic features in extracts from those three books. The analysis is done under the light of Critical Discourse Analysis, verifying the discourses embedded in this violence and the repercussions these discourses may have in terms of perpetuating gender stereotypes, especially in literature. More specifically, the focus of this study is on the “justifications” for the violence against women and if these justifications come from and/or consolidate hegemonic ways of thinking regarding this subject.

**Keywords:** Bestsellers; female protagonist body; violence; discourse; Critical Discourse Analysis.

**Introduction**

Feminist literary criticism has long listed the way women are depicted in books as one of the items considered worth of sharp analysis. However, in recent decades a new factor has emerged which has added even more reason for that: the renewed forms and force violence against female bodies has been taking in bestsellers. The justifications for this violence and the reasons behind these justifications vary, but there it is: the female body being beaten, broken, burnt, and all that displayed in words for millions of readers to see.

Three books published in the last ten years have sold impressive numbers of copies, many (maybe most) of these purchased by women and even by teenage girls: *Twilight* (2005), *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011). Besides being works written by female authors, these books also have in common the

fact that the protagonist/narrator is a woman. However, what matters most is that in *all* of them—even if under different circumstances—the heroine<sup>1</sup> is hurt, a fact which demands a closer look if we consider that it may shape the readers' view on violence against women.

Thus, this work aims at analyzing, from a discursive stance, the violence against the female—namely, the protagonist's—body depicted in excerpts of the three *best-sellers* through linguistic cues (more specifically, lexical choices, the use of verbs in the narrative and the relation subject-object of the violence). Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis are used to verify what kinds of discourse are embedded in these excerpts and the repercussions these kinds of discourse may have in terms of perpetuating gender stereotypes—especially in literature—and behavior towards women. More specifically, the focus of the present work is on the “justifications” for this violence and if these justifications

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come from and/or consolidate hegemonic<sup>2</sup>—meaning, patriarchal—ways of thinking regarding this subject.

### Some theoretical considerations

Violence against women is a recurrent theme in the media. However, if it is pretty obvious how serious the theme is, what lies behind it—that is, gender relations and power—sometimes is not so apparent. The United Nations itself recognizes that

violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men [...]. (“Resolution 48/104”, intro.)

Thus, as a matter of unequal power relations, the violence against the female body portrayed in literary works—especially bestsellers, given the number of readers reached by them—certainly needs to be studied, and the discourse which “justifies” this violence identified and exposed.

One of the key concepts that demand clarification, therefore, is *discourse*. According to Fairclough, discourse is not only a social practice: it is both a way for people to act upon the world and especially upon others, as well as a mode of representation. Society is reproduced through discourse and, at the same time, discourse contributes to the transformation of society (63-64). This potential for social change is what makes being aware of the existence of different—and many times conflicting—discourses in circulation very important, and also what establishes the perception and identification of their presence in several social spheres as extremely relevant. If, as Wodak states, “language is not powerful on its own—it gains power by the use powerful people make of it” (10), spreading, crystalizing and perpetuating discourses are ways of both exercising and keeping control over power—that is, a matter of hegemony.

According to Hennesy, the concept of hegemony suggests that “cultural power is not simply exercised from the top down, but instead is exercised and contested through a process of discursive articulation” (76), which makes a critical theory of ideology<sup>3</sup>—including from a feminist standpoint—possible and, at the same time, explains more specifically the dynamics of discourse. One cannot forget, however, that the discursive constitution of society “does not emanate from a free play of ideas in people’s heads, but from a social practice which is firmly rooted in and oriented to real, material social structures” (Fairclough 92). In other words, social practices—including the ones regarding gender issues—are imbricated in our lives and many times remain unseen—perhaps even unquestioned—throughout a person’s lifetime. The fundamental and paramount point is, therefore, to bring these practices to light and, above all, to question them.

Another fundamental concept is *gender*, since gender related issues—especially male hegemony—have historically determined ways of looking at the world in western cultures. Firstly, gender is a concept that crosses several areas and which, despite having its main axis in social sciences, is a constant presence in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). According to Showalter, gender was used, at first, to represent “the social, cultural and psychological meaning imposed upon biological sexual identity”, being different from sex, “which refers to biological identity as female or male” and from sexuality, “which is the totality of an individual’s sexual orientation, preference and behavior” (2). The definition has been approached from different perspectives over time, and one of the latest approaches to it is gender as a *performance*, “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 32). That is complemented by West and Zimmerman, who say gender “is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one *does*, and does recurrently, in interaction with others” (140).

Regarding literature, Showalter calls attention to the fact that one of the most striking changes in the humanities in the 1980s was the rise of gender as

a category of analysis (1), an argument reinforced by Ruthven's assertion that, even in the early days of feminist literary criticism, gender was already acknowledged as "a crucial determinant in the production, circulation, and consumption of literary discourse" (9). The introduction of gender in the field of literary studies started a new era in feminist criticism—until then centered around the category of "women"—since with this new concept it became possible to study the ways all reading as well as writing forms, whether by men or women, are marked by gender, and the discussion opened the way to include other categories of difference—such as race and social class—which inexorably structure our lives and, consequently, texts.

A theoretical framework which helps identifying discourses in literary texts—albeit underused—is *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA). The main goal of this approach is to analyze the use of language, making clear and explicit what is apparently invisible and naturalized in order to achieve social change. The field of work for CDA researchers involves observing the presence of issues like sexism, racism, age and gender discrimination as well as hegemonic domination and power relations in texts, questioning not only the production of these texts, but also the process of reading them. However, CDA does not forget what can be called *linguistic materiality* while uncovering social problems, since ideologies may be hidden in features like vocabulary choices and grammar aspects.

A shallow reading—one which does not go beyond the surface of a text—is not desired when it comes to promoting social change. What is wanted is a reader who reflects upon what is being read, and that involves recognizing the discourses embedded in the text. Iser, for example, regards as the most efficient literary work the one "which forces the reader into a new critical awareness of his or her customary codes and expectations", which "interrogates and transforms the implicit beliefs we bring to it, 'disconfirms' our routine habits of perception and so forces us to acknowledge them for the first time for what they are". Also, as Eagleton states through Iser's words, "rather than merely reinforce our given perceptions, the valuable work of literature violates or transgresses these normative ways of seeing,

and so teaches us new codes for understanding" (68), that is, more than only allowing a resistant reading,<sup>4</sup> a valuable work of literature incites it.

Literary texts are, consequently, an extremely rich source of material to be examined in order to identify ideologies and hegemonic ways of thinking—whether hidden or on display—so rich that some, like Van Dijk, believe that "[c]omplete discourse analysis of a large corpus of text or talk, is therefore totally out of the question" (99). However, this impossibility stated by Van Dijk probably refers to an analysis of *all* discourses found in a text, and not to the amount of material under analysis—that is, a whole book. Nevertheless, Jäger presents a solution to the problem: the concept of *discourse fragment*. A discourse fragment is a text or part of a text that deals with a particular topic, and, within a text, various discourse fragments on the same topic may be found (47). Thus, by sorting out and gathering the related discourse fragments, it becomes possible to analyze the discourse(s) on a certain topic—for example, violence against the female body—within a book, since the amount of material under study is greatly reduced.

In the Western world, regardless the country, discursive patterns regarding gender have become alarmingly similar. The spreading and perpetuation of depictions of gender—even stereotypical ones—may be undoubtedly blamed on the media, and some discursive patterns can be observed when it comes to violence against the female body. As a consequence, these patterns may also be found in literature—especially in bestsellers—being disseminated among a huge number of readers and perhaps finding support in some of them. Eagleton endorses this idea when he states that since language is "a field of social forces which shape us to our roots, it is an academic delusion to see the literary work as an arena of infinite possibility which escapes it" (76). Cranny-Francis agrees on that, and adds that there is an ideological significance in textual practices, that is, the practices and conventions that define and characterize texts for their readers are not neutral: they are encoded with ideological discourses which articulate the socio-historical formation in which the particular text is written (8-9).

If texts can influence the reader's way of thinking, there is the consequent question of what kind(s) of literary text(s) would be more appropriate to exert this influence or would facilitate the conveying of the discourses and ideologies present in them to the readers. Cranny-Francis's answer is that *fiction* is the genre which achieves this feat, for a variety of reasons. One of them is because people like reading fiction, and if what is intended is to reach a large number of people, nothing better than to start by their entertainment. Another reason for the primacy of fiction over other genres when it comes to the circulation of discourses is that it can be "a site for the allegorical description of social injustices displaced in time and/or place from the reader's own society, but still clearly recognizable as a critique of that society" (8-9). As to this critique, Funck reports that, since the end of the 1970s, feminist literary criticism has given extensive attention to the study of the relationship between women—be them reader or writer—and literature. Throughout this process, unknown or forgotten female writers have been "re/dis/covered" and theories of literary production and critique have been challenged and transformed. With that, revealing the misogyny in literature—through a critique not only of male stereotypes about women, but also of the traditional criteria of excellence—has become one of the main goals of feminist literary criticism (10). With this, narrative conventions regarding plot and characters—that is, conventions in which ideals of "femininity" (of appearance, of behavior, etc.) are embedded—started to be questioned as well, since they also have repercussions on readers, especially female ones.

Regarding that, Brownstein says literature not only influences life, but the history of women has been seriously affected by novels, since women have been affected by the "tantalizing, misleading illusion" of a perfect self, that is, by the idea of "becoming a heroine" (xxiv). Girls, prevented from dreaming of becoming generals and emperors, tend to live more and longer in novels than boys do, looking not only for a meaning to their lives, but for a way to become significant themselves (xv). As Brownstein also points out, young readers like to read about heroines in fiction so as to "rehearse possible lives and to imagine a woman's life

as important—because they want to be attractive and powerful and significant, someone whose life is worth writing about" (xxiv).

For that reason, through centuries, countless women have recurred to books looking for significance, and these books—mainly novels—have, in return, somehow determined these women's lives. Generations of girls whose experience was limited by their upbringing, by their education, by their lack of opportunities or by conventions, have used fiction to escape a stifling, boring or chaotic reality and taken from book plots structures they used to organize and interpret their feelings and prospects. These girls have "rushed right from novels, headlong and hopeful, into what they took to be happy endings" and, from their interpretations of the actions of other people to their notions about themselves, their attitudes "have run along lines derived from fiction" (Brownstein xviii).

Such facts added to Funck's assertions that both language and literature contribute to the maintenance or alteration of the *status quo* and that the determination of dominant meanings happens through language, with existing power relations being subject to challenges by oppositional non-hegemonic stances or discourses (23), demonstrate the meaningfulness of this work. In the same way, Bern's belief in the importance of analyzing popular representations of social problems—because individuals draw on these sources when constructing their understandings of issues such as violence against women—(263) establishes the relevance of not only verifying what justifications are given to violence against the female body in recent bestsellers but also of analyzing how they may affect readers.

### **Analysis of the three bestsellers**

All of the three books under study (*Twilight*, *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Hunger Games*) belong to a series. *Twilight* is followed by three more books (*New Moon*, *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn*), *Fifty Shades of Grey* by two (*Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*),<sup>5</sup> and *The Hunger Games* by two as well (*Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*). However, only the first volume of each series was analyzed, since it is where the strongest

impression of the female protagonist is made on readers. As to the material subjected to study, the parts in the books which presented violence against the protagonist's body<sup>6</sup> were extracted and identified with the initials *TW* (for *Twilight*), *SG* (for *Fifty Shades of Grey*), and *HG* (for *The Hunger Games*), followed by a number referring to the order of appearance of that discourse fragment in the text. After that, the discourse fragments underwent the process of analysis.

The analysis focused on linguistic aspects of the discourse fragments, having as its theoretical basis the principles of CDA and as its methodological approach Fairclough's three-dimensional model (see figure 1), chosen both for encompassing dimensions considered by me as essential when some written work is being examined and for providing a systematized procedure to do that, making it easy not only to analyze but to organize and present the data found.

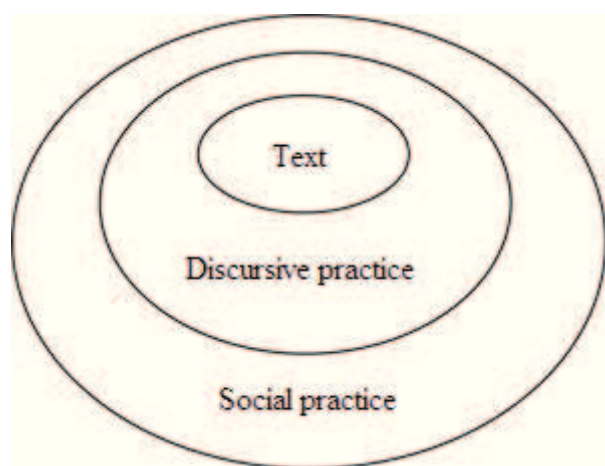


Fig. 1—The three dimensions of discourse according to Fairclough (73)

According to Fairclough (71-73), in the dimension of the *discursive practice* the focus is on the processes of text production, distribution and consumption, whereas in the *social practice* the procedures and practices of social nature of those involved in discourse which are shaped by social structures and power relations. As to the *text*, it is not limited only to its linguistic materiality, but also to its meanings, since signs are socially motivated. It is important to highlight that there is an interactive relationship among the three dimensions;

that is, the connection between text and social practice is mediated by the discursive practice, and the processes of the discursive practice are influenced by the various forms of social practice, with “traces” being left in the text, which become “clues” the interpretative process of the text operates on.

Taking the *discursive practice* and the process of text production to start the analysis of the books focused in this study, it is important to reiterate that all of them are works of female authors: *Twilight* was written by Stephenie Meyer, *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James and *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. After the achievements of feminist literary criticism in both questioning androcentric representations of women and bringing to light female authors, having women as the authors of these best sellers could raise hopes that female characters—especially the protagonist—would receive a different treatment from the one they usually receive from male authors, but, as the text analysis revealed, that is not what happens in two of the books (*Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*). These works present women as clumsy, defenseless and selfless beings, especially regarding violence towards them, which agrees with the hegemonic view of women as inferior to men and dependent on them in order to survive. As to the period in which the books were released, the six-year time span within which *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* were published—respectively in 2005, 2008 and 2011—is not long enough to make a difference in terms of transformations in discourse or social practices, despite the speed in which changes happen nowadays in our world. However, *The Hunger Games*, launched right midway between the years of release of *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, does present some discursive differences regarding violence against the female body compared to the other two, differences which will be dealt with in due time.

Still regarding the production of the texts, one important feature to be mentioned is the *intertextuality* observed between *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*: both female protagonists are saved from death by their heroes and both have recurrent scenes in which they trip and fall down.<sup>7</sup> The presence of this “minor” form of violence, done by the characters to themselves, is

explained by the fact that the author of *Fifty Shades of Grey* admitted having been inspired by *Twilight* (ABC Television), so the tripping and other similarities between the two books do not come as a surprise.

Finally, the three texts were written in first-person point of view, which produces more immediate emotional appeal for readers and an ease of relation between readers and the protagonist, be it by creating an impression of being a friend telling the reader about their own life and experiences or by offering readers a way of “putting themselves in the protagonist’s shoes” and living their lives. Discursively, this brings whatever discourses are present in the text closer to the reader, making them more winsome.

As to the processes of distribution and consumption of the texts, the three books were aimed at different target readers. *Twilight* was written for teenagers/young adults<sup>8</sup> whereas *Fifty Shades of Grey* was intended to be read by a more mature<sup>9</sup> group, and *The Hunger Games* focused on readers at the age of 12 to adult<sup>10</sup>. The actual reading public of these books, however, went beyond the intended one, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for example, although supposed to have adult women as their reading public, was read even by teenage girls and men—a fact verified by my own personal observation –, the latter attracted by the *frisson* caused by the sex scenes. In this sense, *The Hunger Games* was, of the three books, the one which ultimately reached the broadest group—also verified in my own experience: young girls and boys, as well as teenagers and adults of both sexes. This unintended final consumption of the texts has at least two consequences: the most obvious one is that the discourses put into circulation by these books may reach people other than the ones their authors had in mind, and the other one is that the number of people, since more age and sex groups were added to the reading public, was largely increased, so the discourses in the texts were more widely spread. Considering that this study focuses on the violence against female bodies, these facts have, as a consequence, the dissemination of discourses which may favor or condemn it to a greater population.

Finally, regarding the *social practices* found in the books, they are going to be reported along with the

features found in the *text* analysis of the fragments of discourse about each protagonist, which, in its turn, focused mostly on lexical choices and their semantic repercussions and on who performed the violence towards the protagonist’s body (mostly the subject in the sentence). Since the analyses were centered on the protagonists, this is how they will be presented, as follows.

### **The broken—Bella, from *Twilight***

Isabella (Bella) Swan is a high-school student who falls in love with a vampire. She lacks self-confidence, is “naturally” clumsy and, thus, is prone to tripping and falling, as one can see in discourse fragments like *TW1*—“I stammered, blushed, and tripped over my own boots on the way to my seat” (Meyer 17); *TW2*—“I stumbled over a book in the walkway and had to catch myself on the edge of a table” (23); *TW3*—“I tried to keep up better this time through the woods, so naturally I fell a few times. I got some shallow scrapes on my palms, and the knees of my jeans were stained green, but it could have been worse” (117); *TW4*—“I [...] slipped to the ground, landing on my backside. ‘Oh!’ I huffed as I hit the wet ground” (364); *TW5*—“I tripped several times, once falling, catching myself with my hands, scraping them on the sidewalk” (442).

In these fragments, the verbs related to violence towards the female body—to *trip*, to *stumble*, to *slip*, to *fall*, to *hit*—even if they may barely be considered a form of “violence” when compared to other actions, all have Bella as the subject, that is, she is the one performing the violence to herself. The problem in this case, related to the “trips and falls” suffered by the protagonist, is that these verbs put into circulation a discourse which tells readers—especially young, impressionable girls and women—that those are “normal” recurrences and, worst of all, that they may be a valid and effective way of getting the attention and attracting the beloved one<sup>11</sup> (that is, sanctioned *social practices*). Fragments *TW3* and *TW5* even mention “some shallow scrapes on my palms” and “scraping [my hands] on the sidewalk”, and considering that scrapes and cuts rank among the most common self-inflicted wounds, the presence of such a discourse is quite disturbing.

In fragment *TW3*, Bella herself also says that she “naturally” fell and, because of her self-proclaimed clumsiness, one understands that she means “obviously”. Thus, the adverb establishes the protagonist as the kind of heroine who is—or at least feels—inferior to the hero and, because she is constantly getting into trouble, always needs to be saved by him. In other words, she is the “damsel in distress”, what, in terms of gender, is translated as a view of women as incompetent and dependent on men—a very common social practice. This role, as well as its correspondent (and expected) behavior, is one of the many which are traditionally assigned to women and, although the violence described in this and in the other fragments presented so far is almost of no physical consequence, it is discursively significant, since it establishes that, for women, getting hurt is not only natural but also supposed to happen.

The need of being saved that is characteristic of the “damsel in distress” also has discursive repercussions regarding violence against female bodies, since along the plot the heroine often goes through a series of physical ordeals—beatings sometimes included among them—before she is rescued by her savior. In other words, the violence against the female protagonist is, in a sense, “justified” by the plot. In the case of Bella, the thrashing she suffers from the villain vampire, James, before being saved by Edward (the hero) is quite violent, as can be seen in the following fragments: *TW6*—“I didn’t see if he used his hand or his foot, it was too fast. A crushing blow struck my chest—I felt myself flying backward, and then heard the crunch as my head bashed into the mirrors.” (449); *TW7*—“He was over me at once, his foot stepping down hard on my leg. I heard the sickening snap before I felt it.” (450); *TW8*—“His toe nudged my broken leg [...]” (450); *TW9*—“And then something smashed into my face, throwing me back into the broken mirrors. Over the pain of my leg, I felt the sharp rip across my scalp where the glass cut into it.” (450); *TW10*—“He bit her.” (454).

James’s violence towards Bella is much heavier than the one she inflicts on herself, and the words chosen to describe it have a much higher semantic weight as well. They are verbs like *to strike*, *to bash*, *to step down*, *to smash*, *to throw back*, *to cut*, *to bite* and nouns or adjective

+ noun combinations like *crushing blow*, *crunch* (as her head hit a mirror), *sickening snap*, *broken leg*, *sharp rip*, which portray a flogging that leaves the protagonist not only beaten, but cut and broken. All these injuries inflicted on her happened while she was being attacked by a vampire, so it is understandable that she was defenseless or powerless to prevent them. However, it is noticeable and significant that they were caused by a *male* character—whose actions are “obviously justified” by the fact that he wanted to avenge his pride, hurt by Edward—when there was a female vampire, against whom—if the point was hurting Edward by beating or killing his beloved—Bella would be equally defenseless. It is also significant—linguistically and, consequently, discursively speaking—that James, in the position of subject of the sentences, almost manages to get away with the attack, since in *TW6* after saying she “didn’t see if he used his hand or his foot”, Bella then describes what happens but not who does it; in *TW8* it is “his toe” that is mentioned and in *TW9* “something” smashes into Bella’s face, followed by, again, a description of *her* sensations. Only in *TW7* and *TW10* there is a direct reference to James as the doer of the actions with the use of the subject pronoun “he”. So although it is known that he is the perpetrator of those violent acts, the focus is shifted off him (the attacker) to Bella (the victim).

In terms of literary considerations, this shift is suitable, considering that the victim is the “damsel in distress” and, for the plot to be fulfilled, she needs to be in the center of the action—and perilous action—to be saved by the hero. From a discursive point of view, though, the shift not only takes the spotlight off the culprit but also—and that is where gender issues come into the equation—emphasizes women as powerless victims of men, something which is not desirable at all but, at the same time, is what characterizes Bella in the first volume of the *Twilight* series.

### **The beaten—Ana, from *Fifty Shades of Grey***

Anastacia (Ana) Steel is a college student who gets involved in a BDSM<sup>12</sup> relationship with Christian Grey, a powerful young businessman with serious issues regarding power and domination. As mentioned before,

there are many plot similarities between *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, some of them regarding the “trips and falls” of the protagonists: Ana, just like Bella, is “naturally clumsy”—or, as Ana describes herself, “one of the most un-coordinated people in Washington State” (James 280). The following discourse fragments exemplify that: **SG1**—“I push open the door and stumble through, tripping over my own feet, and falling head first into the office.” (7); **SG2**—“[...] I scramble out as soon as the doors slide open, stumbling once, but fortunately not sprawling on to the immaculate sandstone floor” (17); **SG3**—“I walk forward, and I trip, stumbling headlong onto the road” (48).

In all these fragments, Ana is the subject of the sentence—like Bella, she is the one causing harm to herself—and the verbs describe, again, actions which are not excessively violent: *to stumble*, *to trip*, *to fall*, *to scramble*. Discursively, the problem remains the same: these fragments perpetuate a discourse in which those are “normal” recurrences, and hurting yourself may be seen as a sanctioned *social practice*. Ana’s clumsiness also puts her in situations where Christian acts as her savior (when she is almost run over by a bicycle [48] and when her friend José makes an unwanted sexual advance on her [59-60]), which makes Ana a bit of a “damsel in distress” too, reinforcing the discourse of women as in need of male protection.

This is where the similarities end, though. The violence Ana’s body is submitted to—“submission” being the operative word in this case—is of her own accord and not meant to hurt her seriously, only to cause pain, as usually happens in BDSM practices. As to these, even though there are people who do have their pleasure through such practices, there are also people who do not, and who may—especially if they are women—take from discourses such as “beating leads to pleasure”, “submission is mandatory to have someone’s love” and “physical punishment is a natural consequence of contradicting someone” that these are social practices to be followed if one wants to find not only true love, but that in the form of a rich and charming “prince” like Christian Grey—quite a disturbing thought, one has to admit.

Even if there are some who argue that the main theme of the series is “salvation by love”—Ana herself

says, “I had hoped to drag my *Fifty Shades* into the light” (513) —, it is impossible to deny the presence of violence towards the female body in the book. This is shown by the following fragments: **SG4**—“And then his hand is no longer [on my behind]... and he hits me—hard. [...] He hits me again and again, quickly in succession.” (274); **SG5**—“He doesn’t hit me in the same place twice in succession—he’s spreading the pain.” (274); **SG6**—“And he hits me again and again. [...] He continues the unrelenting rhythm. [...] Eighteen slaps in total.” (275); **SG7**—“He turns [my hand] palm up, and before I know it, he swats the center with a riding crop I hadn’t noticed is in his right hand.” (321); **SG8**—“He hits me again across the buttocks. The crop stings this time.” (323); **SG9**—“He lifts his hand and brings it down in a resounding slap against the junction of my thighs, my behind [...]. I note somewhere in my brain that he’s not smacked me as hard as last time.” (365); **SG10**—“A few soft slaps, then building up, left to right and down.” (365); **SG11**—“He spanks me twice more [...].” (365); **SG12**—“Then suddenly, sharply, [the flogger] bites down on my belly. [H]e hits me again. Harder.” (490); **SG13**—“I can’t pull my arms... my legs are stuck... I am held very firmly in place... and again he strikes across my breasts. [...] He hits me across my hip. [...] and he rains down blows on me.” (491); **SG14**—[The blow] comes hard, snapping across my backside, and the bite of the belt is everything I feared. [...] He hits me again, and the pain pulses and echoes along the line of the belt. [...] The belt cuts into my flesh again. (505); **SG15**—[...] this is harder than I thought—so much harder than the spanking. He’s not holding anything back. [...] I yell as the belt bites me again, and now the tears are streaming down my face. [...] He hits me again. [...] My backside feels as if it’s on fire. ‘Six,’ I whisper as the blistering pain cuts across me again, and I hear him drop the belt behind me.” (506).

Regarding the subject of the sentences in the fragments, in most of them Grey is referred to by the pronoun “he” and is, thus, held responsible by the violence—even if sometimes the focus is shifted with the replacement of the direct reference to him by “his hand” (**SG4**), “the crop” (**SG8**), “the flogger” (**SG12**), “the blow” (**SG14**) and “the belt” (**SG14** and **SG15**).



Ana appears as the subject only when she is reporting her feelings or her physical sensations; in most of the fragments she is the object of the verb—that is, the recipient of the action—and in both positions she is portrayed as a helpless victim.

The verbs used to describe Grey's actions are quite vicious—to *hit*, to *spread* (*the pain*), to *swat*, to *lift/bring down* (*his hand*), to *smack*, to *spank*, to *strike*, to *rain down* (*blows*)—even when the subject is something used by him: the crop *stings*, the flogger and the belt *bite*, the blow *snaps*, the belt *cuts*. Also, even though these verbs appear mixed with others which “soften” the violence—like to *caress*, to *fond*, to *smooth*—to describe the frequent BDSM behavior of alternating the giving/suffering of pain and pleasure, and Ana is not seriously injured—at least not like Bella—it is undeniable that violence is present and is—especially in **SG15**—quite heavy. Also, the acknowledged support to the social practice of using violence as a form of punishment—especially to “discipline” a woman—in a text with such popularity is something to be considered with the utmost care, for it may not only perpetuate but also consolidate this practice despite the people involved being BDSM practitioners or not.

Whether it was for love—to “save” Christian Grey from the dark place where his soul was—or for pleasure, Ana willingly surrenders herself to being subjected to violence, and that is quite a dangerous discourse to spread around for millions of people to read. Even if BDSM relationships are—or at least are supposed to be—based on the trust that no one gets (seriously) hurt, there is always the potential danger that things will not happen as expected or that violence may get out of control. And even if at the end of this book Ana walks away from it all loathing the violence she suffered, readers know that when the series is over she gets her prince, crystallizing the discourse that being beaten may be a price worth paying in order to have a “happy ending”.

### **The burned—Katniss, from *The Hunger Games***

*The Hunger Games*, despite the age group it is aimed at, is the book among the three ones under analysis which displays more—and the most aggressive—

violence against the female body. Its protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, is a sixteen-year-old girl who volunteers to replace her younger sister as a participant in the Hunger Games, a televised event in which the contestants are forced to face perilous situations and ultimately fight one another to the death in an outdoors arena. In the dystopian, post-apocalyptic world where the plot happens, Katniss—differently from the other two protagonists under study—does not count on anybody but herself to survive, assuming throughout the story that she is her own “savior”—a novel social practice in itself. During the Games, Katniss is confronted with various forms of physical distress—hunger, thirst, poisoning, injuries—, but she goes through all of them not because the plot demands that she be a helpless girl who needs to be saved or because she has to be humbled so as to please her beloved and win his love: she suffers it all to stay alive, in a relentless way. In her own words, “Every step is an effort, but I refuse to stop” (Collins 169), and it is through stances like this that *The Hunger Games* has garnered an American Library Association's Amelia Bloomer recommendation for feminist fiction (Henthorne 18).

Katniss stumbles, trips and falls, just like Bella and Ana, but it is not due to a “natural clumsiness”. It is the result of trying to survive, as shown in the following fragments: **HG1**—“I've stumbled repeatedly and managed to regain my feet, but when the stick slides out from under me, I finally tumble to the ground unable to get up.” (170); **HG2**—“Somehow my fumbling fingers release the buckle and I fall to the ground in a heap, still snarled in my sleeping bag.” (172); **HG4**—“How long I scramble along dodging the fireballs I can't say, but the attacks finally begin to abate.” (176); **HG8**—“Holding tightly to my bow and arrows, banging into trees that appear out of nowhere, tripping and falling as I try to keep my balance” (194); **HG15**—“I crash into the trees, repeatedly swiping away the blood that's pouring into my eye, fleeing like the wild, wounded creature I am” (291). Kat is the subject in these sentences, but the “justification” behind the actions expressed by verbs like to *stumble*, to *tumble*, to *fall*, to *bang*, to *trip*, to *crash* is not to gain attention as with Bella and Ana. The discourse perceived in these fragments does not

support violence against oneself as something valid and acceptable, and presents stumbling, tripping and falling as sheer consequences of physical exertion—in this case, in order to survive. It is interesting to notice how Katniss describes herself in **HG15** (a “wild, wounded creature”), for it goes against the typical representation of a female protagonist, usually delicate and fragile. Also, it is not a ruse to attract pity to herself, but rather a statement of her condition—even if the final result is sympathy from the reader towards her.

Verbs of higher semantic weight describing the violence towards the protagonist appear in these fragments: **HG3**—“And I run, choking, my bag banging against my back, my face cut with branches that materialize from the gray haze without warning.” (172); **HG5**—“The fireball crashes into the ground at my side, but not before it skids across my right calf. [...] My calf is screaming, my hands covered in red welts.” (176); **HG6**—“I almost faint at the sight of my calf. The flesh is a brilliant red covered with blisters. [...] The burned area is about the size of my hand.” (179); **HG7**—“A stabbing pain shoots through my knee and I know one [tracker jacker wasp] has found me and the others will be honing in. [...] I feel a second sting on the cheek, a third on my neck, and their venom almost immediately makes me woozy.” (190); **HG10**—“The impact with the hard-packed earth of the plain knocks the wind out of me. [...] I manage to shield my face with my arms as shattered bits of matter, some of it burning, rain down around me.” (222); **HG11**—“I place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody.” (223). Katniss is cut, burned, stung by poisonous wasps and deafened by an explosion and, still, nobody is mentioned as the one to blame—except for the burn on her calf, known by readers to have been the result of fire sent by the organizers of the Games. The subject of the sentences vary—Kat herself, the fireball, her calf, a stabbing pain, the impact with the ground, her hand—but ultimately everything points to her. Discursively, this has a double effect: she is put in evidence, since she is in the center of the narrated events, but her attackers—the organizers of the Games—get away with an impressive amount of violence, as proven by noun and adjective phrases like

“face cut with branches”, “brilliant red [flesh] covered with blisters”, “stabbing pain”, “bloody [hand]”, which describe how hurt she is.

One attacker, however, is named and, interestingly enough, it is a female: Clove, another competitor. She is responsible for the most direct—and perhaps most violent—assault on Katniss, as can be seen in these fragments: **HG12**—“I’m turning to fire [an arrow] again when the second knife catches me in the forehead. It slices above my right eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, filling my mouth with the sharp, metallic taste of my own blood. [...] And then Clove slams into me, knocking me flat on my back, pinning my shoulders to the ground, with her knees.” (284); **HG13**—“Clove jams her fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice.” (285); **HG14**—“I attempt to bite her hand, but she grabs the hair on the top of my head, forcing me back to the ground” (285).

Since Clove and Kat are involved in a fight, it is natural that the subject of the sentences alternates between them, but what is striking here are the verbs used to report the action: *to fire (an arrow)*, *to slice*, *to open a gash*, *to send a gush*, *to blind*, *to slam*, *to knock flat*, *to jam (a fist)*, *to bite*, *to grab (hair)*. They all carry a sizeable charge of violence, which, in terms of discourse and traditional views of gender—including in literature—is not usual, since displays of aggressive behavior are destined to male characters. Two girls involved in such a clash and causing injuries to another female’s body spreads a new discourse, one which authorizes female characters to go beyond the roles of victim and of “damsel in distress” and allows them not only to defend their bodies, but to be performers of violence in order to do so. Katniss is, then, in equal terms with her male counterparts in the story, not being more persecuted or exempted for being a woman, which is an unconventional social practice in itself.

As to the results of the violence suffered by the protagonist’s body, Katniss lists them in the following fragment: **HG9**—“And then there are my wounds to contend with — burns, cuts, and bruises from smashing into the trees, and three tracker jacker stings, which are as sore and swollen as ever” (198). Even though she

carries these wounds as war trophies, proof that she fought and survived it all, they are all erased by the organizers of the Games, as reported by the heroine: “I start to sit up but am arrested by the sight of my hands. The skin’s perfection, smooth and glowing. Not only are the scars from the arena gone, but those accumulated over years of hunting have vanished without a trace. My forehead feels like satin, and when I try to find the burn on my calf, there’s nothing” (351). With that, the new stance of a woman towards the violence against her body—that is, a discourse which admits suffering violence as a result of fighting to survive and, most importantly, of fighting in equal terms with men—is metaphorically erased when Kat’s scars are removed. Her scars, a statement not only of her surviving the violence and winning over it but of her own personal history, are taken from her, just like, throughout centuries, women’s victories and women’s history have been lessened and suppressed. Katniss is, ultimately, cleaned up to fit the hegemonic standards, despite the progressive discourses she presented along the story.

### Final remarks

After the analysis of the fragments from *Twilight*, *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Hunger Games* some interesting facts have emerged. For example, as to injuries caused to the protagonists by others, it was possible to observe a tendency to keep the focus off the real causers of the violence by changing the subject of the sentences either to the female protagonist under attack and her feelings/sensations or, when the attacker was a man, by substituting a name/pronoun reference to him for a part of his body or an instrument used to perform the violence, thus reducing the charge of blame on him. As to self-inflicted injuries, the verbs used to describe them portray milder forms of violence—which is not surprising, since most human beings’ self-preservation instinct acts as a restrainer –, but for injuries caused by other people, the verbs present a higher semantic weight due to the viciousness expressed by them—and such viciousness against the female body is most disturbing.

Some other recurrences were also found, and they may constitute discursive patterns to be observed in

other literary works. One of them is that mild, self-inflicted forms of violence, like stumbling, tripping and falling, are practices socially accepted when credited to a “natural clumsiness” of women—even if there is an ulterior motive for that, such as attracting the attention of others (especially the beloved one). Another pattern found is related to the justifications for the female protagonist’s body suffering violence from other characters—and mainly from men. The justifications are related to plot conventions and the roles destined to female characters: she is the “victim” who needs to be saved (like Bella) or who sacrifices herself for love (like Ana). Even though Ana can be looked at from a slightly different angle—the suffering of violence for pleasure—the main point is that, despite the female authorship, there is a perpetuation of the discourse that a woman being hurt is “justifiable”—because she is helpless, because she is selfless (and suffers violence for love) or because she wants it for pleasure.

These recurrences are explainable not only because both *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades* are romances, but also because, as Russ points out, the stories express the attitudes, the beliefs, the expectations, and above all the plots, that are “in the air”, already in circulation. They are “dramatic embodiments of what a culture believes to be true—or what it would like to be true” (Russ 4). However, considering the books analyzed were written by women, the presence of these discourses reveals that they are so deeply imbricated in the way of thinking of the whole society that even those who should contest such discourses keep them alive—which means they need to continue being challenged.

Some hope, however, can be found in *The Hunger Games*. Even if at the end of it the hegemonic prescriptions prevail—the heroine is “beautified” and the violence she went through hidden from view –, Katniss presents a new discourse regarding the female protagonist, one in which suffering violence is justifiable only as a consequence of fighting to survive. As Henthorne states, “in the end it is all about Katniss and the ways she comes to define herself and her own destiny” (62). Also, in *The Hunger Games* women are elevated from a traditional role where they are helpless victims of violence to one where they actually resort

to it to protect themselves when necessary, so perhaps in the future we may see more female protagonists of bestsellers not suffering violence against their bodies, but sending a clear message that they will not take it passively and be beaten, broken or burnt anymore.

#### Notes

1. *Heroine* is used in this work as a synonym for “main character” or “protagonist”.
2. Fairclough considers *hegemony* as a process through which a dominant group exerts domination by establishing values and beliefs known by everybody. In Fairclough’s words, “[h]egemony is the power over society as a whole of one of the fundamental economically-defined classes in alliance with other social forces” (92)
3. In this work, *ideology* is considered as “the ways in which what we say or believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in” (Eagleton 13). Also, ideology is not “simply the deeply entrenched, often unconscious beliefs which people hold, [but] more particularly those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power” (13).
4. *Resistant reading* is a concept from feminist literary criticism, and it means reading in a critical way, consciously resisting the mainstream and hegemonic discourses.
5. After this article was written, another volume was released: *Grey: Fifty Shades of Grey as Told by Christian*.
6. Due to space limitations, the fragments under analysis refer only to the *physical* violence towards the protagonists.
7. Bella, trips three times in *Twilight* (Meyer 17, 23, 442), whereas Ana trips four times in *Fifty Shades* (James 10, 19, 46, 309); Bella falls three times (Meyer 117, 364, 442), Ana twice (James 10, 46).
8. Information available at the publisher’s site: <http://www.hachettebookgroup.com/authors/stepheniemeyer-teen/>.
9. Information available at the publisher’s site: <http://knopfdoubleday.com/book/222129/fifty-shades-of-grey/>.
10. Information available at the publisher’s site: <http://mediaroom.scholastic.com/hungergames>
11. Self-inflicted wounds—including injuries from falls—are manifestations of a psychological disorder called *parasuicide* by some authors and which is relatively

common among teenagers and even adults. A British study reported that 2% of people who hurt themselves said they had done it deliberately, without suicidal intent, and over half (56%) had done it to draw attention to themselves—which is usually the case with young people (Meltzer, Lader et al 28). The online version of the teenage magazine *Glamour* even “advertised” this way of getting attention, with its author saying “The last time I hurt myself was two winters ago, when I slipped on ice and broke my elbow. I wore a sling for a few weeks and let me tell you, I was IRRESISTIBLE to boys” (Lester 2009).

12. *BDSM* is an acronym for “Bondage and Discipline, Sadism and Masochism”, a relationship in which people take on a role of Dominant or Submissive. It may involve some type of restriction (Bondage) and rules set by the Dominant which, if not followed properly by the Submissive, demand punishment to her/him (thus the Sadism and Masochism part) through some sort of Discipline.

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Recebido em: 04/07/2015

Aceito em: 22/09/2015

