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**WHY SO NEGATIVE? STREET LITERATURE AND ITS NEGATIVE EFFECTS
ON THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PSYCHE**

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate School of
Texas Southern University

By

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2021

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**WHY SO NEGATIVE? STREET LITERATURE AND ITS NEGATIVE EFFECTS
ON THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PSYCHE**

By

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Professor Michael Sollars, Advisor

Urban literature, more widely known as street lit is a genre of literature that glorifies and exaggerates drugs, violence, and sex in the lives of its African American characters. Through Street lit readers are introduced to the black man as a figure of power through illegal activity in his community, and black women as either overly aggressive or figures in need of protection. These novels choose loyalty over family, drugs, and athleticism over education, and money and power over morality. These novels and their glorifications cause African American people to see dream lives in goals that are not only unattainable but also morally incongruent with the vision of African American life that African Americans want to project. Instead of aiming to show that African Americans are not the aggressive and dangerous people that society believes them to be, these novels instead portray the lives of these characters as somewhat desirable. This emphasizes making “fast money”. This turns the characters away from legal employment until a business can be introduced to clean the money, such is the case in *The Cartel* trilogy. This lifestyle that the characters live invites readers to sympathize with literal criminals because of the glorification of their profession and home lives. This paper aims to show

the way that Street Lit glorifies negative tropes of African American people and makes them seem desirable despite the lack of a moral compass in its characters.

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VITA

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DEDICATION

To the parents who told me I could: I did it. Thank you for believing in me. I may have done the work, but you got me here. I love you. To the two little boys looking up to me, you can do it too. You will do it too. Believe me, you got it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Carla Brailey, Dr. Iris Lancaster, and Dr. Charlene Evans for their support, constructive advice, and encouragement during my time at Texas Southern University.

I am also very grateful to Dr. Michael Sollars, for all of his feedback and guidance in my research. He worked tirelessly to ensure I was able to obtain assistance and clarification on my thesis preparations. I am forever grateful for the support in this unusual endeavor. Thank you.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Street lit gained its popularity in the mid-90s after the success of *The Coldest Winter Ever* a novel written by a popular activist and rapper, Sister Soulja (Cottenet). This genre of literature encompasses tales of “hood” life in which the protagonists rise the ranks in the drug dealing profession from corner boy to kingpin. These novels typically focus heavily on drugs, sex, and loyalty as key points in the development of the novel. These novels take the focus off of education and put it on money and power through status and respect in an unattainable and dangerous profession. This leads many African American readers to find desirability in the characters that they connect with through their reading. The novels glorify street life in the way that people that live the life never would. Constance Shabazz, who runs an online bookstore states, “Most folks ain’t living that life in the hood, and even those who are don’t see the glamor in it” (Rice). The literature glorifies the gritty and dangerous life of a drug dealer, by showing the characters decked out in designer clothing, living in large homes, and letting those that they employ take the fall for their illegal activities, keeping them rich and safe from interactions with the law. In comparison, many romance novels written by Euro-American authors show their male characters as wealthy businessmen even though their lives start in similar ways to the characters in African American authored novels. A great example of this is Christian Grey in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy. Though he begins his life as the child of a drug-addicted mother and an absent father, he makes his fortune, not through the drug trade, but through business and trade. Grey makes his fortune legally

and amasses an outstanding amount of wealth without having the trouble of worrying over the legalities and morality. Whereas in *The Cartel* characters are constantly looking over their shoulders to ensure that they are not being watched by the FBI or being betrayed by one of their own. The male characters in these novels live similar lives attained by different means. Young Carter drives the nicest cars, wears the “freshest” clothing, and lives in a beautiful home all of which were bought with drug money. As the oldest, but newest member of the Diamond family, Carter takes over running the cartel and brings in his friends from Michigan to stop a war all while falling for a woman who is unbeknownst to Carter intertwined in the war that his family has been fighting.

In the *Cartel* novels, written by Ashley and JaQuavis Coleman, the main characters, three siblings, Breeze and her twin older brothers Mecca and Monroe, find out about their father’s illegitimate son, Young Carter, during a turf war, and must work together to keep their money coming in, while simultaneously trying to get used to their new older brother and a life without their father. In the beginning, the transition runs smoothly, their main issue besides the turf war being one of the siblings' short-lasting animosity towards his newfound elder brother, but things quickly begin to derail after a lie throws them back into the turf war that had been brought to a truce between the two cartels. Through this storyline, the reader is made to connect with Young Carter as he takes on the responsibility of guiding his younger brothers and sister in the absence of their father, even though his intention was never to leave his hometown of Flint, Michigan, where he had his operation going. This storyline negates the nature over nurture argument because the siblings were raised in a wealthy lifestyle in which their father handled the illegal aspects of the business to give them a better life free of drugs,

and their brother lived in a household without a father in the picture and turned to selling drugs to make money. Though all of the characters went to college, their education is only mentioned in passing, not given enough attention to glorifying college life over street life but instead glorifying the life that could be had without it.

Through the characters in the book, readers are meant to connect with the characters that look like them and live the lavish lives they want to live. My work focuses on the negative aspects of some of the stereotypes written in the novels. The idea of the fatherless son being one of these stereotypes. Though there are statistics that show the reasons for many men's inability to be there for their children, such as mass incarceration and death, that is not the case in many of these novels. For example, Young Carter's father was not aware of the existence of his child until the boy was ten years old. When Carter Sr. does find out about his son, he makes the conscious decision to stay out of his life and only support him monetarily, claiming that the reason was the safety of the child.

Novels like *The Cartel* glorify children beating the odds to become better than the parent they did not have. Young Carter is the only one of Carter's four children who is strong enough and capable enough to take over the cartel after the death of their father. The view being expressed here is that children without fathers are stronger than children with fathers. This shows readers that fathers are not necessary in a child's life and can become a hindrance. Young Carter is so strong and so smart because the streets taught him everything his father was not able to teach his other three children. Young Carter is stronger because of the lack of a fatherly presence in his life, whereas his siblings are dependent upon their father and too weak to survive in the world without him. This idea that the father weakens the child makes fathers seem useless, which statistics show is not

the case. The text will later delve into the importance of the father figure in a child's life and show the negative impacts of an absent father. These negative impacts will mostly be seen in the life of E.L. James' character, Christian Grey. White romance literature shows how fathers are essential for the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of their children. Christian Grey falls under many of the statistics shown for children without fathers in his first four years of life, and these issues continue until his adulthood.

Whereas street literature undermines the importance of African American fathers in the lives of their children, white romance literature shows that the rejection of a child by either parent hinders the physical, emotional, and mental growth of the said child. This work aims to show the effect of these glorifications on the black psyche. John Oliver Killen defines the term black psyche as someone's "entire outlook on life" (Lehman, 83). He later goes on to explain that he believes that "people throughout the world, based on their cultural and historic backgrounds, have different psyches" (Lehman, 83). This means that African American and Euro American peoples see the world differently based on their past experiences in America. This is shown in the text of both of the novels. In a 2016 Census Bureau data analysis, data collected showed that "The percentage of White children under 18 who live with both parents almost doubles that of Black children, according to the data. While 74.3 percent of all White children below the age of 18 live with both parents, only 38.7 percent of African-American minors can say the same" (Prince). Though this data does not detail the reasons that many African American males are not in the home, or the fact that not living in a two-parent household does not always mean that the child is growing up fatherless, the research does show that one-parent households in African American homes are normalized more than those of White

Americans. Because of this, it is seen as a “norm” in African American culture taking away the negative statistical aspects and creating “normal” children, whereas in the white culture one-parent households are rarer creating negative problems to arise. The effect of the fatherless home in the novels works to show that fathers are not necessary because mothers can take the burden of raising a child alone and make them better in the end, where the novels should be pushing for father-child interaction and showing that fathers are necessary. Street literature novels make fathers unnecessary, showing readers that the African American father is not needed for anything more than the money that he can provide and that African American children are better off without them.

Another negative perception of African American people forced upon the readers of some street literature novels is the colorism that runs rampant through the African American community. Colorism is everywhere, especially in American mainstream media. So many of our African American artists are light-skinned. Biracial actress and singer Zendaya spoke on colorism in Hollywood, stating “As a black woman, as a light-skinned black woman, it's important that I'm using my privilege, my platform to show you how much beauty there is in the African-American community,” (Murray). She goes on to say that “I am Hollywood's, I guess you could say, acceptable version of a black girl and that needs to change. We're vastly too beautiful and too interesting for me to be the only representation of that. [It's] about creating those opportunities. Sometimes you have to create those paths. And that's with anything, Hollywood, art, whatever” (Murray). Zendaya uses her light-skinned privilege to bring attention to the negative views society has on darker-skinned black women. She talks about how she, as a light-skinned woman, is privileged, not just in the industry but in the world as a whole.

The suggestion that light-skinned people are better than dark-skinned people can be seen within the text of *The Cartel* and many other street literature novels. These dark-skinned versus light-skinned character descriptions relate to the characteristics of the characters they are given to. Such as one twin being darker than the other and also more dangerous. This will also apply to the women in the novel, not only Breeze, the only sister in the sibling group, but Miamor, the woman Young Carter falls in love with after moving to Miami, the setting of the novel. The descriptions of each of the characters become a sort of personality trait. The darker the skin the more sinister the person as seen with the twins.

Throughout history, light-skinned people have been given more privileges than their darker-skinned counterparts. During pre emancipation, they were given roles in the house instead of the grueling tasks of the fields. Post emancipation they were given better job opportunities and opportunities for advancement. This ensured that light-skinned individuals had more money and were higher classed than darker-skinned African Americans. White people's preference for light-skinned individuals caused a separation between the races in which one side considered themselves to be better than the other. In Walter Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*, Emma Lou Morgan's family believed that to be successful and worth anything in their country they needed to lighten their family line. The women only had children by light-skinned men and the men only had children with light-skinned women all in the hopes that each child would come out lighter than their parents until eventually there was very little semblance of blackness in them. When Emma Lou came out dark like her dark-skinned father, her entire family looked down on her. They made sure that she knew that if she was a man her color would not be as bad,

but as a woman, her coloring made her unattractive (Thurman). This idea of blackness as a negative was so ingrained in her that the only men she actively sought out were light-skinned men in an attempt to lighten her family line in a way that her mother failed to do for her.

Readers can see through the text that dark skin is still seen as a negative. All of the darker-skinned protagonists in the texts are worse people than the light-skinned characters. Though Mecca, the biracial brother, is more trigger happy, he does not have the smarts to be capable of real danger like his older brother, Young Carter. Young Carter is able to take over the cartel over both of his younger brothers because he is smarter than both of the twins and more ruthless than Mecca. In the context of the novel, being ruthless is not necessarily a bad thing, but it connotes darkness in dark-skinned people making them seem like bad people in real life.

To further the problematic idea of image in the novel, there is also a sense of body dysmorphia in the novel. The female characters are all described as voluptuous with light-colored eyes. Making readers feel that to be considered beautiful they must be light-skinned, or be dark-skinned with Euro-American features that make them look exotic in the male gaze. This can make some readers feel that they must alter themselves to be considered beautiful.

That is not the case in white romance novels. Ana Steele in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy is not overly beautiful. That is not to say that she is not pretty, but she does not have the type of beauty that makes people want to alter themselves to fit the mold. Her flaws are described in the text. She is described as slim with eyes too large for her face. Ana is used to show the average woman that she is worthy of the same love that

Ana and Christian have. Though Christian was attracted to her in the beginning for the wrong reasons he did love her in the end and it had nothing to do with how “exotic” or full-figured she was even though their relationship was based on sex.

The authors do not solely focus on the physical aspects of the characters however, they show the negative expression of emotions in the African American community. The novel shows how showing emotions, especially toward the women in their lives, causes the African American male characters of *The Cartel*'s lives to spiral. After the characters begin showing affection to the women in their lives bad things tend to happen. One is arrested, two are murdered, and one is put on a hit list by his own family after reacting badly to the betrayal of a girlfriend. The text shows black male readers that emotions are a hindrance and that to be considered real men they have to keep every emotion except anger to themselves.

This differs from the way that Christian Grey is treated in the Fifty Shades trilogy. When Ana forces him to open up to her, his world becomes better. He now has someone to share his life with and he is slowly healing from the trauma of the past with her by his side. The love of a woman, and showing her love in return made Christian's life better, whereas loving Miamor sent Young Carter to prison for a short amount of time.

This work aims to compare the way that street literature affects the African American psyche as compared to white romance literature and its effect on the white psyche. And attempts to answer the question of why one genre focuses so heavily on the negative aspects of a certain culture and keeps past views of what people should be and how they should act, while the other is all about past trauma and learning to heal in healthy ways.

CHAPTER 2

THE (NOT SO) ABSENTEE FATHER

Statistics show that children that grow up without fathers are more likely to face poverty, teen pregnancy, behavioral problems, child abuse, substance abuse, incarceration, childhood obesity, crime, and a lack of education. (National). This proves true for the protagonist in *The Cartel*, as well as Christian Grey in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. As we delve into the characters and their roles in their perspective novels, the reader will see that although the text does not heavily focus on the relationships between the characters and their fathers, the absence of their fathers does shape the characters' lives and actions throughout the text.

From the very first introduction of Young Carter, it is obvious that he resents his father, Carter Sr., for leaving his family. Young Carter finds out about the death of his father and though he's never met him, decides to pay his respects and make peace with the man he never met. Young Carter becomes the focal point at his father's funeral as none of his siblings were ever told of his existence. Young Carter is without a doubt the offspring of the Diamond siblings father, Carter Sr. made obvious through Young Carter's striking resemblance to him. After an altercation at the church with a rival cartel, Young Carter is pressured to stay and help the family through the difficulties of the war that is still brewing after his father's death. It is during this pressuring that Young Carter is told that his mother kept his birth from his father and that his father did not know about him until he was ten years old. He is then told that his father paid for the car he drove after graduation and the house that he lived in when his mother moved them out of "the

hood.” After this bit of information is shared Young Carter is less reluctant to stay around for his family. This informative section of the novel works to villainize the mother and glorify the father. Carter Sr. is an innocent party in his absence from his son's life while his bitter mother did what she could to keep the two apart while taking financial assistance from an already married Carter Sr (Ashley, 54-58).

There is a glorification of Carter Sr. in the novel. He is the father who could do no wrong, the faithful husband, and the untouchable leader. Even after Young Carter is introduced this view of him does not change. The authors try to justify Carter Sr.'s absence in his son's life and vilify his mother to ensure that Carter Sr. kept the image of savior throughout the novel. However, the portrayal of Young Carter can be considered a positive to some readers, especially young readers.

Young Carter fits the alpha male trope. He is strong, smart, and handsome, with stronger leadership qualities than his younger brothers who were raised by a leader of drug Kingpin. Young Carter displays all of this without ever knowing his father. Leading some readers to believe that fathers are not a necessity in a child's life.

Allyssa L. Harris, an assistant professor at the Cornell School of Nursing notes that “approximately 25-50 percent of younger African-American adolescent girls, but very few adolescent boys, read these novels and they, the participants, began reading them when they were 12 or 13 years of age” (Harris). Adolescent girls reading these novels during puberty and the beginning of their sexual development are taught that strength comes from the mother and that disregarding the father is better for the child's development. Through many Street literature novels, it seems that fathers are detrimental to the health of the child. For example, Carter Sr. raises his two younger sons, and one

murders the other over a woman. Though the target audience for Street literature is women aged 18 to 44, Harris proves that younger readers get ahold of the novels through family members and peers, and notes that while older readers were able to discern the difference between fiction and reality, the younger readers are thought to have believed the portrayal of women through the novels to be true (Harris).

In the novel, the authors of *The Cartel* inform the reader through Young Carter, that his father came to every one of his football games and supported him monetarily but for the safety of Young Carter and his mother, Carter Sr. had to keep his son at a distance. Even though this explanation did not change the way Young Carter felt about his father, he later gained respect for the man who left his mother to raise him alone. Young Carter says “My mother couldn’t teach me how to be a man. I turned to the streets for guidance. My father came to my games, but he wasn’t the one to show me how to throw the football” (Ashley, 58). This shows the reader that although Carter lived a privileged life thanks to his father's funding of his lifestyle he was still forced to look to the streets for survival. Young Carter learns that his father moved him and his mother out of their old neighborhood and into a bigger and nicer home in a safer place. This interference from his father saved him from living a life in the impoverished neighborhood he came from in Flint, Michigan, proving that children without fathers are more likely to live in poverty because though his father was not present, his monetary support is his way of being in his son's life. This does not however save him from the other statistics. As an adult, Young Carter, like his father, is a drug dealer, meaning he commits crime for a living and is for a time incarcerated for his role in the Cartel as its leader. From the text, however, it seems as though Young Carter did not have much of a

choice in what his profession would have been with or without his father in his life. Both of Young Carter's younger brothers also sold drugs, and their father was present in their lives. But with his father in his life, Young Carter would have had more of a chance to do something legal and live a better and safer life than the one that his father lived. This is shown early in the first novel. Carter Sr. tells his two younger sons that he sells drugs so that they do not have to. Carter Sr. never wanted his children to follow in his footsteps but his younger sons wanted the same respect and power they saw people give to their father. Though it is not clear how the twins ended up working for the cartel it is obvious that they chose to do so, they were not forced as Young Carter believed he was.

Young Carter feels the absence of his father and turns to the drug dealers on the streets to teach him what he felt should have been taught to him by his father. Although the reader does not get much of a glimpse into Young Carter's past as was the case with his younger siblings, the reader can infer that this involvement caused some trouble at home. Young Carter's mother worked as a nurse and moved him out of their old "hood" in Flint to keep Young Carter safe and off the streets. His involvement likely caused tension in the house which could have been perceived as a behavioral issue with his mother. This theory would prove the statistic to be true. With a present father, it is plausible to assume that Young Carter would have had no reason to turn to the streets, and living with his mother he would not have seen as much of the drug-dealing trade that his younger brothers did, so the money, power, and respect likely would not have attracted him in the way that it did his siblings. The reader cannot know this for sure, but by the time the reader is introduced to Young Carter he is running the drug game in Flint and is only twenty-five so it would not be too much of a leap to assume that he started

selling young, most likely his early to mid-teenage years. His introduction to street life is said to have come from the absence of his father and his search for the male guidance that his mother was unable to provide him. This is the author's way of blaming Carter Sr. for his son's involvement in the streets which in the context of the novel is not a bad thing. However, the blame of African American men for the state of African American communities is also a common theme in Street literature. Though in the genre it is not always a bad thing, this projection of America's negative thoughts of African American men projects into the reading making readers feel that African American men that are not in the home with their children, no matter how involved they are in their children's lives, are the reasons for the state of all African American communities. Saeed Richardson in his article *Breaking Myths About Black Fatherhood This Fathers Day* states that "This viewpoint about black fatherhood is a well-established structure of thought, with a host of supporting beliefs that reinforce it like rebar in a concrete slab: society is devastated because the majority of African American fathers are not at home nor involved in the lives of their children. The solution, therefore, is for black men to return to their responsibilities. These statements are stereotypes, fabrications and completely wrong" (Richardson). While this viewpoint in the text of the article shows that African American fathers are in the home and that their position in the home is necessary, within the context of the novels the absence of a father is a good thing. The absence of a father almost guarantees success, because strong mothers raise strong men, that will one day show that alpha male strength as a kingpin, this kingpin will become rich and live the life of luxury that someone with a father will struggle to get or keep, as is the case with the Twins in *The Cartel*.

The lifestyles of the characters of *The Cartel* are glorified in a way that makes it seem as though this lifestyle is one to strive for, not one to avoid, so Young Carter's involvement in the drug trade is not necessarily seen as a negative thing in the novels. Sherrod Tunstall states that "Many of the authors who write in the Urban Literature genre say they're not trying to glorify it; they write it because they don't want to see readers in the street, and want readers to see that it's not good to be a drug dealer or a prostitute" (Baker). It is difficult for a reader to consider this being true with this series of novels. The authors manage to glorify the lifestyle so well that even Young Carter's stint in prison does not seem to make him want to leave the lifestyle. With his relation to crime, especially as the leader of a crime syndicate, it only makes sense that young Carter would get into trouble with the law at some point. The trouble comes at the end of the first novel. Young Carter is arrested during his baby sister's memorial service and spends a small portion of the second novel, and a larger portion of the third in jail. Young Carter has members of the Cartel on the inside and gets to know his cellmate right before he gets released. A deal made between him and his cellmate proves to be lucrative to the cartel when young Carter is released and he is well protected on the inside. The novel makes prison life look comfortable and easy again glorifying the life of a drug kingpin. None of Young Carter's life in prison serves as a warning to young readers as so many authors say their novels are meant to. Instead, it shows the reader that the pleasures in the life of a drug kingpin outweigh the risks with the law.

Unlike Young Carter, the Diamond twins Mecca and Monroe grew up with their father in the home. As children, the twins and their younger sister lived in a bad neighborhood with their mother and father and moved when their father began to rise in

the ranks of the cartel. To ensure the safety of the family Carter Sr. moved his family to a wealthier neighborhood. Though the Diamond siblings were raised wealthy the twins still turned to selling drugs and becoming members of the cartel in their adulthood.

In the second chapter of *The Cartel* the reader gets a glimpse into the past, seven years prior to the events of the novel when Carter Sr. was still alive and his children were in their teens. The twins are caught snooping on one of their father's meetings with other members of the cartel. When asked why they are snooping one of the brothers voices his plans to become a gangster like his father. Though Carter Sr. tells his son that that is not what he wants for his children, both brothers are seen in the cartel business before their father's death. This shows that children who grow up with their fathers are not completely free from the aspects of life that children without fathers have. Like their older brother, the twins both commit crimes for a living by selling drugs. The only sibling free of the cartel life is their sister, Breeze. This separation does not last long, as Breeze falls in love with Young Carter's protege, Zyir, pulling her into the same life her mother lived. She may not have sold the drugs herself but she was in the cartel by association, not just through Zyir, but through her brothers and formerly her father as well.

Through the characters of *The Cartel*, the authors are trying to show the allure to street life. No matter how the siblings were raised, Young Carter without his father, and the three Diamond siblings with their father in the home and with a wealthy background, their life was always going to involve drugs in some way. The life they wanted was so rooted in the drug game that there was no way to establish the money and power that they desired without gaining it by illegal means.

On the other hand, E.L. James's character Christian Grey had a hard start in life. Whereas Young Carter lived with a mother who took care of him and provided for him even before his father found out about him, Christian's mother was addicted to drugs and the only father figure he had was his mother's pimp. A man who hurt and abused not only Christian's mother but Christian himself. After Christian's mother dies of a drug overdose, he is left alone with her body for four days until the police are sent to the home. He is later adopted by his ER doctor and her husband, the Grey's, but he never forgets his beginning (James).

With his childhood memories in mind, Christian decides that he will never know what it is like to be hungry again and uses that promise to himself as motivation to ensure his business is successful. During the first four years of his life, Christian lives in poverty with his drug-addicted mother. As is shown in the statistics, without his father there for support Christian becomes one of those children that live in poverty. Unlike Young Carter, Christian does not have a father taking care of him in the background, it is truly just him and his mother, and sometimes her pimp and drug dealer. Though he is only four years old at the time of his mother's death, Christian remembers what it is like to wonder where his next meal is coming from and what it is like to be "profoundly hungry" (James, 237). Also unlike Young Carter, Christian falls prey to more than one of the statistics on the list. He is the victim of five of the statistics, some during childhood, and others can be seen in his adulthood and through his relationship with Ana.

In the novel, Christian tells Ana about the fights and behavioral issues he had after being adopted by his parents, Grace and Carrick Grey. He gets into so many fights that his parents become worried and send him to therapy. Though he never comes out and

tells us why he was acting out at school and fighting, the reader can infer that his past had an adverse effect on him. Christian struggles to come to grips with his past and shows hatred for his birth mother. This becomes evident when he admits to Ana that he picks his submissives based on their looks and they all favor his mother. Christian uses his submissives to punish his mother for the way that she and her pimp treated him when he was a child. It is possible that life could have been better for Christian for those first four years had he had a father around to protect him from his mother and those she brought around him and though he does not seem to blame the father he has never known for the life he lived, his absence does show in the way Christian was forced to live.

Christian recalls being hungry as a child, going sometimes days without eating, and mentions that he was “profoundly hungry” (James). This shows that because of his mother, Christian lived in poverty even if only for a few years before his birth mother died and he was adopted into a wealthy family. Christian’s adopted family is further proof of the statistics given. In his two-parent household, he is well-fed, treated well, and safe. Though Christian acts out as a child, he knows that he is safe, and living with people who love him more than his mother was able to because of her addiction. The absence of Christian’s birth father can not be the only considered aspect of his childhood poverty, however. His mother’s addiction, for instance, should also be considered. The reader can infer that Christian’s birth mother was unable to work because of the severity of her addiction. This is also a large part of the reason that Christian was abused as a child. Without the drugs, his mother would have no use for her dealer, pimp, and occasional boyfriend. This is the man that Christian remembers from his childhood, the only father

figure he knew before Carrick Grey. His mother's pimp was his abuser until his disappearance after her death.

This segways into the next statistic. Christian faces child abuse when living with his mother. As she was feeding her addiction Christian was being abused by her drug dealer. The nameless man would beat Christian and burn him with cigarettes. Christian carries the physical and emotional scars of this abuse through his adulthood. He gives Anna a boundary of the places she is allowed to touch him, his entire midsection is off-limits. His chest is marred with burn marks left by the cigarettes. Though he is in a committed relationship with Anna, he feels unworthy of the love that she wants to give him because of the way that his negligent mother and her pimp treated him. There is intense psychological damage done in the short four years that Christian was with his birth mother. His abuse was physical as well as mental. He watched his mother neglect him to love a drug that ended up killing her and allow the man giving her the dangerous drug to harm him.

Christian does not allow himself to become a victim of his childhood. Unlike Young Carter who blames the absence of his father for his involvement in the streets, Christian uses his childhood to guarantee that he never has to worry about feeling the pain of hunger he did as a child. Though Christian's childhood was worse than Young Carter's and he was surrounded by drugs as a young child, he still decided to obtain his income through legal means, first taking a one hundred thousand dollar loan and building a single successful business, then expanding building his fortune by acquiring different fields of business and amassing his personal empire.

Christian has two true father figures in his life, one negative and one positive. The first was his mother's nameless pimp and sometimes boyfriend. The abuse Christian suffered at the hands of his first father figure instilled a fear of men in him and caused some issues in his life when he was adopted by the Greys. The second father figure in Christian's life is his adoptive father, Carrick Grey. Throughout the novel, the reader sees very little interaction between Christian and Carrick and can infer that Christian kept closer to his mother, Grace, growing up. Though it seems as if Christian has gotten over most of his past issues and fear of men, that past fear still affected the relationship between him and his adopted father. It was with the help of his adoptive family that Christian was able to get over his past trauma and grow to become the mogul that he became. Unlike Young Carter, who turned to the streets to solve the problem of growing up fatherless, Christian relied on the family that he had to get through the struggles of his past. However, the addition of a positive father figure, and a drug-free and loving mother, helped to create a positive lifestyle change for Christian Grey. Even with this change, Christian still struggled with the trauma of his past and his rejection by both of his birth parents.

Though Christian strays away from actual drugs after seeing what his birth mother's addiction did to her, Christian has his own addiction that he uses to cope with his struggles of the past. Christian uses sex as a way to cope with his disdain for his birth mother and the way that she treated him. It is brought to the attention of the reader that all of Christian's submissives resemble his birth mother, Ella. Christian takes pleasure in punishing women who look like the woman who neglected him, but refuses to date any of these women because he feels unworthy of love. This could stem from the negligent care

of his mother and the abuse from the only father figure he knew for the first four years of his life. The lack of love from the only two people he knew in his childhood made him feel undeserving of the love given to him when he left that environment. Until he meets Anna, he rejects the idea of the love of anyone including his family. Because of this rejection, Christian uses women, including Anna at the beginning of their relationship, to feel powerful. He does this by way of bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism, or BDSM. The lingering effects of his childhood mistreatments affect the way the reader views the character. Though Christian is a “dominate” male and recruits women to be his submissive, the reader is still forced to view him as broken and sensitive.

Christian controls several aspects of his submissives lives, for example, their diets, where they stay and what they are allowed to do on the weekends, and of course anything that has to do with their sex lives. Before Anna, Christian does not believe in a “vanilla” relationship, this can be fully attributed to the way that he was abused as a child. When he was being abused, though he was only a child, the reader can infer that Christian felt weak, as he grows older he asserts his dominance and shows his strengths through fights in school and as an adult through sex. He uses women to prove to himself that he is strong.

Christian got his start with BDSM young as a submissive to one of his adoptive mothers' friends, Elena. Christian and Elena begin their affair when Christian is only fifteen years old. Elena served as his Domme for six years. During this time, Christian believes that his relationship with Elena is good for him and curves his violent tendencies, and keeps him out of trouble. Christian of course does not see the relationship

for what it truly is, sexual manipulation of a minor. Christian was sexually abused by Elena, unbeknownst to the boy himself, he feels the relationship is okay, even though Elena is married, and their relationship is not legal. Statistics show that “children living without either parent (foster children) are 10 times more likely to be sexually abused than children that live with both biological parents” (Child). Without his parents in his life and the issues caused by his mother when she was alive, Christian becomes an easy target for a sexual predator. Elena preys on Christian’s weakened emotional state and his lack of maturity to make him feel that his relationship with her is the best thing for him when it actually caused damage to him in the long run.

Christian uses sex as a means of escape from the feeling of weakness brought on by his childhood and because of Elena, he begins to depend on it. Besides his relationship with his family, it seems that all of Christian’s relationships are sexual. Throughout the series Ana is not introduced to any of Christian’s close friends and the only woman in his life other than his mother and sister is his former Domme. Christian only allows certain people into his life, Ana was not meant to be one. Like his other submissives Ana was meant to be someone he used for his own pleasure until she wanted more and he released her from her contract. Unlike the other submissives, however, Ana pushes Christian for information on his past, and breaks down his metaphorical walls to learn about him, showing Christian the care no other person outside his family has shown. The reader can attribute Christian’s constant need to feel sexually dominant as an addiction in itself. Though Christian strays away from drugs, likely because of his birth mother's addiction and death, he has his own type of addiction. He is addicted to sex and the feeling of power that he gains from it. He tells Ana in the first novel that he NEEDS to be a

dominant and that causes problems in their relationship as Ana feels that she will never truly be able to be the woman that he needs because she does not connect well with the life of a submissive. Ana is somewhat headstrong, though young and immature, and this is one of the things that pushes Christian to see her as more than a submissive. She does not do whatever he asks without questions as he requests and that causes copious issues within their relationship. Ana tries to be the woman Christian needs and goes so far as to tell Christian not to hold back with her and do whatever he needs to, this turns out to be a mistake as Ana questions why Christian would want to hurt her like he does. The relationship goes from pleasurable, to frightening when Ana sees what Christian is truly capable of; it is at this point that she leaves him deciding that a relationship with Christian is not worth the pain he wants to inflict on her. Christian's addiction to sex is transferred to Ana at the thought of her leaving. He decides that a relationship with Ana is better for him than being a dominant, but this means that Christian holds tightly to Ana after giving up the life of a dominant. For example, shortly after starting her new job at SIP publishing company Christian decides to buy the company in an attempt to control something about her because he no longer controls her sexually as he did as her dominant. Christian takes pride and is excited by the prospect of becoming her "bosses, bosses, boss" while Ana is angry because the space that is meant to be hers looks less like something that she earned and more like something that was given to her for being the boss's girlfriend. Christian claims that his desire to buy SIP has nothing to do with Ana. He tells her that he's wanted to go into publishing for some time and SIP is the best fit for his company. But the reader can see that the buyout is a ploy to stay close to Ana as he waits until after she is employed at the company to decide to purchase it.

Christian's addiction to Ana runs so deep that when he finds out she is pregnant with their child he panics at the realization that he will no longer be the only person she cares for, he believes that Ana will choose their child over him and becomes angry, blaming her for getting pregnant. He comes home drunk the night she tells him of the pregnancy and attempts to have sex. Ana is unwilling to have sex as Christian is too inebriated and he blames the pregnancy claiming that kids mean no more sex. Over a short period of time, Christian loses the tight control he has held over his life. Ana gains all power over him, like a drug. He chooses her over his need to be a dominant, something that makes him feel powerful and in control, then realizes that he has no control over Ana or her decisions. One of these decisions, to have their baby, makes him fear losing her to their child. This lack of control and the fear of losing his personal drug, Ana, makes Christian project his anger on the unborn child that he fears will change his life even more.

Although the writers of street literature claim to be warning their readers about the perils of the negative aspects of street life, the storylines actually glorify the lives of the characters. This makes many readers, especially younger readers believe that what would appear to be a negative in the real world could be a positive. Such as the absence of a father. In most street literature novels the fathers are absent, pushing the false notion that most African American children do not have fathers in their lives. A Huffington Post study states that "Most black fathers live with their children. There are about 2.5 million who live with their children, and 1.7 million who don't, according to the CDC" (Levs). The myth that seventy percent of African American children are raised by single mothers, is not actually a myth, but rather a mishandling of the facts. These statistics use housing

and marital status without taking into account the death of fathers, unmarried but cohabiting parents, divorced but present fathers, incarcerated fathers, and separation due to past incarceration and federally funded housing. (Richardson). Studies also show that African American fathers that live within the home with their children are the most involved fathers of all other studied races. (Cooper). These facts do not show in most African American media. Most current movies, television shows, and street literature novels depict black families as children being raised by a single parent, namely the mother. Take for example the popular television show *The Fresh Prince of Bel-air*. Although Will finds a strong father figure in his Uncle Phil, and the audience sees a great father to the Banks children, Will, the star of the show, is fatherless. In the one episode that his father is present, he abandons Will in the end, canceling all of their plans together and forcing Will to ask his uncle why his father does not want him. (Bentley).

This lack of strong fathers, and excess of successful fatherless children in popular media shows young viewers that fathers are not necessary. The furthering of the negative view in the literature that some of these same young viewers read leads them to believe that fathers are not as essential in the development and upbringing of their children. Showing them at the same time that fathers are essential to the development of children and that being a single parent is the better option.

The opposite is shown in romance literature written by white authors. Christian Grey's disastrous first four years of life, and the subsequent issues that arose from them in his adulthood show the audience reading these novels that the rejection of a parent is the real detriment to a child's development. Though both Young Carter and Christian Grey lacked the guidance of the biological fathers, only Christian seemed to be affected.

The loss of that father figure seems to have made Young Carter stronger than his brothers who grew up with their fathers whereas the rejection of his parents made Christian feel more inadequate as a person. Forcing him to work hard to become rich and feel deserving of nice things, but enduring that he did not feel worthy of anything other than material possessions, namely the love of a woman.

CHAPTER 3

THE APPEARANCE OF ACCEPTANCE

Colorism is defined as “the preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their skin color” (Norwood, 586). There is an obvious separation in the African American community based on colorism. Examples of colorism can be seen in television, movies, music, and in the character descriptions of some street literature novels. *The Cartel* is just one of the many novels that colorism stands out in. Through the descriptions of the characters, the reader can see the type of person that the character is going to be. On top of the obvious colorism of the novel, the women also possess unattainable standards of beauty making readers feel that they must look a certain way to be considered beautiful to African American men. This is not the case in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, where the character descriptions appeal to the average person. Readers of this novel can see themselves in the characters that they are reading about, and it makes them feel as though the happy life the characters in the book are living could be attainable for them. The point of this chapter is to prove that while street literature glorifies the lives of the characters, it makes the reader feel that they must look and act a certain way to be as happy as the characters of the novel leading to a type of body dysmorphia that is seen in the community. (For example, Lil Kim bleaching her skin, lightening her eyes, and getting plastic surgery to make herself feel more beautiful.)

The women of the novel, *The Cartel* play very different roles in the first three books of the series. Miamor, Young Carter’s love interest, can be categorized as the angry black woman. Her past and occupation makes her guarded against the world and in

turn, makes her guarded against the idea of love with Young Carter. Young Carter's younger sister Breeze, however, has been shielded from the bad things in life despite her father's profession. It is not until after her father's death, that Breeze is introduced to the struggles of the war between her brothers and the Haitian Cartel. Breeze is shown as young and naive to the harsh realities of the world until she is kidnapped and taken to Haiti by the leader of the Haitian Cartel. Breeze is believed to be dead until circumstances lead her back to the states and her brothers. Two very different women with two very different stories, but one thing they have in common is their beauty. Both women are described to be insanely beautiful in different ways, but Miamor's looks make her deadly whereas Breeze's make her innocent.

Breeze is described as a very fair-skinned, slim, young woman with green eyes and a thick mane of black curls. Her mother is Dominican and her father is African American giving Breeze an exotic appearance. She is sheltered from the violent life her father and brothers live, and instead spends her time shopping and throwing parties, her only real fault being how spoiled she is. Breeze is an innocent in a world of danger. She lives in a house with murderers and drug dealers and somehow manages to escape becoming one of them.

Miamor on the other hand is described as a brown-skinned woman with almond-colored hair and hazel eyes. She is shapely, with a large behind and small waist. Before meeting Young Carter, Miamor loses her sister, the only person in the world who truly loved her and the reader sees how guarded she is. She is the leader of the Murder Mamas, a group of female hitmen that use their beauty to lure men and then kill them. Miamor is

the self-proclaimed “savage” of the group so she often does the hard work the other girls are too afraid of.

These two very different women follow a problematic trend within the series. The light-skinned woman, Breeze, is seen as innocent, while the darker-skinned woman, Miamor, is viewed as dangerous. Through these two women, as well as the men in the novel, the reader is shown that the more European the features, the more innocent the person. Showing readers that to be bad is to be dark-skinned. This means that all of the lighter-skinned characters of the novel are seen as less dangerous than those who are of darker skin tones. This may not be intentional on the part of the authors, but internalized colorism leads them to make darker skin a negative.

Studies have shown that “people have a proclivity to perceive someone with darker skin as more likely to commit immoral acts” (Grewal). This portrayal of dark as the negative is even seen in magazines and news outlets. Research has shown that newspapers and magazines run darker images when talking about celebrities' negative transgressions whereas they print lighter photos when talking about the good they have done. (Grewal).

This notion of “dark is bad” can be further examined through the men in the novel. The twins, for example, are, like their sister, biracial. The Diamond siblings are Dominican and African American, but Mecca is the brother with more African American features. Mecca is described as being one shade darker than his twin brother, but a further description of his unbraided hair further incriminate him as scary and wild stating that “His hair was unbraided and wild all over his head, giving him the look of a crazed man” (Ashley, 256). Mecca keeps his hair long and in braids whereas his brother has his cut in

a fade. Monroe, nicknamed Money in the novel, is described as the more tame brother and this is shown in the twins' appearances. Mecca has "wild" hair, corn-rowed, like many African Americans with long hair chose to style their hair, and Money's hair is cut low paired with lighter skin. The more tame brother is the lighter brother. Mecca acts without thinking and is the one to break the treaty with the Haitian cartel that ruins the rest of his family. After finding out that Money is sleeping with his girlfriend, Mecca shoots both his girlfriend, Lena, and his twin brother, Money. When he realizes what he's done, Mecca calls his older brother and blames the Haitian cartel, with whom they have an active truce. The Cartel gets the word out to the Dominican Cartel, run by the Diamond siblings' Grandfather, Emilio Estes. Estes sends his men after the leader of the Haitian Cartel and his young daughter and his baby's mother are killed. As retaliation Matee, the leader of the Haitian Cartel, kidnaps Breeze and takes her back to Haiti believing in his fragile state of mind that he is in love with her. He holds her captive until the earthquake in Haiti kills him and sets her free. Mecca accidentally becomes the downfall of most of his family, including his own mother who he accidentally kills in a ploy to murder Miamor. While Mecca is the darker twin, he is not the darkest sibling, however. Young Carter is the only one of the four siblings that is not biracial. Young Carter, though seemingly more laid back and tame than Mecca, proves that he is the most dangerous of all of his siblings. Young Carter runs his own drug operation in Flint before moving to Miami to help his siblings and stepmother. Young Carter seems to pick up right where his father left off, becoming the brother to take over the Cartel even though he is the only brother who was not raised around the Diamond Cartel. Money, the lightest brother is also the most lenient, as the most lenient brother, he is also seen as the "softest"

which makes for a poor leader, and Mecca thinks before he acts and makes for a better fighter than he would a leader. Young Carter proves to be both parts of his brothers, smart and strong, making him the most dangerous of the three. So dangerous in fact, that he does the one thing that it seems no one else was able to, not Miamor and the Murder Mama's, not Emilio Estes and his men, and not the Haitian Cartel, and that is catch Mecca off guard. After learning of Mecca's role in the downfall of the family and the murder of the woman he loves, Young Carter realizes that he cannot trust his little brother and knows that he has to kill him. Young Carter finds the strength to murder his last living sibling to prove himself as a great leader. This idea that Young Carter is the strongest brother and the best leader of the three is another component of colorism. As the darkest-skinned brother and alpha male of the family, Young Carter can be considered the most masculine of Carter Sr.'s three sons. In the article *Perceptions of and Preferences for Skin Color Black Racial Identity, and Self-Esteem Among African Americans*, research results show that men wished to be darker-skinned and women wished to be lighter. The author states that "men in the sample indicated that they believed the opposite gender found darker skin most attractive; the same gender found lighter skin most attractive; and their family members found darker skin most attractive. Conversely, women in the sample responded that they believed the opposite gender found lighter skin most attractive; the same gender found darker skin most attractive; and their family found lighter skin most attractive. While these findings reveal perceptions of others' ideals, rather than one's own, they provide support for the hypothesis that there may be a preference for lightness in women and darkness in men" (Coard, 2267). The assumption here is that in the same way men find femininity in light skin, women find

dark skin to be masculine. This ideal takes on a colorist view when the inverse is considered, darker-skinned women being viewed as more masculine in comparison the light-skinned women to men and lighter-skinned men being seen as more feminine to women. In this inverse situation, dark skin on women becomes a negative trait and lighter skin a negative trait for men. Because of this perception of dark skin as manly, Young Carter becomes the most dangerous of the three brothers because he is the most “manly” and the twins become too soft to lead because they are too feminine.

Skin color is not the only problematic area of the character descriptions. The women of the novel also give the reader unrealistic standards of how African American women should look. There is a type of body dysmorphia in the African American community that makes being comfortable in a natural body difficult. Body dysmorphic disorder is described as “a type of mental disorder wherein the affected person is concerned with body image, manifested as excessive concern about and preoccupation with a perceived defect of their physical features” (Collins). African American women are expected to have tiny waists, large behinds, large breasts, and beautiful natural faces to be accepted by African American men. But to be considered beautiful, African American women also have to have an exotic look. This becomes the case for the women in the novel. Breeze is on the slim side, but she lacks most African American features. She is the epitome of exoticism with her green eyes, light skin, and thick curly mane of black hair. As a light-skinned woman Breeze becomes the “acceptable” black woman, she is what most would consider beautiful. Her light skin paired with her European features makes her more deserving of acceptance based on the standards of colorism. The article “*Whitewashing*” in *Mass Media: Exploring Colorism and the Damaging Effects of*

Beauty Hierarchies states that “Black beauty in popular culture reflects typical westernized beauty,” (*Whitewashing” in Mass Media: Exploring Colorism and the Damaging Effects of Beauty Hierarchies*). The article also covers how a caucasian physical appearance grants an African American a higher status in society. Using the Clark doll test as the basis for their argument, the author tells their readers that “the majority of children who took this test selected white dolls for the positive attributes, and the black dolls for the negative.” (*Whitewashing” in Mass Media: Exploring Colorism and the Damaging Effects of Beauty Hierarchies*). The article then goes on to say that “This internalization of “good” versus” “bad” skin tone based off of westernized ideals is problematic, as it marginalizes an entire group of African Americans” (*Whitewashing” in Mass Media: Exploring Colorism and the Damaging Effects of Beauty Hierarchies*).

Miamor, like Breeze, is very beautiful, but in a different way. Miamor has a body that is deemed acceptable for an African American woman, she has a small waist, large behind, and large breast. But unlike Breeze, Miamor is darker-skinned so to become attractive and acceptable to the males of the novel, Miamor has to have European features. Miamor’s eyes are hazel and her hair is a natural chestnut brown color. Miamor’s features make her look exotic as light eyes are not common in the African American community. These features become problematic because they allude to European features being the standard of beauty for the African American woman. Both Miamor and Breeze have light eyes and are considered beautiful worthy of the lavish lifestyles that they live, whereas the other Murder Mama’s, one brown-skinned with brown eyes, the other dark-skinned with brown eyes rely on the jobs that they do with Miamor to allow them to lead their lifestyles, their money needs to be replenished.

Through Young Carter, Miamor can leave being a Murder Mama behind and move on to a better life. Breeze was raised with money and is well taken care of in her father's absence not only through her brothers but later through the man she decides to marry, Young Carter's protege, Zyir.

This is possibly unintentional on the author's part, but neither of these two women appeals to the everyday woman. Women reading these novels are more inclined to feel inadequate about themselves because the women in their literature are so "beautiful," the standard of their beauty is the westernized standard setting them apart from those readers who have more African American features (i.e wider noses, darker kinkier hair, darker eyes, bigger lips). The authors modeled the characters off of what they considered beautiful, and the most emphasized parts of both characters, the eyes, are more pronounced in the Euro American community than they are in the African American community making it seem as though African American features on African American women cannot possibly be seen as beautiful.

This dislike of African American features is not uncommon in the African American community, however. During slavery, slave owners gave preferential treatment to enslaved people with fairer complexions (Nittle). These slaveowners created a separation between the slaves to ensure there was no uprising and made the lighter-skinned slaves seem like they were better than the darker-skinned slaves by giving them the less strenuous jobs. William W. Brown states in his novel *Clotel or the President's Daughter* that "There is, in the Southern States, a great amount of prejudice against skin colour amongst the Negroes themselves. The nearer the Negro or mulatto approaches to the white, the more he seems to feel his superiority over those of a darker hue. This is, no

doubt, the result of the prejudice that exists on the part of the whites towards both mulattoes and blacks” (Brown, 48). Even the language of the text shows the separation of the race. Brown calls darker-skinned African Americans “blacks” but calls lighter-skinned, biracial African American’s mulattoes. Though both groups are African American people the mulattoes are made to feel that they are better than the blacks because of the “white blood” that runs through their veins. These biracial people were made to feel that they were more deserving of their roles in the house because their coloring and prestigious “white blood” made them more important than those who were assumed to be true African people. The end of slavery did not solve the issue of colorism however, after emancipation it was easier for lighter-skinned African Americans to get jobs than those who had darker skin. This put light-skinned African Americans in a new position of privilege affording them better opportunities to advance and find their own place in society than darker-skinned individuals. Because of this many light-skinned African Americans thought themselves better than their darker-skinned counterparts and would not intermingle or marry darker-skinned individuals choosing instead to marry other African Americans and continue to “lighten” the race. Their thinking was that in ensuring their children were they would continue to live privileged lives and that darkening their familial line would set their family back. This can be seen in the novel *Blacker the Berry* in which the main protagonist Emma Lou, is the dark “stain” on her family's image. Though she is raised by “the right type of people” she is considered too dark and her family, namely the women of her family put her down for the color of her skin, ensuring that she knows just how undesirable her darkness is to those around her as well as those outside of the family. Studies show that even now, light-skinned men make

more than light-skinned women, medium skinned men and women, and dark-skinned men and women, making them the highest-earning group of African Americans on average with darker-skinned men and women making the least amount of money (Reece, 10).

As the reader can see through the text, the problem of colorism has not yet gone away, it now manifests itself in different more subtle ways. It is not apparent whether or not the authors intentionally make the lighter-skinned characters of the books the more innocent characters, but it seems that society's views of people versus their dark-skinned counterparts have invaded the creative mindsets of the authors of the novel.

There are many problematic images in *The Cartel* dealing with skin color and body image, but these views cannot solely be blamed on street literature. These images predate the genre. The bleaching of African American skin to attain the appearance, the relaxing of hair to gain the “good” hair texture, and the surgical alteration to the body to produce a more voluptuous figure are all things that have been done since before the Street literature genre was popularized. But unlike with literature written by white authors, authors of Street literature do nothing to appeal to the everyday African American reader. Instead, they focus on unnaturally attractive people and show their African American audiences that to be considered beautiful they must conform to these standards of beauty, most of which are European standards of beauty hard to attain by the common African American person. Part of this could be because of the idea that black women are more comfortable in their skin than white women. In articles regarding body dysmorphia, there is a lot of focus on white celebrities and the mental disorders that they suffer from regarding their body images (i.e, anorexia, bulimia) (Collins). The

conversation rarely turns to women like Nicki Minaj or Lil Kim who have had alterations to their bodies to make themselves more voluptuous to fit the narrative of what a black woman should be.

On the other hand, Anastasia Steele is described as a slender woman with pale skin, brown hair, and blue eyes too big for her face, there is nothing overly special about her appearance. This is not to say that Ana is not beautiful, but she has a look that is easily attainable. She is not overly voluptuous or perfect in any way, she is just a natural beauty. Ana, like most women, has insecurities regarding her outward appearance. She thinks she is too pale, too thin, and her eyes are too big. Despite her insecurities, Christian falls in love with her not just for her looks, but for her personality as well. This cannot be said for Miamor and Young Carter. Young Carter knows nothing about Miamor, when he falls for her, there is no real development in their relationship whatsoever. Thus, he has no clue that she works as a hitman, or that her target is his younger brother. This means that the characters in *The Cartel* focus more on outward appearances and what they want their partners to be, than on their actual partners. The characters of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy however fall for each other's flaws. Ana falls for Christian's mysterious and broken nature, and Christian falls for all of Ana's flaws, the same flaws that made up his mother and all of his other submissives.

Over the three books that make up the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, there is immense character development for both Christian and Ana. Ana becomes more sure of herself and her appearance, and Christian realizes the self-worth he never thought he had or deserved. Through *Fifty Shades of Grey* readers, especially female readers can put themselves in the position of Ana, they can see themselves physically and somewhat

mentally in the place of the character, as she is very relatable to lovers of literature. Ana appeals to the everyday woman, Ana's character makes readers feel that they can find the type of love that Christian and Ana share and it makes the novel more relatable. Christian however, like the characters of *The Cartel* is held to a nearly unattainable standard.

Though he is not very clearly described in the novel, the reader is told that he is attractive and insanely wealthy. Christian is a twenty-seven-year-old CEO of a multi-billion dollar conglomerate. He is one of the most eligible bachelors in Seattle in the fictional world of the novel and he sets his sights on Ana. Christian like the women in *The Cartel*, does not appeal to the everyday reader. He lives in the world that most only dream of, the world of the rich and beautiful. This is one of the reasons Ana has so many insecurities about herself and her relationship with Christian. She knows that he can have any woman he wants and she questions what it is about her that appeals to him. The answer comes in the second novel when Christian tells Ana that he chooses submissives that remind him of his mother. This is Christian's flaw. His strange obsession with punishing the woman who birthed him even after her death many years before the setting of the novel. Though this is a flaw, the only physical flaw Christian has is the burn marks on his chest. These cannot be considered flaws, however, as they are the markers of the past that Christian survived as a child.

It can be argued, however, that part of the reason Ana is so slim is that black and white women are expected to ascribe to different standards of beauty. While black women are meant to be slim thick, white women are meant to keep to a certain size to be deemed acceptable in society. In a 2012 poll, researchers found that black women worked out to lose weight, but maintain their figures stating while white women want to workout

to stay a certain weight (110, 115, 120lbs) black women measure their weight loss in sizes (6,8,10) and do not ascribe to “white figures” when considering where they want to be in terms of their end goal (Parker).

In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the author focuses more on the psychological development of the characters and their relationship to each other, choosing to make the physical descriptions of both characters less important than the growth and development of the characters as people throughout the series. While the novel is considered romantic erotica and focuses very highly on sex, a lot of the focus of the novel is actually on the characters as people and how they grow as a couple. Whereas in *The Cartel*, Miamor and Young Carter’s relationship in the first three books of the series is more physical than emotional. The characters of *The Cartel* claim to love each other and are willing to change aspects of their lives for one another, Young Carter wanting to marry Miamor, and Miamor wanting to give up her career for him, but there is no development to the relationship, and without this development the reader never sees these two characters develop from more than just a physical connection.

The characters of *The Cartel* show the reader that their outward appearance is more important than the character of the person. The reader learns very little about Miamor and Young Carter and when any information is given it is within the context of that character's personal thoughts or conversations with other characters. Miamor knows nothing about Young Carter's past and Young Carter knows nothing about hers. Miamor’s entire past is told in the second book through her memories when she is being tortured before she is eventually killed by Young Carter’s little brother, Mecca, Young Carter himself never gets the chance to learn this history for Miamor. These two

characters focus more on their attraction to their partners than they do getting to know their partners, there is so much secrecy between the two of them it is hard to say that their relationship is one built on love and not the physicality between them whereas with Christian and Ana all of the secrets are out by the second book and they are learning about each other past the sexual aspect of their relationships. Where one genre focuses on the couple and their development as a couple and how they grow, the other focuses more on the physical appearance, and this shows the African American reader that there is nothing more to relationships than the physical, the appearance of the partner, namely the women, is more important than the characteristics of the person. This means that more emphasis is placed on appearance in the African American community giving the reader the wrong impression about how to attain the love they wish to connect within the literature that they are reading. With readers of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, however, they learn that getting to know their partner and their past is the best way to find the love that they seek. This shows a positive way to connect with people outside of the world of literature as well as with the characters in the novel.

The trouble with the message in *The Cartel* is that it makes many readers feel that they are not good enough. As is the case with most media today. The media portrays beautiful people, especially black women with tiny waists and voluptuous hips, thighs, and behinds, with light skin and long straight hair. Through this image, the media controls how viewers perceive their bodies and pressures viewers to meet a certain physical standard (Bruner). The same can be said for literature, namely, *The Cartel*. These standards of unattainable beauty, though interesting to imagine while picturing a character, make it very hard for the reader to connect with the characters of the novels,

they cannot see themselves in the characters they are reading because they do not feel adequate enough in their own bodies. Whereas with *Fifty Shades of Grey* there is a message of “if she can do it, I can too,” one series uplifts its readers and shows them that it is possible to find love like Ana and Christian, while the other shows its readers that they have to be a certain color to be considered good and that they have to have a certain body type to be worthy of the type of lifestyle and relationships that the characters of the novel live. *The Cartel* and many other street literature novels like it give readers, especially young readers that do not fit the image of what a black woman should look like, a negative image of themselves further pushing America’s anti-black, and anti-natural agenda.

CHAPTER 4

WHAT'S A MAN SUPPOSED TO BE

It is common in street literature for authors to frame African American men in a way that makes them seem aggressive and domineering especially when dealing with women. For example, in the street-lit novel *Harlem on Lock*, Harlem is initially attracted to Chief because he saves her from her father. Though Chief is not the one to beat her father up he is the man calling all the shots. Chief and his scary and aggressive nature save Harlem from being prostituted by her father and whisk her away to a life of luxury as the girlfriend of a kingpin. (Williams). This of course goes south and Harlem falls for another man who is not as tough as Chief but is still a drug dealer, and thus seen as a strong male figure. This need for the males in Street literature to be strong, tough, and domineering comes from a history of men, namely African American men being taught to be emotionally distant.

In a 2012 study, a group of college-aged women were asked what they want in a man. Most of them wanted a tall, athletically built, dark-skinned man. They called men soft and metrosexual, even going so far as to classify them as childish. The researcher concluded that many of these young women wanted a man with a “thug” appearance, not “soft” like men are assumed to be, but more “masculine”. As previously stated this attraction to dark skin is because of society's equation of masculinity and danger with darkness. The article states that “the thug is associated with the most popularized negative images of hip-hop culture, for example, criminal behavior, misogyny, and materialism. He is depicted as tough, promiscuous, and prone to violence” (Ford, 26).

This is the description of the men in street literature and can be seen clearly in the description of the main character of *The Cartel*, Young Carter.

Whereas with young girls, parents are more tolerant, understanding, and sympathetic to their daughters' emotions boys do not get the same consideration. Boys get a more forceful and sometimes angry reaction from parents for showing their emotions. A Professor's House article states that "Parents will say, 'Suck it up, be a man, come on, what are you a girl' in public when boys seem to cross the threshold of tough and manly into sensitive or hurt" (Land). Showing that from a very young age, boys are taught to hold in their emotions as a show of strength. While parents think that this approach is helpful to make their sons "tough" it hurts them more than it helps them to be "real men". A 1997 study found that "boys who aren't taught about their emotions exhibit a form of masculine bravado or fearlessness that can manifest into reactive aggression against themselves and others. It is as if black males try to avoid their own vulnerability and replace it with a sense of masculinity reinforced by society" (Land). This is reflected in their adulthood, and because of this perception of what the adult male is meant to be, the more closed off the male, the more attractive they will seem in the media. Characters in books become unemotional beings, same with the "bad boys" in movies. However, in real life, this emotional distance can be bad for adult connections and relationships. R&B artist, Musiq Soulchild released a song in 2007 titled Teach Me How to Love, in which he asks his significant other to help him unlearn the toxic idea that men are not supposed to show affection. He begins by telling her " I was told the true definition of a man was to never cry" (Atlantic). This tells his listener that from his childhood it was ingrained into his head that he was not meant to show his sadness on the outside because that makes

him less manly. He then goes on to say “I was always taught to be strong. Never let them (women) think you care at all,” this shows how he grew to be so emotionally distant that his past partners were forced to wonder if he cared and that was supposed to be the manly thing to do. While this air of mystery is attractive in theory and overly sexualized in media and literature, it hinders the growth of actual relationships. In the chorus, Musiq Soulchild begs his current partner to bear with him and help him learn to love her saying “Teach me how to love, how I can get my emotions involved, teach me, show me how to love.” (Atlantic) and later going on to admit that he “lacks affection and expressing [his] feelings.” (Atlantic) At the release of this song, Musiq Soulchild is an adult, and though it is unclear whether he wrote the song for an actual partner, the song still relates to the way that many men were taught as children and their struggles in relationships. His expectation for his partner to teach him how to love is a common expectation for Black women. The article *Why So Sensitive? Black Male Fragility Examined* details how in the African American community it is the job of the Black woman to tell a man how to express himself (Hillfleet). This creates a separation between men and their emotions and puts all responsibility on the woman.

In another, older song showing that this is an ideal that is passed down from parent to child in a seemingly never-ending cycle. The 1968 Temptations song “I Wish it Would Rain ” details a man's hope that the weather changes and becomes gray and rainy because that is the only way he will be able to go outside. The song’s lead vocalist David Ruffin states that “Day in day out my tear-stained face is pressed against my window pane. My eyes search the skies, desperately for rain. Cause raindrops will hide my teardrops and no one will ever know that I’m crying when I go outside.” all because

“everyone knows that a man ain’t supposed to cry ” (Paranoia). Men, Black men especially, are taught through their parents, the music they listen to, and even the books that they read that showing their emotions is a negative thing and that showing emotion is being too sensitive and girly. Matthew Lyons, in his article In Defense of Sensitive Black Men, writes about how people assumed he was homosexual based off of his sensitivity, his definition of sensitivity being taking interest in others emotions (Lyons). Because he is caring and does not subscribe to the notion that Black men should be stoic and uncaring, he does not fit the usual gender role for the Black male and is seen as someone that is too soft and cannot be straight.

With the over-sexualization of emotionally distant men and parents need to show their sons that emotions are weaknesses, it is no surprise that in the black community that is what is expected of men to make them seem more attractive. Such is the case in *The Cartel*. In the context of the novel, however, the emotions of the male characters come at a much greater cost than just the loss of a partner.

Just as the women in Street literature must look a certain way, the men must act a certain way. To be considered a strong male in street literature the character must be a person of prominence in the drug world, typically a kingpin or at least someone that is high up in the organization, like a son who will take over as is the case of the twins in *The Cartel*. Young Carter depicts this idea of a strong male leader perfectly. Young Carter does not start as a member of the Diamond Cartel, nor does he want to be a member, but when he sees that the family he has never known is in trouble he makes the decision to stay and pick up where his father left off, as the family's protector. Young Carter steps in and takes over the position of cartel leader over both of his younger

brothers even though they grew up in the cartel and know the workings of the organization. Young Carter, though an outsider, proves himself stronger and more competent than either of his younger brothers. The reader can also infer that because Young Carter is not as emotional as his siblings about the loss of their father he was essentially the strongest of the three boys of the family. His disconnection from the family as a child ensured his success as a leader after the loss of their father, because he never knew his father, he did not suffer that same sense of loss his younger brothers did.

Within the context of *The Cartel*, the reader can infer that showing weakness as an African American man living in the world of our characters becomes the character's downfall. For the twins, it is their shared love of Lena, one brother's feelings for the woman outweighing the love he has for his brother, and the other brothers hurt at his brother and girlfriend's betrayal causing violence between the two that starts a war. For Carter Sr. it is the love for the women in his life, he lets his guard down when he believes his wife and daughter are safe and is killed in the process. For Young Carter, it is the love of Miamor, he is so focused on his relationship with her that he does not realize his best friend is giving information about the Diamond Cartel to the police and setting Young Carter up to go to prison. Anytime the men in *The Cartel* show emotion, especially when dealing with the women in their lives they are showing weakness, and this weakness is a destructive force to not only the men and their livelihoods, but to the cartel as well.

To analyze the men in the novel and how their emotional states affect the way their world sees them, we must first analyze their relationships with the women in their lives starting with Carter Sr. After graduating high school and moving on to college, Carter and his high school sweetheart, Young Carter's mother, break up. Carter then

meets the Estes family. Carter falls in love with Taryn, the daughter of the drug kingpin he works for, and is given the opportunity and connections needed to become a kingpin himself. Emilio Estes openly expresses his dislike for his son-in-law months after his death and admits that the only reason he allowed Carter to profit off of his drug enterprise was that he wanted his daughter to live a certain way. It becomes obvious to the reader that Carter wants what is best for his family, he does not want any of his children selling drugs, but somewhere along the way, he falls short. Both of the twins end up working for the cartel, Young Carter, though never having met his father, has his own drug operation in Flint, Michigan, and the only girl of the family ends up married to a drug dealer after her father's death. Through a short chapter at the beginning of the series, the reader can see that Carter has a very strong relationship with the three Diamond siblings, especially his youngest and only daughter. He seems to have a soft spot for her and this, in the end, is his downfall. A gunwar erupts in a courtroom following a non-guilty verdict on a money laundering charge, Carter lets his guard down hoping to keep his wife and nineteen-year-old daughter safe, he follows a man he believes is a police officer to his car behind the courthouse. As he was thanking the officer for his help, Carter was shot in the head in front of the two women he loved the most. As the man of the house and protector, Carter felt it was his duty to protect his wife and daughter. His twin sons however were able to protect themselves. Carter ensured that his boys were able to shoot and fight to protect themselves in their world of drugs and violence, and though his wife and daughter lived in the same world, he never thought to teach either of them to protect themselves.

The reader can infer that Carter never thought of a world that he was not a part of, as he fails at getting Breeze and Taryn ready for a world without him. This becomes

apparent when Breeze is kidnapped and Taryn is murdered within months of his death. Neither of the women knows how to protect themselves because they were always protected by the men in their lives, but after the deaths of Money and Carter Sr. the Cartel is spread too thin and both women suffer because of it. The death of the matriarch of the family as well as the kidnapping of the only sister in the family causes the last two remaining siblings' grief beyond measure that affects the cartel as a whole.

After falling in love with Miamor, Young Carter fails to delegate his thoughts to both the cartel and Miamor. This causes a lot of tension between Young Carter and Mecca. Young Carter is so infatuated with Miamor that he does not notice when his best friend starts giving up information on the Cartel or the fact that his own younger brother is trying to murder the woman he loves. During Breeze's memorial service Young Carter is planning ways to propose when the FBI comes in to arrest him. He loses track of Miamor in the process and worries more about where she is than he does his status as a free man. Unbeknownst to Young Carter, Miamor has been kidnapped by Mecca after she killed Taryn with a poisoned glass of wine.

Young Carter's emotions leave him open to weakness. Because of his love of Miamor Carter loses focus, seemingly for the first time, as he ran his own drug operation in Flint before ever coming to Miami with no problems. Even while in prison, Young Carter thinks about Miamor and why she did not visit. In the context of the text, it is shown that for African American men, to show emotion is to show weakness, no matter if the emotion is to family or a love interest.

Mecca's emotional downfall, much like Young Carter, is due to the love of a woman. Mecca murders his twin brother and assumes he kills his girlfriend as well after

he catches them together. His love for Lena and his anger at his brother for his betrayal leads him to shoot them both and then lie about it and starting a war. After the death of his brother, life spirals for Mecca, his grandfather is after him, the war with the Haitian cartel is back on, and the cartel is spread so thin it is becoming impossible to keep everyone he loves protected. Mecca, who was already doing drugs and drinking to excess after the death of his father, falls even further into the clutches of the product that his family sells and becomes paranoid. Throughout most of the first novel Mecca is spiraling and the reader has no choice but to see how broken he has become over the course of the events of the novel. This may seem like no big deal but something else the reader notices is that Mecca is the only character without a true love interest throughout the rest of his time in the series. Lena, though somehow surviving the shooting gives birth to his brother's child and begins a relationship with Mecca afterwards as a way to replace Monroe in her and her son's life, but it becomes obvious to the reader that the relationship is one-sided and even though she had feelings for Mecca, in the beginning, those feelings are not as strong as the feelings she had for the brother that was not emotionally broken.

As easily as emotion can be used as a show of weakness for the protagonists of the novel, the reader can also extend it to the antagonist. The leader of the Haitian Cartel, Matee, shows intense familial bonds in the first novel. The men who work for him are expendable but his daughter is not. So when the Diamond Cartel infiltrates his home on the day of his daughter's eighth birthday to show him that he is not "untouchable" he makes the decision to back off and call a truce with the Diamond Cartel to ensure his family's safety. The truce is short-lived however, because soon after, Mecca kills his

brother and blames the Haitian Cartel for his murder. The Diamond Cartel, after taking Mecca's word, breaks the treaty with the help of Emilio Estes, the Diamond siblings' Grandfather. The entire Haitian Cartel is killed, but so is Matee's daughter and the mother of his child. He has no choice but to accept defeat and hide away. He later decides that the only way to get back at the Diamond Cartel for the loss of his precious daughter is to take the daughter of their family, Breeze. In his weakened mental and emotional state, Matee, who planned to kill Breeze, instead convinces himself that he is in love with her. This proves that for Matee and the others of the novel, that love and other emotions are weakness

The text expresses that African American men need to be emotionless beings. Black men are expected to be strong and distant. In a recent study, statistics showed that many African American men suffer from what the researchers termed Tough Guy Syndrome or TGS. TGS is less of a disease and more of a thought process, one that is forced upon young men and boys especially those of African descent, that tells them that they are supposed to man up and move on making expressing real troubles difficult. The researchers asked participants what they believed it was to be a "real man" ; their response was "being a "real man" means providing for their family, achieving the respect of others, and attaining financial success. We also found that it often means being tough and self-sufficient and that many African American men embrace TGS as a source of self-esteem and self-respect" (Neighbors). Considering these statistics, all of the men in the novel can be considered "real men" but their open compassion and love for the women in their lives take away from their tough-guy persona. Young Carter loses the respect of his best friend Ace and ends up going to jail because Ace helped the police

build a case against him. Mecca is sent into hiding to gather himself emotionally so that he is not a liability anymore. And Carter Sr. is murdered. All of these terrible things happen in direct relation to their openly loving their women. Showing male, and some female readers that to love is to show weakness, and to show weakness is to fail as a man.

Statistics show that many men do know how to process or talk about their emotional experiences (Carabello). Street literature does not help to dispel the notion of the emotionless male. It gives its male reader reasons to remain emotionally distant. This emotional ignorance can lead to more than just troubled relationships but also mental health issues. Difficulty expressing emotions makes it difficult to ask for help when their emotions become too intense for them to handle.

This is not the case with white written literature. E.L James describes Christian as brooding and masculine physically, but mentally and emotionally he is broken. Christian himself admits it, telling Ana that he is “fifty shades of fucked up” (James, 269). Christian’s broken state is actually the driving force of the series, unlike in *The Cartel* where the men’s failures are plot devices to move the story along, Christian’s attitude toward love and relationships based on his past is what motivates the entire story. The novel is Ana’s journey in “fixing” Christian. Ana proves to the readers of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series that love can overcome all obstacles. Ana is forced to be open-minded to his wants and needs to have some semblance of a relationship with him and over the course of their short relationship she breaks down all of his walls and works to get to know Christian as a person as is the case for most strong relationships. The difference was that they had a Dominant Submissive relationship and were not actually dating each other.

The actual relationship between Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele does not start until her attempt at open-mindedness fails. She tries to change to be the woman that he thinks he needs and is hurt by the way that he treats her. After she leaves Christian decides that life as a dominant is not worth more than a life with Ana and he is willing to give up his addiction to his BDSM lifestyle to have her. This is when the reader sees Christian break. The second novel in the series, *Fifty Shades Darker*, starts the more emotionally intimate chapter of their relationship. Christian opens up about his past with his birth mother and abuser, her drug dealer. Unlike the men in *The Cartel*, Christian showing his weakness is not a negative thing. In the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, this is the strengthening point in their relationship.

Christian explains to Ana why she is not allowed to touch his torso and gives her a boundary that she is allowed to touch. From this act, Ana can see that Christian is making an effort in their relationship. Ana does not necessarily need to change Christian but there is an underlying need to fix him. Christian is the Broken male trope. An article of problematic tropes states that “This trope tries to push the idea that damaged people, especially damaged men, just need the right woman to come along and set them straight” (Lindy). While the trope is problematic, readers can appreciate Ana’s love for Christian and the fact that she does not dismiss him after finding out just how damaged he is. Ana instead works to help Christian through his emotional problems and pushes him to open up to her about the things that haunt him. This is not the case with the men of *The Cartel*. When problems arise the women of the novel are cast aside. Miamor is kidnapped when Young Carter goes to jail, the twins believe Lena is dead when Mecca kills Money and blames their deaths on the Haitian Cartel, and Breeze and Taryn can only watch from the

sidelines as Carter Sr. is murdered. None of them have the chance to emotionally support the men in their lives when their weakness is used against them. This support, however, is typically seen as the responsibility of the Black woman. The article *Conditioning That Fuels the Mental Health Epidemic for Black Men and How to Stop it* states that “Conditioning tells Black men that our own mental health is not our responsibility, but the responsibility of the women in our lives.” The conditioning described allows Black men to become emotionally distant and “hard” while forcing Black women to shoulder the burden of their emotions as well as the men around them (Yussuf).

Street literature conforms to the old narrative of what a man is meant to be. So within its pages readers get lost in past ideals that make the toxic masculinity of emotionless men seem attractive. This ensures that male readers continue to hide their emotions so as not to make themselves appear weak to not only the women they are trying to attract in their real everyday lives but also to their families and male children. Furthering the narrative that men are meant to be stoic protectors of their family with no emotional capacity. This restarts a continuing cycle as these children will likely grow to show the same emotional detachments to their partners and male children, furthering the toxic masculinity that hinders their social and sexual relationships. The novels show readers that to be emotional is to be weak and to be weak is to lose what is built. For example, Carter Sr. losing his life and essentially his cartel, Young Carter losing his freedom, even if for a short while, Money losing his life, Mecca losing his sanity and the protection granted by the treaty of the two cartels, and Matee losing his sanity and later his life.

Such is not the case, however, in white romance. Through the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, readers can see the attempt by the author to dispel that myth that emotions show weakness in men. Ana motivates Christian to open up and share his emotions and past experiences with her. Similarly to Young Carter and the other men of *The Cartel*, Christian is wealthy, but unlike the other men, showing his emotions does not hinder him in any way. Christian is actually better off in the end. Ana's need to fix him allows him to overcome his fear of being touched, he gains familial ties with Ana and strengthens the relationships he has with his family. Christian's love for Ana and her willingness to accept his past and his complicated emotional state is the strengthening point of their relationship. When Christian fears the thought of Ana leaving him, his emotional breaking point, he opens himself up to her in a way that he was only able to do with the woman who molested him as a teenager. When Ana shows him that it is okay for him to put the burden of his emotional problems on her, he recognizes that she does not see his past as a weakness and becomes a better and stronger man in the end. This shows readers, especially male readers that it is a show of strength to show their partners their emotions. It is healthier not just to the man, but to the relationship itself, defying those toxic childhood teachings that tell them otherwise. Furthermore, it shows female readers that men do not need to be strong all the time, and that like women, men sometimes need emotional guidance and assurances from their partners. This proves that white romance and literature defies the norms to make a change in the way that their men are perceived while street literature follows the norm and keeps men in a stationary lock of toxic masculinity and emotional immaturity for acceptance.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Though Street Literature is fraught with the interesting drama that readers enjoy in the novels they chose to read. It is difficult to look past the glorification of all of the negative aspects of African American culture. The idea of fighting against all odds and coming out on top can be a good message for readers, but not when the “odd” to speak of is constantly African American children growing up without their fathers which is a common theme in Street Literature. Though many children grow up without their fathers, street literature glorifies that lifestyle and shows readers that growing up without a father makes the child stronger in the end making it seem as though African American fathers are not a necessity in a home.

Young Carter’s mother did not tell Carter Sr. about his son until Young Carter was about ten years old out of spite, showing the reader that fathers are dispensable in the African American community. The mother’s dismissal of Carter Sr.'s rights as a father shows the reader the commonality of absent fathers in the African American community. She separated her child from his father, not because it was the best thing for him, but because of her anger at being left behind. However, Carter Sr’s monetary support of his son proves that support from the father is vital in a child's life. Though Carter Sr. was not physically in his son's life, his financial support saved Young Carter from living the life that Christian Grey was forced to endure. Young Carter only had one parent as a physical presence in his life, but his father ensured that he was able to live a life outside of the same rough neighborhood that his parents did, in a nice house, and that he drove a nice

car. Though his mother took care of him, she could not give him a life with the finer things like his father could, proving that the assistance of his father was essential in his upbringing.

Unlike Young Carter, Christian Grey spent his first four years of life in poverty without the love of either parent. He was neglected by his birth mother and knew nothing about his birth father. The negligence of Grey's mother and the abuse suffered at the hands of her boyfriend, drug supplier, and sometimes pimp created a lifetime of distrust and a feeling of worthlessness. His mother shows him that he is unworthy of love, and the reader can infer that the absence of his father solidifies that thought into his mind.

After meeting the Greys and being adopted Christian's life improves drastically, but there is still an underlying fear of being mistreated. Because of this fear, Christian has boundaries that no one, including sexual partners, are not allowed to touch. Christian's struggle to let go of his past struggles, and the rejection he faces at the hands of not only his birth parents, but the only father figure he's ever known, proves the importance of fathers. The reader can infer that with his biological father in his life Christian would not have faced the abuse he endured before his mother's death as well as the sexual assault that was meant to "heal" him as a teenager.

Elena Lincoln was able to prey on Christian Grey due to his weakened emotional state brought on by his tragic childhood. Throughout the end of his teenage years and his adulthood Christian was made to believe that Elena's molesting him was a good thing. Christian believed that becoming her submissive redirected his negative emotions and brought him into a world that allowed him to channel his anger in a less dangerous way, but in reality, she was taking advantage of a fifteen-year-old boy. Because of Christian's

emotional distance from his adoptive parents, Christian was more inclined to open up to the woman that he was sexually active with. Though this relationship was not healthy and Christian was aware that it was wrong, he clung to the relationship that made him feel wanted. It did not matter that his adoptive parents loved him, Christian's experience with his biological parents made him feel unworthy of love. He was aware that Elena did not love him, but he was able to make a connection with her as her submissive. This twisted and inappropriate connection would never have come to pass had he felt the acceptance of his parents as a child.

Street literature shows African American readers that fathers do not need to be present because their children will overcome even without them with little damage. Young Carter did not need his father, he was successful before he met the Diamond family and became even more successful after building his father's drug operation back up after his death. In white romance literature, however, readers are shown the importance of parental support. Christian Grey's relationship or lack thereof with his parents lead to an emotionally stunted adulthood.

Authors of Street literature also often put their own bias into their writing and, as is the case in *The Cartel*, they become overrun with colorism. Throughout the text there is an obvious show of privilege shown to the lighter Diamond siblings, beginning with their high-class position in society and the way that their characters are portrayed as the most innocent in a world of violence and murder. In comparison, erotic romance novels written by white authors show the plain girl being swept off of her feet by the wealthy bachelor to live a life of danger-free leisure.

A comparison between two of the main female characters in *The Cartel* shows readers the way that the author's bias against darker skin is shown throughout the text of the novel. The two women grow up leading very different lives, Miamor, being raised in a home with a sexually abusive stepfather, and Breeze as the cartel's princess. Miamor, the darker-skinned of the two women, can be categorically termed the bad girl. Miamor goes to Juvie at twelve after killing her stepfather as he attempted to rape her older sister, gets out at eighteen, and with her sister's help, becomes an assassin apart of a crew called the Murda Mamas. Breeze on the other hand is lighter-skinned and grew up sheltered from the life her brothers and father lived. Though there was no true escape from the drug game because she lived with it, she was as separate as her father could keep her. She later marries her brother's protege, dragging her deeper into the cartel life but through it all Breeze remains innocent. She never has to take the life of another, in fact, she is the damsel of the series, having been kidnapped at the end of the first novel and missing throughout the second and half of the third. The novel shows darker-skinned individuals as "evil" and the lighter-skinned people as "good."

The colorism of the novel is not reserved for women. The Diamond brothers are fraternal twins with completely different personalities. Money, the lighter brother, is essentially the "good" brother. He is not as innocent as his sister, but between Money and Mecca, Money is the laid-back brother that thinks before he acts. Mecca, unlike his twin, acts before he thinks, making him trigger happy and dangerous in certain situations. The darker brother takes on all of the negative personality traits showing that the darker the skin of the individual the more likely they are to be bad people. The authors further prove this point with the introduction of Young Carter, the only one of the siblings that is not

biracial. Carter is shown to have a calmer personality, but he is smarter, more business savvy, and more ruthless than his other two brothers. Although Young Carter was not raised around the cartel like his two younger brothers, he comes in and picks up where his father left off. He becomes the leader of the cartel as an outsider because he is the perfect “bad” package. The author's negative perception of African American people is mirrored into the work and in turn embedded into the minds of their readers.

The authors also push their idea of beauty on their readers, especially when it comes to the women of the novel. As is common in the street literature genre, the women that appear the most desirable to the men of the novel have wide hips, large behinds, small waists, and large breasts. Where a female character lacks in one area she must make up for it in another. For example, Miamor is darker-skinned but her eyes are hazel. The authors, though not explicitly stating their opinion, show their readers that the only way for a dark-skinned character to be considered beautiful is for them to adopt a Euro-American feature. Breeze, who is not as shapely as the other women of the novel, makes up for her lack of curves with her green eyes, light skin, and thick curly mane of black hair. This makes readers feel that they are only worthy of the love of a wealthy man if they look a certain way.

This is not the case in white romance novels. Ana is described as being pretty but plain and her caring personality and patience are what make Christian fall in love with her. The novels focus on the character development of Christian and Ana and their relationship as a couple. The reader gets to follow along as the two of them fall in love with each other. As the reader follows along they can connect well with the characters and pull themselves into the story. This is because Ana appeals more to the everyday

woman. She is not an unattainable standard of beauty like the women in *The Cartel*, and that makes it easier for the readers to connect with her.

Authors' of street literature do not focus solely on the physical aspects of their characters, but the emotional as well. There is a disconnect between the men of *The Cartel* and their emotions. This disconnect stems from the idea that emotions are a weakness. Throughout the novel, any time the men show their emotions, especially towards the women in their lives, things start to go wrong. The men's emotional distance is meant to be a norm among men so when they show their emotions they are perceived as showing weakness. Carter Sr.'s weakness is his family, especially his helpless wife and daughter. His attempt to keep them safe gets him killed in the process. Young Carter's weakness is Miamor. When his focus is pulled in two different directions, his Cartel, and the woman he loves, he fails to pay attention to the subtle changes in his supposed best friend. This best friend later turns on him with the police and has Young Carter arrested. For the twins, their weakness is Leena and her love of both men. All of these men have the same weakness, love. When they show emotion for other beings they are showing the world that they are not what others would consider "real men." The men in street literature are locked into society's view of what they should be. There is no room for growth so they are forced to believe the old ideal that boys have to be strong and stoic to become men.

E.L. James goes a different route, however. James ensures emotional development through her characters. Ana pushes Christian to open up to her emotionally in order to strengthen their relationship. Ana offers a type of emotional healing that Christian never got with the women before Ana. Although their relationship began as a dominant and

submissive relationship Ana showed Christian that a sexual relationship was not all he needed. She helped him to get over the trauma of his childhood with his mother and move on to a healthier relationship with her. James does not enforce the idea that Christian needing Ana shows weakness. She makes it a show of strength on his part to let down his guard after everything that he went through as a child. This defies the argument that emotions are a weakness and shows male readers that it is okay to make their feelings known and that being a “real man” is not all about being emotionally distant and physically strong.

Street Literature aims to glorify a life of drugs, sex, and money with no cares about how this glorification affects the African American psyche. After an extensive analysis of a popular street literature series *The Cartel*, the reader can see the ways in which authors glorify the negative aspects of a certain “African American” lifestyle. These novels push readers to view the life of a drug dealer as one to strive for by showing the characters spending money on expensive and frivolous things. The novels make the life of a drug dealer seem like one that comes with ease. Showing characters like Young Carter who run the cartels, allude police, and if they are caught, such is the case in *The Cartel*, they are able to use their resources to get back out after spending very little time behind bars. These novels also showcase the negative views of black people and body perception that society has forced on the authors, making many believe that to be dark-skinned is to be incapable of goodness. This shows an obvious favoritism of individuals. Although these novels are interesting and are credited for bringing the joy of reading to a new generation of readers, it is hard to argue that the novels are for the good of the African American community. While it is great to have a genre of novels that appeals to

us and what we like to see, readers do not question why black success has to come in the form of successful drug dealers. Why are we so interested in reading about other African Americans shooting each other over where they are allowed to sell their drugs? Street literature showcases the wrong image of success and makes many African Americans see something to strive for in the lives of the characters whereas novels written by white authors show their characters as normal people living normal lives. When their characters are wealthy, they gain their wealth through legal means, and these novels still appeal to their audience without giving impressionable readers the idea that the only means of success for them is selling drugs and taking down other cartels. Street literature glorifies all of the wrong things in African American societies and makes its African American readers feel that to live the way they want to they must strive to be like the fictional characters living these fast-paced and dangerous lives.

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