

# Sitcoms in a League of Their Own: A Critical Analysis of Situational Feminism in The Golden Girls and Sex and the City

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SITCOMS IN A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN:

A Critical Analysis of Situational Feminism in  
*The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the parallels between the situation comedies, *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*. These shows possess striking similarities in their character portrayals and both emphasize the sisterly relationships of their characters. Using representative episodes, this paper illustrates that *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* belong to the same unique subgenre of sitcoms that involve the non-traditional family formed by close female friends. In addition to criticism by genre, this paper also analyzes *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* for each show's individual manifestations of and implications for feminism. This study observes that the messages communicated by these shows are significant on their own, but are magnified when conveyed through repetition dictated by membership in a genre. Comparative analysis of *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* intersects genre criticism and feminist criticism, creating a situational feminism that transcends entertainment with its social implication

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Unlikely Pathfinders

At first glance, the scripts could not appear more unlike. What could four women over the age of fifty living in Miami in the 1980s possibly have in common with four single, thirty-ish women in Manhattan at the turn of the century? Believe it or not - a lot. *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* introduced two separate cliques of girlfriends, one as charming and witty as the other. They left their marks on television history as some of the first female pioneers to explore the world of television, a landscape once populated exclusively by men and the occasional housewife.

The trends that they share have transcended age, target audience, and television era, bringing success season after season and nurturing an evolving genre: the female-centered sitcom. Watching any episode of either *The Golden Girls* or *Sex and the City* guarantees at least a few laughs, as would be expected with any situational comedy. But it cannot be denied that far more than just their comedy is situational. By definition, a situation refers to the combination of circumstances at a particular moment in time (“Situation” def. 5). Each episode of *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* depicts the lives of four independent women united through the unbreakable bond of womanhood. The circumstances the characters create and fall into have relevance for women everywhere, speaking to what it means to be a woman, regardless of generation. By cultivating the genre of the female – centered sitcom, they have also discovered the treasure that is situational feminism.

The female-centered sitcom has evolved and grown in conjunction with its female viewers; guiding each other to take that next step, becoming a little less guarded and more comfortable. It may have happened quickly, but it did not happen overnight, and this

revolution of sorts has not always been, and still is not supported by all. Nonetheless, it has planted its flag in the ground of television history, leaving a mark on the sitcom and on viewers of all kinds.

This paper traces the expedition that united women and the sitcom, lead by *The Golden Girls* and the women of *Sex and the City*. Chapter Two provides a historical context of the parallel evolutions of the sitcom and of feminism in American society. Chapter Three follows with a literature review of the scholarly research previously conducted on the social and communicative value of television and the emerging presence of feminist thought in television. Using the juncture of the genre and feminist criticism analytical frameworks, the bond these female-centered sitcoms share is exposed. The distinguishable patterns of this feminist-based genre include character personality types, the redefinition of friends as sisters, the importance and context of female conversations, and the gradual acceptance of nontraditional sexual orientation, all of which are discussed in Chapter Four. These shows are also exposed for their strengths and weakness, and their contributions and barriers to situational feminism in Chapters Five and Six. Viewers are left with task of shaping their own understandings of situational feminism through critical analyses of these two female-centered sitcoms.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Historical Intersections**

A beloved genre of American television, situation comedies provide viewers with glimpses into the lives of others, thriving on the entertaining relationships and problems of fictional characters. After spending over 50 years on the television screen, situation comedies have achieved a certain familiarity among audiences. While the sitcom has secured its place in American culture as a popular mode of entertainment, it also has significant value as an area of study. Situation comedies can be viewed critically to assess why the genre has maintained its popularity, to understand the relationship between specific television channels and their audiences, and add to conversations on the nature of comedy and humor (Mills 4, 5, 8).

Traditional analyses of situation comedies have cited specific criteria which classify a television program as a member of this genre. More numerous than those of other genres, traditional features of sitcoms include a distinct narrative style, shooting technique, manner of acting, duration, and scheduling. Additionally, each sitcom episode typically involves the same characters and setting, and is often described as “closed off” because issues are explained and resolved by the end of the episode. This creates an expectation of the “happy ending,” which is characteristic of most forms of comedy (Mills 26-27).

Sitcoms are also expected to have stereotypical characters, ritualistic humor, and formulaic and simplistic plots, as Joann Keyton notes in her article “Groups in Action on Prime-Time TV” (6-7). The elements present in sitcoms do not deviate from the constant, so that with each new episode the characters are back to where they had been the previous week (Mitz 3).

It is also believed that if the comedy in a sitcom requires too much thought, the certainty of its success may be compromised. Although character personalities can develop throughout the duration of a series, sitcom characters must initially be identifiable to be considered humorous (Mills 101). This recognition usually occurs through the use of stereotypes. Sitcom characters, who display stereotypical personalities, respond in patterns that are anticipated by the viewer based on cultural and historical expectations.

According to Diana Meehan, situation comedies secure ratings through their “comic versions of credible people struggling with the everyday” (Meehan 9). These episodes typically occur within a domestic setting, which is an area identifiable to audience members (12). Sitcoms do generally rely on the low risk that comes from the “predictable and the tried and true,” sacrificing a degree of originality (15). Nonetheless, sitcoms are imparted with a degree of poetic license that permits them to roam outside the normal confines of reality through use of “irony, hyperbole, and caricature:” literary techniques that are all intrinsic to situation comedy (109).

However, it has been observed that recent sitcoms have neglected some of the genre’s traditional criteria in order to avoid the appearance of being too generic. This suggests that the situation comedy is more dimensional than it is often regarded, and should not be limited by narrow definition (Mills 25).

With its roots in radio, the sitcom genre was first introduced to television during the 1949 television season with pioneers *Mama*, *The Goldbergs*, and *Life of Riley* (Mitz 3). NBC’s *Mister Peepers*, which ran from 1952-1955, was arguably the first sitcom to achieve notable success (Mitz 55).



Sitcoms have evolved over their brief history, highlighting the changing values of American society and providing social commentaries on contemporary events. Throughout the evolution of the situation comedy, the one element present in all eras has been the family (Mitz 4). The first sitcoms of the 1950s focused on the traditional nuclear family (with a few exceptions such as *I Love Lucy*) and emphasized the innocence of the American experience (Winship 53). When the traditional family was no longer entertaining to watch, sitcom creators began to portray imaginative families, such as those seen in *The Munsters*, *The Addams Family*, *My Favorite Martian*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, and *Mr. Ed* (Winship 54).

The 1970s further revolutionized sitcoms by satirizing situations involving bigotry and discrimination. The three “breakthrough sitcoms” of this era were *All in the Family*, *M\*A\*S\*H<sup>1</sup>*, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. The scenarios in each of these shows paralleled what Americans were facing on a daily basis and offered, for the first time, a perspective on social issues and real family problems (Winship 54-59).

Of the three “breakthrough sitcoms,” *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* affected the sitcom genre the most. By introducing a group of people that functioned as a family without biological ties, the series brought to television a new understanding of and appreciation for personal relationships (Winship 59). No longer was the television family mirrored after the Cleavers of *Leave it to Beaver*. On the contrary, television gave birth to a collection of unconventional families made up of friends who offered each other advice, support, and criticism with an authenticity not previously seen among nonrelatives.

One variation of the non-traditional family that emerged is the “family” composed of girlfriends. This broadcast trend took television by storm in the second half of the 1980s with

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<sup>1</sup> M\*A\*S\*H, which stand for Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, was a situation comedy focusing on the dramatic subject of the Korean War and the key personnel in a particular United States Army MASH unit.

the almost simultaneous introduction of *The Golden Girls* and *Designing Women*. Although they aired during the same time period and both focused on a group of close female friends, the considerable age difference between the two groups of girlfriends offered viewers enough variety to ensure the popularity of both shows.

*The Golden Girls*, with its portrayal of older girlfriends, was especially revolutionary when it premiered on NBC on September 14, 1985. The show ran for a total of 180 episodes over seven seasons.

Each episode of *The Golden Girls* begins with the catchy theme song, “Thank You for Being a Friend,” reinforcing the circle of friendship to which the characters belong. The title of the show plays off of the age of the characters, insinuating that they have entered into their “golden years” even though the term “girls” is generally descriptive of younger women of an indeterminate age (Kaler 52).

The four “Golden Girls” are Dorothy Zbornak (Bea Arthur), divorced substitute teacher and consistent voice of reason; Sophia Petrillo (Estelle Getty), Dorothy’s elderly-but-feisty, old-world Italian mother, Rose Nylund (Betty White), a widow from rural Minnesota who radiates innocence; and Blanche Devereaux (Rue McClanahan), a flirtatious, man-hungry widow who owns the Miami home in which they all live.

Dorothy and Rose meet Blanche after they both respond to her advertisement looking for housemates. Sophia also moves into the house after her nursing home burns down early in the first season. The show takes place almost exclusively within Blanche’s home, with most scenes taking place in either the living room or the kitchen.

Throughout their seven seasons as *The Golden Girls*, Dorothy, Rose, Blanche, and Sophia encounter light and fluffy situations such as dating escapades and failed diet

regimens, as well as more serious issues like disease, abortion, and sexual harassment.

Regardless of the gravity of the situation, the four women spend each episode united in their sisterly bond, each providing the other three with a shoulder to cry on or a friend to laugh with.

The series, which was created by Susan Harris, was well-received by the public from the start. The premiere episode attracted more than 25 million viewers and was the number one show by the end of its first week on the air, beating out *The Cosby Show* (“Golden Girls Central”).

*The Golden Girls* continued to build a loyal fan base of diverse viewers. Not surprisingly, the series was especially popular among the older set. However, the popularity of the *The Golden Girls* with the general public was made evident by the series’ yearly Nielsen ratings. The show was ranked as high as fourth in its third season, and was among the top 10 shows in each of its first six seasons (Huryk 5). The hit series was also awarded a number of awards, including four Golden Globes and 11 Emmys.

In 1992, NBC decided to drop *The Golden Girls* from its lineup. Although CBS offered to pick up the show, Bea Arthur refused to make the move (Nill par.5). Directly following the conclusion of *The Golden Girls* was the premiere of the CBS spin-off *The Golden Palace*, featuring Blanche, Rose, and Sophia in their attempt to run their own Miami Beach hotel. However, the show was unable to garner satisfactory ratings and was cancelled after its first season (Huryk 6).

Today, *The Golden Girls* remains popular through the DVD release of all seven of its seasons as well as through syndication. The series appeared on the Lifetime cable network

from 1997 through February 2009. Since March 2009, episodes have been aired on both The Hallmark Channel as well as WE tv.

The non-traditional family of girlfriends that is the premise of *The Golden Girls* has lived on in other female-centered television sitcoms of more recent years. Throughout the last decade, this trend has been dominated by *Sex and the City* and its younger circle of girlfriends who have glamorous lifestyles and audacious attitudes. *Sex and the City*'s popularity has also spurred the creation of other similar series such as *The L Word*, *Cashmere Mafia*, and *Lipstick Jungle*, none of which achieved the same level of success.

*Sex and the City* debuted on the television screen on June 6, 1998. Created by Darren Star and based on Candace Bushnell's best-selling novel of the same name, the hit series enjoyed a six-season lifetime on HBO. The series finale on February 22, 2004 attained the highest Nielson ratings HBO had seen since the 2002 season premier of *The Sopranos* (Southard 150).

With the seductive tagline "Are you ready for more?" *Sex and the City* lured viewers each week with its intoxicating mix of sex, gossip, and fashion. The series stars four modern, professional women in their thirties and forties as they try to conquer New York City and the men who live there. Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) is the leading woman of the series, narrating each episode in the style that she writes her weekly column on sex and relationships. Although depicted as independent, Carrie is inseparable from her core group of girlfriends: Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), a career-driven lawyer with a blatant cynicism toward relationships; Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), a successful public relations executive known for her sexual escapades; and Charlotte York (Kristin Davis), an art gallery curator who is the most sexually conservative and old-fashioned of the group.

In each episode, the four characters present their own storylines which revolve around the happenings of their own lives. The series does not have a central setting, but instead follows the four women through the streets of Manhattan as they live in the luxurious fashion they are all accustomed to. Although each character lives on her own, the friends are usually seen together or in groups of two or three as they share stories of their sex lives. While all four pride themselves on being no-strings-attached, modern women, relationship dilemmas inevitably arise, prompting the troubled character to immediately turn to her three girlfriends for emotional support and advice.

*Sex and the City* caters mostly to an audience of white, heterosexual, affluent women between the ages of 18-34, mainly because of its ability to fuse the television sitcom and the glossy women's magazine (Arthurs 84). This demographic was named the "Cosmo Girl" by Helen Gurley Brown, former editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan* (Oullette 116). However, *Sex and the City* does attract a wide audience representative of a variety of demographics, one of which is the gay community. Sarah Jessica Parker commented on the show's gay following describing it as, "a natural progression of creating art or culture and entertainment," especially since, "it's a show about women in a city that has a large gay community" (Hernandez par. 3).

*Sex and the City's* vast popularity is also made evident by the 25 percent increase of HBO's ratings during the show's second season. The four women of *Sex and the City* instantly became international superstars, appearing on the covers of nearly every major magazine (Friedman 36). Additionally, the show was named the highest-rated comedy series on cable for two seasons and was bestowed several awards, including four Emmys, three Golden Globes, and a Screen Actors Guild Award (Markle 47).

Even though *Sex and the City* ceased to exist as a television series in 2004, it still remains popular through syndication on TBS (with edited episodes) as well as through DVD sales and rentals. In May 2008, the women of *Sex and the City* made the move to the cinema with the release of *Sex and the City: The Movie*, which grossed \$55.7 million in its opening weekend. The sequel to the movie, *Sex and the City 2*, is scheduled for release in summer 2010.

Shows like *Sex and the City* and *The Golden Girls* become vehicles for disseminating messages because of their popularity among audiences. These shows, along with other forms of media entertainment, are able to exert influence by maintaining and replicating hegemony. Based on the writings of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, hegemony refers to the various means by which dominant members of society attempt to shape, either directly or indirectly, the ways in which others perceive and interpret reality (Dow, "Prime-Time" 9).

Hegemony can be present in the relationship between a rhetorical text and its audiences, namely through the ways it communicates with its publics. Ideological perspectives are not uncommon in rhetoric, and often there are different pieces of discourse voicing similar hegemonic ideas. Hegemony is influential because its patterned messages achieve a familiarity with audiences. Feminist-based discourse is a prime example of how hegemony is maintained when similar ideological perspectives combine to form their own genre of rhetoric.

The concept of genre originated in the writings of Aristotle and other classical rhetoricians (Foss 194). However, it was not explicitly endorsed as an approach to rhetorical criticism until after appearing in Edwin Black's *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* in 1965. For Black, a genre exists when there is a limited number of possible situations for the

rhetor and available rhetorical responses for those situations. The repetition of a type of situation provides the critic with information regarding which responses are acceptable for the circumstances at hand, based on the outcomes of previous situations (Campbell and Jamieson 14).

In *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson define a genre as a “constellation of substantive, situational, and stylistic elements,” and assert that generic criticism is ultimately what reveals similarities (18). Northrop Frye, a distinguished scholar in generic criticism, expands on this notion in his *Anatomy*, stating that, “the study of genres is based on analogies in form,” defining form as, “typical recurring images” (18). While different members of the same genre will inevitably have their own original qualities to set them apart, the rhetorical similarities of a genre will outweigh the rhetorical differences (23).

When applying generic criticism, it is important to acknowledge the shortcomings of the methodology. The designation of a particular genre functions as a set of expectations that automatically influence how an artifact is interpreted and understood (Mills 29). As was previously mentioned, the situation comedy is a prime example of a genre with a definition that has multiple variations determined by each individual series. The inability to clearly define the situation comedy is indicative of the weaknesses of the methodology of generic criticism (37). Although the programs classified as sitcoms still share enough similarities to be placed within the same genre, some do either lack certain features typical of sitcoms, or have other elements that make them unique. This illustrates that genres are temporary by nature, always undergoing the process of genre evolution, in which certain characteristics progress or are left behind. Similarly, a genre is also dependent on the “developing

relationship between the text, its producers, and its receivers,” which is apparent whenever something is said to have “reinvented the genre” (29).

There is a natural intersection where generic criticism meets feminist criticism in the rhetorical analysis of an artifact. This overlap occurs from the emphasis that both methodologies place on the dominant. For generic criticism, the dominant elements observed in two or more artifacts begin to construct a genre. On the other hand, feminist criticism explores how gender is constructed in the rhetorical artifact to enforce hegemony, and also how that process of domination can be challenged (Foss 157). Applied feminist criticism opposes narratives that enforce women’s inequality and have achieved a certain degree of ideological dominance by being representative of mainstream opinion. Generic criticism will lead to feminist criticism if the repetition of a dominant sexist ideology is repeated to the point where that narrative becomes one characteristic of a genre. There are certain situations where you cannot rhetorically examine artifacts without analyzing them as relatives of the same genre, as well as participants in the process of hegemony.

As explained by Bonnie Dow, criticism, especially from a feminist perspective, is a tool used to create meaning within texts rather than one used to describe meanings that are already present (“Prime-Time” 3-4). Dow also sites feminist literary critic Annette Kolodny, explaining how “decoding women as sign” is the main function of feminist criticism (6). Dow includes Kenneth Burke’s explanation of feminist criticism from *Language as Symbolic Action; Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. According to Burke, feminist criticism demands an understanding of the strategies behind prevailing representations of women, existing to prove, “the reflection, selection, and deflection of reality on which these versions rely” (214).



To comprehend feminist criticism, it is crucial to have an understanding of what feminism is. In *Manifesta*, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards state that feminism is, essentially, what the dictionary defines it as: “the movement for social, political, and economic equality of men and women” (56). However, this definition does not give mention to the evolution of the feminist cause in the United States, and the different stages, perspectives, and ideals that have emerged.

The complex history of the American feminist cause and its levels of fragmentation have made it difficult for scholars to agree on a common description to adequately define the term. As Karen Boyle stated in *Feminism Without Men*, “feminisms are defined less by commonality than by difference...but they do share a common recognition of gendered inequality and a determination to change that reality” (Brunsdon & Spigel 174). In addition to the emphasis given to gendered inequality, feminism is also said to have three principle components: it is a movement; the objective of the movement is to achieve social and political change; and the movement cannot exist without the provision of “sufficient information to enable women to make responsible choices” (Baumgardner & Richards 56).

The different waves of feminism each have a unique set of political and personal priorities, and are also separated by the historical events that dictated the direction of the movement. Nonetheless, during each wave of feminism, two distinct ideologies have helped shape the movement’s goals. The liberal tradition of feminism states that women and men are fundamentally equal and therefore should have access to the same rights and opportunities. The contrasting ideology follows the premise that, due to their biological differences, women and men are fundamentally different and therefore it is natural and right for them to have different roles (Wood 64).

When the history of American feminism is looked at from a continuum of waves, the first wave is typically thought of as the women's suffrage movement. Following the campaign for suffrage, women's movements in the United States disappeared for a period of almost 35 years, largely due to concentration of American attention on the two world wars (Wood 68).

The second wave of American feminism, which emerged in the 1960s, consisted of the collective organization of feminists for the avocation of reproductive freedom, professional and educational equality, and fair representation in society (Anderson & Stewart 597). However, even with these common goals in mind, the second wave remained divided by its different factions which each supported its own goals. The two most prevalent second wave groups were radical feminists and liberal feminists. Radical feminism was based on the principle that women's oppression serves as the model other forms of oppression follow (Wood 69). More mainstream was liberal feminism which, instigated by the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, fought against institutional sexism against women (74).

Second wave feminism permeated the media during the 1970s, especially on the television screen, as programs abandoned portrayals of female insubordination by showing independent, working women, seen on shows like *Maude* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Wood 288).

Scholars disagree on the exact end of second wave feminism, but it is generally agreed that, by the 1980s, second wave ideals had lost prominence and began to evolve into what is known as *postfeminism*. The term postfeminism, with its prefix "post", could suggest that feminism is over. On the other hand, Dow voices an opinion shared by the majority of

feminist scholars that regards postfeminism as “a hegemonic negotiation of second wave ideals in which the presumption of equality for women in the public sphere has been retained” (“Prime-Time” 88).

Dow sees the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Second Stage* in 1981 as a central moment in the rise of postfeminism. In *The Second Stage*, Friedan asserts that second wave feminists did not give adequate attention to a woman’s responsibility to her family, deemphasized the power of women’s traditional roles, and disregarded the fundamental differences between men and women. While Friedan was not the first to make these claims, she was the most visible and influential in instigating postfeminism (“Prime-Time” 88).

Boyle suggests that postfeminism should be observed for its “complex relationship to feminism exhibited in mainstream cultural texts” instead of looking at it as a specific movement. What sets postfeminism apart is its conviction that femininity can be used as a source of empowerment for women when combined with the gains of second wave feminism (177). In emphasizing the basic psychological and emotional differences between men and women, postfeminism stresses “feminine values” and suggests the dominance of heterosexuality, marriage, motherhood, and the nuclear family (Dow, “*Ellen*” 94).

Also providing a contrast to second wave feminism is third wave feminism, a new idea of feminism that has emerged in recent years through a variety of cultural manifestations. Third wave feminism rejects the perspective of the second wave, which it asserts has been limited to “white, middle-class, heterosexual women who define themselves primarily as oppressed victims of patriarchy” (Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein 194-195). Not a progression of second wave ideals, third wave feminism favors sexual freedom and a woman’s right to choose and places significant emphasis on the assertion of one’s

individuality. It defines female empowerment as “feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are” (195).

By stressing individualism, third wave feminism strays from the goal of the second wave to create a social movement through the creation of “a shared identity upon which women can act together” (Snyder 186). Liberal feminism of the second wave was founded on the practice of consciousness-raising, through which women share common experiences as a means of raising awareness of the ways in which they are oppressed. Through consciousness-raising, the idea was that what had typically been personal would automatically become political (184).

While third wave feminists do not subscribe to the notion that women identify with a core collection of experiences, they do acknowledge that personal experiences provide a lens into how society operates and which injustices do still exist. Although third wave feminism lacks the organization of the second wave, the belief that “the personal is political” is still evident as women share their experiences in less formal circumstances (Snyder 184).

It has been observed that while feminist scholars regard third-wave feminism as distinct from postfeminism, the media fuse the two together in a manner that makes it difficult to differentiate between the two (Anderson & Stewart 600). Shugart, Wagonner, and Hallstein contend that the media has distorted the academic meaning of third wave feminism to something that takes “gender equity for granted, is more self-obsessed, wed to the culture of celebrity, primarily concerned with sexual self-revelation, and focused on the body rather than social change” (194).

Andrea Press suggests that “current television presents a third-wave influenced feminism that picks up where postfeminism left off” (7). She cites *Sex and the City* and *Ally*

*McBeal* as two shows indicative of a third wave feminist perspective that manifests itself in the “sexiness” of the female characters (5).

Despite the growing popularity of third wave cultural representations, most scholars agree that third wave feminism is not an actual social movement, due to the absence of collective action. Nonetheless, third wave feminism has made contributions to the evolution of feminism and how we understand it today. As R. Claire Snyder contends, third wave feminism has provided a “diverse, antifoundationalist, multiperspectival, sex-radical version of feminism that could move American feminism beyond the impasses of the 1980s and 1990s” (193). Nonetheless, regardless of whether one supports third wave feminism or the “impasses” of older feminism, research proves that television has had a visible presence throughout the entire feminist revolution.

### Chapter 3 Literature Review: Building a Train of Thought

Television has been a popular mode of entertainment since the introduction of program broadcasting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout television's brief history, scholars have noticed that the messages imbedded in television programs tend to reflect the beliefs and customs of society and have the potential to influence and alter those conventions. Regarding the power of television, Bonnie Dow asserts in her book *Prime-Time Feminism* that television texts are "key aspects of the contemporary cultural hegemonic process" (xiv).

More than just a form of entertainment, television does serve as a tool for hegemony. Lynne Joyruck studied the different constructions of relations between the audience, text, and culture in *Reviewing Reception*. For Joyruck, the medium of television is significant because of its complexity: it operates as, "a technological form, as an economic and political institution, as a specific collection of narrative and textual strategies, and as an ideological apparatus that is interwoven with the language of culture as well as unconscious desire" (23). Television is able to function as this "ideological apparatus" due to the manner which it cultivates indirect and involuntary learning among viewers. This characteristic, noted by Diana Meehan, in *Ladies of the Evening*, conveys messages to audience members which are absorbed and processed unconsciously (115).

Because the programs broadcast over television reflect what is relevant to viewers, the nature of television programs has evolved over time. To observe the development of television programming in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, James Chesebro conducted specific quantitative and qualitative analyses of prime-time network series from the 1974 -1975

season through the 1990 -1991 season (197). Recording his findings in his “Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series – A Seventeen-Year Assessment,” Chesebro found that those television shows that are most popular serve as vehicles for imparting viewers with traditional values (214). His study was based on a group of communication systems consisting of five different manners of communication: ironic; mimetic, leader-centered; romantic; and mythical (200). Each system in the group suggests certain customs and norms through the values it promotes. Chesebro asserts that the ironic system promotes existential values; mimetic promotes individualist values; leader-centered promotes authoritative values; romantic promotes idealist values; and mythical promotes theological values. Using this method to identify the communicative emphasis of a particular television series highlights the values intrinsic to that show. This research also makes it possible to notice the presence of trends in a television era, if multiple shows from that time period identify with the same system (209).

While Chesebro was analyzing prime-time network series for their revelations of values, Joann Keyton was studying group communication within prime-time television shows. Her research was based on six popular television series (*The Cosby Show*, *Cheers*, *Dear John*, *Designing Women*, *The Golden Girls*, and *Roseanne*) and focused on how groups interact within the situation comedy genre. She found shows of this genre focus on the relationships present among work groups, family/living units, and social support groups (2). Keyton’s findings are shared in her article “Groups in Action on Prime-Time TV,” in which she quotes J. DeLamater’s assessment of the small group as, “one of the most enduring and most frequently studied areas of inquiry in social psychology” (5).

These kinds of television programs studied by Keyton provide a lens with which we can observe different interpersonal relationships. We often look to different forms of communication, such as the media, in order to make observations and draw conclusions about the different ways in which our society functions. Julia Wood has delved into this area of study with her book, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*. Wood asserts not only that culture and communication are linked, but that gender is also inseparable from this three-way relationship. She argues that not one of those three areas can be studied in full without a complete understanding of the other two (19).

In her discussion of the interdependence of communication, gender, and culture, Wood differentiates between sex, as a biological feature, and gender, as a socially constructed term. She asserts that gender is a social construct and its meaning, “grows out of a society’s values, beliefs, and preferred ways of organizing collective life” (22). Arguing that language plays a main role in defining gender, Wood asserts that language defines men and women differently and that these differences reflect common views of society (111). Furthermore, language has a tendency to promote polarized thinking by creating categories of opposites. Wood criticizes this “all-or-none” school of thought for the elimination of the potential for variations and ranges among people, thus dividing males and females into two different camps of gendered stereotypes (16). Wood assesses that these socially constructed representations of gender, which are products of our gendered verbal communication, give the media the power to the values of society in its portrayals of men and women and to replicate gendered cultural norms by setting the standards for what is considered “normal” (279).



Other research has also uncovered the prevalence of sexism in the language attributed to, and used to describe, women in the media. Matilda Butler observes in *Women and the Mass Media*, a variety of indications of linguistic sexism. These examples include using “empty” adjectives to describe women, having female characters speak with impeccable grammar and in manners deemed “ladylike,” and intentionally omitting joke telling in female scripts (43-44). Butler argues that, as a result of linguistic sexism, women are inclined to believe that they are “linguistic variants” and should regard themselves as they are portrayed in the media (50).

Myra Macdonald’s study of gendered verbal communication adds that gossip, as well as “bitching and nagging,” exist as patterns of language within female discourse. In *Representing Women*, Macdonald writes that gossip is used as a tool to put down women and to downplay the conversations they have with each other about ordinary, daily matters. Furthermore, “bitching and nagging” also functions to belittle communication among women for which, as Macdonald points out, there exist no equivalent term in male communication (56).

Bonnie Dow has extensively studied the representations, and misrepresentations, of women in the media, especially among female focused situation comedies. In *Prime-Time Feminism*, she examines the representations of women characters in “popular, long running programs with female lead characters that were on television either during or after “the second wave of American feminism” (xxiii). Dow recognizes that television’s representations of feminism are often directed by network economic motives, citing that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was CBS’s ploy to attract “young, urban viewers with disposable income” (xxii). However, she believes the ways in which women have been presented in

prime-time television shows (usually as white, middle-class heterosexuals) has contributed to the cultural conversation about American feminism (xiv).

These popular representations of women become stereotypes women are associated with. The media bear much of the responsibility for enforcing these stereotypes through “the reduction of the three-dimensional quality of the real to a one-dimensional and distorted form” (Macdonald, 13). These stereotypes that are presented are harmful to women because they only convey popular beliefs and attitudes with regard to aspects of a woman’s life and behavior. As Meehan states, stereotypes, “establish expectations, validate preconceived notions, and provide viewers with models of behavior for their own lives” (114).

In order to analyze the different stereotypes of women that are promoted by the media, Butler devised a “consciousness scale” to classify media images of women into five ordered “consciousness levels.” Butler explains that this scale is not intended to measure the frequency of female portrayals, but rather the “intensities of the feminine roles that the images portray” (148). The consciousness scale is beneficial because it shed light upon these gendered discrepancies.

The first observed level of the consciousness scale includes portrayals that “put her down,” degrading the female character either through sexual objectification or hint of uselessness. Next is the “keep her in her place” level, which confines women to the domestic sphere. The third level suggests, “give her two places,” by allowing the woman to have a separate work and home life, although not necessarily with a successful balance. The subsequent level will, “acknowledge that she is equal,” portraying male and female characters with equal competency. Lastly, the fifth and highest level of consciousness would “recognize that the woman is nonstereotypic.” If this level was observed, which is rarely the

case with the media, it would depict a woman or man's superiority and success as relative only to their own talents and gifts, rather than their biological sex (Butler 148-149).

These recurring attitudes towards women became increasingly more prevalent in final decades of the twentieth century as more roles for women appeared in television programs. The frequency with which women were appearing as main characters in prime-time network television shows was examined by David Atkin in "The Evolution of Television Series Addressing Single Women, 1966- 1990." He found that single working women were "broken-in" through situation comedies, which accounted for 69.8 percent of all series broadcast during that time frame (519). Atkin recorded 102 women-centered programs and traced the development of trends and economic influences in serial programming devoted to single working women during this time period. In his study, Atkin defined "single" females as "women over the age of 18 who have been widowed or divorced, as well as those never married" (521).

Atkin further concentrated his research for his article "Ready for Prime Time: Network Series Devoted to Working Women in the 1980s." Atkin cites Walters and Huck's description of the 1980s as period of "feminization" for network television. He shares in their opinion that the women's movement on television has been "evolutionary" rather than "revolutionary," observing an increase in the range and frequency of professional roles assumed by women characters throughout the 1980s (677-678, 682). However, Atkin, like Dow, recognizes the economic motives behind these changes in programming. He is in agreement with D.B. Wood that the increase may "have less to do with feminism than the fact that women between the ages of 18 and 19 have become the most sought-after target for advertisers" (683).

Dow also observed this period of “feminization” for network television, noting the growing minority of powerful female writers and producers during the 1980s. She described the television of this decade as “programming written by women, about women, and for women,” citing the launch of both *Designing Women*, produced by Linda Bloodworth-Thomason and her husband, and *Murphy Brown*, produced by Diane English and her husband (“Prime-Time” 135). Dow also cites Susan Faludi’s observation that, by the 1980s, there had been a decline of interest in and support for feminism in the television industry. As a result, shows focusing on the single career woman became less outspoken in their feminist opinions (86).

The growing presence of women on the television screen was especially noticeable in the situation comedies that emerged in the 1980s. Francis Gray explains in *Women and Laughter*, “the sitcom is the only dramatic form that has focused from the outset upon women,” and that “it has been the only televisual space significantly occupied by women” (42). Gray cites the character of Molly Goldberg to prove women’s seniority in the genre since *The Goldbergs* was one of television’s pioneer sitcoms. However, Gray also notes the downside of negative portrayals of female characters that comes from the continually evolving relationship between the sitcom, its creators, and its consumers. Despite this obstacle of the genre, she emphasizes that sitcoms have been positive by providing employment for women as actors, writers, and producers (44).

For the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, *The Golden Girls* successfully established itself as a popular female-centered situation comedy. While there has been limited scholarly research conducted on the connection between *The Golden Girls* and the changing feminist landscape, Anne Kaler did observe the show’s pioneer representation of

womanhood in “Golden Girls: Feminine Archetypal Patterns of the Complete Woman.”

Kaler contends that the show portrays each of the four characters as symbols of the four main stages of a woman’s life: virgin, spouse, mother, and wise woman (49).

The identification of an individual character as the personification of a distinct feminine perspective, as is evident in *The Golden Girls*, is something Amanda Lotz attributes to female-centered series from the 1980s. As she writes in *Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era*, the female-centered shows of the 1990s, such as *Sex and the City*, are different in that they indicate multiple feminist perspectives. Lotz employed a cultural studies framework in her research to determine if the array of feminist perspectives and narratives present caused certain gender stereotypes to become irrelevant. She found that the new representations of feminism present in late 1990s comedic dramas redefined former ideas about women and the ways in which they direct their personal lives (107).

Bonnie Dow would agree with Lotz that it is possible for a show to convey multiple feminist perspectives; however she would apply that statement to female-focused programs of the 1980s as well. In two separate essays, Dow differentiated between *Designing Women* and *Murphy Brown*, two popular prime-time television shows airing in the 1980s, featuring women as their main characters. For Dow, *Designing Women* is a sitcom with a “gendered consciousness”: a program where women talk about a variety of women’s issues. On the other hand, Dow saw *Murphy Brown* as a show with an actual “feminist (or postfeminist) consciousness” because of its allusions to a woman living in a man’s world, armed with the progress of women but constantly having to pay the costs of that progress (“Prime-Time” 137).

*Murphy Brown* is a clear example of postfeminist television for Dow in its absence of “the acknowledgement of women’s collective problems or of the need for collective action to solve them” (“Prime-Time” 160). This is a stark difference from the gendered-consciousness of a show like *Designing Women*. Dow makes this point to emphasize that the different ways in which problems are resolved within a series is indicative of the values of that series. Dow asserts that the situation comedy narrative mandates problem solving, however she observes that the problem solving in *Murphy Brown* is much less collective than the problem solving in *Designing Women* (149).

In her essay “After the Revolution,” Dow begins an in depth analysis of *Designing Women*, and evaluates the degree to which speaks with a feminist, or postfeminist, voice. Dow notes that one element missing from postfeminist series is female bonding, which is the basis of *Designing Women*. Dow quotes Andrea Press’s criticism of the show, saying that its “potentially radical perspective is undercut but the continued trivialization of the obstacles real women would face” (“Prime-Time” 101). Conversely, Dow sees the rhetorical strategy of *Designing Women* as an asset to the show; framing a “feminist discourse” within a “feminine setting” indicative of postfeminist attitudes (105). Faludi, quoted in Dow, also subscribes to this opinion and calls *Designing Women* and *The Golden Girls* “safer alternatives” to single, working-woman shows because “the heroines were confined to the home in nonthreatening roles in a strictly all-female world” (107).

Dow also acknowledges the ways in which *Designing Women* challenges postfeminism, namely through its use of women’s talk as a means of consciousness-raising, which is a mark of liberal feminism (“Prime-Time” 116). Nonetheless, *Designing Women* still stays within the boundaries of the traditional situation comedy, with its inclusion of

comedic subplots to offset any potential seriousness that could arise from collective consciousness-raising, proving that the show is neither decidedly feminist nor postfeminist (123).

*Sex and the City* has also received a substantial amount of scholarly attention for its potential contributions to the more recent evolution of American feminism. One example is Belinda Southard's article "Beyond the Backlash: *Sex and the City* and Three Feminist Struggles." By analyzing the popular television series, Belinda Southard has studied the extent to which female situation comedies have influenced the feminist movement. She believes *Sex and the City* can be read as a "postfeminist text" that is concerned with key feminist struggles, such as the conflicts between individual and collective as well as feminism and femininity (149). Southard recognizes the tendency of postfeminism to replace elements of feminism with what is characteristic of femininity (158). She argues that femininity, which she defines as the traditional assessment of a woman's worth as dictated by men, is distinctly different from feminism (157).

The success of *Sex and the City* as a television series is well-acknowledged, and Jane Arthurs attributes it to the show's prevalent use of sexually explicit discourse. Arthurs claims in "*Sex and the City* and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama" that through its "sexualized mode of address," *Sex and the City* represents women's sexuality in a new light (83). The show's approach to the representation of women's sexuality encourages female promiscuity and validates a feminine culture, which includes tight-knit female friendships (95). While Arthurs believes that the women of *Sex and the City* are old enough to have been influenced by feminism in its early stages, she also asserts that they are too old to participate in a "newly fashionable queer culture." Arthurs is speaking of a "bourgeois

bohemianism” that she believes is descriptive of the women of *Sex and the City*. In this context, *bohemian* refers to the distinct attitude towards women’s sexuality. However, Arthurs notes that in *Sex and the City*, bourgeois bohemianism is “normalized” because “sexual boundaries are drawn.” The women of *Sex and the City*, sharing many of the same freedoms as men, explore their own sexuality but continually reconfirm their sexual boundaries so as not to be considered “vulgar.” (92).

On the other hand, scholarly debate on the continuum of postfeminism in *Sex and the City* also suggests that, despite the heterosexuality of the characters, the show does imply a sense of “queerness.” Jane Gerhard believes that *Sex and the City* is positioned at the intersection of postfeminism and queerness, a view she shares in “*Sex and the City*: Carrie Bradshaw’s Queer Postfeminism.” She defines postfeminism as “the ways in which women enjoy the fruits of post 1970s equality,” whereas for Gerhard, queerness implies “narratives, images, and plot structures that can be read as queer,” regardless of the sexual orientation of the characters (37). Gerhard identifies the committed friendships of the main characters, in addition to the show’s explicit sexual discourse, as two main themes that prove the relationship between postfeminism and queerness (43).

The frequency and importance of the discussions on sex in *Sex and the City* has also been acknowledged by Gail Markle. In “Can Women Have Sex Like a Man?: Sexual Scripts in *Sex and the City*,” she cites M.E. Brown’s description of these scripts as a form of “feminine discourse” through which “women acknowledge their lesser status within a patriarchal society” (49). By conducting a content analysis on the sex-centered conversations of *Sex and the City*, Markle has concluded that the show challenges commonly held cultural beliefs about what is considered appropriate sexual behavior for women. Markle believes *Sex*



*and the City's* popularity mandates the study of the types of messages it delivers as well as the effects those messages have on viewers (46).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Genre Analysis: Trendsetting**

For this study, episodes of *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* were analyzed for scenes exhibiting specific trends and situations. These trends provide for a twofold generic and feminist criticism of these shows. Stereotypical character personalities, the importance of sisterhood, conversations over meals or drinks; and consideration of sexual orientation are trends that legitimize the existence of the female-centered sitcom genre. Additionally, these shows can also be analyzed for their contributions to a discussion of contemporary understandings of women and feminism. Both *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* build on socially constructed representations of women with their depictions of supporting male characters, and by polarizing the conceptions of feminism and femininity.

For both shows, individual representative scenes, rather than full episodes, were selected for analysis. However, extensive viewing of both shows reveals that the vast majority of episodes contain the specific elements that are relevant to this study, especially those revealing character personalities. In order to designate scenes that are especially representative of observed trends, episode guides from both shows were consulted for information regarding specific situations confronted by the characters. Representative episodes were selected from each of the seven seasons of *The Golden Girls* as well as from each of the six seasons of *Sex and the City*.

#### **Two of a Kind**

After watching just one episode of *The Golden Girls*, it becomes clear that the four women have strikingly different personalities. In their study entitled “Myths of Sex, Love, and Romance of Older Women in *Golden Girls*,” Jo Anna Grant and Heather Hundley affirm

Anne Kaler's research on the show's portrayal of the "complete woman" illustrated by the combined personalities of the four characters. Grant and Hundley elaborate on the four discrete personalities exhibited by each of the women: Dorothy representing "masculine reasoning" through her appearance, intelligence, and occupation; Blanche as the "archetype of sensuality" communicated through her promiscuity; Sophia illustrating "the wisdom of experience" through her storytelling; and Rose depicting "metaphorical virginal innocence" through her morals, child-like tendencies, and rural upbringing (124).

Although the women of *Sex and the City* are of a different demographic than the women of *The Golden Girls*, the four types of personalities present in *The Golden Girls* are the same four personalities exhibited by the characters of *Sex and the City*. From this observation emerge the pairs of: Dorothy/ Miranda; Blanche/Samantha; Rose/Charlotte; and Sophia/Carrie.

### **The Masculine Career-Woman**

Dorothy and Miranda serve as the least-feminine characters in their respective shows. They are both tall with short hairstyles, passionate about their careers, cynical with regard to love, men, and relationships, and often lack romantic prospects.

Dorothy and Miranda's lack of femininity are often conveyed by the views of other characters in the shows. The other three women of *The Golden Girls* often make comments directly to Dorothy that are critical of her appearance, regardless of whether they were meant to be offensive. In one episode, Dorothy asks Blanche and Rose whether a silver chain or pearls go better with her outfit. Blanche argues that the chain "accentuates that long, turkey-like neck," to which Rose responds that the pearls "draw attention to the non-existent

bosom.” An agitated Dorothy sarcastically suggests that she just spray paint a sign that says “Too ugly to live” on her “hump” (“And Ma Makes Three”).

Similarly, there is an episode of *Sex and the City* in which Miranda’s coworkers’ views on her lack of femininity are implied when she is assumed to be a lesbian. Miranda agrees to be fixed up on a blind date by her lawyer-friend, Jeff. Her date ends up being a plain, short-haired woman by the name of Sid. After Jeff introduces the woman, he exclaims, “Look at you two- it’s a perfect match!” Miranda quickly excuses herself from Sid to explain to a confused Jeff that she is not a lesbian (“Bay of Married Pigs”).

While Dorothy and Miranda are arguably the most successful of their friends when it comes to careers, they are positioned as the least successful in attracting men and securing dates. When Dorothy begrudgingly agrees to participate in a charity bachelorette auction, Rose suggests that Blanche, Sophia, and she buy Dorothy a man. Sophia enthusiastically replies, “I know just the person- free every Saturday night...oh wait that’s a woman. Oh wait, that’s Dorothy!” (“Love for Sale”).

In the first season of *Sex and the City*, Miranda has a three-month dry spell in which no men show any interest in her. Miranda admits this to a horrified-looking Carrie, adding that Carrie had been too busy having sex to notice. Miranda, however, claims to have been “at Blockbuster renting videos,” something she describes as “tragic” (“The Drought”).

Miranda’s dating tribulations naturally feed her cynical personality. Carrie decides that she will try to set Miranda up with her “nice guy” friend, Skipper, after he begs her to fix him up with somebody. However, Carrie is not optimistic, admitting in a voiceover, “Miranda was going to hate Skipper. She’d think he was mocking her with his sweet nature

and decide he was an asshole, the way she had decided all men were assholes” (“Sex and the City”).

Likewise, Dorothy is also the character of her show to be portrayed as the most pessimistic and sarcastic. Rose attempts to get Dorothy to join a positive thinking group, an offer Dorothy immediately rejects. Rose criticizes Dorothy for not being open-minded, to which Dorothy defensively replies, “I am so, now shut up” (“Great Expectations”).

When compared to their friends, Dorothy and Miranda are the most negative, the least feminine, and the least popular among men. Nonetheless, at the conclusions of their respective series, both Dorothy and Miranda had found themselves in happy, long-term relationships.

### **The Vain Vamp**

Among their groups of friends, Blanche and Samantha enjoy the company of men the most. They are both portrayed as the “slut” and are often viewed with men or talking to their friends about men. They are also the most vain and concerned with their appearances and ages. Blanche and Samantha are both employed; Blanche is a museum curator and Samantha is a public relations practitioner. However, both of their jobs rely, to a degree, on their attractiveness and charisma (Arthurs 84).

While the other three women of *The Golden Girls* have a similar number of male partners on the show and also speak of a similar number of past male partners, Blanche dates and talks about a greater number of men (Grant and Hundley 130). In one episode, Blanche mentions that she wants to be buried in Arlington Cemetery because, “It’s full of men!” (“The Heart Attack”).

Similarly, Samantha's obsession with men is intrinsic to every episode of *Sex and the City*. In the third season, Samantha is banned from her apartment because her other tenants think she has too many male visitors. One neighbor confronts Samantha saying, "You always have visitors coming in. Every time I'm in this elevator, you're with a different man" ("Are We Sluts?").

A fear of aging haunts both Blanche and Samantha and is made evident in their feelings toward menopause. Blanche, who is older than she will ever admit, is devastated after realizing she is experiencing "the change." On the verge of tears, Blanche admits, "It's menopause. Well, I wish I could die because as far as I'm concerned, this is the end of my life" ("End of the Curse").

On the other hand, Samantha, who is the oldest of her friends, is the first to encounter the possibility of going through menopause. Samantha receives a catalog for pre-menopausal women in the mail, which she refers to as "J. Crew for women who are drying up." Indignantly, she asserts to her friends, "FYI- I am not transitioning. I am happening" ("The Big Time").

Blanche and Samantha are brazenly confident in their appearances and abilities to attract the opposite sex. For their respective shows, their comments and behaviors have the most shock value of all of the characters. Nonetheless, Samantha's comments and actions are much more sexually explicit than Blanche's, making Blanche seem modest in comparison. This is probably due to the time gap between the two shows as well as the freedom that is generally granted to shows on the HBO network.

### **The Motherly Prude**

In contrast to Blanche and Samantha, Rose and Charlotte are at the other end of the “virgin/vamp spectrum” (Lotz 101). They are the most sexually conservative of their friends and often voice their traditional values. For example, in the first season of *The Golden Girls*, Rose confesses not only that she hasn’t had sex since her husband died, but also that her late husband was her only lover, and that she had lost her virginity to him on her wedding night. This admission completely shocks Blanche who instantaneously replies, “Get out of here!” (“Rose The Prude”).

Likewise, on *Sex and the City*, Charlotte worries over problems she and her husband are having in the bedroom. Samantha explains that the problem is that Charlotte is not sexy enough. She asserts that Charlotte’s husband, Trey, views her as his “virginal wife” and that Charlotte needs to alter that perception by increasing her sex appeal (“Frenemies”).

The innocence of both characters is undoubtedly a product of their upbringings; Rose hails from small-town, rural Minnesota and Charlotte’s roots can be traced back to affluent Connecticut. However, their backgrounds can also be blamed for the two women being out of touch with reality. Rose is proud of her heritage and often shares her infamous stories about her hometown of St. Olaf. Dorothy, Blanche, and Sophia view these stories as a nuisance; they drag on, involve characters with barely pronounceable Scandinavian names, and never make a point or prove to be relevant to the situation at hand. In one episode, Rose tells a story that is supposed to be about mysterious illnesses. However, Blanche has to ask Rose what the point of “that ridiculous story” was. When Rose continues to tell the rest of her story without success, Blanche becomes so frustrated that she dismisses the story yelling, “Oh, shut up Rose!” (“Sick And Tired”).

Similarly, in one episode of *Sex and the City*, Charlotte surprises Carrie by posing the question, “But how well do we ever know the people we sleep with?” Carrie’s voiceover explains, “That was the thing about Charlotte. Just when you were about to write her off as a Park-Avenue Pollyanna, she’d say something so right-on you’d think she was the Dalai Lama.” Charlotte then asks, “Do you think my hair is too shiny today?” to which Carrie’s voiceover replies, “And then she would say something else” (“Three’s a Crowd”).

Rose and Charlotte are also the two women that are the most naturally maternal. This can be seen in how they express concern over their friends’ problems, and how they handle situations with their own family members. Rose’s motherly tendencies are especially evident when she inherits a pig from her uncle. After Baby, the pig, takes ill, Rose becomes visibly upset and tends to it by checking its temperature. She is bothered by her friends for the majority of this episode because of their relentless joking about the pig’s health (“Bringing Up Baby”).

Charlotte’s desire to be a mother is evident throughout the entire series of *Sex and the City*, even when she is not in a relationship. The viewer learns in the first season that Charlotte has dreamt of motherhood since she was a child. Charlotte becomes upset after learning that her friend Laney has chosen to name her daughter Shayla, which is the baby name Charlotte made up for her future daughter when she had been 11 years old (“The Baby Shower”).

Although Rose and Charlotte are both depicted as sweet and virginal, there are times when they both break away from their innocence and act uncharacteristically. Nonetheless, their prudence, naiveté, and warmth are the patterned traits that best represent their characters.



### **The Wise Storyteller**

The fourth personality prototype present in both series is that of the wise storyteller, exhibited by Sophia and Carrie. Unlike the other character pairs, Sophia and Carrie share what is more of a responsibility to their respective shows than a similar personality type. These two women stand apart from the other characters of their shows for their storytelling abilities and the credibility which they are given by others.

Sophia's ethos is a product of her age, which sets her apart from the other three women on *The Golden Girls*. She is portrayed as the "oral historian" of the group, offering stories of her life in Sicily, her marriage, and the Depression (Kaler 56). Sophia's Sicily narratives often begin with the distinguishing introduction "Picture it," before she dives into what is inevitably a colorful, and often clearly exaggerated or fabricated, story. When Dorothy, Blanche, and Rose come down with the flu, Sophia tells them a story about how illness was dealt with in Sicily. Her narrative suggests that pesto sauce had originated as ear salve that Sicily's "village idiot with a hearing problem" had, accidentally, put on his pasta ("The Flu").

Because she is a generation older than her housemates, and therefore considered wise, Sophia's advice is regularly solicited on the show. During the third season, Sophia announces she is moving out to live with her son, Phil. Upon hearing this, Dorothy, Blanche, and Rose reminisce over all of the memories they have had with Sophia and all of the advice she has given them through the stories of her experiences ("Golden Moments").

Carrie Bradshaw of *Sex and the City* stands out from her girlfriends and is viewed as a credible source because of her career as a journalist and her role as central narrator of the show. She is presumed to be "someone who knows about good sex," communicating her

knowledge and opinions through her weekly *New York Star* column and her narration from within the show's narrative (Akass and McCabe 178). In the pilot episode, Carrie poses the question, and topic of that week's column, "Why are there so many great, unmarried women and no great, unmarried men?" The episode begins with her telling the story of the failed romance of a journalist-friend, complete with a "once upon a time" beginning. Although the fairytale is just the introduction to the episode, Carrie's narrative voiceover continues through the episode as she researches and writes about her topic ("Sex and the City").

Although Carrie is consistently found facing her own relationship problems, her ethos is supported by her friends who seek her advice; by the popularity of her column among others on the show; and also implicitly by the viewers who are connected to the show through her narrative voiceovers. When everything seems to be going wrong at Charlotte's wedding to Harry, Carrie comforts a worried Charlotte who thinks that her marriage is doomed. Carrie brings up Charlotte's previous failed marriage (one that had begun with a seemingly perfect wedding) and hypothesizes, "The worse the wedding, the better the marriage." Carrie is successful in cheering up Charlotte and getting her to enjoy the rest of her wedding. After the best man makes an inappropriate toast, a newly optimistic Charlotte comforts herself, and her groom, with Carrie's advice, proving Charlotte's respect for Carrie's opinions ("The Catch").

Sophia and Carrie are highly regarded among their female counterparts for the wisdom and advice they impart and the stories they share. When confronted with the possibility of Sophia moving, the other three women of *The Golden Girls* acknowledge their dependence on Sophia and beg her to stay. Similarly, Carrie's role as the central narrator on *Sex and the City* designates her presence as indispensable to the show.

### The Sisterhood

The characters on *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* have strikingly different personalities, yet still interact on an intimate level of friendship. The women of *The Golden Girls* entered into a living arrangement dictated by economic necessity, but out of which a family-like bond formed (Kaler 53). On *Sex and the City*, the women are introduced as friends but, throughout the series, the closeness of their friendship is revealed. The women act as a “collective force,” in which the interrelationships within that force are more lasting and dependable than those relationships with any previous male suitors (Southard 153; Gerhard 43).

The two circles of women from each show both think of themselves as a family and speak of their relationships in familial terms on the show. When Blanche tries to get a permit to put a hot tub in her house, the inspector notifies her that she can only have two non-family members living in her house. Throughout the episode, the women try to decide who will have to move out. However, when the inspector returns, Dorothy informs him that none of them will be leaving because they are a “family,” albeit “not the traditional one.” Blanche then announces her decision to make each of the women co-owners of the house so that none of them will have to move out. She tells Dorothy, Rose, and Sophia, “This house was the home of my family, but, you’re right, you’re family now” (“That’s For Me To Know”).

The same concept of friends-turned-family is intrinsic to *Sex and the City*. When Samantha is diagnosed with breast cancer in season six, she does not want to ruin Miranda’s wedding day by telling her. Miranda can sense that something is wrong and pressures Samantha into telling her. She begins to cry when she finds out, so Charlotte suggests she go

back to her “people” and they will talk about it later. Miranda indignantly replies, “You are my people and we will talk about it now (“The Ick Factor”).

In addition to being a family of sisters, the women on *Sex and the City* also depend on each other for the companionship they are often missing from men. On her 35<sup>th</sup> birthday, Carrie finds herself feeling lonely because she does not have a man in her life. Her three friends console her, Miranda telling her that she is not alone and Charlotte suggesting that they be each others’ soul mates (“The Agony and the ‘Ex’-tacy”).

The friendships that the characters on both *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* have with each other are the only relationships that provide consistent reliability and loyalty. By creating a sisterhood, the characters on each show are able to suppress the feelings of alienation that often bother single women (Southard 155).

### **Table Talk**

The distinct mode of address characteristic of female-centered sitcoms is especially prevalent in *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*. Bonnie Dow defines these discussions as “women’s talk” and argues that they are significant and valuable, although often considered gossip and, therefore, devalued. Dow also cites Lee Aitken’s description of these kinds of conversations as “female locker room humor” (“Prime-Time” 105).

Most of the conversations in both *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* take place at the table, over shared meals. It is in this context that the conversations function as opportunities for the women to talk through situations by sharing stories and offering advice (Gerhard 43). More often than not, these conversations focus on sex and the quest for “the right man.” In *The Golden Girls*, they also usually take place at the kitchen table, which serves as a “meeting ground” for the majority of their discussions (Gerhard 45; Kaler 59).

In one episode of *The Golden Girls*, the women specifically acknowledge their tendency to talk about men and sex while eating cheesecake. Dorothy, Blanche, and Sophia are upset by the fact that Sophia is moving out and are all unable to sleep. Blanche goes to get a cheesecake out of the refrigerator, gasping in horror upon realizing there isn't any left. "Oh my god!" exclaims Blanche, "Here we are in the middle of a crisis and there's no cheesecake." Rose then walks in carrying a box and announces, "I figured this would happen, so I went out and bought a cheesecake." A much happier Blanche suggests, "Well, let's slice this baby up and see if we can solve our Sophia problem," which prompts Dorothy to ask, "Do you know how many problems we have solved over cheesecake at this kitchen table?" Her rhetorical question launches a trip down memory lane in which the three women begin to reminisce about their love for, and dependence on, cheesecake ("Golden Moments").

Table talk occurs with similar frequency in *Sex and the City*, although the four women often have table talk over drinks or restaurant meals. The topics of conversation in *Sex and the City* are almost exclusively limited to discussing sex and sharing stories of various sexual encounters and partners. The women find pleasure in sharing their experiences with each other through their conversations, suggesting that the importance of the sexual behavior is measured by the amount of attention it receives, rather than by its frequency (Gerhard 44; Markle 49). For example, after Carrie spends the night at a successful French architect's hotel room, he leaves her an envelope with a thank you note and \$1000. Carrie, bothered by the situation, does not understand why she would have been given money. When Samantha and Miranda come to her aid, a confused Carrie asks, "I don't understand- what exactly about me screams *whore*?" to which Miranda replies, "You mean besides the \$1000 on the end table?" The three women continue to discuss what Carrie should do with her new

money, ordering large amounts of food from room service to accompany their analysis (“The Power of Female Sex”).

The group interaction in both shows serves as a vehicle for personal problem solving. However, because a large percentage of each episode is devoted solely to “women’s talk,” characters are seen talking over problems more often than they are seen making decisions (Keyton 26, 30).

### **Appreciation for Sexual Orientation**

The importance of relationships is central to shows of the female-centered genre. While it can be argued that the most durable relationships are the ones shared between the female characters, the pursuit of, and engagement in, sexual relationships is also of significance in both *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*. However, the construction of sexual relationships in the two shows is different because of the dissimilar eras of television history that are represented by each show. This difference is rooted in the evolving presence of homosexuality on television.

When *The Golden Girls* premiered in 1985, the sexual orientations of television characters were still almost exclusively heterosexual. The 1970s brought forth the first instances of homosexuality on television, but these were mostly limited to occasional appearances of homosexual characters. These single-episode gay and lesbian characters were not regular characters on their shows, and they minimally affected plot evolution (Buxton). In fact, Bonnie Dow notes that these characters are never “incidentally gay,” and instead are portrayed as if their sexuality is a problem to be solved (“*Ellen*” 99).

Even through the 1980s, homosexuality on television was still considered taboo, as was illustrated in *The Golden Girls* with its standardization of sexual orientation. Almost all

of the relationships in the show are presented against a heterosexual background, and the central female characters engage exclusively in the pursuit of male partners. Its absence implies that homosexuality is something not directly affecting the daily lives of these four older women. In fact, there are only three episodes that focus on sexual orientation as a discussion-worthy issue. These episodes introduce the show's only homosexual characters, Blanche's brother Clayton and Dorothy's high school friend Jean.

Clayton's homosexuality is introduced during the fourth season of the show in 1988 and is later revisited in 1991 during the sixth season. In this first episode titled "Scared Straight," Clayton struggles to admit to Blanche that he is gay. Initially, Clayton tries to cover up his homosexuality by lying that he slept with Rose, because he knows that will upset Blanche less than her finding out he is gay. Blanche, the character who is defined by her number of heterosexual relationships and her candid desire for male sexual pleasure, would have never been able to fathom homosexuality as a possibility for her brother.

Many of the female characters display unfamiliarity with the idea of homosexuality, constructing it as a rarity in this episode. When Clayton explains to Rose at the beginning of the episode that Blanche "is way off" with regard to his "type," Rose tries to guess what Clayton's type is by gauging his reactions to passing strangers. Rose notices that Clayton is unresponsive to the first two women to pass them, but stares attentively at a man walking by. Rose laughs at first exclaiming, "Clayton, you're not playing fair! That's a man and you're a man. You're both men!" However, at this point Rose's laugh has become much more forced and awkward since she has made the realization of what Clayton's type really is.

Just as Blanche and Rose had not considered this as a possibility for Clayton, Dorothy also exhibits how little thought she gives to homosexuality when Rose tells her of Clayton's

secret. At first, Dorothy is confused because she mishears Rose say that “Clayton is a hobo.” After Rose clarifies this, a shocked Dorothy exclaims, “Oh, now I get it!” to which Rose replies, “Good. I thought I was going to have to draw you a picture and I’m not sure I would know how to.” By conversing in this manner, the women construct homosexuality as an abnormality. They also illustrate something that is characteristic of the sitcom: the use of humor to lighten the mood when more serious issues are at hand. This type of humor is prevalent throughout the entirety of this episode, often preceding or following arguments, personal confessions, and other types of meaningful conversations.

By the end of “Scared Straight,” Blanche seems to have overcome her discomfort with Clayton’s homosexuality, yet when Clayton visits again two seasons later in the episode titled “Sisters of the Bride,” the issue reemerges clearly unresolved. At the beginning of the episode, Blanche confidently states, “I think that gay thing was just a phase he was going through.” Therefore, it comes as a paralyzing surprise when Clayton arrives and introduces his friend Doug as his, “very special friend.”

In this episode, Blanche expresses a theory with regard to sexual orientation that was commonly held at this time. Blanche explains that she had been fine with Clayton being homosexual, but she did not approve of him dating men. Her misunderstanding of homosexuality has her make the ignorant assertion that “there must be homosexuals who date women,” to which Sophia bluntly responds, “Yeah, they’re called lesbians.”

The obstacle Blanche could not get passed was what her friends would think of her if they found out about her brother’s relationship. Clayton and Doug try to explain to her that they don’t care what other people think because of their love for each other. Although Blanche is still not supportive at this point in the episode, this conversation conveys a



positive understanding of homosexual relationships to the heterosexual audience members. Blanche's renewed struggle to accept her brother as a homosexual in this episode, which aired two seasons after the issue had first been addressed, may seem like a step backwards in the fight to accept the diversity of sexual orientations. On the other hand, this episode should be viewed as a step in the right direction. It is progressive because goes further than just including a homosexual character by also addressing homosexual marriage as a natural expression of love.

Even though Clayton's sexual orientation is only the focus of two episodes, it does have significant implications. *The Golden Girls* was progressive for its era due to its willingness to contribute to a discussion on sexual orientation, albeit only in a select number of episodes.

It could be argued that *The Golden Girls* could have done more to facilitate an ongoing discussion on homosexuality and its emergence as an issue of societal normalcy. However, there is evidence that the writers may have intended be more inclusive of homosexuality. The pilot episode of *The Golden Girls* included a gay cook/housekeeper who originally was meant to be a regular cast member, but was cut from the show when the series began (Wyatt). It is possible that the producers felt the social climate in 1985 was not yet able to tolerate a regular male cast member who could compliment and engage in the lives of the women as if he was one of them.

If that is the case, then it can be assumed that this social climate had grown at least a little more tolerant by the late 1990s because this same idea that was abandoned by *The Golden Girls* was adopted by *Sex and the City*. Debuting in 1998, six years after the series finale of *The Golden Girls*, *Sex and the City* immediately positioned itself as a show with no

concern for social taboos, which was made possible by airing on HBO. Furthermore, both creator Darren Star and executive producer Michael Patrick King are known members of the gay community (Levy 71).

In the beginning of the first episode, right after Carrie introduces Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha, the character of Stanford Blatch appears. Before Carrie's voiceover explains who Stanford is or what kind of relationship she has with him, Stanford laments to Carrie, "I'm beginning to think the only place where one can still find love and romance in New York is the gay community. It's straight love that has become closeted." Carrie's voiceover clarifies that Stanford is one of her "closest friends" and then questions Stanford, "So, are you telling me that you're in love." Within this initial minute of introducing Stanford, Carrie has already confirmed the audience's assumptions regarding Stanford's homosexuality, and has implied that he will be a regular presence on the show because of their level of closeness ("Sex and the City").

Comparing the ways in which Stanford's and Clayton's homosexuality are addressed portrays the different conceptions of sexual orientation in both shows. Whereas Clayton's coming out of the closet was the subject of an entire episode, warranting explanation and justification, Stanford's homosexuality was implied and was regarded as something natural.

However, while diversity of sexual orientation is a component of *Sex and the City*, and healthy attitudes are expressed with regard to homosexuality, it does not significantly permeate the daily lives of the main female characters. During the fourth season, Samantha experiments with bisexuality when she enters into a short relationship with another woman, but neither this relationship nor Samantha's identification as a bisexual woman develop into anything substantial.

In fact, despite the presence of homosexuality throughout the duration of the series, some critics of *Sex and the City* have commented on the show's "reconsolidation of heterosexual norms" (Harzewski 4). Stephanie Harzewski speaks of the show's "graphic catalog of straight sex's themes" which provides viewers with "thirty minute education sessions in straight diversity wherein aspects of heterosexuality are revealed as constructed and frequently accompanied by their own set of perversities" (Harzewski, 3).

Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that *Sex and the City* significantly contributed to diminishing the social stigma surrounding homosexuality as both a real issue in society and an increasing presence on the television screen. Thanks to shows like *The Golden Girls*, which attempted to define and understand variations of sexual orientation, shows like *Sex and the City* were later able to incorporate these orientations as natural human dispositions which no longer required explanations.

An appreciation for sexual orientation is just one of the elements shared by *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*. In conjunction with stereotypical character personalities, the sisterly relationships of the main characters, and the presence of woman's talk, a growing acceptance for homosexuality emerged as a pattern within these two female-centered sitcoms, despite their different eras and target audiences.

## **Chapter 5** **Interpretations of Situational Feminism**

The patterns exhibited in *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* justify the presence of a uniquely female-centered variation of the traditional sitcom. By coexisting in this subgenre, *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* have been given a degree of influence in the messages they convey to viewers. The power of repetition that is intrinsic to any genre reinforces and highlights those shared trends that constitute the genre. Once this genre has been recognized, the next step is to analyze it for the social implications of its repeated messages. In this case, that involves interpreting *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* through the lens of situation feminism by evaluating their contributions, or lack thereof, to a contemporary understanding of women and feminist thought.

### **What He Says Goes**

The focus in *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* is clearly on the women. The plots revolve around the individual happenings of the lead female characters, their relationships with each other, and the romantic relationships they enter into with men. Generally speaking, men have a regular presence in each show. Most episodes consist of at least one romantic sub-plot, involving one of the women and a male companion. Many of these men have brief appearances on the shows, engaging one of the women in a one-episode stand. However, there are a few men who appear with enough regularity on both *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* to be considered supporting cast members. Although these men take a backseat to the female leads, their presence on the shows and the manner in which each of them is portrayed affects how the female characters are defined and understood.

An important distinction between *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* is that, while all of the women are unmarried during both shows, the women of *The Golden Girls* had all previously been married. Blanche, Rose, and Sophia are all widowed, and Dorothy is divorced from Stanley, her husband of 38 years. The women all have their own grown children and may not explicitly be looking to remarry, but they are all clearly searching for male companionship. Throughout the duration of the series, it can be observed that although all of the four women date and enjoy the company of men, only Rose and Dorothy have consistent male partners. Sophia has the least number of interactions with men, and on the occasions when she is seeing someone, the portrayals of her male companions usually bear little relevance to her individual character.

On the other hand, Blanche is the woman who clearly has the greatest number of interactions with men. However, because she has a different suitor in almost every episode, there is little opportunity for their character development. What can be observed of one of Blanche's male companions in a single half-hour episode does not allow for penetration below the surface. On the surface, we can deduce that Blanche's men do not provide her with much beside sexual pleasure, since the relationship is always short-lived. Blanche is aware of the superficiality of her relationships and admits to this in one particular episode during the sixth season. Sophia and Rose both take advice from Blanche on how to improve their current romantic relationships. However, when both of their situations go awry, Rose and Sophia are left feeling depressed and angry with Blanche for steering them in the wrong direction. Noticing how upset Rose is, Blanche confesses to her something that she had never told to anybody else, that she cries every Thursday night. Blanche explains, "It's kind of

lonely not having someone nice and decent like Miles<sup>2</sup>,” and she clarifies that her advice only works with the “shallow guys” that she is accustomed to dating (“Girls Just Wanna Have Fun...Before They Die”). Blanche admits to lacking the meaning that can be found in a relationship with substance, which she fears she will not get to experience because of her personality.

Dorothy’s relationship with her ex-husband Stan is paramount to fully understanding how Dorothy is portrayed, especially because he is a recurring character throughout all seven seasons. The way in which Stan is represented alludes to certain suggestions regarding Dorothy’s character. This is especially evident in the second episode of the series, which is the episode where Stan first appears. From the start, the viewers learn that Dorothy and Stan’s marriage ended because, as Dorothy explains, he “ran off with someone half my age and twice my bra size.” Throughout the episode, Dorothy puts Stan down, referring to him in terms like “dirt bag” and “yellow-bellied sleaze ball” (“Guess Who’s Coming to the Wedding”).

As Stan’s character develops, he is continually portrayed as underachieving, dishonest, money hungry, and needy. He is looked down upon not only by Dorothy, but also by the other three women and Sophia regularly refers to him as a “yutz.” Despite Dorothy’s negative perceptions of Stan, there are times when she succumbs to his advances against her better judgment. Finally, in the sixth season Stan is presented as self-assertive and having a “backbone” after he stands up for himself, which begins a new phase of Dorothy and Stan’s relationship that leads to engagement (“If At Last You Do Succeed”). However, Stan proves that he had not reformed by asking Dorothy to sign a prenuptial agreement at their wedding, causing her to call the wedding off (“There Goes the Bride part 2”).

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<sup>2</sup> Miles Webber is Rose’s significant other in later seasons of the show.

Stan's negative representation which prevails throughout the entire series reinforces Dorothy's stereotypical traits of being the least attractive and the least desirable. The fact that Stan maintains a consistent presence in the show, and that he and Dorothy get back together, suggests that Dorothy cannot do any better. Despite her intellect, Dorothy is continually duped by Stan, the imprudent "yutz." Dorothy's qualities as a strong, witty, able woman are diminished through her relationship with the undesirable Stanley. However, despite her long history with Stan, Dorothy's character is redeemed at the end of the series when she unexpectedly falls in love with and marries Blanche's uncle Lucas ("One Flew Out Of the Cuckoo's Nest"). After being portrayed as the one with the empty date book for seven seasons, Dorothy ends up as the only "Golden Girl" to remarry. However, although she does find redemption, her relationship with Stan illustrates that even though her strong character could prevail, it is not infallible.

Other than Stan, Miles Webber is the only other male character to appear on *The Golden Girls* consistently. Rose and Miles meet as dancing partners in the fifth season and Rose learns, at the same time as the audience, that Miles is a college professor. Miles is portrayed as a nice man who is clearly interested in Rose, but his profession as an academic is emphasized as a prime component of his character. Miles is represented in a way that not only stresses his high intellect, but advertently highlights Rose's lack of intelligence and naiveté.

This stark contrast is observable in Rose and Miles's relationship both directly and indirectly. Seeing Rose fail at holding conversations with Miles's professor friends illustrates this difference between them. Moreover, the characters in the show explicitly mention this discrepancy, suggesting that Rose is not smart enough for Miles. For instance, when Dorothy

suggests Rose invite Miles over to their house for dinner, Blanche agrees it is a good idea because it would “create the illusion that [Rose] is interesting.” Sophia underlines this point even more by adding, “That’s a hell of an illusion. Maybe we should just saw her in half”. Even Rose exhibits a lack of confidence in her relationship with Miles admitting that she feels like a “fish out of water” around his “brilliant friends,” and that she’s “just not smart enough to keep up” (“Dancing in the Dark”).

Although Miles’s interest in Rose is genuine, there is an episode where he even remarks on their different levels of aptitude. Miles is conversing with Dorothy after he and Rose decide to spontaneously get engaged. After Dorothy quotes a verse from Shakespeare, Miles comments, “You know, Dorothy, it’s funny. A casual observer would say we’re the ones who should be together.” Miles and Dorothy end up impulsively kissing, and even though everything ends fine between Rose and Miles, this episode reinforces that Rose is not smart enough to date someone like Miles (“A Midwinter Night’s Dream part 2”).

As previously stated, on *The Golden Girls*, Stan and Miles are the only two male characters to appear frequently. Their character portrayals highlight the representations of Dorothy and Rose that already had been established. Similarly, on *Sex and the City*, the recurring male characters contribute to the perceptions of their female companions. However, on *Sex and the City*, each of the four women has at least one man that is a consistent presence during at least part of the show. Because of this, a more holistic analysis of the implications of male character representations in female-centered sitcoms is available.

One recurring theme of male portrayals in *Sex and the City* is that a woman’s behavior and personality can be influenced enough by a man to the point where she seems to act out of character. This belief is conveyed through both Carrie and Samantha’s



relationships. Although Carrie dates multiple men throughout the series, she is never able to fully detach herself from her relationship to “Mr. Big.” When Carrie and Samantha run into Mr. Big in the first episode, Samantha describes him as “the next Donald Trump except he’s younger and much better looking.” Carrie is obviously smitten with Mr. Big from the beginning. After their first conversation her voiceover comments, “Suddenly I felt the wind knocked out of me, I wanted to crawl under the covers and go right to sleep” (“Sex and the City”).

In the next episode, when Mr. Big walks into the party Carrie is at, her voiceover states, “It was Mr. Big. Major tycoon, major dreamboat, and majorly out of my league.” Carrie already had placed Mr. Big on a pedestal, convinced that she was not good enough for him. After she learns that his date to the party is a model, Carrie dejectedly declares, “I had never felt so invisible in my entire life” (“Models and Mortals”).

Even before they began dating, Mr. Big affected Carrie’s attitude, self-confidence, and state of mind. As their relationship develops, it is constantly marked by Mr. Big’s inability to commit to Carrie and his lack of emotional investment. By diminishing her self-esteem, Carrie’s dysfunctional relationship with Mr. Big causes her to act out of character. Carrie is portrayed as a self-assured, independent career woman, except for when she is consumed with thoughts of Mr. Big. The irony of this situation is that Carrie’s inability to successfully control her personal relationships detracts from her ethos as an insightful journalist. Although Carrie writes about men and relationships in her weekly column, her problematic relationship with Mr. Big suggests that she is not as wise as she seems.

Just as Carrie’s relationship with Mr. Big is the cause of uncharacteristic neediness and dependence, Samantha’s relationship with Smith Jerod provokes Samantha to also act

out of character. Samantha prides herself on her ability to have sex solely for the purpose of satisfying herself. She is comfortable sleeping with multiple men without concern for commitment, and she maintains a casual attitude towards sex. When Samantha first meets Smith Jerod, this is the outcome she expects. Smith is a waiter at a new restaurant that the women attend and Samantha becomes interested as soon as she notices him. The next day, Samantha tells Carrie she is going back to the restaurant and, referring to Smith, asserts, “I’m sleeping with him tonight but he doesn’t know it yet” (“Great Sexpectations”).

However, what was only supposed to be casual sex turned into a full-fledged relationship, despite Samantha’s attempts to keep it from getting too serious. After Smith returns from a film, he tries to hold Samantha’s hand while the two of them are walking in public. A shocked Samantha pulls her hand away and, losing her balance, falls into a ditch. Later, when Carrie asks Samantha about her injury, Samantha explains, “It was Smith’s fault. He did something to me that was so perverse. He tried to hold my hand.” Samantha responds to Carrie’s sarcastic reaction by clarifying, “You laugh, but it’s part of a bigger problem.” She explains that she did not have sex with anyone else while he was away, and she also sheepishly admits to having missed him (“The Domino Effect”). This episode illustrates how difficult it is for Samantha to come to terms with the fact that she has become emotionally attached to Smith. It is not until Smith professes his love for Samantha at the end of the season that she is finally able to say to him, “You have meant more to me than any man I have ever known,” a statement that would not be expected from a character like Samantha (“An American Girl in Paris: Part Deux”).

While men were able to cause Carrie and Samantha to act out of character, others highlight particular stereotypes assigned to the characters of Miranda and Charlotte. As

illustrated in *The Golden Girls* through Rose's relationship with Miles, when an attribute of a male character provides a noticeable contrast to the personality of a female character, that specific trait becomes increasingly more apparent. This is the case on *Sex and the City* in Miranda's relationship with Steve Brady. Miranda is portrayed as the most masculine female character on the show, a representation that is especially visible when she is compared to the three other women. However, her relationship with Steve further emphasizes this portrayal because of Steve's sensitive nature.

Early on in their relationship, Miranda becomes frustrated with Steve's desire to have sex and cuddle for hours when they wake up every morning because she would rather start her day. One Saturday, Miranda tries to get up as soon as her alarm sounds, but Steve pulls her back onto the bed. Miranda replies asking, "How long are we going to do this?" Offended, Steve asks, "You want a time frame for cuddling?" to which Miranda bluntly says yes ("Old Dogs, New Dicks").

Miranda complains about her situation with Steve to her friends, but she receives no sympathy from them. Carrie explains to Miranda that her relationship has "real intimacy," but Miranda instead defines it as "bed rest." The next time she and Steve are together she tells him to spend the night at his place because she wants to be able to sleep and not have to worry about having sex in the morning and then "just lying there and being late." This comment acts as an affront to Steve's sensitivity, and he concludes that Miranda must not enjoy having sex with him. After Miranda explains that she has a "window for sex," Steve, who is clearly hurt, leaves Miranda's apartment ("Old Dogs, New Dicks").

Miranda and Steve's relationship not only highlights their contrasting personalities; it also suggests that they are engaged in a role reversal. An assumption of a "traditional"

relationship is that the man is masculine and therefore insensitive and generally uncomfortable with displaying affection and emotion. On the other hand, the expectation is that the feminine woman is ruled by her emotions and sensitivity. However, by representing Steve as the sensitive half, the conventional masculine-feminine roles of Miranda and Steve's relationship have been switched.

Charlotte, like Miranda, also has a personality trait that is highlighted through her relationships with men, namely her tendency for idealization. Charlotte is represented as the innocent woman who exemplifies femininity and has been dreaming of traditional motherhood since she was a young girl. This attribute of Charlotte's character is further emphasized by the ways she represents the men that she dates, specifically Trey MacDougal and Harry Goldenblatt.

When Charlotte first meets Trey MacDougal she is blinded by the conviction that Trey is her ideal man and soul mate. Charlotte and Trey meet in a peculiar fashion, after she falls in front of the taxi he is in. Carrie's narrative voice over explains, "And that's how, in the most dramatic fashion, Charlotte met her new leading man" ("Drama Queens"). Carrie describes Trey as, "a doctor with family money who had it all." He fit Charlotte's fantasy of what her prince charming would be, and, from the start, Charlotte was convinced that Trey and her were meant to be together. Charlotte confesses to Carrie that she thinks Trey could be "the one," to which Carrie responds, "Charlotte, honey, you've only known him for two weeks. You can know his email address. You can't know he's the one." Charlotte is convinced that he is though, asserting, "I just know" ("The Big Time").

However, as their relationship starts to deteriorate, Charlotte learns that Trey is not her Prince Charming. Beginning with problems in the bedroom, the demise of Charlotte and

Trey's relationship included a number of marital problems including a strained relationship between Charlotte and Trey's mother, Bunny, and the inability to conceive. By idealizing Trey, Charlotte takes a while to realize that the two of them are not compatible together, sexually or otherwise. Trey's disregard for matters of extreme importance to Charlotte, like conceiving a child, pushes Charlotte over the edge and finally ends their marriage.

Charlotte's obsession with idealization is also evident in her initial descriptions of Harry. Harry became Charlotte's divorce lawyer because Charlotte felt more comfortable around him than her original attractive lawyer. Although Charlotte tells herself she would never be interested in Harry, a relationship develops after they unexpectedly have sex in his apartment. However, Charlotte struggles to admit to her friends that she is seeing Harry because he does not fit the prototype of her ideal man. When she finally opens up and admits to seeing someone, she explains that she cannot understand why she is interested in him. "It's ridiculous. He's so not my type. He's bald, and short, and he talks with his mouth full, and I don't even want to be seen in public with him, and I hate his name *Harry* because he is, everywhere but his head." Samantha responds, asking if the sex is bad too, to which Charlotte admits in disbelief, almost guiltily, "It's the best sex of my life....I really like him" ("I Love a Charade").

Charlotte ends up falling in love with and marrying Harry, and even converts to Judaism to be with him. Of all of the women, Charlotte is most often associated with idealization, and she highlights this trait through her representations of both Trey and Harry. However, despite her inclination to romanticize, her relationship experiences suggest that what is often believed to be ideal may not be ideal at all.

*Sex and the City* advocates the presence of an independence and empowerment rooted within each individual woman. This makes the suggestion that women are not dependent on men for anything, except to fulfillments of sexual fantasies and desires. However, when one reads between the lines, it becomes clear that *Sex and the City* indirectly communicates that the women feel incomplete without a stable, committed, male relationship. Often, the women are portrayed not as strong, satisfied, independent women, but rather as desperate, helpless, and on the hunt for commitment and marriage.

On one occasion, the women discuss whether or not it is acceptable to sleep with men to satisfy personal fantasies. While Charlotte is against this idea, Samantha asserts that all of the men they sleep with “fulfill a certain fantasy.” When the discussion turns to why women always fantasize about firemen, Charlotte suggests, “It’s the hero thing. . . . It’s because women really just want to be rescued.” According to Carrie’s voice over, Charlotte’s frank declaration stunned the women because it is, “the sentence that single women in their thirties are never supposed to think, let alone say out loud.” Miranda tries to convince Charlotte that “the white knight” is only present in fairytales, and Carrie tries to comfort Charlotte by proposing, “Did you ever think that maybe we’re the white knights and we have to save ourselves?” However, Carrie had not even convinced herself of this, her voiceover narrating:

Later that day, I got to thinking about fairytales. What if Prince Charming had never shown up? Would Snow White have slept in that glass coffin forever? Or would she have eventually woken up, spit out the apple, gotten a job, a health care package, and a baby from her local neighborhood sperm bank? I couldn’t help but wonder: inside every confident, driven, single woman, is there a delicate fragile princess just waiting

to be saved? Was Charlotte right? Do women just want to be rescued? (“When There’s Smoke”)

The paradox in both *Sex in the City* and *The Golden Girls* holds the autonomy of the women of each show in question. Neither *Sex and the City* nor *The Golden Girls* would be anything without their respective leading females. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that all of the women are partly defined by and understood through the men they date, and that they all depend on these men for a sense of wholeness.

### **Drawing the Line**

A question that is intrinsic to the feminist criticism of popular modes of entertainment is: *To what degree do these artifacts serve to advance, or dilute, a feminist cause?* The phrase “feminist cause” is not used here in accordance with a specific wave or era in the history of feminism, but rather speaks to a continued progress regarding the representations and associations of women within society. Have *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* contributed to this mission by portraying women as architects of their own empowerment? An assessment of the presence of feminist thought within these two shows is fundamental to the answer of this question.

### **Making Strides**

*The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* each have two sets of tools that they use to promote, and also demote, a feminist cause. It can be argued that both of these shows are vehicles for feminism because they maintain three specific channels of women’s empowerment: the female sexual agency; the understanding of fashion as a formula for power; and the act of consciousness-raising.

Traditionally, women had been expected to have two different understandings of their own sexualities. Sexuality could only exist in the private sphere and was not allowed (or at least not welcome) in public. However, as the twentieth century progressed, this view gradually transformed into a greater acceptability of female sexuality. One main stage where the evolution of these conventional standards of acceptability has been showcased is the television screen.

This “mythology of female sexuality” began to change, suggesting women no longer have to be “bad” to enjoy their sexuality (Macdonald 164). During the 1980s and 1990s, the sexual performance of female characters in television series grew increasingly more overt and prevalent (180). *The Golden Girls* experimented with this new notion of female sexuality by celebrating the sexuality of older women verbally, while still remaining conservative visually (Gray 77). In one episode, Sophia announces that she was asked to be in a television commercial for a pizzeria, which will be filmed in Blanche’s home. Blanche responds that she doesn’t want a television crew messing up her kitchen with all of their equipment. Rose earnestly suggest, “Well, how about shooting it in your bedroom, Blanche? The equipment is already set up there!” (“High Anxiety”). Even though this sexual activity is never explicitly shown, allusions like this suggest that Blanche enjoys her sexuality in a way that had not been traditionally acceptable for women on television, especially women of her age.

*Sex and the City* took this notion further by suggesting that female sexuality is not only something that should be celebrated, but also used as a source of empowerment. In this regard, the female sexual agency is considered a tool for feminism because it allows a woman to form an identity that is her own, determined by her own choices and desires. Many feminists champion the idea of the female sexual agency because they believe it makes



possible and probable a discussion on female desire, which had been absent from conversation until recent years.

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards suggest in their book Manifesta the emergence of a “girlie culture.” They define this culture as, “a rebellion against the false impression that since women don’t want to be sexually exploited, they don’t want to be sexual.” They argue that this culture will lead to a stronger feminist movement, even though it is a rejection of the ideas advocated by “feminist foremothers” (136-137). Actions, opinions, and representations that had previously been associated with women’s oppression are now viewed as “no longer being exclusively wielded against women and are sometimes wielded by women” (141).

In an episode of *Sex and the City* appropriately titled “The Power of Female Sex,” this idea of using sex as a means for alternative ends is addressed. The issue arises when Carrie discovers that the man she had a one-night stand with in a hotel left her \$1000 in cash. Samantha dismisses Carrie’s concerns asking, “What are you getting so uptight about? Money is power. Sex is power. Therefore, getting money for sex is simply an exchange of power.” While that explanation seems to refer to prostitution, Samantha instead views it as a product of a woman’s right to sexual freedom.

Rosalind Gill also discusses the value of female sexual agency. While she provides arguments both in support of and in opposition to exercising this particular voice, she does assert the need for arenas where women can express their own pleasure and desires. It can be argued that shows like *Sex and the City* served that role by providing a “place for the breakthrough of female sexual agency (38). Although Gill’s claims are explicitly in reference

to the presence of sexual agency in contemporary advertising, she makes significant claims that mirror certain aspects of *Sex and the City*.

Gill contends that one of the most significant shifts in contemporary advertising was the construction of “the midriff” character; a woman who is “young, attractive, heterosexual, who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always ‘up for it’” (41). It cannot be denied that the four women of *Sex and the City* fit that description perfectly. It is interesting to note that the introduction of the midriff to advertising and the premier of *Sex and the City* occurred at roughly the same time. This highly coincidental timing is a significant because there are trends and similarities observable in both the midriff persona and the women of *Sex and the City*.

The midriff figure can be viewed as an empowered woman because she is defined as an “active, desiring sexual subject” and is seen as “powerful and playful, rather than passive or victimized” (Gill 43). Instead of being concerned with achieving a man’s approval, the midriff prioritizes herself and her personal wants and needs (42). In *Sex and the City*, Samantha clearly fits the description of the midriff figure. She is certain of her attractiveness, stating that men have told her she is as “beautiful as a model.” When she is engaged in a discussion on beauty with the other women, she is the only one to not volunteer a part of her body that she would change if she could. Samantha sees no need to participate in the discussion, claiming “I happen to love the way I look” (“Models and Mortals”).

Later on in the same episode, Samantha fulfils another requirement of the midriff figure when she shows her willingness to participate in unconventional sexual activities. Samantha is attracted to Carrie’s friend Barkley and is aware of his obsession with videotaping the sexual encounters he has with models. Samantha tries to convince Carrie that

she is disturbed by this but, when she does end up sleeping with Barkley, she is the one to suggest the camera be turned on (“Models and Mortals”).

Even though Blanche and Samantha align best with the midriff figure on their respective shows and have the greatest access to sexual agency, the other women are also shown acting with sexual agency on occasion. For example, Dorothy had previously had an affair with a married man named Glenn and decides to meet up with him again after he contacts her, even though to her knowledge Glenn may still be married. Sophia tries to dissuade Dorothy from making the same decision twice, but Dorothy insists that she doesn’t care and that she will see him, pointing at Sophia as she makes this promise (“Cheaters”).

Similarly, Sophia exercises sexual agency in an episode where she charges older men ten cents each for a dance with her. She explains, “The place was packed with old geezers right for the picking.” Dorothy is shocked that she would do this, but Sophia dismisses Dorothy’s judgments, justifying her situation by stating, “Please. I worked hard for the money” (“Dancing in the Dark”).

Another tool of female empowerment applied in *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* is fashion. Like the female sexual agency, arguments can be made for and against fashion as a source of empowerment. However, many feminist do contend that women’s fashion can serve a constructive purpose in allowing a woman to make choices, exert free will, and shape her own identity. Second-wave feminism condemned fashion for restricting women’s identities, but modern feminism recognizes the role fashion can play in the construction of identity because of society’s dependence on the “cultivation of image” (Macdonald 212).

Baumgardner and Richard's "girlie culture" also sees the potential in fashion as a means of liberation. They assert that using makeup, high heels, and other feminine symbols "is not short-hand for 'we've been duped'" (136). Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott second this notion in Gill, describing high heels as "emblematic of a confident, powerful femininity (37).

A woman is able to cultivate a noticeable confidence by using fashion as a means of self-assertion. This confident femininity is exuded by Blanche on *The Golden Girls* and Samantha on *Sex and the City*; self-assurance is an intrinsic part of their character personalities. In one episode of *The Golden Girls*, both Blanche and Sophia are dating the suitor, an older man named Fidel Santiago. Blanche is very upset by the fact that she must compete with Sophia for Fidel and she asserts that Sophia is trying to steal Fidel away from her. Dorothy tells Blanche she thinks Blanche is only upset because her ego is wounded, to which Blanche replies, "Ego? Dorothy, I have no ego. And you can ask the hundreds of men who would gladly cut off their right arm to sleep with me" ("Yes, We Have No Havanas").

Just as Blanche is secure with her own sexuality and desirability, Samantha also radiates certain poise, especially in the company of men. In one episode, she illustrates her confidence to attract men when she and her friends go to the finalists' selection for the New York Fire Department's annual male calendar. When they arrive at the competition, Samantha immediately struts up to the stage. Charlotte is clearly uncomfortable to be that close to the stripping firefighters and asks if they can move back, but Samantha replies, "You've got to be in it to win it." Afterwards, she walks right up to the one firefighter that she had found most attractive and proceeds to introduce herself and overtly flirt with him ("When There's Smoke").

Fashion can also be viewed as a source of empowerment in shows like *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* by redefining the male characters as accessories of the lead female characters. Stephanie Harzewski refers specifically to *Sex and the City*, contending that fashion is of comparable, if not greater, importance to the women than their male suitors. Harzewski notes how, for Carrie, Mr. Big is the only man who is able to compete successfully with “the omnipresent other man, i.e. the Manolo<sup>3</sup>” (3).

By advocating empowerment through the female sexual agency and the way women can create their appearances, *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* provide opportunities for discussions of female sexuality. Within the shows themselves, the characters are often shown engaged in these conversations. Additionally, the attention given to female sexuality encourages women viewers to also partake in their own discussions on these matters. Reflecting on the content of these shows, female audience members become motivated to discuss their own related sexual experiences among each other.

These conversations are of significant value because they create the opportunities for consciousness-raising. A principal attribute of second-wave feminism, consciousness-raising maintains that women gain empowerment by sharing personal female experiences with one another. Consciousness-raising is a unique manner of learning among women that grows out of the sharing of lived experiences. During the second-wave, consciousness-raising was advocated as a way of transcending the *personal*, into the *political*. The belief was that women could use the knowledge gained from consciousness-raising to politically advance the feminist cause.

Today, consciousness-raising no longer has such apparent political implications, yet it is still a valuable source of women’s empowerment. Baumgardner and Richards define

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<sup>3</sup> “The Manolo” refers to the high-end, designer shoe collection named after its creator, Manolo Blahnik.

consciousness-raising as, “honest talk that spawns more feminism, making connections between women” (151). They elaborate that these connections allow women to bond through realizations of what they hold in common (173). Baumgardner and Richards also cite feminist author Carol Gilligan, who affirms the relevance of consciousness-raising to the empowerment of women. For Gilligan, the relationships between women that are sustained through the sharing of personal experiences serve as the “most profound weapon against sexism” (175).

The consciousness-raising among the characters on *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* provides all of the women with knowledge that has been nourished with real-life experiences. Armed with this new knowledge, the women gain a confidence that allows them to conduct themselves with self-assurance and certainty. Furthermore, this depiction of consciousness-raising is valuable because it sets an example which audiences are encouraged to follow.

An examination of *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* proves the ways in which these shows constructively promote positive representations of women. The evidence of the female sexual agency, of using fashion as a source of empowerment, and of participation in the act of consciousness-raising suggests that, through their portrayals of women, *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* both proclaim a main tenant of feminism: women can and should be the designers of their own identities.

### **Backfiring Behavior**

As previously mentioned, there is another side to the debate on sources of female empowerment evident in *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*. While some feminists advocate the female sexual agency, consciousness-raising, and fashion as necessary

ingredients for the advancement of the feminist cause, other feminists criticize those same elements as tools of anti-feminism. These critics argue that *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* have promoted constructions of femininity that limit, rather than support, a woman's behavior, priorities, and opinion of herself.

Belinda Southard defines femininity as, "the traditional assessment of a woman's worth as dictated by men," elaborating that it can take form both physically and materially (157). This definition supports the view that *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* devalue women by emphasizing traditional codes of appearance and stressing the importance of subscribing to high fashion. For example, it has been observed that in *The Golden Girls*, the women are always dressed in new designer outfits that are never seen more than once (Gray, 77). Furthermore, on *Sex and the City*, Carrie's obsession with designer shoes proves to be the origin of her financial troubles as Miranda helps her realize that she has spent close to \$40,000 on shoes alone. Not only does this episode demonstrate how important fashion is to Carrie, it also construes her obsession as irresponsibility by blaming Carrie's financial state on her tendency to buy expensive shoes ("Ring a Ding Ding").

The insinuation that a woman's judgment is clouded by an interest in fashion and a propensity for spending is also echoed in *The Golden Girls*. In order to prevent Rose from holding a yard sale, Blanche offers to buy everything Rose is selling for \$50. Blanche then discovers that included in her purchases are 50 St. Olaf war bonds valued at \$1000 a piece, which Rose had forgotten about. Rose finds out that if Blanche redeems the bonds, her hometown of St. Olaf will go bankrupt. However, Blanche seems unconcerned and proceeds to take four diamond rings out on loan from the jeweler while she decides which one she will purchase with her new money. A visibly upset Rose confronts Blanche asking, "Don't you

care about the people at all?” While eyeing the rings on her fingers, Blanche responds, “Of course I do darling, but just look at how these catch the light!” It is not until Dorothy bluntly explains to Blanche that what she is doing is wrong and hurtful to Rose that Blanche is able to concede and give Rose back the war bonds (“If At Last You Do Succeed”).

In “Feminism Without Men,” Karen Boyle suggests that overemphasizing women’s appearances “replicates the construction of women as objects of the (male) gaze in the mainstream media” (178). Both *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* dedicate a significant amount of focus and conversation to topics like dieting, dress, and overall appearance. This “codifying of the body”, as noted by Macdonald, becomes the principal way that meaning is created (194; 211). By devoting a significant amount of attention to keeping up appearances, it can be argued that *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* detract from the feminist cause by implying that a woman’s worth is determined by her ability to “look good” according to conventional standards.

When Blanche dates a man named Dirk, who is significantly younger than she is, she becomes consumed with trying to maintain a youthful appearance. Dorothy and Rose express their concern for Blanche’s change in her eating habits and her newfound obsession with exercise, but Blanche responds, “Dirk is the youngest man I’ve ever dated. If I’m going to keep him I’ve got to give it all I’ve got” (“Blanche and the Younger Man”).

The stress placed on appearance is also prevalent in *Sex and the City*. One episode that focuses on women’s concern to be considered beautiful shows the women engaged in a discussion on models. Miranda declares, “The advantages given to models and to beautiful women in general are so unfair it makes me want to puke.” When her friends try to comfort



her and tell her she is cute, she replies, “Cute doesn’t cut it in this town. What’s cute compared to supermodel?” (“Models and Mortals”).

By definition, agency refers to a vehicle through which power is exerted. However, for some feminist critics the female sexual agency does not pave an avenue to empowerment. Along with constructions of femininity, the female sexual agency has also been criticized as a tool of anti-feminism. Although Gill wrote of the value of the female sexual agency, she also notes the repercussions it has for women. Gill asserts that sexual agency is dangerous because of its regulatory nature; it demands “the remolding of feminine subjectivity,” suggesting that, “young women should not only be beautiful but sexy, sexually knowledgeable/practiced, and always ‘up for it’” (35). By showcasing characters who exercise their sexual agencies in this way, *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* convey the message that viewers should also conduct themselves in the same manner.

Gill is suggesting that the emphasis placed on heterosexual femininity, through the presence of sexual agency, has shifted the focus away from women’s expressions of desires to the need to “make oneself desirable” (37). This implies that women have an “obligation to be sexual” and that in order to be sexual, by conventional standards, women must subscribe to the constructions of femininity which limit, instead of enhance, a sense of empowerment (53). The female sexual agency aims to portray women as sexual subjects, rather than objects, but this backfires if women are told the ways sexual subjects must look, dress, and act.

Furthermore, it can be argued that sexual agency detracts from the feminist cause because it is not available to all women in equal measure. In her discussion of the sexual agency of the “midriff image,” Gill notes that there are women who are excluded from this

likeness, such as older, disabled, and overweight women. She contends that these women are not given the chance to be sexual subjects because they do not exemplify femininity in the ways it has been constructed by society (44). If sexual agency depends on one's ability to be considered attractive by society, inclusivity will not be offered to the entire female population.

Even though sexual agency is available to all characters in *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*, it is not present in equal degrees. Although *The Golden Girls* still recognizes the importance of the sexual agency despite the ages of the characters, it is apparent that Blanche has the most access to sexual agency. This is partly due to her own free will, since she chooses to be more promiscuous than the other women. However, because Dorothy is the least feminine, Rose is ultra-innocent, and Sophia is the oldest, Blanche conforms most to the midriff persona.

Similarly, on *Sex and the City*, Samantha does choose to employ sexual agency more so than the other women, but that is also because she best represents the midriff ideal. Miranda, like Dorothy, suffers from not being feminine enough, and Charlotte, like Rose, is excluded for being too innocent. While Carrie does not have to worry about those deficiencies, she does not use sexual agency as much as Samantha, due mainly to the cluster of relationships she is occupied by throughout most of the series.

Sexual agency is also criticized for misleading women to believing that emotions can be completely removed from sexual activity. Especially on *Sex and the City*, the message is conveyed that sex does not have to be an intimate, meaningful experience but rather can be a product of fleeting desire and convenience. This no-strings-attached expectation is what the women on *Sex and the City* refer to as having “sex like a man.”

In the first episode of the series, Carrie believes she has successfully had “sex like a man” when she sleeps with an old flame in for the sole purpose of seeking revenge. Afterwards, she admits to feeling “powerful, potent, and incredibly alive,” and as though “nothing and no one could get in [her] way.” However, when she runs into this man again and he expresses his contentment with this “new” Carrie. He is grateful that she “understands the kind of relationship [he] really wants” and suggests that now they can have “sex without commitment.” This encounter immediately destroys Carrie’s previous high. Reflecting on her disappointment with the outcome of her decisions and behavior, Carrie’s voiceover wonders, “Did all men secretly want their women promiscuous and emotionally detached? And if I was having sex like a man, why didn’t I feel more in control” (“Sex and the City”). In this situation, Carrie illustrates the disillusionment felt by many women when sexual agency cultivates feelings of oppression rather than empowerment.

For some feminist critics, *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* stand firmly on the progressive side of the feminism spectrum. These shows not only help to promote, but also advance, a feminist cause because of their applications of the female sexual agency, the act of consciousness-raising, and the freedom to make one’s own fashion choices. However, other critics argue that those exact applications are responsible for devaluing and demoting the feminist cause. Those who oppose the constructions of femininity and the negative consequences of sexual agency would instead place *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* on the opposite end of the feminism spectrum, pointing to their tools of anti-feminism.

## Chapter 6 Interpretive Scripts: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

*The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* serve as evidence of a unique genre centered on core trends, such as the analogously stereotypical personalities of the main characters; the sisterly bond found in female friendships; the notion of explicitly female discourse; and a growing acceptance of nontraditional sexual orientation. While the similarities between these two shows justify their inclusion in the same genre, their differences illustrate its evolutionary nature. *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* act as lenses into the popular social norms and enforced perceptions of gender for their respective eras on television. Together, they present the progression of a genre along a spectrum that is swiftly traveling in a radical direction.

The *Golden Girls* can be used as a launch pad from which we can see the ways women have been similarly portrayed from the late 1980s to the mid 2000s, and also the ways in which these depictions have evolved and have arguably either progressed or regressed. During its primetime era, *The Golden Girls* was considered a relatively radical show. The fact that it had a female cast of single women was not commonplace and the topics of conversations and the explicitness of discussions were provocative for their time. Viewers were not yet accustomed to the allusions *The Golden Girls* made to a woman's right to sexual agency.

*The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* are at two different spots on the continuum of representations of women, but the question remains: where is that continuum today? *Sex and the City* elevated the terms *radical* and *explicit* to an entirely new level. What had been racy for *The Golden Girls* was banal on *Sex and the City*. If these definitions changed so much in

less than a decade, what can we anticipate for the next group of single girlfriends? It has been argued that this emerging explicitness advocates female empowerment and a woman's right to choose, yet this notion is not unanimously supported. Women have also been warned that they are now stuck in a culture that is anything but empowering.

### **Raunch Culture**

That warning is made explicit in Ariel Levy's provocative book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*. Levy has observed the changing nature of what it means to be a woman in modern American society. If there is a culture of womanhood, that culture has changed over recent decades as society has traveled through various eras and experienced an array of movements. However, Levy redefines this female culture in terms of what she believes it has become today: raunch. It is objectifying and exhibitionistic with an emphasis on being "hot" and using sexiness as a means to all necessary ends. Its participants are "Female Chauvinist Pigs" or "women who make sex objects of other women and of [themselves]" (4). And, according to Levy, it does not mark the "death of feminism" but rather is "evidence that the feminist project has never been achieved" (3).

For Levy, raunch culture is fundamentally "commercial" and has taken over and distorted the feminist cause with a new set of rules and convictions (29). In raunch culture, Female Chauvinist Pigs are the main players, enjoying a much more dignified status than the negatively portrayed "Male Chauvinist Pigs." Levy describes the Female Chauvinist Pig in the positive light raunch culture radiates. "She is funny. She *gets it*. She doesn't mind cartoonish stereotypes of female sexuality, and she doesn't mind a cartoonishly macho response to them" (93). Accepting this presentation of a female chauvinist pig suggests that,

in the least, the women of *The Golden Girls* could be considered predecessors and the women of *Sex and the City* could be considered prime examples.

Directly referencing *Sex and the City*, Levy states that its era on primetime television was one of, “explosive sexual exhibitionism, opportunism, and role redefinition” (118). She claims that it idealizes “accumulation” and that its popularity is derived from the sexual and material accumulation of the women (173). Levy suggests that *Sex and the City*’s contribution lies in its presentation of a “complete lifestyle package...for the high-end, urban liberated woman,” and she asserts that *if* it can be considered a “deeply seductive feminist narrative” it must be noted that it is also a “deeply problematic one” (174).

The problem with raunch culture, as speculated by Levy, is its misunderstanding of female sexuality. This misunderstanding is especially dangerous for younger women, who are prompted to endorse exhibitionism because of its prevalence in society (146). Levy’s advises that we return to the original definitions of words like *liberation* and *empowerment* because raunch culture has distorted their true meanings. “The freedom to be sexually provocative or promiscuous is not enough freedom; it is not the only ‘women’s issue’ worth paying attention to” (200).

### **Dichotomy of Consequences**

How can viewers reconcile the contrasting opinions on shows like *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*? Should these shows be applauded for their contributions to women, or criticized for their negative implications? While this dichotomy of consequences can appear overwhelming, it presents the greatest value of these shows: their ability to stimulate consciousness-raising.

When viewers actively engage in discussions on how these shows realistic, or unrealistically understand womanhood, they create invaluable communities of awareness. Consciousness-raising, as previously stated, is inherently feminist and is illustrated and advocated in both *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*. Viewers can become familiar with consciousness-raising by watching it on these shows, and then by applying it to their own lives through discussion and critical analysis of the characters and content.

Two main criticisms of *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*, which are apparent in the majority of sitcoms, come from the nature of television programs. These issues are the relationship between social constructionism and genre limitations, and also the potential for parasocial relationships.

As demonstrated on *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*, character representations are stereotypic because viewers are already familiar with these labels. The situational comedy relies on its ability to achieve a level of familiarity with audience members, and therefore is required to meet certain criteria for comedic success. These criteria are determined by social perceptions, serving as dominant narratives in sitcoms. *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* continually reinforce socially constructed stereotypes through their own negative media portrayals. However, if viewers are aware of this perpetual cycle, they can remove themselves from its subconscious influence by recognizing character portrayals for what they really are: requirements of a genre.

Just as viewers can benefit from being aware of the relationship between social constructionism and the sitcom, it is valuable to have an understanding of parasocial relationships. Donald Horton and Richard Wohl suggest that parasocial relationships exist between television characters and audience members, causing viewers to feel as if they

actually know the characters. These relationships, which can evoke a wide range of emotions in an audience member, help to ensure the viewer's acceptance of the beliefs and values of relatable characters (Grant and Hundley 122-123).

Parasocial relationships are common among viewers of *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*. Because each show is comprised of four women with strikingly different personalities, viewers may identify with one particular woman. This can be proven with a quick Google search of “*What Golden Girl are you?*” or “*What Sex and the City character are you?*” since both questions return a variety of personality quizzes from a number of different website.

Although parasocial relationships seem harmless, they are a means of reinforcing socially constructed perceptions of characters (in this case, specifically women). They can be dangerous if the degree to which a woman identifies with a particular character begins to influence the way that she regards herself, since usually the stereotypical traits of sitcom personalities are those that are the most extreme and exaggerated. It is important for viewers to be aware of the prevalence of parasocial relationships, and how these relationships can even be formed at the subconscious level.

If viewers critically analyze *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* for their situational feminism, these shows can be tools for empowerment by providing opportunities for consciousness-raising and by creating communities of awareness. Informed viewers can applaud these shows for the ways in which they support a feminist cause, be conscious of their weaknesses and impediments, and also enjoy them for their sheer entertainment.

Studying *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* unlocks the mysteries behind their rhetorical significance, and also provides insight into the cultural worth of other shows of this



feminist-based genre. In doing so, it becomes clear that the rhetorical power is found within the individual characters and is manifested in their personalities, lifestyles, and relationships with each other.

Programs like *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* are not just modes of entertainment and should not be devalued or disregarded as such since they also have the ability to influence viewers and function as powerful teaching tools. The issue at hand is not the actual scripts of these shows, but rather how we, as viewers, choose to receive and interpret them. Because both genre and society have had a profound influence on these series, we must become informed viewers in order to appreciate what they objectively convey without being unconsciously swayed. Recognizing the need for continual discussion on these shows, and others too, is the only way to create and sustain this awareness. Ultimately, it is attentive viewing, honest reflection, and openness to consciousness-raising that can, and will, empower and advance women.

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