

Gender and Aging: An Investigation of
Television's Infatuation with Youth and Beauty

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Abstract:

This thesis examines primetime television's negative portrayal of the aging process as well as the double standard in aging that benefits men and punishes women. Unlike their male counterparts, older women in television shows are often portrayed in a negative light or, even worse, not represented at all. Older women are almost invisible in prime-time television shows and movies. In my analysis of "Desperate Housewives," "Grey's Anatomy," and "The Comeback," three popular television series, I argue how the under-representation of older women in television highlights and reinforces society's negative connotations associated with aging and the glorification of youth and beauty. Further, based on my analysis, I argue that this lack of representation suggests that once women pass a certain point in their physical appearance, they lose their power and their voice. It is not only older women who are confronted with this issue as I will demonstrate through "Desperate Housewives," "Grey's Anatomy," and "The Comeback:" as the obsession with youthfulness increases, younger women also feel the pressure. As a result, women try to defy the devastating hands of time by adopting apparently youthful characteristics such as appearing confused and needy.

Chapter One:

Introduction

On November 29, 2007, the Hollywood Reporter released its annual top ten list of the highest-paid actresses in entertainment industry. Thirty- one year old Academy Award winner Reese Witherspoon topped the list, commanding \$15 to \$20 million a movie. Witherspoon was followed closely by 32 year old Angelina Jolie and 35 year old Cameron Diaz. In addition to their profession, financial success and talent, these women all possess two of society's most coveted characteristics: youth and beauty. In fact, 80% of the women on the list were 40 years old or younger. Jodie Foster, who ranked number 9, was the oldest at age 45. The talented and venerable 58 year old Meryl Streep, 62 year old Helen Mirren, and 60 year old Glenn Close all failed to make the list. On the contrary, Forbes List of highest paid male actors included 51 year old Tom Hanks, 45 year old Tom Cruise, 42 year old Brad Pitt, and 52 year old Denzel Washington. This age discrepancy is not only present in films but also television as well. In fact, this year many of the major networks introduced new shows that star an older leading man. For example, 58 year old Ted Danson stars in ABC's "Help Me Help You," 60 year old John Lithgow and 62 year old Jeffrey Tambor star in "Twenty Good Years," (Holloway, 2006).

In contrast to the actors listed above, there are few if any examples of older women starring and leading a series. Instead, these men are surrounded by younger, beautiful women. In 2007, it seems not much has changed since Signorelli and Bacue concluded in 1990 that a "woman's value is in her youthfulness," (pg. 530). For years

the popular media has held women to a stricter standard of beauty and the actors' lists and new television series described above are yet another example of this discrimination.

As a result, women in society feel immense pressure to adhere to this strict standard of beauty. In fact, middle aged women are bombarded with anti-aging ads all promising to help turn back the hands of time. One can almost be guaranteed to stumble upon several of these anti-aging advertisements when flipping through any given women's magazine. However, this is certainly not the case with men's magazines. Walker identifies this phenomenon in her book, *The Crone: Woman of age, wisdom and power*, stating, "Women are socially and professionally handicapped by wrinkles and gray hair in a way that men are not. A multi-billion dollar "beauty" industry exploits women's well-founded fear of looking old. This industry spends megafortunes... Instead of aging normally through their life cycle, women are constrained to create an illusion that their growth process stops in the first decade or two of adulthood," (pg. 30). Unlike men, women are continuously reminded they must conceal any signs of aging.

Chapter Two:

Theoretical Background:

In 1978, Gaye Tuchman's *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media* examined the representation of women in the mass media. She found that women, despite their social progress, are "systematically annihilated" or condemned, trivialized or absent in the mass media (pg.8). At the time, according to Tuchman's findings, women on television were vastly underrepresented compared to their male counterparts. However, when they did appear, these women generally occupied either the role of the helpless victim in need of a rescuer or they were "dismissed to the protective confines of the home," (8). Obviously the women on television did not reap the social and political benefits experienced by women in the real world. The image constructed on television was not reflective of the successes achieved by the women's movement.

Over the past three decades, television's portrayal of women has definitely improved. Of course, some of the issues Tuchman observed still exist today, but not to the same extent. For example, women are still under represented on television, however, to a lesser degree. When women are represented, they are no longer relegated to domestic roles. Now, shows like "ER" and "Law and Order" portray women in leadership roles. Without question the "systematic annihilation" of women observed by Tuchman no longer has the same significance in today's society. While it may not pertain to all women, I found that elderly women on television are still victims of this systematic annihilation. Based on my analysis of "Desperate Housewives," "Grey's Anatomy," and "The Comeback," I found that elderly women are vastly under

represented in both of these popular prime time television series. Like Tuchman, I found that when elderly characters were represented, they occupied peripheral roles and were often cast in a negative light. The negative effects of aging were less severe for male characters I observed. In fact, men in their 50 to-60 age range were often depicted as in their prime. In other words, aging, I found, has inverse effects on men and women. Women are systematically annihilated by the aging process, where as men are rewarded.

Chapter Three:

A Review of the Literature

Over the past thirty years, there has been a flood of research concerning the representation of the elderly in primetime television. While researchers present different findings, there is one finding that remains uncontested over the years. That is, there is an undeniable under representation of the elderly on primetime television. In 1989, after analyzing popular primetime sitcoms Bell concluded (1992) that although the elderly appear more frequently now than in the past, they are still vastly underrepresented. For example, “approximately 12.1% of the people in the United States population [are elderly], but only 3.3 percent,” (Bell, 1992, pg. 307), of the TV characters were classified as elderly. Over a decade later, Dozier and Lauzen (2005) observed prime-time programs from the 2002–2003 seasons, and like Bell, they concluded that, “although Americans 60 and older constitute 18% of the population, findings indicate that such individuals comprised only 4% of major characters in prime-time television,” (pg. 241) Without question, the elderly are vastly under-represented on primetime television.

Previous research indicates that when the elderly actually appear on television, they generally occupy insubstantial roles. Signorielli (2004), after analyzing prime time television, asserted “the message of aging on prime-time television is one that celebrates youth while neglecting the elderly to a smaller percentage of roles,” (pg. 279). Over the years there has been a split regarding the characteristics and personality traits ascribed to the few elderly characters on primetime network. The majority of researchers found that the elderly are cast in a negative light. Gerbner, C., Gross, L., Signorielli, N, & Morgan,

M. (1980) found that prime-time television offered barely any positive images of older people and instead portrayed them with “failing health,” or as “disabled,” (pg. 39). Often times, the elderly are depicted as incompetent, senile, and confused. For example, Bassett, G., Chamberlain, K. Hodgetts, D., (2003) found that the “traditional representations such as the ‘frail elderly’ are now complemented by newer representations such as the ‘remarkably’ youthful elderly,” (pg. 417). Yet, not all researchers agree that the elderly are portrayed in a negative light and instead, they argue that positive attributes are ascribed to the elderly on television. For example Bell (1992) analyzed the elderly characters in “Murder, She Wrote,” “The Golden Girls,” “Jake and the Fatman,” and “In the Heat of the Night,” all extremely popular shows. Based on his analysis, he concluded that the elderly characters were central to the plot, and presented “as powerful members of the community, affluent, always healthy and physically and socially active, portrayed as mentally active, and looked up to and admired,” (pg. 309). Despite Bell’s findings, the majority of research indicates that characters have more negative stereotypes than their younger counterparts.

The under representation of the elderly reinforces society’s negative associations with aging. Primetime shows reflect our obsession with youth and beauty and it seems that our standards are even stricter for women. According to Sontag (1979), this double standard in aging is directly related to how society defines masculinity and femininity. Sontag (1979) asserts that masculinity in our society is associated with “competence, autonomy, self-control-qualities which the disappearance of youth does not threaten.” Femininity in today’s society, however, “is associated with helplessness, passivity, non

competitiveness and being nice,” (Sontag, 1979, para 6). In other words, desirable masculine traits are positively related to the aging process whereas the inverse is true for feminine characteristics. As a result, women become devalued with age.

The notion that women lose their value with age, is further supported by Signorelli and Bacue who concluded in 1990, a “woman’s value is in her youthfulness,” (pg. 438). In a more recent study, Signorelli(2004) found women between the ages of 50 and 64 were classified as elderly rather than middle aged. Based on the research described above, the elderly are often cast in a negative light. Glascock (2001) in his study found that males outnumbered females in every cohort except for characters 20-29 years old (52% versus 48%). In addition, 88% of the female characters were between 20-49 years old. This is an overrepresentation since only 60% of adult women in the US fall in this demographic. Not surprisingly, the representation of female characters declined with age. Unlike their female counterparts, men between the ages of 50-64 often occupied prestigious jobs and were portrayed as successful and productive (Glascock, 2001).

Instead of being portrayed as elderly, males in this cohort were viewed as in their “prime.” This discrepancy between aging and gender ultimately serves to inhibit women. Dozier and Lauzen (2005) along with other researchers, have indicated that there is a double standard, “for the impact of aging on male and female characters in prime-time programs,” since, “middle-aged male characters were more likely than middle-aged females to play leadership roles, wield occupational power, and have goals,” (pg. 253).

Unlike women, who lose their power and voice, with age, men are seen as being at the peak of their careers.

A study focused on “occupational power” in relation to gender and age also found that males exhibit more power in this sphere compared to women. The gap increased with age, with 13% difference between men and women in this 50-59 age group. Furthermore, men far outnumbered women in leadership positions (Mass Communication Division, 2005). In other words, men experienced increased power with age whereas women did not. In keeping with previous research, Glascock (2001) also found that middle age men, ages 50-64, far outnumber middle-aged women. In fact, middle-aged men who occupied powerful and intellectual careers appeared in leading roles in 17 programs.

In a similar study, Kessler, E.-M., Rakoczy, K. & Staudinger, U. M. (2004) concluded that older women were portrayed as being simple-minded compared to their more complex male counterparts. Unlike elderly women, elderly men held more intellectually stimulating and lucrative occupations. In terms of social relations, the researchers found that women, unlike their elderly male counterparts, had more “informal” social relationships. Their relationships seemed to lack strong bonds. Not only are men portrayed as powerful leaders but also with superior intelligence and social skills. These findings can be described in light of Tuchman’s theory of systematic annihilation. It seems that since women, in this case older women, are under represented, they are rarely depicted as developing deep and meaningful relationships.

This double standard is not solely a primetime phenomenon but rather prevalent in other forms of the media. In fact, Lauzen and Dozier (2005), in an additional study concerning age, gender and purposefulness, found that the percentage of males playing “leadership roles increased in a linear fashion as a function of age,” (pg.442). Women, on the other hand, experienced an inverse relationship in terms of aging and available leadership roles.

These successful, powerful, leading middle age men generally share the screen with younger women. In fact, Bazzini, D., McIntosh, S., Cook, S., & Harris C. (1997) found that women were usually 6 years younger than their male counterparts. Glascock (2001) asserted that the age gap is even more significant, falling somewhere between 10 to 15 years. In addition, most of these women occupied the role of the young domestic wife or girlfriend thus further reinforcing traditional gender roles. As Glascock (2001) concluded, this age discrepancy “perpetuates the idea that women must remain youthful in appearance while men are allowed to show signs of aging,” (pg. 662).

This phenomenon is reflected in jokes about aging. For example, Palmore (1971) analyzed aging jokes and concluded that there is a major gender difference. More than half of the jokes about aging men reflected positive attitudes. Over 75% of the jokes relating to aging women, on the hand, expressed negative attitudes. Palmore (1971) asserts that this discrepancy is due to the fact that there is no male equivalent to “old maid jokes,” (Palmore, 1971, pg. 185). Older single men are considered “bachelors” and often depicted in a positive light whereas older women are the “object of pity and censure,” according to Palmore (pg. 185.) Furthermore, Palmore (1971) found that jokes

relating to concealing aging all related to women. He believes this is a result of our cultural values. In our society, according to Palmore, “women seem more ashamed of aging than men,” (186). In another study, Tiggerman and Rothblum (1988) concluded that people tend to be more critical of a woman’s weight than a man’s weight. In general, they concluded that people are much more judgmental of an overweight woman than an overweight man. These studies indicate that women are held to a stricter standard when it comes to aging.

Bazzini et al. (1997) in their study examined the existence of ageist and sexist stereotypes in film over the span of 50 years (1940-1990). The researchers noted that women are often the victims of ageism and sexism since “they are typically subjected to a greater degree of physical scrutiny than men,” (pg. 542). Since women are valued for “youth and beauty,” they asserted that increased age would be associated with an increase in negative personality traits. They found that women compared to men were significantly under represented. Furthermore, older females were often cast in a negative light. Once again, women are more negatively affected by the physical effects of age.

Nowhere is this double standard in aging and beauty more prevalent than in the media and the entertainment industry. As a result, according to Saucier, (2004) women, unlike men, feel constant pressure to remain forever thin, young and beautiful. In her study, Saucier cites specific examples of this age inequality where old actors share the screen with much younger actresses. For example, Saucier (2004) notes that in *As Good As It Gets*, 35 year old Helen Hunt, plays 61 year old Jack Nicholson’s love interest. This is just one of the many examples of this age discrepancy. The double standard is without

question in effect. Saucier calls this the “silver ceiling” phenomenon, employing a term that arose out of the “VintAge 2001: Positive Solutions to an Age-Old Problem” conference. The “silver ceiling” refers to the lack of available roles for older people, especially women, in the entertainment industry. However, it is not only actresses who feel the effects of the silver ceiling, according to Saucier, but women in general. Since older women are underrepresented in popular culture, the “youthful image becomes the ideal for which [all women] strive.” As a result, women feel they lose their value as they age.

Without question, the popular media is an influential source of information regarding women and aging. In fact, McKay (2000) believes that media, more specifically, print magazines actually constructs or defines what it means to age well. In her study, McKay (2000) suggests that magazines select age 50 as a major turning point. After studying 2 years of magazine articles on aging, McKay (2000) concluded that magazines describe celebrities who aesthetically aged well as measured by their happiness and success. Most celebrities have cosmetic surgery in order to defy aging. McKay (2000) argues that the magazine implies that women should attempt to deny age as long as possible. This is a possibility related to the fact that celebrities are rarely honest about cosmetic surgery. Instead, these celebrities create false realities with their physical appearance. As a result, women in society feel the pressure to look younger.

The effect these seemingly ageless celebrities’ poses extend far beyond the glossy pages of the magazines. Instead, these misleading images set the standard for aging in our society. As a result, women in society feel the pressure to look younger.

Furthermore, it effects what is considered normal. For example, Harris (1994) conducted a study that examined the relationship between age concealment and gender. Both male and female adult participants completed a questionnaire regarding techniques they use to conceal the effects of physical aging. Based on the results, Harris (1994) concluded that two double standards in aging exist. First, signs of aging were considered more unappealing for women compared to aging men. Secondly, “people may judge the use of age concealment techniques more harshly in others than in themselves.” This study supports the notion that due to the double standard in aging, women are held to a much stricter standard than men. Women today, like McKay noted, are bombarded with the images of “actresses who aesthetically aged well.” Perhaps, age concealment is frowned upon because according to the flawless celebrities, women are not supposed to show signs of aging.

Women use a myriad of methods, ranging from plastic surgery to the use of anti-aging products, in order to attain this youthful appearance. The 2008 spring supplement of Time Magazine entitled “The Luxury of the Next Generation,” shed light on another method used to defy the hands of time, and that is adopting the styles of younger generations. According to an article in the issue, “Who’s Holding the Handbag? A new generation of American luxury consumers is telling Mom what to buy,” middle aged women often want to stay “abreast with the trends” emulate their daughters, (Van Dyk, 2008, pg. 56). In fact, one study found that young adults influence 88% of household apparel purchases. The article goes onto explain that boomer mothers, “unlike their mothers...don’t want to adopt to the ladies-who- lunch look,” instead they want to be

trendy and hip (Van Dyk, 2008, pg. 56). This edition of Time further demonstrates that women more than ever feel the pressure to erase any signs of aging. It seems that a quick fix is dressing younger.

In addition to anti-aging products and stylish clothing, women also strive to maintain their youthful physique. Kelly, E., Peterson, B., & Silverstein, B (1986) asserted that the media's portrayal of extremely thin women is directly related to the increasing number of women suffering from eating disorders. They propose that the number of women with eating disorders far outweighs men because the "media creates a more weight conscious standard for women," (pg. 520.) Women, they believe, are suffering in increasing amounts from eating disorders because the "standard" is now thinner than ever. They examined the weight differences between male and female on TV programs, magazines and movies. They concluded that bodily attractiveness in these mediums is "slimmer and more oriented to dieting and staying in shape for women than it is for men," (Kelly, E. et al, 1986, pg. 522). In addition, women are presented as less curvaceous now than ever before in magazines and film.

These messages regarding appearance are not only internalized by middle aged women but young girls as well. For example, a study conducted regarding body image, found that girls become concerned with their appearance at a young age. Research indicates that very young girls are dieting because they feel "fat and unattractive." One American survey found that 81% of ten-year-old girls had already dieted at least once." Furthermore, according to Fox, "normal-weight and underweight girls want to lose weight," (Fox, 1997). In other words, the need to live up to the strict standard of beauty

begins at a young age. Young girls are not immune to the images they see on television and in magazines. Instead, this message remains constant reinforce throughout their lives.

As demonstrated above, the popular media, especially television, reinforce the negative connotations associated with aging. According to previous research older women are not only underrepresented but when they are represented they are generally depicted in a negative light. Furthermore, research indicates that there is a double standard in aging that ultimately rewards men and punishes women. Television, magazines and film all reinforce the notion that youth and beauty are vital for women. Since society tries to mirror and live up to the standards set by the media, it is no surprise that women go to great lengths to maintain their youthful appearance.

Chapter Four:

Rationale

Television no longer just entertains and informs the public, it serves to provide standards regarding behavior, beliefs and even body image. George Gerbner's cultivation theory embodies this phenomenon. According to the cultivation theory, "television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors. Its function is in a word, enculturation," (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, pg. 175). In other words, television influences our perceptions and understanding of the world. Television portrays and often promotes stereotypes that are in turn internalized by viewers. Furthermore, cultivation theorists assert that people, who are "heavy" consumers of television, are more likely believe the stereotypes promoted on television. As a result, values, opinions, beliefs and behaviors are not based on the real world but rather on the constructed world of television.

Negative stereotypes associated with aging as well as images of unrealistic idealized bodies are just two of the common misrepresentations promoted by the television industry. In keeping with cultivation theory, the portrayal of these images and messages can have damaging consequences on viewers. Obviously the images on television are not accurate reflections of the real world; however, people who frequently view television may interpret these messages as reality. In other words, viewers would be more inclined to draw negative conclusions about the elderly and negative associations with aging process. There is a significant amount of research indicating that television, along with other forms of mass media, negatively portrays the aging process, especially

for women. The television industry continually reinforces the negative relationship between aging and women by packaging the message in a variety of ways. For example, elderly women are vastly under represented on television. Women on television are generally younger than their male counterparts. Although nothing is explicitly stated, the feminine aging process is depicted in a negative light. Since the negative portrayal of aging is so prevalent, it instills a fear of aging in middle aged and even young women. For example, after two years of research, The Eating Disorder Center of Denver recently announced that there is a “growing” population of “middle aged women” suffering from eating disorders (Bass, 2008). The publication quotes Dr. Tamara Pryor, the director of the study and the Clinical Director of the Eating Disorder Center of Denver:

We call this phenomenon the 'Desperate Housewives Result' because of how thin and young the middle-aged women on the popular television show appears. The timely name puts some responsibility on a culture that supports and encourages fountain of youth fixes" said Pryor. "It is just not statistically 'normal' for women over 30 to have the same bodies they did at 18 or 20, (Bass, 2008).

Keeping with the cultivation theory, it seems that women in society are truly internalizing the messages on television. Without question, television shows, like “Desperate Housewives,” “Grey’s Anatomy,” and “The Comeback,” further supports the notion that a woman’s true value lies in her beauty. They suggest that once their youthful beauty is elapsed by the unrelenting hands of time, women lose their power. This message is so prevalent in the mass media that it has created this fear of aging. Most of the women on these shows are in their 30’s and 40’s yet they look, act, and dress as if they were

teenagers. They have bodies that 20 years old would envy. Since no one wants to be a victim of aging, women try to look and act younger. The desire to appear younger and thinner is reflected on television and I believe it without question effects societal norms.

As a result, I chose analyze “Desperate Housewives,” “Grey’s Anatomy,” and “The Comeback,” in my investigation of television’s portrayal of the elderly and the aging process in general. The primary reason I chose primetime’s “Desperate Housewives,” “Grey’s Anatomy” is because of their extreme popularity as well as their appeal to people of all ages. “Desperate Housewives” first aired in October of 2004 and immediately became a fan and critic favorite. Six months later ABC introduced a “Grey’s Anatomy,” medical comedy/drama that revolves around the lives and relationships of the doctors at Seattle Grace Hospital. Since their debut, both of these shows have maintained extremely high ratings collecting numerous Emmys. These shows have become embedded in popular culture and their characters are in sense cultural icons.

Since “Desperate Housewives” and “Grey’s Anatomy” are primetime hits and have so many dedicated fans, it is likely that the fans internalize the messages and images espoused on these shows. The leading characters on both series both shows are middle aged professionals, in their thirties to forties. I feel that since the characters are at neither end of the age spectrum, they appeal to people of all ages. The leading characters on “Desperate Housewives,” Terri Hatcher, Felicity Huffman, Eva Longoria, Marcia Cross, Nicolette Sheridan, are all female. Currently, there are few primetime series that feature a predominantly female cast. The show by its very nature attracts more female viewers.

However, I felt that a show with a predominantly female cast would provide a greater insight into the pressure women feel in regards to aging. Although, neither show has central elderly characters, I found that the elderly characters who appeared often occupied peripheral, stereotypical roles. In light of the cultivation theory, I believe that since many people follow these shows, they will be more likely to internalize the messages.

Not only do these shows attract a wide range of viewers, but they also represent the double standard in aging. “Grey’s Anatomy” two of the central relationships involve a resident and an intern. In both cases the residents, both highly renowned surgeons, are males and their girlfriends are young interns. Once again, the women are much younger than their male counterparts. Furthermore, the title “Desperate Housewives” reinforces this notion of the man in “power” and the women occupying a traditional, domestic role.

In addition, to “Desperate Housewives” and “Grey’s Anatomy” I chose to analyze HBO’s “The Comeback.” Unlike the two other shows, “The Comeback” was not a primetime hit. In fact, the show was discontinued after its first season which is exactly why I chose to include it in my analysis. Instead of dancing around the issues of aging in the media, the show brings these issues to the forefront. “The Comeback” chronicles, Valerie Cherish’s, a middle aged actress, return to show business after a thirteen year absence. In the late 1980’s, Valerie Cherish starred as a sexy, successful, working woman in popular sitcom “I’m It!” The show ended after four successful years and as a result Valerie exited the entertainment industry. Now thirteen years later, Valerie has landed her “comeback” role in “Room and Board.” In addition to the sitcom, the network insists

that Valerie film a reality show chronicling her return to show business. I think the shows lack of success is of extreme importance in understanding the portrayal of aging in the media. As far as I am aware, “The Comeback” is the first series to truly address the notion that once women are past their prime in terms of youth and beauty, they lose their power as well as sense of worth. Nowhere, as the show demonstrates, is this correlation between youth and success more binding than in the entertainment industry. The show in a sense parodies how the double standard in aging has become so cemented in our culture that it often goes unquestioned. This notion is important especially in light of the cultivation theory. The series suggests that we as a society have come accept this double standard in aging and no longer question the strict standard of beauty women must attain.

Chapter Five:

Outline of the analysis:

In my analysis of “Desperate Housewives,” “Grey’s Anatomy” and “The Comeback” I chose to examine four overarching themes regarding their representation of elderly women and their portrayal of the aging process. First, I evaluated the characteristics ascribed to the elderly actresses portrayed in all three of these series. As previously mentioned, the elderly are vastly under-represented in primetime television and these shows are no exception. In the chance that they do appear, the elderly generally occupy peripheral roles. Furthermore, as my analysis demonstrates these characters are depicted in a negative light. They offer comic relief at their own expense, appear disheveled and out of touch with reality, or display extreme loneliness and isolation.

Secondly, I examined the double standard in aging. The women in these shows were held to a stricter standard of beauty. Similar to previous research all three of these shows feature relationships with age discrepancy where older, powerful successful men are accompanied by younger, naïve, women. Furthermore, I examine how men seem to be rewarded by the aging process whereas women lose their power.

Thirdly, I analyzed the women characters’ realization of the double standard in aging and the extreme pressure they feel to be the culturally desirable youthful woman. In demonstrating this I highlight the threat younger women pose to older, in this case middle aged, women. In all three of the television series, it became increasingly apparent that the women characters were aware of the negative connotations associated with aging.

My fourth finding is one not addressed by previous research, however I found it to be a major trend in all of the shows and that is that many of the women in an attempt to defy the hands of time often adopt inherently childlike characteristics as if to convince others and themselves of their youthfulness.

Chapter Six:

Televisions' representation of the elderly and the aging process

My analysis, of ABC's "Desperate Housewives", NBC's "Grey's Anatomy", and HBO's "The Comeback," shows that the trend regarding under representation of the elderly on television is still present. For example, Patrick Dempsey at 41 is the oldest of the main characters on "Grey's Anatomy" and 48 year old, Kyle MacLachlan is the oldest main character on "Desperate Housewives." In light of the previous research, it is not surprising that all of these main older characters are males. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated below, all of the elderly female characters in "Desperate Housewives," "Grey's Anatomy," and "The Comeback," occupied either reoccurring insubstantial roles or were only featured for a few episodes before either dying or exiting the show. In other words, their roles were not integral to the plot.

In terms of personality and characteristics, I found that "Desperate Housewives," "Grey's Anatomy," and "The Comeback," portrayed the elderly characters in a negative light, especially elderly women. For example, in Season 4, Episode 2 "Art Isn't Easy," the neighbors of Wisteria Lane are upset when their newest neighbors install a loud, unsightly fountain in their front yard. In one particular scene the beautiful "Desperate Housewives" Susan (Terri Hatcher), Gabrielle (Eva Longoria), Katherine and Bree (Marcia Cross) and Katherine (Dana Delany) are all standing side by side in front of the fountain. These women are between the 30 and 40 years old. As they are discussing their disapproval of the fountain, they are joined by Karen McCluskey (Karen Joosten), an elderly widow of Wisteria Lane.

The visual contrast between the four desperate housewives and their 68-year-old neighbor is striking. All of the “Desperate Housewives” look as perfectly groomed as the white picket fences that surround them. From their perfectly styled hair to their supermodel bodies, they are the embodiment of beauty and perfection. Ms. McCluskey, on the other hand, looks disheveled with her graying hair and glasses. She stands slouched over in her mauve mismatched sweat suit which accentuates her round stomach. Already, without any dialogue the “elderly” character is set against her younger, more beautiful, counterparts. When they discuss their disapproval of the fountain, Karen only offers sarcastic comedic relief, unlike the other women who seem to be legitimately concerned about offending their new neighbors. For example, Ms. McCluskey refers to the fountain as a “pain in the ass.” The women begin to debate whom among them should confront their new neighbors, a homosexual couple; Ms. McCluskey is the first to make a suggestion. She insists Bree should speak to the neighbors since she has “a kid who came flying out of the closet and a husband who came looking for the door knob.” This dialogue in addition to the visual elements depicts Karen as sarcastic and messy especially compared to her younger, beautiful neighbors. The scene suggests that Karen, due to her old age, can offer no meaningful comments. She is solely there for comedic relief.

This episode also features Ida, another elderly neighbor who always appears confused and incompetent. For example, later in the episode, the neighbors of Wisteria Lane meet again to discuss their disapproval of the fountain. Ida is one of the neighbors

present for the debate. When Katherine, the leader of meeting, discusses her disapproval of the fountain, Ida pipes in:

Ida: Yeah, we gotta show those gays that we mean business!

Susan: Ida, again the issue is not Bob and Lee being gay, it's the fountain.

Ida: Well, can't it be both?

This verbal interaction portrays Ida not only as confused, but out of touch and homophobic. Her statements are outdated and ignorant. Even after they speak to her like a child, she still seems confused.

“Grey’s Anatomy,” like “Desperate Housewives,” often features elderly characters in peripheral roles. Since the show is set in a hospital, these elderly characters are usually patients or concerned family members of the patients, yet, they rarely occupy a leadership role. In season 1 episode 4 “Deny, Deny, Deny” intern Christina Yang’s mother visits Seattle Grace when her daughter becomes ill. Like “Desperate Housewives” Karen McCluskey and Ida, Mrs. Yang embodies many of the same stereotypical characteristics of the elderly. Mrs. Yang, arrives at the hospital to care for her daughter who has just suffered from an ectopic pregnancy, however Christina is ultimately annoyed by her clueless and often embarrassing mother. For example, when strong willed Christina is determined to hasten her recovery so that she can return to work, her colleagues remind her that she needs to rest. During their conversation, Mrs. Yang continuously interrupts with comments that embarrass Christina like, “I keep telling

her there's more to life than surgery and career." She treats Christina like a child in front of her colleagues.

In another scene, Dr. Burke, Christina's boss, visits her hospital room while her mother is present. As he enters the room, Christina becomes obviously uncomfortable because unbeknownst to her mother, she and Dr. Burke had a secret affair that led to her pregnancy. To make matters worse, Christina tried to get an abortion without telling him that he was the father. Although her discomfort is apparent, Mrs. Yang fails to recognize her daughter's anxious and nervous demeanor. Mrs. Yang, without hesitation, tells Dr. Burke that he is "good looking" and that her daughter "never brings home men as good looking" as he. Obviously embarrassed by her mother's inappropriate comments, Christina snaps at her mother to "stop talking."

Despite her blatantly inappropriate comments, Mrs. Yang, feels that Christina is wrong and responds with "Forgive her; I don't know what I ever did to raise such an unpleasant girl." In fact when Dr. Burke leaves, Mrs. Yang is confused as to why her daughter is so irritated since she "only said nice things." This interaction portrays the gray haired Mrs. Yang as socially incompetent as she is unable to pick up on social cues. Like Ida and Karen, Mrs. Yang's inappropriate behavior provides comic relief. Her old age has inhibited her ability to take care of her daughter. If anything, she is more of a burden than a blessing.

"The Comeback," also sheds light on the negative portrayal of aging in the media. In fact, "The Comeback" in a sense parodies how the double standard in aging has become so cemented in our culture that it often goes unquestioned. In the pilot episode,

Valerie explains the plot of the show to the cameras. In “Room and Board,” Valerie is a successful architect who shares an apartment with her much younger, thinner, and beautiful roommates. During the first five minutes of filming, the producers realize unless something is changed, the show will never be picked up by a network. It is apparent that Valerie’s age is the issue. For example, one of the producers states, with a puzzled look, “So I mean I just don’t get it. Why is she living with these kids?” Furthermore, even her costars jokingly ask each other, “How old do you think she is?” It seems that Valerie’s acting merits cannot compensate for her age. The writers and producers completely rework the plot as well as Valerie’s character. The producers explain to her, “No one is buying you living with these kids. So now it’s two young girls and two young guys. And you’re the Aunt living upstairs.” No longer is Valerie the successful business woman. Instead, she is “Aunt Sassy,” whose sole purpose is comedic relief.

As they tape the pilot, it is apparent that Valerie no longer occupies a lead role but rather a peripheral one. Furthermore, like the older women on the other two series, Valerie’s character, Aunt Sassy is used for comedic relief. During the first episode, Valerie’s lines all highlight the notion that she is the old and out of date. In one scene in particular Valerie playing the role of Aunt Sassy, walks into the apartment to find her niece fooling around with a boy. Upon entering, Valerie, adorned in her pastel 80’s jogging suit, shrills at the top of lungs exclaiming, “Note to self. I don’t wanna see that!” The audience breaks out into laughter. Her line further demonstrates that Valerie, due to her age, is unable to relate to her younger, attractive, costars. As a result, she in a sense is

the object of the joke. Just like Ida and Karen McCulksey of *Desperate Housewives*, Valerie is used for comedic relief. Instead of laughing with her, the audience is laughing Valerie.

As demonstrated by the examples above, the women elderly on these primetime television shows are portrayed as out of touch with reality and confused. Their comments are often inappropriate and serve solely as comic relief. However, “*Desperate Housewives*” Phyllis represents a different stereotype associated with the aging process and that is loneliness. In the “*Art Isn’t Easy*” episode of “*Desperate Housewives*,” Phyllis, Bree’s mother-in-law, is neither disheveled nor incompetent but instead lonely. Phyllis is the mother of Bree’s deceased husband Rex. After her son’s death, the family rarely visits their grandmother who lives alone in a retirement community. Due to family issues, Bree, much to her chagrin, is forced to visit Phyllis. It is apparent that Phyllis wants Bree to stay longer since she rarely gets company, especially family. Upon leaving, Bree comments on a photograph of her deceased husband. With tears welling in her eyes, a depressed and dejected Phyllis responds:

Phyllis: I have a lot of pictures. All of the women here do, they’re what we have left of the things time has taken from us: youth, homes, husbands, and for the unluckiest, children. I thought I was getting back a part of Rex. But now?

Bree: I know you are lonely Phyllis but I can’t give up this child just to make you feel better

Phyllis: You should go; your family is waiting for you.

Prior to her husband and son's death, family and friends surrounded Phyllis. Now, however; over time her support system has vanished, leaving her alone. Bree's visit provided her with a glimmer of hope that she may once again feel like part of a family. However, it is apparent that nothing will change. The scene visually separates the world of the youthful woman and the elderly woman as the younger and seemingly flawless Bree exits the lonely and forgotten world of Phyllis to return to her family and friends. Phyllis, like, "all of the women" in her retirement community, is left with only the nostalgic memories of her "youth" As a young woman, Phyllis, like Bree, was surrounded by people who loved her. Now, time has literally taken everything from her.

Phyllis' situation suggests that women as they age experience inevitable isolation and profound loneliness. However, these feelings of emptiness are not always as apparent on the surface. For example, initially, it seems that Karen McCluskey only offers comic relief. However, upon deeper examination, it is apparent that her sarcastic demeanor is only a front shielding her true loneliness. The viewer is provided a glimpse into her lonely life during season one's "Live Alone and Like It," episode. The episode opens, as Lynette in the midst of her reoccurring day dream where her "nasty neighbor Karen McCluskey would keel over and die." Unfortunately her fantasy is short lived as Lynette finds herself in another argument with Karen. This time, Karen is scolding her for leaving her trash cans on the side of the road for days. The following altercation occurs:

Karen: It's bad enough we have to look at the god awful color you painted your house. We shouldn't have to stare at your cans for days on end.

Lynette: You wanna talk about good neighbor etiquette how about you hire a gardener to care of that jungle you call a lawn

Karen: I am on a fix income.

Lynette: Oh well Perhaps you should consider moving somewhere less expensive, like a nursing home.

Karen: Go to hell

Lynette: Run by Germans

Throughout the entire argument Lynette continually refers to Karen's old age. She even makes light of the fact that Karen, like many retired Americans, struggles financially. Although this is a major issue in the United States today, Karen's plight evokes little sympathy from the viewers. Instead, Karen seems to embody a "grumpy, mean spirited stereotype" associated with the elderly. She is constantly criticizing Lynette. To say Lynette, a busy, working mother with four young children, has her hands full, is an understatement. As a result, the viewer relates more to Lynette than her bitter elderly neighbor.

After the interaction, both women return to their homes. However, while walking back, Karen collapses to the ground. A hesitant Lynette calls 911. Lying helplessly in the ambulance, Karen no longer appears cold and unpleasant, instead for the first time, the viewer witnesses her vulnerability. She calls to Lynette from her stretcher, begging her to come to the hospital. Lynette tries to create an excuse. However, Karen reaching for her hand cries, "Please come with me, I'm scared. If I die, I don't want to die to be with strangers." At this moment, Karen's loneliness is exposed. Lynette would never

consider Karen her friend, if anything she was her enemy. In fact, based on the previous altercation one might assume that if Lynette were ill her grumpy, old, mean spirited neighbor is the last person she would want by her side. However, it is apparent that Karen really has no else to care for her.

After returning home, Lynette becomes concerned that Karen is not well. She has not seen her out of the house and she has a week's worth of newspapers piled on her front door. Lynette, worried something might be seriously wrong, ventures into Karen's home. She finds a crippled Karen, immobile on her couch due to her arthritis. Since she lives alone, Karen did not have anyone to help her open her medicine so as a result she sat alone in pain for days. It seems that Karen's cold demeanor is more a protective front that prevents outsiders from realizing that she, like Phyllis, is vulnerable and alone. In this episode, Karen serves to reinforce many of the negative characteristics ascribed to elderly women. At first, she is depicted as a spiteful and grumpy old woman who always irritates her neighbors. As the episode progresses, she transitions into the lonely, forgotten old woman who lacks the ability to relate to others. Karen's plight ultimately serves to perpetuate the negative connotations associated with aging process.

In the situations described above Bree and Lynette's robust lives stand in contrast to the lives' of their lonely elderly costars. However, they are not completely immune to the aging process. Despite her flawless appearance and seemingly vast social circle, Bree, like her mother-in-law experiences the negative effects of aging. During an altercation with her daughter, Bree is reminded that she and Phyllis are not that different after all. In this episode, Bree catches Danielle sneaking around with her new neighbor

Matthew Applewhite. Bree, after discovering Matthew hiding under Danielle's bed, marches across the street and informs Mrs. Applewhite of the secret affair. An enraged Betty Applewhite ensures this will never happen again. She even threatens to send Matthew away to prevent him from causing any more problems. A heartbroken Danielle cries for days, claiming that her mother tried to sabotage her relationship because her life is so "pathetic." Bree, asserts that her daughter's accusation is "just ridiculous."

Danielle fires back, exclaiming:

"Daddy's dead, you drove your boyfriend to suicide, you're getting older by the minute and soon you'll be so dried up and bitter that no man will ever want to touch you ever again. And now you're determined to ruin my life. So I have to stay with you here while you turn into an old fossil."

Her daughter's cutting comments leave Bree at a loss for words. Danielle's rationale for her mother's incentive to "ruin" her life reflects society's negative connotations associated with aging. Since youth and beauty are glorified in our society, it seems only logical to Danielle that her mother would be jealous and "bitter." As a young woman, Danielle possesses many of the traits that are coveted in our society. Furthermore, Danielle alludes to the fact that her mother will soon become a burden and an unwanted responsibility. Danielle's comments illustrate how the notion that as women age they begin to lose their sense of value and worth is so deeply embedded in our society. Even though it will be years before Bree is even considered elderly, her daughter's statement

reinforces the idea that the negative effects of aging are inevitable. It is only a short awhile before Bree's life transforms to one of loneliness and isolation like Phyllis and Karen McCluskey.

"Grey's Anatomy's" Addison Montgomery-Shepherd embodies the negative stereotype cast on the "older woman." As previously mentioned men on television generally date much younger women. However, there are exceptions like Addison. Addison, a OB/GYN, has relocated to Seattle Grace Hospital in hopes of repairing her damaged marriage with Derek Shepherd, a renowned heart surgeon. Not only did Addison cheat on her husband, but he in attempt to move on is now dating, Meredith, a much younger first year intern. Despite these complications, Addison is determined to mend their marriage. In fact, she is convinced that Derek will return to New York immediately.

Initially, Addison views Meredith and Derek's relationship as an obstacle. She is convinced that with time she and Derek can repair their marriage and eventually return to their life on the east coast. Derek finally agrees to give their marriage a second chance. However, he insists that they stay in Seattle and start fresh. Seeing no other option, Addison reluctantly agrees. As if repairing her damaged marriage was not hard enough, Addison is forced to see Meredith, Derek's ex-girlfriend, every day at the hospital. As the season progresses, Derek devotes time to mending his marriage, informing Meredith that he needs to work things out with Addison because she is his family and has been for the past ten years. Finally, it seems that the Shepherd marriage has been repaired and strengthened.

However, Derek, without question, is still attracted to Meredith. In fact, in the last episode of the second season, Derek and Addison attend a black tie event hosted by the hospital for all of the doctors. Addison is dressed in an elegant, red floor length gown. However, Derek barely even glances at his wife once Meredith enters the room. Even while dancing with his wife, he gazes longingly at Meredith. He barely responds when Addison asks him questions. It seems that Derek is completely entranced by the much younger Meredith. Despite the fact that he is still married, he is unable to control his attraction toward his much younger intern. Meredith, aware that Derek is staring at her, leaves the dance floor. Immediately, Derek jumps at the chance to follow her. He hastily insists that he must check on a patient leaving his wife for the evening, all alone. An oblivious Addison waits anxiously alone completely unaware of the fact that her husband is having sex with another woman.

Why would or should Addison suspect he was with another woman? That very same day, she and Derek were the happily married couple flirting over a cup of coffee. She was convinced that their marriage was back to normal. Finally, Derek returns at the end of the night as guests are trickling out. A flustered, Meredith enters shortly after. However, Addison does not suspect anything or even notice Meredith. She is happy Derek has returned as she is ready to call it a night. Although Addison is not elderly, this episode reinforces the negative light often cast on the “older” woman. Addison is not only portrayed as oblivious and uninformed but also undesirable. The moment Derek laid eyes on the younger, sexier and more beautiful Meredith, he completely forgot about his wife. He did not even attempt to feign interest in his wife because he was too enamored

with another woman. This further reinforces the notion that once women begin to age, they lose their desirability and ability to maintain an intimate relationship. Whether it is through self-deprecating humor, confusion, or ignorance, all of these women embody some form of the negative characteristics society commonly associates with aging.

Chapter Seven:

The Double Standard in Aging

Without question, the elderly are under-represented on television. However, the issue of aging becomes more complex when gender is introduced. Since women tend to be held to a stricter standard of beauty, middle-aged male characters were more likely than their female peers to be considered in their “prime”. “Desperate Housewives”, “Grey’s Anatomy” and “The Comeback” reinforce this “double standard” of aging. As previously mentioned, they are not alone as many of the major networks introduced new shows that star an older leading man who date much younger and beautiful women. This is definitely the case in “Desperate Housewives” and “Grey’s Anatomy.” Previous studies on aging and television found that women were somewhere between 6 to 15 years younger than their male counterparts. For example, in “Desperate Housewives,” all of the women are younger than their husbands by at least 2 years, except for Lynette Scavo, played by Felicity Huffman, who is 1.5 years older than Tom Scavo, played by Doug Savant. In “Grey’s Anatomy” two of the central relationships involve a male surgeon and a female intern. “The Comeback’s” portrayal of Valerie her producer Jimmy’s relationship illustrates the existence of the double standard in a professional rather than romantic relationship.

In both relationships, the highly renowned surgeons are males and their girlfriends are young interns. Furthermore, it is the men, Dr. Shepherd and Dr. Burke that are in control of the development of the relationship. The younger interns, Meredith and Christina, occupy not only a subordinate role in the workplace but also in their respective

relationships. As each relationship progresses, Dr. Shepherd and Meredith and Dr. Burke and Christina, it is the women who become more emotionally attached. Season 2, episode 2 “Enough is Enough,” opens with a depressed a Meredith and a dejected Christina lying on the bathroom floor trying to comfort one another. Meredith is lamenting over the fact that Derek never told her he was married and the once strong willed Christina appears vulnerable and shaken after Dr. Burke ended their relationship. The following conversation occurs between the two of them:

Meredith: It’s not us. It’s them. They didn’t tell me he had a wife. They gave absolutely no warning they were going to break up with you.

Christina: It’s not that Burke broke up with me. It’s how he broke up with me. Like it’s business. Like it’s a business affair. Like he’s the boss of me?

Meredith: He is the boss of you.

Christina: What’s worse is that I care. I used to be all business and then he goes and gets me pregnant. He ruined me. I’m ruined.

Meredith: I feel empty.

This scene is similar to others, when the women are not practicing medicine, Christina and Meredith spend their time discussing and analyzing their relationships at length. For example, in a later episode when Meredith must undergo an emergency appendicitis surgery, she still can only concentrate on her love life. She lies in the hospital, lamenting over the fact that she is unable to decide between two men. “Derek, Finn, Derek, Fin. I’d die as the girl who couldn’t make a choice, right?” Despite the fact

that her health is in danger, it is apparent that Meredith's relationship remains at the forefront of her concerns. Dr. Burke and Dr. Shepherd, on the other hand, rarely discuss their romantic relationships unless they are confronted by their girlfriends. The two of them are more concerned with medicine and surgery. These men not only possess power in the public sphere but also in the private sphere as they tend to determine the direction of the relationship. Even though both of the women are intelligent interns, in their relationships, they become the youthful, beautiful younger women, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles.

In "Desperate Housewives" Carlos and Gabrielle's marriage is the embodiment of this age and power dichotomy. The pilot episode introduces the beautiful Gabrielle, as a former model who while in New York developed, "a taste for rich food and rich men." As a result she married Carlos, an older financially successful investment banker. Carlos is the bread-winner and he totes Gabrielle, his trophy wife around to different events. Both Gabrielle and Carlos are aware of the act they must perform in public. He wants to maintain the image of the powerful, successful husband with Gabrielle as his beautiful wife. The need to maintain this image is further demonstrated during an argument that occurs after Carlos' insists that Gabrielle accompany him to an event.

Carlos: It's business. Tanaka expects everyone to bring their wives.

Gabrielle: Every time I'm around that man, he tries to grab my ass.

Carlos: I made over \$200,000 doing business with him last year. If he wants to grab your ass, you let him.

Gabrielle, obviously infuriated, storms after Carlos. However, in the end Gabrielle agrees to attend the event after Carlos reminds her that he, “spent \$15,000 on a necklace that [she] couldn’t live without.” As Carlos’ wife, Gabrielle is appreciated for her beauty. Carlos is both older and financially successful therefore he is in charge of the development of their relationship. Their marriage reinforces the double standard in aging.

Like the Gabrielle and Carlos’ marriage, Dr. Burke and Christina’s relationship also sheds light on the power and age dichotomy. From the very first episode, a driven, competitive and ambitious Christina set herself apart from her peers. However, as the series progresses, a once defiant and independent Christina also plays into these traditional gender role stereotypes. For example, in the same episode in season three that Meredith undergoes an appendectomy, Dr. Burke is recovering after he was shot arm by a crazed patient. Everyone believes he is ready to return to work after undergoing surgery and extensive physical therapy. However, Burke is keeping a secret. He is experiencing tremors in his hand and for the first time, Burke’s confidence is shaken. Despite his apparent fear, the person pressuring him to return the most is Christina. For example, anytime Burke exposes his reluctance, Christina quickly retorts “Stop second guessing. It’s not like you... You’re hand is fine and Shepherd will clear you for surgery.” It seems that in order for their relationship to continue, Christina needs Burke to be the ultra confident and successful surgeon. In fact, Christina goes as far to convince Dr. Shepherd that Burke is ready, stating “He’s perfect. He’s Burke.”

Her efforts are successful and Burke is cleared for surgery. However, later when the two are alone, Burke finally reveals the truth about his hand tremors, stating “You wanted me to be fine. My hands are the only thing that is of value to you... You want Preston Burke.” Christina tries to deny the accusation; however she then offers to help him hide his tremors by assisting him in surgery, stating “Nobody has to know.” It seems that Burke’s reputation as a successful, experienced, leader is a vital element in their relationship just like Gabrielle’s youth and beauty are central to her marriage. It is important to note the distinction between the genders here. Burke, as a man, is valued for his intelligence and the ability to hone his skills whereas Gabrielle, as a woman, is valued for her appearance. Burke and Gabrielle, in their respective relationships, serve to highlight Sontag’s assertion that desirable male characteristics are not threatened by the “disappearance of youth,” unlike female characteristics.

After Burke reveals his secret tremors, the viewer witnesses a change in Christina’s behavior. Prior to Burke’s injury, Christina scrubbed on in surgeries to further career, now her motivation is Burke’s reputation. She spends hours rearranging the surgery schedule in order to ensure that she will be able to assist Burke. Furthermore, in the past, Christina was never one to downplay her accomplishments; however now when she is praised for assisting in a difficult surgery she deflects any credit.

Not only are women depicted as much younger than their male counterparts, as in the case with the “Grey’s Anatomy” intern surgeon relationship and “Desperate Housewives” trophy wife Gabrielle, but unlike men their power declines with age. Dr. Ellis Grey and Dr. Richard Webber’s relationship on “Grey’s Anatomy” as well as the

relationship between Valerie and her producer, Jimmy, on “The Comeback,” shed light on how the power dichotomy becomes more severe with time.

In the first episode of “Grey’s Anatomy,” we are introduced to Dr. Richard Webber, who is currently the chief of surgery at Seattle Grace’s hospital. He is revered as a world renowned surgeon. We are also introduced to Meredith’s mother, Dr. Ellis Grey. A former colleague of Dr. Webbers, she too was once a world-renowned surgeon and is widely recognized as a pioneer in the medical world. In fact, the other interns are filled with awe and excitement when they learn that “The Dr. Ellis Grey” is Meredith’s mother. Everyone is curious about her mother and whether she is still practicing medicine. However, Meredith remains silent on the subject. The viewer becomes aware that Dr. Ellis Grey has Alzheimer’s disease and rarely recognizes her own daughter. In fact, when Meredith visits, she is greeted by her hostile mother who yells and often belittles her. Meredith wishes she could keep her secret concealed, but it is revealed when her mother is admitted to the hospital for liver complications in season 2, episode 3. At this point, Dr. Grey’s Alzheimer’s is rapidly progressing as she becomes irrational and believes that she is still a practicing doctor.

In one scene, a male intern is trying to perform a simple examination when she confuses him for her husband. She becomes enraged when he tries to touch her. She begins violently screaming, “My work is what counts! It what pays for you and this house! So why don’t you just leave me alone and let me do it! Meredith thinks she needs you but I sure as hell don’t!” She becomes violent and threatening to the point that they have to sedate her. The flashback suggests that when Dr. Grey was in the prime of her

career she was ill tempered and did not possess traditional maternal instincts. Although she is suffering from Alzheimer's, she still belittles and berates her husband and indicates that both he and her daughter are in a sense, burdens to her. The scene suggests that in order to fulfill her role as a successful doctor, Grey's personal life was compromised. Dr. Grey stands outside traditional roles occupied by women and it seems that she is punished as a result. She was unable to play both roles of surgeon and mother.

On the contrary, Dr. Richard Webber, Dr. Grey's former colleague, has fared much better as he sits four floors above in his Chief of Surgery corner office. When he learns that his old friend is in the hospital, Dr. Webber makes it his mission to ensure that she receives the best treatment. He assigns George, an intern, to watch her carefully explaining, "The Alzheimer's causes her reality to switch. That's why I'm depending on you to keep a special eye on her." However, George is unable to attend to her properly, causing Dr. Webber to sternly state, "Get out of here...I'll take care of her." At the end, it is only Dr. Webber that can control Meredith's mother. Even though Alzheimer's is a disease that usually effects people as they age, I think it is significant that Dr. Grey, a woman, who in her thirties was at the top of career, now has lost all control and power in her sixties.

Conversely, her former colleague, also in his sixties, is currently the Chief of Surgery at the hospital. As her health deteriorates, his career flourishes. In addition, Dr. Webber is the only one who can properly care for Dr. Grey. As her caretaker, her health is now in his hands. It is not only Dr. Grey he must rescue but as the chief of surgery, he in a sense fills the role of a wise father figure to many of the interns. Unlike

Dr. Grey, he did not have to compromise his personal life in order to maintain a successful career. This episode embodies the double standard of aging. In their youth both of these characters were successful doctors, however; with time, Dr. Grey has lost her power while her male counterpart's power has increased. This relationship further supports Dozier and Lauzen findings that men's leadership roles, unlike that of women, increase with age.

Like "Grey's Anatomy," *The Comeback's* Valerie and Jimmy also embody this power dichotomy. As previously stated, Valerie is a middle aged actress who is making her return to show business. She talks at length about her previous show, "Im It!" However, the writers are not impressed by her. In fact, they often treat her with little respect or no respect. Valerie often tries to make suggestions, but they are often scoffed at or rebuffed by the writing team. In her fleeting attempts to make a suggestion, Valerie is portrayed as flighty and at times a pushover.

Jimmy, on the other hand, a producer on the show, has known Valerie since her days on "I'm It!" The two are about the same age; however they are depicted in completely different lights. Valerie comes across as desperate to remain in the spotlight. Jimmy is less impressed by these frivolous and trivial matters. Unlike Val, he refuses to have her reality cameras near him. Jimmy comes across as level-headed and oftentimes is forced to rescue Valerie from being further ridiculed by the writers. Val seems so desperate to make her character memorable that she is constantly trying to intervene with the writers. In fact, most of the time, she even seems to overstep her boundaries. However, it is always Jimmy that must rescue her. For example, in one scene, Val wants

the writer's to change an inappropriate joke they wrote for Aunt Sassy. Valerie is so certain that the audience will react poorly that she presents the writers with alternative ideas. Although she was only trying to help, the writers begin to mock her and in a sense ridicule her. Valerie, always trying to please, allows the mocking to continue. Finally Jimmy ushers her to the side and insists that she is right about the joke having to change. However, he reminds that her it is not her job to tell the writers.

Jimmy is presented as level-headed and reasonable whereas Valerie is depicted as over-emotional and at time out of line. It seems that Jimmy has benefited from the aging process as he commands the respect of everyone on the set. Everyone not only listens to him but it seems that the crew looks up to him because of his success over the years. Valerie seems to experience the opposite effect. For example, when Valerie was a young actress on "I'm It!" she used to work with the writers when she felt a line was not right. She insists that they respected her opinion. However, now thirteen years later, the writers not only ignore her but they also often mock her. They do not value her opinion because as a young writing team, they think of her as old and dated. Instead of benefiting from her experience in show business, Valerie is seems to be penalized. Balding Jimmy, on the other hand, is respected because of his experience in the industry.

The double standard in aging is not only highlighted in male and female relationships but also in relationships between people of the same gender. In fact, many of the situations revolving around Juna and Valerie shed light on the strict standard of beauty forced upon women. The media's obsession with youth and beauty is further highlighted in episode 10 entitled "Valerie Stands out on the Red Carpet." In an earlier

episode, Juna, Valerie's costar admits that this is her first acting gig. Despite the fact that Juna is new to limelight, the paparazzi seem to follow her everywhere. She is even being called, "The New It Girl on TV."

Valerie soon learns that Juna will grace the coveted cover of Rolling Stone. Upon hearing the news, Valerie reveals that thirteen years ago she too graced the cover of Rolling Stone. Even though Valerie is excited for Juna, she can not fully conceal her jealousy. As a result, Valerie hires a new publicist so that she too can be featured in magazines. However, Valerie's attempts, unlike Juna's, are not met entirely with open arms. Finally, Valerie receives word that she will be featured on the cover of a yoga magazine, even though it is no Rolling Stone, she is excited. However, the only issue is that Valerie has never tried yoga so to say the least, Valerie has tremendous amount to learn in less than a week. Not only does she have to have become a yoga expert but she must also create a yoga room in her house. During preparation, Valerie invites Juna over to practice yoga at her house with an instructor. Even though both are newcomers, the young and limber, Juna, has less difficulty learning the poses. The instructor barely has to help Juna and encourages her to try more advanced positions. Valerie, on the other hand, requires assistance. Instead of pushing her, the yoga instructor tells her, "Try and accept where you are now. Yoga is about accepting your limitations." It seems that Valerie's age is affecting not only her ability but also how others treat her.

Finally, it is time shoot the cover; however, Valerie is extremely sore and can barely hold novice poses. After an agonizing day of shooting in her new \$6,300 yoga room, they get the shot. Valerie had to go to great lengths, from spending a fortune to

enduring tremendous pain, all for a poorly circulated magazine that she has never read. However, thirteen years ago, she like Juna, was actively pursued by the fashionable, popular, and racy *Rolling Stone* magazine. Much like Juna, she was depicted as a sex symbol. However, now due to her age, her presence in the entertainment industry is limited. Not only does the aging process physically handicap women but as this scene suggests, it may also affects their personality. From the publicist, yoga instructor, and decorator, Valerie is depicted as both jealous and desperate as goes to extreme measures to be noticed. This particular episode suggests that the repercussions of aging are felt not only physically but mentally as well. Valerie longs to return to the days when she like Juna still possessed such sought after qualities.

The dynamics in Derek and Addison's rocky marriage also shed light on the double standard in aging. The Shepherd's ten year marriage is riddled with many obstacles including infidelity. Although both are guilty of these acts, Addison is portrayed as the adulterous and manipulative wife while Derek plays the hopeless romantic. However in reality, Derek, is cheating on his wife with a younger woman. Nevertheless, his affair is presented as an intimate relationship whereas Addison's affair is depicted as purely physical and anything but romantic.

As previously mentioned, Addison is introduced to the cast during the second season when she travels across the country to mend her broken marriage. Within moments of her arrival, the viewer is pitted against her for a variety of reasons. First, the viewer and Meredith, Derek's romantic partner, are completely unaware of her existence. Secondly, not only does Addison completely complicate and disrupt Derek and

Meredith's relationship but the two women immediately become rivals. Thirdly, Addison is depicted as depicted as the adulterer who "slept with her husband's best friend."

In the following episodes, the audience roots for the innocent, doe-eyed, heroine, Meredith, rather than the manipulative, stern Addison in their battle for Derek's affection. However, it is important to note that while this love triangle continues, Derek is still legally married to Addison. In other words, Addison is not the only adulterous one in the relationship. In fact, at one point Addison, tired of vying for her husband's attention, presents Derek with divorce papers. All he has to do is sign. However, the decision is not that easy for him. After a moral dilemma, Derek decides he wants to mend his marriage with Addison and ultimately end his relationship with Meredith. For months, Derek had been romantically involved with both women however, unlike his wife he was not portrayed as manipulative or adulterous. Instead, Derek is presented as the victim whose cheating wife forced him into the arms of another woman. It seems that he is now finally ready to forgive Addison.

A few episodes later, the Shepherd marriage is once again rocked with drama and infidelity. Just when things were retuning to normal, Derek sleeps with Meredith. Addison is obviously devastated. In fact, she shows up at the hospital drunk informing the Chief, "I'm going to do some drinking instead...I need to do some drinking today," because her marriage, "seems to be just about over." While she pathetically mopes around Derek, that same day, is bubbly and spirited as he flirts with Meredith, his intern. It seems that the romantic Derek and young and naïve Meredith can do wrong. In fact the

audience encourages their relationship because Addison is still considered the adulterer. The viewer may pity Addison, but it seems that her reputation as the stern, older manipulative woman still proceeds her. The Shepherd's relationship is yet another example of the double standard in aging. Both parties are guilty of infidelity however only with Addison is it scandalous. Both Derek and Meredith are presented as victims in their own right. Derek is depicted as the hopeless romantic searching for true love. When in reality he is intimately involved with two women and ultimately cheating on his wife. Furthermore, it is the manipulative Addison who prevents the young and beautiful Meredith from being with her true love. Meredith's positive attributes often overshadow the fact that she is an adulterer sleeping with a married man. It is interesting how Addison, the older woman, is never forgiven but Meredith, the younger woman, is never depicted as doing any wrong.

The above examples demonstrate that an unquestionable double standard in aging exists. As previously mentioned, nowhere is this double standard more strictly reinforced than in the entertainment industry. The final episode of "The Comeback" parodies how the entertainment industry perpetuates the double standard in aging. In this episode Valerie hosts a party for the premiere of reality television show. What was supposed to be a fun evening turns into a nightmare for Valerie. Instead of accurately chronicling her return to show business, the network edited the footage making it, "the crazy actress show." For the viewer who watched the entire season, it is apparent that network manipulated the raw material to make Valerie appear like a desperate and unprofessional actress as well as an unfit step-mother. Nowhere is this misrepresentation more

exaggerated than in the reality show's presentation of Valerie's relationship with Paulie G, a writer for "Room and Board." From crude and vulgar jokes to complete disrespect, Paulie G has ridiculed Valerie from day one. Whether it is through mockery or contempt, Paulie G goes out of his way to make Valerie feel insignificant. He intentionally ignores any of her requests and treats her like second class citizen on the set. Even though Valerie is a veteran in the entertainment industry, it is apparent that Paulie G believes she is well beyond her prime. Nevertheless, an always cheerful Valerie excuses his behavior. When most people would lash out, Valerie keeps her cool.

Despite the numerous examples of Paulie G's blatant disrespect for Valerie, the reality show depicts a very different situation. The first few minutes of the premiere depict the one time Valerie bad mouthed Paulie G referring to him as a "monster." The next scene features Paulie G praising Valerie as "a terrific comedic actress." The viewer is not only aware that Paulie G is lying but also that the reality crew elicited the comments from Valerie. At the end, Paulie G is portrayed as kind and thoughtful. Valerie, on the hand is portrayed irrational and spiteful. Valerie's reality show further exemplifies the double standard that is deeply engrained in society and even more so in the entertainment industry. Had Valerie been twenty years younger, one wonders whether she would be depicted in such a negative light? Instead, due to her age, the producers were able to manipulate the material so that Valerie fits the mold of the desperate middle aged woman. Not only is Valerie depicted falsely but so is Paulie G. It seems ironic that Valerie is punished for behaving like a professional whereas Paulie G is rewarded for his inappropriate behavior. Somehow Paulie G is freed from any of the

negative repercussions that accompany this behavior. Instead, he is depicted in a positive light. In other words, the premier fits with the patterns found in other studies where women are punished for aging and men are rewarded.

From Dr. Webber and Dr. Alice Grey to Valerie and Paulie G, it is apparent that a double standard in aging exists. These examples highlight the inequality that accompanies the aging process. Furthermore, they suggest that once a woman is passed her prime, she not only loses her desirability but her voice and ultimately her power. The male counterparts on the hand experience many benefits from the aging process. Not only does their status increase in terms of their career but also in terms of their desirability. The aging process presents many positive gains for men. However, as demonstrated by the examples above, the inverse is true for their female counterparts. Instead, these women feel the negative repercussions of aging.

Chapter Eight:

The Realization of the Double Standard

After analyzing the shows, it seems that many of the women characters are aware that a double standard in aging exists. Issues and plot lines regarding aging reveal some of the deepest insecurities in these characters. For example, in “Desperate Housewives” season one, episode 6, “Now you know,” Gabrielle feels the pressure of youth and beauty as she is threatened by a younger woman. The viewer learns that Gabrielle is having an affair with John, a high school senior who mows her lawn. He is much younger than Gabrielle, which, aside from the fact that she is married, is the reason the affair is so secretive. Gabrielle an obviously a confident woman, always prances around the house in skimpy outfits when John is working. One day, she is having coffee at her friend Bree’s house when Bree’s daughter, Danielle, returns from school with a friend. Gabrielle is surprised to find that her friend is John.

Immediately, Gabrielle begins to feel jealous when the two go upstairs to study in Danielle’s room. She attempts to elicit concern from Bree, stating, “Doesn’t it make you nervous? A boy upstairs with Danielle?” However, Bree insists they are only studying and there is no need to worry. Later in the episode, Gabrielle sneaks out of her house to confront John. She asks why he has not returned her phone calls and he replies that he has been busy. Gabrielle quickly replies, “Yeah, I’ve seen who you’ve been busy with.” She refuses to believe that they are “just friends.” Gabrielle decides that she needs to take action to get rid of this “young” girl. In the next episode, Gabrielle convinces Danielle to attend a summer camp in New York City. Since Gabrielle cannot turn back the hands of

time, she does the next best thing in her mind and eliminates the threatening, younger Danielle. Gabrielle feels directly threatened by Danielle's youthfulness, so much so that she refuses to accept the fact that Danielle and John have a completely platonic relationship.

A few episodes later in season one, Gabrielle's aging insecurities are once again revealed. For most of her life, Gabrielle, has prided herself on her physical appearance. In fact, she has built a life of luxury and wealth on her looks and appearance. She considers her appearance as one of her best assets. However, Gabrielle realizes that her best assets are not eternal and instead only fleeting. For example, in her twenties Gabrielle was one of the top models in New York City. Adorned only in designer clothes, Gabrielle graced the pages of elite fashion magazines and walked the most celebrated runways. Men swooned over her, as they showered her in gifts and compliments. However, now ten years later, things have changed dramatically as she and her one time successful, wealthy husband are practically bankrupt.

After having a lived a life of ease and luxury, Gabrielle finds herself back in the work force having to earn a living. She decides to return to modeling. Instead of booking the top photographers, Gabrielle is forced to model at auto shows in the local mall. Without question, a lot has changed over the ten year period. Gabrielle begins to realize as time passes, her value and sense of worth in terms of physical appearance are quickly vanishing. Later in the same episode, Gabrielle takes her frustration out on her maid. However, her maid does not take the abuse quietly, instead she yells, "You are not better than me! The only reason you have anything in your life is because you are pretty.

One day you'll be old and when that happens you'll be nothing!" Gabrielle, already insecure about her appearance, fires her maid without hesitation. After the altercation, a usually ultra confident Gabrielle appears defeated as she stares into the mirror. It seems that this incident in addition to the one with Danielle, bring Gabrielle's deepest insecurities to the surface. Her whole life has been built on her beauty and appearance, and now she realizes how quickly it all can disappear. She no longer is treated the same way and commands less respect in her profession. It seems that everything she has worked for has faded away with the passing of time.

In season one episode "Move On," Lynette Scavo, like her neighbor Gabrielle, is threatened by younger women. In this episode, Lynette, overwhelmed at home, decides to hire a nanny to help around the house. Lynette wastes no time in hiring Claire for the job. Initially, Lynette enjoyed having free time and thought nothing of the fact that Claire, in her twenties, is both young and beautiful. However, the situation soon changes. One morning an embarrassed Claire informs Lynette that Tom, Lynette's husband, saw her naked. Although, it was a complete accident, Lynette is convinced that her husband kept this incident from her because he is attracted to the new nanny.

A threatened Lynette decides to confront her husband; Tom explains that he did not inform Lynette because it was "not a big deal," and instead a complete accident. He adamantly insists that he is not at all sexually attracted to Claire. However, Lynette, is not convinced stating "You're denying you're attracted to her....Men by nature are drawn to fertile young women with whom they can plant their seeds. The basic flaw of your gender." In a society where women are valued for their appearance, it seems that

Lynette almost assumes that her husband to be attracted to Claire, who is the embodiment of youthfulness and beauty. In fact, Lynette even presents attraction to younger women as a fact, almost a law of nature. However, Tom quickly replies, “I am not attracted to her. It’s you.” Even with his continued reassurance, Lynette is still skeptical. Finally, she is persuaded when Tom reminds her, “You’re the one. You always have been and always will be.” However, her feelings of relief are only fleeting. The very next day, Lynette watches as Tom gazes longingly at Claire’s partially exposed chest. This time, there is denying the sexual attraction. Even though Tom is in love with his wife he cannot conceal his feelings of lust for Claire. In fact, Tom himself recognizes his sexual desires and ultimately decides to fire Claire. It seems that Lynette’s initial feelings of suspicion were actual reason for concern. This incident serves to legitimize the claim that men are almost “by nature” attracted “fertile” youthful women. Furthermore, it reminds the viewer that even the strongest marriages are vulnerable.

The notion of truly hitting the “silver ceiling,” or feeling discriminated against based on age, resonates with Valerie as well as the viewer during a scene where the cast has costume fittings. In this scene, both Valerie and Juna, her young, thin, and gorgeous costar, are given their wardrobes. The 5’ 10’ Juna emerges from her dressing room in a tiny bikini, runway ready. Moments later Valerie steps out in an oversized pastel jogging suit. Valerie looks mortified but everyone says “it is perfect.” By perfect, it is obvious that they mean perfect for an elderly, outdated woman. The visual contrast is clear. As Juna, the vibrant twenty year old prances around carelessly in a bikini, while Valerie looks defeated in her outdated and frumpy sweat suit. Like the women in “Desperate

Housewives” and “Grey’s Anatomy,” she too is aware of this double standard. It is apparent that she is embarrassed and almost ashamed that as a middle aged woman her options are extremely limited. Valerie attempts to fix the situation by insisting in that the wardrobe director replaces her outfit with a “Juicy suit,” a hip brand worn by teenagers and young woman. However, it seems that her requests were not met when she is forced to don the frumpy jogging suit on the first day of shooting.

In “Grey’s Anatomy,” the fear of aging and the threat that youthfulness imposes is present as well. As previously mentioned, in season 1 Meredith, an intern, becomes romantically involved with her boss, Derek who is a renowned neurosurgeon. However, at the end of the season, Meredith is informed that Derek is actually married. To further complicate the situation, his wife, Addison, a renowned OB/GYN, has relocated to Seattle Grace Hospital in hopes of repairing their damaged marriage. In season 2 episode 1, “Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head,” Addison tells Derek that even though she cheated on him, she is here now to win him back. She admits that she was surprised to learn that he has a girlfriend and a much younger one at that. She states, “And now you have a girlfriend in Seattle. She seems... sweet. She's young. That whole wide-eyed "ooh, he's a brain surgeon" thing happening, but still sweet. Which is what you were going for, right?” Addison is obviously threatened by Meredith’s youthfulness; she even refers to her as “The anti-Addison.” Prior to arriving in Seattle, Addison felt that winning her husband back would be an easy feat, however; now she must compete against a younger woman. Not only is Meredith younger, but she possesses more positive traits. She is kind, funny, and often self-deprecating, all characteristics that appeal to the audience.

Addison, on the other hand, comes across as stern and manipulative. The audience is pitted against her, when the truth behind their deteriorating marriage is revealed. It was Addison who cheated on Derek with his best friend of 20 years. Not only is Addison threatened by Meredith, but she, the older woman, is not portrayed in a positive light thus further reinforcing the negative associations with aging.

Derek is not the only one interested in a younger intern. In fact, in season three, Addison finds herself attracted to Alex, the male intern assigned to shadow her. The more the attraction increases, the more Addison attempts to deny her feelings. Addison is aware of the taboo associated with an older woman dating a younger man especially one in a subordinate position. Jokingly Addison confides in a female coworker stating, “I spent the entire day looking at Alex Karev like a puppy at a chew toy....He’s like 12 years old. He could fit all his belonging in a milk carton.” It is apparent that Addison is trying to make light of her feelings. It is interesting to note that Meredith is the same age as Alex, however, her age is never made an issue during her courtship with Derek. Furthermore, Derek and Meredith are able to have a meaningful relationship. In fact, much of the show focuses on the development of their relationship. Addison and Alex’s relationship, on the other hand, is portrayed very differently. Instead of developing a close emotional bond, their relationship depicted as lustful and purely physical. Addison, obviously aware of the double standard, feels she needs to be secretive about her relationship because it is considered taboo.

Lynette Scavo in “Desperate Housewives” “Anything You Can Do” episode, also questions her own youthfulness. This time however it is not in relation to a man.

Lynette, attempting to be more involved and improve her reputation, volunteers to help with the production of a play at her sons' school. She is stunned after attending the first meeting. All of the other mothers are reminiscent of Stepford wives, especially the organizer Maisy Gibbons. When Lynette offers a suggestion, Maisy curtly responds "Let's leave the creative part to the mothers who've assumed the heavy lifting." Maisy successfully makes Lynette feel inadequate. So in turn, Lynette takes on more responsibility in order to prove herself. In the end, Lynette is incapable of keeping up with these women. She is exhausted all the time; she does not understand how they have so much energy. Refusing to give up, Lynette begins stealing her son's ADD medicine. She quickly becomes addicted but feels it is her only option if she wants to keep up with these young, seemingly perfect moms. At one point she even steals the medicine from one of her friend's son. Lynette's fear of aging is so intense that she resorts to drugs.

Much Like Lynette, Valerie, in "The Comeback" questions her own youthfulness. However, Valerie's dilemma is related to her physical appearance and the threat posed by younger women. In episode 11, Valerie learns that "Room and Board" has been nominated for a "People's Choice Award." Upon hearing the news, Valerie immediately contacts Nolan Miller who not only designed her gowns for "I'm It!" but also designed the gowns for the glitzy cast of "Dynasty." Later in the day, Valerie informs Billy, her publicist that Nolan Miller will be her designer. It is apparent that Billy is not impressed as he tries to conceal his laughter. Instead, Billy insists that she wear the "hot designer" Jay McHerald, the winner of the popular show "Project Runway." Even though Billy reminds her that, McHerald is "happening, like right now," Valerie remains hesitant,

adamantly insisting that she looks the “best in Miller.” Finally Valerie’s opinion is swayed when Billy states, “You’re going to be on the red carpet next to Juna. You gotta kick it up a notch.” Valerie knows that she needs to try to conceal her age and appear youthful. One solution is wearing a trendy, young designer. This situation mirrors the phenomenon described in *Time* where older women are dressing in clothing designed for someone their daughter’s age.

As a result, Valerie agrees to try both of the designers’ gowns. Miller’s outdated dress is covered in green sequence and equipped with a matching boa. Despite the fact that the gown is more appropriate for the set of “Dynasty,” than the 2006 “People’s Choice Award,” Valerie, immediately falls in love with the gown. Even though she seems set on wearing Miller’s creation, she tries on McHerald’s vibrant red gown with a plunging v neck. It is obvious that Valerie feels uncomfortable in the ultra revealing dress. However, everyone in the room insists that she looks phenomenal and stylish. Even her housekeeper exclaims, “Oh so skinny!” Her resistance wears with the flood of compliments. Valerie is convinced to wear the “hot designer” gown because it makes her feel young.

Valerie has realized that if she wants to have a career and stand out in the media she must not only compete with the younger women but also conceal her age. Valerie is not naïve; she knows that she must try to appear, young, thin and beautiful if she wants to remain in the spotlight. Valerie is an established actress, but obviously that is not enough. Unfortunately, Juna’s youth and beauty, completely overshadow any of Valerie’s merits. As a result, Valerie chooses to wear the racy, hip, and edgy dress. The

dress might help portray Valerie as youthful, however; she can not completely conceal how uncomfortable she feels. On the day of the awards, she attempts to walk the red carpet with confidence but she is constantly fussing with her gown. Valerie is obviously uncomfortable. However, as an actress she knows there is little room for aging in the entertainment industry.

Chapter Nine:

Attempts to Defy the Hands of Time

It is apparent that the women in these primetime series, much like real women in society, are aware of the double standard in aging. In my analysis I found that one of the ways the women “Desperate Housewives” Susan Myers, “Grey’s Anatomy’s” Meredith Grey, and “The Comeback’s” Valerie, try to defy the hands of time is by adopting stereotypical youthful characteristics. These women, as if to convince others and themselves of their youthful nature, embody the naïve, flustered helpless romantic.

In season one, episode 7 “Anything You Can Do” Susan about to go on her first date with Mike, a new neighbor on the street. She spends all morning getting ready and trying on different dresses. During this time, Susan’s behavior is similar to that of a love-sick young girl as she nervously exclaims that she has “butterflies” in her stomach. Furthermore she interacts with her teenage daughter, Julie, as if they were peers. For example, Julie says “Mom, you’re getting too dressed up” and she responds, “I know but I want to look really sexy.” Their conversation is not characteristic of a mother and daughter but more of friends. After trying on various outfits, Susan opts for glittery, gold, short, strapless dress and high metallic shoes. The dress does not seem appropriate for a 43 year old divorced mother. It is apparent through her choice of dress that Susan is trying to conceal her age.

Feeling confident she walks across the street to meet Mike, only to learn that he has to reschedule due to an “unexpected houseguest.” The situation worsens when Susan learns that the guest is a much younger, beautiful, woman. Even though Mike insists that

they are just old friends; Susan refuses to believe him. Furthermore, the younger woman's arrival causes her to act much younger. After confiding in Eddie, her neighbor, Susan decides to follow Mike and Kendra. She ends up at a cowboy bar filled with younger women. Eddie convinces her that the reason Mike is with Kendra is because unlike Susan, she is "fun." In an attempt to impress Mike and demonstrate her youthfulness, Susan decides to ride the mechanical bull. As a result, she ends up embarrassing herself. Even though Mike insisted that they were only friends, Susan was too threatened by Kendra's youthfulness to listen. I believe Kendra brought out Susan's fear of losing her power and attractiveness as a result she attempted to dress and behave as if she were younger. Susan, it seems felt the only way to compete was to prove that she too can be youthful and "fun."

Susan is not alone in her quest to defy the hands of time. In fact, her own mother displays similar characteristics especially when she is prompted by the threat a younger woman. In season one, episode entitled, "Children will listen," Susan's mother, Sophie, moves in with her daughter after she ends her relationship with her long time boyfriend. Upon her arrival, it is apparent that Sophie has greatly influenced Susan's flighty mannerisms. Like her daughter, a confused Sophie rambles on about her love her life as she was a teenager. Sophie informs Susan of her break up with Morty and implies that she believes he is having an affair. Susan attempts to reassure her mother that she has no reason to be concerned insisting that they have a strong relationship. However, Sophie quickly responds with, "You think men his age don't have needs? You should see the waitresses he hires. Every year, they get younger and younger." It is obvious that

Sophie, like her daughter, feels threatened by younger women. Trying to make light of the situation, Susan replies, “Maybe you just feel that way because every year you get older and older.” However, an obviously not amused Sophie responds, “Well that’s a horrible thing to say.” As if to convince herself and her daughter, she follows by stating, “I’m not that old...people think we are sisters.” It seems, that Sophie, like her daughter is threatened by younger women.

Throughout the episode, she displays behavior one might expect from Julie, her granddaughter. For example, one day Susan finds Sophie holding up the ice cream truck line as she bats her eyelashes and giggles at the drivers jokes. Although Sophie is not attracted to the ice cream truck driver, she wants to convince herself and others that she is still attractive. Later in the episode, Sophie suggests she and her daughter “... go to a club and dance with some hot guys! I’ll say I’m 42 and you can say you’re 28!” This behavior is not characteristic of grandmother. However, it is apparent that her youthful-like behavior is motivated by the fact that she is threatened by younger women.

Adopting youthful characteristics, acting in a coquettish manner, and participating in activities associated with twenty year olds, are all methods Sophie uses to defy the hands of time. It seems as though she is trying to convince not only herself but those around her that she is still desirable. Even though she is a grandmother, Sophie does not want to lose her sense of worth. Like daughter, Sophie adopts inherently youthful characteristics in order to defy the hands of time. It is obvious that Sophie felt threatened by the younger women Morty employed. It seems that the only way Sophie feels she can

gain her sense of worth is by convincing herself and others that she, like the younger women, is still attractive.

Susan and her mother are not the only women of Wysteria Lane who attempt to defy the hands of time. Eddie Britt, Susan's neighbor and fair weathered friend, outwardly displays youthful characteristics. In season two, episode "You Could Drive A Person Crazy" Eddie begins dating Susan's ex-husband thus pitting the two women against each other. In an effort to mark her territory, Eddie obviously aware of Susan's aging insecurities adopts an extremely youthful demeanor and appearance. For example, one morning Eddie adorned in a tiny, roller girl getup covering no more than a bathing suit skates over to Susan's house. With her hair in pigtails, Eddie yells, "Wohoo Susan! Weee" as she skates circles around Susan who is leaving to run an errand. Susan attempts to ignore Eddie as she hurries into her car.

A determined Eddie refuses to allow her to leave. Not only is she dressed in a revealing outfit, but she also acts in an immature manner. For example, Eddie is only talking to Susan so she can discuss her new, romantic relationship with Susan's ex-husband. In fact she insists that Susan, "Vent! Tell me what a bitch I am..." This catty behavior is not appropriate for a woman in her mid thirties. However, Eddie is intent on getting a rise out of Susan. She even goes as far as to describe their first date informing Susan, "You know what I get like when I drink tequila. A couple shooters and my bra unhooks it self." This overt display of immature behaviors suggests that Eddie not only needs to convince Susan but also herself of herself that she is still desirable and youthful. It seems that Eddie is acting in such an immature and catty manner to remind herself that

she still possess these traits. Eddie is a woman that prides herself on her ability to seduce any man. However, well into her mid thirties, Eddie is no longer considered “young.” As a result, she blatantly displays her “youthfulness.”

Meredith Grey, like the women of “Desperate Housewives,” exhibits inherently youthful and childlike characteristics. Throughout the series, Meredith, usually appears flustered, confused, and unsure of herself. As evidenced by the above example, Meredith seems to spend the majority of her time fussing over her relationship with Dr. Shepherd like a confused teenager. Her behavior in the pilot episode is no exception. The series opens as Meredith wakes up on her couch after a one night stand. With a blanket draped around, she frantically gathers her belongings because interestingly enough today is also her first day as an intern at Seattle Grace Hospital. Finally, the man she had a one night stand with wakes up as flustered Meredith shouts, “You have to go. Seriously, I’m late which isn’t what you want to be on your first day of work.” This behavior and lack of professionalism is not expected from a doctor in her mid thirties. Instead, Meredith, like Susan, acts like a naïve child.

These immature behaviors are only strengthened when Meredith learns that the mystery man she had a one night stand with is actually Dr. Shepherd, a surgeon at the same hospital. When Meredith finally makes this realization, instead of acting like an adult, she reverts back to her childish behavior. For example, the first time she sees Dr. Shepherd; she immediately turns and bolts for the door. Once again, this behavior seems rather childish for an intern at a hospital who has completed medical school. When Derek confronts her, Meredith becomes flustered and for a while struggles to verbalize

any coherent statements. Finally, she tells Derek to “Stop looking at me like that. Like you’ve seen me naked.” Then she once again runs away. The behavior Meredith displays in the pilot episode is not representative of a mature, knowledgeable doctor but rather as a confused, flustered young woman. At times, when practicing medicine, Meredith displays glimmers of professionalism. However, whenever Dr. Shepherd, her love interest is present she almost instinctively acts childish and immature as if to convince both of them of her youthfulness. When Addison is introduced, these behaviors practically become staples in Meredith’s personality. Meredith adopts this technique to remind Derek that she is the embodiment of youth. It seems that Meredith’s plays into the notion that woman are valued for their youth and beauty.

“The Comeback’s” Valerie also attempts to defy her age by mimicking the behaviors of her young costars. For example, in episode 3, Valerie, the cast, and her reality TV crew, fly to New York City to attend a network party. On the airplane Valerie, despite the fact that she is sitting in another section, seems desperate to be included in her costars conversations. Her reality crew captures her desperate attempts to be noticed by her cast mates as she is constantly turning around and squirming in her seat like a child. Unable to wait for the seat belt sign to be turned off, Valerie rushes to the back to chat with her young costars. While walking over to her costars seats, she starts dancing and singing the words a rap song. When she finally reaches her young costars, Juna jokingly responds, “Oh God that song is just so done though.” Valerie, quickly retorts, “I know, I know and it’s stuck in my head and I hate that.” Viewing her actions through the reality camera lens, it is apparent that Valerie thought the song was current and hip. To make

matters worse, Valerie falls into another passenger as the plane is rocked by turbulence. It is obvious that Valerie is acting like a “teenager” so that she will not only fit in with her costars but also fit the youth mold desired by the entertainment industry. Despite her desperate attempts, it is apparent that this youthful, hip image Valerie is projecting is merely a front. Instead of acting like a professional, ultimately, Valerie, like “Desperate Housewives” Susan, ends up looking foolish.

In another episode, the cast has their first photo shoot for “Room and Board.” However, much to her dismay, Valerie is ostracized from the rest of the cast because of her age. Her four younger costars are all front and center as they flirt with each other in their bathing suits. Valerie, on the other hand, dressed in her jogging suit is forced to stand in the background. The photographer keeps telling the young girls to look “sexy.” It is obvious his comments are not directed at Valerie. However, she continues to pout her lips and appear seductive. Finally, the photographer tells her to her stop “making pouty lips” and “model mouth” poses. However, she refuses to stop because she wants to appear younger, like her costars.

Chapter Ten:

Conclusion

America as a society is infatuated with youth and beauty. Nowhere is this obsession more present than in the mass media. This notion that women are valued for their appearance is continually reinforced in films, television and magazines. As a result a fear of aging, especially among women, is deeply embedded in popular culture. In fact, older women in current and past television shows are either portrayed in a negative light or, even worse, not represented at all. Men, unlike women do not experience the negative effect of aging, in fact as they age they tend to gain more power. “Desperate Housewives,” “Grey’s Anatomy,” and “The Comeback,” are no exception to these findings. In fact all three of these shows strategically package the negative association with aging in a variety of ways. First, the elderly are vastly under represented in both shows. Yet when they were portrayed, it was in insubstantial roles where they appeared confused, unkempt, and even offensive.

Secondly, the three shows highlight the double standard in aging, as the hands of time seemed to favor men. As men age they experience an increase in power. Like Dr. Webber, and were often involved in romantic relationships with younger women. Thirdly, they reveal how the women in these shows are not blind to this double standard; rather they seemed to be very aware and very insecure. Based on my analysis I believe that these shows’ negative depiction of older women in television both highlights and reinforces society’s negative connotations associated with aging and glorification of youth and beauty. Since women are valued for their youth and beauty, their sense of self

worth decreases with each passing year. These character's insecurities are revealed when confronted with the reality of aging. Women, as a result, try to defy the devastating hands of time by striving toward this unrealistic ideal of youth and beauty.

As Gerbner concluded with his cultivation theory, television has the unique ability to influence our perceptions and understanding of the world. Since television often molds the public opinions it is important understand exactly what messages it sending to the viewers. Primetime television creates negative associations with aging. I think it is vital that we recognize how television reinforces the obsession with youth and beauty by devaluing of women as they age. It seems that somewhere along the way, we as a society have lost the ability to value the wisdom that comes with the aging process.

Obviously this analysis of "Desperate Housewives" and "Grey's Anatomy" in relation to the aging process has its limitations. First, the analysis only included four episodes from each of series. As a result, the elderly characters discussed in the paper were not reflective of all of the older characters that appear in the series. Secondly, although both shows are among the most watched primetime television shows, they are not representative and reflective of all shows on primetime. Thirdly, the study focused mostly on elderly women. The exploration of male characters was only in light of the double standard in aging. Despite the limitations, the findings provide implications for future research. For example, these findings support the notion that a double standard in aging on primetime television exists. In keeping with the cultivation theory, it would be interesting to understand how men and women interpret and internalize these messages. Are they, like the women in both of the shows, aware of the double standard in aging? In

addition, I believe it would be of value to gain a better understanding of how negative portrayals of older television characters effects elderly viewers. In other words, how does viewing television effect there self-concept. Furthermore, television is a popular and influential cultural tool in the United States; it would be interesting to see how the elderly are portrayed in other countries where less television is viewed. Does the standard still exist? Are the elderly portrayed in a positive light? Overall, this study indicates the need to recognize society's negative associations with the aging process.

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