

THE LADY OR THE TRAMP:

A Critique of Television's Stereotypes of Women in News and Entertainment

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ABSTRACT

While much has been written about the general portrayal of women on television, particularly their role in the workplace, there has been little analysis of how women's sexuality has been depicted in TV programming. This paper examines how so-called promiscuous women on television are portrayed—both in fictional shows, like sitcoms, and news programs that cover and uncover real-life sex scandals. This paper argues that television employs hegemonic devices and stale, antiquated narrative scripts to stereotype women as either sluts or virgins based on whether they seemingly enjoy sex or are open about their sexuality.

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DEDICATION

To my Dad, for inspiring me to write and being my editor for 22 years;
And my Mom, for being as close to the “Perfect Woman” as you can get.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In 1998, *Time* magazine asked, “Is Feminism Dead?” On its cover, four women appeared: Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem...and Ally McBeal, a fictional television character. The first three women were responsible for momentous progress in women’s equality; McBeal made such statements as, “I am a strong, working career girl who feels empty without a man.” *Time* wasn’t just asking if feminism was dead; it was investigating an emerging new feminism. Helene Shugart (2001), a few years later, also noticed the trend:

They are evident everywhere in the mass media today: Scores of outspoken, vibrant, defiant young women, vocal about sexism and endowed with an exhilarating sense of entitlement based precisely on their gender....Popular culture touts this phenomenon as a “brand new feminism” that appears to take gender equity for granted, is more self-obsessed...primarily concerned with sexual self-revelation, and focused on the body rather than social change. (p. 194)

Gina Bellafante (1998), the author of this *Time* magazine article, asked, “Fashion spectacle, paparazzi-jammed galas, mindless sex talk—is this what the road map to greater female empowerment has become?” (p. 56). Ariel Levy (2005), author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, pointed out a change in American women. A relatively short time ago, women were burning bras and speaking out against discrimination. Now women’s magazines advertise “How to Please a Man,” and women proudly wear t-shirts with the *Playboy* bunny logo. Some women, like the

character of Ally McBeal, assert that this isn't the death of feminism, but rather is the new female empowerment (Levy, 2005). Levy (2005) noticed the growing trend for "the new feminist" woman to equate sexuality with liberation. She wrote:

This new raunch culture didn't mark the death of feminism, [women] told me; it was evidence that the feminist project had already been achieved. We'd *earned* the right to look at *Playboy*; we were *empowered* enough to get Brazilian bikini waxes. Women had come so far...we no longer needed to worry about objectification or misogyny." (Levy, 2005, pp. 3-4)

However, this paper argues what Levy (2005) pointed out, that "'Raunchy' and 'liberated' are not synonyms" (p. 5). Just because a woman is portrayed as sexual doesn't mean that she is simultaneously portrayed as a liberated woman. The rise of the presence of female sexuality in the media does not mean that negative stereotypes have been banished. Just as Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow (2002) pointed out with the portrayal of homosexuality in their article, "Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: *Will and Grace* and the Situation Comedy Genre," increased visibility does not necessarily indicate greater social acceptance.

This paper examines the portrayal of sexually-liberated women on television. It looks at both fictional characters developed by writers as well as real life women who became famous because of their sexuality. In taking up this question of how television presents women as sexual beings, a characteristic supposedly now embraced by some feminists as progressive, I was particularly interested in whether or not these depictions challenged Victorian notions of femininity and purity. Have women really advanced in

terms of sexuality, or does the increased portrayal merely further patriarchal domination in our culture? I believe it is important to take up this question because the depiction of female sexuality increasingly portrayed on television and in the media as a whole, particularly in the last twenty years, has vast implications for the feminist movement as well as for everyday women.

This paper attempts this task by first looking at three examples of fictional promiscuous women on television, and then three examples of real life women in the media portrayed as promiscuous. The three examples of promiscuous women on television have spanned nearly twenty years: Elaine on *Seinfeld* in the early 90s; Samantha on *Sex and the City* in the late 90s and turn of the twenty-first century; and Edie on *Desperate Housewives* in the present. The real life women this paper examines are Debra Lafave, Monica Lewinsky, and Tonya Harding. This paper argues that through hegemonic processes, television conceals its bias against these women who are upfront about their sexuality. While seemingly supporting the notion that women have the right to utilize their bodies and sexuality, these narratives actually depict sexually-liberated women in an antiquated fashion, as fitting the stale sexual stereotypes of impious, immoral sluts.

In support of the thesis, Chapter Two of this paper begins with a history of the role of promiscuous women as outcasts in society. It will proceed with background information about independent women featured on television over the years. Chapter Three will be a review of previous literature that relates to the topic of this paper, such as past depictions of female sexuality. In Chapter Four, I include a brief explication of key

definitions and methodologies utilized later in the paper, such as feminism, feminist criticism, and hegemony. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven analyze the depiction of each of the promiscuous fictional characters. Following these analyses, I include in Chapter Eight a brief discussion about the implications of the fictional depiction of sexually-liberated women on television, including an examination of the way it has progressed over time. This discussion also includes an explanation of the reasons why I wanted to take a look at real life women as well as fictional ones. In Chapter Nine, I include some previous literature about sex scandals in the media as well as a discussion of Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm. Chapters Ten, Eleven, and Twelve take a look at the three real life women and the depiction of them through press coverage of their scandals. Finally, Chapter Thirteen concludes with the relationship between the real and the fictional, and the implications of these gender stereotypes for women.

CHAPTER TWO

Historical Context

The Lady and the Tramp

The idea that women can be categorized as either virgins or whores, and nothing in between, is thought to have originated with Victorian attitudes about women, as noted in Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp's (1990) article, "The Lady, The Whore, and The Spinster: The Rhetorical Use of Victorian Images of Women. The "cult of domesticity" in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was based on the concept that there were separate spheres for men and women in Victorian England: the private sphere for women, and the public sphere for men (Jorgensen-Earp, 1990). Deborah Gorham (1982) explained that the Victorian notion of the "perfect woman" (i.e. the virgin character, not the whore character) was someone who "was willing to be dependent on men and submissive to them, and [who] would have a preference for a life restricted to the confines of the home" (quoted in Jorgensen-Earp, 1990, p. 84).

Lisa McLaughlin (1991) argued in her article, "Discourses of Prostitution/Discourses of Sexuality," that this enduring reliance on home as the "natural" place for women led females to be designated as the "other" and ultimately submissive to men. She pointed out that this associating of women with virtue was ultimately "more restrictive than liberatory, however, since it put an enormous burden on women by making them responsible for morality" (McLaughlin, 1991, p. 250). The Victorian notion of the perfect woman as moral and limited to the home prompted the conclusion that any woman who did not act appropriately could be considered a Fallen Woman, "who had

strayed from virtue's path and could no longer serve as an ideal" (Jorgensen-Earp, 1990, p. 84).

It was in fact sexual desire that differentiated the Fallen Woman from this Victorian ideal (McLaughlin, 1991). Historically, the feminine ideal had been characterized by the female body's "restraint and reproductive capacity...as the 'natural' condition by which all other forms of female sexuality have been defined as unnatural and deviant" (McLaughlin, 1991, pp. 250-251). This restraint by the Perfect Woman suggested that self-indulgence would classify a female as the Fallen Woman, leading to the historical notion of sexual abstinence (by a woman) as a virtue.

Furthermore, this either/or, virgin/whore dichotomy and idea of the "perfect woman" still exists today. Mainstream religions still preach that woman was made from man and is naturally subservient. Biology tells us that woman's destiny is to reproduce (Jorgensen-Earp, 1990). Moreover, Deborah Borisoff and Dan Hahn (1993) pointed out in their article, "Thinking with the Body: Sexual Metaphors," how the ways we use sexual metaphors communicate these enduring stereotypes. For example, phrases like "he can't keep his paws off her" and "she was turned on" suggest that men are the animalistic aggressors while women are like machines, acted upon by men. Women cannot yield to sexual desires or impulses unless *overcome* by passion (Borisoff & Hahn, 1993). If they want to be "good girls," they cannot admit to desiring something sexual, or they would be labeled "bad girls." Only through restraint can they be good (Borisoff & Hahn, 1993).

Noteworthy Representations of Women on Television: The Boob Tube?

As women's place in society shifted from the 1950s to the 1970s, so did the portrayals of women on television. Feminist discourses on television tended to correspond with what was going on with the role of women in society (Lotz, 2001). In the 1950s there was perky housewife and mother, Donna Reed, on *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966), while the 1960s gave us *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-1970), a blonde ready to serve her "master" (Stern, 2005). Danielle Stern (2005) pointed out in her article, "Role Model and the City?: Viewers Respond to *Sex and the City*," that with the advent of the feminist movement in the 70s and 80s, characters on television shifted from these subservient 50s and 60s housewife roles to women working outside of the home.

The year 1970 brought Mary Tyler Moore of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) who received praise as a new representation of a working woman, independent and without a husband. However, as Bonnie Dow (1990) pointed out in her groundbreaking article, "Hegemony, Feminist Criticism and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*," Moore was simply a subservient woman in the workplace rather than a subservient woman in the home, as she maintained the stereotypical role of mother and daughter in a less obvious way, this time in relation to colleagues. More working women arrived in the 1970s, like the three women of *Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981) and Laverne and Shirley in *Laverne and Shirley* (1976-1983) (Stern, 2005).

The 1980s brought even more representations of women in the workplace: Clair Huxtable on *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), Maggie Seaver on *Growing Pains* (1985-

1992), and Jennifer Hart on *Hart to Hart* (1979-1984). However, as Stern (2005) pointed out, in this case, “quantity did not equate to quality of representation” (p. 2).

In the 1990s, *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) portrayed what seemed like television’s first truly progressive, independent woman. Brown worked as a television journalist. However, Bonnie Dow (1992) claimed that Brown’s independence reflected the “costs of that progress” as well as the benefits (p. 137). Brown also was given typically male characteristics, which seemed to suggest that only a manly woman could be successful in the working world (Dow, 1992).

The other female lead character on a television show in the 1990s that was frequently discussed is Ally McBeal, a lawyer. In, “Cautionary Tales of Liberation and Female Professionalism: The Case Against *Ally McBeal*,” Michele Hammers (2005) argued that despite Ally McBeal’s professionalism and promiscuity, the show portrayed her in such a way as to seem physically and emotionally infantilized. McBeal was also guilty of turning topics that could become great feminist questions into issues of personal duress (Hammers, 2005).

We’ve considered the origin of the notion that women who are sexual have historically been labeled the “fallen woman” or the “bad girl” in our society, but what about portrayals of them on television? In “Transcending the Virgin/Whore Dichotomy: Telling Mina’s Story in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*,” Leah Wyman and George Dionisopoulos (2000) noted that past feminist critiques of the portrayal of women on television have observed that there have emerged in the media two opposing characterizations: “One encompassing characters who are moralistic, nurturing, and

asexual, and the other consisting of those who are unethical, dangerous, and erotic” (p. 209). This paper examines the latter category—those female characters that are not the typical moral, virginal, submissive woman.

CHAPTER THREE

Past Literature on Women and Female Sexuality on Television

From Mary to Carrie

This paper examines the portrayal of sexual, independent women on television; past literature has looked at one aspect or the other, not both. Some theorists have looked at the depiction of female sexuality on television (Amy-Chinn, 2006; McLaughlin, 1991; Wyman & Dionisopolous, 2000; Cuklanz, 1998; Franco, 2004), while others have studied strong and assertive women as lead roles on television programs (Dow, 1990; Dow, 1992; Gerhard, 2005; Hammers, 2001; Richardson, 2006; Cooper, 2001). A smaller number of theorists looked at female sexuality as an element or indicator of third-wave feminism in relation to the female lead character on a television show (Kim, 2001; Shugart, 2001); however, the character's sexuality was not the main focus of either of these analyses of literature.

One area of discourse that has been studied in relation to female sexuality is the depiction of the prostitute with regards to feminist criticism and analysis. In "Discourses of Prostitution/Discourses of Sexuality," Lisa McLaughlin (1991) concluded that discourses of prostitution are based on society's dominant ideology and are shaped in such a way that they actually impede the progress of feminism. McLaughlin (1991) also argued that the representation of prostitute as "other" suggests that the female, feminist community is "exclusionary" (p. 267).

Dee Amy-Chinn (2006) also examined the depiction of the prostitute on television in her article, "'Tis pity She's a Whore: Postfeminist Prostitution in Joss Whedon's

Firefly?.” Amy-Chinn (2006) examined the stereotype of the “whore” in the short-lived show, *Firefly*. She argued that only superficially can *Firefly* be seen as a post-feminist effort; ultimately the main character’s construction as the hegemonic “other” alienated her and undermined the effort to be seen as anything besides a sex object (Amy-Chinn, 2006).

While some literature has examined the portrayal of prostitution, another area of study has focused on female sexuality in terms of the way rape is depicted on television programs. In “The Masculine Ideal: Rape on Prime-Time Television, 1976-1978,” Lisa Cuklanz (1998) looked at instances of rape on prime time television from the years 1976-1978 and found that the depiction of rape served mainly as a discourse on masculinity, not on law reform. The portrayals of rape on television have served to bolster hegemonic masculinity (Cuklanz, 1998). Judith Franco (2004) studied the rape revenge narrative and analyzed the implications of the empowerment for women through violence in her article, “Gender, Genre and Female Pleasure in the Contemporary Revenge Narrative: Baise Moi and What It Feels Like for a Girl.”

As the number of female lead characters on television increased, more and more theorists studied the way their depiction represented women and feminism in general. Bonnie Dow wrote several articles about different leading ladies on television, articles which eventually were compiled into one book: *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970*. For example, in the chapter entitled, “1970s Lifestyle Feminism, The Single Woman, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*,” Dow (1990) argued that Mary Tyler Moore, one of the first representations on

television of a single, working woman, was actually not as groundbreaking as some had claimed. The show had taken the traditional female role of mother and daughter and transposed these relationships to her relationships with her coworkers (Dow, 1990).

Another chapter of Dow's book was "*Murphy Brown: Postfeminism Personified*" in which Dow (1992) argued that Murphy Brown's problems are more than individual problems but are actually representative of a greater predicament. Brown's success in the workplace was also partnered with typically male characteristics; was the show suggesting that male traits are necessary to get ahead in the workplace? (Dow, 1992).

Another female lead character that has been discussed is Ally McBeal. In "Cautionary Tales of Liberation and Female Professionalism: The Case Against *Ally McBeal*," Michele L. Hammers (2005) argued that although on the surface Ally is a successful lawyer and talks frankly about sex with her girl friends, ultimately the show reinforced stereotypes of the role of the female and never challenged any societal norms. L.S. Kim (2001) looked at the post-feminist perspective of looking at sex in her article, "Sex and the Single Girl in Postfeminism: The F word on Television", and concluded that *Ally McBeal* took the idea that women can be sexual and spun it in a negative way. The women on *Ally McBeal* used sex to get ahead in the workplace, reinforcing negative stereotypes of sexual women as deviant (Kim, 2001).

Brenda Cooper (2001) in her essay, "Unapologetic Women, 'Comic Men' and Feminine Spectatorship in David E. Kelley's *Ally McBeal*," noted that some theorists claimed that *Ally McBeal* was another show that perpetuated the stereotype that women cannot be successful in both the workplace and in their personal lives. According to *Ally*

McBeal and other, similar dramas, women cannot be successful without being miserable (Cooper, 2001). However, ultimately Cooper (2001) argued that David E. Kelley, the creator of *Ally McBeal*, actually created a show in which viewers felt comfortable to view through “feminine spectatorship” the foibles of men as well as women trying to deal with them (p. 431). Although the show did not challenge certain stereotypes, it did get issues out into the open (Cooper, 2001).

While Cooper argued that *McBeal*'s female perspective allowed the development of a truly female viewpoint on issues, Helene Shugart (2001) claimed in her essay, “Mediating Third-wave Feminism: Appropriation as Postmodern Media Practice,” that the show portrayed women as unconcerned with the political and social significance of female sexuality. The characters on the program understood the power sex had over men; however, this bred competition among the female characters on the show, suggesting that feminism's image of women as sisters is a lie (Shugart, 2001). Shugart (2001) concluded that on *Ally McBeal*, “mass-mediated, gendered representations...occur in a political-economic context that ultimately serves dominant ideology” (p. 202).

Sex and the City is beginning to attract more attention from critics. Although the show was lauded as a realistic portrayal of women (Stern, 2005), Jane Gerhard (2005) examined the program, and argued in her article, “Sex and the City: Carrie Bradshaw's Queer Postfeminism,” that like *McBeal*, any chance that the show had to disrupt gender constructions was lost due to its central message of searching for the right man to complete the woman. Any potentially liberating aspects of the show about women's

sexuality were undone by the notion that only through finding the right man and romantic love would the women find true happiness (Gerhard, 2005).

All of this literature looked at the depiction of the “liberated” woman in the workplace. This paper asks, what about the depiction of the liberated woman in the bedroom? Many shows are not only showing women as powerful in their careers, but also holding the reins of their sexually-liberated lives. Television is increasingly portraying female characters that don’t see marriage as the sole priority. There is a void in the literature in terms of how women are depicted sexually, not as prostitutes, but as successful, everyday women.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology

Defining Feminism, Feminist Critique, and Hegemony.

Feminist criticism has become increasingly hard to define because the term “feminism” has taken on many meanings over the years (Lotz, 2001). There is not just mere feminism any more, there is liberal feminism, cultural feminism, power feminism, third-wave feminism, and the list continues (Foss, 2004; Lotz, 2001). First-wave feminism is identified as the period in early twentieth century when women were fighting for basic rights, like the right to vote (Gerhard, 2005). Second-wave feminism is what many think of when the word “feminism” is uttered today. It originated with such influential works as Betty Friedan’s *A Feminine Mystique*, and the movement focused on erasing gender stereotypes that suggested women cannot perform certain duties (Foss, 2004, p. 152). Third-wave feminism originated with those who were born after 1960 and thus were usually raised unaware of any struggle women underwent to obtain rights (Foss, 2004). Women today have the same legal rights as men, but post-feminism questions those indefinable, hegemonic ways women still are subjected to the dominant male ideology of the nineteenth century idea of separate spheres (Gerhard, 2005).

Feminist criticism is one way a person can “intervene in the ideology of domination” (Foss, 2004, p. 157). Sonja Foss (2004) defined one aspect of feminist criticism as, “the analysis of rhetoric to discover how the rhetorical construction of gender is used as a means for domination and how that process can be challenged” (p. 157). Certain representations of women on television are a “product of attitudes and

beliefs ingrained by decades of cultural hegemony” (Len-Rios, Rodgers, Thorson, & Yoon, 2005, p. 154). Foss (2004) clarified, “In feminist criticism, then, the focus is on the rhetorical process by which these [qualities considered desirable for women and men] come to seem natural and ways in which that naturalness can be called into question” (p. 157).

In Todd Gitlin’s (1982) groundbreaking work on hegemony and television in, “Prime time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment,” he provides a framework for studying these three female characters. Gitlin (1982) argued that television uses the process of inoculation in order to further hegemony. Barthes (1973) defined inoculation as the process in which “one protects the dominant ideology from radical change by incorporating small amounts of oppositional ideology” (quoted in Dow, 1990, p. 144). While demand for the portrayal of certain groups on television increases, the dominant ideology tries to figure out a way to retain control by allowing only certain limited changes (Gitlin, 1982). While some may praise the increased visibility of certain types of characters on television, the changes are only superficial and still represent the views of the dominant ideology.

In this paper, I begin by analyzing three female television characters and look at what sort of “other” status, if any, they are suggested to have within each program. Using feminist criticism, specifically the idea of hegemony, I analyze two aspects on each program: one, how the dichotomy between the virgin character and the promiscuous character is established; and two, the way other characters on the show view the chosen character’s sexuality through a close analysis of dialogue and nonverbal communication.

I was interested in discovering if programs cast the promiscuous character as “other” as they have done in the past with other marginalized groups of people, for instance with homosexuality or race.

For each program, I decided to examine three episodes that deal significantly with the character’s sexuality. For each, I was only interested in the parts of the episode that have to do with that character.

CHAPTER FIVE

Elaine Marie Benes

Seinfeld Pushes the Limit

The first promiscuous woman I consider is Elaine Benes, one of the lead characters on the popular television show, *Seinfeld*. Before the show's start, Elaine and the main character, Jerry Seinfeld, had been dating but had decided to try being just friends. The show revolved around their friendship, as well as their friendship with Jerry's childhood best friend, George, and Jerry's next door neighbor, Kramer. Elaine worked several different jobs during the course of the show: as an editor at Pendant Publishing, as a personal assistant, and finally as a writer for the J. Peterman catalogue.

Seinfeld (1989-1998) was arguably one of the most innovative and popular television shows of all time (Pierson, 2000). During its nine season run, the show was honored with more than twenty major awards as well as close to sixty nominations. In TV Guide's 2002 list of the "50 Greatest Shows of All Time" *Seinfeld* came in at #1 ("Seinfeld: About the Show"). *Seinfeld* certainly pushed the envelope in regards to sex, with episodes about threesomes, contraception, casual sex, and homosexuality, but in a covert way. For example, in one episode entitled "The Contest," the characters competed to see who can abstain from masturbation for the longest period of time. However, due to its network television status on NBC and the culture of the time period, the characters never once uttered the word "masturbate," and referred to their success in refraining from masturbation with euphemisms like being "master of your domain" and "queen of the castle."

Elaine, like the male characters on the show, seemed to date a new man in every episode. Throughout the series she had numerous dates and sexual relationships. She had one boyfriend, David Putty, who lasted multiple episodes, but she downplayed any emotional significance of the relationship by constantly emphasizing that she only liked him for the sex. Elaine's laid-back approach to dating, her casual sexual relationships, as well as her emphasis on sexual relationships over romantic ones qualifies her in the case of this paper as a "promiscuous woman."

Analysis of the Portrayal of Elaine Benes

Marla the Virgin vs. Elaine the _____

In one episode of *Seinfeld* entitled "The Virgin," the character of Marla is introduced as one of Jerry's many girlfriends. Jerry is bewildered when he finds out that she is a virgin; George, Kramer, and Elaine are all equally surprised. This episode out of the entire series most stereotypically casts Elaine as the promiscuous woman opposite the pure virgin. While many episodes feature Elaine's sexual relations with men, this one most clearly lays out the virgin/whore dichotomy so prevalent on other television shows and movies (Wyman & Dionisopoulos, 2000). In the episode, Marla is referred to as "Marla the Virgin," which leads the audience to mentally fill in the blank, "Elaine the _____."

The dichotomy is further established by the way Elaine and Marla are portrayed through the juxtaposition of their dialogue. Right after Marla finally builds up the courage to tell Jerry about her virginity, Elaine bursts into the room and interrupts Jerry and Marla's conversation. Elaine then proceeds to tell a story about how her diaphragm

flew out of her purse at a party for the rest of the guests to see. She laughs it off though and asks, “I mean, big deal, right? So I carry around my diaphragm, who doesn't? Yeah, like it's a big, big secret that women carry around their diaphragms. You never know when you're gonna need it, right?” she asks, guffawing and chewing on food in an unladylike manner. Marla stands looking horrified as she mumbles, “I should be going,” in her quaint and dainty English accent (“The Virgin,” 1992). Not only is the dialogue juxtaposed in this exchange (Marla confessing quietly she’s a virgin followed by Elaine telling a story about her birth control), but also the women’s manner is juxtaposed (Marla speaks quietly and in an accent, while Elaine speaks loudly and spiritedly).

This scene serves to emphasize the fact that Elaine is different from other women in her comfort not only engaging in sex but also speaking about sex. Elaine even acts as a “sex expert” of sorts later in the episode when she has coffee with Marla to apologize, but then proceeds to give Marla advice about men. Elaine views sex as irreverently and casually as her crass cohorts, Jerry, George, and Kramer, which is further illustrated in dialogue from this episode. Jerry is upset that Elaine told Marla that all men like to leave after they have had sex:

JERRY: What else did you say to her?
 ELAINE: Nothin'. I was just givin' her the straight dope.
 JERRY: More like a dope was giving it to her straight. Another cup of coffee with you, she'll wind up in a convent.
 ELAINE: Listen, there was a lot more I could've told her, believe me.
 JERRY: And what is that about leaving after sex? Did I ever leave with you?
 ELAINE: You might've... if I'd stayed. (“The Virgin,” 1992)

I also was interested in looking at how other characters on the show react to Elaine’s sexuality. “The Virgin’s” plot continues into the next episode, entitled, “The

Contest.” As previously mentioned in this paper, this episode title refers to the contest the four main characters take part in to see who can last the longest without masturbating.

When Elaine wants to take part, though, the men give her a hard time:

ELAINE: I want to be in on this, too.
 GEORGE: Ohh, no. No, no, no...
 ELAINE: Why?
 JERRY: Because you're a woman!
 ELAINE: So what?
 JERRY: It's easier for a woman not to do it than a man.
 ELAINE: (*Sarcastic*) Oh...
 JERRY: We have to do it. It's part of our lifestyle. It's like, uh... shaving.
 ELAINE: Oh, that is such bologna. I shave my legs!
 KRAMER: Not everyday. (“The Contest,” 1992)

Although the men give Elaine a hard time at first, they ultimately let her into the seemingly male-oriented contest, although she has to put in 150 dollars instead of 100 like the rest of the men. Some could argue that this shows the bias against female sexuality. However, what is noteworthy about this exchange is not that she has to pay more, but the fact that her masturbating is not an issue with the others. The men are completely comfortable and at ease with the fact that she masturbates, something that television usually portrays men as uncomfortable with. In fact, the only person in the episode made to feel guilty about masturbating is George, by his mother.

In the end, Marla and Jerry end up breaking up because Marla finds out about the contest. She, in stereotypical pure virgin figure form, is disgusted:

ELAINE: Marla? Hi, oh, I'm glad I ran into you—
 MARLA: I don't want to have anything to do with you or your perverted friends. (*Confused, Elaine moves closer*) Ooohh, get away from me! You're horrible. Horrible! All of you! (*Marla exits*)
 ELAINE: (*to Jerry*) What happened?
 JERRY: I told her about the contest.
 ELAINE: Ohh. Boy, she's a whack-o. (“The Contest,” 1992)

Marla is looking down upon the group of friends, which, upon first viewing, suggests that the virginal figure is the “normal” one and Elaine, being grouped with the boys, is “abnormal” and “perverted.” However, it ends up (in typical *Seinfeld* fashion) that Elaine gets the last laugh. Marla ends up cast as the “other,” not Elaine. Elaine’s sexuality is not the issue, and Marla’s uptight nature is lampooned.

In the episode, “The Sponge,” Elaine is again humorously cast as promiscuous in juxtaposition to a virginal figure. Jerry is talking about his girlfriend du-jour, Lena:

JERRY: I mean, she’s giving and caring and genuinely concerned about the welfare of others – I can’t be with someone like that!
 GEORGE: I see what you mean.
 JERRY: I mean, I admire the hell out of her. You can’t have sex with someone you admire.
 GEORGE: Where’s the depravity?
 JERRY: No depravity! I mean, I look at her, I can’t imagine she even has sex.
(Elaine enters.)
 JERRY: *(Gesturing towards Elaine)* On the other hand... (“The Sponge,” 1995).

This segue, like Elaine’s interrupting of Marla the virgin, serves to directly contrast, for comedic purposes, Elaine’s promiscuity with Jerry’s virginal girlfriend.¹

Promiscuous Pioneer or Just “One of the Boys”?

This episode, “The Sponge,” also gives the audience a window into how the other characters on the show view Elaine’s sexuality. Like “The Contest,” Elaine’s casual sexual relationships with men don’t seem to be an issue with her friends. Jerry casually asks Elaine over lunch about her new boyfriend, “How’s the sexual chemistry?” (“The Sponge,” 1995). Even the writer of this episode, Peter Mehlman, noted in the commentary the significance of this interaction: “I always thought one of the great things

about *Seinfeld* was that they always discussed things in mixed company that [men and women] don't usually [on television], so Jerry could just ask 'How's the sexual chemistry going?' and Elaine was one of the boys so that was fine" (Season 7 DVD, 2006).

This episode, "The Sponge," revolves around how Elaine's favorite contraceptive, the Today sponge, has been taken off the market, much to her chagrin.² Upon finding out that most pharmacies no longer stock it, she goes on an exhaustive search to try to find any remaining ones. She ultimately stumbles upon a drugstore that has a case of them:

ELAINE: *(with little hope)* Yeah, do you have any Today sponges? I know they're off the market, but...

PHARMACIST: Actually, we have a case left.

ELAINE: A case! A case of sponges? I mean, huh...a case. Huh. Uh...how many come in a case?

PHARMACIST: Sixty.

ELAINE: Sixty?! Uh...well, I'll take three.

PHARMACIST: Three.

ELAINE: Make it ten.

PHARMACIST: Ten?

ELAINE: Twenty sponges should be plenty.

PHARMACIST: Did you say twenty?

ELAINE: Yeah, twenty-five sponges is just fine.

PHARMACIST: Right. So, you're set with twenty-five.

ELAINE: Yeah, just give me the whole case, and I'll be on my way. ("The Sponge," 1995)

The irony in this scene is that while Elaine is initially concerned with how it will come across if she orders an entire case of sponges, and hesitates to confess that she wants them all, the pharmacist doesn't seem to flinch at all as she struggles with her order. Peter Mehlmen comments: "She doesn't want to come off as too much of a slut in front of an old, proper man" (Season 7 DVD, 2006). However, Elaine in this case is not treated as "other" by the pharmacist (or the show itself); the pharmacist does not roll his eyes or say anything to seem judgmental.

Furthermore, later in the episode, Jerry is about to break up with Lena because she is “too good”, but decides against it when he discovers she has an entire closet full of cases of the Today sponge. This decision reflects the fact that the show portrays a woman having sex as more “normal” than a woman who is so good Jerry can’t even picture her having sex. While the sitcom format certainly isn’t known for making political statements, since most of the time situations are created in order to get a laugh (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002), it is still interesting that no one second guesses or comments negatively on the fact that Elaine gets a case of sponges. Jerry in fact is comforted when he notices that Lena has a vast supply of birth control.

In analyzing certain instances where it is clear that Elaine’s friends on the show do not have a problem with her promiscuity, it is important to address a commonly used argument that some have made about her character. Some have argued that the other characters on the show are “okay” with her sexuality because she is depicted as being just “one of the boys” (Worth, 2000). However, I believe that this assumption is overly-simplistic and generally incorrect. Elaine Benes certainly is “one of the boys” in the sense that she spends most of her time with men, but Elaine is not “one of the boys” in terms of being portrayed with mostly typical masculine traits, like Dow (1992) suggested of Murphy Brown. Elaine is shown on the show doing particularly “feminine” activities.³ In many instances she is shown shopping, painting her apartment, worrying about her appearance, enjoying a museum’s costume exhibit (which none of the male characters will accompany her to), attending the opera, and getting a manicure, among other activities. Just because she has male friends, doesn’t necessarily mean one can

automatically assume she has masculine traits. Thus, I don't believe the argument that she is allowed to be liberated in her sexuality because she has masculine traits has merit.

One could also argue that Elaine's questionable moral character suggests that the promiscuous woman is cast as the evil character. However, the other characters on the show are portrayed as equally amoral as Elaine is, which negates the argument. The humor of the show often comes from the lack of virtue of all four of the main characters, not just Elaine (Pierson, 2000).

CHAPTER SIX

Samantha Jones

Sex and the City and Having "Sex like a Man"

The second promiscuous woman this paper examines is Samantha Jones on HBO's *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). Samantha is a beautiful, successful Public Relations executive in her early to mid-forties with an insatiable appetite for sex. *Sex and the City* told the story of four single, female friends in their mid-thirties to early forties living and working in New York City. Carrie, a sex columnist for a fictional New York newspaper, is the protagonist. Carrie has three best friends: Miranda, a successful lawyer; Charlotte, a Park Avenue princess; and Samantha. The show follows the dating escapades and sex-ploits of the four women.

While all the women on *Sex and the City* were certainly sexually active, and not necessarily within monogamous relationships, the reason this paper focuses on Samantha is because part of Samantha's specific character arc that is emphasized on the show is her laissez-faire and "progressive" attitude towards sex. Samantha proclaims that she is "tri-sexual", as in she will "try anything" ("Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl," 2000). On HBO's own website, Samantha's description revolves around her sexuality: "Forget wedding dreams; Samantha takes lust over love any night, and she's proud of it" ("Sex and the City"). Carrie described Samantha as, "The ego of a man trapped in the body of a woman." On the show, she insisted on several occasions that she didn't believe in marriage, and treated men as disposable.

While *Seinfeld* tiptoed around sex and sexuality, *Sex and the City* put it all out there, literally. Due to its appearing on HBO, *Sex and the City* could show and talk about what other shows on network television couldn't or basic cable wouldn't. The show was thus considered groundbreaking in its frank and open discourse about sex from a woman's perspective. *Variety's* John Dempsey wrote:

They've so captured the imagination of masses of viewers with their hard-R-rated bed hopping and witheringly frank sex talk that the show has entered the vocabulary, transcending the showbiz pages of the local papers and turning up regularly in news features about urban dating rituals. (quoted in Stern, 2005, p. 1)

Sex and the City sparked controversy and ignited conversations about the increase in sex on television and this new portrayal of women as "coitus-crazed" (Jacobs, 1999). Ariel Levy (2005), author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, argued that "*Sex and the City* told a hugely influential story about women, with every bit as much cultural power as shows like *That Girl* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*" (p. 173). The show was an immense hit, and, like *Seinfeld*, had a cult-like following of devoted fans. It ended in February of 2004 after six seasons. Over the years it won several awards, as well as enjoyed huge sales of DVDs and success in syndication.

Analysis of the Portrayal of Samantha Jones

Slut Pride...or Prejudice?

The virgin/whore dichotomy is most prevalent on the program *Sex and the City* with the relationship between Charlotte and Samantha. In the 3rd season episode, "Are

We Sluts?,” Charlotte is concerned because her boyfriend in the heat of the moment called her a “fucking bitch” and a “fucking whore,” which leads her to consult her friends about her promiscuity. The humor in this is derived from the fact that Charlotte is known as the most innocent figure in the group of women. When Samantha notices Charlotte is upset, she kids, “What? You slept with someone after the second date?” Charlotte scowls and asks her friends:

CHARLOTTE: Do you think I’m a whore?

SAMANTHA: Oh, please. If you’re a whore, what does that make me? (“Are We Sluts?” 2000)

Samantha’s comment is followed by a moment of awkward silence where the rest of the girls avoid making eye contact. Samantha is visibly concerned by her own question. This instance is one of many that sets up the virgin/whore dichotomy; while Charlotte has a lot of sexual relationships, Samantha is always juxtaposed against her to show that Charlotte is actually the virginal one.

In another episode, “Frenemies,” Charlotte is having trouble consummating her relationship with her new husband, Trey. At their weekly breakfast, Charlotte expresses her frustration over the fact that her husband can’t have an erection. Of course, Charlotte, depicted as the “Perfect Lady” in the Victorian sense of the word, doesn’t even use the “naughty” words like “get hard” or “masturbate,” which Samantha fills in for her.

Samantha, after listening to Charlotte discuss her problem with Trey, gives an answer that is ironic:

CHARLOTTE: He masturbates, and he reads porn, but when it comes to me...nothing.

SAMANTHA: Madonna/Whore.

CHARLOTTE: You think?

SAMANTHA: Absolutely! Trey sees you as his virginal wife, not his sexual plaything. (“Frenemies,” 2000)

Samantha seems to have summed up her own relationship with Charlotte: One is portrayed as the Madonna, and the other as the whore.

The next breakfast scene takes place later in the week, and Charlotte is more frustrated than ever with her problem. Samantha, on the other hand, is reveling in a new “relationship” with a man who comes over for sex, and nothing else. She doesn’t even know his last name or his occupation. Samantha’s promiscuity and carefree relationship is directly juxtaposed with Charlotte’s meaningful yet sexless relationship, much to Charlotte’s annoyance.

CHARLOTTE: How can you not know anything about him? You slept with him!
 SAMANTHA: I *fucked* him; he made me come six times. That’s good enough for me.
 CHARLOTTE: Stop it! Why do you always have to talk about sex like that?
 SAMANTHA: Because I can...
 CARRIE: Okay girls simmer down Mommy hasn’t had her caffeine yet...
 CHARLOTTE: I can’t take this anymore. Sex is supposed to be something special that happens between two people who love each other.
 SAMANTHA: Or two people who love sex.
 CHARLOTTE: Oh my god! You’re such a –
 SAMANTHA: A what?? What am I, Charlotte?
 CHARLOTTE: When are you gonna learn that you can’t just sleep with every thing that comes along? (“Frenemies,” 2000)

This scene exemplifies the juxtaposition of Charlotte’s purity with Samantha’s promiscuity. It is interesting that the show decided to have two such opposite characters. Does that suggest that one can’t exist without the other? Or that a television show isn’t comfortable depicting only promiscuous women?

“Fuckenstein”

It is evident that *Sex and the City* portrays Samantha as the whore in the series as directly opposite Charlotte as the “virgin.”⁴ This paper argues that Samantha is ultimately constructed as the “other” in the show, despite the fact that on the outside her friends are supportive of her liberated sexuality. In the episode, “Frenemies,” it is clear that Charlotte judges Samantha’s lifestyle. However, while many episodes depict Charlotte, the virginal figure, passing judgement, other episodes feature other people doing the same as well, sometimes in less obvious ways.

In the episode, “Are We Sluts?,” it is Samantha’s neighbors that are appalled by Samantha’s sexual behavior. Samantha has a guest over late one night when the doorman is off duty. What she doesn’t realize is that when she buzzes him up, a robber sneaks in behind him. The next morning when Samantha realizes what had happened, she notices that her fellow tenants start acting strange around her. As she walks into the lobby of her building, one can see in the background the doorman looking her up and down in a condescendingly “approving” way and smiling. That he acts this way to Samantha and not to other women passing suggests to women watching the show that promiscuous women are treated differently by men.

Samantha, when she sees her neighbors whispering about her, decides to confront them:

SAMANTHA: If you want to say something about me, say it to my face.
 WOMAN #1: You’re bad for the building.
 SAMANTHA: What?
 WOMAN #2: You have too many visitors.
 WOMAN #1: There are always men in the hall.

WOMAN #3: *(wearing an eye patch)* I got robbed because of you! (“Are We Sluts?” 2000)

In this case, Samantha’s sexuality has become a problem for other women. Samantha is the social outcast for being the promiscuous one in the building. In recounting the story to Carrie, she even compares herself to being chased out of the lobby like she was “Fuckenstein.” *Sex and the City* sends this message to women: Be careful who you sleep with, because bad things could happen if you aren’t careful, and not for the reason of health or safety, but rather because you will become an outcast in society.

Samantha ends up moving out of her apartment building in the Upper East Side to the “hip and trendy” meatpacking district. The final scene of the episode depicts Samantha in her element; she is smiling, walking with confidence, and swinging her purse as she strides down the street. She walks by a group of transsexual hookers and casually coos, “Morning ladies!” Carrie’s narration explains that Samantha moved somewhere she felt more comfortable, where “Whores were whores, men were women, and rents were much, much higher” (“Are We Sluts?” 2000). This final scene suggests that Samantha is comfortable with people who are more like her, which in this case are prostitutes. Although it is her decision to leave her apartment, it is significant that she ends up leaving in order to escape ridicule and judgment.

It’s not just strangers that judge Samantha and treat her like an “other.” In one episode, “Cover Girl,” it is Carrie who makes Samantha feel like she is marginalized. Carrie is trying to pick an outfit for the cover of her upcoming book, and enlists Samantha to help “decide what...was sexy” (“Cover Girl,” 2002). When Carrie shows up to Samantha’s office for their lunch meeting, Samantha is on her knees giving oral sex to

the “World Wide Express guy.” Carrie, stunned, runs away so quickly that she bumps into the doorframe and hurts her elbow. Later, Samantha tries to turn the experience into a joke, but is obviously concerned what Carrie thinks of her.

At their weekly breakfast, the topic of “blow job etiquette” is discussed which revives the tension between Carrie and Samantha:

MIRANDA: Samantha, do you kiss a guy after a blow job?
 CARRIE: No, she just signs the delivery slip, and he’s on his way. (*Chuckles to herself, playfully sips on her straw in a child-like manner.*)
 CHARLOTTE: What’s going on?
 SAMANTHA: Apparently Carrie has a problem with the fact that she saw me blowing the World Wide Express guy.
 CHARLOTTE: Ew... (“Cover Girl,” 2002)

Although Carrie insists that she doesn’t have a problem with Samantha, it is clear that Samantha is offended by Carrie’s joke, as she makes no eye contact with Carrie the rest of the scene and abruptly leaves.

After a few other arguments, Carrie finally apologizes to Samantha, and even goes so far as to commend Samantha’s nature: “I really admire your ability to put your sex life out there” (“Cover Girl,” 2002). I would argue that this line is what the creators of *Sex and the City* are trying to portray in the series in general. Most of the praise for the show stems from the fact that the women are supportive of each other in life and especially in each of their sexual exploits (Gerhard, 2005). However, this is a superficial read of the series, made evident in this episode by Carrie, a few moments later, adding this:

CARRIE: I did judge you, just a little. And I feel bad...
 SAMANTHA: Oh, honey, it’s not just you. I judge me. (“Cover Girl,” 2002)

Sex and the City had a chance to make Samantha look truly liberated in this scene and depict a woman who enjoys sex as admired. However, by Carrie admitting that she did judge her, as well as Samantha admitting she even judges herself, the show suggests that women should feel guilty when they start to have sex casually, like men are often depicted as doing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Edie Britt

Desperate Housewives: Sex in the Suburbs

The last fictional character we will consider is Edie Britt on the television program, *Desperate Housewives* (2004-present). Edie is a real estate agent with a rock-hard body and several ex-husbands. She frequently uses her sexuality and good looks to get ahead, and won't stop until she gets what she wants, or in most cases, who she wants. The show, like *Sex and the City*, revolves around the lives of four female leads, as well as several secondary characters, but this time it is set in a suburban town, Fairview, on a street called Wisteria Lane, rather than in the bustling metropolis of New York City. From the outside, Wisteria Lane is the perfect community: the neighbors all know each other, the lawns are perfectly manicured, and the husbands are gorgeous. However, as is often the case, what you see is not what you get. Niall Richardson (2006) described the show as a "dark satire on contemporary, suburban existence" in her article, "As Kamp as Bree: The Politics of Camp Reconsidered by *Desperate Housewives*" (p. 160).

The four main ladies are: Bree, an uptight wife and mother who tries to cultivate the perfect family at all costs; Susan, a clumsy but goodhearted single mother; Lynette, a working mother of four rambunctious children; and Gaby, an ex-model and adulterous wife. Edie places her relationship with men as a higher priority than her relationship with these women, which leaves her with no true friends of her own (besides Mrs. Huber, who is killed in the first season). Edie is the modern day "whore" in the virgin/whore dichotomy. Not only is she portrayed as having "bad girl" characteristics, but the other

characters on the show even refer to her as “evil.” Her biggest role on the show is her rivalry with Susan over Mike, a handsome plumber.

Analysis of the Portrayal of Edie Britt

The Battle of Good vs. Evil: A Fight for Prince Charming

While *Sex and the City* established Samantha’s sexual character through Charlotte, on *Desperate Housewives*, Edie is affirmed as the promiscuous character by her relationship with Susan. Susan is depicted from the very first episode, “Pilot,” as the hapless, innocent victim to be empathized with. In “Pilot,” three quick flashbacks show Susan, her husband, Karl, and their daughter, Julie, sitting at the dinner table. In the first, Susan and Karl are happy, as the narrator of the show announces they had just moved in to their new house. In the second flashback, Susan and Karl are fighting, as Susan had just found lipstick on his collar. In the last flashback, Karl is walking out of the house with a suitcase in hand, as the narrator explains he was leaving Susan for his secretary. Susan, crying, is consoled by her daughter. Julie looks sadly over at the empty place setting where her father sat in the first two flashbacks. By the time the show returns to the present, the character of Susan has already been constructed as a pitiable one.

The neighbors of Wisteria Lane are all attending the wake of one of their fellow neighbors. Susan walks out of her house with a tray of macaroni and cheese in hand, which the narrator explains was, “the only thing she knew how to cook, and she rarely cooked it well” (“Pilot,” 2004). The narrator continues:

NARRATOR: A year had passed since the divorce, and Susan started to think how nice it would be to have a man in her life, even one who would make fun of her cooking. (“Pilot,” 2004)

While the other main characters on the show were distinguished in their short introductions as harrowed mother or unhappy trophy wife, Susan was characterized as unlucky-in-love single mother.

At the wake, Susan meets Mike Delfino, a handsome plumber who just moved in across the street from her. After establishing Susan as the poor woman who was cheated on by her husband, the possibility of her ending up happy with Mike seems like karmic justice, as they flirt over her burnt macaroni and cheese. However, as is usually the case on television, there's always a catch. In this case, that catch is Edie Britt.

Edie is introduced a few scenes later. Susan is standing on Mike's front porch, welcoming him to the neighborhood with a small, potted plant that looks just as feeble and hapless as she.

SUSAN: I brought you a little housewarming gift. I probably should've brought something earlier, but...

MIKE: Actually, you're the first in the neighborhood to stop by.

SUSAN: Really?

NARRATOR: Susan knew she was lucky; an eligible bachelor had moved onto Wisteria Lane, and she was the first to find out. But she also knew that good news...

EDIE: Hello there!

NARRATOR: ...travels quickly. Edie Britt was the most predatory divorcee in a five block radius. Her conquests were numerous, varied, and legendary.

EDIE: I hope I'm not interrupting. You must be Mike, I'm Edie Britt, I live over there. Welcome to Wisteria Lane!

NARRATOR: Susan had the met the enemy...and she was a slut. ("Pilot," 2004)

While *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City* were more clandestine about the virgin/whore dichotomy, *Desperate Housewives* was direct and upfront about it, evident in this last section of dialogue. From the very first episode, Susan and Edie are set up as enemies and direct opposites. Susan is the girl-next door, with brown mousey-hair, while Edie is a

larger than life buxom blonde. While Susan is decidedly awkward around men, stuttering and blushing, Edie is assertive and well-spoken.

In this scene, Edie wears a low-cut tank top which barely covers her chest as she flirts unabashedly with Mike. Edie's upfront tactic of using her sex appeal to get Mike's attention obviously makes Susan uncomfortable, because as Edie speaks, Susan appears flustered and pulls her sweater closer around her, as if to comfort herself. This action suggests that women who are straightforward about what they are after, in this case a sexual relationship, are threatening to other women.

As they walk away from Mike's house, Edie casually asks Mike, the plumber, if he could stop by her house later "to take a look at my pipes." The narrator chimes in, "When it comes to men, women don't fight fair" ("Pilot," 2004). Besides setting up Edie's promiscuity, this scene serves to emphasize what Helene Shugart (2001) argued, that this sort of depiction of women on television suggests the idea that feminists are lying when they say women are like sisters. *Desperate Housewives* reinforces the stereotype that women are catty and competitive.

The Evil Whore

Sex and the City suggested that Samantha's promiscuity was sometimes a problem to others and worthy of judgment; *Desperate Housewives* didn't hint at the idea that Edie's promiscuous nature made her evil, it explicitly stated it. Wyman and Dionisopoulos (2000) defined "the powerful whore" as a woman who "does not get used by men. Instead, she uses sex for her own pleasure and to gain advantage. As a result, however, she is depicted as evil and viewed as a danger that needs to be stopped" (para.

17). In *Desperate Housewives*, Edie is depicted as this “powerful whore.” It is made evident that Edie uses sex to get what she wants as she sashays around Wisteria Lane in her stiletto heels and short-shorts combination. It is also made clear in this past section of dialogue when the narrator describes Edie’s sexual partners as her “conquests,” suggesting that Edie uses men to rack up notches on her bedpost, so to speak, and not that she actually cares for them.

Susan eventually wins Mike’s affection, and they date for a period of time. However, at the end of season two, Mike is hit by a car and slips into a coma. Susan stays with him through most of it, but at the end it isn’t Susan who is by his side when he awakens but Edie, not because she was visiting him but because she was picking up something from his hospital room. Mike has severe amnesia and can’t remember anything from the past three years, including Susan. Edie takes advantage of his condition and proceeds to play nurse in order to facilitate Mike’s falling in love with her. Edie tells him that Susan is lying when she says that they had been dating. Susan is outraged. In this scene, from the episode in season three, “Nice She Ain’t,” Susan confronts Edie:

EDIE: He’s mine now.
 SUSAN: No, no, no, this is not how this ends! Evil does not triumph over good!
 EDIE: That’s how you see me?
 SUSAN: Damn straight! You lie, you cheat, you scheme, you ruin people’s relationships! I mean, how do you sleep at night?
 EDIE: Soon, with Mike on top of me...if you know what I mean.
 SUSAN: You see- Evil. Evil!
 EDIE: Has it ever occurred to you that Mike and I are meant to end up together?
 SUSAN: No! Mike...you don’t even want him! You’re just doing this to hurt me.
 EDIE: Wow. How self-absorbed can you be? I have had a thing for Mike since the day he moved in here. And I even backed off when he fell for your little Miss Adorable act. (“Nice She Ain’t,” 2006)

This scene suggests that the promiscuous woman will do whatever it takes to get what she wants, including lying, cheating, and scheming. It suggests that women like Edie are judged negatively by others, and even considered evil. Just as Kim (2001) argued about the women of *Ally McBeal*, Edie's use of sex to get what she wants reinforces negative stereotypes of sexual women as deviant.

Finally, as with Elaine and Samantha, Edie is constructed as the "other." In the episode, "Every Day a Little Death," Edie is upset over her neighbor and best friend's death. She stops by Lynette's house to ask for her attendance at a memorial service, and accidentally interrupts the four women (Lynette, Bree, Gaby, and Susan) playing their weekly game of poker.

LYNETTE: Tuesday's poker day!

EDIE: Oh, really? I love poker!

[Ladies in the group all shuffle cards and avert their eyes; awkward silence]

EDIE: Okay then... ("Every Day a Little Death," 2005)

Edie is visibly upset that she is left out of this tradition, as well as not invited when she hints at being interested in becoming more friendly with the other women. Not only has her only friend just died, she now is being shunned by this group as well.

Meanwhile, Susan is afraid that Edie will find out that Susan accidentally burnt down Edie's house (something that happened in the second episode of the series). Susan, plagued with guilt, agrees to accompany Edie to scatter the ashes in memoriam. Susan ends up confessing to Edie about the fire, who promptly tosses the ashes in Susan's face. However, Edie decides not to press charges on Susan, because she doesn't want lengthy paperwork and the involvement of the authorities to delay the start of construction on her

new house. What she does ask of Susan though is that she be invited to the group's poker games. Susan seems incredulous that this is the request; Edie reveals that "it would be nice to be asked" ("Every Day a Little Death," 2005).

Edie is the social outcast of the street. Some could argue she has no female friends because she doesn't like any of them or doesn't want any. However, this scene shows that Edie has no female friends because of her promiscuous and deviant manner, and not because she doesn't want to. Because of her promiscuity, she has earned herself no friends because the other women find her threatening.

As they travel together, Edie reveals a side of herself uncharacteristic of Edie: insecure.

EDIE: I bet you were a cheerleader in high school, weren't you?

SUSAN: My junior year...how'd you know?

EDIE: Girls like you were always cheerleaders...clear skin, honor roll, popular...In high school, I was the girl who hung out with the freaks by the loading docks and smoked. Everyone hated us.

SUSAN: Well, thank God we leave that behind.

EDIE: I don't think we do. I'm still the outsider that doesn't get invited to the cool parties, and you're still the perky cheerleader who thinks she can pull the wool over everyone's eyes. ("Every Day a Little Death," 2005)

This conversation reveals that not only does the group of women on Wisteria Lane alienate Edie, other women throughout her life have, as well.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brief Discussion

What “The End” Meant

Susan Faludi (1991) wrote in her book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*: “In prime-time television shows, from *thirtysomething* to *Family Man*, single, professional and feminist women are humiliated, turned into harpies, or hit by nervous breakdowns; the wise ones recant their independent ways by the closing sequence” (p. xi). This book was published in 1991, just one year after *Seinfeld* premiered and well before *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* debuted on the small screen; however, it is eerily applicable to the conclusion of *Sex and the City*.

Joanna Di Mattia (2004) wrote that *Sex and the City*, “although promoted as a show about sex and the single girl,” ultimately was a “renegotiation of the classic romance fantasy” (p. 17). Samantha is no exception to what Faludi pointed out. Although she was the spokeswoman for the liberated woman, when the show concluded she was portrayed in a monogamous relationship with a man who proclaimed his love for her, and as a tear streams down her face, she whispers, “You have meant more to me than any other man I have ever known” (“An American Girl in Paris (Part Deux),” 2004). This ending suggests that Samantha merely had thought that she didn’t need a man, but that she had just not met the right one yet. Thus, Samantha’s happy ending, like the other women’s, was reached through her finding Mr. Right.

Sex and the City’s finale echoes something that Faludi (1991) called the myth of women’s liberation. The myth states that, “Women are enslaved by their own liberation.

They have grabbed at the gold ring of independence, only to miss the one ring that really matters” (Faludi, 1991, p. x). Samantha’s character embodies this false myth that anti-feminism created; throughout the show Samantha is depicted as grabbing for the “gold ring of independence,” but ultimately realizes when she has met Mr. Right that all along she was missing that one ring that matters.

It is too early to predict what will happen to Edie on *Desperate Housewives*, as the show is still on the air. However, the final episode of *Seinfeld* is interesting, especially as juxtaposed with *Sex and the City*’s finale. This paper has argued that while *Seinfeld* was not able to be as explicit with its sexual content as *Sex and the City* due to the time period it came out as well as its place on NBC, Elaine was not dissimilar to Samantha in terms of her myriad men, casual sexual encounters, and abhorrence of anything to do with marriage or children. What is noteworthy is how differently the two characters ended up. While Samantha ended up in the arms of her Mr. Right, Elaine ended up in the finale of *Seinfeld* in a jail cell, sitting with her three friends, punished for not being “good Samaritans.”

It is striking that in a show that is supposedly progressive in its feminist undertones, *Sex and the City* reverted to antiquated notions of the dream of finding Mr. Right, but that on *Seinfeld*, a show that never set out to make any political or cultural statements, a woman is allowed to be independent.⁵ I have no idea why *Seinfeld* placed the lead characters in a holding cell for the finale; what is noteworthy is what Elaine is not: married.

The Message Fictional Characters Send to Real Women

This paper argues that women who are depicted as promiscuous have, through hegemonic devices, been marginalized in our society and cast as the “other.” Through the judgment of her friends, the disapproving glances of strangers, her alienation from neighbors, and her own loneliness, the sexually liberated woman on television faces life as sexual but miserable. The myth that Susan Faludi (1991) claimed the media created, that of the liberated woman being ultimately unhappy, is evident in both *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*.

Ironically, as time passed in the 90s and into the new century, the portrayal of the sexually liberated woman became more and more negative. While Elaine was rarely made into the “other”, Samantha faced discrimination about her sex life from her friends, acquaintances, and even strangers, but often in less than obvious ways. Finally though, Edie was portrayed as the stereotypical, evil slut.

So how did it happen that as more women have been portrayed on television as sexually liberated, the less progressive each depiction became? Why was Elaine’s promiscuity on *Seinfeld* not an issue, while on *Desperate Housewives* it’s commonplace for Edie to be called, “a slut,” “a carnivore,” “evil,” and, “a whore”? I believe the answer comes from the ideas behind post-feminism and anti-feminism.

Susan Faludi (1991) seems to have at least one answer. She wrote:

Certainly hostility to female independence has always been with us. But if fear and loathing of feminism is a sort of perpetual viral condition in our culture, it is not always in an acute stage; its symptoms subside and resurface periodically.

And it is these episodes of resurgence, such as the one we face now, that can accurately be termed “backlashes” to women’s advancement. If we trace these occurrences in American history...we find such flare-ups are hardly random; they have always been triggered by the perception—accurate or not—that women are making great strides. (pp. xviii-xix)

Faludi (1991) argued that as women achieve equality in society, or at least appear to, the hegemonic device that she refers to as “backlash” tricks women into believing that gaining equal rights actually makes life worse for women. In the case of the three women in this paper, it could be argued that as women seem to be gaining equal rights in the bedroom, so to speak, men through this hegemonic device of “backlash” construct storylines that warn women what being sexually liberated can do. In Elaine’s case, not many women on television at the time were portrayed as sexual, so she was not seen as much of a threat. However, with the advent of non-network shows like *Sex and the City* and *The L Word* talking frankly about female sexuality, perhaps some felt threatened, and thus created characters similar to Edie that dealt with the “consequences” of being promiscuous.

When Fiction Becomes Reality

In the first section of this paper, I examined the ways that sexually active or promiscuous fictional female characters are portrayed on television. It became evident that very often highly sexual characters were directly juxtaposed with virginal and pure characters. It also was suggested that these women were portrayed to have an “other” status; through hegemonic processes, the dominant ideology made it clear that a sexual

woman is only acceptable under certain circumstances, and that there are social repercussions for a woman being open with her sexuality. It is a reminder that increased portrayal of sexual women on television does not mean greater acceptance of female sexuality. While some shows like *Sex and the City* were lauded for their modern portrayals of women, they in fact reverted to antiquated ideals of how a proper woman should act.

In the second part of this paper, I examine whether or not these sorts of stereotypes occur in the media with real life women. In other words, do the media take these stale, contrived scripts about women and female sexuality and project those caricatures and judgments on real women? Or do the media give a more realistic portrayal of real women than television writers give to fictional ones? And, if the media also follows certain scripts about promiscuous women, are they the same scripts as fictional characters? This paper particularly takes note of the notion of the sex scandal as the scene for these potential narratives about women.

The three real-life women this paper will examine are: Debra Lafave, a Florida school teacher who was prosecuted for the statutory rape of one of her teenage male students; Monica Lewinsky, a White House intern who had sexual relations with former President Bill Clinton; and Tonya Harding, an Olympic athlete who allegedly arranged to injure another skater, Nancy Kerrigan. The notoriety of these three women spanned approximately the same time frame as the three women in the first section, from the early 90s to the mid 2000s.

The artifacts I chose to examine for these women were their “tell-all” television interviews on major news networks. I chose these because they were a unique medium in that they provided the framing of not only the interviewer, but also the woman herself, as she had the opportunity to explain and justify her own actions. For Debra Lafave I examined her interview with Matt Lauer for a *Dateline* special entitled, *Crossing the Line*. In Monica Lewinsky’s case, I looked at her famous interview with Barbara Walters on *20/20*. Finally, for Tonya Harding, this interview was with Connie Chung on *Eye to Eye with Connie Chung*. In the case of Tonya Harding, I also examined some earlier media coverage of her in news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* in addition to her Connie Chung interview. I did this because in her case, Harding’s success in figure skating attracted national media attention before the scandal with Nancy Kerrigan occurred. However, for the first two examples of Lafave and Lewinsky, there was no media coverage available prior to their scandals, as they were not public figures.

CHAPTER NINE

Past Literature on Sex Scandals

The preceding literature review outlined the ways in which female sexuality has been depicted on television, as well as how powerful, working women have been portrayed on fictional television programs. Three more areas of literature are of interest to the second half of this paper. The first is literature about what Walter Fisher called the narrative paradigm, or the idea that the world is made up of a series of narrative scripts and stories that we choose from and recreate. I'll also include some explanation of the related term, "public fantasy." The second is literature that has examined the effects of sex scandals on the depiction of women in the media. The third is literature that deals with the image of the man involved in the sex scandal; for this paper, I include articles looking at President Clinton specifically. Finally, I will conclude with a brief discussion of literature that has highlighted the increase of sexuality entering the news and public sphere.

The Narrative Paradigm and Public Fantasy

Walter Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm is about the use of narrative scripts in the way we communicate in our daily lives. Fisher argued that the way we use stories actually shapes the way we view the world. He wrote in his article, "Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument":

Regardless of the form they may assume, recounting and accounting for are stories we tell ourselves and each other to establish a meaningful life-world. The character of narrator(s), the conflicts, the resolutions, and the style will vary, but

each mode of recounting and accounting for is but a way of relating a “truth” about the human condition. (p. 6)

Fisher (1984) explained that, “the narrative perspective...has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination” (p. 2). His insight is that the narrative paradigm is not exclusively relevant to fictional stories; it also is important in understanding real life situations. This concept is helpful in understanding how the scripts about fictional promiscuous women could influence the media and prompt them to employ those stereotypes in real life cases.

Teresa de Lauretis (1999) described a similar idea to Fisher’s in her article, “Popular Culture, Public and Private Fantasies: Femininity and Fetishism in David Cronenberg’s *M. Butterfly*.” De Lauretis (1999) argued that public fantasies are affected by popular culture and by fictional representations of people: “In this sense, the narratives inscribed in popular culture forms...complete with characters, passions, conflicts, and resolutions, may be considered *public fantasies*” (p. 304). Nikki Sullivan (2003) elaborated on de Lauretis’ argument in her book, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*: “In other words, dominant cultural narratives, or ‘public fantasies’ as de Lauretis calls them, are internalized, psychically invested, and become part of one’s sense of self, and one’s way of knowing, experiencing, and interacting with the world and others” (p. 61). Sullivan (1999) contended that these cultural narratives have a great impact on how we see the world, and how we “engender our individual actions, interactions, identities, ways of seeing, knowing, and being” (p. 76).

Sex Scandals

Sex scandals are illuminating vehicles in examining the relationship between female sexuality and the depiction of “proper” femininity because they reflect some of these narrative scripts and reveal media bias (Gamson, 2001; Anderson, 2002; Deem, 1999). Joshua Gamson (2001) in, “Jessica Hahn, Media Whore: Sex Scandals and Female Publicity,” argued that political sex scandals lend themselves to “stale sexual roles and scripts” and employ “stock female roles that ‘enlightened’ societies often claim to have outgrown” (pp.157-158). Gamson (2001) also suggested that the sexual roles are strongly influenced by the Victorian notion of virginal or promiscuous women. Gamson (2001) looked specifically at the case of Jessica Hahn, a woman who became famous after bringing rape charges against televangelist Jim Bakker. Gamson (2001) claimed Hahn was “the best summary we have of the sex-scandal icon: Good girl and her evil twin, trusting, naïve ruined woman and calculating, sex-drenched golddigger” (p. 158).

Melissa Deem (1999), like Gamson, argued that women involved in sex scandals are cast in narratives where they struggle between public politics and their private lives. In her article, “Scandal, Heteronormative Culture, and the Disciplining of Feminism,” Deem (1991) explored the complex situation that feminism faced in the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal. Many feminists were unsure of what stance to take; Deem (1999) argued that there was a need to recontextualize feminism in the public sphere.

Karrin Vasby Anderson (2002) looked at image restoration employed by Hillary Clinton during, but not limited to, the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal in her article, “Hillary Rodham Clinton as “Madonna”: The Role of Metaphor and Oxymoron in Image

Restoration.” Anderson (2002) claimed that the public image of Hillary Clinton evolved from “bitch” to “Madonna” over a period of time. Anderson (2002) argued that Hillary Clinton, in the midst of the sex scandal, attempted to craft her image as a protective, traditionally feminine icon, which Anderson believed “proved to be a strategically sound, politically effective defense strategy that bolstered not only President Clinton’s credibility with the electorate but also Rodham Clinton’s image” (p. 23). Interestingly, the article did not look at the converse of the argument, of whether or not Monica Lewinsky was cast as the whore character in opposition to Clinton’s Madonna image.

The Rhetoric of the Male Perspective in Sex Scandals

The second body of literature of interest to this paper revolves around the construction and restoration of President Clinton’s image in the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal (Simons, 2000; Kiouisis, 2003; Kramer & Olson, 2002). It is noteworthy that there has been much written about President Clinton’s image during the sex scandal, yet very little written about Lewinsky’s image.

Herbert W. Simons (2000) wrote, “A Dilemma-Centered Analysis of Clinton’s August 17th Apologia,” in which he provided an assessment of Clinton’s use of rhetorical strategies to win back support. In the aftermath of the scandal breaking, Clinton managed the predicament “not badly, but not as well as he could have” (Simons, 2000, p. 449). Clinton’s hollow-sounding confession and attack on the Independent Counsel were not helpful in the short-term; however, Clinton’s image over the long run was not hurt by these miscalculations (Simons, 2000).

Michael R. Kramer and Kathryn M. Olson (2002) also examined the way that President Clinton used strategies of apologia to restore his image. Kramer and Olson (2002) looked at the way the President dealt with the scandal over a period of time, going through different stases of apology. Kramer and Olson (2002) argued that Clinton's movement between stases was a strategic decision and not just reactionary. They asserted that the shifting "helped him maintain adequate public approval to govern...and kept him in the Oval Office through the scandal" (Kramer & Olson, 2002, p. 365).

Spiro Kiouisis (2003) conducted a study exploring the influence of news coverage surrounding the Monica Lewinsky scandal on public opinion of the President. Kiouisis (2003) concluded from his findings that media coverage had a correlation with favorability, specifically that during periods of heightened media attention, the President's favorability rating would shift.

Finally, what was also noteworthy was the social impact of so much public debate and scrutiny about sex in the White House. As Reese Cleghorn (1998) noted in the *American Journalism Review* article, "The News: It May Never be the Same," "Vintage news taboos died with stories about oral sex and presidential semen" (p. 4). In an article from the *Columbia Journalism Review*, E.J. Graff (2005) asked, "When is scandal merely voyeurism?" (p. 8). Are citizens merely using sex as a distraction from worse problems in the world, causing a fictitious "moral panic"? (Graff, 2005).

In the next three chapters, this paper looks specifically at three women who came under media scrutiny for their actions that defied normative gender behaviors.

CHAPTER TEN

Debra Lafave

“Too Pretty For Jail”

The first example of a promiscuous woman in a national news story is Debra Lafave, a teacher from Florida. Lafave was arrested in June 2004 and charged with sexually abusing her 14 year old male student. At the time Lafave was 24. Lafave had met the student in May 2004 on a field trip to Sea World that she was chaperoning with her husband, Owen Lafave. After the field trip they met on several instances, and began having sex on June 3, 2004. They had sex a total of five times, in her classroom, her home, even in the back of her SUV while the boy's 15 year old cousin drove (Newsome, 2006).

Lafave pled guilty in a deal that spared her from going to prison and instead put her under house arrest for three years and probation for another seven. Her lawyer used an insanity defense, claiming that Lafave was bipolar and had an eating disorder. Lafave also cited acting under emotional duress due to past events in her life, including having been allegedly raped when she was 13 and her sister having recently been killed in a drunk driving accident (Krause, 2005).

There have been many cases over the years of female teachers having sexual relations with their male students. In Santa Anna, California, English teacher Sarah Bench-Salorio, 29, pled guilty to twenty-nine counts of lewd conduct after she had sex with three boys, ages 11 to 13, two of them former students of hers. She was sentenced to six years in prison. In Worcester, Massachusetts, Sarah Jennings was charged with

sending inappropriate nude photos to a teen. An Elementary-school physical education teacher, Pamela Rogers, 28, from McMinnville, Tennessee, was sentenced to 9 months in prison and eight years probation for having a relationship with her 13 year old student for 2 ½ months. Most famously of all was Mary Kay Letourneau, who had sex with one of her students, and now is the mother of two of his children. After a seven year prison sentence, Letourneau and her former student got married in 2005 (Newsome, 2006).

With all of these instances of inappropriate sexual relationships between female teachers and their male students, Lafave's case stands out because of the huge volume of national coverage the scandal received. Much of it had to do with ex-model Lafave's attractiveness. Lafave's lawyer famously said that she was too pretty for jail: "To place an attractive young woman in that kind of hellhole is like putting a piece of raw meat in with the lions" ("Teacher Sex Insanity Plea Planned," 2005). Lafave's piercing blue eyes and platinum blonde hair were discussed as much as the crime she had committed. Ariel Levy (2006) in an article for *New York Magazine* entitled "Dirty Old Women" postulated why the American public was so rapt by Lafave's story:

Lafave's beauty and youth blurred the lines of her narrative. What were these stories about? We couldn't tell if they were instances of abuse by adults in positions of power who were badly harming children or if they were *American Pie/Maxim* magazine-style farces about lucky little dudes. (para. 5)

In *The Star Banner*, a local Florida newspaper, Anthony Violanti (2006) noted the same fascination:

‘There were reasons for local coverage; it affected the schools, the community and the courts. But the national coverage of the Lafave case did not serve a journalistic purpose,’ said Kelly McBride, ethics group leader at the Poynter Institute for journalists in St. Petersburg. ‘It was prurient, sensationalized and voyeuristic. (para. 5)

Analysis of the Media Coverage of Debra Lafave

The Powerless Whore

Joshua Gamson (2001) wrote in his article, “Jessica Hahn, Media Whore: Sex Scandals and Female Publicity,” about the stale sexual roles and narrative scripts that sex scandals often feature. He wrote:

While larger sex scandal narratives, in which powerful men are almost invariably the central characters, tend to be much more about institutional moralities than sexual ones, their subsidiary, scandalizing female characters have remained quite thoroughly sexualized, and their sexuality has remained quite rigidly imagined as either virginal or whorish. Power-hungry temptress of powerful man (busty, licking her lips), chaste beauty ruined by powerful man (young, smooth skinned, eyes cast down but glancing up with hints of desire): It’s like a 1950s central casting call for a soft-core production of *Samson and Delilah* set in the 1890s. (p. 158)

While Monica Lewinsky was portrayed as a “power-hungry temptress of powerful man,” flashing her thong and being upset when the President did not get her a job in the White House as promised, Debra Lafave acted the part of “chaste beauty ruined by powerful

man” (Gamson, 2001, p. 158). It was not just the media who portrayed Lafave in this manner though; her own attempts at restoring her image, as well as her legal defense, both served to reinforce this stereotypical female portrayal.

The Lafave case raised several questions; one of the most recurring was why a beautiful woman would commit this sort of crime. Lafave’s explanation of her actions and attempt to restore her name ultimately acted out narrative scripts about female sexuality. First, Lafave’s use of childlike mannerisms and words served to infantilize her, to make her seem like she was the victim, the “ruined woman.” This ruined woman is at once the virgin *and* the whore; whore in the sense that she was sexually aggressive, and virgin in the sense that she was young, child-like, and naïve. The defense was cunning—who could blame a doe-eyed, “little girl”?—but what it suggested about a woman’s sexuality was questionable and consequential.

On September 13, 2006, Lafave appeared on *Dateline NBC* in a special with Matt Lauer entitled, “Crossing the Line.” Lafave had become the self-proclaimed “poster girl” for female teacher/male student statutory rape cases. From the very beginning of the interview, Lafave made it clear that she had become a social outcast because of her actions:

LAUER: What’s the reaction you get in the street from people who recognize you?
LAFAVE: Snickers. Stares. Mothers would hold their children tightly when they
 saw me. (“Crossing the Line,” 2006)

Lafave had become an outsider. Lauer emphasized the fact that the reason they were speaking in the interview was not because of the nature of the crime, but the fact that she

was so beautiful that people couldn't understand why she would want to sleep with a 14 year old.

LAUER: So why do you think you got all the attention?

LAFAVE: I don't know.

LAUER: I'll say it. Do you think it's because you're pretty?

LAFAVE: I think so. And sex sells. ("Crossing the Line," 2006)

Several times in the interview, Lafave refers to herself in a child-like way, suggesting that she wasn't that much older than her student, and also suggesting that, like Ariel Levy (2006) pointed out in her article "Dirty Old Women," she was just a "lost little girl in the body of a 30 year old" (in this case, a 24 year old). In the case of a sexually aggressive woman who preys on a young man, the public has a hard time accepting that it's because of her sex drive or her inherent nature, as many would think about a man.

In the interview, Lafave gave multiple excuses, many of which had to do with convincing the audience that she was not an overly sexual woman, but rather a confused little girl. Several times in the interview, she referred to her childhood: "I couldn't go anywhere without [my big sister]. I loved playing Barbies. I would play school with all my dolls and teach them how to read." Later in the interview, Lafave again cited her love for dolls, an arguably uber-feminine signifier: "I always wanted to be a teacher. Like I said, I used to play school with my dolls" ("Crossing the Line," 2006). Lafave even deflected blame by saying that, "I think he just became very flirtatious. And you got to remember that, at that period in my life, I didn't feel like an adult. I was crashing fast" ("Crossing the Line," 2006).

Lafave continued to use child-like imagery when she would talk about her relationship with the student. Lafave was careful to never say that she was turned on by him, or enjoyed the sex acts; rather, she would describe herself as having a “school-girl crush”:

LAUER: What did you guys say after you kissed?

LAFAVE: There wasn’t anything to say. It was—at that point, I just turned into a little school girl crush. (“Crossing the Line,” 2006)

Lafave also recounted how she had been raped when she was 13. She used this experience to emphasize her portrayal of herself as victim rather than predator. Lafave, in fact, denounced her sexuality, insisting that not only was she not overly sexual, she was not sexual at all: “I still had issues with even having sex, period, because of my rape. Flashbacks. And I had just associated sex with sin and filth” (“Crossing the Line,” 2006).

The reiteration of her love for dolls, her nostalgia for her childhood, and her “school girl” state of mind all suggested to the audience that Lafave never grew up. Lafave refused to let an explanation be that she was a sexual woman. On television host Nancy Grace’s show dedicated to discussing female teacher/male student sexual relations, Nancy Howard, a psychotherapist, pointed out this gender discrepancy:

You know, the thing is, Nancy, why is it that we can’t look at this woman as a pedophile? That’s what she is. And therefore, she has a compulsion for a behavior that is not—that she really can—is unable to resist the impulse towards. If she were a man, we would have no problem sort of seeing her as an unwell person, a compulsive sex offender. (“Sex Scandals in the Schoolhouse,” 2006)

Howard pointed out a critical argument: because of Lafave's gender, not to mention her beauty, the audience had a hard time imagining her as a sexual predator. In the first section of this paper we saw that fictional women on television were only allowed to be sexual if they were also deviant and evil. Apparently, in real life it's hard for people to accept even this option if the woman on the outside looks so "normal" and virtuous.

Excuses, Excuses: Conforming to Gender Stereotypes

Lafave continued to place herself in conventional gender-appropriate narrative scripts:

LAUER (v/o): Debra says that an early abusive relationship with an older boy forever shaped her view of sex.

LAFAVE: I kind of developed this idea that it was my role in order to make a man, guy, boy happy, I had to do my part, which was pleasing him in that way.

LAUER: But you felt it was your duty. You didn't really feel as if you had a choice.

LAFAVE: Mm-hmm. Exactly. ("Crossing the Line," 2006)

Lafave was clearly trying to shift the blame; she attempted to make it difficult for the audience to find her responsible for her actions by reverting to antiquated notions of power in a heterosexual relationship. These statements suggested that despite her being several years senior, the fact that she was a woman automatically made her submissive to him. It did not matter that she had been the pursuer in the relationship; because she was a woman, she obviously was the one trying to please him. Like Nancy Howard suggested, the fact that she was a woman and thus somehow playing into a sexual fantasy of young men, people forgot that she was, in fact, a pedophile.

Lafave gave even more reasons for why it was not really her fault that she had raped this student. She cited her sister's tragic death as one reason why she could not distinguish between right and wrong:

LAUER (v/o): In 2001 Debra's beloved older sister, Angie, was killed by a drunk driver. Debra was devastated, and today she wonders could her sister have saved her from herself?

LAFAVE: I think about if she was here would I have done what I did? ("Crossing the Line," 2006)

The final reason Lafave provided as to why she should not be held accountable for her actions was that she was recently diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. Dr. Eric Hollander was cited by the defense to explain why this would make her blameless. Hollander was quoted in the *Dateline* interview as saying, "When women become hypersexual, the number one disorder, really, that seems to drive hypersexuality in women is bipolar disorder" ("Crossing the Line," 2006). Her lawyer, John Fitzgibbons, further argued: "Here we have a woman that by every societal standard can get a date, can get a man...I believe the only logical reason why Debra Lafave did what she did was because of her mental illness" ("Crossing the Line," 2006).

Fitzgibbons' statement indicates that a sexually aggressive, attractive woman must have something wrong with her for us to be able to understand it. A male teacher having sex with his student is overtaken by his sexual desire; a woman has to have had some traumatic event in her life or psychological condition for us to be able to understand why she would do this. We are evidently mesmerized, if not blinded by, what the mainstream sees as an incongruity—a beautiful, innocent-looking woman using her sexuality in an unlawful and immoral manner.

In 1910, Magnus Hirschfeld, a prominent sexologist and gay rights advocate, developed an account of four types of gender ambiguity, i.e. four things that differentiate the sexes and make someone “normal” within their gender. Under the third type of gender ambiguity we find “persons divergent with regard to their sex drive;” one example cited was sexually aggressive women (quoted in Sullivan, 2003). Hirschfeld’s distinction is evident in this case, as Fitzgibbons had been arguing precisely that. Fitzgibbons’ argument that her mental disorder was the only “logical reason” supports Hirschfeld’s antiquated idea that women who are sexually aggressive are not normal—a notion which apparently still holds up in court today, including the court of public opinion.

A defense attorney, Ray Giudice, appeared on the same Nancy Grace show previously mentioned and echoed the double-standard that is apparent in this case:

GIUDICE: Nancy, if the roles were switched here, and I had a 26-year-old man and a 14 year-old girl, and I argued on his behalf that he was bipolar and in the midst of hypersexual activity, that would probably get me disbarred, with all respect...

GRACE: And tarred and feathered, and ran out of town. (“Sex in the Schoolhouse,” 2006)

The fact that this defense attorney recognized the improbability and absurdity of arguing Lafave’s defense for a man indicates that the double standard that exists for men and women in terms of their sexuality exists today, even in an arena that is supposed to be without bias.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Monica Lewinsky

“Monicagate”

The second promiscuous woman this paper examines is Monica Lewinsky. Lewinsky graduated from college in 1995 and took a position as an intern at the White House under the Clinton administration, a decision that led to her being one of the most notorious characters in United States history. She began having an affair with President Bill Clinton. She confided in fellow co-worker Linda Tripp, who began to tape their conversations. Amidst accusations of Clinton having inappropriate, extramarital relationships with several other women, including Gennifer Flowers and Paula Jones, Monica seemed to be just one of the many. However, the trouble began at a White House news conference broadcast to the American public, when President Clinton claimed, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman” (“A Chronology,” 1998). “That woman” was, of course, Lewinsky. Once the Linda Tripp tapes and Kenneth Starr’s report on the affair surfaced, which included DNA evidence from ejaculate collected off Monica’s now infamous blue dress, Clinton recanted his statement, admitting that he had lied under oath. The deception led to Clinton’s impeachment by the U.S. House of Representatives. However, Clinton was acquitted by the Senate, and continued to serve the rest of his term (“Five Years After,” 2003).

As explicit details of the affair were reported, Lewinsky’s private sex life quickly became public. As Kristin Kolb (1999) noted in her article, “Sluts Anonymous”, a review of Leora Tanenbaum’s book, *Slut! Growing up Female with a Bad Reputation*, Lewinsky

had garnered the title “slut...the worst thing you can call a girl” (para. 4). Lewinsky tried to restore her tarnished image. She agreed to an interview with Barbara Walters, came out with a tell-all book, and even tried to be known for something other than her sexual self by designing a handbag fashion line. *Time* magazine noted the public relations uphill battle: “The publicity encourage[d] us to see her not as a home wrecker but a homemaker, someone who’s smart but fun, ‘sensual’ instead of sex-driven” (Cloud, 1999).

However, public opinion polls showed that the public did not find Lewinsky more sympathetic or more likeable after all this. In fact, after Lewinsky’s famous interview with Barbara Walters, polls showed that it made people feel more sympathetic towards the President (“Poll: Public Remains Unsympathetic to Lewinsky,” 1999). *Time* wrote: “Even the world’s most expensive PR couldn’t keep Monica from being Monica” (Cloud, 1999).

Another curious aspect of the aftermath of the scandal was the way that feminists sided more with the President than with Lewinsky. Gail Hanson (1998) in *Insight on the News* boldly claimed that, “Many of today’s most esteemed feminists would rather shield themselves behind the letter of the law than take a moral stand on behavior that, dare we say it, would have had them calling for impeachment had the President been a Republican who opposes abortion” (para. 4). Even Catherine MacKinnon, who “literally wrote the book on sexual harassment,” did not find the President’s behavior to constitute sexual harassment (Hanson, 1998, para. 3). The one thing that women seemed interested in about Monica was the shade of her lipstick; after the show ended, television stations

were overwhelmed by people calling asking the brand and color of the lipstick she had been wearing.

Analysis of the Media Coverage of Monica Lewinsky

The Powerful Whore

What is interesting about Wyman and Dionisopoulos's (2000) depiction of female sexuality in their article "Transcending the Virgin/Whore Dichotomy: Telling Mina's story in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*" is that while most literature over the years has argued that a woman historically can either be a virgin or a whore, and not both (Jorgensen-Earp, 1990; McLaughlin, 1991), these two authors asserted that there are distinctions within the dichotomy: the virgin, the powerless whore, and the powerful whore. After examining Monica's appearance on *20/20 with Barbara Walters* on March 3, 1999, it is clear that Monica was portrayed in the media as Wyman and Dionisopoulos's (2000) notion of the powerful whore. Through the nature and wording of Walters's questions, as well as Lewinsky's answers to them, the portrayal of Lewinsky clearly was that of a powerful whore. Ironically, while Monica Lewinsky agreed to be interviewed on television in order to tell her side of the story, she ended up falling into a familiar narrative script about how a "proper" woman should act, and more importantly, should not act. Wyman and Dionisopoulos (2000) defined the powerful whore:

The powerful whore. In contrast to the powerless whore, the powerful whore is not a victim of a hostile and sadistic sexual mentality. She does not get used by men. Instead, she uses sex for her own pleasure and to gain advantage. As a

result, however, she is depicted as evil and viewed as a danger that needs to be stopped. (para. 17)

One way in which Walters framed Lewinsky as the “powerful whore” was by suggesting that Lewinsky was the sexual aggressor in the relationship, rather than believing Lewinsky’s side of the story, in which she insisted that for the most part it was mutual. It is important to note that the knowledge of the true nature of the relationship is irrelevant for the questions this paper wishes to examine; it is not what actually happened in the relationship, but how the media chose to depict Monica’s sexual self that is significant.

One example is the discussion of Lewinsky flashing the President her thong.

Walters brought up the now-infamous flirtation:

WALTERS: November 15, 1995...The government is shut down; the interns take on greater responsibility at the White House; and on that day, you found yourself alone with Bill Clinton in the Chief of Staff’s office and you lifted the back of your jacket and you showed the President of the United States your thong underwear. Where did you get the nerve? I mean, who does that?

LEWINSKY: It... I’m sure as you know, and everybody who has ever been in any situation where there’s flirtation...it’s a dance. And it’s sort of one person does something, and then do you meet that person and raise the stakes? And that was how our flirtation relationship was progressing...

WALTERS: Was it saying, ‘I’m available’?

LEWINSKY: I think it was saying, ‘I’m interested, too. I’ll play.’ (“20/20,” 1999)

What is interesting in this exchange is how Walters clearly made Lewinsky out to be the aggressor. Even after Lewinsky called it a “dance” and discussed how she felt that they were flirting back and forth, Walters made sure to point out that Lewinsky was making the advance on the President—not the other way around. Lewinsky highlighted the difference in what the two women are suggesting when she said “I’m interested, *too*” [my emphasis]. It’s almost as if Lewinsky wanted the last word on the matter. It is also

noteworthy how Walters subtly rebukes Lewinsky for her actions when she said, “Where did you get the nerve? I mean, who does that?” (“20/20,” 1999) Walters here is casting Lewinsky as a not-normal woman; the suggestion is that a woman who would make such a sexually-forward advance is not a proper woman.

There are numerous other instances in the interview when Walters chided Lewinsky for her sexual aggressiveness, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. For example, Walters brought up an incident when Lewinsky was being sexual with the President when he took a phone call:

WALTERS: That first encounter, the President took a phone call from a Congressman while you were very closely together. How did you feel about that?

LEWINSKY: It is an intimate topic; there was a level of excitement about that. Excitement and maybe a little bit of danger that was involved in this relationship. And to pretend that there wasn't wouldn't be truthful.

WALTERS: Didn't make you feel cheap?

LEWINSKY: No.

WALTERS: Okay. (“20/20,” 1999)

The exchange here is similar to the first; in both, Walters tried to steer Lewinsky into taking responsibility as a slut. It is evident from her statement that Lewinsky clearly felt a sexual thrill from the encounter; however, Walters wanted to label the act as “cheap.” Walters essentially asked the question again, of how the encounter made Lewinsky feel, suggesting that Lewinsky did not give the answer that Walters had hoped, i.e. that she had felt ashamed for her brazen sexuality.

Another instance where Barbara Walters made Lewinsky look like a promiscuous woman, and thus like an outsider, was when she questioned her about the phone sex that occurred between her and the President. Instead of asking Monica to simply clarify what

phone sex was, Walters asked her to explain it to the audience in such a way that suggested that Monica was abnormal in her sexual behavior:

WALTERS: In the early days of your relationship, Bill Clinton called you every four or five days. You had over 50 telephone conversations, I mean that's an enormous amount of conversation. Most of them were late at night. Now sometimes you did what you call phone sex. A lot of people don't know what phone sex is. As best you can explain it...

LEWINSKY: *[awkwardly laughs]* It's a way of being intimate over the phone when you can't be intimate in person—physically intimate.

WALTERS: Physically intimate?

LEWINSKY: Oh gosh...talking about—oh this is so embarrassing—what we would do if we were together at that time.

WALTERS: I think I get it. (“20/20,” 1999)

Walters including the “a lot of people don't know what phone sex is” part seems to have been suggesting that what Lewinsky was enacting was sexually deviant, because most “proper” women would not know about this practice.

A final example of when Monica is portrayed as the sexual aggressor is in a brief exchange about the removal of the President's shirt:

WALTERS: Now the second time you were with the President, you took his shirt off?

LEWINSKY: I think he unbuttoned his shirt, and it was one of the more endearing moments that I had with him. (“20/20,” 1999)

We probably will never know if Walters purposefully described the scene inaccurately, or if she genuinely thought it had happened the other way around. What is clear though is that the audience received one image: Lewinsky making the sexual advance on the President. Walters earlier summed up what she thought of Lewinsky when she said, out of the blue, “You are a very sensual young woman. Passionate” (“20/20,” 1999). It seems in this case that Walters let her bias about female sexuality slip into her questioning.

Sexual Advances or Career Advancement?

Besides casting Monica Lewinsky as the sexual aggressor, Barbara Walters also portrayed Lewinsky as power-hungry, just as Wyman and Dionisopoulos pointed out in their depiction of the “powerful whore.” Walters seemed preoccupied with the notion that Lewinsky was only interested in Bill Clinton as the President, as the most powerful man in the country.

WALTERS: How much of the infatuation was that it was Bill Clinton, and how much was it that it was the President of the United States?

LEWINSKY: I think the initial attraction had more to do with it being the President and yes I found him attractive, but I think that I tend to see him more as a man than as the President. (“20/20,” 1999)

Later, Walters confronted Lewinsky about why she told other people about the President, bluntly asking, “You have also told other people—you told ten other people—that you had this relationship with the President, I mean, big mouth! Why did you want people to know?” (“20/20,” 1999) Later in the interview, Walters continued to be preoccupied with the power factor in the relationship, acting bewildered at the fact that Lewinsky would speak harshly to him:

WALTERS: Towards the end of your relationship with Bill Clinton, you had many arguments. You would scream at him sometimes over the phone! You would threaten him, the President of the United States!

LEWINSKY: I didn’t see him as the President of the United States. I saw him as a man, and that was how I treated him.

WALTERS: Were you then out of control? (“20/20,” 1999)

Walters suggested in these three instances that power was a factor for Lewinsky in seducing the President.

The other key way that Walters suggested Lewinsky was using her sexuality in order to gain power was the discussion about Lewinsky’s job hunt. Lewinsky at one point

had been transferred from the White House, and the President hadn't tried to stop it.

However, he did promise her that if he were to be reelected in the Fall, he would bring her back to work in the White House. However, after his reelection, he did not keep his word. Walters asked Lewinsky why she had been angry about his broken promise:

WALTERS: One of the things that perhaps people don't understand is that once you broke off the sexual relationship, Bill Clinton continued to have conversations with you, meetings with you. It isn't the end of the end and that's it.

LEWINSKY: No, but I have to add that there was another element to all this which was my job. I had lost my job, and I had been promised that I could come back.

WALTERS: You know, other women have had sexual relationships, and they don't expect that out of it is going to come a job!

LEWINSKY: I never expected that out of this relationship would come a job! Never in a million years!

WALTERS: But you then said you gotta help me get a job.

LEWINSKY: No, what happened was that he promised me on April 6, 1996, when I had to leave the White House, he promised me and he said I promise you if I win in November I'll bring you back, like that.

WALTERS: And he didn't, so he didn't keep his promise.

LEWINSKY: Mm hmm.

WALTERS: So you could've said he didn't keep his promise, he didn't get me a job, so be it. But you held him to that!

LEWINSKY: I did, I did.

WALTERS: Towards the end of this relationship, you were a real pain in the butt! ("20/20," 1999)

Walters was suggesting that not only was Lewinsky the one making the sexual advances, she also had ulterior motives of seeking her own personal gain from the experience.

Walters' questioning suggests that a woman who is aggressively seeking a sexual relationship with a powerful man has ulterior motives. The fact that Walters called Lewinsky a "pain in the butt" also suggested that a woman is not allowed to mix power and pleasure at all (even if that was not what Lewinsky was doing in the first place).

The Victorian notion of the “perfect woman,” as described earlier in this paper was that of a woman who was happy to be confined to the home and devoid of sexual desire, outside of the desire to reproduce (Jorgensen-Earp, 1990). This old-fashioned viewpoint is not uncommon in our society today. In this interview, Barbara Walters suggested that Lewinsky was an improper woman for two reasons. First, Lewinsky was portrayed as deviant because she allegedly was the sexual aggressor in the relationship, an action many thought abhorrent because of the President’s high status and clout. Second, Walters suggested that Lewinsky was using her sexuality in order to get ahead in the workplace, another antiquated stereotype about sexually aggressive women. As Zareena Hussain (1998) wrote in her article, “Feminists are Hypocrites in Scandal,” “Sex, as evidenced by the Lewinsky case, continues to be used as a tool to put women down. Charges of promiscuity will never sting men with the same vengeance as they do for women. The liberation of years past is only imagined” (p.5).

CHAPTER TWELVE

Tonya Harding

The Rise and Fall of an Ice Tomboy

Before 1994, Tonya Harding was best known for her rags-to-riches story of growing up poor and then becoming a championship figure skater. Harding's childhood was tumultuous; her alcoholic mother would beat her in public, and her family moved fifteen times before she was in the fifth grade. However, she began skating at age three, which provided her with an outlet and hope for a better life, which in her case meant a more lucrative life. Harding famously once said that she saw "dollar signs" when she skated (Duffy, 1994, para. 7). Harding dropped out of high school to continue to pursue her dream. In 1991, she became the first American woman to perform a triple-axel in competition.

Harding's behavior off, and even on, the ice started to overshadow her skating. She became known not only for her high jumps but also for her erratic behavior, stopping mid-performance on multiple occasions to complain of a loose skate blade or a shoelace malfunction. There was the incident when Harding got into a confrontation during a traffic jam in which she allegedly wielded a baseball bat (White, 1995). *Newsweek* wrote of Harding: "She never did seem quite cut out for the role of America's Sweetheart that every woman's skating champion since Peggy Fleming has had to fill" (Adler, 1994a, para. 2). Tonya Harding became national news when her rival, Nancy Kerrigan, was attacked off the ice during a practice session for the 1994 U.S. Figure Skating Championship. The attack was linked to Harding's ex-husband Jeff Gilooly and

bodyguard Shane Stant. Gilooly, in order to reduce his own sentence, implicated Harding in the crime. Harding pled guilty to hindering the investigation, but to this day denies that she had anything to do with planning the attack against Nancy Kerrigan.

After the scandal broke, Harding attempted to save and restore her faltering image. She chose to appear on *Eye-to-Eye with Connie Chung* to respond to the accusations. The interview aired on February 10, 1994, a little over a month after Kerrigan had been clubbed on the knee. Harding attempted to bolster her image by revealing her history of abuse at the hands of her mother and her ex-husband. She attempted to make the public feel sorry for her and empathize with her situation. However, as William L. Benoit and Robert S. Hanczor (1994) concluded in their article, “The Tonya Harding Controversy: An Analysis of Image Restoration Strategies,” Harding was unsuccessful in her attempts, because the image she tried to project in the media after the attack and in the interview was so much at odds with what the public had seen before. Before the attack on Kerrigan, Harding was depicted as “recalcitrant and headstrong” (Feder, 1995, p. 35). Benoit and Hanczor (1994) pointed out that in the interview (and arguably in the post-attack media in general) Harding portrayed herself quite differently, as “a meek, tentative, frightened person who tried her best to meet the expectations of her husband” (p. 485). A *CNN/USA Today* poll on February 24th showed that the public did not believe her defense in the interview; 31% believed that Harding was involved in the plot from the beginning (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994).

Analysis of the Media Coverage of Tonya Harding

White Trash on Ice

Tonya Harding did not become infamous because of her sexuality. In fact, the scandal that surrounded her and her rival Nancy Kerrigan had nothing to do with sex at all. Tonya Harding's story may not seem to belong in a paper examining the sexuality of women on television. However, it is important to look at the case of Tonya Harding because she did not become famous, or infamous, because of anything to do with her sexuality, yet still was cast as a whore by the media.

In the first section of this paper, it was evident that in fictional television, whore characters were very often juxtaposed against virginal characters. For every Samantha, there seemed to always be a Charlotte. In the case of real life women in the media, the 1994 Olympic scandal involving Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan seemed no different. Abigail Feder (1994) in her article, "Big Girls Do Cry: Femininity and "Toughness" in the Kerrigan-Harding Affair," pointed out the explicit dichotomy:

This contrast in normative gender behaviors spilled over in the postattack [sic] coverage—reporters picked up "The Great White Hope vs. White Trash" angle of the story and played it out with a vengeance. Kerrigan was the pure Madonna, pristine in her white Vera Wang costume dresses....Harding was the white-trash whore. (p. 19)

There had been scandal in the Olympics before, with drug use and violent behavior, but never before had someone been accused of intentionally trying to harm another athlete (Feder, 1994). The act itself was shocking to people, but it was especially appalling to

many because it happened between female athletes in one of the most “feminine” of sports. As Feder (1995) noted, in the figure skating world, “Women...are caught in a trap that Naomi Wolf could have labeled ‘the bind of the Beauty Myth’: a woman must live up to popular notions of beauty in order to compete successfully, both on the ice and in the commercial endorsement sweepstakes” (p. 26).

Even before the scandal broke, Tonya Harding had never been portrayed as the feminine ideal for a figure skater. She was routinely described as “tomboyish” and as a “tough cookie,” obviously “rough around the edges” (Feder, 1995, p. 22 & p. 40). She had “thick thighs and forearms” (Duffy, 1994, para. 8). *Newsweek* wrote that she “cuts a powerful figure on the ice but not a particularly elegant one” (Adler, 1994a, p. 70). The media loved covering Harding’s more “trashy” antics, like her “wild barefoot dash to the curb to rescue her pickup from a tow truck” or slapping another driver in a traffic argument (Adler, 1994b, p. 34). In any article discussing Harding’s skating ability, there inevitably would be a passage describing Harding’s poor upbringing.

Newsweek described her favorite activities as, “[r]acing... along with hunting, pool and, apparently, smoking” (Adler, 1994a, p. 70). The media seemed fascinated by such an incongruity—a woman in such a feminine sport with seemingly masculine traits. An illustration of this incongruity reported by the media was how Harding learned to shoot a gun before she learned to read (Adler, 1994a). The media also often included disparaging quotes from people supposedly close to her about Harding’s disposition. *Newsweek* noted how a former associate described her as a “creature of the streets”

(Adler, 1994a, p. 70) and how her own step-father called her “very selfish, very surly” (Adler, 1994a, p. 71).

After the scandal broke, news articles describing Harding in derogatory ways would also invariably comment on Nancy Kerrigan’s good looks or charitable nature. For example, while Harding’s body type was criticized as not ideal for the femininity of the sport, Kerrigan was often described as Grace Kelly-esque (Feder, 1995). *Time* called her “lovely to look at, with a lean musculature, sculpted features” (Duffy, 1994, para. 8). Abigail Feder (1995) pointed out that media coverage also juxtaposed the women in another way: Kerrigan was apparently the perfect, loving, obedient daughter and best friend of her blind mother, while Harding was “rightfully” punished for not “honoring her mother,” and she called her coach an employee rather than a surrogate parent or friend (p. 38).

While Harding was out drag racing and shooting pool, the media pointed out that Kerrigan enjoyed golf (Adler, 1994a). Despite their shared working class upbringings and determination in the sport, Kerrigan clearly was constructed as the virginal, good girl, while Harding was constructed as the whorish, bad girl.

There were other ways in which this scandal fell under Walter Fisher’s (1984) definition of a narrative. Besides the roles in which Kerrigan and Harding were clearly cast—virgin and slut, good girl and bad girl—much of the media coverage depicted them as working within a fictional or imaginative world, like a fairy tale or soap opera, thus suggesting that they are practically fictional characters themselves. Over and over again, the scandal involving the two figure skaters was referred to in either of these ways—as

either a fairy tale gone bad or a tabloid-worthy soap opera. On the other hand, *Newsweek* wrote this of Kerrigan: “America’s penchant for simplistic fairy tales has cast her as a skating princess who—but for the evil machinations of others—would be a prohibitive favorite to win the gold” (Adler, 1994b, para.13). *Newsweek*, conversely, wrote this of Harding: “A different person could have fashioned from this autobiography an inspirational story of transcending poverty, but somehow Tonya’s personality keeps getting in the way” (Adler, 1994a, para. 5).

CNN called it a “virtual Tonya-rama...A veritable Kerrigananza,” suggesting that the scandal had not only a conspicuous soap opera element to it, but also a voyeuristic, circus-like, freak show appeal (Rushin, 1994, para. 1). The absurdity of the situation was clearly apparent.

On February 10, 1994, Tonya Harding appeared on the CBS show *Eye to Eye with Connie Chung* to explain herself to the public and salvage her severely tarnished reputation. The interview centered mainly around the facts of the case, as Chung allowed Harding to tell her side of the story. However, the interview did not stray from the narrative scripts that earlier articles about the skater had already constructed. For one, Harding was still portrayed as abnormal in the sport because of her masculine character traits.

CHUNG (v/o): It may seem as if her life is spinning out of control. But this blue-collar kid didn’t get to be a world-class skater by giving up...

HARDING: I may not go to the opera and go to expensive dinners all the time, you know. I like to go four-wheeling. I like to go bowling. I like to shoot pool. I like to do those kind of things, and I don’t think it makes me a bad person because I have a lot of hobbies. (“Olympic Hopeful,” 1994)

Of course, it wasn't the number of hobbies that Harding had that made her a "bad person" but rather the types of hobbies she had. And, like the articles from earlier in her career, Chung made sure to bring this up to distinguish Harding from other skaters, and other women in general. Chung even said in a voiceover, "Tonya Harding was different, and she knew it" ("Olympic Hopeful," 1994). What is interesting is that Harding was the one who was "different" and not Kerrigan. Kerrigan grew up with the same low income background, and had the same drive to succeed in athletics. However, as the media was quick to point out, the way in which Kerrigan went about this, by adhering to the gender norms, was correct, while Harding stood out by being different, i.e. abnormal.

The dichotomy created by the media—of white-dress princess vs. white-trash whore—carried over into the interview, as well. Chung pointed out the juxtaposition of the two skaters:

CHUNG (v/o): If the attack was meant to eliminate the competition, it backfired, turning Nancy Kerrigan into a hero—endorsements, movie deals, and the cheers of America.

CHUNG: Nancy Kerrigan has this image as being a darling princess, and you have this image—perhaps clearly from the media—of being a bad girl. How does that make you feel?

HARDING: Everyone has their opinion, you know? ("Olympic Hopeful," 1994)

Harding certainly did not try to persuade Connie Chung, or the public, of anything other than the logical conclusion that most had come to, that she was the villain, the bad girl, the whore.

A Sex Scandal... With No Sex?

Later in the interview, a segment was aired to show what the rest of the world was saying about the scandal. It was evident in their reports and feedback that the stage for

this narrative was a soap opera, as suggested in previous American news coverage. Susan Spencer, reporting for *Eye to Eye*, pointed out the interesting international coverage.

SPENCER: The French have a skater of their own who's considered a favorite—no matter. French Channels 2 and 3 have devoted as much time to Harding and Kerrigan as they have to her.

FRENCH JOURNALIST: In France they don't know why there—they are—two girls—very beautiful girls—and why the violence is present...in the sport and in the skating. (“Olympic Hopeful,” 1994)

People around the world were captivated by the scandal because it challenged normative gender behaviors.

Australian television, notorious for its love of soap operas, was entranced by the

Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan scandal:

AUSTRALIAN JOURNALIST: It's like “Day of Our Lives” on ice.

SPENCER: So it's been on every night. It is, after all, as the Aussies say, the best soap opera America has exported in a long time.

AUSTRALIAN JOURNALIST: Given the elements of sex and glamour and the possible crime and even possible retribution at the Olympics. (“Olympic Hopeful,” 1994)

A feminist reading of these remarks reveals two significant implications. First, it is noteworthy that the Australian journalist mentioned sex as one of the elements of the scandal. There was, in reality, no sex part of this scandal; it was about violence, competition, and ethics within sports. However, because two women were involved, and the media coverage was so heavily invested in the virgin/whore dichotomy, people started to assume there was some sex element. In a story about a bad girl like Tonya Harding, people couldn't help but assume the adjective “promiscuous” with bad girl — even if Harding had been married and (presumably) monogamous for years. It is significant how the media made this jump for the public, from bad girl to slut. The second

point of interest from the remarks was the reference to “Days of Our Lives.” The recurring notion that this was a soap-opera suggests that violence between women is at once nonsensical and entertaining. There seems to exist a double standard: if a male athlete had been accused of injuring another male athlete, it would have certainly been newsworthy. It would have been shocking, and people would have taken notice. However, would it have been referred to as a soap opera over and over again in the media? No, because the idea of female-on-female violence conjures up antiquated notions of bad girl vs. good girl. To be able to “explain” such an incongruity, the media resorts to outdated sexual scripts. As Joshua Gamson (2001) pointed out in his article, “Jessica Hahn, Media Whore: Sex Scandals and Female Publicity,” “the available roles for women in most sex scandals are as jarringly cramped and retro-camp as a comic book’s” (p. 158).

The public had many concerns and questions about the nature of this scandal. For one, how could a woman, in such a “lady-like” sport as figure skating, stoop to such a level and resort to such violence? The media seemed to use Harding’s masculine characteristics as a shorthand to explain it to the public, and assure the public that only bad girls with masculine traits could do such a thing. The media took Harding’s masculine traits, which previously had been used in the media to portray her as a great athlete, and made them into an excuse for why she allegedly arranged for an attack on her rival. Harding did not change many minds in her interview with Chung, as she continued enacting the narrative script that the media had already written for her.

The Tonya Harding scandal suggests that women can be cast as the promiscuous “other” even if they were not promiscuous to begin with. A woman apparently does not have to be a slut in order to be labeled one; she just has to be a poor bad girl.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Implications

The portrayals of these six women on television, both real and fictional, all send one message to women: there are consequences for your sexual choices. American women today are assured that they have achieved the same rights as men, yet they are barraged with the same stereotypes that have existed since the seventeenth century. In terms of a woman's sexuality this is especially true. Women have been given a conditional sense of agency over their own bodies, as television suggests that a woman can be sexual, but that there is a price to pay. As Nikki Sullivan (2003) wrote, "The punishment or stigmatization of so-called 'unnatural' actions and identities is everywhere apparent in our society, and functions to reaffirm or naturalize that which is held to be 'normal'" (p. 84). As women like Samantha "proudly" flaunt their sexuality, the dominant discourse simply disguises the portrayal of women's sexual liberation in order to appear progressive, while in reality still distinguishes who is "normal" and who is not.

Ariel Levy (2005), author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, echoed this idea, speaking to the notion that television has offered women a warped idea of what progress looks like:

The proposition that having the most simplistic, plastic stereotypes of female sexuality constantly reiterated throughout our culture somehow proves that we are sexually liberated and personally empowered has been offered to us, and we have accepted it. But if we think about it, we know this just doesn't make any sense. (pp. 197-198)

Discussing masturbation, oral sex in the Oval Office, and one-night stands supposedly suggests that women have been given a sexual freedom that men have had for a long time. However, these depictions of women's sexuality have dangerous consequences for the feminist movement and women in general. The increased visibility of female sexuality on television has lulled women into thinking that because they are allowed to flaunt their sexuality they have achieved sexual freedom.

It is particularly disturbing to see how the same sexual scripts about bad girls and good girls carry over from fictional television into news programs that are supposed to be unbiased. This representation obviously reflects the tendency of the media to create a one dimensional image of the proper, and improper, woman, cleverly hidden behind "progressive" storylines, "in-depth" reporting, and "objective" interviews.

More research is needed to evaluate the full range of how women's sexuality is represented on television. As noted in my literature review, few authors have written about how female sexuality is portrayed on television, which I believe reinforces the suspicion that women's sexuality is often merely an afterthought. It is important, though, to consider the effects of the media in continuing and condoning the simplistic depiction of women who are sexual as automatically the bad girl, the slut. An interesting topic of study would be to examine the depiction of promiscuous *men* on television; I would hypothesize that they are not routinely cast as the evil character, but rather often as the hero, the stud, the ultimate man whose promiscuity is celebrated, ala James Bond. The double standard is everywhere and yet obscure.

Conclusion

In the past twenty years, television has increasingly depicted women engaging in, enjoying, and taking charge of their sexuality. However, as this paper has argued, the increased portrayal of sexual women has not meant a more realistic depiction of women. Instead, antiquated ideas about “proper” femininity have been reinforced. Instead of challenging the notion that women cannot be respected and have a sexual appetite, the depiction of women on television has suggested that the age-old dichotomies of good girl/bad girl and angel/slut still prevail in our culture today.

Not only are these stereotypes personified by fictional characters on television, they also appear in the media’s depiction of real life women. Women who have been exposed for their sexuality, as well as those who are open and honest about it, are routinely marginalized in our society and given “other” status. This kind of mass media mis-education poses a challenge for today’s feminism: Can TV programmers and the content they programmed be liberated from age-old sexual stereotypes?

NOTES

¹ It is important to note that while I'm making sure to point out how the virgin/whore dichotomy is set up with these two examples, these examples are not routine on the show. It is not commonplace for Jerry to point out Elaine's promiscuity versus his own girlfriend's sexuality. He did indeed date Elaine, after all. Also, it is important to point out that nothing is sacred on the show; while Jerry skewers Elaine's promiscuity in these two instances, he teases all the characters for many different reasons. It would almost be stranger if he *didn't* poke fun at her sexual relationships.

² It is interesting that these two episodes—"The Virgin" and "The Sponge"—are included in this paper because even though these episodes are years apart (Season 4 and Season 7, respectively), any person well-versed in *Seinfeld* trivia will point out the error in "The Sponge" that Elaine's favorite contraceptive has not always been the Today sponge because she refers to her diaphragm in "The Virgin."

³ I just want to note that while I tend to frown about classifying things as "masculine" or "feminine" activities, I had to in this case to defend against the argument that she has masculine traits.

⁴ Virgin is in quotation marks here because Charlotte is not an actual virgin, but merely constructed as the virginal character.

⁵ I think it is important to note that I am not saying that the act of "finding Mr. Right" is anti-feminism. Instead, I am pointing out that the character that the show constructed to be celebrating her independence ends up happy because she is in the arms of a man who loves her.

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