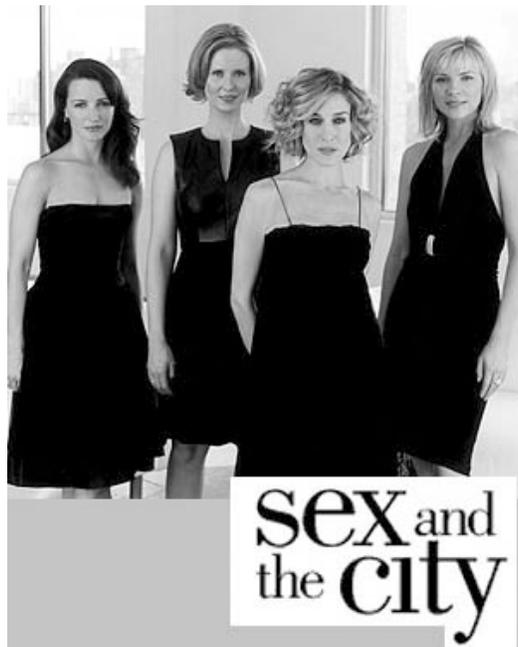


**Narrative Structure in *Sex and the City*:
“I Couldn’t Help But Wonder...”**



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Abstract:

Sex and the City uses a unique narrative structure to portray the complex issues faced by single women. Each episode, the central theme is posed by the main character as she ponders a topic for her weekly column. This device performs several functions that aid in illustrating the meaning of the single woman and creating identification with the audience: voiceover narration and the development of spectatorship, construction of multiple meanings, and women's relationship with technology.

Narrative Structure in *Sex and the City*: “I Couldn’t Help But Wonder…”

Introduction

Sex and the City is a popular HBO program that chronicles the lives of four single women in New York City. Based on the weekly sex column in the *New York Observer* written by Candace Bushnell,¹ and produced by Darren Star of *Beverly Hills 92010* and *Melrose Place* fame, the series uses a narrative structure unique to television comedy to portray the complex issues faced by single women in their 30’s. During each episode, the central theme is posed by the main character, Carrie Bradshaw, in the form of a question, often preempted by the phrase, “I couldn’t help but wonder…”, as she ponders a topic for her column in the fictional newspaper *The New York Star*. The question is stated through voiceover narration while Carrie types on her laptop

¹ In 1996, Bushnell’s columns were published as a book, *Sex and the City*.

computer. This narrative device performs several functions that aid in illustrating the meaning of the single woman and creating identification with the audience.

Sex and the City has been aired since 1998, and finished its 5th season in the summer of 2002. Over its 74 episodes, the series has gone through a gradual evolution in terms of narrative structure and characterization, but the main narrative device throughout has been how the central theme is framed for each of the main characters. This paper addresses the narrative structure of *Sex and the City* in three areas: voiceover narration and the development of spectatorship, construction of multiple meanings around a central question, and the relationship of women with technology, specifically in regard to Carrie’s relationship with her laptop computer.

Sex and the City, its cast, and crew are regularly nominated for top awards in the television industry. The show and its main star, Sarah Jessica Parker, have won Golden Globe Awards in their respective categories from 2000-2002. *Sex and the City* also garnered the Emmy for Outstanding Comedy Series in 2001 making it the first cable show to win in that category. (Internet Movie Database) Many episodes reach audiences in excess of 11 million viewers, an accomplishment for a non-network program. (Tauber et al., 2001) Its presence on HBO has offered a commercial-free, half hour, setting new standards for television in terms of sexually explicit scenes and discussion.

Parker’s character Carrie serves as the narrator and filter by which the audience navigates through her life and the lives of her three friends. Miranda Hobbes, played by Cynthia Nixon, is a successful attorney; Charlotte York, played by Kristen Davis, is an art dealer; and Samantha Jones, played by Kim Cattrall, is owner of a public relations

firm. While the show is primarily focused on the lives of single women, throughout the series, each character has been portrayed in a variety of relationship states, including committed relationships, living together, marriage, and divorce.

Single Women on TV – Historical Perspective

Even before Helen Gurley Brown wrote *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1962, television shows have featured single women. But Brown’s book introduced the idea of a fabulous single life for women, one that is a “rich, full life of dating,” counter to the previous stereotypes of single women as lonely and isolated. (Gurley-Brown, 1962)

Comedic television shows since the late 1960’s have attempted to capture the experiences of single women as lead or title characters, from *That Girl* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to *Laverne and Shirley*, *Three’s Company*, *Living Single*, and *Murphy Brown*, and currently *Friends*, *Less Than Perfect*, and *Will and Grace*. These shows were developed over a time when the television comedy form was evolving from the standard sitcom format to what Newcomb termed the “domestic comedy” in which setting and relationships were the main plot device rather than situation. (Newcomb, 1974)

The Mary Tyler Moore Show first aired in 1970 and is often considered the first example of women’s independence depicted on television. (Douglas, 1994: p. 204) Set in Minneapolis, Mary Richards was a single woman who moved to the city to start a career as a news producer at the fictional station WJM-TV. The story lines of the series revolved around two aspects of Mary’s life, her familial relationships with her co-workers and her interactions with her friends in the apartment in which she lived. While this show was groundbreaking in regard to its depiction of a single career woman, critiques of the show have discussed the framing of Mary in the traditional feminine role, substituting a family of co-workers and friends for a traditional family. (Dow, 1990) *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* is one of many programs that were produced in the seventies

that dealt with the contradictions being created by the interests of the women's movement and more traditional notions of family. (D'Acci, 1992: p. 172) Similar shows of this period included *Rhoda*, *Alice*, *Good Times*, *Maude*, *One Day at a Time*, and *All in the Family*.

Other comedies featuring single women have been bound by either home or work spaces. On *Laverne and Shirley*, *Living Single*, *Friends* and *Three's Company*, most action takes place in the apartment in which the main characters lived. Shows like *Murphy Brown* and *Less Than Perfect* (or ensembles that featured single women like *Ally McBeal*, *News Radio*, and *Just Shoot Me*) follow *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* formula for work place interaction, thus repeating the coworker-as-surrogate-family plot device.

Each of these shows and the countless others that followed this home/work setting have been limited by its format and structure in portraying the multiple positionality of the single lifestyle. Treatment of issues like sex and sexuality, loneliness, relationships, and children were treated in a superficial manner that was shown in relationship to the hegemonic ideas of family in society. For example, *Friends* uses the standard plot of neurotic, almost desperate women, seeking the perfect man, but all the while, the perfect man is right next-door. *Will and Grace* offers the same plot, with the twist being that Will is gay, and therefore unattainable in the traditional sense. While these shows have featured an occasional lament by the characters as to their fear of being alone or their inability to secure a long-term relationship, the audience is never privy to the true struggles of the single woman in defining herself in society. Limited by the standard situation comedy format and network television's standards for

censorship, it is difficult for these shows to foster the broader discussion of issues and identification that is found in *Sex and the City*.

While *Sex and the City* has been criticized for its emphasis on white heterosexuality, its blatant consumerism, and its sexual objectification of women, the unique qualities of the narrative allow for reading the text in multiple ways. In regard to the popularity of shows featuring single women, Lotz said “especially when series and characters resonate with audiences to the degree that many recently have, we must explore what is in these texts with an eye to their complexity instead of quickly dismissing them as part of a hegemonic, patriarchal, capitalist society.” (Lotz, 2001: p. 114) One explanation for the popularity of shows like *Sex and the City* is that women viewers are able to admire the lead characters for their career successes, while, at the same time, identifying with their relationship troubles (Hunt 1998). The remainder of this paper will deal with the ways in which the narrative structure of *Sex and the City* provides a unique site of identification and meaning for the single woman.

Research Questions

Does *Sex and the City* provide a realistic portrayal of single women in their 30’s?
What role does the narrative structure play in a realistic portrayal?

The first question requires a clear definition of the “realistic portrayal” of the single woman. But the object of realism is difficult to ascertain in the television medium. “One of the important insights of structural linguistics is that no symbol system directly reflects the real world.” (Allen, 1987: p. 10) The question of reality is problematized first by attempting to define what one means by a “single” woman. As Judith Butler observed, it is difficult to ascertain the essence of what constitutes a woman, “for we refer not only to women as a social category but also as a felt sense of self, a culturally conditioned or constructed subjective identity.” (Butler, 1990: p. 325) The term “single woman” can be used to describe a variety of ways in which those with female bodies can be constructed. A single woman can be unmarried, divorced, widowed, separated, can have or not have children, or can be in a committed relationship (either heterosexual or lesbian) while living with someone or not. While each of these situations share the representation of a woman as the degree to which a man is or is not present in her life, each has unique issues and challenges to be discussed within the narrative.

Like many domestic comedies of our time, *Sex and the City* has incorporated qualities of the serial or soap opera that make for what many researchers have studied as pleasure in melodrama (Fiske, 1990; Brunsdon, 1997). While each episode of *Sex and the City* is self-contained, regular viewers recognize the value of watching episodes in order, as much of the action, humor, and discourse revolve around character

development, relationships, and situations over time. The four main characters are stable in the series, but many past lovers have left and returned, providing another point of identification with single female viewers. Plots play out over several episodes and seasons, like the relationship of Carrie and Big, Miranda’s pregnancy, and Charlotte’s separation and divorce.

Another unique characteristic that lends toward the creation of realism for the series is its varied use of locations in and around New York City. While the show has several points of regular action - Carrie’s apartment, the diner in which they meet, and Charlotte’s gallery - many of the episodes feature what the director, Michael Patrick Harris, called walk-alongs, scenes in which the characters are filmed while walking along a New York street.² Other locations include numerous bars, clubs, restaurants, galleries, and other outdoor New York scenes like parks and boats, not to mention out-of-town locations in the Hamptons, Los Angeles and San Francisco. This provides a strong difference to the traditional sitcom in which location shots are rare and action occurs in one or two main sets.

But it is the unique qualities of the central theme device that provide the best opportunity for addressing “reality.” One way to assess “reality” of the portrayal is to discuss the point of identification or spectatorship of the audience. In *Sex and the City*, the central theme and other points throughout the show are narrated by Carrie, often filmed looking out a window or walking pensively around her apartment, then filmed looking at her computer screen while she types and speaks the central theme of the episode. The transference of the gaze from looking at her to looking with her is an

² Harris, *Sex and the City* DVD, Season 3.

example of the feminine gaze (Mulvey 1989; Cooper, 2001). This gaze is in contrast to the long-standing usage of the male gaze in media production in which audiences are encouraged through camera angles and discourse to identify with the masculine spectator position.

Additionally, the discourse of the voiceover provides feminine identification. In providing Carrie's thoughts, feelings, and ideas, and narrating the activities of the other characters, she is able to weave together the multiple meanings of the central question. Allen recognized the role of narrator in engaging the audience through acknowledgement, by directly addressing or confiding in the reader. (Allen, 1992: p. 114) Kozloff identified a typology of narrator to assess the role of narrator in the text. This typology included the degree to which the narrator is a character in the story, the perspective of the narrator to the story, the distance in which she is related in terms of time, space, and self-consciousness, the reliability of the narrator, and her omniscience. (Kozloff, 1987: pp. 82-84) The character of Carrie provides voiceover narration to each episode, but does so in a manner in which her perspective, distance, and omniscience vary. She is often privy to events in which she is not physically present (like when she narrates what is happening at Charlotte's apartment or Samantha's office), but during the voiceover moments in which she frames the central question, one gets a sense of her insecurity, self-consciousness, and subjectivity. The posing of the central question allows not only Carrie, but the other women, to grapple with these questions in a manner that does not usually provide a clear and unambiguous closure at the end of each episode.

The use of voiceover has been incorporated by other television comedy (it is much more likely in dramas like *Magnum PI* or *The Waltons* and is prevalent in advertising) over time, but rarely in regard to the single woman, thus problematizing the issue of spectatorship from the single woman's perspective. In the past, *The Wonder Years*, *Dobie Gillis* and *Doogie Howser* - which coincidentally utilized the typing of his journal on his desktop computer to summarize the moral of each episode - effectively used voiceover and direct address. Currently, shows like *The Bernie Mac Show* and *Titus*, both on Fox, have chosen to use direct address. Shows using either voiceover or direct address with female characters include *My So-Called Life*, *Felicity*, *Clarissa Explains It All*, and much earlier *The Patty Duke Show*, but these shows featured teenage or young adult characters in the main role. But, as in the case of *The Patty Duke Show*, the plot device of making the audience privy to Patty's thoughts via her journal writings provided a point of identification for teenage girls who were struggling with their own identity and sexuality. (Lockett, 1997: p. 96) One could argue that Carrie's preparation of her column as a type of journal in which she, and ultimately the audience, work out their own issues of identification as single women.

A second aspect to assess in terms of the realistic nature of the portrayal would be the continuum of postfeminist attributes that are present in a text. Lotz defined four postfeminist attributes:

- 1) Narratives that explore the diverse relations to power women inhabit
- 2) Depictions of varied feminist solutions and loose organization of activism
- 3) Deconstructions of binary categories of gender and sexuality, instead of viewing these categories as flexible and indistinct
- 4) The way situations illustrating struggles faced by women and feminists are raised and examined in the series (Lotz, 2001)

These attributes were developed through an analysis of poststructuralist thought and theories of third-wave feminism. In her doctoral dissertation, Lotz analyzed several contemporary shows, including the first two seasons of *Sex and the City*, for the presence of postfeminist attributes. She found that *Sex and the City* best exhibited the postfeminist attributes of exploring diverse power relationships of women and deconstruction of the binaries of gender, but handled political issues of activism and race either subtly or superficially.³ But Lotz concluded “despite the absence of representations identifying ethnicity and class as important aspects of women’s subjectivities and experiences, the series is able to discuss explicitly the sexual politics that some women must negotiate in the late 1990s.” (Lotz, 2000: p. 206) Lotz utilized the depiction of the central question as the main grounds for the multiple positionality of the series. It is the role of the narrative in creating the forum for approaching these issues in a manner that is consistent across episodes, yet humorous, ironic, and sensitive.

Finally, another way to look at “reality” is in regard to how the women in the series relate to the objects in their lives. *Sex and the City* has multiple points in which this can be analyzed, in terms of women’s relationship with fashion, shoes, men, friends, New York City, etc. But looking at the narrative device of the central theme, the main object in Carrie’s life is her laptop computer. Women’s relationship with technology has been a topic under study in regard to the gendering of technology and the creation of identity around technology (Turkle, 1995; Margolis/Fisher, 2002). Carrie’s relationship with her laptop can be analyzed for the accuracy of the portrayal.

³ After the second season of *Sex and the City*, however, episodes were developed around both the issues of race and class, probably in response to such criticism.

Methodology

Each of these three aspects was analyzed to determine the extent to which the main plot device of the central theme is the key force in providing identification with and polysemy of the text. The entire series (5 seasons, 74 episodes) was reviewed to identify examples of how each aspect of the central theme device contributed to the reality in the portrayal of single women.

Voiceover Narration

As mentioned above, the voiceover narration technique offers a point of spectatorship and identification that is not available in traditional comedies featuring single women. On shows such as *Friends*, *Will and Grace*, or *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, one sees the interactions of the single woman with other characters, but is rarely, if ever, privy to her internal thoughts or monologue. This one dimensional look might show the result of an internal struggle, and may even feature scenes in which the character hashes alternatives with another, but is not able to provide a more complex understanding of the internal monologue behind the dilemma.

What one experiences when listening to the buildup to the central question is the line of logic and thought that Carrie makes to get to her central question. For example, Carrie often laments about the number of singles in Manhattan and the infinite possibilities that exist. These are first perceived as positive qualities, that having multiple options is a positive attribute. But she ultimately builds to her central question, for example “Has monogamy become too much to expect?” Or in an episode in Season Five, she describes the feeling that single women have when their careers and lives are

going well, yet they lack a committed relationship. She asks the question, “Why is it that the one thing we don’t have ruins all the things we do have? Why does one minus a plus one add up to zero?”⁴

Sex and the City uses directing and film techniques that add to identification with the characters. By first hearing Carrie’s thoughts, and then having the perspective of Carrie as she looks out her window, around her apartment, and then ultimately at her computer screen, the viewer not only gains access to her thoughts, but is actually able to virtually become the character. The combination of hearing the words as she speaks the central question and watching them simultaneously typed on the computer screen is a strong bridge in tying the subject position of the audience to the character.

During the first two seasons, *Sex and the City* experimented with other creative address techniques. In the first season, it was not unusual for Carrie to break character and directly address the audience, perhaps providing some additional background information during a phone conversation or while eating at the diner. This technique, however, created a confused audience identity, in which one is first being addressed by the character and then later becoming the character. Through the second season, a common device was to use a montage of strangers, non-characters, directly addressing the camera at the point just after the central question was posed. These strangers provided the multiple ways in which the question could be framed and understood, but identification was minimized because there was no history with these characters. As the series progressed and the characters became more developed, these two

⁴ This is in reference to her invitation to her own book party in which she does not have a guest to invite with her.

techniques were no longer necessary, and *Sex and the City* consistently relied on the role of Carrie's voiceover to provide the main points of identification and spectatorship.

Polysemic Meaning

While the main characters, Carrie Bradshaw, Miranda Hobbes, Charlotte York, and Samantha Jones, are seemingly similar in background and status, one way in which multiple meanings are conveyed is through the unique perspectives of each woman. Miranda is the successful attorney that has a cynical outlook on relationships; Charlotte is the eternal optimist, searching for the perfect man; and Samantha uses sex as its own end, more concerned with pleasure than intimacy. Carrie is the practical one, caught between the reality of her situation as an independent, single woman and the ideal that she will one day find her soul mate. While each character is ostensibly true to the stereotype she represents, the plot often involves juxtapositions of traits that make for less consistent, yet more believable characterizations. For example, while Charlotte would be deemed the prude of the group, during the first three seasons, she had almost as many sex partners as Samantha. Her promiscuity was positioned in relation to her search for a mate, while Samantha's was represented as sexually aberrant. But, within this role, in a few rare episodes, Samantha has revealed a vulnerability for a closer relationship. The show portrays the multiple meanings through humor, pun, and irony, as well as poignant situations and complex relationships.

The central questions cover issues of dating, relationships, family, friendships, children, sex and sexuality. The first episode of *Sex and the City* showed Carrie

pondering the end of love in Manhattan. She wrote “cupid has flown the co-op.”⁵ Then she followed up with “How the hell did we get into this mess?” Figure 1 provides some of the specific central questions considered in subsequent episodes.

Figure 1 – Central Question Examples

- “How powerful is beauty?” (“Models and Mortals,” Season One)
- “Is there a secret cold war between marrieds and singles?” (“Bay of Married Pigs,” Season One)
- “Was secret sex the ultimate form of intimacy?” (“Secret Sex,” Season One)
- “Are relationships the religion of the 90’s?” (“O Come All Ye Faithful,” Season One)
- “What are the breakup rules?” (“Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” Season Two)
- “Is it better to fake it than to be alone?” (“They Shoot Single People, Don’t They,” Season Two)
- “Can you change a man?” (“Old Dogs, New Dicks,” Season Two)
- “Are New Yorkers evolving past relationships?” (“Evolution,” Season Two)
- “Can you be friends with an ex?” (“Ex and the City,” Season Two)
- “Are we romantically challenged or are we sluts?” (“Are We Sluts?” Season Three)
- “Is timing everything?” (“The Big Time,” Season Three)
- “Are we 34 going on 13?” (“Hot Child in the City,” Season Three)
- “Can you ever really forgive if you can’t forget?” (“Time and Punishment,” Season Four)
- “How much does a father figure figure?” (“A Vogue Idea,” Season Four)
- “Why do we believe our worst reviewers?” (“Critical Condition,” Season Five)
- “Were we the new bachelors?” (“The Big Journey,” Season Five)

While specific issues of feminist activism are not portrayed in the text, issues of gender, sexuality, and power are often problematized by the central question. For example, during Season Three, an episode entitled “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” posed the question, “Has the opposite sex become obsolete?” Carrie’s newest boyfriend, having

⁵ This statement refers to the cooperative ownership of many apartments in New York City.

revealed that he had previously dated a man, brought on this dilemma. While Carrie struggled with this confusion, the other characters are dealing with gender ambiguity in separate ways. Miranda is grappling with a relationship with Steve, a clingy boyfriend who seeks a more committed relationship. Miranda is leery about making the decision to move in together. During an argument, Steve accuses Miranda of being the "guy" in the relationship. This causes Miranda to question her own femininity and sends her in near panic to "New York's newest trend," the goddess workshop to find her inner goddess.

At the same time, Charlotte has met a photographer at her gallery that photographs women in male drag, and he convinces her to pose for him. But during the session, Charlotte feels uncomfortable performing masculinity. She uses excuses like claiming to be "bad at math" or "not able to change a tire," thus making her incompetent as a man. To inspire Charlotte, the photographer gives her a pep talk about feeling powerful and dominant, telling her "every woman has a male inside of her." The scene ends with Charlotte saying, "I think I need a bigger sock," and falling into passionate embrace with the photographer.

Samantha is in a power struggle of her own in this episode in which she has hired a male assistant. The assistant is described as an "alpha dog" and proceeds to run Samantha's business in an aggressive and arrogant manner. In a final confrontation, he is rude during a client phone call. Samantha subsequently fires him and then propositions him, with the implication made that during sex she would be on top.

In the final scene of the episode, Carrie’s relationship with her “bisexual” boyfriend comes to a head when she goes with him to his ex-boyfriend’s birthday party. A multitude of sexualities and complex relationships are portrayed in that the ex-boyfriend is now involved in a committed relationship with another male, and they have a baby together. The baby is the result of an egg that was donated by the ex-boyfriend’s ex-girlfriend (played by Alanis Morissette) who has recently gone to Hawaii to marry her female partner. Ultimately Carrie describes the party as “Confused Sexuality Land,” and compares herself to the character of Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* falling down the rabbit hole. The scene concludes with a game of Spin the Bottle in which Carrie is ultimately kissed by the Alanis Morissette character. Carrie leaves the party resigned to not being comfortable with the deconstruction of the gender roles, chalking up the ambiguity to youthful dalliances. While this scene squelches the potential to grasp the elusive quality of gender, it does provide one example of the character grappling with her own sexual confusion. What this narrative does is provide a troubling of gender that illustrates the fictional nature of the social constructions of the binaries of male and female. (Butler, 1990; p. 339)

While many of these scenes are humorous and rely on pun and irony for the pleasure derived by the audience, by using this technique across the entire series, *Sex and the City* is able to create a pattern of expectations with viewers that what is obvious is not always what it might seem. Other episodes have dealt with confused gender roles. In “Belles of the Balls,” the plot is complicated by the fact that the men in which each of the women are involved are acting in a manner that is considered by Carrie to be more stereotypically feminine. “Body image problems, depression, mood swings, late

night phone calls, obsessing over relationships. Did I mention these were my male friends?" She poses the question "Are men just women with balls?" Carrie's ex-boyfriend, known only as Mr. Big, calls her because he is distraught at having been dumped by his latest girlfriend. At the same time, Carrie's current boyfriend acts childish when she receives calls from Big. When Steve finds out that he has testicular cancer and must have one of his testicles removed, he acts in what Miranda considers to be a very vain manner in inquiring about receiving a testicle implant. And, Charlotte now married to Trey and trying desperately to get pregnant, asks Trey to have his sperm tested. His response is one that highlights the equating of sperm count to his idea of masculine identity.

But not all episodes deal specifically with gender roles. Rather they question the traditional rules of society regarding relationships. In an episode entitled "The Monogamist" from Season One, the idea of monogamy and commitment in the traditional sense is portrayed through Carrie's plot in which she sees her boyfriend of the time, Mr. Big, out with another woman. The secondary plots include Miranda sleeping with an ex-boyfriend only to tell him she still wants to see other people; Charlotte refusing to give oral sex to her current partner, which causes him to breakup with her, so she gets a puppy to fulfill her need for commitment; and Samantha using two real estate brokers against each other in a monogamy metaphor. Even Carrie's gay best friend, Sanford Blatch, adds his opinion of monogamy by saying, "I can't even commit to a long distance carrier." The episode, however, does return to a traditional view, when Carrie returns to Mr. Big who has indicated he might be willing to see her

exclusively. Her voiceover is "in a city of infinite options, sometimes there is no better feeling than knowing you only have one."

Another episode during Season Four entitled "A Vogue Idea," dealt with the role of fathers. The central question was "How much does a father figure figure?" While Miranda contemplates the role that Steve, the father of her unborn child, will play in its life, Carrie offers a rare look at her childhood. The audience, for the first time, gets the impression that her father's absence had deeply affected her ability to engage in close, personal relationships with men. Samantha's plot line, taking a more humorous route, showed her attempting to organize a threesome for the birthday of her then-boyfriend Richard, but that goes awry when the young participant calls the older Richard "Daddy."

Some themes are indirectly carried out across episodes, thus creating a matrix of themes throughout the series. In addition to Carrie's kiss with Alanis Morissette, lesbian themes have been explored in multiple episodes. For example, both Miranda and Charlotte became involved in relationships with lesbians. These were portrayed as platonic relationships, but were complicated by expectations. In Miranda's case, she realized that in order to move up in her company, she needed to be in a relationship. When it was mistakenly perceived that she was in a lesbian relationship and that might give her more access to her boss, she played along with the misconception. When she ultimately revealed that she was not a lesbian, her boss proclaimed that it was too bad because his wife had been "looking to add a lesbian couple to their social circle."

In another episode, Charlotte meets a group of lesbians at a gallery opening. She realizes that she enjoys the company of women and is evasive about her sexuality

in order to continue her social interaction with them. But ultimately, when she revealed that she was not a lesbian, she was no longer welcome in the group.

A string of episodes in Season 4 dealt with Samantha’s sexual relationship with a woman. The character of Samantha is often presented as the site of the most explicit sexuality, but this was done in contrast to the close relationship she embarked upon with Maria. While Samantha’s lesbian experience ended after a few episodes, it did provide a moment in which Samantha is seen as vulnerable and capable of having a relationship that goes beyond sex.

While these scenes deal with overt lesbian themes, there are other aspects of *Sex and the City* as a woman-centered program that could also be deemed a lesbian narrative. Alexander Doty argues that the interest in shows that feature close female friendships is “their crucial investment in constructing narratives that connect an audience’s pleasure to the activities and relationships of women – which results in situating most male characters as potential threats to the spectator’s narrative pleasure.” (Doty, 1993: p. 41) Throughout the series, the women characters are portrayed in supportive family roles, as many of the men often disappoint, leave or are left. Often the central question deals with the loss of independence or a change of lifestyle due to a new relationship, thus disrupting the equilibrium of the female relationships of the series. Examples of this carried across the series include Carrie coming to the aid of an ill Samantha or being asked to accompany Miranda home after eye surgery, Carrie joining Miranda when she breaks down walking down the aisle at her mother’s funeral, and Charlotte, upon hearing that Miranda planned to go through with her pregnancy, joyfully proclaiming “we’re having a baby” as if she were the father.

These ironic and often surprising twists provide more than simply interesting plot fodder. By positioning the multiple meanings, the audience is able to consider a variety of ways in which an issue might be relevant to them. It also shows the multiplicity of meaning and provides a point that often spurs discussion. It is this ability to create meaning in the lives of women outside the text that provides possibly the greatest power of the narrative.

Relationship with Technology

The column that Carrie writes for the fictional *New York Star* situates her in a career that is both virtual and flexible. A self-proclaimed sexual anthropologist, it is this premise that provides the legitimacy of the varied issues the show covers. By positioning Carrie as a freelance columnist, she is free from the workplace relationships that have often confined the contexts of single women in past television series. Carrie’s usage of a laptop computer is a clever device that allows her to be shown in a variety of ways working on her column. Primarily, she is seen in various positions around her apartment, on her bed, at a desk, in a chair, but often Carrie takes to the streets to work on her column, with scenes of her typing in coffee shops and hotel rooms. The presence of technology has changed many traditional workplace interactions, as Sadie Plant found: “all the structures, ladders, and securities with which careers and particular jobs once came equipped have been subsumed by patterns of part-time and discontinuous work which privilege independence, flexibility, and adaptability.” (Plant, 1997: pp. 38-39) Sherry Turkle, also working with the nature of technology and identity, found that “the computer offers us both new models of mind and a new medium on

which to project our ideas and fantasies.” (Turkle, 1995: p. 9) These theories are consistent in how the laptop and thus Carrie’s relationship with the technology is portrayed in the series.

The laptop provides key representations to the narrative. First, it aids in portraying Carrie as a fancy-free type, not chained to a desk or any particular set of circumstances. Her regular relationships are those of her own choosing, not imposed upon her by family or work status. In one episode, Carrie is compared to a wild stallion that is unable to be tamed. (“Ex and the City, Season Two) Her chosen career and usage of technology are reflective of that position.

Secondly, by freeing Carrie from the workplace, the action is able to occur in any number of settings, while still legitimizing her career. She can travel across country for a book tour or go on vacation and still be considered working, as she contemplates relationship issues that occur in The Hamptons or on a visit to the suburbs.

On *Sex and the City*, the laptop takes on the role of sexy accessory, as during Season Five, when Carrie is photographed for her book cover. After discarding several pose ideas that were too risqué for her comfort, the chosen shot shows her in a very short, yet smart skirt, holding the laptop in a shy manner near her waist. In contrast, on the cover of the book, *Sex and the City*, by Candace Bushnell, on which the series is based, Sarah Jessica Parker is photographed in the nude, with only the laptop computer for coverage.

But Carrie’s relationship with her computer has been complicated in some episodes. In “My Motherboard, Myself” from Season Four, Carrie’s Macintosh computer crashes and she is frantic as she tries to recover it. Her then boyfriend, Aidan, tries to

assist her with the rebooting process, but only makes matters worse while Carrie looks on nervously. The next scene shows the two anxiously waiting for tech support with the laptop wrapped in a pashmina shawl, much like waiting for medical attention in the emergency room. When they are finally called by the technician, they are told that Aidan is a PC guy and Carrie is a Mac person, so therefore incompatible. Aidan later tries to come to Carrie's aide by purchasing a new laptop. Carrie, however, is bothered by Aidan's need to fix things for her, to make things better. Even though her whole career of columns is on the computer and she is helpless in dealing with the situation, she has trouble receiving help. This is not the typical plot in which boy rescues girl. Carrie knows she needs help, but is afraid to accept it for what it might mean in terms of her own independence and ability to handle situations. By complicating the situation in this manner, the plot is opened to a broader identification with the audience.

Conclusion

While many have criticized the framing of the central question through voiceover and typing on the computer as a gimmick (Kirsch, 2001; Avins, 2000), it is this device that precisely provides many ways in which an audience can identify and create meaning in the text. Some have even gone as far as to suggest that it is a *Doogie Howser* rip-off. (Kirsch, 2001) But the premise of the *Doogie Howser* series was markedly different than the way the technique is used in *Sex and the City*. Doogie used a desktop computer that was stationed in his bedroom in his parents’ home. He used his computer to compose a journal that summed up the moral of each episode. The usage of the technique came regularly at the end of the show, and often had Doogie reflecting on the lessons learned. The device was used in this manner to summarize the episode and provide closure. In contrast, *Sex and the City’s* usage of Carrie’s laptop and the central question are used not to summarize and conclude each episode, but specifically to set up the multiplicity of meanings. Rather than closing the dialogue, the central question leaves room for more discussion or unique ways of approaching the issue. Some researchers have found that the ability to identify polysemic meanings is a gendered function of the text. Fiske has argued that “masculine” programmes are less open to multiple interpretations than “feminine” programmes, which tend to be more open and ambiguous. (Fiske, 1986) The *Doogie Howser* device would appeal more to the male audiences that Fiske describes that seek closure in a narrative, while the *Sex and the City* approach is more like that of the daytime serial, in which plots are left open-ended and questions are explored for the issues that they broach rather than how they are resolved.

Regardless of the criticism, this simple device provides a regular point in which identification and meaning can be created for the audience. This is achieved through voiceover address and film techniques that create a feminine gaze, creating multiple meanings that are constructed for each character and often left unresolved, and portraying women’s relationship with technology as fluid and freeing, yet at the same time being helplessly dependent on its presence in their lives. In this way, *Sex and the City* not only creates meaning for single women who occupy various spaces and lifestyles, but also women in committed relationships and men, who might be able to create meaning for themselves by gaining the perspective of spectatorship or find a scenario that strikes a chord within themselves. While the show does not try to tackle issues of feminist activism nor does it regularly incorporate images of women of color, it is able to offer a “realistic” portrayal in which many in diverse circumstances can still find meaning and perspective on the complicated subject positions of single women in our society.

As with any textual analysis, the presence of techniques within a text is not the only way in which identification can be assessed. Future research should focus on the audiences’ perception of the usage of the central theme, the identification with Carrie or other characters, and the resonance of the relationship with technology, and whether these techniques add up to what audiences consider a “realistic” portrayal.

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