THE SEASON OF THE VAGINA: A THIRD-WAVE FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF THE

TELEVISION SERIES NEW GIRL AND GIRLS

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This thesis examines two of the female-driven sitcoms from the 2011-2012 season, *New Girl* and *Girls*. I analyze both series from a third-wave feminist perspective, looking at how each series portrays its respective lead character, Jess and Hannah, and how each series portrays funny women in general. Through these analyses, I ultimately argue that Jess on *New Girl* represents a much more promising feminist icon than Hannah on *Girls*. This is mainly because Jess is driven by self-love and self-confidence while Hannah is so defined by her self-hatred that she becomes difficult for viewers to relate. Most disappointingly, I find that female-driven sitcoms use humor as a weapon to discipline its characters.
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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

At the 2011 Primetime Emmy Awards, the six nominees for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series surprised the audience by taking the stage as their names were called and standing together, holding hands, and feigning excitement as if they were in a beauty pageant.

*Entertainment Weekly* columnist Karen Valby wrote,

> It was all so delightful, until viewers really got a look at these six extraordinary women standing together in such a winning, righteous display of wit and camaraderie. The range of their talent was formidable, their combined achievements staggering. When the dazzled audience rose to a standing ovation, they weren’t applauding the funniest women of the night, they were honoring the funniest people, period.¹

This moment is representative of a particularly strong year for women in comedy. *Bridesmaids* defied box-office expectations to become the eighth

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highest-grossing, R-rated comedy of all time, earning $288 million dollars,\(^2\) and female-driven comedies dominated the 2011 television landscape. Several sitcoms including *Are You There, Chelsea?, Best Friends Forever, Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23, Girls, New Girl, Suburgatory, Two Broke Girls, Up All Night*, and *Whitney* premiered during the 2011-2012 television season. All of these sitcoms were created by, written by, and starring women.

Women in comedy have perplexed audiences and critics for generations. Kristen Anderson Wagner wrote that comedy is “diametrically opposed to the cultural ideal of femininity... with its emphasis on submissiveness, deference, and passivity.”\(^3\) This means that comedienne often have to utilize traditional gender roles in their comedy, for instance, by making fun of their appearance or skills as housekeepers. Audiences do not respond well to female comics. They typically like comedienne who stick to prescribed gender norms and categories.\(^4\)

\(^2\) See Box Office Mojo, “All Time Box Office: Domestic Grosses by MPAA Rating,” *Box Office Mojo*, accessed December 20, 2012. *Bridesmaids* is also the highest-grossing R-rated female comedy of all time, and it is the eighteenth-highest-grossing R-rated film of all time. Other R-rated female comedies include *Sex and the City, Sex and the City 2, The Sweetest Thing, Young Adult, and Bachelorette*.


This thesis examines two of the female-driven comedies of the 2011-2012 season, *New Girl* and *Girls*. I analyze both series from a third-wave feminist perspective, looking at how each series portrays its respective lead character, Jess and Hannah, and how each series portrays funny women in general. *New Girl* and *Girls* are representative of the current wave of female comedy, and both series are critically acclaimed. Their first seasons were Emmy-nominated, elevating them in comparison to other female-driven sitcoms. Additionally, their lead characters are in states of arrested development, embodying what *Entertainment Weekly* columnist Melissa Maerz identified as a new media trend: “the lady-child... the savvier counterpart to the man-boy, that overgrown teenager so often played by Adam Sandler or found in the movies of Judd Apatow.”

This new character trope is worth examining through these two series. Therefore, I pose the following questions:

**RQ1:** How does Jess on *New Girl* exemplify or challenge third-wave feminism?

**RQ2:** How does Hannah on *Girls* exemplify or challenge third-wave feminism?

Finally, as I will argue, comedy is a male-driven industry, often defined by what men find funny. When audiences encounter funny women, they often

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judge them according to traditional gender roles and have prescribed notions of how funny women can act. Because funny women have become the hot, new popular culture trend, these notions of how comediennes can act may be changing. Thus, I also examine the following question:

RQ3: How do female-driven sitcoms liberate women from the confines of traditional humor boundaries?

I begin this thesis with this chapter, which provides a rationale for the project. Next, I review the body of literature surrounding women in comedy as well as femininity on television. I then describe the critical orientation for the study, explicating the nature of critical rhetoric and third-wave feminist critique. With this introductory material completed, I then turn to two analysis chapters, examining *New Girl*, followed by *Girls*. Finally, I conclude by summarizing my findings and proposing directions for further study.

**Rationale**

In his article, “Dear Members of the Academy,” film critic Owen Gleiberman passionately asks the voting board of the Academy Awards ceremony to imagine a world where *Bridesmaids*, “a movie that received lavish critical praise, that entertained huge audiences in a splendid fashion, and that single-handedly redefined the landscape for women in Hollywood,” could win the Oscar for Best Picture. Indeed, *Bridesmaids* did change the landscape for women in Hollywood, particularly for women in comedy. The

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film was written by two women, Kristin Wiig and Annie Mumalo, and starred a group of six comediennees. The film earned $288 million worldwide, was the year’s highest grossing film based on an original idea, and became the highest grossing, R-rated female comedy of all time, dethroning Sex and the City.7

Bridesmaids was also an award-season favorite of 2011-2012. It was nominated for two Academy Awards: one for Best Original Screenplay and the other for Best Supporting Actress for Melissa McCarthy’s performance as the oversexed bridesmaid Megan. Additionally, the film won the American Film Institute Award for Best Picture and both the Critics’ Choice Award and the People’s Choice Award for Best Comedy. Bridesmaids was nominated for 44 other major awards.8 It also appeared on several critics’ lists of the best films of 2011, including Entertainment Weekly, the New Yorker, The Hollywood Reporter, MTV, TV Guide, ABC News, the New York Times, CBS News, and E! Online.

The overwhelming success of Bridesmaids spurred a new media narrative: women are just as funny (and raunchy) as men. It also empowered studios to greenlight more female-centered comedies, which led to the creation of several new sitcoms for the 2011-2012 television season

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8 Ibid
that were created by, written by, and starring women. This “are women funny?” narrative appeared in several types of publications during the 2011-2012 television season, dominating popular media for quite a while. At Comedy Central’s 2012 Comedy Awards, Matthew Perry joked about this bizarre media trend. While presenting an award, Perry said,

This year, we saw many hilarious performances by women, as well as many idiotic articles from men about how women suddenly became funny. Yes, imagine how great The Mary Tyler Moore Show would have been had Mary, Betty White, Cloris Leachman, Valerie Harper actually been funny. If only Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, Gilda Radnor, Julia Louis-Dreyfuss had been able to get a laugh. I guess what I’m saying is, this wasn’t the year women finally became funny; this was the year men finally pulled their heads out of their asses.

Indeed, the success of Bridesmaids, the 2011-2012 television season, as well as several studies released in 2011-2012 that indicated women are not as funny as their male counterparts all prompted the current “are women funny?” narrative.

The debate over whether women are funny (i.e. are they as funny as men?) has existed for decades. A 2012, New York Times article noted that:

the question ‘Are women funny?’ comes up every few years (usually during an artistic wave that would seem to make the answer obvious), most recently when David Letterman’s comedy booker was removed

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9 These female-dominated series include: Are You There, Chelsea?, Best Friends Forever, Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23, Girls, New Girl, Suburgatory, Two Broke Girls, Up All Night, and Whitney

Before the 2011-2012 debate, women’s comedic skills were most recently challenged in two high-profile articles from 2007-2008. In 2007, controversial columnist and author Christopher Hitchens wrote a guest column for *Vanity Fair* called, “Why Women Aren’t Funny.” In the archaic, heteronormative article, Hitchens argues men have to be funny to impress the opposite sex, while women are under no such pressure and thus have not developed the same comic timing as men since they “already appeal to men, if you catch my drift.” He also noted that most successful, genuinely funny comediennes are “hefty, or dykey, or Jewish, or some combo of the three.”

Alessandra Stanley mocked Hitchens’ article in her 2008 *Vanity Fair* cover story called, “Who Says Women Aren’t Funny?,” which praised contemporary influential comediennes like Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Sarah Silverman, and Amy Sedaris, among others. The debate mostly disappeared until *Bridesmaids* conquered the American box office in 2011, save for an April 2011 *New Yorker* article that praised actress Anna Faris for being “funny like a guy.”

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The success of *Bridesmaids* brought this pop culture debate back into the cultural narrative of 2011, but the enormous number of female-created and female-starring comedy series that premiered during the 2011-2012 television season kept the debate over women’s humor in the news. Some of the most prominent female-dominated series from 2011-2012 include *Are You There, Chelsea?, Best Friends Forever, Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23, Girls, New Girl, Suburgatory, Two Broke Girls, Up All Night,* and *Whitney.* In fact, one *New York Times* article dubbed the 2011-2012 television season “the season of the vagina.”15 This claim seems accurate, as when I searched the LexisNexus database for American articles from the last year containing the words, “women, comedy, and television,” 2,183 articles appeared. This number excludes everything published in *Entertainment Weekly* and pop culture websites like *The Onion’s* AV Club, two outlets that directly confronted this debate.

As with any prominent female-centric media trend, including the election of female politicians or the debate over breastfeeding in public, backlash appeared in the media as well. This backlash revolved around two major themes: criticizing the media for proliferating a “women are funny now” narrative, and a male-driven backlash against women’s perceived dominance in society. Several media outlets chastised the media for claiming that women had suddenly become funny, with *Entertainment Weekly* leading

the charge. In one issue, Karen Valby wrote, “One hesitated to declare 2011 the year of the funny woman. That suggests some fleeting trend in which the fairer sex suddenly revealed a hidden talent.” In another article, Valby promised not to:

celebrate some tired idea that women are suddenly funny. Instead let’s high-five the notion that we as a culture may be approaching the time when we stop remarking—be it with well-intentioned delight or condescending surprise—that ladies are making us laugh and just enjoy the laugh.

Finally, in an online article titled “Enough with the Reviews Pitting What’s Your Number? and Bridesmaids Against Each Other,” Valby mocked film critic Leonard Maltin for writing that he was surprised when he enjoyed What’s Your Number because he was not a fan of Bridesmaids, that other R-rated, female-centric comedy. Valby sarcastically wrote, “Imagine his surprise that while he didn’t find women funny in one movie, he did in another.” Many journalists wrote about their annoyance with the media narrative associated with Bridesmaids. They did not like the implication that women had never been funny until Bridesmaids appeared, nor did film critics appreciate that every female-centric film released afterward was compared to, and expected to be like, Bridesmaids.

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Another major form of backlash involved men’s reactions to the narrative. In April 2012, Two and a Half Men co-creator, Lee Aronsohn, tweeted, “Enough, ladies. We get it. You have periods... We’re approaching peak vagina on television, the point of labia saturation.”19 Additionally, several male-driven sitcoms appeared in the 2011-2012 television season as well, including How to be a Gentleman, Last Man Standing, Man Up, Men at Work, and Work It, all of which revolved around men feeling overwhelmed by women’s success and empowered men to rise above their subordinate status. Unlike the new female-driven sitcoms, however, these shows were all critically panned, and only Last Man Standing and Men at Work received full-season pickups.20 This backlash, however, reinforces the dominance of the “are women funny?” narrative. These male-centric comedies directly challenged the funny-women trend by focusing solely on men and by drawing laughs from jokes about women’s dominance in society.

Thus, the current “are women funny?” debate is worthy of study because of the sheer volume of coverage that hints at, it not explicitly discusses, its relevance, particularly given that the coverage itself reflects and shapes society’s views of women in comedy. Obviously, this debate is rooted in years of gender norms and expectations related to women. This is apparent in Christopher Hitchens’ Vanity Fair article, which implied that

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20 Additionally, Men at Work airs on the cable network TBS, so it earns considerably smaller ratings than the other male-centric series mentioned.
women do not have to be funny because they are already physically attractive to men. Columnist Meghan Daum adopted a similar orientation in her *Chicago Tribune* article:

Women avoid funny because they're afraid of what they'll have to give up in exchange, for instance the coy mysteriousness that men supposedly prize above all else. A funny woman, no matter how conventionally lovely, generally has to accept that she'll also be perceived as a little bit funny-looking. When she gets a laugh, she risks subliminally conveying the message that she's making up for some hidden deficiency, that she's sad or irreparably broken.

As these two writers suggest, asking if women are funny implies that funny women are abnormal. The absence of a similar narrative about men reinforces the patriarchal assumption that men are the comedic gold standard.

In addition to the gender implications of the narrative, the selected media outlets are important because of their popularity, accessibility, and their pop culture orientation. Although several female-dominated television comedies and dramas premiered in the 2011-2012 season, the media tended to group the following female-driven sitcoms together: *Are You There, Chelsea?*, *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*, *Girls*, *New Girl*, *Suburgatory*, *Two Broke Girls*, and *Whitney*. I am examining these particular series because critics often mentioned them in the same articles. Furthermore, they

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regularly compared and contrasted these series in terms of their storylines, characters, ratings, and critical reception.²³

Media narratives are important to study because the framing of news coverage “can shape audience perception of and even behavior as relevant to that issue.”²⁴ In this case, the news coverage is about funny women and gender expectations. Studying the media coverage of female-led sitcoms offers an opportunity to examine and interpret reactions to mediated representations of women in comedy. This media coverage has implications for mediated funny women, for gender studies, and for understanding the audience response to these narratives.

Television and other mediated texts are also important to study because they profess some truths about society and have the power to shape the worldviews of their audiences. As media scholar Bonnie Dow explains,

To the extent that television teaches us something about television and how it works, it tells us something about the world and how it works. The poststructuralist insight that everything is discourse, and that we therefore cannot separate discursive practice from ‘real life’ is quite useful here. Whether or not television ‘reflects’ reality outside the tube is beside the point: we watch television and it is therefore part of life. Rather than existing in some autonomous realm outside of


political life, media is part of it. What criticism can do is to accentuate the importance of that realization and offer specific arguments for that meaning.\textsuperscript{25}

Dow believes that television is inherently worthy of study because it is part of life, not merely a reflection of it. Television is so engrained in our culture that it is imperative to examine the messages it presents because those messages become part of society. Dow also noted the importance of constantly reassessing television's representations of women. She explained that “television representations of women change over time, just as the conversation about feminism in other areas of cultural life change over time.”\textsuperscript{26} Thus, it is always important to examine how contemporary media outlets portray women because these representations are always changing. Additionally, it is important to examine contemporary media representations of disenfranchised groups like funny women because, as Helene Shugart wrote, “Seemingly emancipatory messages and representations may, in fact, function to reify dominant discourses.”\textsuperscript{27} Therefore, while it seems liberating or progressive to praise the hilarious women who made headlines in the past year, this media coverage may reinforce dominant gender ideologies.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, p. 21.
In addition to the importance of studying television programming, it is important for scholars to examine comedy as a rhetorical device, particularly through the lens of the sitcom. As rhetorical scholars Lisa Gring-Pemble and Martha Watson note, “Satire is a primary technique for deflating egos and providing social critique.” Thus, successful comedy often serves as a vehicle for social commentary. Because of this principle, comedy has to be grounded in reality. Rhetorical critic Paul Achter notes that successful parody incorporates the qualities of the institutions it satirizes or critiques and twists those conventions to garner laughs. He also wrote that the carnival, or the comic, is “an important textual mode ordinary citizens use to confront and critique power—a way to get through to power by destroying it with laughter.” These same principles apply to sitcoms as well. In a famous piece on situation comedies, scholar David Marc concluded that sitcoms “depend on familiarity, identification, and redemption of popular beliefs... The sitcom, despite several attempts to push it in deviant directions, insists on a portrayal of reality that can best be defined with statistics.” Thus, sitcoms appeal to audiences because they so closely mirror our cultural

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landscape, which may explain why the sitcom has remained the most consistently popular genre on television.31

Most media coverage of female-led sitcoms centers around the following series: Are You There, Chelsea?, Don't Trust the B---- in Apartment 23, Girls, New Girl, Suburgatory, Two Broke Girls, and Whitney. All of these television series were created by women, written by women, and starred women, although Two Broke Girls was co-created by Michael Patrick King, the creator of Sex and the City. Additionally, all of these series premiered to some critical acclaim and/or ratings success, with the sole exception of Are You There, Chelsea?, which enjoyed neither critical nor audience attention and was canceled after its first season. These series are also important because several of them have already been nominated for major awards. New Girl was nominated for Best Comedy Series at the 2012 Golden Globes in its first season, star Zooey Deschanel was nominated for Best Actress, and the series has also received award nominations from the Writers Guild of America Awards and the Satellite Awards. Deschanel won the TV Guide Award for Best Actress. Additionally, New Girl, Suburgatory, and Two Broke Girls competed against each other for the People's Choice Award for Favorite New TV Comedy (Two Broke Girls won). Because the current cultural moment surrounding women in televised comedy is rooted in gender stereotypes and

expectations, in the next section, I review literature on women in comedy as well as literature on how television series portray femininity.
CHAPTER TWO:
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The narrative around the female-centric sitcoms of the 2011-2012 television season is complex and ripe with gender implications. In the end, the media seems to be asking if women are as funny as men. Because this thesis deals with the portrayal of women in comedy, I review literature concerning the broader portrayals of and opinions about women in comedy as well as the portrayals and expectations regarding femininity on television. First, I examine literature that discusses how comediennes\(^\text{32}\) have been perceived historically in addition to examining several influential female comics. This section will ultimately offer an explanation for why audiences and critics are uncomfortable with women in comedy, arguing that they prefer women to stay within prescribed gender roles.

\(^{32}\) Throughout this study, I will refer to female comedians as "comediennes" and "female comics." While I am not endorsing the use of these terms, I use them for the ease of the reader so that he or she can understand that I am specifically referring to comedians who are female. Additionally, this language is consistent with the literature I am citing.
Because so much of the discourse around *New Girl* and *Girls* revolves around the main characters’ femininity and their female perspectives, I then examine scholarship that explains how femininity is portrayed on television and in other mediated texts. Next, given the time table and the mediated nature of my case studies, it makes sense that I look to other scholars who also analyze gender, humor, and third wave feminism. Finally, I briefly examine the first and second waves of feminism before looking at the shortcomings of these movements so the reader can understand how and why third-wave feminism appeared. Ultimately, the absence of literature regarding women in comedy makes the analysis of the contemporary media narrative around popular contemporary female comedienne necessary.

**Women in Comedy**

**A History of Women in Sitcoms**

Because this study examines two contemporary examples of female-centric sitcoms, it is important to trace the evolution of women in sitcoms. Perhaps the most famous female sitcom star of all time is also the genre’s first: Lucille Ball, star of *I Love Lucy*. Feminist scholar Lynn Spangler called Lucy “the grand dame of sitcoms,”\(^{33}\) reflecting a perception of Ball that still exists. Her series is one of the most successful television programs of all time and has been in syndication for more than fifty years. Spangler notes, however, that the series presents both liberating and constraining feminist

messages. The series was conservative in confining Lucy to the traditional role of “housewife” and in portraying Lucy as afraid of her husband, who regularly spanked her for misbehaving. However, Lucy consistently resisted her husband’s definition of what she should be, and her strong friendship with Ethel was liberating for female viewers.34 Despite some of the messages I Love Lucy sent to viewers, the series has remained popular since its debut in 1951. Since I Love Lucy paved the way for female-centric sitcoms, other important women began to dominate the television landscape. Often, these female-dominated sitcoms reflected the eras during which they aired.

Although Lucille Ball played a woman stuck in an unfulfilling role as a housewife, she paved the way for career women to dominate television. Although Mary Richards is considered more iconic, many consider Marlo Thomas in That Girl (1966) to be “the prototype single career woman” on television.35 However, That Girl was followed by the much more iconic The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970). That series centered on career woman Mary Richards, played by Mary Tyler Moore, and her quest to “make it on her own.” The series was also notable for depicting a perpetually unmarried woman. Despite Mary Tyler Moore’s name in the title, however, the series found its strength in a large ensemble cast, and many of the other female characters utilized traditional gender roles in their comedy. For example, Betty White played oversexed Sue Ann.

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., p. 94.
After Mary Tyler Moore and others paved the way for independent women on television, *Maude* (1972) changed the television landscape with a more outwardly feminist character. Spangler wrote,

> Maude’s opinions are expressed adamantly and continually, whether they concern the political or the personal. Perhaps more significantly, the series often deals seriously with issues of concern to middle-aged women, a female demographic on television much outnumbered by the younger, prettier, and more svelte.\(^\text{36}\)

*Maude* also made headlines for a controversial storyline in which Maude became pregnant and decided to have an abortion, then pressured her husband to have a vasectomy. It is also important to note that the episode aired two months before *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal.

Other important female sitcom touchtones include the female ensemble casts of *Golden Girls* (1985) and *Designing Women* (1986). Both series were created by women, and both series utilized comedy to tackle important social issues like gay marriage, sexual harassment, poverty, and female body image. Furthermore, both series centered on the power of female friendship. *Golden Girls* revolved around the lives of four women: three in their fifties and sixties and one in her eighties, and was “a celebration of female friendship and sexuality in the ‘golden years’ of life.”\(^\text{37}\)

*Designing Women*, on the other hand, focused on the lives of four female coworkers at an interior design firm in Atlanta. Feminist media scholar Bonnie Dow notes the importance of one of the main characters, Julia

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\(^{36}\) Ibid, p. 121  
\(^{37}\) Ibid, p. 160.
Sugarbaker, who “takes the personal and makes it political, validating the feelings and experiences of the other women by placing them in a larger cultural context.” Additionally, Roseanne (1988) presented lower-middle-class family life, while Murphy Brown (1988), which was created by a woman, also utilized more political, confrontational humor.

More contemporary female sitcom representations include Ellen Morgan on Ellen (1994), noteworthy for coming out as a lesbian on her show and in real life; lawyer Ally McBeal on Ally McBeal (1997); the four lead characters on Sex and the City (1998), which is often criticized and praised for its portrayal of female sexuality; comedy writer Liz Lemon on 30 Rock (2006), which is also noteworthy because Tina Fey created, produced, and starred on the series; and City Councilwoman Leslie Knope on Parks and Recreation (2009), for which lead actress Amy Poehler has also written and directed. Actress Julia Louis-Dreyfuss has played several significant sitcom characters including Elaine Benes on Seinfeld (1989), Christine Campbell on The New Adventures of Old Christine (2006), and Selena Meyer on Veep (2012). The wide range in these important characters, actresses, and types of humor each series utilized represents what Alessandra Stanley notes is the contemporary trend in female comedy: a more eclectic sense of humor.  

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Perceptions of Women in Comedy

Many scholars have analyzed different “boy’s clubs” in society, such as sports journalism, law enforcement, and accounting. Comedy, too, is overwhelmingly considered a boy’s club or a masculine pursuit, even though women are not prohibited from becoming professional comedians. This perception is mostly due to the stereotype that “women’s ‘natural’ inclination toward emotion and sensitivity has left them incapable of possessing a quality—humor—that many feel is dependent on ‘masculine’ traits such as intellect and aggressiveness.” As Tina Fey wrote in her book Bossypants, “Only in comedy... does an obedient white girl from the suburbs count as diversity.” Because of this tension, scholars have examined the various roles women play in comedy from several different angles, instead of solely analyzing female comics. Andreas Philaretou and Christi Young, for example, looked at waitresses in comedy clubs, which they labeled “sexualized work environments” because comedy club waitresses are often encouraged to flirt with customers and dress provocatively, emphasizing more traditional gender roles. Additionally, a 2006 study on perceptions of female characters in comedy films found that during times of high economic or

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social turbulence, audiences rated female characters who made sexual jokes as less physically attractive. Even more disappointingly, those female characters experienced worse outcomes at the end of their movies, and audiences rated them as less moral. These results may indicate a desire to punish female characters who defy traditional values. The authors explain:

Perhaps women who joke openly about sex are to some extent violating an authoritarian society’s sexual norms and conservative conventional values. Negative outcomes for these “promiscuous” women may reflect a subtle message that women who flaunt their sexuality are bad, and bad things happen to them.45

According to these studies, sexuality, femininity, and humor should not mix. Comedy audiences appear more comfortable with women in more traditional gender roles.

In her article on the history of early comediennes in film, Kristen Anderson Wagner wrote:

The inherently aggressive nature of comedy is also diametrically opposed to the cultural ideal of femininity as defined at the turn of the twentieth century, with its emphasis on submissiveness, deference, and passivity. Comedians deliver punch lines and kill their audiences. They call attention to society’s idiosyncrasies and failings rather than quietly accepting the world as it is, and in so doing, they often expose truths that would otherwise go unspoken.46

Because of the popular belief that femininity and comedy are contradictory, comediennes had to appeal to the audience’s desire to see them in feminine roles. While a few women, including Louise Fazenda and Mabel Normand,


became successful slapstick comics, others aimed for more refined comedy and used interviews to express their dissatisfaction with comedy and their desires to become dramatic actresses. Early comediennes such as Fay Tincher, Dorothy Devore, and Bebe Daniels would refer to comedy as a “stepping stone” to meatier, more respected dramatic roles. Additionally, scholars found that some female comics, such as Marie Dressler, Fanny Brice, and Stella Mahew, “sacrificed” their femininity by making fun of their physical appearance or developing slapstick routines around their shortcomings in the kitchen, thus utilizing traditional gender roles in their comedy. Nonetheless, comediennes were often regarded by their audiences as “lacking in both femininity and class,” a perception that may still exist.

With this understanding of how comediennes are perceived by their audiences, it is also important to examine how audiences react to jokes about women. Thomas Ford, Christie Boxer, Jacob Armstrong, and Jessica Edel’s 2008 study found that sexist humor, which they define as the denigration of women through humor, encourages men high in hostile sexism to actively discriminate against women and to express their sexist attitudes. This finding is important because it reveals that men feel comfortable revealing and acting upon their sexism when it is disguised as a joke. Similarly, the researchers concluded, “The prevalence of disparagement humor in popular culture and its disguise as benign amusement or ‘just a joke’ give it potential

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47 Ibid, p. 42
48 Ibid, p. 42
to be a powerful and widespread releaser of prejudice in our society.” The authors also describe sexism as conditional, because while sexist attitudes are not socially acceptable in American culture, they are not completely unacceptable, either. Along these lines, Dara Greenwood and Linda Isbell found that men rated by the researchers as either benevolent sexists or hostile sexists rate dumb blonde jokes as funnier and less offensive than nonsexist men. Interestingly, however, nonsexist women found dumb blonde jokes to be funnier and less offensive than nonsexist men. The authors believe these nonsexist women rated the dumb blonde jokes as funny because they did not want to be accused of not being able to “take a joke.” Thus, not only can jokes that degrade or mock women bring out preexisting sexist attitudes, but women who hear these jokes may feel the need to laugh along with them to prove that they are not humorless. The bottom line is that women can produce and understand humor, as long as they are willing to do so within the bounds of acceptable gendered behavior. Despite these prejudices, women have been able to carve out their own comedy legacies. I will briefly examine literature regarding some of the most influential female comics.


Influential Comediennes

Several women have achieved widespread success in comedy. Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, Mary Tyler Moore, and Tina Fey are iconic figures in comedy regardless of their sex. Literature on specific comedienne tends to focus on the women’s legacies or how they are remembered; for example, Dennis Bingham examined why Doris Day is not considered a comedienne, despite her roles in popular romantic comedies. Another popular branch of scholarship focuses on these women’s roles as symbols as opposed to their rhetorical comedic strategies. For example, Kyra Pearson analyzed the role Margaret Cho played as a “symbolic assassin” by using her comedy to highlight disparate power relations in the United States.51

Many scholars have examined the personalities of successful female comics, and several agree that rather than ignore their sex, many influential comedienne’s jokes relied on defying or mocking gender roles. In his study of actress Doris Day, Dennis Bingham argued that Day should be remembered as a comedienne, although her status as a symbol of purity and her reputation as “the object of male-centered humor” prevented audiences from recognizing her comic talent.52 In line with other research on female comics, Bingham argued that Day’s most famous comedy roles defied gender expectations. He wrote, “In the “wolf in sheep’s clothing” comedies, Day

often appears to play the male role. Her characters are calm, controlled, honest, confident, competent, and absolutely who they claim to be. The men, on the other hand, playact; they are mendacious, sneaky, manipulative, and shallow, all traits often attributed to women.”

Perhaps because they achieved success in the comedy “boy’s club,” female comics often turned gender expectations on their head, utilizing their presumed femininity to their advantage.

Comedienne Roseanne Barr also utilized traditional understandings of women, family, and gender roles in her comedy. Scholar Roseanne Freed wrote, “In a medium that is far more comfortable with sweetly de-sexualized mommies, Roseanne rudely confesses the burdens of female anatomy, its cramps and dishpan hands and stretch-marked cleavage yearning to breathe free.” Critics also praised Barr’s television series for defying more than feminine roles. The television series *Roseanne* was often praised for subverting traditional depictions of family, gender, and class.

In addition to studying how comedienne defied gender stereotypes, many scholars have written about how hard comedienne have fought to preserve or control their legacies. Scholar Dennis Bingham wrote that Doris Day tried to preserve her virginal (i.e. traditional) image by turning down the role of Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate* and by starring in a bland sitcom

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53 Ibid, pg. 15.
Instead,55 other comedienne more directly challenged hegemony.

Roseanne Barr regularly fought with producers, directors, and cast members on *Roseanne*.56 Barr often overstepped boundaries in her quest to make the fictional Roseanne more realistic. In various articles, Barr is portrayed as hostile, entitled, and inconsiderate, but ultimately correct in her decisions. Yet, her male counterparts were perceived differently, even though it was commonplace for male comics to exert control over their respective series.57 Freed wrote:

> The media’s selective and catty coverage of such squabbles is equally misleading. Stand-up-performers-turned-sitcom-stars Tim Allen, Jerry Seinfeld, and Paul Reiser are the heirs to *Roseanne*’s prime-time success. These men obviously influence the creative direction of their shows. Yet their presumably power-mad appetites rarely merit the sort of vitriolic entertainment news ink that has stained Roseanne since she stepped on the Studio City soundstage.58

Similarly, in her article on Margaret Cho, media critic Kyra Pearson praises Cho for political comedy, which challenged racial stereotypes, homophobic attitudes, and Republican Party ideals.59 Again, male comics control their legacies and personas as well, but female comics who exert this type of power are often portrayed as controlling or aggressive, once again punished

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56 Ibid.
for defying gender norms. In the next section, I turn my attention to a more female-friendly comedy arena: film and romantic comedies.

Comediennes in the Media

Because of the perception of comedy as a boy’s club, there is a lack of research on nichè comedienne. While some authors have written about particular comedy niches (including comedienne of the silent era, heavy-set comedienne, and African-American comedienne), scholars have written much more extensively about genres of comedy, particularly about romantic comedies.60 Although romantic comedies are often problematic in their portrayals of women (i.e. they often imply that women need to find heterosexual romantic partners to find happiness), several newer films show promise in the genre regarding women’s roles.

As media scholar Eleanor Hersey notes, “Most critics are ambivalent about the genre’s [romantic comedies’] liberating potential for its large female audience;” however, several critics highlight promising new trends in romantic comedies.61 Several contemporary romantic comedies, including *Something’s Gotta Give, It’s Complicated, Last Chance Harvey*, and *Hope Springs*, star older women such as Meryl Streep, Emma Thompson, and Diane

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Keaton. The films’ flattering depictions of middle-aged women challenge the Hollywood stigma against their age group. Additionally, several contemporary romantic comedies portray marriage as less important and valuable than friendship or career and personal fulfillment. For example, films like Miss Congeniality and Legally Blonde ended with celebrations of career milestones for the female characters rather than the traditional kiss. In fact, Legally Blonde originally ended with a kiss, but test audiences demanded to know more about Elle’s future, prompting the writers to create her graduation speech.

Unfortunately, there are still challenges for romantic comedies to overcome. As Kelli Marshall writes, romantic comedies remain problematic because they still “hinge on heterosexual love and marriage,” excluding homosexual relationships altogether. She also notes that while several contemporary films do highlight career, personal, and social fulfillment for women, the heroines still become more well-rounded after finding true love. All of these patterns imply that women need to find male romantic partners

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63 Eleanor Hersey, “Love and Microphones: Romantic Comedy Heroines as Public Speakers,” Journal of Popular Film and Television 34, no. 4 (2007): 146-159. Miss Congeniality ends with Agent Hart accepting the titular award from the women of the Miss United States pageant. The final shot is of Agent Hart laughing while surrounded by her new (mostly female) friends. Legally Blonde ends with Elle’s speech at her graduation from Harvard.

64 Ibid

to make them complete. These messages are problematic because they imply that men can “fix” women and provide their happiness.

**Femininity and Sexuality on Television**

With this understanding of how female comics are perceived by audiences as well as how they are portrayed in the media, I will now explore how femininity and, when appropriate, women’s sexuality are portrayed on television. This section will explore audience perceptions of femininity in addition to traditional gender roles on television. In this section, I explore what audiences wish to see from women, which often conflicts with the qualities that make a comedienne popular.

**Audience Perceptions of Femininity and Sexuality**

While observing the decision-making process at a television network, Jackie Cook and Wilson Main wrote:

> Working well outside the remit of social reform, and in many instances even accused of being antipathetic to its goals, TV production is single-mindedly intent on constructing programming with real appeal to target audiences. This most often means programming that pleases across the broadest possible consensus. Experimentation, “edgy” concepts, or attempts at the social re-engineering of behaviors or attitudes, all make TV executives nervous.66

These authors suggest that studio executives are often forced to include problematic, but traditional, storylines to appease the largest crowds possible and ensure their programs’ success. Additionally, media scholars

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William and Denise Bielby noted that often, writers and producers are forced to favor commercial interests over creative ones, leading to more problematic, but popular, characters and storylines. As a whole, it appears that audiences do not respond well to characters or entertainers who break with traditional gender roles. In a study of strong female characters on television, researchers found that both men and women agreed that the selected characters were strong; however, they rated the characters as neither attractive nor unattractive and rated their personalities as only slightly pleasant. Not surprisingly, women rated the characters as less irritating than men did. African-Americans, however, rated the characters as more positive overall—more pleasing to look at, nicer, and more relatable. The researchers theorize that these results could reflect how African-Americans are more culturally familiar with strong females. Thus, audiences expect to see women with whom they are culturally comfortable. The researchers concluded that “overall, this population of students accepted strong female characters, but not enthusiastically.”

In line with this research, scholars have examined popular reactions to gay characters and celebrities as homosexuality challenges traditional

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gender roles. In her analysis of Ellen Degeneres’ coming out in 1996, Bonnie Dow noted that Degeneres’ announcement “was clearly geared toward gaining the approval of mainstream, heterosexual Americans—the kind of people that ABC wants to watch its sitcoms.” Dow argued that to mainstream audiences, representation is equivalent to acceptance, and audiences as well as ABC executives applauded themselves for their newfound tolerance of homosexual characters. As Dow wrote, “Ellen was a sitcom about a lesbian that was largely geared toward the comfort of heterosexuals. In this sense, it differs little from the history of representations of gays and lesbians on television.” This example highlights television networks’ dependence on mainstream audience approval. Even when a real person chooses to come out as a lesbian, thus defying gender norms, networks have to make sure their series and fictional characters can still appeal to traditional values and audiences.

Helene Shugart examined the contrasting popular reaction to Rosie O’Donnell’s coming out as a lesbian in 2002. While Ellen Degeneres’ coming out was met with protests of her sitcom and of Disney operations (which owns ABC), in addition to negative news clips, editorials, and letters to the editor, Rosie O’Donnell’s sexual orientation received little media attention,

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71 Ibid, p. 129.
and fans were not outraged on the same level they were with Degeneres.\textsuperscript{72} Shugart projected that, although public sentiment toward gay characters and celebrities was more favorable in 2002 than it was when Degeneres came out in 1997, Rosie O’Donnell’s coming out was considerably less controversial because O’Donnell’s persona was rhetorically constructed as one of both a mother and a child. According to Shugart, this persona “positioned her squarely within a mainstream, traditional cultural context.”\textsuperscript{73} Shugart also proposed that audiences are more comfortable with gay celebrities and characters who are not associated with political agendas, and, thus, do not scare audiences. She wrote, “Such patterns may suggest that queerness is tolerated and even embraced in the mainstream for its entertainment value, which at least minimizes if not neutralizes its political threat.”\textsuperscript{74} Ironically, since the publication of Shugart’s article, O’Donnell’s popularity has dramatically declined, most likely because her abrasive nature broke with her rhetorically-constructed identities as mother and child, and she is much more of a political activist.

More recently, the popular series \textit{Grey’s Anatomy} introduced two lesbian characters, Callie and Erica, who challenged gender norms in many ways. They were not thin, fashion-forward lipstick lesbians, and both characters had previously exclusively dated men. Unfortunately, the


\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, p. 57

potential for a progressive televised lesbian relationship was squandered when ABC fired Brooke Smith, the actress who played Erica, most likely because she was not feminine or attractive enough. In fact, media scholar Niina Kuorikoski states, “Representing a 40-year-old career woman, a successful surgeon, who falls for another women and, soon after, declares her gayness seems to be quite strongly at odds with the televiusal landscape of contemporary America where lesbians are, by definition, young, good-looking, stylish, and extremely feminine.”

Even as America becomes more accepting of homosexuality and gender ambiguity, television audiences seem to prefer characters who fit into prescribed gender roles and categories.

Across the television landscape, perhaps no genre relies on gender stereotypes more than the sitcom. Media scholar Muriel Cantor noted that “macho men” are absent from contemporary sitcoms, replaced by a new stereotype of doofy husbands and fathers, most likely because women are the target audience for domestic comedies. Additionally, while appealing to their target female audience, domestic comedies often reflect female ideals of duty, love, and commitment. Cantor explained that domestic sitcoms tell women that “middle-class men are kind, gentle, loving, just, and supportive husbands and fathers and therefore worth getting and keeping. And although working-class men are portrayed as weak, often buffoons, they are

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easily manageable.”77 However, in a study of more contemporary sitcoms featuring attractive, intelligent women married to overweight, immature men, Walsh, Fursich, and Jefferson found that “this type of sitcom actually reinforces the same patriarchal ideology reflected by I Love Lucy more than 50 years ago.”78 For example, in their analyses of the popular, long-running sitcoms The King of Queens and According to Jim, the researchers found that minor plot events showed the sitcom wives as dominant; however, the major plot events revealed that the husbands were in control. The wives were almost exclusively confined to the domestic space, while the husbands were regularly shown in the public sphere or interacting with friends.

Additionally, both sitcoms featured supporting characters who challenged gender norms but were still portrayed as lonely, unhappy, and pathetic. They wrote:

Nontraditional gender roles are often represented by secondary characters who are close friends or extended family members. Some of these characters are even shown to have impressive careers. However, they are depicted as childlike, weak, dissatisfied with their lives, and ultimately unhappy—and they are consistently laughed at... The continuously featured problems of the softer, feminized sidekicks, Spence and Andy, stand as a warning of female emancipation gone too far.79

77 Ibid, p. 283.
79 Ibid, p. 130.
In these cases, Spence and Andy, the odd, feminized male sidekicks on *The King of Queens* and *According to Jim*, respectively, represent characters who are punished for breaking gender norms.

In their study of both primetime sitcoms and dramas, Lauzen and Dozier found that men were significantly more likely than women to occupy positions of power, engage in goal-directed behaviors, and enact leadership roles. Additionally, men portrayed all of the scientists and all of the military, government, and religious leaders on the chosen television series. Women, on the other hand, portrayed 100 percent of the homemakers, flight attendants, nurses, prostitutes, and strippers and also were more likely to play secretaries, entertainers, and waitresses.\(^8^0\) Promisingly, however, the presence of women working behind the scenes as writers, creators, and/or executive producers was associated with “more equitable on-screen portrayals of female and male characters.”\(^8^1\) Still, the bottom line is that audiences continue to buy into gender stereotypes and rate female characters accordingly.

Because television and comedy are rooted in traditional gender expectations and because television often shapes and reflects dominant beliefs, it is important to understand how female-driven sitcoms portray women and humor. In the current cultural moment, women are seizing

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\(^8^1\) Ibid, p. 496.
control of a traditionally masculine pursuit—comedy. Therefore, it is critical to examine how these women are changing or reinforcing the rules, which may be beneficial for both men and women.

**First- and Second-Wave Feminism**

Clearly, it is difficult to talk about something as influential as television without also talking about politics. Therefore, it makes sense that television plotlines often mimic the gender norms and politics of the era. To fully understand the impact of this overlap between entertainment and politics, I now turn to a discussion of feminist history. Historians and scholars often describe the feminist movement as coming in waves. It is worth noting, however, that some feminist thinkers dispute the wave metaphor, as it suggests that each movement had a distinct and separate agenda, when in reality they blend together.

Feminist historian Amy Kesselman explains the wave metaphor by noting that feminism “is a story of ebb and flow,” moving from periods where feminism and women’s issues were relevant, prevalent, and highly supported to periods of intense backlash where feminism was criticized as “socially destructive.” The first wave of feminism generally refers to the women’s rights activists of the 1840s and 1850s, whose primary focus became women’s suffrage. Kesselman wrote, “Women all over the country engaged in efforts to change unjust laws, improve the education of women,

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and eliminate the barriers to women’s participation in public life.”

In fact, the term feminism originated during this time period to describe women who believed that women should be fully integrated into the social, political, and economic realms.

The first wave is thought to have died out after women won the right to vote in 1920. The second-wave of feminism began in the 1950s and 1960s largely as a reaction against women’s continued subordinate status, particularly in the workplace. However, as Kesselman wrote,

The tensions that were building in the lives of women in the 1950s and 1960s, however, went beyond the need for work outside the home; they had to do with the devaluation of women in everyday life, sexual objectification, the violence against women that permeated society and the socialization of women to meet the needs of men.

In other words, second-wave feminists fought against culturally institutionalized sexism that plagued women in the political, domestic, and professional spheres. Second-wave feminism called attention to several important concepts, including equal pay for equal work, affirmative action, Title IX, the glass ceiling, date rape, sexual harassment, and gender privilege. Feminist scholar Helene Shugart wrote that second-wave

83 Ibid. p. 542
84 Ibid, p. 545.
feminism often perpetuated the idea that women are oppressed and men are the oppressors.  

Author Ariel Levy also noted that second-wave feminism changed women's vocabularies, wardrobes, tastes, and consciousness. In fact, Levy argues, the “Women’s Lib” look was popular—women often disregarded bras and makeup, wore their hair long and unkempt, and wore pants and jeans. More broadly, second-wavers rejected traditional markers of feminine appearance and embraced more androgynous looks. Finally, Levy wrote that during the second-wave, “in addition to being crucial and revolutionary, feminism was cool.” That is, feminism was a popular social movement that even helped popularize social trends, like long hair for women.

One of their biggest and most successful rhetorical strategies during second-wave feminism was consciousness-raising, where women publicly shared their personal stories of their encounters with sexism. Public protests and political activism were also popular strategies. In a 1973 speech about women’s rights, feminist Kathie Sarachild defined consciousness-raising as “studying the whole gamut of women’s lives, starting with the full


reality of one’s own.” She also argued that by comparing research findings and generalizations about women to their own lived experiences, consciousness-raising perfectly followed the scientific method. Additionally, many second-wavers appealed to a universal womanhood in an effort to unite all women. This emphasis on womanhood led to the popular misconception that second-wave feminists hated men.

**Shortcomings of the Early Feminist Movement**

While the first wave of feminism was ultimately successful in obtaining women’s right to vote, it also had some shortcomings. To garner male support for women’s suffrage, women’s rights activists often utilized traditional gender roles in their campaigns, arguing that voting was easy enough for women or quick enough for women to do between chores so that it could not distract from housework. Additionally, Kesselman wrote, “Suffragist pragmatism also intensified the racism, nativism, and class bias of the white, native-born suffrage leadership.” For example, many prominent suffragists would argue that women were more worthy of the right to vote than African-Americans or foreigners, often supporting property or literacy

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91 Ibid.


95 Ibid, p. 543.
requirements for voting. Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of the first wave is that these activists never challenged the distinction between men’s and women’s worlds, allowing sexism to continue. As Kesselman noted, “The suffrage movement demonstrates the perils of focusing exclusively on one goal, deferring others until it is achieved.”96 While women successfully won the right to vote, they allowed, and even encouraged, the continuation of their subordinate status.

Similarly, second-wave feminism suffered from class and racial biases. In her 1996 book, feminist media scholar Bonnie Dow openly criticized second-wave feminism, condemning “a white, middle-class, heterosexual bias, an assumption that a ‘seize the power’ mindset and more vigorous individualism will solve all women’s problems, and a conflation of feminist identity with feminist politics.”97 Cultural scholars Sari Bilken, Catherine Marshall, and Diane Pollard leveled three significant criticisms against second-wave feminism: 1) it often forced women to choose between their racial and gendered identities; 2) it perpetuated the idea that women in public office could help the world because of their peaceful and nurturing natures; and 3) it ignored women’s roles in outdated, despicable human practices, such as slavery and colonialism.98 Furthermore, as feminist

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96 Ibid, p. 545.
scholar Jennifer Scanlon argued, second-wave feminism was divisive, particularly on issues related to sex, leading to the “Sex Wars” of the 1970s and 1980s. During this time, feminism split into two camps: one that supported pornography, sex work, sadomasochism and other nontraditional expressions of sexuality; and the other cast as the “powerful, organized, sex-unfriendly, politically correct enemy of pornography.” Thus, while second-wave feminists often fought for women’s rights to sexual pleasure, others cast feminism and sex, or heterosexual sex, as incompatible.

This chapter has traced scholarly thought on women in comedy, examining audience perceptions of comediennes, influential female comics, femininity on television, and shortcomings of first- and second-wave feminism. Ultimately, I conclude that audiences are uncomfortable with women in comedy because of the outdated notion that women’s passive, obedient, nurturing natures conflict with the aggressiveness of comedy. This audience discomfort is also evident in the rejection of lesbian media figures including Rosie O’Donnell and fictional character Dr. Erica Hahn. Often, the corporate, ratings-driven nature of television forces television series, and sitcoms in particular, to include the most traditional, least controversial characters and plot lines possible so the series can attract bigger audiences. It is with this larger understanding of women in comedy and earlier waves of feminism that I now turn to the critical orientation of the project.

100 Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE:
CRITICAL ORIENTATION

In this chapter, I define the key concepts that are crucial to understanding the theoretical orientation I take in this project. I first explain both critical and feminist rhetorical analysis. I then describe the texts used for analysis within this project. In the end, I hope to convey that the goal of this project is to apply third-wave feminist rhetorical criticism to *New Girl* and *Girls* in order to explore three primary research questions.

**Critical Rhetoric**

Traditional rhetorical criticism has been used to analyze how effective certain chosen texts, typically speeches or published works, are in conveying messages to particular audiences. More generally, traditional rhetorical scholarship examines singular texts. However, this type of criticism can be extremely limiting to rhetorical scholars because, as Michael McGee suggested, our culture is fragmented, a fact ignored by traditional
scholarship. As a result of this fragmentation, the meaning of speeches and rhetorical works does not exist solely in a single text. McGee explained,

Rhetors make discourses from scraps and pieces of evidence. Critical rhetoric does not begin with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent. The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the other bits of discourses from which it was made. It is fashioned from what we call “fragments.”

Thus critical rhetoric examines multiple texts and fragments to understand the significance and formation of larger texts. A critical rhetoric approach is particularly helpful in examining mediated texts, like those used in this project, which are constructed of several fragments and audiences. By this, I mean that mediated texts are constructed of a variety of elements, including dialogue, images, stories, plot twists, and symbols, and these fragments are interpreted by different audiences toward which the texts are geared. Moreover, audiences use fragments to connect with texts in a variety of ways. Often, audiences bring their own fragments to texts, constantly comparing texts to other works, their own frames of reference, and their life experiences. These audience-provided fragments add to the larger collage associated with a given text. Some would argue that these mediated texts are more influential over audiences than more traditional forms of rhetoric. In his call for a turn to critical rhetoric, Raymie McKerrow wrote,

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102 Ibid, p. 279.
Facts of Life may never aspire to inclusion in the ‘canons of oratorical excellence,’ but it may have more influence on a teenager’s conception of social reality than all the great speeches by long-dead great speakers. To ignore ‘symbols which address publics’ in all their manifest forms has, as its ultimate consequence, the perpetuation of sterile forms of criticism.\textsuperscript{103}

Thus, critical rhetoric recognizes and embraces the complicated and influential nature of mediated texts.

John Sloop wrote that critical rhetoric contains three implications for the scholar. First, critical rhetoric places its focus on doxastic knowledge; that is, critical rhetoric is concerned with public argument and public understandings of objects. Second, it views its writing as a political practice, “an attempt to alter or shift public knowledge by illustrating how that knowledge has been constructed.”\textsuperscript{104} Finally, critical rhetoric is concerned with the materiality of public discourse.\textsuperscript{105} A critical rhetoric approach is particularly fitting for this project because it allows the critic to make political statements about fragments from mediated texts. As I point out in Chapter Six, analyzing these fragments allows me to make arguments about the politics surrounding women in comedy. For this project, I examine textual and visual fragments from New Girl and Girls while tying these fragments into the larger cultural moment surrounding women in comedy.

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\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, p. 18.
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Third-Wave Feminist Critical Rhetoric

Traditional feminist scholarship examines texts that reaffirm or challenge patriarchal gender ideologies. In a groundbreaking 1989 essay, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell argued that women’s discourse warranted attention and inclusion in the rhetorical canon. In 1992, feminist critic Barbara Biesecker pushed this argument further by insisting that the standards for evaluating rhetorical significance needed to change. She wrote, “What is the problem with a criterion that applies equally to all, a criterion that purportedly crosses lines of gender, race, and class and asks only that an individual, any individual, generate rhetorical works of extraordinary power and appeal?” One way to avoid an “affirmative action approach” is to link feminist criticism, like Campbell’s and Biesecker’s work, to critical rhetoric. Therefore, it is important to reexamine Raymie McKerrow’s comments on the purpose of critical rhetoric,

In practice, a critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power. The aim is to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society—what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change.

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107 Barbara Biesecker, “Coming to Terms with Recent Attempts to Write Women into the History of Rhetoric,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 25, no. 2 (1992), 144.
Thus, critical rhetoric is particularly useful when examining power imbalances, as feminist scholarship aims to do. One popular, contemporary branch of feminist scholarship examines third-wave feminism.

In a 1995 essay, feminist critic Bonnie Dow examined tensions within feminist scholarship, noting three key issues that deserved more attention in the discipline: the role of differences among women, men and women, and branches of feminism; the use of feminist theory; and the links between feminist theory and politics. Dow ends the essay by recommending that feminists create “a theoretical room of our own, an approach to rhetoric that goes beyond adapting traditional theories to the discourse of women.” In many ways, including the addition of voices of different types of women and ending the reliance on traditional forms of discourse, third-wave feminist criticism creates this theoretical space.

To understand third-wave rhetorical approaches, one must understand what third-wave feminism is. In their article, “Politics and the Single Woman: The ‘Sex and the City Voter’ in Campaign 2004,” feminist scholars Karen Anderson and Jessie Stewart divided third-wave feminism into two categories: third-wave feminism in academia and third-wave feminism in popular culture. Academically, two major books brought third-wave feminism into the mainstream: Rebecca Walker’s *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* and Barbara Findlen’s *Listen Up:*

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110 Bonnie J. Dow, “Feminism, Difference(s), and Rhetorical Studies,” *Communication Studies* 46 (1995), 108.
Voices from the Next Feminist Generation. Both books were collections of personal narratives written by third-wave feminists that highlighted their diversity, complexity, and contradictions, exemplifying McGee’s notion of textual fragments. Additionally, because third-wavers embrace these contradictions within their lives, third-wave feminism becomes harder for scholars to define. Anderson and Stewart also note that these contributors tended to be young, closely tying third-wave feminism to Generation X.

In popular culture, third-wave feminism is often set up in opposition to first- and second-wave feminism. Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein define the pop culture version of third-wave feminism as a “brand new feminism’ that appears to take gender equity for granted, is more self-obsessed, wed to the culture of celebrity, primarily concerned with sexual self-revelation, and focused on the body rather than social change.” Several scholars found that third-wavers were portrayed in the media as sexy, fun, alluring, empowered, and assertive, which directly challenged the stereotypes associated with dowdy, unattractive, man-hating first- and second-wavers. More negatively, third-wavers were also portrayed as slutty and angry.

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Finally, Anderson and Stewart warn that the media often confuses or conflates third-wave feminism with postfeminism, or the idea that feminism is over or unnecessary because second-wave feminism was a success.115 Perhaps dishearteningly, one of the major contradictions of third wave feminism is that traditional patriarchal structures, like big business, have figured out ways to commodify or sell third-wave feminism. Feminist critic Sarah Banet-Weiser explains, “Feminism itself has been rescripted (but not disavowed) so as to allow its smooth incorporation into the world of commerce and corporate culture,” a phenomenon known as “commodity feminism.”116 For example, Banet-Weiser describes how women in the 1990s bought music by the Spice Girls, a highly commercialized pop group who adopted “Girl Power” as its motto, and Nike products because of the corporation’s “Play Like a Girl” advertising campaign.117 These commercial products profited from their association with feminism and from their cooptation of a feminist message.

Several contemporary scholars take third-wave feminist approaches to chosen texts. Third-wave feminism highlights several themes and ideals for third-wave scholars to pay attention to and analyze, including themes

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117 Ibid, p. 120.
related to representations of race and class, consumerism, sex-positive lifestyles, and contradiction. In her analysis of *Ally McBeal* as a feminist icon, Bonnie Dow coins the term “lifestyle feminism” to describe the way that “television programs—and popular reactions to those programs—understand feminism as a matter of identity or lifestyle, not politics. And feminist identity is most easily represented through White, straight, single, professional women working in a supposed man’s world.”\(^{118}\) Thus, third-wave feminism is often represented as a lifestyle, not a political ideology. Characters often express feminist ideas and recognize inequality, but they do not fight for institutional change.

One of the most liberating—and theoretically frustrating—tenets of third-wave feminism is that it allows women to define feminism for themselves, which ties into Sloop’s assertion that critical rhetoric is concerned with doxastic knowledge rather than with the essence or truth of things. That is, we are all members of different communities, which Sloop refers to as a rhetoric of difference. Third-wave feminism is a complement to this idea, as women can choose which tenets they want to accept according to the various communities with which they self-identify. Additionally, Dow notes that televised lifestyle feminism contains some sort of narrative quest—like Liz Lemon’s quest on *30 Rock* to have a successful career and family, or Mary Richards’ quest to “make it on her own” on *The Mary Tyler* 

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Lifestyle feminism falls in line with the third-wave idea that the personal is political; third-wave feminists are allowed to focus on themselves.

Ariel Levy’s book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* is another example of a third-wave feminist criticism. In the book, Levy examines the current cultural moment around raunch culture—or women’s total embracing of sex-positivity, such as women wearing Playboy merchandise, objectifying other women, and utilizing their sexuality or bodies for their own profit. Levy pastiches several texts, including personal interviews, the television series *Sex and the City*, *Playboy* magazines, and her experiences at sex parties and strip clubs. Like third-wave feminism, Levy views raunch culture as a generational rebellion against second-wave feminism, although ultimately these raunchy women are buying into the patriarchy by trying to act like men.\(^{119}\) I argue that raunch is a natural extension of third wave feminism. By embracing third-wave ideals and sex-positivity, women are starting to embrace dirtier, raunchier humor. All of the female-centered comedies that premiered in the 2011-2012 season featured raunchy humor in some fashion.

**Texts Used for Analysis**

Although several sitcoms created by women premiered in the 2011-2012 television season, in this study, I specifically look at the first seasons of

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the sitcoms *New Girl* and *Girls*. Both series were nominated for Primetime Emmy awards in 2012, and *Girls* won the Emmy for Outstanding Casting in a Comedy Series. These series also received the most media coverage when compared to the other female-led sitcoms of 2011-2012. *New Girl* received attention because of its star, actress Zooey Deschanel of *(500) Days of Summer* and *Elf*. Additionally, the series premiere of *New Girl* attracted 10.2 million viewers and became the first new series to receive a full-season order from any network in 2011, as well as the number one new series for adults between the ages of 18-34. *Girls*, on the other hand, was less commercially successful than *New Girl*, but more critically beloved. Despite its critical acclaim, *Girls* has received a lot of backlash from viewers and even actor James Franco, who call the show overrated, unfunny, and whiny. Critics also bemoan the lack of ethnic diversity in the main cast.

*New Girl*

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120 *New Girl* was nominated for the following 2012 Primetime Emmy Awards: Outstanding Casting for a Comedy Series, Outstanding Directing in a Comedy Series, Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series, Outstanding Main Title Design, and Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Comedy Series; *Girls* was nominated for the following 2012 Primetime Emmy awards: Outstanding Casting for a Comedy Series, Outstanding Comedy Series, Outstanding Directing in a Comedy Series (for creator and star Lena Dunham), Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series, and Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series (also for Dunham).


New Girl stars independent film actress Zooey Deschanel as Jessica Day, a middle-school teacher in her late twenties. The series begins with Jess discovering that her boyfriend of six years is cheating on her, so she moves out of their shared home and into a loft with three male strangers whom she met on Craigslist. Her roommates include underachieving bartender and eventual love interest, Nick; metrosexual womanizer, Schmidt; and former basketball star, Winston. Coached by her new roommates and her best friend Cece, a professional model, Jess begins to reconstruct her identity.

The series is critically acclaimed, appearing on several year-end “best of television” lists. Pop culture website The A.V. Club wrote, “What began as a Zooey Deschanel star vehicle evolved in 2012 into TV’s tightest comedic ensemble piece, its five players perfectly chosen for their roles and its storylines getting at real issues of regret and loss among thirtysomethings.” While the series is an ensemble comedy, Zooey Deschanel is undoubtedly its star. The series is framed around Jess’ life. Additionally, Zooey Deschanel sings the theme song of the series, which is about Jess, and while the song plays, the three male cast members literally place a frame around Deschanel.

Because of her background in movies such as Elf, Yes Man, and (500) Days of Summer, much of the criticism leveled against New Girl focuses on

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Deschanel’s tolerability as an actress and media personality. Some critics and audience members dismissed the series for focusing on another “Manic Pixie Dream Girl”\textsuperscript{126} because of Deschanel’s penchant for playing quirky romantic leads.\textsuperscript{127} The critical reception of \textit{New Girl} presents an interesting case because critics who watch the series seem to love it, while others instantly dismissed the series because they find Deschanel annoying as a person.

\textit{Girls}

Like \textit{New Girl}, \textit{Girls} is an ensemble comedy centered around the life of its main character, Hannah Horvath. Hannah is a 24-year-old aspiring writer, and in the series premiere, her parents tell her that they are no longer bankrolling her “groovy lifestyle.”\textsuperscript{128} Inspired to finally look for a real job, Hannah spends the first season trying to live experiences interesting enough to write essays about. The series also revolves around Hannah’s best friend and roommate, the attractive, image-obsessed Marnie; her childhood friend, the free-spirited and flaky Jessa; and Jessa’s younger cousin, Shoshanna, who wishes life were more like \textit{Sex and the City}.

Also like \textit{New Girl}, \textit{Girls} presents an interesting case because it is simultaneously one of the most adored and reviled series on television.

\textsuperscript{126} See chapter six for a full breakdown of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl archetype (page 121).
\textsuperscript{128} See \textit{Girls}, 1.1, “Pilot.”
Critics enjoy the series, which has an 87 percent score on Metacritic.com, a website which aggregates reviews of pop culture artifacts and assigns them scores up to 100 percent. Audiences, however, criticize the series for several reasons, most of which are unrelated to the quality of the series. Some resent Lena Dunham’s success at her young age, while others complain about the privileged backgrounds of the stars of the series, all of whom hail from famous parents, claiming that the series is inauthentic. Other prevalent complaints revolve around the lack of ethnic diversity in the cast, the lack of “realness” in its main characters, and Dunham’s physical attractiveness.

Thematically, both series are similar. Jess on *New Girl* and Hannah on *Girls* both start their respective series with personal crises that force both them to rebuild their lives—Jess catches her live-in boyfriend cheating on her, and Hannah’s parents stop financially supporting her. Both women are essentially experiencing quarter-life crises and have to reconstruct their identities as young, single, empowered women.

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For this project, I watched the DVD copies of both seasons. *New Girl*'s first season contains 24 episodes that run about 22-minutes each. Because *Girls* airs on HBO, its first season contains only ten episodes, but they each run approximately 30 minutes. In the following analysis chapters, I examine the main character of each series, Jess and Hannah, respectively, by analyzing dialogue, plot, character development, visuals, and their lifestyles. Given my critical rhetoric approach, I was open to the themes found in the dialogue, plot lines, and visuals within both shows. As I watched each episode of the series, I transcribed the DVD descriptions of each episode to remind myself of the main plotlines. I then transcribed any rhetorically significant conversations—typically any conversation about the identities and personalities of Jess and Hannah. I also recorded conversations between other characters if they centered on Jess or Hannah. Finally, I always noted what Jess and Hannah looked like, focusing on clothing choices and hairstyles.

Once themes emerged, I analyzed those themes to discover their rhetorical and feminist significance. In the analysis chapters, I highlight the most prevalent and rhetorically significant themes found: the physical appearance and personality, sexuality, and gender implications, which typically focused on gender roles and feminist identities. Several other themes emerged during these viewings, most notably depictions of female friendships and race. Furthermore, *Girls* contained several lesbian
undertones; however, I decided that to examine these themes, I would have
to focus too heavily on characters other than Jess or Hannah. While female
friendships, race, and lesbian undertones are interesting and perhaps
rhetorically significant, they would detract from my analyses of Jess and
Hannah. Through a third-wave feminist rhetorical analysis of the two
sitcoms, I investigated the following research questions:

  RQ1: How does Jess on *New Girl* exemplify or challenge third-wave
       feminism?

  RQ2: How does Hannah on *Girls* exemplify or challenge third-wave
       feminism?

  RQ3: How do female-driven sitcoms liberate women from the confines
       of traditional humor boundaries?
CHAPTER FOUR:

*NEW GIRL: FEMINIST ROLE MODEL OR JUST ANOTHER MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL?*

This chapter examines Jessica (Jess) Day, the main character on *New Girl*, in relation to third-wave feminism. To do this, I examine the first season of the series in order to argue that her feminist identity is complicated. The series presents both liberating and constraining elements. I proceed in three sections: Jess’ physical appearance and personality, Jess’ sexuality, and the gender implications of her interactions with both male and female characters. Ultimately, I explain how every aspect of Jess’ character, including her physical appearance and her personality, revolves around her sexuality. These findings are unsurprising given the prominent role sexuality plays in the third wave movement.
“Am I dressing too provocatively? Do I need to get thicker pajamas?”

Jess’ Appearance and Personality

Despite Zooey Deschanel’s ranking as number 41 on the 2012 Maxim Hot 100 list, her character’s physical appearance on the show is not sexualized. Other characters on the series do not see her as a sexual creature, and her boyfriends are attracted primarily to her fun personality. Interestingly, while not overtly sexual, the show makes it clear that Jess is an extremely feminine woman, primarily through her clothing choices. Jess has a very stereotypically feminine appearance. With very few exceptions, she does not wear pants unless she is engaging in some sort of physically demanding activity. For example, Jess wears jeans when she moves into her new loft, when she helps Nick move out of their apartment, and when she plays football with her roommates. Additionally, she wears sweatpants when she trains for a marathon, and she wears overalls in a few episodes as a symbol of her awkwardness. Jess only deviates from her feminine clothing when the series wants to highlight her behavior. More typically, Jess wears figure-flattering dresses, skirts, and high-waisted shorts. Her clothes are usually modest. Jess wears dresses and shirts with high neck lines, rarely exposing cleavage, and she often wears stockings underneath her shorts.

131 1.5, “Cece Crashes.”
skirts, and dresses to cover her bare legs. Finally, she almost always wears flat shoes, whether they are her typical ballet flats or her boots. Jess’ style is defined by its lack of sex appeal, which falls in line with Jess’ asexual personality.

Because of the absence of sex appeal, it is easy for Jess to be portrayed as frivolous, childlike, and not sexy enough to meet the traditional heterosexual standards, as represented by her friends. In fact, several episodes demonstrate that Jess’ true self is the complete opposite of sexy or sexual. In one of the first episodes of the series, Nick asks Jess to pretend to be his girlfriend and accompany him to a wedding to make his ex-girlfriend jealous. Nick and Schmidt encourage her to dress in a more provocative and adult manner to inspire jealousy. After Jess tries on several conservative, feminine dresses, Schmidt explains,

I’m really gonna need you to step it up tonight, okay? When I see you, I want to be thinking, ‘Who let the dirty slut out of the slut house?’... We’re not trying to be mean. We just don’t want you to be yourself. In any way.135

The dialogue with the male characters illustrates that Jess represents the polar opposite of “the dirty slut.” She is the opposite of sex appeal. To further demonstrate the point, Nick and Schmidt finally approve when Jess tries on a short, tight, purple, off-the-shoulder, one-strap dress. The dress is so tight and short that Jess complains about having to wear “little girl’s

135 1.3, ”Wedding”
bicycle shorts”¹³⁶ so that she can fit into it. This comment makes clear to the viewers that Jess is uncomfortable in the outfit, and she further illustrates this point by constantly tugging at the shorts during the wedding reception. In an effort to add some of her personality to the dress, however, Jess secretly brings fake hillbilly teeth to the wedding and wears them whenever Nick’s ex-girlfriend is away. This illustrates that at the wedding Jess is incapable of being just the “dirty slut” Schmidt commands; she has to be funny as well. Therefore, the series suggests, she cannot solely be sexy.

In another episode, when Jess prepares for her first date since leaving her boyfriend of six years, she panics and puts on overalls, a tank top, and black high heels, which cause her to fall over almost instantly. Jess panics because she has no confidence in her attractiveness or sexual appeal and because she has not had to prepare for a date in several years, so she tries to dress and act more provocatively; however, the series suggests that Jess is physically incapable of being sexy in an adult manner. Cece, a professional model, has to come over and help dress Jess for her date. Since Jess does not have anything appropriate (i.e. provocative) for a first date, Cece trades outfits with Jess, lending her a tight, short, sleeveless black dress. Her roommates are impressed with Jess’ sexier, more serious look until she starts beatboxing and dancing in the dress.¹³⁷ Again, the episode suggests that Jess

¹³⁶ Ibid.
¹³⁷ 1.1, “Pilot.”
is incapable of being sexy enough for a first date and needs not just a female, but a professional model to tell her how to be attractive.

A later episode emphasizes the absurdity of Jess’ sex appeal when Jess becomes afraid that Nick has a crush on her and naively believes that her appearance is the reason. She asks Cece, “Did I do this? Am I dressing too provocatively? Do I need to get thicker pajamas? Maybe it’s my posture. I have really sexy posture.” Jess fundamentally does not understand what provocative fashion looks like and thinks the way she stands must be too sexy. This also implies that the thought of Jess being sexy is a joke. Jess is so sweet and innocent that she cannot be sexual, dichotomizing “sweet” and “sexy.”

To further highlight Jess’ lack of sex appeal, the show often contrasts her appearance with that of her best friend. Cece is a professional model and often wears form-fitting, short, and cleavage-exposing clothing. The series also contrasts Jess’ and Cece’s opposing personalities. Cece is much more blunt, angry, and flirtatious than Jess, and her clothing reflects these aspects of her personality. In one episode, Jess asks Cece for relationship advice. Jess sits on her bed in a full jacket and trousers pajama set and glasses, while Cece is draped across it wearing nothing but a strategically placed bed sheet. Cece is always dressed more provocatively than Jess, reinforcing the sweet-sexy dichotomy on the series. Cece is the “bad girl”—loud, opinionated,

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138 1.5, “Cece Crashes.”
139 1.20, “Normal.”
bitchy, and sensual, while Jess is the “good girl”—dedicated to others, angelic, and feminine.

While the other characters see Jess as sweet and non-sexual, the show seems to complicate her choices regarding her appearance by making them a sign of defiance and empowerment. Despite the fact that her appearance is immature or decidedly “not adult,” Jess embraces her girly look. Even during instances when she agrees to let her friends dress her, she adds quirky, youthful accents to the outfits to reflect her personality. For instance, when Jess’ roommates call her a “ruiner,” even though she is wearing the sexy purple dress at the wedding, Jess snaps and tells her friends that she is done pretending to be Nick’s sophisticated girlfriend. She yells,

   Okay, you know what? Forget it. I’m not helping you guys anymore. Give me my teeth back. You don’t appreciate them! Give them back. I’m gonna have fun. Because there’s nothing wrong with who I am, and I like having fun at weddings. And I like dancing. And if you don’t like that [puts in teeth], well, then tough tater tots, tooter. Jess is back!  

Her roommates eventually apologize for trying to change her, admit that they love her, and perform Jess’ modified version of the Chicken Dance in the middle of the reception’s dance floor. In a later episode, Jess has sex with her boyfriend for the first time even though she had been wearing overalls, clothing her friends had previously told her to throw out. While Jess’ too-sweet appearance may be problematic, particularly since the series implies that sweet women cannot be sexy, her dedication to, and willingness to

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140 1.3, “Wedding.”
141 See 1.9, “Bad in Bed” and 1.1., “Pilot.”
embrace her appearance is liberating. Jess’ overall personality echoes this theme.

Before New Girl premiered on television, Fox unveiled an advertising campaign for the series revolved around the tagline, “Simply Adorkable,” a combination of “adorable” and “dork.” Presumably, advertisers created this phrase to summarize Jess’ personality. She is adorable, which the series implies means childlike and youthful, and dorky, or goofy and immature. Jess embodies all of these qualities. Several small moments throughout the series reveal Jess’ frivolous personality. She regularly sings made-up songs about whatever she is currently doing on the show. Within the first two episodes of the series, she makes up songs about seducing her boyfriend, meeting her roommates, playing basketball, and singing about her day.142 When she and Paul begin dating, they skip off together singing about being in line at Best Buy.143 She also sings to end other characters’ fights and sings the theme song of the series.144

Jess also reveals her childlike personality in other ways. She invents a new version of the chicken dance, where the last step involves trying to peck the air like a chicken, because she feels the dance should be more accurate.145 She sneaks a pair of fake hillbilly teeth into a wedding and speaks in a fake

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142 See episodes 1.1, “Pilot,” and 1.2, “Kryptonite.”
143 1.6, “Thanksgiving.”
144 1.22, “Tomatoes.”
145 1.3, “Wedding.”
hillbilly accent. For Christmas, she buys each of her roommates a pair of roller skates and gets Cece a fake mustache. One of her biggest Christmas wishes is to visit Candy Cane Lane, a suburban street where all of the houses have elaborate Christmas lights and decorations. She even rings a triangle to let her roommates know when she’s using the bathroom. Jess regularly acts immaturity, perhaps indicating why the series is called New Girl instead of New Woman.

While several characters, including Jess’ students, Cece, her landlord, and her other roommates love Jess’ innocent, childlike personality, most men on the show criticize Jess’ inability to be “real,” that is, to confront harsh truths like an adult. When her roommate Nick is diagnosed with a possible thyroid problem, he lashes out at Jess and says,

You can go to my funeral, but you can’t talk. My funeral is my time to shine! I want the girls to think, “I wish I brought Nick Miller to orgasm.” I want the guys to think, “I wish I bought him more stuff.” And I don’t want Daffy Duck voices and Feeling Sticks. You don’t know how to be real. I can’t have you trying to cheer people up.

Nick does not think Jess can experience real (i.e. negative or complex) emotions, which frustrates him when he is experiencing a health crisis. Jess responds by telling Nick that he has accomplished nothing in his life, but at the end of the episode, Nick drunkenly confesses to Jess that he loves her personality. The honesty with which her friends criticize her personality

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146 Ibid.
147 1.9, “The 23rd.”
148 1.24, “See Ya.”
149 1.15, “Injured.”
leads Jess to experience several small personality crises. For example, when she begins dating Russell, the rich, older father of one of her students, she questions her immaturity. When Russell does not kiss Jess on their first date, Jess wonders if she is sophisticated enough for an older man. On their next date, she steers the conversation toward the Beatles’ breakup and breast and prostate exams, as she believes these are more “adult” conversations. According to her friends and loved ones, she is incapable of acting like a normal adult. The series reaffirms this notion by constantly making her immaturity a source of humor. The idea of Jess acting like an adult is a joke.

As perhaps an extension of her childlike personality, Jess is a talented middle school teacher. Throughout the first season, the series introduces several students who adore Jess, including a bullied boy Jess defends, a group of students in detention whom Jess teaches how to play the bells, and the daughter of one of her boyfriends, whom Jess knows better than her parents do. However, many of the things that make Jess great at her job are childlike traits as well. She uses a “feeling stick” to encourage her students to share their emotions, and she tries to use the stick with her roommates. She is also criticized for giving her students arts and crafts time instead of lecturing more. In one episode, she performs an original song about a sad sparrow to talk to her students about bullying. Although she teaches preteens, Jess could easily be mistaken for a kindergarten teacher. The series

150 1.18, “Fancyman 2.”
demonstrates that Nick’s analysis is correct: Jess is incapable of confronting harsh truths and acting seriously. The very qualities that make Jess great at her job and at successfully interacting with preteens prevent her from becoming an adult—an actualized woman.

One of the most striking aspects of her personality is Jess’ total lack of boundaries, which challenges the stereotype of women as socially gifted. In some ways, she is socially handicapped, particularly when interacting with new people, which is a source of much of the show’s humor. For example, when Winston moves into the loft, Jess announces that she wants to introduce herself. Nick and Schmidt warn her that Winston was drinking the night before, implying that Winston will be hungover, but Jess insists that she has to meet him. She walks into Winston’s room while he is sleeping, brings him breakfast, slams down the dishes to wake him up, and sings, “I’m Jess!” This example continues a long line of other instances in which Jess has issues with filtering her conversation. When Jess interviews with her future roommates in hope of living with them, Nick asks if she has pets, prompting Jess to tell the entire story of her breakup with Spencer and her failed attempt to surprise him with sex. Later, Jess tries to buy a television from a pawn shop and tries to convince the owner to lower the price. She reasons, “I’m a teacher. Do it for the kids… I just got out of a big relationship,

153 1.2, “Kryptonite.”
154 1.1, “Pilot.”
and I don’t know what I’m doing emotionally, or, let’s be honest, sexually.” 

Jess often shares too much about herself, creating awkward situations and again highlighting her immaturity. She is incapable of following social norms and having appropriate conversations.

“I got the dirty twirls, Schmidty! Watch out, ‘cause you’re about to get laid, world!”

Jess’ Sexuality

Jess’ sexuality affects every aspect of her personality. As an extension of her lack of conversational boundaries, Jess is very open about her sex life with her friends and roommates. She always tells them when she sleeps with someone or wants to sleep with someone, even confessing to Schmidt that she is feeling horny and wants to have a one-night stand. Her friends even help her pick out a partner for her one-night stand, and Schmidt gives them a ride to his place.

Interestingly, the only times the series portrays Jess’ silliness and lack of boundaries positively are when these traits help her obtain a heterosexual relationship or sex. In fact, her lack of boundaries about her sex life helped begin her relationship with Paul, implying that women can and should be rewarded for embracing their sexuality. When Jess fights with Nick because of how he treated Paul during Thanksgiving, they have the following exchange, although Jess is unaware that Schmidt, Winston, and Paul can hear her:

155 1.2, “Kryptonite.”
156 1.13, “Valentine’s Day.”
Nick: It doesn’t matter what I think, does it? Because I don’t have to have sex with him!

Jess: I do! I want to. I want to have sex with him big time. You heard me! Big time! Okay?... [Paul looks shocked] I wanna take him down to Chinatown and slice him off a piece of this pumpkin pie, okay?... I wanna do all the things that you do in a bedroom with him, okay? I wanna do it standing up and sitting down, and half up and half down, and the wiggly one, and the bear attack, and the claws in the head, and the one that figure skaters do, and the What’s for Lunch, and the Give Me That Hat. Let’s just say that I’m good. I’m really, really good!

[Schmidt gives Paul a fist-bump] And I don’t care what you think!157

After this exchange, Schmidt mentions that he also knows the “Give Me That Hat” and has put his own spin on it, trying to assert himself as the sexual expert of the house after Jess’ outburst threatened his status. Later when she goes Christmas shopping with Nick, Jess shows him the gift certificate she made for Paul, which reads, “Good for One Night of Nerdy, Weird Sex That Works for Both of Us. No Returns or XXX Changes.”158 Jess has no problem flaunting her sexual identity, fully accepting that her sexuality is nerdy and weird.

In another episode, Schmidt asks how her sex-cation was because she spent a week with her new boyfriend, Russell. Jess responds, “I did have a lot of sex. Thank you,”159 indicating that she is proud to talk about her sex life. Furthermore, when she tries to have a one-night stand with a stranger, she proudly shows Schmidt her box of 100 condoms, seemingly bragging about how prepared she is.160 Finally, when Jess is horrified to learn that her

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157 1.6, “Thanksgiving.”
158 1.9, “The 23rd.”
159 1.20, “Normal.”
160 1.13, “Valentine’s Day.”
roommates have all thought about her while masturbating, Winston reveals that he has heard Jess masturbate while thinking about the three of them, too. Clearly Jess has no problem with talking about or acting upon her sexuality, which demonstrates her sex-positive attitude.

While her lack of boundaries is often a source of humor, Jess’ total acceptance of her sexuality helps her get exactly what she wants. Before she confessed her sexual attraction to Paul, she had harbored a secret crush on him for years. Her openness with her sexual desire for “nerdy, weird sex that is good for both of us,” assured that she and Paul had healthy, enjoyable sexual encounters, which both characters confirm on multiple occasions. Jess’ openness with her sexuality is rewarded over and over on the series, demonstrating that women can lead happier, more fulfilled lives once they embrace their own sexuality. The series clearly promotes sex positivity, which is in line with third-wave feminism.

Like other aspects of her personality, however, Jess’ sexuality is complicated. Jess’ sex life seems to revolve around a tension between her skill and her confidence. Jess says she is great at sex, but she becomes insecure about her sexual skill when she wants to sleep with Paul. In fact, an entire episode called “Bad in Bed” is dedicated to Jess’ sexual insecurity. In the episode, Jess panics that Spencer cheated on her because she was not “erotic enough,” so she questions her sexual skill. Additionally, her first two

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161 1.19, “Secrets.”
attempted sexual encounters with Paul end badly. The first time, she simply cannot go through with having sex, so she turns to her roommates, her best friends, and Schmidt’s internet porn collection for help. When she tries to have sex with Paul again, she tries to be adventurous by engaging in role playing, but she pretends to be a newscaster from the 1940s, followed by an old woman and a lumberjack, while Paul pretends to be old Hollywood icon Jimmy Stewart. She also buys an elaborate piece of lingerie called the Starfish, which Paul cannot untangle, and she tries to playfully spank and choke Paul, but she hurts him both times. Encouragingly, the episode ends with Jess and Paul finally having sex in an elevator, showing Jess’ adventurous side. Throughout the rest of their relationship, the series portrays Jess as sexually gifted. When Paul is afraid they will break up, he cries because their sex is “amazing.” Additionally, when Jess has rebound sex with Paul months after their breakup, Paul confesses to his fiancée that he and Jess had “really dark” sex. He says, “Jess and I slept together... We did lots of stuff. There was talking, and there were hands, and we ruined a throw pillow.” These examples illustrate that while New Girl portrays Jess as sexually empowered and gifted, she is also sexually insecure, complicating her sex-positive identity. It is worth noting, however, that Jess becomes more confident as the first season continues, so the series seems to imply

162 1.8, “Bad in Bed.”
163 1.9, “The 23rd.”
164 1.23, “Backslide.”
that women should be confident in their sexuality to avoid looking like Jess in the earlier episodes.

Also complicating Jess’ sex-positivity is the fact that Jess is unable to go through with her one-night stand. She follows Schmidt and Cece’s advice to choose a man with whom she feels no emotional connection, but she still cannot bring herself to have sex with him. She briefly considers having a one-night stand with Schmidt, but she cannot go through with that either, presumably because she did not have romantic feelings for either man. In fact, Jess only has sex with men she is in relationships with, implying that sex cannot happen without emotional ties and commitment.

Additionally, while Jess embraces her sexuality, she fails at being outwardly sexy in the eyes of the other characters. Jess’ sexiness is a secret, despite Zooey Deschanel’s obvious physical attractiveness. All of her boyfriends are attracted to Jess’ personality, and they do not learn about her sexual skill and confidence until later in their relationships. For example, the first scene in the pilot episode revolves around Jess’ attempt to surprise her long-term boyfriend by showing up to their house while wearing only a trench coat. She pretends to be a stripper whom Spencer is helping put through college because she wants “a three-dimensional sex character,” but the best stripper names she can think of are “Rebecca Johnson,” “Two Boobs Johnson,” and “Tiger Boobs.” Later in the pilot episode, Jess tries to pick up a

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165 1.13, “Valentine’s Day.”
166 Throughout the course of the first season, Jess has sex with Paul and Russell and references having sex with Spencer in the past. She was in relationships with all of these men.
rebound man by leaning in and saying, “Hey, sailor!”\textsuperscript{167} Once again, the series implies that Jess’ sexual appeal is a joke and further reinforces its sweet-sexy dichotomy.

Finally, and perhaps as an extension of her childlike personality, Jess is often unable to use sexual terms, suggesting discomfort with sex. When she tells Schmidt that she wants to have a one-night stand, she explains that she is feeling “twirly” because she cannot say “horny.”\textsuperscript{168} Similarly, Jess and Nick get in a fight in one episode because Jess cannot say “penis,” and she later refers to her vagina as her “gumbo pot.”\textsuperscript{169} In addition to her inability to voice sexual terms, Jess is unable to handle nudity. When she sees Nick naked, she laughs and leaves the room.\textsuperscript{170} When she sees her boyfriend’s ex-wife, Ouli, naked in a steam room, Jess tries to avoid her. Ouli and the other women are naked, but Jess is wearing a polka-dotted bikini that covers her belly button. When she has dinner with Ouli and Russell later that night, she immediately blurts out that she saw Ouli naked.\textsuperscript{171} She is so uncomfortable with nudity that Jess wears a bathingsuit when she showers at the loft so that her roommates cannot see her naked.\textsuperscript{172} Her obvious discomfort with sexual terms and with naked bodies suggest an embarrassment with sexuality that is uncharacteristic of third-wave feminists, which is troubling.

\textsuperscript{167} 1.1, “Pilot.”
\textsuperscript{168} 1.13, “Valentine’s Day.”
\textsuperscript{169} 1.4, “Naked.”
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} 1.22, “Tomatoes.”
\textsuperscript{172} 1.1, “Pilot.”
Jess’ complicated sexual identity liberates her in some ways, but definitely constrains her in others. The show embraces sexual desire as healthy and fun; however, Jess’ inability to have sex without attachment signals that sex should only happen with commitment. Fortunately, Jess is not the only character who prefers sex to come with commitment. While Cece and her roommates all have casual sexual encounters, they are all portrayed as most happy in relationships. Cece and Schmidt are unable to have a casual sexual relationship without falling in love. Winston realizes that he no longer wants casual relationships, and Nick pines for his ex-girlfriend throughout the first season. Finally, Schmidt and Cece, who have a no-strings-attached sexual relationship throughout the second half of the season, develop feelings for each other and enter into a serious relationship.

Even Jess’ sex education lessons to her students are complicated. During sex education week at her school, Jess dresses up as Mr. Monogamy, teaches students how to put on condoms, and provides them with a list of alternatives to sex, like watching *Friday Night Lights*, checking each other for lice and tics, looking at pictures of STDs, and writing letters to convicts. While Jess’ sexuality is healthy and while she asserts her sexual identity, she fails as an externally sexy woman and equates sex with commitment, which ultimately constrains her sex-positivity.

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173 1.17, “Fancyman.”
“It’s so fun having another girl here! There are tampons hidden all over this apartment.”174: Gender Implications

Despite the title of the series, New Girl is an ensemble show. The series focuses on Jess and her relationships with her three male roommates and her best friend Cece. Jess and her roommates bond almost instantly. By the end of the pilot episode, the roommates are embarrassing themselves in the middle of a crowded restaurant singing, “(I’ve Had) The Time of My Life” to cheer up Jess after her date never arrives.175 She, Cece, and her roommates become what feminist critic Bonnie Dow calls, “a nontraditionally structured television family” in the vein of sitcoms like The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Cheers, and Friends. She adds, “All cases involve a group of people who care about each other, are committed to their relationships, and form bonds because they live and/or work together.”176 Within this family structure, Jess fills several typical female roles, most notably that of mother. Interestingly, however, Jess also embodies characteristics of the father, implying that the series advocates a more gender-neutral definition of “parent.”

Jess’ most obvious female role is that of mother of the loft, despite Jess and her roommates’ insistence that Schmidt is the mother figure because he keeps the loft clean and organized.177 In her analysis of Mary Tyler Moore,
Bonnie Dow writes that Mary Richards is also a mother figure to her friends and colleagues.

Mary’s sensitivity, relationship skills, and willingness to spend her time and energy on the problems of others are symptomatic of her status as mother to the group. Like the traditional mothers of domestic sitcoms, she derives her value as a person from what she can do for others. Jess embodies all of these qualities as well. She is sensitive and nurturing. She is the most relationally skilled member of the group, even helping her landlord and an armed stranger with their emotional problems. Finally, Jess is other-oriented. She constantly dedicates her time and energy to her friends’ problems. In fact, the extended version of the series’ theme song, which plays over the DVD main menus, contains the following lines: “You get down and make a frown, she’s gonna turn, turn, turn it around. She’s gonna turn, turn, turn it around. Who’s that girl? Who’s that girl? It’s Jess!” The theme song establishes that one of Jess’ jobs or defining characteristics is to bring joy to others. Jess clearly embodies Dow’s definition of mother.

Jess is always accessible to her friends, and she provides advice and emotional support regularly. Despite the fact that she is not in a successful long-term relationship, each of her roommates and Cece consult Jess for relationship advice. In one episode, Jess tells Nick and Schmidt to stop asking her for advice. When they agree, Jess immediately says, “That was a joke! I

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love it when you guys ask me stuff. It makes me feel really important!”

Jess relishes her role as emotional supporter and nurturer. For example, in the first episode of the series, Jess teaches Coach how to talk to women because his female clients kept complaining about his abrasive communication. Jess knows how to speak to people with empathy and concern, as a typical mother would.

In line with her role as the mother, Jess is nice to everyone, which makes everyone like her. One episode, “The Landlord,” directly addresses this aspect of Jess’ personality. The episode starts with Nick and Jess in a car together. Nick begins yelling at another driver for trying to steal his parking space, although Jess cautions Nick to consider the other driver’s feelings. When the other driver pulls out a gun, Jess begins yelling encouraging things at the other driver, such as, “You don’t need that gun!” and “Maybe violence is his only way to express himself!” As she continues yelling nice things, the man puts his gun away and gives Nick the parking space. After the incident, Nick criticizes Jess by saying, “You know what, Jess, maybe I don’t live in a world where I smile, and people do whatever I want.” Later in the episode, Jess approaches her landlord, whom all of her roommates are afraid of, and befriends him by listening to stories of his divorce. The landlord grows to like Jess so much that he proposes they have a threesome with Nick.

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179 1.18, “Fancyman 2.”
180 Coach, a personal trainer played by Damon Wayans, Jr., was originally Jess, Nick, and Schmidt’s fourth roommate; however, because Wayans also starred on ABC’s Happy Endings, the character was written out of the series and replaced with Winston.
181 1.1, “Pilot.”
Interestingly, he does not want to have sex with Jess alone, implying that Jess is not sexual enough to attract the landlord by herself.\textsuperscript{182} Once again, Jess is asexual. She needs something as extreme as another person to make her sexually appealing.

Previous feminist literature would have seen Jess’ motherly role as limiting and regressive because she is confined to a prescribed gender role; however, the series also demonstrates that Jess is the father of the loft. Similar to Bonnie Dow’s definition of Lou Grant’s role on The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Jess provides sage advice and coaching for her friends and her students, and she guides and protects the people in her life.\textsuperscript{183} One episode is dedicated to Jess’ efforts to stop a bully in her class from hurting her other students.\textsuperscript{184} She also protects Cece from her bad boyfriends. For example, in one episode, Jess picks up a drunken Cece after Cece broke up with her DJ boyfriend at a nightclub. Jess lets Cece spend the night at her loft and prevents her roommates from taking advantage of Cece, who becomes extra flirtatious when she is drunk.\textsuperscript{185} Jess protects and guides her loved ones, most often in the form of providing advice and guidance.

Again like Lou Grant, Jess provides sage advice to her friends. The series constantly proves that Jess knows her friends better than they know themselves, which interestingly means Jess’ advice is always correct. In one

\begin{footnotes}
\item[182] 1.12, “The Landlord.”
\item[184] 1.14, “Bully.”
\item[185] 1.5, “Cece Crashes.”
\end{footnotes}
episode, Jess becomes hurt when she learns that Cece and Schmidt hid their casual sexual relationship from her; however, after she sees Cece wearing a tacky shirt Schmidt made for her, she realizes that Cece has developed romantic feelings for Schmidt. Jess insists that deep down, Cece did not tell Jess about the relationship because she knew Jess would detect Cece's feelings.\footnote{1.19, "Secrets."} Jess is perceptive, and knows her friends so well that she can correctly predict and explain their behavior. By embodying the roles of both mother and father, \textit{New Girl} promotes a more liberating, gender-neutral definition of "parent."

Jess’ roles as both mother and father, or of gender-neutral parent, are most apparent in her relationship with Nick. When he becomes injured during a football game, Jess snaps into mother mode; she takes him to see her gynecologist friend, despite Nick’s protests, because Nick does not have health insurance. Later she comforts him when the doctor finds a problem with his thyroid, makes him see a specialist, and helps pay for the examination.\footnote{1.15, "Injured."} She regularly gives Nick relationship advice, as a mother would, and several times throughout the season, she encourages him to do more with his life than work as a bartender, much like a discerning father would. In line with her paternal role as protector of the loft, Jess orchestrates an elaborate lie to trick Nick into breaking up with his girlfriend. In the season finale, Nick wants to move out of the loft so that he can live
with his ex-girlfriend, with whom he has just gotten back together. Jess
knows that the relationship will fail again and that Nick will be unhappy, so
she pretends to lose her keys in the desert so that she, Nick, and the other
characters have to camp out together, reminding Nick how much he enjoys
living with his friends. The plan is successful, and Nick moves back into the
loft, unaware of Jess’ trick. Jess’ relationship with Nick illustrates her dual
role as mother and father of the loft, which liberates Jess from the
traditionally prescribed role as mother.

Throughout the first season of New Girl, the series makes clear that
Jess is feminine, which sometimes makes other characters respond
negatively to Jess. Whenever Jess’ identity is challenged, she defends herself
and her feminine ways, and the series does this through juxtapositions of her
femininity. The episode “Jess and Julia” directly challenges Jess’ overly-
feminine personality. In the episode, Nick’s girlfriend, a lawyer, agrees to
help Jess get out of a traffic ticket. When Julia gets to the loft, Jess offers her
homemade cookies and cupcakes and wraps a blanket around Julia, despite
her protests. Then Jess reveals that she ran a red light because she saw an
injured bird in the road, so she stopped in the middle of an intersection to
help it, then had to run the red light to get out of the intersection. After
hearing the story, Julia says,

You never know. A judge might buy into this whole thing...Your whole
thing. With the cupcakes and the braking for birds, and “bluebirds
come and help me dress in the morning”... It’s a great thing. I mean, the big, beautiful eyes, like a scared baby. I’m sure that gets you out of all kinds of stuff.

Jess is clearly offended by the conversation and tells her other female friends about it, who agree that Julia crossed a line by criticizing Jess’ personality; however, as one friend notes, “I think I know what she meant. I mean, you do like girly stuff. I mean, it kind of freaked me out at first. When I met you, you were wearing a hat made of ribbons.” These conversations imply that, while her friends have grown to accept her personality, Jess is weird and perhaps too feminine to be normal.

Later, Jess and Julia have multiple fights about Jess’ femininity. In one scene, Jess and Julia have the following exchange:

*Julia:* I see what you’re doing. I know that I’m the mean lawyer girl who wears suits and works too much. And you- you’re the really fun teacher girl with all the colorful skirts, and you bake things. And eventually Nick is gonna come running to you, and you’ll tuck him in under his blankie and—
*Jess:* What is it with you and the blankie thing? I never said the word blankie! I don’t talk like Teddy Ruxpin.
*Julia:* If I acted the way that you act when I was at work, nobody would listen to me.
*Jess:* Well, if I acted the way you act at work, my students would turn in really weird, dark dioramas, so—
*Julia:* I don’t like you, and I don’t want to be your friend.

Julia, implicitly representing a typical second-wave feminist, implies that Jess is too girly to be taken seriously and is hurting professional women; however, she also implies that Jess’ femininity makes her more attractive to men, perpetuating the stereotype that feminists are unattractive. This example reinforces R. Claire Snyder's argument that by “defining third wave
feminism as fun, feminine, and sex positive... third-wavers unfortunately play right into the popular misconception that second wave feminism was dour, frumpy, and frigid.” They end their fight after Jess’ court date a few days later, when Jess stands up for herself. She says,

I brake for birds. I rock a lot of polka dots. I have touched glitter in the last 24 hours. I spend my entire day talking to children. And I find it fundamentally strange that you’re not a dessert person. That’s just weird, and it freaks me out. And I’m sorry that I don’t talk like Murphy Brown, and I hate your pantsuit. I wish it had ribbons on it or something to make it just slightly cuter. And that doesn’t mean I’m not smart, and tough, and strong!... I’m about to go and pay this $800 fine, and my checks have baby farm animals on them, bitch!

At the end of the episode, Julia goes to Jess’ loft for a girls’ night after she realizes she has never had a female friend and participates in Jess’ crochet circle. While the episode ends on a happy note, it contains both empowering and problematic implications. Jess’ final confrontation suggests that she is comfortable with her femininity and her larger personality, which is empowering for viewers and encourages them to identify with Jess. In their article on appropriation within the third wave, Helene Shugart, Catherine Egley Waggoner, and D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein write,

Being empowered in the third-wave sense is about feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are. Vigorous assertion of one’s individuality, then, is highly praised by third-wavers, such that an ‘in-your-face,’

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190 1.11, "Jess and Julia."
confrontational attitude also can be described as a hallmark of the third-wave.\textsuperscript{191}

Thus, because she stands up for her personality and defines womanhood for herself, Jess embodies a third-wave attitude. The episode asserts that women can be strong, assertive, \textit{and} feminine.

However, while Jess is an empowering example in the episode, Julia's character has problematic implications for feminism. As the self-defined “mean lawyer girl who wears suits and works too much,” Julia seems to represent a stereotypical second-wave feminist. Because of Julia’s confession at the end of the episode that she has never had female friends and would like to crochet with Jess and her friends, the episode implies that all masculine or powerful women secretly desire crochet-filled girls' nights. This suggests that to truly be empowered and happy, women need to be feminine. While third-wave feminism asserts that “there is no one way to be a woman,”\textsuperscript{192} \textit{New Girl} implies that all women need to be at least a little feminine. Therefore, while Jess’ character is empowering for viewers, Julia’s character is more problematic.

Along the lines of “Jess and Julia,” several episodes of \textit{New Girl} end with some sort of assertive monologue by Jess where she asserts that she loves who she is and refuses to change. Not only is this empowering for


viewers, but it also falls in line with third-wave feminism. Helene Shugart wrote, “Vibrant and outspoken, third wavers appear gleefully brazen, brimming with optimism and intoxicated by their own potential.”193 Jess’ confidence, assertiveness, and enthusiasm about her femininity and larger personality, typify third-wave feminism. For example, in the second episode of the series, Jess has to get her belongings back from her ex-boyfriend, but she cannot summon the courage to confront him. Her roommates and Cece both encourage her to become more assertive, and from that point onward, Jess has no problem standing up for herself. She stands up to Spencer, gets her belongings back, and takes the shirt off his back. When Spencer suggests that she would be better off living with him than living with strangers, Jess stops her roommates from hurting Spencer and says,

I got this. I’ve got a place to live, Spence. It’s over. I spent 6 years trying to figure you out. All you are is a guy with really beautiful hair. I’m happy you cheated on me. Thank you. Because if you hadn’t, I would have married you, and then you would have hurt me all over again. And, yeah, I was scared to start over. I didn’t know what to do. And, yeah, I’m living with three guys I met on the internet. And, yeah, stranger danger is real. But I love these guys. I barely know them. I just met him [Winston]. But I love them.194

Jess embraces her new lifestyle and her new friends.

When one of Jess’ students tries to bully her by posting videos of Jess singing on the internet and by asking her demeaning questions about her relationship history, Jess snaps and breaks the student’s science project. She

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194 1.2, “Stuff.”
confesses to the student and apologizes to the girl’s parents and to the principal. When she sees the bully in class the next day, Jess says, “Look, I know I’m not your favorite teacher. You don’t like my style. That’s fine. But I’m not gonna change who I am, so you’re just gonna have to deal with it and respect it. Also, you’re gonna take this paper, and you’re gonna sing a duet with me.” Not only does Jess embrace who she is and embrace that other people may not like her, but she punishes the student by making her act more like Jess. She is aware and accepting of the fact that her personality is a joke to some of her students. Jess knows that the ultimate punishment is to make the bully embarrass herself, which means she has to act as uncool as Jess.

Finally, in one episode, Russell and Jess get into their first fight because he will not go on any of the dates Jess planned for them. He blames the drinking game he played with Jess and her roommates the night before for his unwillingness to go on their dates and challenges Jess’ immature lifestyle. Once again, Jess refuses to change. She explains, “Well, that’s where I live, and those are my friends. That wasn’t even the first stabbing this month. And, Russell, my life is just as important as your life. And if you wanna get with me, you’re gonna have to get with my friends, and that is a Spice Girls song.” The series makes it clear on several occasions that Jess is proud of who she is and of her lifestyle, and she will not change for any

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195 1.14, “Bully.”
196 1.20, “Normal.”
romantic partner. While her assertive nature challenges feminine stereotypes, it is Cece and her roommates who teach her to stand up for herself. Although some characters find her personality or aspects of her lifestyle annoying, Jess embraces who she is, which is empowering for viewers.

In their list of third-wave activist strategies, feminist scholars Stacey Sowards and Valerie Renegar discuss the resistance to female stereotypes as a prominent form of activism. Jess regularly challenges these stereotypes, especially through her view of romantic relationships. For almost the entire first season, Jess only wants a casual relationship, which is a goal typically associated with men. In fact, there is an episode of the series solely dedicated to Jess’ quest for a one-night stand. Additionally, Jess’ relationship with Paul ends because Jess does not want a serious commitment while Paul does. Jess surprises herself with this revelation, noting,

Paul told me he loved me. And I couldn’t say it back, so I said thank you. Which is horrible. And I don’t know what to do ’cause I’m always the one who loves more. That’s my thing. One time I went on a date, and by 11pm, I gave the guy my ATM code.

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198 1.13, "Valentine's Day.
199 1.9, "The 23rd."
By showing that she used to have a more feminine view of relationships, the show seems to hint that Jess’ gender identity is becoming more complicated since moving in with her male roommates.

In fact, much of the humor on the show is based on masculinizing the women and feminizing the men. While Jess embraces her femininity and aspects of “girlie culture,” she also challenges some stereotypically feminine traits, through her desire for a casual relationship and her propensity to make speeches asserting herself. Jess’ identity is in line with feminist scholars Julia Wood and Natalie Fixmer’s assertion that

third-wave feminists’ insistence on acknowledging and wrestling with complexities and contradictions within and between women motivates them to build coalitions that allow women to identify simultaneously with multiple identities that have sometimes been regarded as separate and even divisive.\(^{200}\)

Thus, Jess can embody and reject certain aspects of her femininity.

Overall, Jess’ personality is complicated: empowering in some ways and constraining in others. By incorporating so many masculine characteristics into Jess’ personality, the writers suggest that it is perfectly acceptable for healthy, admirable characters to blur the gender binary. Some of the best aspects of Jess’ personality are associated with either femininity or masculinity, but Jess’ pride in herself, her appearance, her paternal role, and her personality suggest that people can—and should—blur the lines of gender. The other characters on the series also blur gender lines. Schmidt is

considered the mother of the loft and embraces a metrosexual lifestyle, pampering himself with beauty products and designer clothing, while still embracing alpha-male sexual behaviors. Nick is emotional, yearns for a serious relationship, and loves sports, alcohol, and underachieving. Winston is a former professional athlete, but he also yearns for a serious relationship and secretly listens to Broadway soundtracks. Cece is a model, but she is also aggressive and afraid of commitment and expressing emotion. While Jess is ultra-feminine in some ways, the show encourages viewers to embrace a more well-rounded view of gender.
CHAPTER FIVE:

GLRLS: THE FUTURE OF TELEVISION OR WHINY, SELFISH, ENTITLED BRATS?

Jon Hamm, star of the television series Mad Men, wrote in Entertainment Weekly, "My favorite thing about Lena Dunham’s work is that it is universally polarizing. Not all like it, not all hate it, but everyone is aware of it. And everyone has an opinion." Indeed, audiences and critics are divided in their opinions of Dunham’s signature work, the HBO series Girls. This chapter examines Hannah Horvath, the main character on Girls, in relation to third-wave feminism. Hannah presents a unique challenge to critics because Lena Dunham—creator, writer, and occasional director of the series—also portrays Hannah. Her portrayal sometimes blurs the lines between creator and character in the eyes of the audience. Lena Dunham has done nothing to ease this conflation, freely admitting that her life informs

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Hannah’s experiences. She even admitted to *Entertainment Weekly* that she maintains a spreadsheet detailing funny things that happen to her so that she can use them on the show. To examine Hannah’s third-wave implications, I analyzed the first season of the series and argue that her feminist identity appears liberating, but is actually quite constrained, perhaps disappointing feminists. To make this argument, I proceed in three sections: Hannah’s physical appearance and personality, Hannah’s sexuality, and the gender implications of the series, including examinations of the feminine roles Hannah plays and rejects and the feminist politics of the series. Ultimately, I explain how every aspect of Hannah’s character, including her physical appearance and her personality, revolves around the troubling interplay between her sexuality and her self-loathing.

“I think that I may be the voice of our generation... Or at least a voice of a generation”: Hannah’s Appearance and Personality

One of the most obvious arenas in which the series embraces third-wave beliefs is Hannah’s appearance. Most obviously, Hannah’s body is not stereotypically feminine. As mentioned in the literature review, feminist critics claim that a third-wave ideal is often androgynous and shuns gender norms, which Hannah embodies. She is “13 pounds overweight,” and

204 1.1, “Pilot.”
she is short. In fact, when her ex-boyfriend confesses to her that he is gay, he implies that her masculine appearance helped him to have sex with her, explaining that “there is a handsomeness” to her. He also says that other people may question Hannah’s sexuality if she continues to dress in a masculine manner. However, Hannah is also criticized for dressing too femininely. In a later episode, she takes a job at a coffee shop, but her boss makes her change clothes because her short, white, lacy dress is “daring the world to fuck with” her. He says that she needs to dress in “a nice, cute top and jeans with a slim leg.” By dressing Hannah in both a feminine and a masculine manner, the series seems to embrace an androgynous look, challenging some gender stereotypes.

While Hannah regularly wears makeup, her makeup almost always looks natural. In the two scenes where she is obviously made-up, other characters mock her for looking ridiculous. When she dresses as a punk gothic girl as a role-playing ritual with her boyfriend, Hannah wears heavy black eyeliner, eye shadow, and lipstick, prompting her roommate’s boyfriend to say, “You look like you’re gonna put a hex on some popular girls.” In a later episode, Hannah lets her coworkers “fix” her eyebrows by filling them in with a dark eyebrow pencil. When Adam, Hannah’s casual sex partner, sees her, he laughs and says, "What the fuck is up with your

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206 1.10, “She Did.”
207 1.1, “Pilot.”
208 Ibid.
209 1.9, “Leave Me Alone.”
210 Ibid.
eyebrows? You look like a Mexican teenager.”  

When Hannah obviously wears makeup, as feminine women traditionally do, she looks unnatural and ridiculous to her friends, solidifying the perception of Hannah as androgynous. In fact, the only arena in which Hannah looks stereotypically feminine is in her clothing choices. Throughout the first season, she usually wears empire-waisted dresses or skirts with blouses. She always dresses in a feminine manner, although the show’s costume designer describes Hannah’s style as “lovingly disheveled,” which is perhaps a more masculine trait.

Although Hannah appears to exert a lot of control over her appearance, often the show is contradictory when it comes to Hannah’s opinion of her body. The series shows Hannah as both in control of her body, and as a passive observer of it. Hannah’s back, upper arms, and butt are covered in large tattoos of illustrations from children’s books. Clearly, Hannah sees her tattoos as a point of pride and sees her decision to get the tattoos as an exertion of control over her body. Unless she is in a work environment, she wears sleeveless shirts and dresses that accentuate her tattoos. Furthermore, when Hannah’s boyfriend suggests that she have them removed, she looks horrified. She explains that she got the tattoos because, “Truthfully? I, um, gained a bunch of weight very quickly, and I just felt very out of control of my own body, and it was just, like, this Riot Grrl idea, like,

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211 1.4, “Hannah’s Diary.”
'I’m taking control of my own shape!'” For Hannah, the tattoos are an expression of her feminist desire to take control of her body and not let her weight define her. Hannah seems to like that she does not look like every other woman. In other episodes, her boyfriend tries to convince her to work out and lose weight, but Hannah explains that she only loses weight in her face, never her stomach, and she has accepted that she will always be a little overweight. When he asks if this means she has tried to lose weight often, Hannah responds, “No, I have not tried a lot to lose weight! Because I decided I was gonna have other concerns in my life, okay? I apologize.”

Seemingly, Hannah has accepted her body shape and weight, but the show features several instances where Hannah lashes out and despises her body. This is important because in situations where Hannah has control over how her body is interpreted, she says overwhelmingly negative things about it.

While in some ways, Hannah embraces her weight and her nontraditional shape, she does not accept her body to the degree that she suggests. Girls portrays Hannah as a grotesque overeater. This portrayal sends a mixed message, suggesting that while she thinks she is in control of her weight, she has no willpower. She is regularly shown eating when she is upset or stressed, and in one scene, she eats cupcakes while taking a bath. In another episode, she confesses that she secretly ate four cupcakes in her friend’s bathroom after she learned that she has HPV, implying that Hannah

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213 1.1, “Pilot.”
214 1.3, “All Adventurous Women Do.”
215 1.1, “Pilot.”
eats to cope with bad news. Therefore, while Hannah insists that she cannot lose weight and that she is naturally 13 pounds overweight, the show proves her wrong and implies that she is incapable of bodily control. Therefore, the feminist message about Hannah’s body is contradictory.

Furthermore, Hannah does not embrace her weight as much as she insists that she does. In fact, she hates being overweight and considers her weight to be the great struggle in her life. When Marnie’s boyfriend, Charlie says that she and Marnie looked like angels while they slept the night before, Hannah rolls her eyes and says that Marnie looked like a Victoria’s Secret Angel, while she looked like a “fat baby angel.” Hannah, it seems, still considers the thin, feminine, and elegant Marnie more beautiful than she is, or at least complies with what she views as societal standards of beauty. In a later episode, Adam mocks Hannah for thinking she knows what real struggle is because she is slightly overweight. She sobs and yells, “I am 13 pounds overweight, and it has been awful for me my whole life!” Hannah, a privileged, educated young woman, genuinely believes that her weight provides her with the artistic angst necessary to be a serious, respected writer. Thus, while Hannah claims to accept her body, the series makes it clear that she hates it.

The second major arena where Hannah complicates her third-wave identity is her self-serving personality. Hannah is extremely self-centered,
which falls in line with the third wave’s focus on the self. Her parents lament that Hannah “does what she wants when she wants to do it, and she has fun. And then she thinks about that fun, and she learns from that fun.” Her parents worry that Hannah has no practical career possibilities or life plans because she is too concerned with fun and instant gratification. While Hannah does plan to become a professional writer eventually, she rarely works on her writing, apart from keeping a journal. When her roommate’s boyfriend discovers the journal, he learns that Marnie complains about his “smothering” love and is no longer attracted to him, ultimately leading to their breakup. Hannah watches the breakup unfold, then turns to Marnie and says, “Hey, Marnie, if you had read the essay, and it wasn’t about you, do you think you would have liked it? Just as, like, a piece of writing?” When Hannah should have been comforting her best friend over the breakup that her journal caused, she refocuses the conversation on her own writing and talent. Hannah regularly demands attention and places herself and her needs first.

Hannah’s self-centered behavior actually falls in line with third-wave feminism, although most critics assume her self-absorption is representative of her place in the Millennial Generation. Feminist critic Helene Shugart wrote,

A third-wave philosophy also is individually liberating in that it absolves women of responsibility to the collective. Rather than

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219 1.6, "The Return."
220 1.5, "Hard Being Easy."
shouldering the burden of all women, third wavers are responsible to and for themselves, not representative of and thus beholden to generations of women past, present, and future.”

Thus, Hannah is allowed to make terrible decisions and focus on herself without worrying about how she represents womankind. Shugart, Catherine Waggoner, and D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein also wrote, “Being empowered in the third-wave sense is about feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are.” This means Hannah can define feminism for herself and continue to make poor life choices while still being empowered.

While her behavior falls in line with third-wave feminism, Hannah’s complete self-absorption prevents her from maintaining meaningful personal relationships, perhaps preventing viewers from seeing a feminist identity as worthwhile. Instead of equating feminism with independence or an empowering focus on the self, Girls equates feminism with loneliness by destroying Hannah’s relationships. After Marnie’s breakup, which Hannah refuses to acknowledge her role in instigating, Hannah never consoles her friend, instead focusing her energy on turning her casual sex partner into a boyfriend. After several episodes of build-up, Hannah and Marnie end their friendship and move out of their shared apartment after a huge fight where

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Marnie reveals that Hannah is selfish, crazy, and a bad friend. Marnie points out that they only ever discuss Hannah’s problems and that Hannah does not have any friends from preschool, to which, Hannah replies, “Uh, I have a lot of friends from preschool. I’m just not speaking to them right now.” Hannah and Marnie end their friendship after Hannah admits, “Maybe that’s not what’s important to me right now. I don’t really give a shit about being a good friend. I have bigger concerns.” While Hannah sacrifices her relationship with her best friend to focus on her own romantic relationship, her selfishness destroys her romance as well.

Hannah’s selfishness also manifests itself in her romantic life. After Hannah and Adam end their casual sex relationship, Hannah learns that Adam is a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, which his friend describes as his most defining character trait. After she confronts Adam about omitting such a big part of his life, they have the following exchange:

*Adam:* You never asked! You never asked me anything besides, ‘Does this feel okay?’ or ‘Do you like my skirt?’ or ‘How much is your rent?’ I’m not gonna fucking talk your ear off about shit you don’t ask about. You don’t wanna know me! You want to come over in the night and have me fuck the dog shit out of you, then you want to leave and write about it in your diary. You don’t want to know me!

*Hannah:* Do you even think about me when I’m not there?

*Adam:* See?!

Adam tries to confront Hannah about her self-absorbed tendencies, but she steers the conversation back around to her own needs. Only after Hannah

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223 1.9, "Leave Me Alone."
224 Ibid.
225 1.7, "Welcome to Bushwick/The Crackcident."
agrees to pay more attention to Adam will he agree to date her. Ultimately, however, Hannah and Adam break up because she is less committed to their relationship than he is. She does not return his declaration of love and ignores his obvious desire to move in with her. In fact, she returns Adam’s declaration of love with an assertion that she has “actual things” she wants to achieve before she can focus on a relationship and says that he distracts her from her goals. After Hannah fought for weeks to make Adam commit to her, she rejects his love once they begin dating seriously. Hannah’s rejection destroys Adam emotionally and physically—he is hit by a car while they break up in the middle of the street. Therefore, while one of the major tenets of third-wave feminism involves focusing on the self, the series seems to punish Hannah for being selfish by essentially destroying her most important relationships. These examples demonstrate that the series seems to punish Hannah for focusing too much on herself, which makes feminism, if this is in fact feminism, seem self-destructive and unrewarding.

While Hannah’s focus on herself could be read as empowering since it implies self-confidence or self-import, the series makes it obvious that Hannah hates herself. I have previously discussed Hannah’s insecurity over her weight, but the series also makes clear that Hannah eats because of insecurity and sadness. She secretly eats cupcakes in Shoshanna’s bathroom when she learns that she has HPV. When Marnie reminds Hannah that she

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226 1.10, “She Did.”
227 1.3, “All Adventurous Women Do.”
needs to ask her parents for money to pay her share of the rent, Hannah
snacks on chicken, cake, and spaghetti.\textsuperscript{228} This portrayal of Hannah's weight
issues clashes with Lena Dunham's proclamation to \textit{Entertainment Weekly.}
She said, "My point with getting naked is never proven. It's not like, 'Oh, I did
it the first season, and now you guys get that there's women of a certain size
on TV, so I'm done.'"\textsuperscript{229} Dunham implies that she gets naked on the series to
make audiences more comfortable with average women's bodies, i.e. the
bodies of women without thin, model-esque frames. Hannah's overeating
problems, however, remove Hannah's agency and control over her body.

Hannah also exhibits her lack of confidence through her descriptions
of herself. As mentioned earlier, when Charlie calls her an angel, she
describes herself as a "fat baby angel." When Marnie asks Hannah not to
leave her during a party, she responds that Marnie has nothing to worry
about; Hannah is a "loser."\textsuperscript{230} When Hannah finally gets a chance to read
some of her writing at a literary event, she panics and chooses a terrible
story about the death of an online acquaintance because she thought her
favorite and most cherished stories were not serious enough for a
sophisticated audience. She has no real confidence in her work as a writer.
Finally, when Marnie and Hannah end their friendship, they have the
following exchange:

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{228} 1.6, "The Return."
\item \textsuperscript{229} Melissa Maerz, "#ItGirl," \textit{Entertainment Weekly}, February 8, 2013: 42.
\item \textsuperscript{230} 1.7, "Welcome to Bushwick/The Crackcident."
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Marnie: No, but you judge everyone, and yet you ask them not to judge you.

Hannah: That is because no one could ever hate me as much as I hate myself, okay? So any mean thing someone’s gonna think of to say about me, I’ve already said to me about me, probably in the last half hour.231

Additionally, Hannah admits at various points over the course of the first season, “I hate everyone who loves me,”232 and “I hate myself.”233 The series demonstrates, both directly and indirectly, how much Hannah hates herself. Again, this is not an empowering message for viewers.

“I’m, like, making your fantasies come true! Why are you laughing?”234:

Hannah’s Sexuality

Hannah’s sex-positive lifestyle is portrayed as both liberating and constraining for her. Hannah begins the series in a casual sex partnership with Adam, and she relishes in her sexual desire. She openly discusses her sexual relationship with her friends, divulging intimate details about Adam’s sexual fetishes and showing them a picture of his penis.235 Despite her desire to date Adam exclusively, Hannah offers to have sex with two other men—her ex-boyfriend and her boss—who both reject her. She also has sex while on a date with an acquaintance from high school days after breaking up with Adam.236 Additionally, when Hannah learns that she has a sexually transmitted disease, she reframes that problem more positively, eventually

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231 1.9, “Leave Me Alone.”
232 1.5, “Hard Being Easy.”
233 1.10, “She Did.”
234 1.5, “Hard Being Easy.”
Tweeting that “all adventurous women do.”237 She is a deeply sexual character and openly flaunts her sexuality, even though she makes terrible sexual choices. In fact, Hannah may be seen as a sexual train wreck—she picks terrible sexual partners including abusive Adam, her gay ex-boyfriend, and her creepy boss, who may or may be sexually harassing his female employees.238

In line with the idea of “raunch culture,” which I discussed in the review of literature, Hannah also has sexually explicit conversations. When Marnie sleeps in Hannah’s room to avoid her boyfriend, Hannah asks, “What does it even feel like to be loved that much?... I think you need to admit something to yourself, which is that you are sick of eating him out. Because he has a vagina.”239 Additionally, Hannah tells Adam about attending her friend’s abortion. Adam is taken by her flippancy while discussing such a serious topic, for which Hannah apologizes, but explains, “I just mean, what was she gonna do, like have a baby and, you know, take it to her babysitting job? It’s not realistic.”240 When Hannah learns that her ex-boyfriend most

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237 1.3, “All Adventurous Women Do.”
238 In defense of Hannah, all of the Girls make poor sexual choices. Marnie hates her clingy partner, but has sex with him after he breaks up with her because she does not want to be alone. She also has sex with an unattractive stranger at Jessa’s wedding. Jessa has sex with several strangers, an engaged ex-boyfriend, flirts with the married man whose children she nannies, and she marries a pretentious older pervert who had previously tried to initiate a threesome with her and Marnie. Shoshanna is a virgin through most of the season, but she tries to lose her virginity on a first date with an online match and eventually has sex with Hannah’s aimless, 30-something boss at the coffee shop. All of the women on the series make poor choices (See 1.1, “Pilot,” 1.2, “Vagina Panic,” 1.5, “Hard Being Easy,” 1.7, “Welcome to Bushwick/The Crackcident,” 1.9, “Leave Me Alone,” and 1.10, “She Did.”).
239 1.1, “Pilot”
240 1.2, “Vagina Panic.”
likely gave her HPV that he contracted from a promiscuous ex, Hannah exclaims, “I knew it was her ‘cause that girl wears floral capris like her hymen is still intact, but she was such a slut in such a big way.”

Finally, when Hannah has an STD test, she openly discusses all of her fears about AIDS with her doctor, leading to the following disturbing conversation:

_Hannah:_ You know if you have AIDS, there’s a lot of stuff people aren’t going to bother you about, like, you know, for example, no one’s going to call you on the phone and say, ‘Did you get a job, or did you pay your rent, or are you taking an HTML course?’ because all they’re going to say is, like, you know, ‘Congratulations on not being dead.’ You know, and it’s also a really good excuse to be mad at a guy. It’s not just something dumb, like, ‘You didn’t text me.’ It’s like, ‘You gave me AIDS, so deal with that. Forever.’ Maybe I actually am not scared of AIDS. Maybe I thought I was scared of AIDS, and what I really am is wanting AIDS.

_Doctor:_ That is an incredibly silly thing to say. You do not want AIDS. Do you know that every 35 minutes a woman is newly diagnosed with HIV, and a third of those women are under the age of 30, and many of them will die of AIDS?

_Hannah:_ So you’re saying that if Adam gave me AIDS, then I’m definitely going to die of it?

_Doctor:_ No, I’m not saying that... You could not pay me enough to be 24 again.

Hannah’s raunchy attitude and absence of a filter cause her to admit that she is secretly jealous of the power and leverage AIDS gives its victims. Hannah is so blunt and open with her sexuality, that often the series portrays her as a sexual idiot. She cannot fathom how horrific a fatal disease like AIDS is because she just wants attention, tying back to her self-absorption. Her sexual stupidity also emerges when she talks about her clearly degrading relationship with Adam. She openly discusses her bruises, humiliation, and

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241 1.10, “She Did.”
242 1.2, “Vagina Panic.”
hurt feelings, and never seems to understand that her relationship with
Adam is abnormal and unfulfilling.

While her raunchy attitude does fall in line with third-wave culture
and carves out a space for the “woman child” in popular culture, the series
seems to punish Hannah for her explicitness. Her friends react negatively to
Hannah’s crass attitude, such as when Hannah shows her friends and
coworkers a picture of Adam’s penis.\textsuperscript{243} When Hannah discovers that she has
HPV, she suspects that she indirectly contracted it from her ex-boyfriend’s
ex-girlfriend and tells Marnie, “And she’s always, like, liking my Facebook
statuses. It’s such a weird, aggressive move. It’s like, ‘Oh, sorry I passed you
an STD, but I enjoy your quirky web presence.’” This leads Marnie to
continue crying and ask, “How can you joke at a time like this, Hannah?”\textsuperscript{244}
Hannah’s explicitness should be empowering, but her friends and confidants
are consistently disgusted by her, and many of her comments undercut her
intelligence. The series seems to imply that raunch and sexual explicitness
are signs of stupidity or immaturity, perpetuating the stigma associated with
sexually empowered women.

Hannah’s sexually explicit conversations are a source of humor on the
series. They paint her as adolescent and socially handicapped. When
Hannah has her first truly promising job interview on the series, she bonds
with her interviewer about hating hipsters and hanging out in the same

\textsuperscript{243} 1.4, “Hannah’s Diary”
\textsuperscript{244} 1.3, “All Adventurous Women Do.”
neighborhoods of New York. When the interviewer reveals that he attended Syracuse University, Hannah jokes, “I read a statistic that said that Syracuse has the highest incident of date rape of any university.... Which weirdly went way down the year that you graduated... That was just a joke because I was saying that there was no date rape because they figured out who it was who was doing it, and it was you.”

The interviewer lectures Hannah about appropriate workplace conversation and says he cannot hire her. Hannah has no problem making sexually explicit jokes or comments, even when they cost her first well-paying job. Hannah’s raunchy comments are funny to the audience because of the awkward situations they create, but her comments are horrifying to the other characters on the show. Again, the series seems to miss the mark by representing Hannah’s sexual empowerment as inappropriate instead of having her legitimately own her sexuality.

While Hannah’s sexual desire is liberating, other aspects of her sex life are problematic. Instead of reveling in her casual sex partnership, Hannah constantly tries to make Adam commit to her. Hannah and the other characters refer to her as miserable, and Hannah only seems truly happy after Adam agrees to exclusively date her. The series implies that casual sexual relationships are not as satisfying as traditional monogamy and commitment, ultimately reinforcing the dominant heteronormative idea of courtship. Furthermore, the series never portrays Hannah as sexually

245 1.2, “Vagina Panic.”
satisfied. Her sexual encounters with Adam are always awkward and focused on his pleasure. Every pornographic, degrading sexual act Hannah participates in—pretending to be a hooker, dressing up like a gothic girl, sending Adam a naked photo, insulting Adam while he masturbates, lying on her stomach and holding her legs behind her—is for Adam’s benefit. In fact, immediately after ending their casual relationship, Hannah watches Adam masturbate and participates in a role-play scenario he devised. When she tries to masturbate alongside him, he forbids her from doing so. Not only does she stop and ignore her own desires, she continues participating in his role-play fantasy, even though he had just broken up with her against her wishes. Furthermore, after one sexual encounter, Hannah gasps, “That was really good. That was so good. I almost came.”

Hannah is never shown having an orgasm or enjoying sex—in fact, she only complains about it, regularly pointing out bruises that she received from sex with Adam or being yelled at by Adam for not taking his orders. The series completely overlooks Hannah’s sexual pleasure. Her sexual encounters seem to imply that to Hannah, sex is humiliating, unpleasant, and, worst of all, a means to receive male attention. While Hannah’s focus on male pleasure seems like a deviation from her self-absorption, it actually calls attention to her pathology. Hannah ignores her own desires to seek approval from the men in her life. She seems to equate sex with attention. Furthermore, Hannah’s

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246 Girls, 1.2, “Vagina Panic.”
sexual behavior could also be read as a performance—she acts the way she
\textit{thinks} a sexually liberated woman is supposed to act, although she is too
immature to enjoy or comprehend her sexual experiences.

In addition to ignoring her desires, the series portrays Hannah as
abnormal and scary in bed. While Adam regularly engages in strange sexual
role-play or abusive sexual acts, the early episodes of the series do not
explain whether Hannah enjoys this type of demeaning sex.\footnote{247} Hannah’s
sexual practices outside of her relationship with Adam are addressed in the
sixth episode of the season, when she has sex with a more “normal” man
from her hometown. The encounter is awkward and portrayed as
undesirable for both Hannah and Eric, her date. While having sex with Eric,
Hannah bites him and then tries to initiate sexual experimentation, until he
protests and asks that they just have sex. Hannah apologizes for being too
aggressive, explaining that she was only trying to guess what he wanted from
her. Again, Hannah’s focus is only on male pleasure. Several silent seconds
later, she asks Eric, “I’m tight like a baby, right?” to which Eric exasperatedly
yells, “Come on!”\footnote{248} While third-wave feminism embraces nontraditional
sexual desires, the series seems to punish Hannah’s sexual behavior. Eric, a
genuinely nice, caring, attractive, and wealthy man from her hometown is
repulsed by Hannah’s behavior, which implies that traditionally attractive
men will never be attracted to Hannah. Throughout the series, Hannah’s

\footnote{247} The second season premiere seems to address this omission when Adam insists, “You said I made you feel like your whole body is a clit!” (2.1, ”It’s About Time”)
\footnote{248} \textit{Girls}, 1.6, ”The Return.”
sexual behavior is constrained in several ways—she never enjoys sex, she focuses on male pleasure rather than her own, and she is unattractive to “normal” men. Whereas rhetorical critics have claimed that sexual activity and independence can be liberating for females, Girls seems to discipline Hannah’s sexual desire.

In addition to being sexually immature and abnormal, Hannah also uses her sexuality as yet another outlet for her self-loathing. Several of Hannah and Adam’s sexual exploits involve degrading Hannah. They engage in sexual role play where Hannah pretends to be an underage prostitute and a high-powered career woman who needs to be “punished.” When they break up, Hannah agrees to stay around and watch Adam masturbate. The series most directly confronts this issue when Adam sends Hannah a picture of his penis, then admits that the picture was not for her. Marnie and Charlie tell Hannah not to respond to the text because it is insulting to send her a sexual picture meant for another woman. Hannah agrees, but when they leave the room, she sends Adam a picture of her breasts. When Hannah finally gathers the courage to break up with Adam over the picture incident, she explains,

It makes me feel stupid and pathetic to get a picture of your dick that I know was meant for someone else, and you didn’t even bother to explain because I made you think that you don’t have to explain... I just want someone who wants to hang out all the time and thinks I’m the best person in the world, and wants to have sex with only me. And it makes me feel very stupid to tell you all this because it makes me

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249 1.4, “Hannah’s Diary.”
sound like a girl who wants to, like, go to brunch, and I really don’t wanna go to brunch, and I don’t want you to, like, sit on the couch while I shop or even, like, meet my friends. I don’t even want that, okay? But I also don’t wanna share a sex partner with a girl who seems to have asked for a picture of your dick. 250

This moment is empowering for Hannah. She finally confesses that Adam makes her feel terrible and demands more for herself; however, when Adam kisses her in response, she immediately has sex with him again, not realizing that Adam considered it break-up sex. Hannah even admits that she lets Adam hit her body during sex. 251 She is consistently degraded and humiliated by Adam.

“I just tried to fuck you, sue you, and extort you. I’m fucking nuts!” 252

Hannah’s Gender Implications

Much like Jess on New Girl, Hannah’s life revolves around her own “nontraditionally structured television family.” 253 Hannah lives with her longtime best friend, Marnie, an uptight, image-obsessed art gallery employee. She and Marnie regularly hang out with their two other friends, Jessa, a free-spirited British nanny; and Jessa’s cousin Shoshanna, who is slightly younger than the other characters and obsessed with girlie culture. Unlike Jess on New Girl, Hannah plays no traditionally feminine roles within this family because she is portrayed as a failure at all of them.

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250 Ibid.
251 1.3, “All Adventurous Women Do.”
252 1.5, “Hard Being Easy.”
Hannah is not a good daughter to her real parents or to her surrogate family. When her parents cut off her financial support in the pilot, Hannah reveals what a terrible daughter she is. She protests their decision, reasoning that “I’m your only child, it’s not like I’m draining all your resources.” She ignores her mother’s response that they are professors and therefore not rich enough to fund an additional adult lifestyle. During this dinner conversation, Hannah tries to order dessert on her parent’s tab, only to be cut off again. In retaliation, Hannah threatens to cut her parents out of her life, refuses to see them before they leave New York, and implies that she may turn to drugs or promiscuity without their financial support. She says, “Okay, my friend Sophie, her parents don’t support her, last summer she had two abortions. Right in a row. And no one came with her.” Later in the series, Hannah’s parents pay for her to fly home and celebrate their wedding anniversary together, but Hannah cancels their dinner plans so that she can go on a date with a local pharmacist.

Hannah also fails as a daughter in her makeshift family. She is incapable of accepting any form of guidance or criticism. Despite this, Hannah is the glue holding her makeshift family together. For example, Marnie and Jessa have never been close, but they first bond when they both realize how much Hannah has failed them as a friend. Hannah is the only person who gets along with Marnie, Jessa, and Shoshanna outside of their

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254 1.1, “Pilot.”
255 Ibid.
256 1.6, “The Return.”
group hangouts. However, while Hannah binds the group, she certainly does not lead it. She is not the mother in her nontraditional family dynamic. She is too self-absorbed to support or nurture anyone else. She is the opposite of nurturing; she is destructive. After breaking up Marnie’s relationship with Charlie, Hannah completely ignores Marnie, making her feel abandoned and missing Marnie’s obvious signs of depression, such as her sexual experimentation, failed attempts to seduce Charlie, and passive-aggressive comments about financially supporting Hannah.\

Besides completely ignoring Marnie, Hannah also physically and mentally destroys Adam. She finally succeeds in making Adam confide in her, commit to her, and love her, only to break up with him for being too clingy. When he tries to run away from her after the break-up, he is hit by a car. While Hannah did not necessarily plan for Adam to fall in love with her, she told Adam that she wanted someone to love her. While breaking off their casual sexual relationship before they exclusively dated, Hannah explained, “I just want someone who wants to hang out all the time and thinks I’m the best person in the world and wants to have sex with only me.” Hannah implied that she was ready for commitment, which made Adam confide in and fall in love with her. Her interpersonal relationships demonstrate that Hannah is

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257 See 1.4, “Hannah’s Diary”; 1.5, “Hard Being Easy”; 1.8, “Weirdos Need Girlfriends, Too”; and 1.9, “Leave Me Alone.” Hannah continues destroying Marnie’s romantic life in the second season, as well. In one episode, she shows up while high on cocaine to Marnie’s new boyfriend’s house shortly after their first sexual encounter to tell Marnie that she is a bad friend, and in the next, she invites Marnie to a dinner party without warning her that Charlie and his new girlfriend will be there because she is trying to punish Marnie for having sex with her ex-boyfriend (See 2.3, “Bad Friend”; and 2.4, “It’s a Shame About Ray”).

258 1.4, “Hannah’s Diary.”
not other-oriented, which feminist critic Bonnie Dow cites as one of the most critical maternal traits.\(^{259}\) While this could be read as an empowering rejection of traditional feminine roles, Hannah is so nontraditional that she borders on completely unsympathetic to the audience.

Clearly Hannah is unlike any other woman on television. It is liberating that she cannot fit into any prescribed gender roles. Sowards and Renegar note that resistance to stereotypes is a form of third-wave activism.\(^{260}\) Additionally, third-wave feminism is focused on the self. Shugart wrote, “Rather thanShouldering the burden of all women, third wavers are responsible to and for themselves, not representative of and thus beholden to generations of women past, present, and future.”\(^{261}\) Thus, Hannah can reject typical feminine roles, focus on herself, and still be empowering. However, Hannah is still troubling for viewers because they cannot identify with her. In many ways, Hannah seems to despise women, including herself. This is not a “girl power” show. Hannah has no real concern for the other people in her life. This becomes clear by examining her relationship with her best friend, Marnie.

In addition to breaking up Marnie’s long-term relationship, Hannah depends on Marnie to pay their full rent. She always promises to ask her

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\(^{261}\) Helene A. Shugart, “Isn’t It Ironic? The Intersection of Third-Wave Feminism and Generation X,” Women’s Studies in Communication 24, no. 2 (2001): 133. DOI: 10.1080/07491409.2001.10162432
parents for money, but never does so, always presuming that Marnie can afford to pay both halves. In the episode following Marnie’s breakup, Hannah leaves town and does not provide emotional support to her friend. In the second half of the season, Hannah is largely absent from Marnie’s life. When Marnie ends their friendship, she calls Hannah, “a big, ugly fucking wound.” The series makes it clear that Marnie is correct, even though she has been an equally unsupportive friend to Hannah. Hannah is selfish. She does not care about other people. She subscribes to gender roles so nontraditional that audiences cannot connect with Hannah.

While Girls may liberate Hannah from traditional gender roles, the series sends conflicting messages about Hannah’s role as a feminist. The series seems to directly address one feminist debate in the episode, “Hannah’s Diary,” when she encounters sexual harassment. When Hannah’s new boss begins giving her breast massages and spanking her at work, she initially panics, consulting two of her coworkers about what to do. They both encourage her to let her boss continue inappropriately touching her because he treats them better and gives them bigger bonuses. Hannah eventually decides to use her sexuality as a weapon by letting her boss continue to sexually harass her so that she can do a terrible job at work—she cannot properly break down boxes and regularly arrives to the office late. She eventually offers to have sex with her boss because she thinks it will make an

\[262\] 1.9, “Leave Me Alone.”
interesting story for her book of essays, and, therefore, will help her career. Hannah uses her boss’ sexism for her own personal gain, embracing a third-wave, sex-positive perspective.

Although Hannah appears to be a feminist, embracing sex-positivity and experimentation with gender norms, the series seems to conflate visibility with politics. In her analysis of the narrative around Ellen Degeneres’ coming out in 1997, media critic Bonnie Dow notes the difference between visibility and politics. She concludes that “Ellen was a sitcom about a lesbian that was largely geared toward the comfort of heterosexuals. In this sense, it differs little from the history of representations of gays and lesbians on television.” She also criticizes the series for emphasizing “personal issues over political ones; that is, it presents acceptance by family and friends as the most crucial issues Ellen faces.... Ellen simply refuses to recognize the existence of organized, systematic, or politically oppressive homophobia, and the political status of gays and lesbians is never raised.” Thus, Dow concludes that having a visible lesbian on primetime television does not represent acceptance of lesbians. Shows have to go one step further and engage in political issues to exact change or truly make an impact. In this sense, Girls seems to equate feminist visibility with feminist politics, but real politics very rarely are addressed by the show. Dunham herself seems to

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263 1.5, “Hard Being Easy.”
265 Ibid, pp. 132-133.
mistake feminist visibility for feminist politics, as she told Playboy, "I like being a mouthpiece for the issues I think young females face today. It's always shocking when people question whether it's a feminist show. How could a show about women exploring women not be?" Unfortunately, the series lacks the overtly confrontational statements needed to be truly political.

While Girls tackles subjects such as sexual harassment, class, privilege, sexuality, and abortion, the series is devoid of any political message, lessening its feminist impact. Hannah is a visible feminist; however, that does not mean feminist politics are happening in the series. Hannah seems to support abortion because she accompanies Jessa to the clinic; however, Jessa skips her appointment and later discovers that she was never pregnant. This allows both Hannah and the series to avoid making a judgment on abortions. When Hannah is sexually harassed by her boss, she uses his harassment for her personal gain, but the series keeps his motives ambiguous, never confirming that he intentionally harassed his female employees. In fact, after Hannah’s final confrontation with her boss, where Hannah quits her job after he turns down her sexual advances and then tries

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267 1.2, "Vagina Panic."
to blackmail him, the series makes Hannah look more despicable than her boss.268

Perhaps it is unfair to expect Girls to be outwardly political. As Dow writes, “Popular culture can be political, in the sense that it can empower certain constituencies and can energize political agendas. However... its dependence on the power of personality, hot topics, and quickly shifting tastes makes it a fragile basis for lasting social change.”269 Unfortunately, the series continues to try and address political topics in a misleading, ambiguous way that seems to perplex famous second-wave feminists. For example, during the 2013 Golden Globes award ceremony, host Tina Fey joked, “Lena, we love your show, but if they’re forcing you to do that nudity, you have to tell us. Just give us some kind of signal, and we’ll inform Child Services.”270 Fey implies that Dunham is too young to voluntarily appear naked as often as she does throughout the series’ first season. Dunham’s message about accepting different female body types may be lost on second-wavers, who appear to see her nudity as gratuitous or forced. Furthermore, Dunham confessed to Entertainment Weekly that she cried after appearing on The View because Barbara Walters called the series’ depiction of sex and nudity “shocking” and “depressing.” Dunham elaborated, “What they really

want to talk about on The View is, ‘You’re naked! And you’re Brian Williams’
daughter!’...’ I was frustrated. I felt like I had a big sock in my mouth.”

While Dunham wants to discuss the roles sex and nudity play in her series,
second-wave feminists come to their own conclusions without really
engaging Dunham in that conversation. Girls may be too ambiguous to lead
to real dialogue about issues of class, race, and sexuality, which, perhaps
unfairly or unfortunately, means the series needs to address these issues in
more direct, overtly political ways.

Overall, Hannah is a complicated third-wave character. She seems to
embrace a third-wave feminist identity; however, the series demonstrates
repeatedly that Hannah is not as empowered as she appears. She discusses
the “Riot Grrl” implications of her body, but she also considers her weight the
defining tragedy in her life, thus refusing to embrace it. She characterizes the
third-wave’s focus on the self; however, the series implies that Hannah’s self-
absorption is not admirable and is, in fact, destructive. Her sex-positive
attitude is empowering, although her sexual immaturity and her focus on
male pleasure are appalling. Finally, Hannah is so defined by self-hatred that
viewers should not want to emulate her. Like Bonnie Dow writes about Ellen,
Hannah may be a feminist who is visible to viewers, but visibility is not
enough.

CHAPTER SIX:
CONCLUSIONS

By analyzing *New Girl* and *Girls* from a third-wave critical perspective, it becomes clear that both series offer very different liberating and constraining elements, and both eschew feminist political statements and debates, perhaps signifying our culture’s continuing discomfort with overt feminist politics. I chose these particular series and characters because they represent the most critically adored and criticized series of the wave of female-dominated sitcoms that premiered in the 2011-2012 television series. This chapter will examine my conclusions about this project, including my answers to my research questions. Next, I will examine similarities and differences between my analyses of Jess and Hannah. After that, I explore the differences in the media reception of both series because they are both widely criticized in feminist and mainstream critical circles. Finally, I conclude by offering paths for future research.
Major Findings

In my first case study, I examined Jessica Day, the protagonist on *New Girl*. Jess is ultra-feminine, particularly in her appearance and her childlike qualities, but ultimately represents a fairly promising feminist role model. Her confidence in herself and her insistence on defining womanhood for herself are empowering for viewers, as is the series’ predilection for troubling and challenging traditional gender constructs. That said, the series still has work to do. Through several different relationship examples, *New Girl* emphasizes traditional heteronormative monogamy, which runs counter to Jess’ sex positivity. Additionally, the series seems to mock second-wave feminists, perpetuating the stereotype that second-wavers are masculine and lonely. Thus, the series presents both liberating and constraining elements.

The second case study focused on Hannah Horvath, the protagonist of *Girls*. Hannah appears more outwardly feminist than Jess. She plays with femininity in her physical appearance, speaks brazenly about sex, and breaks several gender stereotypes with her raunchy, unfiltered behavior. She is so defined by self-absorption and self-hatred, however, that she becomes difficult for audiences to relate to, and the series seems to punish her sex positivity and self-focus by stripping away her interpersonal relationships. This series certainly challenges gender norms and expectations, but it disciplines its characters too severely to empower viewers.

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This trend also appears in *New Girl* creator Liz Meriwether’s other claim to fame—the romantic comedy film *No Strings Attached*, where the protagonists enter into a casual sex relationship, but ultimately fall in love with and commit to each other.
Finally, these case studies exemplify the larger question of how humor is used in female-dominated comedy. Promisingly, several comedy plotlines on both *New Girl* and *Girls* revolved around heavier social topics, such as issues of class, race, and gender. Unfortunately, both series remain apolitical when discussing these important issues. Additionally, both series rely heavily on sexual humor, but in completely different ways. Both series demonstrate that their protagonists are sexually immature, but while *New Girl* makes jokes about Jess’ inability to say “penis,” and her insistence on giving her role play characters back stories (like Rebecca “Tiger Boobs” Johnson, the stripper with a heart of gold trying to pay her way through college), *Girls* finds humor in Hannah’s graphic, awkward, borderline abusive, sexual encounters and hilariously uninformed proclamation that she wants AIDS so that she can use her disease to bully her loved ones. Part of the difference rests in the expectations and liberties afforded to basic cable versus premium cable channels (i.e. *New Girl* airs on Fox, while *Girls* airs on HBO and can utilize more risqué language and situations), but the series seem to have two fundamentally different worldviews. *New Girl*, like its protagonist, is bubbly, optimistic, and goofy, while *Girls* is grittier, more cynical, and perhaps more realistic. Finally, both series mine constant laughs from their characters’ unfiltered speech and behavior, as well as their social awkwardness. Through these types of jokes, the shows use humor to illustrate the characters’ lack of femininity or even empowerment. The protagonists are so
socially handicapped that they both become objects of ridicule. Rather than an instrument for liberation, humor becomes a weapon leveled against the female characters.

**Similarities and Differences in the Findings**

Throughout this project, several key similarities and differences emerged in *New Girl* and *Girls*, highlighting the role and nature of contemporary women in comedy. Both series privilege monogamous relationships, despite the overt sex-positivity of the main characters, ultimately constraining women into traditional heteronormative romantic roles. Additionally, and disappointingly, both series avoid political discussions or activism, despite addressing political issues of class, race, women’s rights, and gender.

Interestingly, both Jess and Hannah fulfill the “woman child” archetype in completely different ways. *Entertainment Weekly* columnist Melissa Maerz, citing recent popular media forms including *Girls*, *New Girl*, *2 Broke Girls* and the movies *Young Adult*, *Bridesmaids*, and *Bachelorette*, described this new media archetype.

Call this new prototype the lady-child. She’s the savvier counterpart to the man-boy, the overgrown teenager so often played by Adam Sandler or found in the movies of Judd Apatow, who also exec-produces *Girls*. (Because life’s unfair, the lady-child is usually much hotter than the man-boy, and much less likely to wear sweatpants.) She’s probably still living with her parents or with roommates, long after college is over. It’s likely that she doesn’t have a real career yet, but only because she’s waiting for a job that’s worthy of her liberal-arts education. She’s witty and dry, almost to the point of unlikability. She may or may not eat cupcakes for dinner. After watching so many
Katherine Heigls play supermom to their immature boyfriends on screen, Dunham and her colleagues seem to be saying, "Hey, girls have issues, too."\footnote{Melissa Maerz, "Hollywood Goes Girl Crazy," \textit{Entertainment Weekly}, April 13, 2012: 16-17.}

While both women clearly represent women in states of arrested development, Jess is adorably childlike, while Hannah is a brat—immature, stubborn, and self-centered.

Finally, one crucial difference emerged in the texts: \textit{New Girl}'s Jess is defined by her self-confidence and self-worth, while \textit{Girls}' Hannah is defined by her self-hatred. This is the most glaring difference in the two series, and it ultimately demonstrates why Jess seems to be a much more promising feminist icon than Hannah. Viewers want to be Jess, while they are afraid to admit to being Hannah.

**Media Criticism and Feminism**

One of the most striking similarities between \textit{New Girl} and \textit{Girls} is that both series have received much vitriolic media attention; however, the series inspire far different criticisms. While the criticism lobbed at \textit{New Girl} generally revolves around the tolerability of series star Zooey Deschanel, the criticism around \textit{Girls} attacks every element of the series—the background of the stars, the unattractiveness of Lena Dunham and the character she plays, the content and humorousness of the series, and the lack of diversity. This criticism is important to examine by itself because it affects how audiences
read the series, and illustrates the messages audiences extract from both shows.

The central question surrounding *New Girl* criticism is, “Is Zooey Deschanel annoying?” Deschanel is often called unrealistically childlike, or she is dismissed as just another “Manic Pixie Dream Girl.” The Manic Pixie Dream Girl archetype was first labeled by A.V. Club writer Nathan Rabin in an article about Kirsten Dunst’s character in *Elizabethtown.* He wrote,

> The Manic Pixie Dream Girl exists solely in the fevered imagination of sensitive writer-directors, who use them to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl serves as a means to an end, not a flesh-and-blood human being. Once life lessons have been imparted, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl might as well disappear in a *poof!* for her life’s work is done... Audiences either want to marry her or commit grievous bodily harm upon her and her immediate family.

Other famous Manic Pixie Dream Girls include Kate Hudson in *Almost Famous,* Natalie Portman in *Garden State,* and Katharine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby.* Since the identification of the trope, calling a female character a Manic Pixie Dream Girl has become Internet shorthand for, “Annoying, Quirky, Anti-Feminist Woman.” Several internet writers instantly labeled Zooey Deschanel’s *New Girl* character a Manic Pixie Dream Girl and dismissed

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the series as annoying and shallow. Internet writer Daniel O’Brien explained,

Zooey Deschanel’s character in *The New Girl* [sic] is probably the clearest example of this right now, as that entire show is based around how quirky and eccentric and, as a result, lovable, Zooey’s character (I think her name is “Eyeface”) is. Except she’s not so much "eccentric" as much as she is "bad at being alive and functioning socially, in the present." Criticisms like these tie back to the notion of textual fragments. Because Deschanel has played Manic Pixie Dream Girls in some of her best-known films, like *Elf* and *Yes Man*, audiences already associate her with this trope, affecting their reading of the series. Ultimately, Critics and audiences mock Deschanel’s ultra-femininity, concluding that the show cannot possibly preach feminist ideals.

For her part, Deschanel has challenged the dichotomy between feminine and feminist in the media, telling *Glamour*, “We can’t be feminine and be feminists and be successful? I want to be a fucking feminist and wear a fucking Peter Pan collar. So fucking what?” Later in the same interview, she noted the importance of having both male and female friendships and challenged the reporter when he asked about her desire to have children.

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She said, "It’s my pet peeve when people press you on it. And it’s always women who get asked! Is anybody saying that to George Clooney?" Deschanel is trying to prove that she, and by extension, her character, are strong women and, therefore, worthy of serious attention.

While *New Girl* is often criticized because of its star, *Girls* is criticized for its content, its lack of diversity, and the unattractiveness of its leading lady—both Dunham’s physical attractiveness and Hannah’s attractiveness as a person are heavily analyzed. However, the most common criticism lobbed against *Girls* may be related to its “privileged” viewpoint. Lena Dunham is the daughter of a successful artist and a photographer. Fashion designer Zac Posen was her babysitter, and her parents live next door to Meryl Streep. Allison Williams (Marnie) is the daughter of news anchor Brian Williams; Zosia Mamet (Shoshanna) is playwright David Mamet’s daughter, and Jemima Kirke (Jessa) is the daughter of the drummer for the rock band Bad Company. Critics, audiences, and even movie star James Franco question the series’ authenticity since all of its stars come from privilege, although they also complain that the series is too whitewashed, despite taking place in New York City, one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse areas of the country. This line of criticism is particularly interesting because it appears

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279 Ibid, 140.
to be sexism masked in progressive clothing—the genealogy of the actresses involved with *Girls* is irrelevant to the series. As Film Crit Hulk, a blogger and pop culture critic, wrote,

> We never seem to mind this when it's the blisteringly-talented filmmakers like Duncan Jones [son of David Bowie] and Jason Reitman [son of Ivan Reitman], but Sofia Coppola [daughter of Francis Ford Coppola]? Yup. That's nepotism at work! Look, sexism isn't about things inherently coming from sexist places. No one actually *thinks* they're sexist. Sexism is always about the ways we don't realize we're reacting to something along gender lines. The ways we are being biased without actually realizing it. And, yes, the nepotism angle on Sofia and Dunham is absolutely a double-standard.²⁸²

The basis of acting is pretending to be someone different. Why should the genealogy of an actress matter? Similarly, A.V. Club editor Todd VanDerWerff points out that the series’ lack of racial diversity is symptomatic of “a broad, systemic problem within the TV industry, and harping on this little-watched show as if it’s the standard-bearer in that department strikes me as a strange way to tackle that problem.”²⁸³ In sum, nepotism is irrelevant to the content of a television series, while cries of racism are misdirected. The entire television landscape needs to incorporate more diverse voices.

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Another common criticism is that the series is totally unrelatable. Pop culture website FlavorWire seems to mock this criticism as they subtitle each recap of the series: “How real was Girls this week?” Each recap begins, Accused by some of whitewashing Brooklyn and beloved by others for depicting the harsh truth of post-college New York life for over-educated women in their 20s, Girls may well be TV’s most talked-about comedy. Considering that most of those conversations hinge on how realistic the show is or isn’t, this season we’re recapping Girls by asking three writers who should know — our interns, Chloe Pantazi, Alison Herman, and Julia Pugachevsky — how real each episode felt. The website seems to mock the idea that Girls is not “real” enough by making its 20-something interns review the series; however, their interns are not fans of the show. In one of the most recent episode reviews, intern Alison Herman wrote, “The longer Girls goes on, the more I’m convinced that what began as one of the show’s greatest strengths — a protagonist who’s flawed in the extreme — has now become its greatest weakness.” The website’s joke has backfired since their reviewers cannot relate to Hannah’s self-absorption. Other feminist critics, however, often point out what elements of the series are relatable — mainly the feelings of aimlessness and uncertainty that follow recent college graduates. They also defend Dunham’s physical attractiveness, praising her for challenging beauty ideals, while condemning

285 Ibid.
audience members who say that Dunham is too unattractive to be funny, asking if they would say the same thing about comedian Louis CK.286

Part of the criticism against Lena Dunahm also ties back to the notion of fragments. Audiences have no pre-existing fragments with which to associate Lena Dunham or the series. Before Girls, Dunham was best known for her independent film Tiny Furniture, in which she wrote, directed, and starred. Unfortunately, independent films attract such small crowds that mainstream America had no idea who Dunham was prior to Girls, making it easier for audiences to associate Dunham with Hannah or the small fragments of her background with which they are familiar. Furthermore, Girls is such an unusual series that audiences can access no fragments while watching the show. It is hard for the audience to combine their own fragments in meaningful ways to interpret the series.

Ultimately, the venomous criticism leveled against both New Girl and Girls demonstrates a crucial way that the female-dominated, female-oriented series, and ultimately the female, cannot win. In 2013, the sexist rhetoric around female-dominated series has shifted from, “Are women funny?” to

“Are women feminist enough?” As with questions about women’s ability to be funny, the answer can never be a clean “yes.” Characters like Jess are too likeable or too feminine to be progressive enough, while characters like Hannah are not likeable or feminine enough. An outwardly third-wave, fiercely political heroine could never be funny. We have to accept that we may never see a “feminist enough” character on a sitcom, and that is okay.

**Directions for Future Research**

This study aimed to add to the shortage of scholarly literature on women in comedy. As this project can never fully address the scope of issues related to women in comedy, there are several paths for future research. Most simply, these two sitcoms both warrant further study. The second season of *New Girl* has been more progressive than the first, as Jess has lost her job and has to define herself outside of her teaching career. She also entered into her first casual sex relationship. The second season of *Girls*, on the other hand, has been more regressive. Although Hannah has taken more pride in her sexuality and her sexual pleasure, the series has focused more on the importance of heterosexual romance and has made each of the central characters despicable.\(^{287}\) Perhaps the creators of these series have read some of the criticism against them and are trying to become even more

\(^{287}\) While the second season of *Girls* has been more progressive in terms of Hannah’s sexuality, the season finale (which aired on March 17) ended with Adam running shirtless from his apartment to Hannah’s, breaking down her front door, and cradling her like a baby before announcing, “I’ve always been here.” He appeared to “save” Hannah from her Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (an ailment which was bafflingly introduced late into season two). The critical response has been overwhelmingly negative, especially because the same episode included Marnie’s reconciliation with Charlie.
empowering, or perhaps they had to begin their series with particular models of femininity that would be more easily understood by audiences, and now they can complicate their characters.

Additionally, future scholars could investigate other female-dominated sitcoms (including new series *The Mindy Project*, or any of the other sitcoms mentioned in the introduction) to see if their representations of womanhood are concurrent with the present findings. Furthermore, scholars should examine representations of women in comedy films to see if there is a difference in media. Similarly, scholars should examine the conflation of star and character that tends to happen in female-centric sitcoms. In addition to Zooey Deschanel and Lena Dunham, characters played by Tina Fey (*30 Rock*), Whitney Cummings (*Whitney*), and Mindy Kaling (*The Mindy Project*) are all seen as extensions of those women. While these actresses are all writers on their respective series, other actresses like Jane Levy (*Suburgatory*) and Krysten Ritter (*Don't Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*) are also assumed to be like their characters. This trend is not specific to female comedy as Louis CK and Jerry Seinfeld face similar issues; however, the problem seems to be more severe with female comics.

In addition to discussing *New Girl* and *Girls*, I discussed two newer, media-labeled female archetypes in this project: the Woman-Child and the Manic-Pixie Dream Girl. Both of these female character types warrant further scrutiny, particularly related to their places in comedy. Liz Lemon, Tina Fey's
character on *30 Rock*, certainly fulfills the woman-child archetype, and several film and television characters have appeared recently that challenge the Manic Pixie Dream Girl archetype, including Zooey Deschanel’s characters in *New Girl* and *500 Days of Summer* and Parker Posey’s character on *Louie*. Scholars should explore how both of these archetypes are used, applied, and challenged.

Because of the tendency to dismiss female characters as stereotypes, the vitriolic media response to these female-centric television programs merits its own study. In addition to examining media responses in general, it is also interesting to see how these media criticisms evolve and which criticisms become most dominant as these series progress. Furthermore, as the response to *Girls* demonstrates, it is interesting to see how one primary criticism is not enough for some female-dominated series. These critical responses highlight where we are as a culture in terms of accepting women into the boy’s club of comedy.

The arguments about privilege and racism on *Girls* appear to be forms of sexism disguised as progress; however, conversations about representations of race are still important. With the exception of Mindy Kaling, who is Indian, there are no representations of minority women lead characters in prime time network sitcoms. It is important to see what roles race play on television, both in terms of supporting actresses and
characters and in terms of lead characters. In the spirit of this project, it would be interesting to see how women of color are portrayed on female-dominated sitcoms versus traditional sitcoms.

The criticisms leveled against these series also highlight the dominant cultural conversations about women in comedy. As I suggested earlier, American culture seems to accept that women are funny; however, the cultural conversation has shifted to "Are funny women feminist enough?"

While this question is less blatantly sexist than questioning women's abilities to be funny, it is still problematic and unfair. There will never be a perfect feminist character on television, particularly in comedy; however, this is just my interpretation of our cultural moment. Communication critics should still examine what the dominant "question" is surrounding women in comedy.

**Concluding Thoughts**

To conclude this project, I return to my research questions. First, *How does Jess on New Girl exemplify or challenge third-wave feminism?* Jess is constrained by her childlike nature and girly appearance; however, her assertive nature and total self-confidence, as well as her sex-positive attitude exemplify third-wave feminism. Additionally, Jess and the other characters challenge gender norms. Jess acts as both the mother and the father of the loft and she has masculine relationship desires, while male characters Nick,

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288 Some examples of minority women in supporting roles on prime time network sitcoms include Rashida Jones and Retta on *Parks and Recreation*, Yvette Nicole Brown on *Community*, Sofia Vergara on *Modern Family*, Hannah Simone on *New Girl*, and Liza Lapira on the recently canceled *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23.*
Schmidt, and Winston are feminized. Second, *How does Hannah on Girls exemplify or challenge third-wave feminism?* Hannah embodies an androgynous third-wave appearance, challenging typical beauty standards; however, she is so defined by her self-loathing that viewers may not identify with her. Additionally, the series seems to punish Hannah’s concern for herself by making her so self-absorbed that she cannot maintain meaningful personal relationships. Finally, *How do female-driven sitcoms liberate women from the confines of traditional humor boundaries?* Unfortunately, humor served to constrain both characters, making them look ridiculous. For example, Jess falls over or looks unnatural when she tries to be “sexy,” while Hannah looks scary when she tries to be feminine. Humor is a tool for holding back these women. In the future, feminist critics should concern themselves with more open and limitless research questions, as many critics simply examine whether or not characters are feminist. This tension is even evident in the phrasing of my own research questions, which ask how each character exemplifies *OR* challenges third-wave feminism, when the answers are combinations of both.
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