“HER CHOICE CHANGED EVERYTHING”:
WOMEN AND LOVE ON DAWSON’S CREEK AND FELICITY

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This thesis uses the television characters Joey Potter (Dawson's Creek) and Felicity Porter (Felicity) as case studies of how media images of women often display feminist tendencies while simultaneously promoting traditional female roles. Though Joey and Felicity each exhibit a number of positive, feminist qualities over the course of their respective series, this is largely overshadowed (or possibly cancelled out) by the substantial emphasis placed upon their romantic relationships with men. Using textual analysis of Dawson’s Creek and Felicity, this study examines specific ways in which each show shapes its narratives to present men and romance as the central focus of Joey and Felicity’s lives and how this undermines the series’ attempts to fashion these characters as modern, independent women. This mix of progressive and regressive female characterization is typical postfeminist fare, so these depictions are explored in relation to postfeminism and the interplay between feminism and femininity.

Particular attention is given to the placement of the characters' romantic narratives within the text, and this study finds that their love lives are consistently structured as the defining elements of their lives. Non-romantic storylines, such as those related to the characters' education or careers, are typically used to progress or add conflict to the women's romantic relationships instead of being presented as important in their own right. In all instances, the season finales--often the dramatic high point of a television series--focus on the women's love lives, thus placing the greatest significance on those particular storylines. Though romantic
highs and lows are common conventions within the teen drama genre, only female characters are primarily defined by their love lives, while male characters are not.

This study concludes that though there is some merit to the feminist aspirations of these portrayals, television ultimately needs to move away from these frequent depictions of women who are "complete" only if they live happily ever after with the man of their dreams.
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INTRODUCTION

Dawson or Pacey? Ben or Noel? For the WB television series *Dawson’s Creek* and *Felicity*, respectively, these are not mere questions. Instead they are foundations for the central narrative arcs of the female protagonists on each series. *Dawson’s Creek*’s Joey Potter (Katie Holmes) spends the majority of the series’ six seasons concentrating on her on-again, off-again romances with childhood best friend Dawson Leery and loveable screw-up Pacey Witter. Similarly, *Felicity*’s heroine, Felicity Porter (Keri Russell) engages in four years of fluctuating between her high school crush, Ben Covington, and her sweet and reliable friend, Noel Crane. Taken individually, neither of these portrayals of young women is necessarily problematic. However, they are symptomatic of an overall cultural trend which repeatedly dictates that a woman’s ultimate goal is a lasting romantic relationship with a man. This constant focus on women’s love lives subtly works against the gains of the feminist movement, which allowed women to seek non-traditional roles and define themselves on their own terms, not just in relation to men. In this paper I use the characters of Joey Potter and Felicity Porter as case studies in order to examine how images of women in the media often display feminist tendencies while simultaneously promoting traditional female roles.

While Joey and Felicity each exhibit a number of positive, feminist qualities over the course of their respective series, this is largely overshadowed (or possibly cancelled out) by the substantial emphasis placed upon their romantic relationships with men. This mix of progressive and regressive female characterization is typical postfeminist fare, in which contradictions run rampant in a seeming attempt to please feminist sensibilities without fully discarding traditional patriarchal notions. Characters such as Ally McBeal, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, *Alias*’ Sydney Bristow, and the women of *Sex and the City* have drawn a certain amount of attention in
scholarship on postfeminist depictions in the media because their statements about women are bold and noticeably debatable. Joey and Felicity, on the other hand, have not garnered much attention in this academic dialogue, perhaps because they are not obvious sites of contention and are more understated representations of the push and pull between feminism and femininity. They are not pop culture icons of feminism in the way that Ally McBeal is sometimes positioned. These subtler portrayals, however, are more prevalent, and they present the same dilemma as the flashier postfeminist characters on television and in film.

Postfeminism has been discussed at some length in academic scholarship, with varied interpretations of what the term means and when and how it should be applied. For the purposes of this paper, the most appropriate description of postfeminism is Angela McRobbie’s, which refers to it as “an active process by which feminist gains for the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined,” and she further argues that “elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism” (256). Postfeminist representations of women avoid being either “uniformly regressive or unvaryingly progressive” (Meyers 11) and instead are “fractured,” with “images and messages inconsistent and contradictory, torn between traditional, misogynistic notions about women and their roles on the one hand, and feminist ideals of equality for women on the other” (12). Though not necessarily part of a concentrated “backlash” against feminism, as described by Susan Faludi (1992), these images and messages subtly but effectively work against the tenets of the feminist movement.

The “undoing of feminism” can take a number of different forms, but for Joey and Felicity it occurs because their love lives and their struggles to decide which man to settle down
with are constructed as the most important and most defining elements of their lives.
Throughout their respective series, Joey and Felicity are both shown dealing with a variety of typical young adult problems related to school, careers, social issues, love, sex, friends and family. But in each case, the narrative is structured so that the most weight is placed on romantic relationships, and specifically on each woman’s ultimate selection of a mate. Love triangles and romantic highs and lows are common conventions within the teen drama genre, so it is expected that these characters would have some romantic storylines, and this in itself is not problematic.
What is problematic is that female characters such as Joey and Felicity come to be solely identified with and defined by their romantic entanglements, which is rarely the case with male characters within the same genre. For example, on the teen/family drama Everwood (another WB series which recently ended) the primary narrative for the young male lead, Ephram Brown, is his tenuous relationship with his father, and there is also a strong emphasis on his talent for playing the piano and aspirations to attend Juilliard. While his love life also garners significant attention within the series, it is not structured as the driving force of his life or of the series narrative. Similarly, Joey’s male counterpart on Dawson’s Creek, Dawson Leery, is established in the very first episode as an aspiring filmmaker, and this remains his defining characteristic throughout the course of the series. Though his romance with Joey and with other women is an important part of his storyline, the ultimate question within his narrative is whether he will achieve his goal of becoming a filmmaker.

As Dawson’s Creek came to a close in 2003, the most pressing question was “Who will Joey end up with - Dawson or Pacey?” And the final episodes of Felicity go so far as to have Felicity travel back in time (if only in a dream sequence) so she can change her decision and choose Noel instead of Ben, thinking that this will solve the problems that she is facing in her
life. What message does this send about what defines a woman’s future? While choosing a mate is an important decision that does greatly affect one’s future, is the prominence of this choice on these series balanced with the other important factors in these women’s lives? Is this just a case of television shows employing the most dramatic and emotional storylines possible, or is something else at play here?

Using textual analysis of *Dawson’s Creek* and *Felicity*, I examine specific ways in which each show shapes its narratives to present men and romance as the central focus of Joey and Felicity’s lives and how this undermines the series’ attempts to fashion these characters as modern, independent women. Joey certainly struggles with issues unrelated to her love triangle with Dawson and Pacey, and Felicity obviously spends some of her days doing something other than pining and agonizing over Ben and Noel. But these other storylines ultimately take a backseat to the characters’ love lives, as the texts directly and indirectly place the greatest importance on the women’s romantic choices. In several instances, non-romantic storylines develop promisingly, only to be used to service the romantic storylines, making all narrative roads inevitably lead to the same place.

I also consider marketing strategies related to each of the series in order to analyze how they reflect and add to the focus on these characters’ love lives. As David Roger Coon argues, “promotional materials have the potential to influence the ways that viewers eventually read the main texts and, therefore, should be studied as important components of the text that they promote” (3). For example, one *Dawson’s Creek* marketing campaign centered on an image of Joey dramatically positioned between Dawson and Pacey, accompanied by the tagline, “Her choice changed everything,” and the WB made promotional t-shirts for *Felicity* which displayed
that all-important question, “Ben . . . or Noel?” These representations of the series highlight the love triangles and identify Felicity and Joey only in relation to the men in their lives.

Focusing this analysis on Joey and Felicity is not intended to fashion these two characters as the most relevant or most problematic portrayals of young women in the media. Instead it is intended to highlight the fact that these are the types of female characters that have become very common over the last decade. While a character like Buffy the Vampire Slayer doesn’t come along every year, characters like Joey and Felicity do. And in these characters we often find what McRobbie refers to as “gentle denunciations of feminism” (257). These are “everyday” women who embody the common but often subtle contradictions of postfeminism, by being strong, independent women who still want nothing as much as they want a man to make their lives complete.

**Postfeminism, Feminism and Femininity**

Central to my analysis of Joey Potter and Felicity Porter and to the concept of postfeminism is the marriage of feminism and femininity. Postfeminist representations of women typically contain elements of both “traditional feminism” and “traditional femininity,” which in previous eras were viewed as polar opposites. The manner in which Joey and Felicity reject some notions of femininity (both of them criticize beauty pageants, for example) while also embracing their own femininity (they are both conventionally attractive women and often speak with whispery, vulnerable voices) signifies that femininity and feminism are no longer considered mutually exclusive categories. Before delving into specific analyses of Joey and Felicity, it would be helpful to briefly examine the changing relationship between feminism and femininity and the ways in which this can be beneficial or problematic to feminist messages.
Historically, feminism and femininity have been placed at odds with each other, as one of the main tenets of 1970s second-wave feminism was that traditionally feminine roles, behaviors and standards of beauty were sources of women’s oppression, and therefore were oppositional to the goals of the feminist movement. The upkeep required of women to maintain the physical appearance expected by male-dominated society is considered to be just another way that women are kept under control, so an adherence to a feminine beauty regime is positioned as an affront to feminist notions. The basic belief is that because women had been oppressed for years, they needed to break away from everything that had come to define women—namely subservient roles and being valued for one’s looks. Hilary Hinds and Jackie Stacey summarize this prevailing image of feminism and femininity in conflict:

There is no doubt that the persistent media characterisation of the feminist, from the bra-burner onwards, condenses a range of characteristics antithetical to conventional definitions of desirable femininity: the feminist is a slack-busted, ugly woman with hairy legs and no make-up, living in domestic squalor with her dirty children (if any children), seeking to stir up ferment amongst her more attractive and contented sisters. (161)

Feminism and femininity were very much seen as “either/or” categories, with feminism shown to represent everything that femininity was not, and vice versa. Though this was not necessarily the reality of the situation, this was the scenario presented in the media. This distinct dichotomy is currently still seen in some media representations of feminism, but we are now in an era where it is more common to see “feminine feminists,” which is a trademark of third-wave feminism and postfeminism. However, there is much debate over the feminist viability of these portrayals and whether they further or hinder the cause.

Some feminists and feminist scholars do take a severe stance against traditional femininity and have relatively strict parameters for what it means to be a feminist, either in real life or in a media portrayal. From this perspective, to adhere to traditional beauty standards or choose to be a housewife is to be part of the problem, as these practices are seen as supporting
patriarchal power. Instead of the freedom of choice, it is about “right” and “wrong” choices, and
the “right” choice from this standpoint is to reject the women’s roles and feminine ideals that
have been the expected and restrictive realm of women for so many years. While it is certainly
ture that women should not be limited to the outdated notions of traditional femininity, I disagree
that these notions need to be entirely rejected in order to label one’s self or a media portrayal as
feminist. Feminism is about having choices and expanding the options that are available to
women, whether they are options related to career opportunities, physical appearances or any
other aspect of life. Therefore, as new options are made available—and there is undoubtedly still
progress to be made on that front—that does not necessarily make the traditional choices less
valid. Where issues arise is when those traditional choices are depicted as the dominant ideal,
instead of merely one of several viable options. There is a big difference between saying “a
woman can be feminine” and “a woman should be feminine.” And postfeminism, while claiming
to support the former statement, often ends up promoting the latter.

Andrea Press argues that postfeminism marks “an increasing openness toward traditional
notions of femininity and feminine roles” (qtd in Lotz 112). Feminists are “allowed” to be
feminine now, as feminism is no longer synonymous with a complete rejection of all components
of femininity. Though postfeminism is sometimes labeled as anti-feminism (fitting with Faludi’s
concept of “backlash”), Bonnie Dow offers what I consider a more appropriate description,
which views postfeminism as “a distinction recognizing that some discourse which questions
certain feminist issues and/or goals assumes the validity of other feminist issues and/or goals”
(Prime-Time Feminism 87). According to this viewpoint, progressive feminism is still an
important element of postfeminism, but it has been adapted (or, some would argue,
compromised) for a new era of feminism. Postfeminism embraces femininity as something that
can happily co-exist with feminism. It still stands that women should be free to defy traditional femininity (which could be anything from refusing to wear high heels to refusing to get married) and this has been a principle of the feminist movement for decades. But the postfeminist framework also defends the notion that women who do choose to take on feminine roles and/or appearances can be “just as feminist” as women who do not.

Hinds and Stacey name Princess Diana as a key figure in the growing visibility and popularity of “feminine feminists” over the last decade. In their discussion of Diana’s frank and revealing 1995 interview on the BBC series *Panorama*, they describe her as:

... a fantasy reconciliation between feminism and femininity. Here finally, it seemed, was the embodied resolution of these two polarized categories: the “most beautiful woman in the world” speaks her victimisation in such a way as to be hailed a feminist survivor of patriarchal oppression. For many, Diana represented the acceptably feminine face of feminism, mobilising as she did the most feminine version of feminist discourse – self-help therapy-speak. (169)

Diana symbolized this new brand of feminism that is seen as effective but not intimidating, in the sense that feminist ideas are put forth in such a manner that makes them more accessible and acceptable to the general public who may have found previous images of feminism too threatening. Diana’s comments in the *Panorama* interview included:

a critique of the objectification of women by the media, a challenge to the gendered inequalities of the institution of marriage, a plea against male infidelity and duplicity, and a thorough refusal of the myths that suggest that, being a wife and mother is necessarily satisfying for today’s woman, and that the family is a safe and nurturing place for her to be. (162)

The fact that these criticisms of oppressive forces in women’s lives came from a woman who was, literally, a princess who lived in a castle and was also a fashion and beauty icon of her time, sends a clear signal that the face of feminism has changed. When Diana first arrived in the public spotlight prior to her marriage to Prince Charles, she was the traditionally ideal image of femininity—a shy and unimposing woman who would become a doting wife and mother. When
this image was later shattered, a new and stronger Diana emerged, and her transformation into a fully independent but no less desirable and feminine woman showed that power and glamour can co-exist in a woman’s life. And soon the predominant notion was that power and glamour should co-exist in every woman’s life.

The title character of the television series *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) is another prime example of a postfeminist depiction, and because of this she has been at the center of debate in academic circles as well as the popular press. Ally is a character that blends feminist and feminine elements, signified on the most basic level by the fact that she is a successful attorney who proudly wears mini-skirts. The traditional conflict between feminism and femininity rears its head in much of the academic and journalistic writing about Ally McBeal, and a common accusation is that Ally is “too feminine to be truly feminist,” with her obsession with men and her appearance cited as some of the reasons that she is “too feminine” (Moseley and Read 236). This suggests that the balance between feminism and femininity is very delicate—the two are compatible to a point, but where is the line drawn in terms of how much femininity is “acceptable” for a feminist portrayal? It is no surprise that postfeminist representations of woman are so contradictory, because even though there is a blending of feminism and femininity, the dichotomy between those two categories never seems to truly disappear, and this results in mixed messages.

Despite the fact that embracing femininity has helped feminism become somewhat more relatable and accepted by the general public, postfeminist representations ultimately undermine the gains of the feminist movement because this “acceptable” version of feminism is now the predominant image of feminism in the media. A 1998 *Time* magazine cover famously cited Ally McBeal is an indicator that feminism is dead. The implication is that if Ally McBeal is what
passes as feminism these days, then we have a serious problem on our hands. The mainstream success of postfeminist portrayals like Ally comes at the expense of radical feminism and other approaches to feminism which offer greater challenges to the status quo. For much of the contemporary audience, postfeminism = feminism, which greatly limits the parameters of feminism and is misrepresentative of the diversity of perspectives within feminism. What we need is a variety of feminist images (just as we need a greater variety of women’s representations in general) but currently the feminist images in the media are dominated by “feminine feminists” which is a comparatively “safe” depiction of feminism. Postfeminist portrayals do not break down enough of the boundaries that continue to shape the way people think about women and feminism, so there needs to be more female characters that stray from the postfeminist norm.

One relatively new television character who breaks this pattern is Kara “Starbuck” Thrace on the current remake of the 1970’s series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-present). Starbuck is decidedly feminist and decidedly unfeminine. She rarely styles her hair, applies glamorous makeup, or wears dresses or revealing clothing. She is attractive but not gorgeous and others rarely commend her for her looks. She is physically strong and capable of competing in hand-to-hand combat against both female and male opponents. A ranking military Captain, she excels at a job typically held by a man and is the most skilled and admired fighter pilot in the fleet. Starbuck is the type of female character that we rarely see on television, so this portrayal is refreshing and encouraging in the way that it reminds us that even though a feminist can be feminine now, she doesn’t have to be. But there is only one Starbuck, while there are plenty of characters like Ally McBeal, Joey Potter, or Felicity Porter. It will be a while before we see postfeminist portrayals on television take a backseat to bolder images of women.
The relationship between postfeminism, feminism, and femininity remains tenuous. I’ve offered here my analysis of these issues with the understanding that these are complicated issues that neither I nor any other scholar can claim to have the definitive response to. As I continue on to my analysis of Joey and Felicity, I want to be clear that it is not femininity itself that I see as undermining the feminist potential of these characters. Their adherence to a feminine appearance or their desire to have boyfriends and fall in love is not inherently problematic. I agree with Moseley and Read’s assertion that for women today, “‘having it all’ means not giving things up (the pleasures of feminine adornment and heterosexual romance) but struggling to reconcile our feminist desires with our feminine desires” (238). The issue is not that Joey and Felicity are “too feminine” in their looks or behaviors, but that their “feminine desires,” specifically their desires to romantically connect with men, are shown to be more important than any other desires and goals. The focus on that particular “feminine desire” is especially problematic because it suggests that women need always be linked to men, and that feminism is okay as long as everyone still gets a boyfriend at the end of the day.
JOEY POTTER

Josephine “Joey” Potter is one of the four primary characters on *Dawson’s Creek*, which aired on the WB from 1998-2003. The series revolves around the lives of four teenagers (15-year-olds when the series begins) in the fictional town of Capeside, Massachusetts. Best described as a teen drama or soap opera, the series focuses primarily on interpersonal relationships of all kinds and on the teenage characters’ navigation of the path toward adulthood and self-fulfillment. Though the title character, Dawson Leery, is generally considered the central character in the series, over time Joey not only developed into the most prominent female on the show, but also equaled and perhaps bested Dawson in terms of screen time and narrative focus on her character. Katie Holmes, who portrays Joey, was arguably the breakout star of the series, and this likely influenced the increased focus on her character, to the point where the series could have been titled *Joey’s Creek*. I mention this primarily to explain why Joey inhabits a narrative space comparable to that of Felicity Porter (whom I discuss in the next chapter) despite the fact that Felicity is the title role and de facto central figure on her series, while Joey is not. Joey, though seemingly a supporting role in the early episodes of *Dawson’s Creek*, quickly became a major focal point of the series, and thus it is fitting to discuss her and Felicity within the same context.

Joey is a typical girl-next-door character, though with a uniquely troubled home life. Her mother died of cancer when Joey was a child, her father was imprisoned for selling drugs, and her older sister Bessie, who becomes Joey’s guardian, is in an interracial relationship that results in a child out of wedlock, which only adds to the unfavorable way in which the townspeople
view the Potter family. Joey works part-time as a waitress to help support the family and is also an excellent student with aspirations to attend college (which she eventually does, in the series’ fifth and sixth seasons). She begins as somewhat of a tomboy, rarely wearing dresses or makeup, though this changes over the course of the series. Joey exhibits a more realistic than idealistic worldview due to her family’s circumstances, while results in a level of maturity that is matched by few of her peers. Her personality offers a mix of strength and vulnerability. In Dawson’s Creek: The Official Companion, Joey is described as “a headstrong, vibrant, wily, sultry, and determined go-getter” and also “a frail, sometimes uncertain, emotionally sensitive, in-need-of-love person” (Crosdale 77-78). The contradictory nature of her personality parallels the fact that the series portrays Joey as a feminist, but simultaneously situates her within a traditional female context.

Joey the Feminist

Joey is a feminist, as illustrated by her refusal to give in to society’s expectations of how a woman should think and act. She rejects certain traditionally feminine values that she doesn’t agree with. A recurring theme in the series is the fact that Joey is cynical about romance, while Dawson, her male best friend and intermittent love interest, is an unapologetic romantic who expects real-life relationships to mirror the sweeping romances typically found only in films. An episode from the first season, titled “Kiss,” highlights their opposing viewpoints on the subject:

**Dawson:** You know, it’s attitudes like yours that prevent storybook romances from happening. You’re way too cynical. You’re far too jaded for this conversation.

**Joey:** Sorry, Dawson. But romance doesn’t come with a John Williams score . . . and it doesn’t come with a sunset or starlit summer night either. And I’m personally offended by this movie mentality that would have us believe that Brad Pitt and Sandra Bullock are gonna magically drop from the sky and sweep us off our feet [. . .] These movies aren’t real. They’re not kissing with their tongues. It’s take 22, the girl’s bored, the guy’s gay. It’s celluloid propaganda.
**Dawson:** Joey, Joey, Joey. You bitter, cynical, jaded thing.

This exchange reflects a clear reversal of traditional gender assumptions and shows that Joey rejects the idea that as a woman she should go through life waiting for her Prince Charming to appear. She does not idealize romantic love and thinks it is foolish to believe that a “storybook romance” would solve all of one’s problems.

Another early episode (“Beauty Contest”) that exhibits Joey’s feminist beliefs centers on the local Miss Windjammer beauty pageant. In discussing contemporary standards of female beauty, Joey angrily spouts that “20th century men are conditioned to worship women who look like nutritionally-deprived heroin addicts,” and she dismisses the Miss Windjammer pageant:

> [It’s] a blue-blooded tradition which celebrates the grand achievement of being born rich, the culmination of which is this asinine formal dinner held at the yacht club where some young nubile whose daddy owns the bank is crowned Miss Windjammer. It’s the most archaic display of ageism, racism and sexism known to man.

Though Joey is eventually persuaded to enter the beauty pageant, she does so because her family is poor and she desperately needs the prize money in order to start saving for college. To increase her chances of winning the pageant, she temporarily gives in to traditional standards of femininity, wearing elegant clothes and styling her hair (neither of which she does regularly in her everyday life), using her full (and more feminine) first name, Josephine, and learning to walk gracefully in high-heeled shoes. This newly-feminized Joey causes Dawson to realize a growing attraction toward her. However, after the pageant (in which she places second), Joey quickly dismisses Dawson’s advances as well as her temporarily adopted feminine trademarks, stating that they do not reflect who she really is, and that Dawson was only attracted to her because she was masquerading as a feminine ideal, not because of her true self. This illustrates that Joey refuses to change who she is for the sake of a man. Despite the fact that she has been harboring strong feelings for Dawson for some time, she will not pretend to be something she’s not, and
she only wants him if he loves her for who she really is. Though finding love is important to her, being true to herself is ultimately more important than that.

These early episodes establish Joey as a budding young feminist, and as she grows into womanhood in later seasons, she continues in this same vein. She remains outspoken, becomes more self-confident, and keeps her personal goals in the forefront of her mind. She strives to “find herself” and does so, first by discovering a love of art and, later, of writing. She works hard to realize her dreams of attending college (she winds up at the fictional Worthington College) and of traveling to Paris. In the final episode of the series, which takes place five years in the future, Joey has become a successful career woman, living in New York and working as a junior publishing executive. Through this account of Joey’s narrative arc, it is clear that the character displays a number of progressive female qualities and could serve as a positive feminist role model for the young women who are the primary audience of Dawson’s Creek. But this narrative that I have recounted is only part of the story, and when it is placed back into context, amidst Joey’s concurrent romantic narrative, it becomes evident that the romantic narrative takes precedence over storylines related to Joey’s education, career, friends and family.

Facilitating the Romantic Narrative

Although Joey is involved in a variety of storylines in addition to those dealing directly with her love life, these storylines are placed within the narrative in ways that minimize their importance. One example of this is in the episode “Double Date,” in which we first learn how desperately Joey wants to go to college in order to find a better life for herself somewhere far from Capeside. In this episode, Joey takes on an extra credit project for her biology class because she worries that her score of 98 percent on the midterm exam isn’t good enough. When
she is teased for fretting over an already high score, Joey heatedly replies that every single point is vital to her because her only hope of going to college rests on receiving a scholarship. “A scholarship is pretty much my only way out of Capeside,” she argues. “And if I don’t get out of here, well, I’ll be a sadder story than I care to imagine.” Joey’s determination to excel academically is an ongoing storyline throughout the series. But this storyline takes a backseat to her romantic storyline, even within this same episode. The focus of the episode is not Joey’s academic dreams but a love triangle between Joey, Dawson and Pacey. Joey is assigned to work on the extra credit project with Pacey, and during their time together, Pacey begins to develop feelings towards her and kisses her. This becomes a conflict because Pacey is best friends with Dawson, who also has feelings for Joey. So ultimately, the plotline about Joey’s academic dreams becomes a mere footnote within this story of romantic conflict.

Academics are again overshadowed by romance in a prominent storyline in one of the series’ later seasons. When Joey begins college in the fifth season, she finds a mentor in Professor Wilder, her English teacher. Joey wants to become a writer and is inspired by Wilder’s teaching and by the novel that he wrote as a young man. Wilder encourages and challenges Joey in ways that help her improve her writing and gain confidence in her work. Joey also works with Wilder and a handful of other talented students on a literary project for the college. While these elements of the storyline aid Joey’s academic/career narrative, their significance is weakened by the fact that there is obvious attraction and flirtation between Joey and Wilder, who is a young and attractive professor and a favorite among the female students for this reason. Joey and Wilder eventually begin a romantic relationship, though it is short-lived and doesn’t progress past a few kisses and intimate discussions. The issue here is that Joey’s development as a writer and intellectual is not presented as important in and of itself. It is linked to her budding romance
with Wilder in such a way that this potential relationship is the focus of the storyline, while other elements (Joey’s interest in writing and her achievements as a student) are merely the framework through which this relationship could develop. The series could have chosen to explore the same academic/career story elements by giving Joey an inspiring mentor or teacher without any romantic inclinations. (*Felicity* actually accomplishes this in a couple ways, giving Felicity both a female counselor who is a guiding force in her life and a male art professor with whom she has a completely platonic relationship full of mutual admiration and respect.) As a point of comparison from the same series, Dawson has two important mentors in his aspiring film career, a retired filmmaker (Mr. Brooks) who reinvigorates Dawson’s desire to make movies, and a successful young director (Todd) who takes Dawson under his wing and helps him make his first connections in Hollywood. His student/teacher relationships with each of these men are treated as full storylines in themselves and are unrelated to Dawson’s love life except in a few peripheral circumstances. Unfortunately, Joey is not given this same treatment and does not have a significant academic/career storyline to carry on its own merits, only storylines that directly connect to a romantic narrative.

There are other instances where Joey’s non-romantic storylines are given a prominent role but still inevitably serve the greater purpose of influencing, commenting on or causing conflict in Joey’s love life. This is the case with the recurring plotline dealing with Joey’s father, Mike. Joey has a troubled relationship with her incarcerated father, and this is dealt with prominently in several episodes of the series. However, in each of these episodes, the narrative still favors a focus on Joey’s love life, specifically her relationship with Dawson. The final episode of the series’ first season shows Joey reluctantly visiting Mike in prison for his birthday. She finds herself too angry at her father to speak with him, leaving Dawson, who has
accompanied Joey to the prison, to speak with him instead. During their conversation about Joey, Dawson’s feelings for her become clear, and Mike realizes that Dawson is in love with Joey. When Joey finally confronts Mike, what begins as a scene about examining and strengthening their father-daughter relationship becomes a conduit to advance the Joey/Dawson romance:

**Joey:** Do you really love me, though? Because I’m 15 years old, and I go through every day of my life thinking that no one loves me.

**Mike:** Well, nothing could be further from the truth. I’m not the only one. Dawson Leery, he loves you, Joey. He’s never told you?

**Joey:** Never.

**Mike:** Well, he does. I know it.

**Joey:** How?

**Mike:** Because he looks at you the same way your mother used to look at me. And you love him. Have you told him? You have to tell him, Joey. Don’t make my mistake. Don’t wait ‘til someone you love is eaten with cancer and wasting away while you hold back the one thing they’re waiting to hear.

The realizations gained from their conversations with Mike lead Joey and Dawson to confront and discuss their feelings at the close of the episode, which ends with a kiss that likely positions the Joey/Dawson romance as the focal point in viewers’ minds as they await the start of the next season. Instead of exploring Joey’s difficult relationship with her father as a storyline on its own terms, the series structures it in a way that once again emphasizes Joey’s love life.

Mike reappears for several episodes in the latter half of the show’s second season when he is released from prison, and we again see Joey work through her strained relationship with him. But as it did the first time, the storyline ultimately serves the overarching Joey/Dawson romantic storyline. Just as Joey has become more accepting of Mike, Dawson (who is now Joey’s boyfriend) suspects him of dealing drugs again and reluctantly relays this information to Joey. Joey is furious at Dawson about the accusation, but confronts her father and is forced to
turn him in to the police when she learns that Dawson’s assertion was true. The dramatic fallout from these events, however, is not focused on the breakup of Joey’s family or her loss of trust in her father, but on the conflict it causes between Joey and Dawson. The emotional climax of the episode (and thus the season) is the final scene in which Joey breaks up with Dawson:

Joey: I hope one day that I will be able to forgive my father for all of this. And I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive myself. But I know that I will never forgive you. See, Dawson, there are certain circumstances that love cannot overcome. And from now on, I don’t want to know you.

At this point it becomes clear that though much of the action in the episode is focused on Joey and her father, the overall story being told is not really about them. As the scene fades to black after this final dialogue, the story that resonates from the episode is that of the destruction of Joey and Dawson’s relationship. This again illustrates how Joey is repeatedly returned to the realm of romantic love (whether falling in or out of it), even when non-romantic storylines are featured prominently. Though Joey’s other storylines may receive more screen time in particular episodes, in the end these storylines typically inform or affect Joey’s love life, and thus it is the romantic narrative that most often carries the dramatic resonance of the episode and the series as a whole.

The Final(e) Statement

Both of the episodes I’ve just discussed are season finales, and the placement of these romance-related events at the end of the season is also rather telling. Season finales are major events within a television series, so the plotlines that are highlighted during a finale are automatically imbued with extra significance. Finales are often the most memorable episodes of a series because they typically call for more monumental plot developments than other episodes. By focusing on Joey’s love life during season finales, the series essentially marks her romantic
choices and conflicts as the most important aspects of her life (and, extrapolating from this, sends the message that these are the most important aspects of any woman’s life).

Joey’s storyline in every season finale of Dawson’s Creek’s deals with her love life. The first two season finales I have already recounted here. The third season finale (appropriately titled “True Love”) finds Joey severing ties with Dawson and declaring her love for Pacey, after a dramatic season-long courtship, and sailing away with him for a romantic summer. This is the culmination of a season in which Joey’s love life truly dominates the narrative, as she goes from pining over Dawson (who has a new girlfriend) to a short romance with college student A.J. to a burgeoning love affair with Pacey which then drives Dawson to again pursue Joey’s affection. The impact of Joey’s decision to run off with Pacey at season’s end—effectively choosing him over Dawson and tarnishing the life-long friendship and attraction between her and Dawson—is further highlighted in the marketing campaign for the following season. The print ad for the series’ fourth season hammers home the idea that Joey’s choice of man is a life-changing, cataclysmic, epic event. The ad bluntly states, “Her choice changed everything.” The accompanying photo shows Joey at the center with Dawson and Pacey on either side of her, facing away from her in opposite directions. All three of them, Joey especially, have somber expressions on their faces, further demonstrating the weight of the situation and the significance of Joey’s decision. The background of this image is a dark, cloudy sky, symbolic of the emotional storm that Joey’s choice has caused and will continue to loom over everyone, especially Joey.

The implication is that Joey choosing Pacey is a truly defining moment—if not the defining moment—of Joey’s life thus far, and that there is nothing that has affected her life as much as this has. (Keep in mind that this is a woman whose mother died when she was a child
and whose father has been sent to prison). Nothing else matters as much as this does. A promotional poster like this, which focuses on a singular issue within the narrative, essentially sends the message, “This is what the show is about,” and since Joey is at the center of the image and of this storyline, it is also saying “This is what Joey is about.” Whatever else Joey deals with in her life (which in this season includes the arduous process of applying, getting accepted, and paying for college), none of it is as important as this. David Roger Coon writes about “regressive promotional materials” that can weaken a text’s capacity for presenting a progressive portrayal of women (4). Discussing a similarly romantic-themed ad for the Alias (2001-2006), in which CIA agent Sydney Bristow is pictured between potential suitors Michael Vaughn and Will Tippin, Coon states:

The [ad’s] phrase “Love is still the greatest adventure” seems to say that this romantic situation is more important than the work she does for the CIA. Her globetrotting missions that attempt to save the world are well and good, but they can’t compare to her life’s true mission (the “greatest adventure”), which is apparently to end up with a suitable man. (10)

Though Joey Potter is certainly not an action hero like Sydney Bristow is, she does have her own important work to do, such as her academic work which is key to her future career aspirations. Though this does play a relatively significant role during the fourth season, the ads promoting the season draw attention only to that romantic choice that “changed everything.” This shapes the way that viewers approach the text, reinforcing the events of the third season finale which frames Joey primarily as the center of a romantic narrative.

The last episode of season four follows Joey and Dawson (best friends once again) as they struggle to say their final goodbyes before heading off to college, and the episode ends as they share a kiss reminiscent of the one that the first season ended with. This finale is particularly interesting, because the previous episode could just as easily have been the season
finale instead. In the penultimate episode, “The Graduate,” all the major storylines are given closure, and it ends with Joey giving a meaningful valedictorian speech at graduation, from which we gain a sense of the excitement she feels about embarking on a new chapter in her life. A new chapter which, incidentally, is unrelated to her love life. Had the season ended here, the dramatic focus of Joey’s storyline would be on her academic achievements and her anticipation of the opportunities and experiences that await her in college. However, the following episode (the actual season finale) takes the focus away from this element of Joey’s life and again situates her within a romantic narrative. The so-called cliffhanger is thus unrelated to what lies ahead for Joey at college and instead revolves around the familiar question of “What does this mean for Joey and Dawson’s relationship?” This is a good example of how quickly the series can shift between a more feminist stance (depicting Joey as a soon-to-be independent woman with a promising future) and a more traditional female portrayal (concentrating on Joey’s connection to a man and her anxiety over saying goodbye to him). While both perspectives are present in the series, this is another instance where the storyline that places Joey in a more traditional role is given the final say and therefore carries more weight within the narrative.

The finale of season five once again highlights Joey’s relationship with Dawson, and the episode ends with her frantic attempt to find Dawson before he leaves town so that she can declare her love for him once more. They kiss before parting ways, and again the audience is left wondering about the future of their relationship until the start of the next season. The series finale, at the end of the sixth and final season, plays a large role in establishing the lasting legacy of Dawson’s Creek, because the final episode of a series typically centers on the core characters and themes of the series, as a final statement of “what the show is all about.” In an interview about the end of the series, Executive Producer Paul Stupin stated that he and others working on
the show “wanted to return to the conflicts that had originally challenged each of the four (main) characters, particularly that central question of whether Joey would choose Dawson or Pacey” (Levin 3D). With this imperative in mind, the series finale of Dawson’s Creek heavily emphasizes the love triangle between Joey, Dawson and Pacey, and in doing so, stages Joey’s final choice between Dawson and Pacey as the defining moment of the character and of her future. It is depicted as a decision that she must make in order to make her life complete. It is worth noting that the episode just prior to the finale shows Joey realizing her life-long dream of going to Paris, and the lasting images of the episode are of Joey confidently maneuvering through the city, an independent woman living the life that she has wanted for so long. But as with the series’ fourth season, this “feminist ending” to Joey’s story, is not in fact the end of the story. Since the final episode shows Joey deciding that it’s time to settle down with a man and choose which man that will be, the implication is that her life was not actually complete prior to this point because she was single.

As the airing of the series finale approached, the fact that Joey would make her final choice between Dawson and Pacey was heavily promoted, indicating that this was the main event of the episode. The other plotline from the episode that was given a similar level of attention in promotions was the fact that one of the four main characters would die (which turned out to be, interestingly enough, the only character not involved in the Joey-Dawson-Pacey love triangle: Jen Lindley). Surprisingly, even the failing health and eventual death of her friend Jen does not diminish the relative importance of Joey’s love life, and in fact, it becomes a major catalyst for Joey’s much-hyped “final choice.” As the two women have a heart-to-heart discussion in Jen’s hospital room, we see that the primary storyline at play is not Joey and Jen’s friendship or Jen’s imminent death, but Joey’s romantic relationships with men:
Joey: The only decision left is the one that I need to make with myself. To stop running, once and for all. I mean, I know who I’m supposed to be with. I’ve always known. But then the fear takes over. The free-floating anxiety-ridden fear in the pit of my stomach that makes me run. Jen, I am completely comfortable running. I really don’t know any other way.

Jen: Maybe I can help. What if I demand that you make that decision? No more running. I’m going to make it my dying wish. My death will serve a greater purpose. It’s your ultimate motivator.

Even at the deathbed of one of her best friends, Joey’s storyline still focuses on her love life. Instead of centering on the difficulties Joey must be having in facing her friend’s death, the narrative structures this dying friend motif as yet another means of forwarding Joey’s romantic storyline. This is similar to the way in which the saga of Joey and her father, as discussed earlier, ultimately served as a means to a familiar end. As Jen herself stated, her death serves “a greater purpose,” that purpose being to refocus the attention on Joey’s love life. In the end, Joey decides that it’s time for her to take that all-important step of settling down with a man. The revelation that it is Pacey, not Dawson, who Joey chooses is saved for the final few moments of the episode, which further emphasizes that this is the culminating event of Joey’s life thus far and of the series as a whole.

A Matter of Gender or a Matter of Genre?

Considering that Dawson plays a large role in much of Joey’s romantic narrative and that, as noted earlier, he is the unapologetic romantic of the series, the question arises of whether this overemphasis on love lives is even a gendered issue at all. Love, sex, break-ups and make-ups appear constantly in the teen drama genre, as well as in the more general but related genre of melodrama. Because of this, women and men are frequently given these types of storylines, and many characters, regardless of gender, are largely concerned with their love lives and with
finding the right partner. However, when comparing Joey and Dawson, it is apparent that Joey is defined primarily by those romantic storylines, while Dawson is not.

Dawson dreams of becoming a successful film director, and he pursues this dream throughout the course of the series’ six seasons. He, of course, also dreams of Joey, and at times his relationship with her is his main concern. But completely separate from Joey, Dawson has an established identity as a filmmaker. He idolizes film director Steven Spielberg, decorating his walls with posters of Spielberg’s entire film collection and discussing his admiration for Spielberg’s work on many occasions. Dawson makes a few amateur films over the course of the series, even winning top prize at a regional film festival. The fifth and sixth seasons of *Dawson’s Creek* are especially heavy-laden with stories dealing with Dawson’s troubled journey toward realizing his dream. He attends film school, drops out of film school, re-enrolls in film school, works as an intern on a film set and later as a director’s assistant, and the penultimate episode of the series focuses on the filming of his first “real” film—the one Dawson invests all his money in with the hopes that this will launch his filmmaking career. The series finale reveals that five years after he made that film, Dawson has made it big in Hollywood, having developed his own production company which is producing a television series based on his life in Capeside. The crowning moment in Dawson’s narrative—and, in fact, the very last moment of the series—occurs when Dawson announces to his friends that his idol, Steven Spielberg, has finally agreed to meet with him.

While Joey’s storyline culminates with her “final choice” between Dawson and Pacey, Dawson’s storyline culminates in a manner unrelated to his love life. Though Dawson is a romantic and clings to the idea of soulmates and true love, his narrative is not structured in a way that leaves him incomplete without a woman. The fact that he has his dream job is what
completes his story and completes him. Compare this to Joey, who in the series finale has also attained a desirable and successful career, but her life is shown to be incomplete because she has not yet been able to settle down romantically, and her final decision to make a life with Pacey is what brings closure to her story.

When examining other teen drama series, we continue to find young male characters who, in contrast to most of their female counterparts within the genre, are depicted as having facets of their lives which have equal or greater importance than their romantic relationships. The romantic conventions of the genre are present—these young men have dramatic and emotional love lives, just as the women do—but the men’s storylines are ultimately focused on elements other than their love lives. As noted previously, Ephram Brown on *Everwood* (2002-2006) is one example of this, as his primary storyline throughout the series is his rocky relationship with his father, Andy. When the series begins, Ephram and his recently-widowed father have an extremely difficult and conflicted relationship, and Ephram’s issues with his father remain his defining characteristic over the course of the series. Ephram and Andy slowly make steps toward strengthening their father-son relationship only to encounter new conflicts that break their bond once again. Arguably, the most defining and life-altering moment in Ephram’s narrative over the course of the series is in the episode “Fate Accomplis,” when Ephram purposefully misses his audition at Juilliard, essentially sacrificing his long-held dreams as a classical pianist, in order to spite his father. This surprising and dramatic turn of events was given full cliffhanger treatment and instilled with great significance, as the emotional consequences reverberated through Ephram and Andy’s relationship for the remainder of the series. This is the type of storyline that one rarely sees given to women within this genre. One notable exception to this “rule” is *Gilmore Girls* (2000-present), in which one dramatic season
finale finds the young female lead, Rory Gilmore, dropping out of Yale, causing a serious conflict between Rory and her mother. But overwhelmingly, the women are kept within the confines of their romantic narratives, while the men, though they also have romantic narratives, are allowed to carry major storylines that are only indirectly related—or, in some instances, completely unrelated—to their love lives.

Other examples can be found on teen dramas *The O.C.* (2003-present), *One Tree Hill* (2003-present), and *Smallville* (2001-present). On *The O.C.*, the main character, Ryan Atwood, is a teenager from “the wrong side of the tracks,” a juvenile delinquent who is taken in by a wealthy family and must adjust to his new surroundings and lifestyle. Ryan is in love with the girl next door, as is often the case in teen dramas, and their relationship is one of the main storylines. However, Ryan is primarily defined by his role as an outsider in his elitist surroundings, and much of the series—especially the first season—follows Ryan’s struggle to be accepted within the rich and glamorous community in which he now lives. Ryan’s overall narrative arc is about overcoming disadvantages and preconceptions and surpassing his and others’ expectations for what he can achieve in life. His relationships with women—particularly with that girl next door, Marissa—factor into this narrative, but so do his relationships with his adoptive parents and his best friend Seth, which are given generous amounts of screen time and significance as well. Ryan’s storyline is about much more than Marissa or his love life in general, so much so that in the recently-aired final episode of *The O.C.’s* third season, Marissa was killed off. The fact that Ryan’s narrative can and will continue without the presence of his primary love interest illustrates that “getting the girl” is not the end-game of his story, which stands in direct contrast to the wealth of female characters (like Joey and Felicity) for whom “getting the guy” is the final chapter of their televised tales.
Another male “outsider” narrative is seen on One Tree Hill, where social outcast Lucas Scott is recruited for the high school basketball team and is thus thrown into conflict with the popular star of the team, Nathan Scott, who also happens to be Lucas’ half-brother. The rivalry between Lucas and Nathan, and the related conflict between Lucas and his father (who abandoned Lucas and his mother but raised and championed Nathan) is Lucas’ main storyline. Lucas’ primary love interest, Peyton, is Nathan’s girlfriend at the beginning of the series, so his romantic narrative serves to intensify his non-romantic narrative (his conflicts with Nathan), which is the opposite of what we normally see when a woman is the protagonist.

Finally, on Smallville, a teen drama mixed with superhero action-adventure, a young Clark Kent, a.k.a. Superman, battles the typical demons of teenaged life while also battling super-powered villains and struggling with the difficulties and responsibilities linked to his super-human abilities. Though he longs to have a “normal” romantic relationship, specifically with his dream girl, Lana Lang, this desire must come second to his sense of duty and commitment to his destiny of becoming a savior for humanity. In other words, he has bigger problems to deal with. Clark’s narrative is, quite simply, “The man who would become Superman.” Over the course of the series, it is frequently stated that this is his destiny, his one true purpose. At times he has to sacrifice his personal happiness, including his relationship with Lana, because his role as protector of the people is ultimately more important. Though Smallville’s supernatural elements place it in a slightly different context than the other series discussed here, it presents the same teen drama conventions, with Clark and his friends having many of the same experiences and storylines as characters on Dawson’s Creek and other traditional teen dramas. And just as we’ve seen with the rest of the genre, here the male character is largely defined by something other than his romantic relationships.
The genre, then, is not the issue here. The highs and lows of love are an integral and expected part of teen dramas, and male and female characters are equally involved in these types of storylines. However, a gendered difference is found in the way that the characters’ romantic narratives relate to their overall narratives. For male characters, the romantic narrative is typically an important part of their series-long storyline but is not their primary or defining storyline. For female characters, the romantic narrative is their overall narrative, with all other storylines given less overall significance. Returning to the discussion of Dawson’s Creek, we see that even within the same series, the love lives of the lead male and lead female roles are handled in different ways. Both have important romantic narratives over the course of the series, but only Joey needs to have a partner at the close of the series in order to be truly happy. Though it’s not “wrong” for a woman to live happily ever after with a man at the end of a story (after all, feminism is not about rejecting heterosexual romance), the fact that Joey’s story ends this way and Dawson’s does not suggests that men can take or leave romantic commitment, but that this is what’s expected of women and what women should want and strive for. This type of representation of women is very common, which is problematic because it promotes a traditional image of women’s lives as the ideal. By consistently portraying women in this light, teen dramas are offering their audiences (largely made up of young women) a limited perspective on women’s roles and interests. In real life, some women concern themselves primarily with their love lives, while other women are driven more by their careers, education, friendships, hobbies, or other pursuits. (The same can be said of men, of course, but media portrayals already address this diversity within men’s lives.) All of these are valid choices, as women pursue and find happiness through whatever means suit them best as individuals. Media images, however, do not
reflect this, and continue to portray an ideal in which a woman’s ultimate goal is a man. The
teen drama is one genre in particular where we see this played out again and again.

The constant emphasis on Joey’s love life, despite the presence of many other
dramatically viable storylines, is what prevents this feminist-leaning character from making
much of a statement against traditional female roles. Though Joey herself never asserts that her
love life is her primary concern or states that settling down with a man is her ultimate goal, the
way her storylines unfold and the manner in which they’re presented shape the narrative so that
these are the messages that are conveyed. She says one thing, but we see another. These
contradictory signals within the same text are common in the postfeminist era, and they add to
the illusion that much progress has been made in the representation of women in the media,
while in reality, that progress is subtly being undermined.
FELICITY PORTER

The year that Joey Potter first appeared on the television landscape also marked the debut of Felicity Porter, the lead character of the WB’s *Felicity* (1998-2002). The teen drama series follows Felicity’s four years of college in New York City. Throughout the series Felicity (portrayed by Keri Russell) experiences love and heartbreak, navigates complicated relationships with her parents and friends, and struggles to find her direction in life. Though shy and unsure of herself at the beginning of the series, she gains confidence, strength and independence as she overcomes personal and external obstacles during her college years. As Felicity begins college, she is on track to follow in her father’s footsteps and become a doctor, but she also has a strong interest in art. One of the recurring storylines over the course of the series is Felicity’s dilemma over which career path she should follow, which causes tension with her parents (especially her father) as well as internal conflict for Felicity herself. Compared with the way Joey’s career-related storylines were minimized in importance on *Dawson’s Creek*, Felicity’s academic and career choices are given a refreshing and commendable amount of screen time and weight within the narrative on *Felicity*. Overall, Felicity is portrayed in a somewhat more balanced way than Joey is, as her storylines are not quite as heavily biased towards romantic love. The fact that Felicity is frequently situated in plotlines unrelated to her romantic relationships does represent a step in the right direction; however, the series does not completely break from convention, and there is ultimately greater importance placed on Felicity’s love life than on other elements of the narrative.
It is worth acknowledging that *Felicity*, though problematic in ways which will be discussed in this chapter, can be seen as a positive development in terms of women on television because it was one of the first dramatic series to showcase a teenaged or young adult woman as its main protagonist. Despite Joey’s prominence on *Dawson’s Creek*, the series (as evidenced by its title) was essentially Dawson’s tale, meaning Joey was not ultimately responsible for driving the narrative. *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000) and *Party of Five* (1994-2000) both had more than one young woman among their main characters, but those women shared the limelight with their male counterparts, who were often placed in more significant positions within the text. *My So-Called Life* (1994-1995) was the first dramatic series to truly focus on the perspective of a teenaged girl, but despite critical acclaim, it was cancelled in its first season. At the time of *Felicity*’s debut, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) was the only other dramatic series in production that fully centered its narrative on a young woman. Even though there may be issues with the way Felicity is portrayed in the series, the fact that the experience of a young woman was given the spotlight and that the series lasted for four years—with moderate success and critical acclaim—is in itself an encouraging notion.

The basic premise of *Felicity* is one that at first seems antithetical to feminist notions—so much so that it caused some women I know to dismiss the series before it even debuted. In the pilot episode, Felicity impulsively abandons her long-held plans to attend Stanford University in order to follow her high school crush, Ben Covington, to the fictional University of New York. Ben is a man she hardly knows, whom she’d admired only from afar until the day of their high school graduation when she finds the courage to ask him to sign her yearbook. Ben writes a warm and thoughtful message to her, which proves to be reason enough for Felicity to change her future plans and move across the country to be near him. Her actions here don’t exactly
fashion Felicity as a young feminist role model. However, later in the episode it becomes clear that Felicity is not just a lovesick girl with no other goals but to snag the boy of her dreams. When her ill-conceived hopes of a sweeping New York City romance with Ben are shattered (the first time they encounter each other at UNY, Ben is with another woman and doesn’t even remember Felicity’s name), Felicity quickly realizes that this was a ridiculous notion in the first place.

To her parents’ delight, Felicity begins making arrangements to return home to attend Stanford as originally intended and get back on track with the life that her parents had planned for her “since [she] was pretty much a zygote.” Felicity’s parents ridicule the decision she made in coming to New York, declaring it a “colossal mistake” in a tone that makes Felicity realize that her parents don’t think she is capable of making her own decisions and therefore have never allowed her to do so. Her parents treat her like a child, and she is ready to break away from that environment. “If I made a mistake, then at least it was mine,” she tells them, indicating that she wants to be responsible for her own choices (even the wrong ones), instead of having someone else always deciding what’s best for her. Felicity discovers how much her parents had controlled her life thus far, learning that she hadn’t even earned her way into Stanford, as her father had pulled some strings so that she would be accepted for admission, ensuring that the life he plotted out for her would continue as planned. Upon further reflection, Felicity realizes that she doesn’t know if she even wants that life, but she does know that she doesn’t want her parents in charge of it anymore. Felicity wants to make her own decisions, to forge her own path. She explains to Ben, “I’ve never made a substantial choice in my life, and that’s why I came here. I thought it was you, but you were just really the excuse.” Her decision to alter her future plans was never really about Ben. What appears at first as an indication of a woman’s dependence on a man is
really a demonstration of a woman declaring independence from her parents. Felicity moves to New York to become her own person and decide for herself what her future would be. So despite initial appearances, the premise of the series is actually rooted in feminist principles, as it revolves around a young woman intent on making her own choices in life and discovering what she wants and who she is.

*Felicity* has even received recognition for its feminist viewpoint. In a television analysis by the National Organization of Women, “Watch Out, Listen Up!: Feminist Primetime Report Update 2000-2001,” the organization ranked *Felicity* third overall in their study, which examined 59 primetime television programs in terms of gender composition/diversity, violence, sexual exploitation and social responsibility. The series also ranked third in the category of “Shows with the Least Sexual Exploitation,” indicating that NOW analysts viewed Felicity and the other female characters in the ensemble as “respected/value participants” and approved of “the types of roles the women filled, their intelligence/skills, their attire/appearance and the way male characters interacted with them” (2). It’s worth noting that *Dawson’s Creek* also fared relatively well, ranking 21st overall and 10th for least sexual exploitation. In fact, NOW singled-out the WB as a network with remarkably female-friendly programming, stating that “many programs starring women and girls could be found on The WB and analysts felt that the majority of them offered good role models.” (This is encouraging, considering that young women are the network’s main viewing demographic). The report’s “NOW Recommends” list included three programs from the WB (*Felicity, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and the show which received the top rating, Gilmore Girls*), which was more programs than any other television network. Clearly *Felicity* and other select series within the teen drama genre have numerous positive attributes which reflect some progress in the portrayal of women on television.
But in the postfeminist era, progressive feminist elements often appear side-by-side with traditionally feminine elements, and the latter often counteracts the impact of the former. The fact that Felicity received a seal of approval from NOW, a well-known and well-respected feminist organization, and yet can justifiably be criticized for some of the messages it conveys about women is indicative of the contradictory nature of postfeminist texts. Like a typical text within the postfeminist era, Felicity promotes certain feminist values while simultaneously undermining them in various ways, so while some consider the show to be predominantly feminist, others have valid reason to take the opposing point of view. Amanda Fazzone criticizes NOW’s decision to praise Felicity, arguing that Felicity may be an empowered individual, but that this is limited to a particular type of power—“the power of very attractive, very young women to attract just about any man they want” (16). Fazzone continues: “True, that is power of a sort—just not the sort you’d expect NOW to applaud.” The fact that Felicity is an empowered woman is a progressive step, but the fact that her sense of power and success is inextricably linked to her relationships with men is a callback to more traditional notions about a woman’s place in society. Felicity’s impact as a feminist role model is weakened by the fact that there is so much focus on her successes and failures with men, and on the series-long question of which man she will end up with. Despite the fulfillment she finds in other areas of life, her story and her happiness are structured within the text as incomplete until the uncertainties of her love life are resolved and she is settled into a romantic relationship.

Promotional Images: Selling the Romance

The promotional poster and print ads for the first season of Felicity illustrate the series’ dynamic mix of progressive (Felicity as independent woman) and traditional (Felicity searching
for a man) elements but clearly places the emphasis on Felicity’s love life. At the center of the image is a large close-up of Felicity’s face. On each side and slightly behind her are smaller images of her two primary love interests on the series: Ben, of course, and Noel Crane, Felicity’s dormitory resident advisor who becomes her close friend and first boyfriend. An image in the top left corner, much smaller than the picture of the love triangle, shows Felicity walking in front of a city skyline and carrying various bags and suitcases. This suggests that the series is, in part, about a woman moving to a new city, somewhat lost and alone, and finding a new life for herself. It is rather telling that this image of Felicity as an independent woman is relegated to the corner, while the image of the Noel/Felicity/Ben love triangle takes up the majority of the ad space. With Felicity and her two suitors prominently placed as the focus of the advertising campaign, the implication is that this is what the story is about, this is what’s important: Felicity’s search for love.

This promotional imagery is symbolic of how the narrative ultimately plays out on the series. Felicity has some storylines and adventures that don’t involve her love life (as represented by the corner image of Felicity on her own, with the city at her disposal), but those elements of the story are overshadowed by the romantic storyline. The marketing campaign sets up Felicity’s love life as the main selling point of the series, which consequently trivializes other aspects of the character’s life. Here we can see that the “undoing of feminism” on Felicity began even before the first episode aired. It’s a series centered on a woman, with a woman’s name as its title, and yet the image used to promote the series places the woman squarely between two men. The image of the more independent Felicity was apparently important enough to be included on the poster—and to be part of the story—but not important enough to be the only image shown or to be placed at the center. It is understandable that the marketing department
would want to include Ben and Noel, two attractive young men, on the promotional poster and would want to make some indication that series would have some romantic storylines. (After all, this is a series and a television network that is targeted toward young female viewers). But they just as easily could have reversed the placement of the images on the poster—with the Felicity-in-the-city picture larger and in the center, and the image of her with Ben and Noel off to the side—and this would have showcased Felicity’s journey toward self-discovery (regardless of her relationships with men) while also promoting the fact that her love life would be one element of the show. The poster also could have been arranged to give the two types of images equal space and emphasis. Since *Felicity* is an ensemble series, instead of highlighting Felicity’s love triangle with Ben and Noel, they also could have used a group photo to include other integral characters such as Felicity’s closest female friends Julie and Elena. But instead, the promotional posters throughout the entire run of the series emphasize Felicity’s love life. The posters and print ads promoting the second and fourth seasons use images with Felicity at the center and Ben and Noel on each side, much like the promotional image for the first season. The third season image shows Felicity and Ben, who are in a relationship together during the whole season, embracing each other and smiling. Clearly these extratextual images single out Felicity’s romances with Ben and Noel as the driving force on the show, and thus place Felicity in a more traditional female role instead of highlighting the ways in which she actually breaks out from that role.

**Career Storylines vs. Romantic Storylines**

As Felicity’s journey toward self-discovery unfolds, the majority of this journey takes place in connection to her romantic relationships with men. This sends the message that a
woman “finds herself” mainly through her experiences with men, and therefore these experiences are more valuable and important than those unrelated to romance or sex. Especially during the first season of the series, there are few times when Felicity’s storyline does not involve her love life, whether as the primary storyline in an episode or as a smaller subplot in which her potential or existing romantic relationship is somehow affected by the main events of the episode. As noted earlier, Felicity’s primary non-romantic storyline over the course of the series is her career interests in medicine and art and her fluctuation between these two possible paths. Though it is laudable that the series devotes significant attention to Felicity’s academic and career choices, this storyline is often linked with Felicity’s romantic storyline in a way that shapes her love life as the primary narrative and her academic/career storyline as either a by-product of that or as a vehicle with which to advance or add conflict to her romantic relationships.

To begin with, Felicity’s art vs. medicine dilemma does not become a major part of the storyline until a man from Felicity’s past persuades her to rethink her career path. In the two-part episode, “Todd Mulcahy,” a former crush from Felicity’s summer camp days unexpectedly arrives in New York hoping to reconnect with her, much to the dismay of Noel, who at this time is Felicity’s boyfriend. Up until this point, Felicity was happy with her pre-med status, and had not given a thought to her interest in art since she first arrived at college. But through her interaction with Todd, who knew her back when she expressed a great love for art, she is reminded of how important art had been and still is to her. Todd gives her a letter that she had written to him when she was 12 years old in which she writes:

I guess I could be an artist if I wanted to, but that would mean my dad would never talk to me again. I know one day when I grow up, I’ll have to make a decision - if I’m gonna be an artist or a doctor. I’m just happy that day isn’t today.
This shows Felicity as a woman who has thought about her career options since she was a young girl. Todd is shocked to hear that Felicity is pursuing medicine instead of art and urges her to reconsider and not to dismiss the dreams she once had of becoming an artist. It is Todd’s intervention that causes Felicity to question her decision to study pre-med, and she begins to revisit her passion for art. Her hesitation about studying medicine almost costs her a spot in a prestigious medical seminar, but she convinces the professor that she can be devoted to both medicine and art, even quoting her 12-year-old self in the process. Felicity has Todd to thank for gaining this realization about the direction of her career and her life. She explains to Noel, “This strange guy from my past just shows up [and] starts criticizing how I’m living my life, and I think he’s right.” In this instance, Felicity rediscovers a part of herself and reexamines her career path only after this interaction with a man who is romantically interested in her.

In other instances Felicity’s choices regarding art and medicine seem to serve the greater purpose of introducing a new love interest for Felicity and/or inviting conflict into her existing romantic relationship. This again emphasizes the overall importance of her love life while minimizing the significance of her career storyline as its own narrative. Felicity’s refueled interest in art leads her to frequent an art studio where she meets a man named Eli. She forms a connection with Eli through their shared love of art, and when Felicity’s relationship with Noel hits a rough patch and he falls back into the arms of an ex-girlfriend, Felicity gives in to her attraction to Eli and loses her virginity to him (in the art studio, lest we not forget what it was that led her to Eli in the first place). This, of course, has dire consequences for her relationship with Noel, which becomes a major focus for the remainder of the season. Felicity’s pursuit of art becomes less about her search for a fulfilling career path and more about how this foray leads to her affair with Eli and causes a major upheaval in her love life.
A similar situation occurs in the second season when Felicity begins community service at the university’s student health center. At this point she has switched her major to art, but she still has not completely ruled out medicine, so she opts to continue pursuing it in this capacity. At the health center she meets the young director of the center, Greg, another potential love interest, so once again the exploration of Felicity’s occupational interests becomes intertwined with her love life. This health center storyline comes to center on Felicity’s relationship with Greg and, by extension, her relationship with Ben, who is harboring feelings for Felicity and competes with Greg for Felicity’s affection. Felicity’s enthusiasm for her work at the health center serves to bring her and Greg closer together, which unfortunately gives the impression that the work she is doing is worthwhile not on its own merits, but mainly because it is forwarding this romance. A clear example of this can be seen in the episode “Revolutions.” In this episode, Felicity learns of a university policy that prohibits the health center from distributing emergency contraceptives. Feeling that this is wrong and wanting to enact change, Felicity organizes a sit-in at the health center to protest this policy. Greg initially disagrees with Felicity’s actions, but in the end her arguments sway him and he joins her side of the debate. At the end of the episode, the university agrees to change the policy, and Felicity and Greg celebrate by sharing their first kiss. Therefore, the culmination of this storyline involving progressive actions related to women’s health and rights is a new boyfriend for Felicity—as if that is the important victory, the true happy ending of the episode. This minimizes the impact not only of the cause that they are fighting for, but of the image of Felicity pouring herself into this job that she obviously cares deeply about. This would have worked just as well as a story without the romantic angle, but instead the episode shifted from feminist to traditionally feminine by placing the final dramatic note on Felicity’s burgeoning relationship with Greg.
The idea that a woman’s concerns about love and romance should always be the driving force in her life is also demonstrated in another episode dealing with Felicity’s aspirations in medicine. In the episode “Docuventary,” Felicity is working on a difficult project for the medical seminar she is enrolled in, and she is also struggling romantically, as Noel has broken up with her and she is trying to make amends with him. For her seminar she must develop a research proposal, and the research topic that she chooses deals entirely with romantic love.

Felicity explains to her professor what type of medical research she is proposing:

The idea that love is a genetic condition. The idea being that the various components of love—including but not limited to attraction, respect, trust, stamina, the ability and desire to communicate—that all of these parts are genetically determined. That maybe we’re all pre-programmed to connect with someone else who’s programmed in a compatible way.

The fact that her medical research interests involve studying, of all things, love once again keeps Felicity from truly breaking away from traditional femininity. Even though she is involved in rigorous pre-professional training and pursuing a career track that has historically been associated with men, the progressive implications of this are undermined by this idea that Felicity, presumably because she is a woman, would use this training and this opportunity to research the factors that affect her own love life and thus help her gain an understanding of why her romantic relationships turn out the way they do. This is not to say that the components of love are not worthy of scientific study, but merely to point out that having Felicity focus her research in this area suggests that women, even in their serious professional pursuits, are and should be focused on finding and maintaining romantic relationships. Here the series once again refuses to spotlight Felicity’s academic/career storyline without tying it in to her interest in improving her love life.
The Romantic Cliffhanger

The importance placed on Felicity’s love life is reflected by the fact that her romantic choices are the subject of all four of the series’ season finales. As noted before, a season finale is a major event in the life of a television series, so placing Felicity’s love life at the forefront of these episodes frames that element of her life as the most important. As the first major cliffhanger moment in the life of the series, the final episode of the first season centers the narrative on that original selling point from the pre-season promotional campaign—the love triangle between Felicity, Ben and Noel—and culminates in Felicity deciding which man to spend a romantic summer with. Her decision, of course, is not revealed to the audience yet, and this choice between Ben and Noel is positioned as a major turning point in Felicity’s future and as a big mystery, with the hopes that viewers would discuss and debate the “Ben or Noel?” question over the series’ summer hiatus and return the following season to see the big reveal and dramatic resolution of this event.

Though Felicity’s love life is the primary story element over the course of the season, this narrative focus is ramped up even more in the final episodes of the season so that Felicity’s other storylines relatively fade away in deference to her romantic storyline. The episodes leading up to the finale establish the personal reconnections that Felicity is making with both Ben and Noel, showcasing each man’s positive qualities and Felicity’s legitimate and conflicted attraction to each of her suitors. Noel is offered a summer internship in Berlin and invites Felicity to come with him. Ben plans to spend the summer in his (and Felicity’s) hometown in California and invites Felicity to join him on a two-week, cross-country drive before they each settle in at home with their respective families. Felicity’s choice between these two options is structured entirely in romantic terms. Even though there are other variables in this situation, her choice is not about
which summer location interests her the most or has the most opportunities for her, and it’s not about whether she’d rather spend her summer at home or away. It is about which man she wants to be with, and the other factors related to the decision are not portrayed as being of comparable weight or worthy of considerable deliberation. The dramatic importance of this decision is further heightened by the episode’s use of Ravel’s “Bolero,” a piece of classical music which, because of its slowly growing intensity and explosive climax, is widely considered to be overtly sexual. Strains of “Bolero” are laced throughout the episode, further highlighting the romantic and sexual nature of Felicity’s current situation as its seductive refrain indicates that the drama is building towards a big climactic event.

As the episode ends, Felicity states that she has made her decision and rides away in a taxi, her destination (and thus her choice of man) a mystery to the audience. The question of which man Felicity has chosen is the only major question posed by the finale. A season finale will often leave various narrative threads open, setting up a number of questions and situations to be resolved in the next season. However, this finale positions the “Ben or Noel?” question as the only unresolved situation, which further emphasizes the importance of this decision within Felicity’s life, as it is structured here as the only decision and the only story. Felicity’s choice between Ben and Noel was used as the primary marketing device for the series’ second season. Along with the promotional poster which showed Felicity squarely between Ben and Noel (not wanting to reveal her choice just yet, of course), the WB also produced t-shirts with the phrase “Ben . . . or Noel?” on the front and the second season premiere date (September 26, 1999) displayed on the back. Anticipation of the new season was centered on the fact that viewers would finally learn who Felicity had chosen to spend her summer with. The series teases out this unanswered question in the first episode of the second season, keeping Felicity’s choice a secret
until the second act—roughly 12 minutes into the episode. The character of Javier, Felicity’s friend and boss, is used to reflect the viewers’ perspective, as Felicity refuses to reveal her choice to him right away and he responds insistently, “Tell me who the hell you [chose] or I will kill you. You better come back and tell me or you are fired, I’m not kidding!” Javier’s eagerness to find out whether Felicity chose Ben or Noel further informs the audience that her decision should be the focus of everyone’s attention. Eventually Felicity’s choice is revealed in rather dramatic fashion, with Felicity sitting in the middle of a hallway and Ben and Noel approaching from opposite sides. As Noel, in stylistic slow-motion, walks by Felicity and coldly turns away from her, it becomes clear that Felicity has rejected him and chosen Ben.

The drama surrounding Felicity’s choice of man and its eventual unveiling to the audience is very deliberate, and there is no question that this is structured as the main event of the first season finale and the second season premiere. While it is an effective way to structure a narrative, it has unfortunate consequences in terms of the way it positions Felicity. Making this romantic cliffhanger the driving force of the series for several months (from the finale in May to the premiere in September) places all the emphasis on Felicity’s love life and gives no attention to any other aspects of the character. Felicity becomes little more than a romantic heroine, a woman torn by her love for two men, a woman who must decide which man holds the future for her. Once the series places Felicity in this position, it is difficult to remove her from it.

Centering the narrative on Felicity’s love life this early in the series solidifies the importance of Felicity’s romantic decisions and specifically her constant fluctuation between Ben and Noel. This shapes the narrative for the episodes and seasons that follow, lacing Felicity’s interactions with Ben and Noel with romantic and sexual tension, so that the implications for Felicity’s love life are always present, even when a scene is presumably about something else.
The final episodes of the second and third seasons are not dramatic cliffhangers like the first season finale, but they do similarly concentrate on Felicity’s love life, again leaving an impression of Felicity as, first and foremost, a woman in search of a lasting romantic relationship. At the end of the second season, Felicity is dating Ben and they are planning to spend the summer together in California, where Ben has a lucrative summer job waiting for him. However, Felicity is offered a prestigious internship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which would require her to remain in New York for the summer. Felicity at first declines the internship so that she can spend the summer with Ben, as she is worried that being apart from Ben will put their relationship in danger and doesn’t want to take that risk. However, Ben worries that Felicity is passing up an important opportunity, so he convinces her to reconsider. Felicity is also persuaded by her counselor, Dr. Pavone, a woman who throughout the series tells Felicity the harsh truths of life and love and challenges her to become a stronger, more independent person:

**Dr. Pavone:** I know you. I know Ben. I know what this internship is. Take the internship. Don’t throw away an opportunity to become a more interesting person out of fear.

**Felicity:** Fear?

**Dr. Pavone:** Of losing Ben.

**Felicity:** That’s not why I turned down the internship. I just . . . I’m choosing to be with Ben. That’s just what I want to do this summer.

**Dr. Pavone:** An opportunity like this internship does not come around very often. And if you and Ben are gonna work this out [. . .] then you’ll be there for each other long after this opportunity has come and gone. That’s what love is about.

**Felicity:** No one’s ever said love.

**Dr. Pavone:** Well in that case, definitely take the internship.

Essentially everyone except Felicity thinks that she should put her career before her boyfriend in this situation—even her own boyfriend.
Felicity does eventually accept the internship but continues to be concerned about the ramifications for her relationship with Ben. Here again we see how her career storyline is used to add drama to her romantic storyline, such that the focus remains on Felicity’s love life and the career opportunity is structured as simply another unfortunate barrier to a successful romantic relationship. Felicity stays reluctant and uncomfortable about her decision to stay in New York for the internship until the moment when she and Ben say goodbye for the summer and he says “I love you” to her for the first time. Only then, when she has Ben’s assurance that he feels deeply for her and that their relationship can survive the distance, does she truly embrace the great career opportunity that awaits her. This suggests that choosing the internship instead of a summer with Ben would not be worth it if it cost Felicity her boyfriend. But since there is an indication that her relationship with Ben will remain strong, then it is okay for Felicity to pursue the internship, since it no longer poses a threat to her love life. Even though Felicity does challenge traditional female roles by choosing what is best for her career instead of what is best for her romantic relationship, the subtle message of the episode is that this internship is a positive development in Felicity’s life only if doesn’t disrupt her relationship with Ben.

The end of the third season once again brings the Ben/Felicity/Noel love triangle to center stage. Felicity’s primary—and practically only—storyline in the final few episodes of the season sees her struggling to balance her relationships with Ben (still her boyfriend) and Noel, who has confessed that he’s still in love with her. Felicity and Ben plan to spend their summer camping together, while Noel, having graduated from college, is set to move away to begin his career. But when Ben decides to enroll in a summer training program instead, and Noel’s job falls through, Ben and Felicity end up spending another summer apart, while Felicity and Noel end up sharing an apartment in New York for the summer. The final moments of the episode
show Felicity and Noel happily walking through the city together, which leaves the lingering question “What will happen between them over the summer?” Similar to the first season finale, this episode focuses the drama on Felicity’s two romantic options, as opposed to any other aspect of her life. The inevitable return to this story motif at the end of every season reinforces the idea that this is ultimately the main story being told. Felicity deals with a variety of issues throughout the season, but in the end it always comes back to her love life. The final episodes of the fourth (and final) season drive this point home in spectacular fashion.

The Series Finale

Felicity essentially had two endings: the intended ending and the actual ending. This was due to executives at the WB ordering five additional episodes of the series after the finale had already been filmed. The producers and writers then had to develop a feasible way to extend the storyline even though they had already ended the series in the way they intended. One of the producers, Matt Reeves, stated, “We just knew we were gonna build to Felicity’s graduation—that that was what was really important to us” (Reeves, interview). It seems that despite the fact that the big “Ben or Noel?” debate was an integral part of the show, the producers didn’t want to aim for a “Ben or Noel” ending, but instead wanted to focus on Felicity’s graduation from college, somewhat mirroring the beginning of the series which saw Felicity graduating (from high school) and embarking on the next phase of her life.

The original ending of the series is the 17th episode of the final season, “The Graduate.” In this episode, Felicity’s father confronts her just before graduation, telling her that she has been throwing her life away for the past few years and has only been concentrating on Ben. When Felicity tells him that after graduation she plans to stay in New York to live with Ben, her father
asks her, “Isn’t four years of following Ben Covington around enough?” Felicity defends her
decision at first, but as the episode continues, she begins to believe that her father is right. Ben
decides to move to Arizona in order to be closer to his son, whom he fathered during a one-night
stand when he and Felicity were broken up. Ben wants Felicity to come with him, meaning she
would have to give up the job that she has lined up in New York. Felicity finally puts her foot
down, telling him “I have been following you for four years. It’s your turn now,” and “All I’ve
been thinking is ‘Go with Ben, follow Ben.’ That’s all I want to do, is follow you. Sometimes I
think I’d follow you anywhere. But I can’t.” In the end, Felicity and Ben make a mutual
decision to go their separate ways, noting that if they’re meant to be together, then they will find
their way back to each other eventually.

After graduation, Ben moves to Arizona as planned, and Felicity ends up back in
California taking pre-med classes, having decided that she wants to become a doctor after all.
Felicity seems happy with her decision and her direction in life, with few regrets about taking
this path instead of following Ben. In the final moments of the episode, Ben surprisingly arrives
in California, telling Felicity that it was his turn to follow her. Even though Felicity’s love life
does have a happy ending here, this differs from the second season finale in that Felicity’s
happiness is not dependent on this romantic outcome. Her post-college life is not portrayed as
being empty without Ben—or any other man, for that matter. The fact that she and Ben end up
together after all is treated as the icing on the cake instead of a necessary element of Felicity’s
life. Had this been the final episode, the series would’ve ended on a highly progressive note,
with Felicity realizing that putting her boyfriend first limited her choices and opportunities in life
and deciding to forgo that relationship so that she can truly follow her own path. However, the
additional five episodes that were tacked on at the end of the series take the narrative focus away
from this feminist ending and return Felicity to the romantic realm and the ever popular “Ben or Noel” dilemma.

The final five episodes of the series are structured as a “what if?” scenario. Not wanting to truly continue the storyline since they were happy with how everything wrapped up in the intended finale, the producers decided to send Felicity “back in time” (it was, of course, ultimately shown to be an extended dream sequence). On the eve of Noel’s wedding, Felicity breaks up with Ben because he cheated on her, and when she sees Noel again she begins to wonder if she should have chosen him all along. Felicity tells her friend Meghan, a Wiccan, that choosing Ben was a mistake and that if she could go back in time, she would choose Noel instead. Meghan performs a Wiccan spell to send Felicity back to the night (at the beginning of fourth season) when Felicity had become frustrated with Ben and had a one-night stand with Noel. However, armed with the knowledge that Ben will eventually break her heart, this time instead of making up with Ben, Felicity chooses to pursue a relationship with Noel. The remaining episodes of the series show how her decision to be with Noel instead of Ben could have altered everything that had originally happened during the season. This drives home the fact that, more than anything else, Felicity’s romantic decisions have drastic consequences for her and everyone around her:

Meghan: You change one thing, everything changes

Felicity: Choosing Noel changed everything?

Meghan: It’s all different now. The ripple effect. One little decision is not just one little decision.

Perhaps more than ever, Felicity’s love life carries a substantial amount of weight in the narrative, as here her decision to alter the direction of her love life deeply affects everything that happens around her. (Note how closely this sentiment parallels the “Her choice changed everything” mentality of Dawson's Creek.)
Felicity sees the ability to choose Noel over Ben as her salvation, but in the end the ripple effect of this has a negative impact on almost everyone including Felicity, as Noel breaks up with her, and she finds herself falling in love with Ben all over again, even though she knows that he will cheat on her in the future. The most severe change of events is that, due to a chain reaction of new circumstances, Noel is killed in a fire. Felicity is devastated, but comes to believe that this is symbolic—she loves two men but cannot continue to do this. She must make a choice and let one go completely. Felicity returns from her “time travel” with the knowledge gained from her strangely realistic dream and finally lets go of any romantic connection to Noel and learns to forgive Ben for his actions and gets back together with him. Thus after five episodes of Felicity’s romantic hijinks, the original feminist ending to the series is somewhat lost, and the actual culmination of the series finds Felicity obsessing over the two men in her life and discovering that Ben is her one true love. Reeves stated that he and the other producers, despite the extra episodes, wanted the series to end in the same place. But while the storylines essentially do end in the same place, the message does not. Focusing the final episodes of the series on Felicity’s love life and showing her once again fluctuating between Ben and Noel dilutes the progressive feminist ending that was established and instead places Felicity into the too common role of a woman determined to find the man that will make her life complete.

Though problematic in ways similar to Dawson’s Creek, Felicity is somewhat more successful at shaping a feminist narrative. It falters along the way, but the fact that Felicity has a well-defined academic/career storyline over the course of the series is indicative of the significance of those events and choices in Felicity’s life and in women’s lives in general. In contrast, Joey’s academic/career narrative on Dawson’s Creek is handled more sloppily, with Joey shifting gears with no explanation from her alleged passion for art to suddenly being
depicted as a writer and lover of literature. The lack of coherence in this aspect of Joey’s storyline suggests that this side of her life does not matter as much, so it is unnecessary to develop those stories in the detailed and comprehensive manner in which her romantic narrative is handled. Even though the outcome of Felicity’s romantic storyline is ultimately placed on the highest pedestal, it is important to note that overall there is a better balance between her “feminist” and “feminine” storylines than there is for Joey. It is unfortunate that the series more often than not relies on Felicity’s love life to drive the narrative and to promote the series, because behind all that there are numerous other well-developed, dramatic and entertaining storylines. More so than on Dawson’s Creek, the elements for a well-balanced portrayal of a young female are present on Felicity, but the arrangement of those elements within the narrative keeps the focus on Felicity’s romantic relationships with men.
The portrayal of Joey Potter and Felicity Porter promotes the traditional belief that a woman’s primary goal in life is to find a man. Though both characters self-identify as feminists and do not themselves assert that settling down with a man is what is most important to them, their narratives are structured in a way that does place the most importance on this aspect of their lives. Is the desire to fall in love with a man an anti-feminist desire? No, certainly not. Feminism is not about rejecting men or dismissing traditional women’s roles as inherently negative. Especially now that feminism and femininity do not have to battle against each other, women can exhibit their strength and independence and fight for their rights while also delighting in “feminine” pleasures, such as clothes shopping, beauty regimes and that search for Mr. Right. It is a very delicate balance, however, and these postfeminist representations of women often work against feminist principles more than they work toward them. Joey and Felicity are smart and capable women who speak their minds, but the progressive potential there is undermined by the fact that what ultimately defines these characters is their relationships with men.

Romantic love is an integral element of the teen drama genre and is perhaps one of the main reasons that viewers, especially young women, are drawn to the genre. But it is possible to develop feminist characters and messages alongside an ongoing romantic narrative without diluting the potentially progressive impact of those characters and messages. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is one teen drama series that has a strong feminist message and incorporates Buffy’s love life into the narrative without shaping it as the defining element in her life. Buffy’s relationship with men, especially her conflicted and passionate romance with the vampire Angel, are vital to the series and to Buffy herself. But above all else, Buffy is a vampire slayer, and as such is
responsible for, literally, saving the world. Though Buffy struggles to balance that daunting responsibility with her desire to be a regular woman who can, among other things, have normal relationships with men, she knows that her duty as a slayer is more important than anything else, and that is the message that the text promotes as well. Another series that successfully integrates a woman’s love life without undermining the feminist message is \textit{Veronica Mars} (2004-present), a show that interestingly enough is often compared to \textit{Buffy the Vampire Slayer} due to its portrayal of a young, strong and witty high schooler. The title character, Veronica, deals with typical teenage issues, including the highs and lows of young romance. But she is also a junior sleuth, solving minor mysteries in each episode as well as larger season-long mysteries, and at its core, this is what drives Veronica and the series as a whole. Veronica spends the entire first season of the series trying to solve her best friend’s murder. Joelle Tjahjadi explains:

It is this drive that pushes the overarching plotline of the show. It is the motivation of Veronica’s life from the first episode, and is indeed, the central point that the entire show is focused on, even if it is the silent passenger in the backseat for the first few episodes. Most of the actions taken by our blonde heroine are somehow related to her single-minded determination to solve the murder.

Just like Buffy, Veronica is shown as having a significant purpose in life other than finding a man and falling in love. Veronica’s love life still gets the full treatment, with typically angst-ridden teen love triangles, first kisses, romance and heartbreak, but it is depicted and structured as just one element of her life, no more important than her detective work, her academic and career goals, or her relationships with family and friends. The popularity of \textit{Veronica Mars} and \textit{Buffy the Vampire Slayer} indicates that there is an audience for this type of female character—a woman who embraces femininity and heterosexual romance but is not dependent on men to achieve validation, strength and happiness, as there are other aspects of their lives that are equally fulfilling.
However, characters like Buffy and Veronica are thus far rather rare, while characters like Joey and Felicity are common in both television and film. Because of the problematic nature of these portrayals, are all those Joeys and Felicitys in the media completely detrimental to feminist agendas? While I argue that Dawson’s Creek and Felicity often undermine the feminist elements of their narratives and their characters, I cannot be entirely dismissive of them. Joey and Felicity are women who can take care of themselves and who stand up for what they believe. As role models for young women they are far from ideal, but considering that there is a basic level of feminist notions represented, they are better than some. Michele Byers argues that “when a show offers us feminist potentialities (even if they are not fully realized), we should not dismiss it, even if it does not fully meet our desires and expectations for feminist television” (179). There is merit to the feminist aspirations of these two series, and NOW’s report on primetime programming attests to the fact that Dawson’s Creek and especially Felicity were more progressive in their portrayal of women than most other series that were on the air at that time. However, even though it would not be appropriate to fully dismiss these series and the characters of Joey and Felicity, it would be damaging in the long run to fully embrace them. We need to move away from these all too common depictions of women who are “complete” only if they live happily ever after with a man. Once television producers choose to present the public with more female characters who are not defined by their love lives, then that is truly a choice that will change everything.
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