SEX AND THE CITY, PLATINUM EDITION: HOW THE GOLDEN GIRLS ALTERED AMERICAN SITUATION COMEDY

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ABSTRACT

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When *The Golden Girls* premiered in 1985, the show helped usher in a new era in American situation comedy television. American audiences had never seen a situation comedy where a group of adult women were the focal point of each episode. There had certainly been programming prior to the show where women held starring roles, but never before had anything like *The Golden Girls* been shown in American prime time television. The show left an indelible mark and millions of Americans have followed the adventures Dorothy, Rose, Blanche, and Sophia, both in its original run from 1985 to 1992, and in its current syndication status on several cable television networks.

*Sex and the City, Platinum Edition: How The Golden Girls Altered American Situation Comedy* explores several of the ways in which the program effected American culture in terms of television as well as away from the television screen. The first chapter of the project explores how the show laid the groundwork for several other programs followed the show’s lead by installing a group of adult women at its center. Comparisons between *The Golden Girls* and several of these shows (including *Sex and the City*, *Designing Women*, and *Hot in Cleveland*) are made in terms of character types and plotlines. The conclusion is drawn that *The Golden Girls* was the first adult female ensemble in situation comedy television and these shows were inspired by the program.

The second chapter of the project examines how each of the characters through the performance of age and sexuality were actively fighting denigrating stereotypes often associated with older females in American society. The chapter contains specific examples from several episodes involving each of the series four main characters and how each of these portrayals...
stands in direct contrast to the beliefs typically attributed to older American women regarding the intersection of age and sexuality.

The third and final chapter of the project explores how the series was able to connect with audiences members of all ages. One key way the series was able to establish its audience was through addressing real life social issues, which had become popular during the 1970s through shows such as *All in the Family*, *Maude*, and *The Jeffersons*; all created by producer Norman Lear. The chapter specifically focuses on the *The Golden Girls*’ treatment of controversial topics including HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, and homelessness. In confronting topics such as these, the show was able to contribute to real life discourses that were occurring when show was originally airing. The assertion is presented that by tackling social issues such as these, the characters were able to de-centralize their ages and connect with audience members of various age demographics because issues such as these affected people of all ages.
I dedicate this project to my *Golden Girls* Luegenia Taylor Walker & Annie Mae Brown. I miss you both every day. My friend Charlene Stewart, you were always so strong. For my cousin Sherry Reeves, without you the life I have been so blessed to live would not be possible. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.
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INTRODUCTION: THANK YOU FOR BEING A FRIEND

Picture it! (as any good *Golden Girls* watcher knows this catch phrase was constantly used by the show’s eldest character Sophia Petrillo): Detroit, MI 1990. I’m Jared Clayton Brown and I am about six years old and I am at home with my mother on a Saturday evening. I settle in for the night next to my mom with a dish of crispy chili cheese fries (a Detroit culinary favorite). We are watching television and *The Golden Girls* comes on the screen. Fast forward to 2003; I am in my freshman year of college sitting alone in my dorm room flipping through the channels and there the show was again, in syndication, on the Lifetime channel. I recall the pleasure both my mother and stepmother took in seeing the program. Perhaps it was a search for nostalgic traces of my mother and stepmother as I was away from them for the first time and for the first time as a young adult I really began to understand just what it was that had made both of my moms laugh with pleasure. As time went on, *The Golden Girls* became appointment television for me. At that point, the show had been off the air over ten years, but I was discovering what millions of television viewers had already come to see: that there was something very appealing and humorous about the lives of these four women who were sharing their lives together under a Miami roof.

It has been about a decade since I became reacquainted with the *Girls*. Since that time, I have seen all 180 episodes multiple times and like any devoted fan of any popular culture object, I have come to have my favorites. I discuss my favorite episode, “Journey to the Center of Attention,” (season seven) in terms of the intersection of age and sexuality in chapter two. My favorite character, Dorothy, is the one out of the four I feel I can most relate to. She was oftentimes thought of as the voice of reason in a house of chaos. Additionally, she was treated as
a bit an outsider by the other women, mostly for her seemingly masculine traits of tall height and deep baritone voice.

I myself have often times in my life felt out of place, whether it was as a kid, when other kids were running around and I sat and read quietly. Or as an adult when I was unsure of myself as a young black gay male who grew up in an inner city culture where this was not readily embraced. There was a pure sense of comfort that came from tuning in day after day to see the four women in whatever hilarious predicament the show’s writers could fathom to place the women into.

While the show has been personally significant to me, it has had social significance as well. While it is arguable that the four women were almost certainly unlike anything previously offered to television viewers, they did strike a chord with audiences. The show consistently rated in the top ten of most watched programs for six out of its seven seasons. It is has been a success in cable syndication as well. As a devoted viewer, I have followed the program as it has traveled across various cable channel destinations, from Lifetime to Women’s Entertainment to its current cable residences, The Hallmark Channel and TV Land. Many people I have talked with over the years have shared their fond memories of the show.

One reason that explains the show’s endless appeal with audiences can be gleaned through the concept of “multiple literacies” (Kellner, 103). Precisely, what this means is that different audiences members can view the exact same text and walk away from the viewing with totally different opinions about the text they just viewed. This idea is certainly applicable to The Golden Girls. One audience member may view Dorothy’s character as the sort of den mother/house leader for the other characters in the show as she is often the voice of reason for
the other characters in the show. Another viewer might envision Dorothy as somewhat of an outsider from the group because of her masculine qualities, namely her tall, imposing figure and her deep baritone voice, for which she is consistently ridiculed by the other members of the household. Blanche could also be viewed through the “multiple literacies” framework because of her sexual activity. It is well established that Blanche is the most sexually active of the four women; one audience member could see her choice of being sexually free as irresponsible and immoral while another might view her sexual freedom as empowering. However audiences choose to interpret the program, one thing is certain, which is that *The Golden Girls* was one of the most watched programs during its run and various groups were tuning in to see the goings on of Dorothy, Rose, Blanche, and Sophia.

Another way the show has been a touchstone to both viewing audiences and on the overall television landscape rests in the heart of its formula. Before *The Golden Girls* came on the screen there had never been an ensemble of four adult women who were the focal point of a television series. The first chapter of my work focuses in on the formula that I believe was invented with the show’s inception: the adult female ensemble in situation comedy. As any diligent television viewer is well aware, since television’s earliest days, there have been female leads in situation comedy, starting with pioneers like Lucille Ball, but never before had there been a group of all adult female co-stars within the setting of a sitcom. I look at several aspects of the show, starting with the group of women. I examine the characters, situations the characters face and draw comparisons to several other shows that have followed the success of *The Golden Girls*. In this chapter, what I ultimately express is that *The Golden Girls* laid a foundation for a new subgenre of comedy.
In the second chapter I look at the relationship between the performance of age and sexuality in the program. What I seek to establish in this chapter is an overall argument that the show offered a vastly different view from what had been previously available to audiences concerning the intersection of age and sexuality. While there had certainly been older adult women in television situation comedy before, there had not been a program where their concerns were the consistent focus. Additionally, where several previous older female characters gave off the impression that certain parts of life were over once you were of a certain age, the females in *The Golden Girls* made it seem almost as though life was at its peak during one’s twilight years.

The ladies in the show all led active sexual lives (though for some the activity was more frequent than others, namely Blanche Devereaux’s). Additionally, while the show addressed topics that could be considered age appropriate, it also handled issues that were not bound by age, such as HIV/AIDS, sexual harassment, homosexuality, teen pregnancy, assisted suicide and homelessness. My final chapter examines these complex social topics and how the show chose to address them. I establish the idea that the show’s creators used these issues to build dialogue around these concerns, and in constructing the dialogue they were able to make the women’s age almost a non-factor, thus allowing them to connect with viewers off all ages.

Despite the influence on generations of programming, the program has not received its just desserts in terms of academic scholarship. There have been numerous articles and books written about other female centered shows, such as *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. Yet only one academic article has been devoted to *The Golden Girls* (Kaler 1991). It’s puzzling that the show has not received its academic due, when so many others that were built around its
formula have. This project sheds light on the influence that *The Golden Girls* has had both on television and everyday life.
CHAPTER I: AS THE GENRE UNFOLDS: AN EXAMINATION OF HOW A GOLDEN SUB-GENRE WAS BORN

*The Golden Girls* has received virtually every type of critical accolade that it possibly could during its seven years on NBC. Each of the four principal cast members was awarded an Emmy Award during the show’s original run from 1985-1992. This is a feat that only two other casts in television history have managed to accomplish; *All in the Family* (1970-1979) preceded their recognition and *Will and Grace* (1998-2006) followed it. What was the magic about these four women sharing their lives together in a Miami, Florida condominium that drew millions of viewers each week?

Part of the answer lies in Anne Kaler’s article, “Golden Girls Female Archetypal Patterns of the Complete Woman,” in which she argues that each of the characters is a representative element: “virgin, spouse, mother, wise woman,” that when placed together comprise a “complete woman.” (49). She suggests that each of the women helps to complete the other three. In considering the appeal of the show to audiences, perhaps viewers were able to connect with one or perhaps multiple characters because they were able to see some part of their own life reflected back at them, and possibly gaining some possible sense of completion within their own real lives away from the television screen. Part of the reason why consumers become devotees of popular texts lies in their feeling a sense of identity and an ability to feel the “positive emotions found in fan experiences” as qualified in the concept of “interaction ritual theory” (Cottingham, 170).

Another part of the answer can be located in the idea that television viewers had never been treated to a series quite like this one. When the show launched on September 14th 1985, three of the four leads were 63 years old. The fourth and youngest cast member was 51 years old. Never before within a situation comedy series, was a quartet of women who were all past the age
of 40, the focal center for each episode, though, there were other programs featuring predominantly female casts, such as *The Facts of Life* and *One Day at a Time*.

*The Golden Girls* mark on television culture is represented by the formula that was created and that other shows were able to follow as a result of its success: the sub-genre of the mature, female ensemble in television situation comedy. This chapter will explain various elements that comprise the subgenre and exist in varying degrees across several of these programs. Genre is considered a “classificatory category” (LiMing, 1). It is a way in which texts (literary and otherwise) can be grouped in a manner that allows mass audiences to understand what type of narrative they will experience before they actually encounter the text. Genre is necessary in helping to establish the themes that exist within the mature female ensemble situation comedies that I examine.

John Fiske’s work “Reading the Beach” searches for cultural signifiers as he interprets the various parts of the beach culture. While the beach is not an actual literary text in the same vein as a Shakespearean essay, there is still cultural knowledge that can be gleaned from reading a non-literary text. I will read various elements of various female ensemble situation comedy programs consisting of elements that comprise a subgenre. Elements of this subgenre include character types, plotlines, and challenges that are faced by characters within the narratives.

While premises of programs following the formula might have been different, it is undeniable that *The Golden Girls* set a pace that many other shows have attempted to follow. Many of these programs have obtained significant success with wide audiences (e.g., – *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Designing Women*, etc.). Others have managed to be successful by appealing to Black racial demographics (*Girlfriends*, *Living Single*). Each of these shows
stems from the same source material. The core characters are a group of women who tend to serve as each series’ central attraction. In some instances, men might serve as supporting cast members or as catalysts for certain storylines. In *The Golden Girls*’ case, men were very much secondary to many of the show’s plots and in some instances were afterthoughts. There’s a potential inference that men were playing the part of the proverbial set decoration that women were oftentimes called upon to be in many popular television shows and movies.

An examination of how *The Golden Girls* was able to serve as the launch for the subgenre of television comedy must start with first defining what (in terms of American culture discourses) popular situation comedy is. Like so many popular generic offerings, much of situation comedy’s appeal lies in the familiarity of audiences knowing what it is they can expect from most texts that fall into sitcom classification. Certain generic elements allow these programs to audiences, no matter how seemingly unique a show’s spin on the elements are. Harking back to the early days of American television comedy with now-canonized programs like *Father Knows Best* and *I Love Lucy*, situation comedy has in many cases been driven by the idea that characters can make it through a 22-minute set of plot circumstances with the help of a family unit. Whether that unit took shape in a traditional *Father* form or *Lucy’s* traditional/surrogate hybrid, the support characters received bore, and continues to bear, a strong resemblance across many of these texts.

In his important work about the situation comedy genre, Brett Mills writes that there are “six aspects of genre that can be used to examine all aspects of it: setting; character; narrative; iconography; style; stars” (Mills, 37). What this signifies is that in order to understand how any genre is composed, then it is necessary to examine the elements that comprise a specific genre.
For the purposes of my work, I will examine several of the elements that comprise *The Golden Girls* as well as other shows that exist within the subgenre that I propose exist. Where the connection comes into play that supports the idea of a proposed genre among these female ensemble sitcoms are the character types, recurring situations, and plotlines. In looking across these shows, certain commonalities consistently appear which allows for the suggestion to be made that there subgenre of situation comedy does in fact exist among these programs.

Another important archetype in the format of situation comedy is the usual ability to have the any given plot problem resolved by the conclusion of a 22-minute episode in a program’s series. There are a few instances where residual effects might linger into another episode of the series. Writers many times employ this plot device when trying to highlight the importance of an issue (whether the issue is socially relevant in real life); or the issue might simply make a strong mark on the course of series history. An example of this in sitcom terms is the *Good Times* two-part episode “The Big Move.” The episode’s plot revolves around the belief that the Evans family will move out of the projects and poverty that surround the family for the series’ duration. At the end of part one, the family is shocked to learn of the demise of family patriarch James in an automobile accident. Several episodes after this one show the surviving Evans family trying to move on without the protection and guidance dispersed by James. A few shows involve Florida’s venturing back out into the world of single womanhood; she eventually remarries, though the new husband does not serve as a significant figure in the series.

Another notable element woven into the tapestry of the situation comedy formula is the idea that audiences can take away moral lessons that are applicable to their real lives after the medium that has delivered the messages has ended. These lessons usually exist in a binary
alternating between socially relevant topics to more basic fundamentals concerning how characters should interact with each other to produce harmony within whatever familial space a series characters’ were occupying, be it a domicile (Full House, The Cosby Show), workplace (The Mary Tyler Moore Show) or another space where occupants/characters regularly came together (Cheers). In the 1980s and early 1990s, HIV/AIDS was addressed in many sitcoms because it was during that time the disease was beginning to emerge as a threat to global health. Also very regularly addressed within many situation comedy discourses were concerns of social violence (weapons usage, child abuse, sexual assault, etc.).

It is beyond the scope of my work to know what producers and writers’ precise intent was in creating the storylines involving many of these real life situations, however an inference can be made that these programs did spark, or at the very least, contribute to the conversations that were taking place in the larger portal that was the real world. It is within the realm of possibility to imagine that producers were attempting to do more than make people laugh, but also to really challenge audiences to think about what was really happening in the world outside the television screens when many of these shows were being created.

Perhaps the most obvious generic element contained within sitcoms is the laughter, which the texts always strive to produce for audiences; whether that audience is actually present during the show’s filming or it’s the millions of television viewers who collectively comprise the audience the show is eventually broadcast to. The end goal of the writing, the morals, the messages, and the performance efforts exerted by the programs’ actors is for the audience to respond in a fashion indicative of their being satisfied humorously.
Much of today’s comedy focuses on the actors’ ability to deliver a joke at exactly the right moment and in the right place. In some ways, it is not unlike the singular musician’s role in the larger scope of the symphony in that he/she must perform their part in just the right place so that the overall dynamic of the piece has its desired impact on the audience. This comedy of the lines is a vast departure from the classic slapstick form that is repeatedly dispersed to audiences in reruns. A prime example of the slapstick of situation comedy of former days is Lucille Ball’s Lucy Ricardo. *I Love Lucy* is an iconic program whose stories were driven primarily by Lucy’s constant attempts to liberate herself from her role as the happy homemaker housewife. The character was seemingly untalented; it was Ball’s real life brilliance at performing as untalented that was always the ultimate foil for schemes involving the Lucy Ricardo character. Patricia Mellencamp discusses this idea: “[I]f Lucy’s plots for ambition and fame narratively failed, with the result that she was held, often gratefully, to domesticity, performatively they succeeded” (Mellencamp, 68). For much of *The Golden Girls* series, it was only sparingly that the characters would engage in physical slapstick comedy to get a laugh from the audience, as the humor of the show was far more dependent on comic timing and line delivery.

In many sitcoms over recent decades, actors have displayed a penchant for being able to perform physical comedy, but their comedic physicality was not emphasized in these more modern shows in the same manner where it proved to be a dominant force in *I Love Lucy*. One notable exception to the lack of regular performance of physical/slapstick comedy in contemporary situation comedies is the character of Steve Urkel in the ABC/CBS series *Family Matters*, portrayed so memorably by Jaleel White. The irony of the situation was that the Steve Urkel character was only supposed to be a one-time appearance but the reaction from the audience was so strong that writers chose to build much of the show’s remaining plotlines
around the Steve Urkel character. In fact, several more characters portrayed by White/Urkel would be introduced over the course of the series’ cumulative nine-year network tenure.

One other element worth noting that exists within many situation comedies is the tendency for there to be an arch-enemy, nemesis, or best friend oftentimes to a leading character in the series. Fitting the archetype of enemy/arch-nemesis is the character of Newman from the long-running NBC staple *Seinfeld*. Another, perhaps not quite as obvious, representation of the nemesis kind could be the Central Perk coffee-house manager Gunther from *Friends*, another popular NBC sitcom. Gunther can be placed into this mold because of his unrequited love for the character of Rachel. His unyielding devotion to her causes him in many cases over the show’s ten-year run to behave adversely towards anyone who even shows the slightest interest in her romantically.

Having given consideration to what elements comprise texts within the broad generic scope of situation comedy; it’s necessary to examine what is textually woven into series within the sub-genre of mature female situation comedies that exist. One of the primary textual commonalities in these narratives is how these groups of women come together through various circumstances in their lives. In *The Golden Girls*, Blanche, Rose, and Dorothy are brought together (the audience learns this history in a flashback episode) following Blanche’s placement of advertisements in a local newspaper. Blanche, Dorothy, and Rose each find themselves living alone as single women after having been married for several years. Rose and Blanche are forced back into single womanhood following the deaths of their husbands. Dorothy once again finds herself as a single woman after her husband abandons her for a younger stewardess. The program’s fourth character, Sophia, the mother of Dorothy, finds herself living with the other
three women after her retirement home Shady Pines is destroyed in a fire. Sophia also had suffered the loss of her husband predating the start of the series narrative.

In *Designing Women*, the CBS network’s attempt at cashing in on the success of NBC’s *The Golden Girls*, the four females in the narrative are brought together by a shared professional ambition as they all work in an interior design firm. Two of the characters (Suzanne and Julia Sugarbaker) are partners who own and operate the firm, while Mary Jo Shively is an associate designer. Rounding out the show’s quartet is Charlene Stillfield-Frazier, who serves as the firm’s secretary and bookkeeper. What this show and others revolving around a quartet of female characters have in common with *The Golden Girls* is that they all somehow find a group of women who are serving as a base of support for the other characters. Whether the support is built around a home or work place, these women often see each other through life’s ups and downs and help to get the women through journeys in life. Concerning the struggles that the women go through, they often times are reflective of many of the hot button issues taking place when the shows are originally being created. In many cases, the shows assist in sparking cultural discourses around taboo topics or they contribute to on-going already existing dialogues.

On the black side of the subgenre, the female characters in these series are also drawn together through unusual circumstances that serve to drive the series’ narrative. In *Living Single*, which aired on Fox from 1993-98, the four female members of the ensemble were brought together in much the same way that the women in *The Golden Girls* came together under the same roof. Three of *Living Single*’s four ensemble members (Khadijah, Regine, and Synclaire) shared a brownstone apartment in Brooklyn, New York. Khadijah and Synclaire were related cousins in the series (similar to the family relationship dynamic shared between Dorothy and
Sophia in *The Golden Girls*). The third roommate, Regine, had been a friend of Khadijah’s since childhood. The fourth member of the show’s ensemble, Maxine, was a constant presence in the other three’s apartment/program’s primary setting. Maxine’s constant presence was explained as she was a neighbor who lived across the street, who also happened to be a best friend and former college roommate to Khadijah.

Another common theme that distinguishes the subgenre is an emergence of character types that appear across several of the texts. The first type of character archetype that can be identified as existing within these female ensembles is the assertive, independent, leader of the pack. This type of female is usually the one who tends to be the most realistic in these shows. Oftentimes, they serve as the voice of reason and are also an intertextual representative for how the audience might see the characters in the narratives. These women also have a capacity for dominating the other women in their circles. While these characters might be domineering towards members of their own gender; in many instances they have issues with men because of possibly perceived failure of conforming to the social norms that have been assigned to them given their biological sex.

*Golden Girl* Dorothy is the embodiment of this type of female. It is as though she almost seems to be an internalized other within the house. While she does not fully betray her biological assignment, much of how she chooses to behave and carry herself is not in accordance with expectations of how a woman should be. The other women in the house consistently accost Dorothy for her perceived failure of being able to attract and maintain healthy relationships with male suitors. In fact, in the historical narrative of *The Golden Girls*, Dorothy is the only one of the ladies who ends up alone because of being abandoned by her husband of 38 years; whereas
the other three ladies are all left alone because of the more natural occurrence of losing their husbands to death.

Julia Sugarbaker of *Designing Women* is yet another representative who is a leader of the pack in her series. She is not only a literal leader in her group of females is that she is a co-owner in the firm that serves as the centralized catalyst that bring the women together; she also runs the business in a manner that can be read as being more like that of a businessman rather than a businesswoman. Julia’s possesses one significant behavioral trait that is comparable with Dorothy’s character. She too has a deep voice that demands respect from not only the other women, but everyone else outside the circle whom she encounters.

Another reason Julia can be considered as a leader of the pack is because it she who serves as protector of the group. In several episodes of the series, Julia takes on the characters who oftentimes are representatives of the antagonist points of view the women encounter. She usually finds herself having to defend both herself and the other women of the group from attacks ranging from feminist issues to other social crises where the women are usually representatives of the positive side of the coin. One such memorable episode is “Killing All the Right Ones” (season two) where the firm is hired to coordinate the funeral of a man who is dying from AIDS. Toward the episode’s conclusion, Julia confronts the antagonist (characterized as a conservative female client), who says the ailing young man is being “punished for his sins.” It is Julia who points out the error in her way of thinking and thus assists in providing the audience with the moral lesson for that particular episode.

Queen Latifah’s character of Khadijah James in *Living Single* is yet another representative leader of the pack. In that show, she is the one who once again often provides the
voice of reason for the other characters in the series. She is a leader not only in her home, but also in her professional life, as she is the creator of *Flavor* magazine; a nod to Latifah’s real life production company, *Flavor Unit Entertainment*. Khadijah is never hesitant in her honest opinions with the other members of her household. As in the other series, Khadijah is a character who often takes on antagonist forces that threaten to bring discord to the harmony that otherwise tends to exist in these narratives. Oftentimes, it’s Khadijah who serves as the voice of reason to the other members of the ensemble when discord erupts between the other characters. This is most prominently displayed as Khadijah oftentimes has to play mediator between Maxine and Regine, as those two are often at odds due to Regine’s annoyance with Maxine’s constant presence in the other three women’s apartment.

Another identifiable character trope that exists within the realm of mature female sitcom ensembles is the sexpot. This woman is the type of character who is able to amuse the audience through the use of her sexuality. These women, while very close with the other women in their families/casts, are often very self centered and tie much of their self worth to their sexual desirability. Blanche Devereaux easily qualifies for placement in this character canon. One of the longest running themes of *The Golden Girls* regarding Blanche’s character is that she consistently sleeps with men and is not very discriminatory in her choices. She spent many of the series’ episodes regaling the other women with stories of her past escapades as well as consistently pursuing new sexual highs. Part of the reason for Blanche’s promiscuity could be associated with the fact that she lost the one great love of her life (her husband George) and she has been on a valiant quest to replace him ever since, yet no man has ever been able to fill his place.
Another characterization of this type comes from the currently airing TVLand program *Hot in Cleveland*. Wendie Malick’s character Victoria Chase is also the very embodiment of this idea of sexpot. She is consistently on the prowl for her next male conquest. It can be inferred that her seeking validation from men is merely an extension of the character’s professional life. Victoria works as an actress and consistently displays behavior that suggests she is very insecure in who she is both on and off the screen within the series. Perhaps her seeking refuge in the arms of men is a way for her to deal with the consistent rejection she is subjected to in her daily life as an actress who is also advanced in age.

It is debatable as to whether these women are in control of their sexuality. In many cases, these women are judged by the greater (often invisible) society that exists outside the confines of the spaces that we as audience members watch the women occupy. There are times when the other women in the shared television space pass judgment on the woman of objectification. In Blanche’s case, she is often put down by the other women in the show for her promiscuity. But she still continues to exude a lack of inhibition in the face of her friends’ criticism and when the other female characters in their shows are trying to capture male attention, Blanche is often looked to for guidance from the other characters in the series.

Another character trope common in this subgenre is the naïve innocent. This character is usually portrayed as not very sophisticated. In several instances, these characters are physically mature in that they exist as a woman in their bodies, yet there tends to be a separation of mind/maturity in that these characters can almost be viewed as being girls occupying women’s bodies. In many of the program’s these women’s personae are utilized as comedic fodder for the other members of the cast as they are made fun of for their lighthearted natures and seemingly
naïve/unsophisticated outlooks on the world. In some instances, these characters are given attention because of physical attributes that seem to overshadow their personalities. An example of this is would be the comments consistently made about Rose’s being big-breasted in *The Golden Girls*. It also seems non-coincidental that on both *The Golden Girls* and *Designing Women*, the women embodying the naïve characters have blonde hair.

Rose Nylund of *The Golden Girls* is an embodiment for this type of character archetype. She is often looked down upon by the other roommates in the house for the girlish unsophisticated manner in which she displays herself. A possible way of reading Rose’s actions and words is seeing her in a binary as both a success and a failure of womanhood. She is a success in how she conforms to outside male patriarchal standards of performance associated with her gender. She is not very bright and as a result sets herself up to be controlled by the greater outside forces of society. Simultaneously, Rose is a failure because she is not nearly as liberated as her female life companions. Often much of the humor associated with her character has to do with her inability to understand simple references that women who are much less advanced in age are able to understand. She is also regarded as a light-weight intellectually because of her constant and often unwelcome stories about her often referenced hometown of St. Olaf, Minnesota.

The influence of the naïve innocent character is can certainly be traced to other similar programming that appeared in the wake of the success of *The Golden Girls*. Notable examples of this character trend can be seen in the programs *Designing Women* and *Living Single*. In *Designing Women*, this character type is evident through the presence of Charlene Frazier Stillfield, who worked as the secretary for the Sugarbakers’ design firm. While her character’s
naivety appeared to be more tolerated by the members of the cast, often times the character exhibited the same childlike innocence associated with Rose.

Also of note was the fact that like Rose, Charlene was born and raised in the small Midwestern town of Poplar Bluff, Missouri, and seemingly embodied the morals often associated with life in middle America. The similarities between Rose and Charlene can be examined even further if one considers the penchant that each of these characters has for storytelling. Throughout the course of *The Golden Girls*, Rose subjects her housemates to countless stories about her beloved St. Olaf that are often ridiculed by the other members of the household. To a lesser, yet still noticeable degree, Charlene demonstrates this same penchant for telling stories about her hometown of Poplar Bluff. The most noticeable difference between Rose and Charlene’s storytelling is that when Charlene tells her stories, many times they seem to have some type of purpose that serves a given episode’s plotline, whereas Rose’s stories more so seem to serve as no more than a comedic mechanism. Another noticeable similarity that exists between Rose and Charlene is the fact that each of them has the most success in terms of men throughout the course of both series. Like Rose, Charlene meets and has a several seasons-long relationship while the other women in the program mostly languish in their attempts at romance. Charlene takes her relationship a further step than Rose’s in that she ultimately marries and has a child with Bill, who is the man she meets early into *Designing Women*’s run.

Another program with a similar innocent character trope is the Fox network sitcom *Living Single*. Synclaire James-Jones moved from Minnesota (also like the character of Rose) in order to start a new life in a new major city as a member of the family unit to which viewers are exposed during the series. Also like Rose, Synclaire has a very naïve child-like innocence that
leaves her vulnerable to the insults of the other members of the ensemble. Another commonality that Synclaire shares with Rose’s character is the fact that she has the most success in the area of romance out of the quartet of women during the series run. Synclaire finds love and eventually marries the also simple-minded character of Overton Wakefield Jones, who serves as the superintendent in the building that serves as the primary setting the audience sees during the course of the series.

In *Hot in Cleveland*, the naïve character trope exists in the character of divorcee Melanie Meretti, who is played by *One Day at a Time*’s youngest daughter, Valerie Bertinelli. When the audience meets Melanie’s character during the show’s pilot, the audience is viewing a woman who with the support of her friends, is working to recover from the loss of her husband after he abandons her for life with a younger woman. As the series unfolds, Melanie’s naivety is attributed to her relative inexperience with men as it is revealed that the only real significant romantic relationship she has experienced in her life is with her now (during the series) ex-husband. It is notable that Melanie’s innocence is attached to her relative inexperience with men because unlike the characters of Rose and Synclaire, the character of Melanie (pre-series) lives in Los Angeles, which can be considered as a more sophisticated metropolis than the Midwestern locales where Rose, Charlene, and Synclaire originate from. Perhaps, it is a creative method on the part of the series writes for *Hot in Cleveland* to align Melanie’s naivety with her relationships rather than readily associate it with where her character lives in an effort to drive forward the narrative of the series. Her character slightly differs from the other naïve women in that she has not yet (though the potential still exists as the show is currently in production) experienced a successful romantic relationship with a male character.
The final character archetype that I will argue is attributable to *The Golden Girls* female ensemble model is that of the wise elder who serves as a maternal figure to the other members of the ensemble. The character type can be traced back to *The Golden Girls*’ Sophia. It is important to note that pre-dating *The Golden Girls*’ airing on television, there were older female characters on television. Notable characters of this kind included Granny Clampett from *The Beverly Hillbillies* and Thelma Harper of *Mama’s Family*, where ironically two of the stars from *The Golden Girls* were members of the season one cast: Betty White and Rue McClanahan. While these characters were present on television, the shows were not exclusively female driven, meaning that there were also main characters from the shows that were males.

Sophia Petrillo is the wise elderly figure in *The Golden Girls* in a number of ways. She is by far the oldest member of the group as she is 80 years old when audiences initially meet the character in season one. One of Sophia’s trademarks is her sharing of memories from her youth in Sicily, Italy, which is where her character was born and raised. Additionally, Sophia regales her housemates with tales from her years living in Brooklyn, New York, where she spent the bulk of her adult years and lived with her husband Sal, who audiences only meet through occasional flashbacks as he is already deceased when the series begins in present day 1985. Sophia would often begin these tales with her trademark catchphrase: “Picture It!” Additionally it is in Brooklyn where Sophia raised her daughter, “leader of the pack” Dorothy, as well as her other two children, daughter Gloria (whom the viewing audience sees on sporadic occasions during the series portrayed by various actresses) and her son Phil, who viewing audiences never meet, but are able to determine based on stories shared about him that he is a cross dresser, which in its own indirect way serves as comical fodder considering that we as a viewing audience never actually get to see him.
Because she is much older than the rest of the ensemble members, Sophia makes it a point to share her hard-earned life wisdom with the rest of the bunch. In many of the story lines, Sophia serves as a guiding force helping the women to recognize what life might look like for them when they get into what could be argued as the last stages of their lives. She shows them that they can be resilient against health challenges, as Sophia’s significant health problems that are referenced repeatedly through the course of the series, most notably the fact that she suffered a stroke which destroyed the part of her brain that allows her to censor what she says, which explains Sophia’s penchant for biting and witty remarks that often made audiences laugh.

The female character of Sophia definitely sets a trend that is noticeable in another female ensemble program with a *Golden Girls* connection: *Hot in Cleveland*. That tie comes into view when considering that the wise elder character (Elka Ostrovsky) in the *Hot in Cleveland* program is played by none other than Betty White who was Rose Nylund in *The Golden Girls*. It’s as though White has graduated from being the naïve Rose to the wiser Sophia type who is now the elder that the other characters in the *Cleveland* ensemble turn to for wisdom.

I have outlined a few of the elements that comprise the subgenre of the mature, female ensemble under the bigger umbrella of the situation comedy genre. My review of similar situation comedies demonstrates that they have various commonalities from character types to plotlines. These texts offer viewers a common experience that they can come to expect whenever they turn on the television to any of these shows. Ultimately, what I believe is that these shows and their themes and characters can be traced back to the four old women who lived together under one roof in a Miami condominium.
CHAPTER II: SEX AND THE BIDDY: AN EXAMINATION OF AGE AND SEXUAL PERFORMANCE IN THE GOLDEN GIRLS

“With the dominant framing of later life as asexual, popular cultural portrayals of sexually active or engaged older people were generally confined to humorous greeting cards in which the joke played on notions of seniors as not sexually desirable, not sexually desirous and not sexually capable. The absence of portrayals of later life sexuality was notable in television, advertising and film. For example in his study of prime time television in the USA, John Bell found that sexuality is generally removed from the lives of elderly characters.”

- Vares

Ideas like the above quote are what were often associated with ideas of female sexuality. In thinking about The Golden Girls it has to be acknowledged that oftentimes the program was going against ideas and social norms like the mentioned above statement. While I am focusing in on female age and sexual performance for my work in this chapter, it bears mentioning that both males and females of older ages are typically non-existent when it comes to portrayals of their sexuality in popular culture discourses. Part of what makes The Golden Girls so groundbreaking is that it not only placed the performance of female age and sexuality center stage, but it also imbued older women with strength and dignity through the portrayals that were offered to viewers on a weekly basis during the show’s seven year run.

In considering the impact of The Golden Girls on other sitcoms that came to fruition in the wake of its new formulaic success, it is imperative to examine what elements of the characters’ performances allowed them to be so acceptable to television audiences given that the program was the first of its kind to air on American television. For the purposes of my work, I will analyze each of the characters performances in relation to both notions of and age and sexuality that are widely considered appropriate within American culture. I believe it necessary to confront these stereotypes in order to argue that The Golden Girls was and continues to be a
counter narrative to these widely perceived and typically accepted discourses concerning both elderly female age and sexuality.

The method through which I plan to proceed and confront these issues of sexual and age beliefs are through an intertextual analysis where I consider segments from a few episodes of the program as well as how the characters are portrayed throughout these texts. I will then situate these portrayal considerations within a larger framework of the American social ideologies that reify the beliefs around senior citizen aged women and sexuality and how these beliefs affect the popular discourses expressed about the belief of these women and their livelihoods.

One crucial theory that helps to ground my argument is Richard Schechner’s discussion concerning Jacques Lacan’s idea of “the mirror stage,” which is defined as “a stage in infancy in which the infant sees its reflection in the mirror and assumes an image of a whole self as the true self” (Schechner, 15). Where I find this to be useful in my work is in considering that a television can be considered a mirror where a viewer can begin to assume an identity based on an image a viewer may feel that they identify with. The images that viewers were offered on a weekly basis over the series’ seven years were in sharp contrast to the idea that “The older woman in our society is socially devalued and is subject to a number of harmful, negative stereotypes that picture her as sick, sexless, uninvolved except for church work, and alone; one of the most persistent and pernicious stereotypes of older women [which] is that of asexuality. [Additionally] While it is true that age is the most important factor affecting the frequency of sexual activity for both sexes, there is ample evidence to topple this widely held myth” (Payne & Whittington, 14). It can be argued that both the creators of the series and the actresses embodying the characters were seeking to hold up a mirror in which audiences, specifically women who were in the same
age range as the women in the show, could see themselves and begin to assume and incorporate the images being performed in front of them on the television screen into their own lifestyles.

Another theory that proves useful in examining the program’s impact is Jill Dolan’s “utopian performative” (460). This idea means that the performers are able to construct through performances an idealistic space with which an audience is able to identify and enter into via the presented performance. This idea certainly aligns with a method in which the program could be decoded by members of the viewing audience, both those who share common demographics with the show’s characters as well as those who do not, but might somehow see a piece of their identity being reflected back through a situation that takes place within the confines of the television screen. I assert that not only were viewers provided a certain escape into a type of utopia via the images they saw but there was also a utopia occurring within the television set for the characters of the program where they were free to construct and perform lives free from the stereotypes generally associated with the older women in American society.

In order to engage the idea that culture resides on the physical bodies of the women in the series, it is useful to consider Linda McDowell’s argument that “the body is the place, the location or site, if you like, of the individual…while bodies are undoubtedly material, possessing a range of characteristics such as shape and size and so inevitably taking up space, the ways in which bodies are presented to and seen by others vary according to the spaces and places in which they find themselves” (McDowell, 34). I would argue that utilizing McDowell’s idea revolving around bodies as cultural geography, we can use the female bodies within the program as a means of locating an unchartered territory revolving around performances of female bodies within television situation comedic discourses. The limits are completely dismissed within the
program in terms of the various situations that the women become involved over the course of show’s seven-year run. The characters remind us of their age through confronting age-centered issues including concerns about health and the like, but the characters also address social issues that are decidedly not centered specifically on the women’s ages. In the final chapter of my project, I explore how the show was able to build its audience by de-centering the age of its characters through the use of what were then contemporary social issues.

The previously mentioned character types I deconstruct in the first chapter of my work had very little association with how the women of *The Golden Girls* appeared and performed. The late Bea Arthur, who portrayed the character of Dorothy Zbornak, once said of why she felt the show had such massive appeal: “I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that there were these old, post-menopausal ladies who looked good, wore fabulous earrings, dressed well, and had very active sex lives. It showed that old people don’t have to look and smell funny and hide in the corner” (Brooks, 155). How the women performed their characters was far removed from several of the pervasive stereotypes that are associated with older women in American society. The women are often shown in attractive clothing and participating in social situations that dictate that they are still in fact very active in the area of sexual activity. Also worth mentioning here is that throughout the course of the series the women are often engaging one another in discussions about sexual encounters. More often than not, the encounters are usually present day activities and not memories suggesting that sexual behavior is merely a distant memory for the women.

In order to fully understand how these images were a radical departure from what up to that point had been a relatively consistent stream of undesirable older female character types on
television, it is important to discuss some of the various performances given by the four women throughout the series and examine how these portraits are not in alignment with the dominant narrative that offers messages about older females on television. In looking closely at the characters’ performances, we can better understand just what message was being mirrored back at audiences and how the reflected image helped audiences to re-imagine what life for women of a certain age could be. For the characters of Blanche and Dorothy (portrayed by the late Rue McClanahan and Bea Arthur respectively); I will examine the season seven episode “Journey to the Center of Marinara.” Throughout the episode, the two characters behave as rivals in a type of sexual battle of wills where they are vying for the attention of men in a local neighborhood establishment, with Dorothy eventually gaining the upper hand over the usually more sexually successful Blanche.

For the character of Sophia, portrayed by the late Estelle Getty, I will analyze the episode “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun…Before They Die.” In this episode, Sophia is trying to figure out how to capture the sensual attention of a male counterpart. Specifically, I direct my attention to how the character’s age and sexual performativity is relative to the ideologies regarding women who are part of the senior citizen set. Sophia is trying to engage in behavior that is thought of as being off limits to her. Throughout the course of the episode, she makes continuous references that suggest the external society’s belief that women of a certain age group should no longer be interested in participating in sexual activity.

In “Journey to the Center of Marinara,” the narrative begins to unfold as Blanche forces Dorothy to attend The Rusty Anchor, one of Blanche’s favorite local nightclubs as her guest. Blanche problematizes Dorothy’s desire to stay home alone and believes she needs to get out
more in order to get the full experience of being a part of the greater social order of dating men. What Blanche is unaware and unprepared for is that Dorothy (unintentionally) steals her thunder as she becomes more popular than Blanche once she begins to sing tunes that draw the attention of men in the establishment. In being able to use her voice to draw the attention of men in the establishment, Dorothy is able to gain the attraction of the men that Blanche’s typically successful physicality is not.

The two women competing for male attention offers significant insight into the program’s success at foregrounding a sense of agelessness for the women. The characters’ choices to partake in sexual matters while at an age when most would regard active sexuality as being in their pasts is clearly demonstrated through Blanche and Dorothy’s escapades. I will further deconstruct this text, but I feel it necessary to point out that this episode is only one of several in the series where Blanche competes with her housemates for the sensual attention of men. Blanche’s longing to be desired has oftentimes caused her to be gratified sexually, yet at the same time, she has drawn negative attention from the other members of her household for her shameless, bold approach to sexual activity. Her confidence in her ability to capture men’s attention is something on which Blanche prides herself. This goes against the ideas associated with hegemonic gender attitudes regarding sexuality. It is normally the man who is thought of as being the sexual aggressor, while it is the woman who is considered to be the one who is pursued.

Another episode that demonstrates these competitive tendencies that exist between members of the female ensemble is “Yes, We Have No Havanas,” which served as the premiere episode for season four of the series. The episode is a prime example that serves as a
demonstration of the women still being actively involved in sexual activity. The episode’s premise revolves around a love triangle involving Blanche and Sophia, as they vie for the affections of a gentleman of Cuban ethnicity. Over the course of the episode the women behave in manners that seek to sabotage the other’s chances for romance with the suitor. The way that they behave is more suggestive of behaviors one might expect to occur from much younger, perhaps teenage females.

The idea that the women allow themselves to resort to such antics, while it serves a comedic purpose to the narrative, also helps to eradicate the ever present ideology that once a female has reached a certain plateau her sex life should cease to exist. Not only are the women bickering over his affections, they are also seen on camera in intimate situations with the gentleman they are vying for. In fact, the manner under which the conflict between the two women is sparked happens when Blanche catches Sophia in a park locked in a passionate kiss with the gentleman. From there, the humor over who will end up with the gentleman ensues and causes discord among the family unit. By the episode’s conclusion the women have managed to mend their fences. This typical genre trope is also facilitated by the narrative occurrence of the man’s death and also the revelation that he had been involved with multiple affairs with numerous women.

Another episode that helps to reify the notion that the women had a radical approach to sexuality is “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun…Before They Die.” The episode concerns Sophia’s taking advice from Blanche when trying to gain attention from a male suitor. Granted, Sophia is the eldest member of the household, however the manner in which Sophia behaves is more like that of a somewhat naïve teenager. The reason for her behaving like this is partially attributable
to the stroke she suffers, which the audience never actually sees but is consistently reminded of throughout the course of the series. Sophia’s behaviors and mannerisms throughout the series is much like that of the unsure teenage ingénue in that she cannot seem to recall what it was like when she wanted to attract a man’s sensual attention. As the episode progresses, Sophia follows the advice of the more sophisticated, yet ironically enough younger resident vixen Blanche Devereaux.

As the episode progresses, we see Sophia actually get dressed up in a fashion not regularly associated with her character. The manner which she dresses is again under Blanche’s direction. Sophia proceeds in a manner that suggests she is much younger than her approximate 80 years of age that the character portrays in the series. The uncertainty she faces is something that can be identified with by people of all ages. Additionally, the manner in which Sophia proceeds in light of her feelings of uncertainty is also something with which audiences of all ages are potentially able to identify.

In the episode “Rose the Prude,” Rose is at the foreground of the amorous occurrences. She is contemplating entering into her first sexual relationship since the death of her husband, the often mentioned Charlie Nylund. The manner in which Rose handles herself with uncertainty could be compared to how a younger female is when considering embarking on her first romance with a male. Rose’s uncertainty is reflective of how many younger age people approach sexuality. The unsure nature of what may happen should one choose to become involved in a romantic encounter is something that has a certain component of agelessness to it. The women’s performances of sexuality can be linked with the sexuality of teenagers because as research demonstrates “sex is a large component of teen life” (McKinley, 38).
Rose’s uncertainty is a character element with which audience members can identify and a context within which they perhaps ultimately envision themselves. This is a part of what can make any program successful; giving viewers the capability to somehow see themselves mirrored in the events on-screen. The women of the show were oftentimes involved in situations where they were not only performing age in a way that it was related to their physicality. They often had to make choices about situations that could have happened to anyone who was a member of any number of age groups. This element of the program speaks directly to the show’s ability to build an audience consisting of various age groups. There was an ability for the show to build an audience that consisted of various layers and demographics. In many of the episodes, there was a capability for the program to be read through multiple literacies, and therefore be read differently depending on the person viewing the episode.

Part of what has helped to make the show a lasting favorite since the conclusion of its original run in 1992 are the generation of younger viewers who likely were either too young to initially understand the humor or were possibly not even born when the show was originally being created. It stands to reason that there are so many meaningful connections that have been established and are continuing to occur between the episodes and the audiences that are viewing the program. One manner in which the show can be read is that the characters within the text can be interpreted as advocates against the stereotypes that are associated with the older women. Women, once they reach a certain plateau in their lives, are considered to be non-interesting and are often portrayed as asexual or weird. Prime examples of this embodiment can be found in older women characters that were in popular programs pre-dating *The Golden Girls*. Some of these female characters included Endora, the matriarch witch on *Bewitched*, Granny Clampett, the matriarch on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and Mother Addams, the matriarch of *The Addams
Family. In each of these programs, the women are not at all fashionable, desirable, or sexualized creatures.

In considering older aged women in relationship to sexuality within situation comedies, it also bears mentioning two characters from programs that aired right around the same time as The Golden Girls. The first character is that of Mona Robinson, portrayed for eight seasons in ABC’s Who’s The Boss, from 1984 through 1992, by Katherine Helmond. The character of Mona was certainly one that could be associated with the archetype that Blanche came to represent in The Golden Girls, of the proud and sexually liberated older woman. There’s one stark difference, however. In Who’s The Boss, the character of Mona is merely a supporting one, as the main narrative of the series centers around the progressing relationship Mona’s daughter, the career driven Angela Bower (portrayed by Judith Light) has with the family’s live in male housekeeper Tony Micelli (played by Tony Danza).

Also deserving of consideration during the time of the 1980s is the program Mama’s Family. The sitcom initially debuted on NBC in 1983, though was soon cancelled before finding success in first-run syndication, where it ran until it concluded in 1990. This ensemble was led by the character of Thelma Harper, which was played by Vicki Lawrence. The program was actually a spin-off from the legendary sketch comedy program The Carol Burnett Show. In its debut the program, which centered on the relationships Thelma has with her family, ironically included half of the women who would eventually go on to appear in The Golden Girls. Rue McClanahan portrayed Frances Crowley, Thelma’s sister who is the complete antithesis of the Blanche character. Fran, as she is referred to in the series, is the proverbial old maid, who lives with Thelma’s family, and never really fulfills her own sense of feminine responsibilities in that
she never marries nor has children of her own. Betty White also appeared in the first season of the series in the role of Ellen Harper, Thelma’s selfish, manipulative daughter who is constantly seeking upward mobility away from the homely roots represented by the Harper family as a whole within the series.

As for Thelma herself, she shares a few commonalities with two of the *Golden* women that are worth noting. She does serve as the leading figure in the cast, which contrasts with the ensemble that comprised the cast of *The Golden Girls*. She is like Sophia because of her outspoken nature and often blatant disregard for how what she says will impact those whom she addresses. She is also reminiscent of Dorothy in how she serves as the series’ voice of reason. In many of the program’s episodes, it is usually Thelma who can integrate what it is that audiences may be thinking within the contexts of the show. While the character is given agency by her outspokenness, she is almost completely void of any sense of sexuality. Save for one episode where Thelma dates a teacher she meets in a night school class she attends to earn her high school diploma, the series never really addresses her sexuality nor gives audiences reason to sense that she takes an active part in elderly age sex. The audience never meets Carl, Thelma’s husband who dies predating the beginning of the series, leaving her widowed. It appears through the series’ treatment of the character that her sex life has completely ceased with his death, as she does not enjoy a significant romantic relationship throughout the series’ run.

There are several instances in the program where the women perform behaviors that are directly associated with sexuality. The behaved performances are not done in a manner that could be labeled as vulgar or threatening to the overall dignity that the women maintain throughout out the series’ run. In one instance the women visit a pharmacy in order to purchase
condoms for a leisure cruise they are planning to embark on with some male companions that the audience does not meet during the episode. The narrative allows the women to represent the spectrum of the attitudes revolving around sexuality. The scene begins with Blanche’s suggestion that the women should be socially responsible and purchase the contraceptives. Rose, in her typical girlish naivety, has no clue what it is Blanche is referring to and begins to ask inquisitively about various items in order to figure out just what it is Blanche is referencing. Rose’s continued failure at coming up with the correct answer is marked by Dorothy’s exasperated yelling of “condoms” to where the trio draws the attention of the rest of the customers in the store.

Dorothy and Rose both appear to be humiliated at having what is typically a private matter and made into a public spectacle, considering that most people do not make a scene when purchasing such a private item. The idea of “multiple literacies” can certainly be engaged when considering the various reactions exhibited by the women (Kellner, 103). Multiple literacies can be applied to the show through the usage of Stuart Hall’s Audience/Reception theory where multiple readings can be laid onto one text based on how any given audience member opts to interpret the program. There’s Rose and Dorothy’s shame at being found out for trying to participate in a seemingly forbidden pursuit: both the purchasing of condoms which is a signifier of their choosing to be involved in sexual activity.

In further considering Hall’s idea of audience reception, one can apply how multiple meanings can be gleaned from any given episode of The Golden Girls, thus heightening the possibility for audience expansion. For instance, one can consider the multiple meanings that can be gleaned from the condom episode. The first part of Hall’s theory is referred to as the
“dominant-hegemonic” reading (174). This means that the audience is responding to and interpreting the text as it is believed the author intended for it to be read. I believe Hall’s idea applies to this particular episode in that the audience understands that this show is first and foremost a comedy and meant to make the audience laugh above all else. The middle ground interpretation in this theory is the “negotiated” preferred reading of the text which means that the audience completely understands the manner the author or creator meant for the text to be decoded from but at the same time they infuse a text with their own personal meanings (Hall, 175). This receptive lens is useful for considering the text because I am certain there are those members of the audience who again understand that the show is supposed to be humorous, yet at the same time they could potentially not understand why the women are engaging in the business of purchasing condoms because “available research consistently suggests that increasing age is associated with a decreased interest in sex” (Gosney and Taylor, 538).

The third portion of Hall’s theory, the “oppositional code,” counter-hegemonic reading, which is explained as the audience totally rejecting the ideas that a text is infused with, is also of use when considering potential methods with which audiences might engage with The Golden Girls (175). A potential counter-hegemonic reading of the characters’ performance of age and sexuality could be that the women are merely making fools of themselves by engaging in activity that is considered to be beyond their age group. Certain members of the audience could believe that the women need to relinquish their sexuality because they are “too old to perform the particular act of sexual intercourse” (Arrington, 52). Rose and Dorothy’s embarrassment at being found out for purchasing condoms could be considered as a reinforcement of the idea that women of a certain age ought not to engage in sexual activity rather than seeing the program and
the situation as a means of going against dominant social norms surrounding older female sexuality.

On the opposite end of the paradigm, there is Blanche who bears no sense of shame for her part in the goings on at the drug store. She even goes as far as to use the store’s sound system to defend she and the other women’s choice of buying condoms and overtly states, both to the store patrons (and ultimately the audience viewing the program), that there is no shame in the choices the women are making by investing in the condoms. Her conclusion at the end of the speech of their behavior being “morally and socially responsible” can be interpreted in a manner that suggests that there are no age boundaries when it comes to sexual behaviors and that the women’s decision to purchase condoms fits in with behavior that could be conducted by people of various ages and should not be considered unusual behavior for women who are the same ages as the ladies in the program. Ultimately this performance as well as the others of being sexually daring are mirrored back towards audience members and they can then take on these images and find ways in which they can be incorporated into their own daily lives as a means of their being able construct and perform their own utopias.

What also can be concluded from looking at the show is that a utopian performance space is carved out for viewers, both old and young, in that they can be liberated from their own feelings of marginalization by viewing these women as they engage in performing behaviors not readily associated with people who are their age. By daring to be bold in their choices regarding sexual practices and coupling those behaviors with their age allows a space to be carved out that very possibly would not exist either on the television screen. If the portrait of these characters had not been painted and portrayed so convincingly on television screens, then it is difficult to
imagine another forum that would have encouraged viewers to imagine how they could begin to envision alternative characters that moved away from the consistent reifications offered by the likes of the othered elderly women types such as Granny Clampett, Grandma Addams, and Endora.
CHAPTER III: AND NOW FOR A VERY SPECIAL EPISODE; THE AGE(LESS) APPEAL OF THE GOLDEN GIRLS

ROSE’S 72-HOUR THORN

An element worthy of consideration in light of both *The Golden Girls*’ initial success and the current success the show experiences in syndicated reruns are the viewers who have continuously watched the show. It is useful to think about just how this show managed to become such a massive success. The show has become the huge cultural phenomenon it has partly because of the multiple meanings that various audience demographics have attached to it. The life background of an audience member watching the program, or any media form for that matter, is likely to inform how an audience member views and interpret the text.

In the program lays a wealth of interwoven relationships that when considered can help to explain the show’s appeal to various demographics. The primary setting of the ladies’ lives was Blanche’s home, and that setting allowed the ladies to function much like a traditional family. Dorothy, Rose, and Blanche often behaved like sisters, with Sophia serving as a surrogate mother to Blanche and Rose in addition to fulfilling her biological mother role to Dorothy. Serafina Bathrick argues through her critical analysis of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* that programs that focus on decidedly female themes have three types of relationships to offer: “the mother-daughter relationship,” “sisterhood,” and the relationship between “women and work” (Bathrick, 168). These three types of relationships are certainly present within *The Golden Girls*. It can certainly be argued the show ushered in a sense of older female empowerment. That power related to how the characters’ demographic was portrayed. The *Girls*’ portrait of elderly life not only attracted viewers, but it also allowed a quality of agelessness to be attributed to the program.
In this chapter of the thesis, I begin by examining a social issue that significantly affected contemporary life in the 1980s: AIDS. The 1970s ushered in an attitude of sexually liberated behaviors in several parts of the United States. Part of the explanation around the new openness regarding sexuality was “female(s)…in the 1970s dove into sex…as a way to explore questions of identity…”(Bryan-Wilson, 76). An effect of the sexual openness of the 1970s was the spread of HIV/AIDS. In this period, HIV/AIDS had recently emerged as a threat to many different communities, the ripple effects of second wave feminism from the 1970s were starting to show their impact on greater society, and the ideas about the types of programming options viewers were responding to were being challenged in light of the success of Norman Lear’s television success in producing a string of programs that had a conscience.

It is imperative to examine real world factors and how they informed what viewers watched. These factors help explain how *The Golden Girls* was able to become the juggernaut that it was by following the similar production patterns of shows that came before it, while also breaking new ground. What was it about four older women that television viewers found to be so entertaining that they were compelled to tune in week after week for seven years?

While the show certainly made use of the apparent demographic signifier of its older female ensemble members’ ages, it also worked to de-centralize the ages of the characters by oftentimes utilizing real life social issues that would often suggest that the women were still part of contemporary/younger life. The program, like several other situation comedy series from that era took a note from the Norman Lear style of programming by offering episodes that sought to educate viewers about various social issues that were affecting audience members in their actual lives. Television audiences were introduced to the socially conscious programming of auteur
Norman Lear in 1970s programming such as *All in the Family*, *Maude*, and *The Jeffersons*. Through his programming, Lear tackled controversial issues such as rape, abortion, and race, which up to that point had not been handled through the lens of television situation comedy.

*The Golden Girls* confronted age-oriented topics including menopause, being widowed (as three of the program’s main characters were widows), and age discrimination. The program also dealt with social issues that had relevance to audience members of various age groups. Throughout its run, the program aired episodes dealing with homelessness, teen pregnancy, addiction, homosexuality, and HIV/AIDS. In airing these special episodes, not only was the program offering its own social commentary about issues of the day, but the ensemble suggested to its viewers that the issues that were impacting the younger generation were also relevant to the older demographic so readily associated with the program. By examining some of these special episodes, I suggest that the show was broadening its appeal, thus successfully expanding its audience viewership in a manner where age, while an obvious social signifier, was not a limiting factor for who could watch and appreciate the program.

The first episode I will examine in terms of the show’s transcending the boundaries of age is the episode “72 Hours” from season five. In this episode, Rose fears that she has contracted HIV due to blood she received several years prior during a transfusion. As the episode progresses, the audience sees Rose confronting the fear that she might have contracted the virus, but the other members of the household confront their own prejudices around the disease. “Older persons rarely are considered to be at risk for HIV/AIDS, and even though they may be involved in risky behavior, such as unprotected penetrative sex, they may not consider themselves vulnerable to becoming infected” (Ward, Disch, Levy, Schensul 571). Research suggests that this
mode of thinking was rather dominant during the initial onset of HIV/AIDS epidemic during the late 1970s into the early 1980s. “In the early days of the HIV/AIDS pandemic more than two decades ago, there was an outburst of discriminatory reactions against homosexual men and other minorities, who were among the illness’s first known victims” (Torres-Ruiz, 30).

While I consider the social significance of the program and its ageless appeal, I think it is also important to simultaneously acknowledge that the characters’ age was only slightly a factor when addressing HIV/AIDS. Age became a minor factor primarily in the attitude of one of the other members in the ensemble towards Rose. Sophia’s behavior towards Rose is incredibly irrational and primarily based around fear and misunderstanding of the potential risks posed by the disease. Sophia’s behaviors can be read as being biased around age because she is older and has never experienced during her sexual prime the issues and problems that are raised concerning HIV/AIDS. She treats Rose in a way that could be thought of as insensitive. An additional motive for addressing HIV/AIDS could have been to “simply make seniors aware of the risks” attached to the disease (Kotz, 46). The show’s creators choosing to take on the issue of HIV/AIDS allowed seniors who may have been out of step with problems in contemporary sexuality to become more informed; additionally a connection is made between the seniors within the text and those in the viewing audience. Another bridge is built between seniors and members of younger generations as well, as an understanding is created that social issues (in this case HIV/AIDS) are not constrained by age and can impact various demographics.

It is certainly arguable that *The Golden Girls* was a bit radical in its choice to take on social issues of the day that were not strictly associated with the women’s ages. By tackling these hard subjects the show chose to reach out and demonstrate, though not in an overt manner, that
these issues did also play a part in the lives of everybody, and not merely the younger generation that is often targeted by much of popular media discourses. By bringing the issues forward into the public eye via the television screen, an opportunity for discourses to happen around significant social issues is created as “[television] acts as a forum for social commentary” (Lang, 67). This idea is prevalent in that a clear message is being sent to viewers that *The Golden Girls* is offering viewers an ideological code that women who are of a certain age range need not be discounted out of life strictly because they have arrived at a certain plateau in their lives. Episodes such as “72 Hours” can be interpreted as a method through which the show’s producers were seeking to determine what events were significant to the lives of senior citizen aged women.

The episode was originally broadcast in 1990, just nine years after the first diagnosed cases of what would come to be known as HIV/AIDS. Much of what happens in it is reflective of what was happening with the public’s relationship to the disease. Assumptions including, “HIV is transmitted by sharing personal items with an infected person such as a drinking cup, towel or clothing and HIV is transmitted by sharing a toilet with an infected person also revealed some misconceptions” (Goktas, 541). Notably within the series is Sophia’s reaction to Rose’s possible illness. There are several instances throughout the course of the episode where Sophia reacts in manner very similar to how people in real life behave toward people who are afflicted with the disease. Sophia refuses to drink from the same glasses as Rose and makes her intolerance known by marking all of the glasses used by Rose with a letter R. She sprays everything Rose touches with disinfectant and uses the neighborhood gas station’s restroom as she does not want to share the same facilities with Rose. This display of intolerance on the part of Sophia’s character is
representative of the beliefs that were often present in the real life exterior to the television screen.

By taking this real life issue that afflicted so many people across various age groups and offering it to viewers in a way that did not interact with the typical demographic often associated with the age group, then the program was asserting that the characters were in fact members of society in a way that they were often not so easily associated with because of their advanced ages. Not only was the program able to dismiss the stereotypes that were connected to age and social issues such as HIV, thus building its audience base, but the show also was able to educate viewers about issues that were thought of as socially unacceptable to discuss publically.

Audience members were also able to take the journey through becoming more informed about the issue of HIV/AIDS, but there was also a sense that the creators were trying to remove a moral stigma around the idea that HIV/AIDS was a disease of punishment. By associating the disease with Rose’s character, the show forfeited the opportunity to easily exploit the tie that would have otherwise been obvious by associating the disease with sexual promiscuity and the character that embodies the attitude of being socially and sexually liberated: Blanche. By foregrounding Rose as the character who potentially has the disease, then a message is being sent to the audience that HIV/AIDS is not merely a disease contracted by people who are sexually promiscuous. The message is reiterated even further via a monologue that is delivered by Blanche who takes Rose to task for actually implying that Blanche is the one who deserves to be potentially ill because of her sexually liberated attitude. Blanche tells Rose and thus the audience that HIV/AIDS is not a punishment for one’s sins. This speech is a signal to the audience that truly anyone can be vulnerable to contracting the virus.
In considering how *The Golden Girls* was able to appeal to a wide audience of television viewers, it is essential to think about character attributes that took audiences away from the women’s age. One very tangible element of the women’s identity that people of all ages were able to identify with was the fact that the ensemble was made up of women who were all single. Yet even in their advanced years, they were still making attempts at, and often times being successful in, taking an active part in sexual activity. In a sense, *The Golden Girls* picks up where shows such as the 1970s classic *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and the 1960s primetime drama *Peyton Place* left off. *The Golden Girls* continued an exploration of female characters that were not defined primarily by their relationships/attachments to men, but by how they were able to function on their own and in relationship to other living situations such as friendships with other women and co-workers.

Moya Luckett’s work “A Moral Crisis in Prime Time: *Peyton Place* and the Rise of the Single Girl,” addresses the idea that the female centered *Peyton Place* “focused on female sexuality outside marriage and its role in defining women’s identity and selfhood” (Luckett, 75). This idea certainly can be brought to the foreground when considering how *The Golden Girls* was able to reach out to its audience. The program was never at a loss for story lines involving the women’s navigation of single life within their senior citizen populated community. Many of the episodes addressed the females’ journeys as they faced life on their own as single women. While it is beyond the scope of my work to define precisely whether the program’s creators were trying to create a program that was linked with feminist perspectives, I think it is arguable that the show was empowering to women in that it showed that while the women (in many cases) were seeking male attention, yet at the same time they did not lose sight of the value of their own lives as single women.
Often, comic fodder could be drawn from the various situation’s that the women were engaged in regarding their being single females. Dorothy was typically subjected to the jest of the other women in the house because of what could be considered her masculine traits. This was mostly attributed to the fact that Dorothy more often failed to perform what Emilee Gilbert analyzes as being “gender appropriate” in terms of a feminine identity (134). Dorothy, while her appearance could be identifiable as female, did not often perform her femininity in a way that could be easily associated with traditional female norms. For instance, Dorothy was physically the tallest of the women and the other women often compared their statures to hers as a means of highlighting how she physically did not live up to the expectations that were set for her as a female.

Another portion of Dorothy’s character was her deep voice, which often times served as the house’s voice of reason. In thinking about Dorothy’s failed feminine performance juxtaposed with the being the group’s voice of reason, a character is created that has appeal to audience members of all ages. Her character is someone who can be thought of as being relatable to people of all ages. For a younger viewer tuning in to the program, she might serve as reminiscent of a wise old grandmother who is not afraid to tell the truth.

INDIRECT CONFRONTATION

In the episode, “Brother Can You Spare That Jacket?” the series deals with the problem of homelessness. It follows a general pattern of the series addressing social issues in an indirect manner that did not too radically alter its humorous tone. The episode begins with the women discovering they have won $10,000 in a lottery game. Sophia then inadvertently gives the ticket away by giving a jacket that has the winning ticket tucked inside to charity. What ensures for the
remainder of the episode is the women go on a quest to retrieve their lost prize. After discovering that the jacket with the ticket has been donated to a local homeless shelter, the women sneak inside posing as homeless women in need of a place to sleep.

While searching for the ticket, the women have several encounters with characters in the episode who are actually homeless, placing a face on the issue. What’s problematic with this episode is that it took the women venturing out of the normally viewed setting of their (comfortable) home in order to learn about this problem. They only venture out of their home because they are seeking financial gain. I would argue that a plausible explanation for such an indirect approach could lie in the encounters the women have when in the shelter. As stated in the beginning of this chapter, the show used social issues to decentralize the women’s ages, which allowed them to connect with audience members of all ages.

In the episode, Blanche, Rose, and Sophia each have encounters in the homeless shelter with someone who is of a different age. Blanche encounters a male doctoral recipient; Rose talks with a male Pullman Porter who is in her age bracket and hails from her home state of Minnesota; while Sophia actually sees a friend she used to know from her time at the Shady Pines Retirement Home. During each of the encounters, the characters explain their situation of how they came to be homeless. In talking about the situation behind what lead them to their being homeless, there is also a bit of audience education taking place. Much like the “72 Hours” episode, I would argue that the episode and how the plots are presented/explained seeks to promote an idea that anyone can be susceptible to social ills and that no one demographic is exempt. This could be looked at as demonstrating that homelessness touches people of all ages and backgrounds. By having outlying guest characters (versus perhaps members of their own
families or the ladies themselves) experience the problem, they address the issue however it is in a way that could be thought of as passive.

While the method by which the women make contact with the homeless community could be considered as passive and a bit of a stretch in terms of the construction of the narrative, there still seems to be a sense of awareness that is achieved. Being that the homeless gain a voice in popular discourse (albeit the voice comes through being situated within a fictional comedy series). The visibility given to this marginalized community still allows for the possibility of a discourse to occur beyond the realm of the television screen. By proposing that such conversations can occur gives space to the idea that audiences understand that a social problem such as homelessness can happen to anyone regardless of one’s age. Social justice is directly gained for both the homeless and the women of the show (as well as older people in general) by there being an “erosion of stereotypes” concerning precisely who can be affected by a social problem like homelessness (Knecht, Martinez 528).

SOMEWHERE OVER THE GOLDEN RAINBOW

Another social issue the show confronted frequently was homosexuality. It is vital to note that during the mid-1980s when the show was being created, much of the imagery associated with the then “contemporary gay culture valued youth and beauty” (Levitt, Manley, Mosher, 90). Like many other social demographics in American society, minority portrayals are often times sacrificed in favor of what can be considered aesthetically appealing to a major audience. Research demonstrates that “older adult sexual minorities are an invisible population in our communities” (Canetto & Wright, 424). By confronting the social issue of homosexuality, particularly its relevance to the senior citizen population, a modicum of social justice was
achieved in that gave a voice to a sect of the population that was oftentimes not easily seen by mainstream society. By addressing the issue of homosexuality, the program was able to make a proclamation that it could address issues that were not only primarily age-centered, thus the program was aligning itself with various age groups and allowing its audience base and social impact expand exponentially.

Throughout the course of the series, there were several episodes that brought the issue to the forefront, granted the program dealt with the issue in a manner that kept with the text’s overall lighthearted comedic tone. The show’s pilot episode included a character named Coco, who was meant to be the household’s chef. However, he was never heard from nor spoken of after the premiere episode. Had the show’s writer’s chosen to keep him in the show, it would have been the prime opportunity for the show to have taken a direct approach in confronting the social issue of homosexuality, rather than the indirect approach the show ended up taking though the show did revisit the issue several times through a series of guest characters that forced the women to confront the issue.

I can only speculate as to why the show chose to indirectly confront the issue of homosexuality as a social issue while other issues were readily addressed and had a direct influence in the lives of the characters. Perhaps, it was a reflection of the real world that existed at the time of the show’s creation. Considering that the show was filmed starting in the mid-1980s, right in the thrust of what was the start of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and this time period was also following pretty closely to the sexual revolution of the 1970s, where prior to the emergence of HIV/AIDS, many places in America had very liberated views regarding sexuality. Perhaps as a pushback against the threats that were being posited onto society as a whole by the
disease and because of male homosexuality’s link to the disease, the show did not want to alienate viewers by having them face a homosexual character on a weekly basis.

In any case, how the issue of homosexuality connects to my central argument of social issues as a tool for age decentralization is that the indirect nature of the issues helps to take the women out of the familiar elements of the program. Perhaps by taking the issue of homosexuality out of the main cast of characters and imbuing it into other guest characters this was a possible method under which producers were seeking to connect with and enlighten viewers.

Also important to consider when talking about homosexuality in The Golden Girls is that the characters who were gay were not young, so perhaps it was a two-tiered approach in reaching out to viewers. The women in the show were not young, thus making it a valuable statement to have gay characters who were also not of the young adult set that so many gay characters have been in television programs have been normally. Perhaps, part of the explanation of why LGBT representations of older people tend to be scarce in popular media is due to the idea that when one reaches a certain stage of life, an assumption is made that one might lack interest in engaging in activities such as exploration of one’s sexuality, whereas, with youth more consideration is given to the idea that life will be easier if one accepts his/her sexual orientation at a younger age.

The women in the show were able to decentralize their age when dealing with the issue of homosexuality by not making it an issue that they had to directly confront on a consistent basis. Granted, the characters that were brought into the series did have significant ties textually to characters in the program (among the gay characters introduced over the years were Blanche’s
brother Clayton and Dorothy’s best friend from college, Jean), but because they were only guest roles they did not have significance in their relationships with the program as a whole.

While these characters were older just like the other women in the show, the show’s creators shrewdly enlightened several generations of viewers all at once through their appearances. They were educating members of the younger generation by showing what LGBT representation looked like in the senior citizen set. Simultaneously, the show was educating members of the older generation of viewers by allowing those who were perhaps not familiar with older portraits of LGBT characters. While the precise motives of the show’s creators to tackle homosexuality are beyond the scope of my research, it can be presumed that there was an attempt at reaching for social justice concerning a marginalized identity. The audience who viewed the program was being exposed to a marginalized social group (LGBT) by aligning the plight of the LGBT community with yet another marginalized identity, which was the senior citizen community.

By bringing an alternative sexual identity to the forefront in each of the episodes of The Golden Girls centering on the LGBT community, and by demonstrating that the ladies were just another group of people who were being affected by everyday life problems, age is decentralized. In addressing the issues of the LGBT community and other social problems in this manner, the women were able to proclaim to the audience (and greater society as a whole) that they were members of contemporary life and that their identities need not be discounted simply because of their advanced ages. While their age was certainly a social signifier and much of the show’s narrative construct revolved around addressing the connotations associated with older age, there were also other social effects being made on audiences that stemmed from the text.
These effects were being created in a manner that only a text such as a television show that reaches an audience of millions of viewers can create via a singular representative image. “As a term, ‘representation’ has typically been defined as referring to signs, symbols, images, portrayals, depictions, likenesses, and substitutions; and we have tended to think of representations as the primary function that television performs” (D’Acci, 374).

I have argued that by tackling real social issues that affected the audience, the characters were able to in a sense make audiences forget that they were watching four old women. The ladies’ age became a decentralized non-factor in that based on how the topics were dealt with, it was made plain to audiences that the women (and therefore real life people in the women’s age range) held legitimate stakes in significant social issues that were (and are) oftentimes primarily associated with younger generations. By thinking critically regarding HIV/AIDS and LGBT issues and how the program showcased them through a lens of humor, an assertion can be made that a double sense of social awareness was achieved. First, making audiences knowledgeable about these problems allows for a discourse around them to be established in the public sphere. Secondly, by allowing the discourse to be public can possibly disrupt potentially harmful stereotypes that promote misunderstandings about socially marginalized identities. Also by confronting real life issues like homosexuality and HIV/AIDS, the show reifies that while situational comedy can certainly be entertaining and humorous, it can also serve a greater purpose by helping audiences unpack challenging issues giving them permission to laugh while thinking over the issues. I’d venture to guess that somewhere Norman Lear must be laughing.
CONCLUSIONS: ENDING CREDITS

In my work on *The Golden Girls*, I have examined some of the ways that the show has made a cultural impact on viewing audiences and television programs that have followed since the show’s original conclusion in May 1992. I utilized the classification genre theory method in order to first precisely define the term situation comedy. Using this theory as a departure point, I examined several programs with similar features to *The Golden Girls*. I identified the character types I thought to be present in these series (leader of the pack, sexpot, naïve/innocent, and wise elder). By examining characters from other situation comedy programs with female ensembles as the core characters, I arrived at the conclusion that several of these types of characters do in fact exist in other television programming and that these types of shows can in fact be traced back to *The Golden Girls* being the first of these types of shows to exist on air thus laying a foundation for the other programs that have followed.

It’s vital to critically engage the elements that comprise *The Golden Girls* in order to come to a complete understanding of how the show has affected television culture. I have argued that distinct commonalities in adult female ensemble comedies can be found in television shows beginning with *The Golden Girls*. There is a certain type of family support that the characters experience by engaging with one another across the various series. While there are definitely concerns around age that the ladies of *The Golden Girls* provide to one another, there are also other issues that have no barrier of age that are faced by the women not only in *The Golden Girls*, but also in other series that I have considered throughout this work. The women across several of these series are confronted with problems around men, work, finances, and a variety of
other issues that for the most part are able to be peacefully resolved by the conclusion of any given twenty-two minute episode.

Part of the appeal of *The Golden Girls* stems from how the women were displayed physically; this includes the clothing, makeup, jewelry, and other accoutrements that adorned the women’s bodies throughout the course of the series. Special attention was paid to their appearance: the women were never allowed to be seen as dowdy. It was vital that the women’s appearance not be an afterthought, as their visual appearance helped convey one of the show’s central messages; that a woman could still be sexually appealing despite having reached a certain age plateau. Additionally, the appeal also stems from how the women’s characters were portrayed through the series’ run. I demonstrated the choices made in these portrayals through examining several episodes and critically considering the characters in relationship to other portrayals of elderly aged women in situation comedies.

I have arrived at the conclusion that the women of *The Golden Girls* broke new ground in two major ways. The women’s looks were a vast departure from the majority of other portrayals of senior women that had been offered to television audiences up to that point. The characters’ differing appearance offered a sense of empowerment to viewers who fell into the age demographic that the characters represented. Week after week, the stories that were told reiterated the idea to audiences that certain activities need not leave one’s life simply because of one’s age. Dorothy, Rose, Blanche, and Sophia conducted themselves in a variety of ways that may not have been readily associated with women in their age group (sex, dating, competing over men, etc.) by greater society.
The program made a statement that it could speak to more than just issues revolving around women and age. Like several other sitcoms, the show took inspiration from auteur Norman Lear and addressed social concerns that affected the lives of audience members who watched the program. Because the show premiered in the mid-1980s, during the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic into the world’s conscience, producers incorporated the crisis into the show. I also critically considered the social issues of homosexuality and homelessness, both of which were, and still are, affecting millions of lives. I examined how the characters were involved with these issues in both direct and indirect manners. Whereas many other sitcoms engaging social issues had characters that were considerably younger, thereby giving an active voice and agency regarding these issues to younger generations, when what set the *Girls* apart from other programs was the fact that the characters involved with these social concerns were older people.

By addressing social issues in the show, a consistent message was delivered to viewers that older people had just as much of a stake in social problems as their younger counterparts. Because these issues comprise a considerable part of contemporary life, the show declared that older people had value and were still essential members of society as a whole. A type of justice is accomplished through these special episodes in that a voice is given to both the issues that are being addressed, as well as a certain kind of age(less) quality, as audiences are challenged to forget about the ages of the characters that are the conduits of the messages.

Like the millions of fans that have come before me and the millions that will certainly follow, I continue to find comfort and laughs as I watch the stories of Dorothy, Blanche, Rose, and Sophia play out across my television screen. While it was only a fictionalized account, there
were times where the show took on greater meaning as it aligned itself with real life concerns.

The program has made me laugh, while at the same time it has challenged and ultimately changed my worldview in some ways. The show consistently reifies one of my most fervent beliefs: that we are all the same and far more in common than we sometimes realize. Part of who has helped me to draw this conclusion are the four Golden Girls who came together under the roof of that Miami household to make millions of us laugh and think simultaneously: Dorothy, Blanche, Rose, and Sophia.
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