

THE QUEST FOR POWER IN *DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES*:  
IDEAL FEMININITY THROUGH THE BODY, EMOTION, AND EMPLOYMENT

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## ABSTRACT

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One of the most powerful arenas where the construction of ideal femininity gets constructed is through the depiction of women on television. My thesis investigates one of the most popular television shows in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Desperate Housewives*. It explores how the female protagonists are depicted through the ways they attempt to maintain power within their suburban worlds. My thesis discusses how certain power is allotted within the narrative of the show. I investigate the implication that power is a good thing, and also offer analysis with some of the problems of gaining power. We not only see constrained power, but also see women in positions of status. Power within family dynamics, romantic love/marriage, and domestic and professional activities are central to my thesis. I focus on beauty and image through consumption, the struggles for women balancing their domestic and professional worlds, and alternative depictions of femininity through the repression of emotion. I use textual analysis to examine dialogue, plot and narrative, character development, genre, and aesthetics/formal elements within production, which include costumes, make-up, cinematography, editing, acting, lighting, and sound. My thesis draws on feminist scholarship within media studies and popular culture studies; specifically elements of sociological and psychological theory within the context of gender.

“Beautiful lawns, spacious homes, happy families. These are the hallmarks of suburbia. But if you look beneath the veneer of gracious living, you will see a battle raging. A battle for control. You see the combatants everywhere, engaged in their routine skirmishes, fighting fiercely to have dominion over the world around them.”

*-Desperate Housewives, “You Could Drive A Person Crazy”*

Dedicated to my loving family and friends

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## INTRODUCTION

*Desperate Housewives* is an American television dramedy that aired for eight seasons between 2004-2012 on Sunday evenings, with millions of viewers. The show was created by Marc Cherry and produced by ABC Studios and Cherry Productions. *Desperate Housewives* portrays the exhilarating lives of the four female protagonists, Lynette Scavo (played by Felicity Huffman), Gabrielle Solis (Eva Longoria) Susan Mayer, (Teri Hatcher) and Bree Van de Kamp (Marcia Cross). All of the women are depicted as mothers and wives, united in their everlasting friendship with each other. It is set in the fictional town of “Fairview” on the fictional suburban street of “Wisteria Lane.” “Setting *Desperate Housewives* in the suburbs is central to the show's discourse, as suburbia connotes an identifiable ideal and linear conformity while facilitating an inverse darkness where all is not as it seems. Suburbia has come to represent a model of domesticity and community in which both social and physical boundaries are defined” (Hill 164). The suburbs are a familiar space where both traditional and mysterious conventions can take place. It can be assumed that the setting of the show is made to represent any typical suburban town in the United States. In other words, it could take place anywhere in America. The character of Mary Alice Young, a dead neighbor who commits suicide in the premiere episode, narrates *Desperate Housewives*. The show won several Primetime Emmy awards, three Golden Globe awards, and four Screen Actors Guild awards, among other honors. *Desperate Housewives* is now in syndication in the United States and internationally.

*Desperate Housewives* certainly runs on sensationalism and often highly unrealistic plot lines. However, aside from the wildly fictitious narrative structure of the show, the variety of the way that each leading woman attempts to gain power leaves room for some interesting analysis. *Desperate Housewives* has some fiery female spirits who both challenge conventional gender



roles, while at the same time reinforcing idealized hegemonic femininity on television. While the title may suggest that these women are desperate to the point of unhappiness or failure, while we do see struggle, we also see women who reclaim their power in concrete ways.

*Desperate Housewives* has received negative criticism regarding the sensationalist narratives regarding murder, infidelity, and even natural disasters like tornadoes. However, when closely reading the text regarding the construction of ideal femininity through beauty and consumption, the struggles for women in professional employment, and alternative depiction of femininity through the repression and display of emotion, we not only see constrained power, but also see women in positions of status. We see women who take on masculine qualities relating to language and desire. However, I suggest we reframe these notions of masculine qualities, to consider them to be an expanded definition of femininity. We see women who strive to maintain their dominance and assertions through various plot lines and conversations. We observe sexually free women, women who talk back to their husbands, and women who express openly how they feel. But in opposition to that, we also see women holding back their emotions, which is even more subversive in the construction of femininity.

While there are about eighty characters that appear in the series, my thesis focuses on the main four female characters. Gabrielle Solis is a beautiful former model that is the youngest of the four housewives. She has two daughters and is married to a couple of different men in the series: Carlos Solis and Victor Lang. She also has an affair with her teenage gardener when she becomes restless and bored staying at home while her husband is out working. Gabrielle is often portrayed as selfish and vain, but also warm and kind hearted. Actress Eva Longoria plays her. Lynette Scavo is an intelligent, strong-willed advertising executive and is married to Tom Scavo. She raises four children and also helps manage a pizzeria with Tom. During season four, she also

battles lymphoma. Lynette is portrayed as manipulative and aggressive, but also loving, family oriented, and moral. Actress Felicity Huffman plays her. Bree Van de Kamp is the most satirical of the four ladies. Her character is reminiscent of the happy homemaker trope, like June Cleaver from *Leave It To Beaver*. However, underneath her mask, she is damaged and insecure. She is married to Rex Van de Kamp, Orson Hodge, and has a few other relationships. Bree's daughter becomes pregnant and her son comes out as gay, which at times makes her relationship with her children challenging. However, Bree does grow from that experience. She battles alcoholism and often seeks religion to prove to herself that she is moral. She is portrayed as a perfectionist, an accomplished chef, and the most conservative of the women. However, she is also depicted as a caring and compassionate woman. Actress Marcia Cross plays her. And finally, Susan Mayer is the most carefree of the bunch. She is married to Carl Mayer, who she later divorces. She is a single mother to her daughter Julie during much of the series, until she marries Mike Delfino. She has a son named Maynard with him. Susan often gets herself into bizarre and humorous situations and is portrayed as absent-minded, lovable, honest, and vulnerable. Actress Teri Hatcher plays her.

It is important to note that not all characters in *Desperate Housewives* are created equally. Not all the women maintain the same level of dominance within their relationships. This is illustrated through the housewives taking on social roles coded as masculine, such as atypical ways of engaging in conversation, repressing emotion, having free sexuality, and maintaining honesty even when it means they might lose a man. Some women get punished more than others for their sexuality, or flirtatious behaviors. For example, Bree is shown in an immoral light during the final season of the series when she has wild one-night stands with men and deals with alcoholism, and even contemplates suicide. She is a character that is punished for her behavior to

a much greater extent than Gabrielle who has an affair with her teenage gardener. Lynette is punished for challenging conventional femininity when she threatens her husband's masculinity. She is punished because they almost get a divorce due to her husband being fed up with her aggressive nature. However, in the end the couple stays together. The show therefore challenges the status quo a little bit, only to reinforce it once again at the end of the series.

But aside from certain characters having more control within their relationships, each desperate housewife spends every season of the show on a quest for love to achieve happiness. Despite alternative depictions of femininity as assertive, each woman defines her sense of self and fulfillment through her relationship with a man. The interesting part though, is how each woman tries to achieve this romantic narrative. *Desperate Housewives* can be considered rewriting the romance narrative, because it both supports and defies many aspects of how to achieve ideal romance through the construction of femininity. It is a new romantic narrative, compared to Radway's definition. Radway explains that the end result of effective romance depicts "...female defiance...[as] rendered ineffectual and childlike as well as unnecessary" (Radway 303 qtd in Durham and Kellner). *Desperate Housewives* therefore challenges hegemonic constructions of love and femininity through its four protagonist's continuous rejection of passivity.

In other words, each leading lady in *Desperate Housewives* attempts to claim power and have a satisfying relationship through their personality and behavior. Lynette strives for equality in her marriage, and often uses manipulation to achieve it. Gabrielle uses her beauty and sexuality to maintain control, and to satisfy her own emptiness and frustrations. Bree represses her emotions and aims for perfectionism in her domestic life, in fear of being taken advantage of. And finally, Susan succeeds in men finding her irresistible through expressing her own emotion

and honesty. Through character development, the housewives can be understood within gender theories surrounding language, the workplace, domestic life, sex appeal, and emotion.

My thesis explores how the female protagonists on *Desperate Housewives* challenge hegemony through the ways that they attempt to maintain power within their suburban worlds. These worlds include their families, activities, and romantic relationships. I discuss how this attempt at power is portrayed through romantic love and marriage within heterosexual relationships, and the construction of what it means to be conventionally feminine.

This thesis interrogates the concept of power within *Desperate Housewives*. I will be using the words power/empowerment, agency, and hegemony in my work. It is therefore important to define how I use these terms. By power, I mean control within marriage or a relationship, visual or content related attention, and decision-making privileges. By control, I mean something that is constructed through interaction with others. In other words, I am referring to the privileges that certain characters get by other characters viewing them in control. I am defining power here, not as a perception, but as something that one has.

My thesis discusses how certain power is allotted within the narrative of the show. I investigate the implication that power is a good thing, and also offer analysis with some of the problems of gaining power, and the contradictions and assumptions we make concerning who has power. I also look at how characters exercise power when they don't have it, according to others.

With power comes an opportunity for advancement in status through beauty and image, the career world, or attaining a mate. Janeway distinguishes between two different types of power. She explains "The liberating power of capability may be power-as-seen from within, while the limiting power of domination is power-as-experienced by others" (Janeway 103). I

mostly use Janeway's notion of "power of domination" in my thesis. While "power as seen from within" is also important in shaping self-confidence, through my analysis, I am more focused on how other characters in the series view the character in question. Are they generally constructed as a powerful character? In which ways are they powerful? How do they gain and lose their power? Janeway also explains that "power is part of a shared and ongoing process, a set of manifestations we can call the powers of the weak and therefore can be thought of as a contract between ruled and ruler" (104). Therefore, when analyzing power, it is important to keep in mind the relationship between the powerful and the powerless.

When I use the term agency, it goes hand in hand with power. I define agency as the way in which power gets executed and distributed. The type of agency that women seem to be granted on *Desperate Housewives* can be defined as a type of synthetic, or artificial power. There is agency in some form, but it is not complete. Therefore, the depiction of power is nuanced and often ambiguous. When I discuss hegemony, power and agency are a large piece of that. I define hegemony based off of Antonio Gramsci's definition that the ruling ideas are reproduced as "common sense." This unequal distribution of power appears to be both legitimate and natural. It refers to adhering to expectations. It is a concept that refers to the ability of dominant groups in a society to exercise control over weaker groups, not by force, but by gaining their consent. (Gramsci). I often use hegemony to inform my notions of analyzing femininity. I define this type of hegemonic femininity as conventional, traditional, and idealized. The terms power/empowerment, agency, and hegemony are essential to grounding my analysis of *Desperate Housewives*, and are concepts that I will frequently discuss in my thesis.

I investigated episodes throughout the entire series, which included eight seasons of material. These episodes were selected based on topical relevance of themes. The themes I chose

to discuss include beauty/the body, employment depictions, and emotion. “Beautiful Girls” and “Pretty Little Picture” deal with the body/beauty, while “You Could Drive a Person Crazy” and “I Remember That” deal with employment depictions. I used double the sample size for my discussion on emotion because I did not analyze each episode in as much depth as the previous topics. I used “The Art of Making Art,” “There’s Something About A War,” “Women and Death”, and “Pilot” in my discussion on emotion.

Each episode is representative of typical trends and patterns that are addressed throughout all of the seasons. They are representative of the show as a whole. The segments I chose to discuss portray key examples of the themes that I analyze. These samples together construct the meaning and central messages of how power gets defined on *Desperate Housewives*. I use textual analysis to examine dialogue, plot and narrative, character development, genre, and aesthetics/formal elements within production, which include costumes, make-up, cinematography, editing, acting, lighting, and sound.

All three of my chapters interrogate the notion of empowerment. In other words, though I discuss a range of topics, power is the common thread between them all. My first chapter investigates the ways in which consumerism shapes striving for the beauty ideal, which in turn defines conventional femininity. It is titled The Construction of Ideal Femininity Through Beauty: *Desperate Housewives*’ Lessons about the Body Through Consumption and Performance. My second chapter discusses the representation of the struggle between motherhood/marriage and the professional working world. It is titled Interrogating Empowerment Through The Depiction of Housewives with Employment Outside Of the Home. My last chapter analyzes the ways that femininity can be challenged through denying the essentialist notion that all women are sensitive, and should therefore share their feelings. It is

titled *Alternative Depictions of Femininity: Maintaining Status Through The Repression of Emotion*.

Situating *Desperate Housewives* within the context of genre is essential to understanding its meaning. Akass and McCabe discuss how researchers have outlined the show within a genre framework. They explain that “the show [has] a blending of various generic forms of conventions---romantic comedy, suspense thriller, murder mystery, family drama, magic realism, soap opera” (Akass and McCabe 12). Storylines run the gamut of dealing with divorce, death, infidelity, accusations of murder, and of course, sex. However, the show is so much more than an abundance of gratuitous sex scenes. I like to refer to *Desperate Housewives* as essentially a dramedy, with elements of both drama and comedy that are exaggerated which actually lends itself to borrowing elements of the soap opera genre. The melodramatic, heightened plot lines and acting often resemble a soap opera. However, the frequent satirical, campy, and sarcastic tone also mocks the soap. Therefore, *Desperate Housewives* is filled with genre hybridity, meaning it borrows elements and pokes fun at a multitude of genres. Due to the multiple elements of different genres, the central meaning on *Desperate Housewives* is often read as ambiguous. We see both a parody of ideal femininity as well as a depiction of it. “Drawing on representations of women, gender stereotypes, and generic techniques from a range of literary, filmic, and televisual sources, *Desperate Housewives* plays on the past and its audience's existing cultural knowledge as a means through which to access and interrogate contemporary social convention” (Hill 163). The campy and satirical nature of the show is grounded in historical depictions from previous media, like, for example the characters on *Leave it To Beaver*.

My thesis draws on scholarship within media studies and popular culture studies. Both of these fields are highly interdisciplinary. Therefore, I draw on a multitude of perspectives to

inform my work. I discuss elements of sociological and psychological frameworks within the context of gender theory. My thesis is grounded in feminist theory, drawing on the field of women's studies. My thesis directly relates to the sociological theories of status that Crawford and Unger indicate:

Status refers to a person's potential ability to influence or control others. Sociologists distinguish between two kinds of status: ascribed and achieved. Achieved status is based...on the role one performs in an organization or a family...[and]...ascribed status defines who is supposed to have more social power in society...[and]...is usually based on inherent characteristics and cultural norms. (76)

For the characters in *Desperate Housewives*, one could describe their femaleness as an ascribed status. My thesis addresses the different ways that they succeed in claiming their achieved status. Lynette and Gabby succeed in this achieved status in very different ways than Bree and Susan. Roles within the family, marriage, and the career world are avenues where status is apparent. Some might argue that because of Bree's failed marriages, she doesn't achieve it at all. However, she does end up with her lawyer, Tripp, during the final episode of *Desperate Housewives'* run. Television's history has often defined successful women as ending up with a man, regardless of if they are in a career or not. However, we have seen a shift in portraying women who can have it all. In shows like *Grey's Anatomy* or *Law and Order*, we see women characters with romance as well as professional success.

Scholars have discussed *Desperate Housewives* in terms of gender through a feminist perspective, with topics including motherhood, marriage, audience response, general reception of the show, and even how *Desperate Housewives* can be read within a political context. Scholars have examined the ways in which media studies and gender work in tandem to analyze



*Desperate Housewives*. I will discuss a few studies that I found particularly relevant and representative of trends and patterns that I saw in the scholarship.

Janet McCabe and Kim Akass feature authors of various essays discussing a wide range of topics, surrounding the appeal of the show, and the ways in which we can think critically about it. I will discuss a few pieces that I found the most compelling. In this book, Sharon Sharp's piece on the housewife situated in the domestic space and the current trend of reality television makes some compelling arguments on the contradictory and nuanced ways that we can read the show. Sharp discusses the ways in which the representation of housewives get articulated on *Desperate Housewives* and how that speaks to "cultural anxieties about domesticity...[and] how the media currently constructs the housewife" (Sharp 120). Sharp argues that the construction of the housewife is both a gateway to bringing feminist issues to the surface, while at the same time supporting conventional notions of women tied to the domestic sphere. (Sharp 121). In addition, in McCabe and Akass's collection of essays, Anna Marie Bautista explores the notion of desperation and housewifery in the show. She references Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in regards to the challenges that housewives face while staying at home in suburbia. Bautista argues that *Desperate Housewives* illustrates cultural myths about the 'happy housewife...based upon nostalgic images of the 'ideal' portrayed on 1950's television" (Bautista 157). She argues that *Desperate Housewives* breaks down these myths by showing the struggles, disappointments, and tragedies that the women of Wisteria Lane face, portraying them as human women, rather than a cultural fantasy (Bautista 157).

Similarly, another important piece that I found while searching for scholarship on *Desperate Housewives* is Eveliina Salomaa's bachelor's thesis where she discusses what it means to represent women and the housewife identity on the show. She draws from discussions

surrounding gender identity and feminist media studies to ground her work. In addition, she questions the portrayal of women in the social roles surrounding motherhood and friendship. She investigates how language shapes the way we perceive constructions on television, and also takes a historical perspective, discussing housewives in the 1950s and how that informs portrayals on *Desperate Housewives*. Salomaa also discusses how post-feminism fits in to her analysis, which is a perspective that has often been examined when discussing the show. Salomaa cites Kaufer-Busch when she states: “*Desperate Housewives* tries to bring back to life the feminine mystique and return to the old fashioned gender norms, but fails in it. *Desperate Housewives* destroys feminine mystique's central ideas of motherhood, monogamy and marriage while it presents post-feminist icons for women.” (qtd in Salomaa 9). Salomaa grounds her scholarship in crucial theories surrounding gender and identity that are essential to seeking conclusions surrounding the show. In addition to *Desperate Housewives* specific scholarship, academics have also discussed the show's parallels and comparisons to *Sex and the City*.

Historically, *Sex and the City* was groundbreaking in providing a space on television for women to exercise sexual agency and satisfaction for the sake of the act alone. On *Sex and the City*, we see women taking control of their own sexual pleasure in ways that men are often depicted as doing. In other words, women are seen as seeking out sex, simply for the experience; not necessarily always wanting commitment and love to go along with it. Both *Desperate Housewives* and *Sex and the City* focus predominantly on character development, relationships, and questions of identity within sexuality, career development, and life choices. Hegemonically, women seeking sex for mere pleasure is a viewpoint that has frequently been discouraged. Crawford and Unger reference Joseph and Lewis when they explain “For women, cultural constructions of sexuality lead to an ongoing tension between pleasure and danger” (Crawford

and Unger 247). On *Desperate Housewives*, we see the same type of conversations about personal sexual experiences and celebrating desire and pleasure. Therefore, *Sex and the City* scholarship is key in grounding and informing research on *Desperate Housewives*.

A number of scholars have written about sexual agency on *Sex and the City* and the importance it had for opening the doors for sexual empowerment on screen. Owen et al. articulate the ways in which *Sex and the City* challenged cultural norms surrounding the repression of female sexuality. They explain, “*Sex And The City* gave us the pleasures of woman-centered conversation, female friendships, and the profound love women have for each other. Female characters spoke frankly about their sexualities, an unprecedented event in American television” (Owen et al 122). In addition, much like the characters on *Desperate Housewives*, Owen et al. also suggests that that “Occupational success, free expression of sexual desire and attire, vulnerability, and power were indeed the fabric of the four protagonists of *Sex and The City*” (Owen et al. 120). These quotes illustrate how the act of striving for fulfillment in both the professional and sexual arenas were groundbreaking on television that preceded *Desperate Housewives*. *Sex and the City* made this struggle important and acceptable on screen.

Other scholars have situated the themes of consumption and the body in *Sex and the City*, which are also present in my analysis of *Desperate Housewives*, specifically in my first chapter. Aston et al. cite Glen Creeber who explains, “*Sex And The City*...deliberately sets itself up as an ostentatiously glamorous show that reproduces a world of beauty, wealth, and cosmopolitan decadence” (qtd in Aston 9). Johnson et al. discuss class as essential to shaping ideal femininity based on a reliance of products and extravagant objects that make up environment. I am therefore building on *Sex and the City* scholarship to inform my argument. In addition, Owen et al. references Arthur and explains *Sex and the City* “naturalized overt female sexuality” but kept the

sexuality tamed through the reliance on consumption. (qtd in Owen et al 116). Certain characters in *Desperate Housewives* rely more heavily on purchasing products than others. My first chapter will discuss the character of Gabrielle Solis, and how consumption and the beauty image shapes her empowerment and lack thereof.

CHAPTER I: THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDEAL FEMININITY THROUGH BEAUTY:  
*DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES*' LESSONS ABOUT THE BODY THROUGH CONSUMPTION  
 AND PERFORMANCE

My first chapter focuses on the character of Gabrielle Solis, a former runway model, played by Eva Longoria. During the first few seasons, Gabrielle is portrayed as a vain, selfish, and spoiled fashionista who moves to the suburbs of Wisteria Lane to start a new life after the demise of her modeling career in the city. She is married to wealthy businessman, Carlos Solis, an assertive, conventionally masculine character with strong muscles, a low voice, and a sharp attitude. Some of Gabrielle's most memorable plot lines include having an affair with her teenage gardener and later losing her attractive looks due to pregnancy and the stress of raising her two daughters. Though all of the characters on *Desperate Housewives* are exaggerated, Gabrielle is arguably the most heightened. Especially in the first few seasons, her longing for attention is depicted as high maintenance and oftentimes unreasonable. This can be concluded from the tone of arguments that Gabrielle and Carlos have with each other, where Carlos is often portrayed as frustrated and bothered by his wife. This tone is noticeable in acting styles which will be discussed further in this chapter.

Because Gabrielle is perceived as a former runway model, the construction of her image and beauty is a big part of her identity as a character. The female characters on television that embody ideal attractiveness pose interesting questions regarding how they attempt to claim power. This attempt is a source of both agency and oppression. On one hand, because a female character is beautiful, she probably has more screen time than a character that is understood as lacking attractiveness. In this sense, simply being in front of the camera is a type of power in itself. However, the agency is one-dimensional because image is focused on more than other characteristics, like personality.

This chapter will focus on two noteworthy episodes that are a strong representation of how agency gets defined for Gabrielle Solis. Because *Desperate Housewives* is embedded with contradictions, Gabrielle's character can be analyzed as both a strong female representation, and also a powerless one. The first episode that will serve as an example of *Desperate Housewives* inconsistencies regarding the message of the text is from season three in an episode called "Beautiful Girls." In this storyline, her personal shopper, Vern, asks Gabrielle to coach a group of young girls for the upcoming "Snowflake Beauty Pageant." In the episode, Gabrielle teaches young girls how to embody ideal femininity through the lens of pageant training. These teachings are depicted as highly physical, highlighting the flawless body as central to how a woman gets defined within our culture. The young girls take turns modeling and walking on the pseudo runway. We can read this attempt at the ideal and status as a type of power through beauty. However, it is also an example of powerlessness because it is unattainable. The clothing, make-up, lighting, and camera angles of this episode are central to its themes of superficiality and the exterior image. It is important to analyze visual elements of the episode, in addition to narrative and themes to understand the overall meaning of *Desperate Housewives*.

The very fact that Gabrielle can afford a personal shopper speaks to the type of lifestyle centered around consumption and wealth that *Desperate Housewives* highlights. Gabrielle having a personal shopper represents wealth and status. The suburban women of *Desperate Housewives* are portrayed as having a multitude of possessions, elaborate houses, nannies, gardeners, expensive cars, and high class, healthy quality food. These conventions display how the quest for power and agency is interwoven with the portrayal of upper class lifestyles. The entire visual aesthetic of the show is vibrant. In other words, the color and tone of the shots from the camera have a plastic appearance, especially during scenes that take place in the home, that

highlight the grandiosity of the expensive houses. In addition to elaborate interior decorating and the structure of homes, especially in Gabrielle's house, clothing and make-up are also central to the sparkling aesthetic of the show. In "Beautiful Girls" Gabrielle wears a tight and short pink spaghetti strap dress with vibrant green embroidered flowers. Her hair is smooth, shiny, and stylish. Her lipstick is bright red and her dark mascara makes her eyes stand out. Gabrielle's entire look is polished and glossy not only when she is teaching the girls beauty ideals, but even when she goes grocery shopping, doing the most mundane, everyday tasks.

Due to attractive exteriors, whether through homes, clothing, or make-up, what appears as flawlessness can be interpreted as power because of the status gained from image. Gabrielle teaches the young girls that striving for ideal femininity leads to attaining status. In that sense, the status is earning a title of beauty pageant queen. Winning Pageants are the most ultimate display of proving what it means to be a conventional woman in American culture. Therefore, ideal femininity and beauty can be read as empowering because of the "prizes" women get from striving to reach this ideal. These "prizes" may include a mate, clothing, and/or high social status. However, this agency is constrained because it often relates back to consumption and wealth. Only certain women are able to maintain this ideal due to the expensive nature of stylish clothing, make-up/cosmetics, and beauty products. Gabrielle tells Vern that she got each girl her own makeup kit, custom tailored to match her skin. This is a sign of privilege. Gabrielle was able to afford this specialized product, and without her, the girls would not be taught the "proper" path to femininity. All of the leading female characters on *Desperate Housewives* are depicted as wealthy. The show therefore fails to represent other class identities.

As discussed in the introduction, the type of agency that women seem to be granted on *Desperate Housewives* can be defined as a type of synthetic, or artificial power. From first

glance at the narrative surrounding Gabrielle Solis, she may appear as a dominant character because of her beauty. However, thematically, this type of agency is actually destructive in hindering progress to move beyond a strong emphasis on beauty. Power through beauty looks like agency on the surface, but actually is not, due to reinforcing unattainable ideals. For Gabrielle, what looks like agency is actually limitation. Gabrielle is limited because her identity is based on a set of pre-determined social rules for ideal femininity, which are based merely in the consumption of products.

Though the girls are training for a one-day beauty pageant, the ideals that Gabrielle teaches them represent values to keep in mind for their whole feminine lives. Drawing on the work of psychologist Robert Sears, Julia Wood explains that one of the key ways young people learn to perform their gender is through social learning. “Social learning theory claims that individuals learn to be masculine and feminine primarily by imitating others and getting responses from others to their behaviors” (50-51). “Beautiful Girls” is an example of Gabrielle Solis putting social learning theory into action. It demonstrates Gabrielle teaching the girls how to achieve power through self-modification as a result of consumption. Therefore, power is defined through the construction of conventional femininity, a gender performance that encompasses buying products to strive to achieve a flawless body. In addition, Gabrielle teaches the girls that having this attractive body is the key to being desirable and successful in life. Gabrielle declares: “I want to introduce you to your new best friend, Mr. spray tan” (“Beautiful Girls”). Gabrielle’s dialogue of the use of the phrase “best friend” teaches the girls to look to products as a type of partnership. Embodying a symbolic friendship with a beauty product not only creates self-reliance on an object, but it can even build a life long partnership between the company that created it, and the purchaser who consumes it. Therefore, consumption acts as a



gateway to femininity, and a way to strive to achieve the gender ideal. Susan Bordo's theories surrounding the body and femininity ideals fit with the portrayal attempted agency in *Desperate Housewives*. Bordo outlines the importance of consumption through the economy, the standardization existing in the construction of femininity, and the status that women try to achieve in a quest for the ideal. Bordo explains:

Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity--- female bodies become docile bodies---bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, 'improvement.' Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress---central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women --- we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification" (166)

Bordo suggests that female bodies become passive agents. She calls this "docile." It is important to note that the body as a blank canvas becomes an object that can be tailored, shifted, and even destroyed through the struggle for an ideal construction of a woman. Bordo not only describes the self-maintenance and purchasing of products for the body, but she articulates the vulnerable, malleable nature of it. This is noteworthy as the young girls represent a stage of pliancy, a stage where they can easily trust and respect the character of Gabrielle Solis, who both symbolizes and represents femininity through her modeling career.

Gabrielle teaches the girls that femininity is bought and sold. She teaches this not only through her dialogue, but through the way she moves through space, smiles, and radiates strong posture and command of her body. Mary Louise Roberts addresses some important questions that we can strive to answer while watching "Beautiful Girls." She asks: "Why, for instance, are acts of consumption gendered female in the cultural imaginary? Why are women identified as the

primary consumers of Western society?” (819). Consumption can be analyzed within the framework of femininity based on the specific products that are designed only for women. Bright red lipstick, shaving cream for legs, perfume, and curling irons are examples of products that are marketed as feminine due to packaging and advertising. Soft colors like pink are used to symbolize who the product is intended for. Women are the subjects of the television commercials, which sends the message that they should be the ones purchasing the product. When men step into the arena of buying these products, they are viewed as straying from masculinity. Therefore, women have become the prime targets for beauty products which creates an overwhelming pressure to fit the narrow perception of how beauty gets defined, which in turn creates what appears to be status from the surface. In addition, the sheer number of products that are sold to women makes it seem like each one is important to achieve femininity. The details of this construction include being thin, having long flowing hair, a generous amount make-up on the skin to cover blemishes and enhance the lips and the eyes, tan skin, and remaining as petite as possible.

The implications for purchasing gender lead to objectification and what Mary Ann Doane refers to as women putting on a “masquerade.” Gabrielle admits to the superficial exterior that femininity embodies as she asks the girls: “Have you ever seen a runway model without the hot clothes and make-up? Well trust me, they are not that special” (“Beautiful Girls”). Here, Gabrielle defines the costume that women put on to strive to achieve status. Doane states that “Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed....to masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one’s image” (138-139). Doane articulates Gabrielle’s lessons that women measure their self worth and confidence through putting on their own masquerade. Using Doane, we can even go as far as to say that the

superficial exterior is actually making up for a lack of masculinity. For example, behaviors like shaving hair, and covering the face with make-up hide masculine qualities. Hair is associated with manliness, and make-up makes the face appear vibrant and womanlier. When women wear a masquerade they are creating a space between their own identity and the ideal femininity that they strive to embody (Doane 138-139). However, the masquerade is not enough. To embody ideal femininity, there is another key component that goes along with the shallow exterior.

This chapter has focused on discussing image and the exterior so far. It is also important to highlight what attributes Gabrielle teaches the girls that are focused more internally. Confidence and having a sassy attitude are both crucial to Gabrielle's depiction of what it means to reach ideal femininity. I define both traits as reinforcers of the myth that confidence and attitude along with an attractive appearance can make women achieve anything that they desire. However, Gabrielle's professional success is limited through the depiction of her employment. Gabrielle is portrayed on *Desperate Housewives* as having a career in modeling and in being a personal shopper for wealthy clients. The types of occupations that her character is given, speaks to their conventionally feminine nature. Types of careers women are allotted on *Desperate Housewives* will be addressed more in chapter two. We can use Janice Radway's reference of the narrative of traditional femininity to apply to Gabrielle's career. Radway explains that feminine "fictional heroes are 'naturally' preoccupied with fashion. Romantic authors draw unconsciously on cultural conventions and stereotypes that stipulate that women can always be characterized by their universal interest in clothes" (193). Radway is speaking of essentialism, which is also a concept that will be discussed in my next chapter. In contrast, Lynette Scavo is portrayed as having a more corporate, administrative, office-based career in advertising, rather than Gabrielle's high-class personal shopping career. Why was Gabrielle not portrayed as a

businesswoman like Lynette? It may be because of her attractive appearance and sexuality. This is what Radway refers to as a “cultural signifier” for interest in dressing the body with high fashion (Radway 190). On the contrary, Lynette’s appearance does not give off this signification, and both she and Tom are both depicted as having high-powered careers in marketing. Gabrielle’s appearance is much more central to her as a person, versus Lynette who values character over appearance. Gabrielle uses her beauty and to maintain control, and to satisfy her own emptiness and frustrations in her romantic and personal life.

We can continue to analyze lessons that Gabrielle teaches the girls that work in tandem with an attractive image. Gabrielle explains that to be looked at is the result of more than the costumed body moving through space. It is the attitude that goes along with it. This is seen when a young girl walks up on the stage, and begins to demonstrate what Gabrielle has taught the group. Her eyes are forward, her shoulders are back, and she is looking left, and looking right, just like how Gabrielle taught her. However, it is not enough though. The young girl explains: “My eyes were forward.” Gabrielle then asks, “Where is your confidence? Where is your pride?” (“Beautiful Girls”). Having a fierce, confident look is where women get their power. It is the way they walk, the gaze their eyes embody, and the personality that gives their masquerade some kind of life. Gabrielle makes this clear as she explains that the walk was incomplete. It was missing personality.

Structuralist theory can help us understand gender when the young girl demonstrates to the rest of the group how to physically embody the feminine ideal. Though women are usually positioned as passive, here we see the girl taking an active approach, moving through the physical world; embodying the space, performing her gender. We see binary oppositions of walking vs. sitting. The rest of the girls are sitting, as a member of their group suggests a

standard for them to follow. The girl on display however, is walking, which could be seen as agency. However, the agency is self-contained and only existing in the world between Gabrielle and the girls, the students. The space is private and we do not see the girl walking outside of this teaching sphere. The power that they are granted exists within a classroom space, and is therefore a simulation. Strong walking can only accomplish so much. It cannot help to resolve arguments regarding the battle for power within relationships, for example.

Gabrielle's limited agency would be incomplete without discussing the importance of weight in striving for the feminine ideal. During lunchtime, the girls ask Gabrielle what it was like being a famous model. She discusses the importance of being skinny as they devour a pizza. They discuss how important it is within hegemonic femininity to stay skinny, as they are contradicting their own ideals, eating pizza. The fat versus thin structuralist framework is standard within feminist theory. In response to a girl's question about what it was like to be a famous model, Gabrielle explains: "You would not believe the horrible things these girls did to stay skinny." A girl responds: "Do you have to be skinny to be a model?" And Gabrielle then replies: "Yes, when was the last time you saw a fat person on a magazine cover?" ("Beautiful Girls"). At first look, it seems as though Gabrielle is supporting the ideal of femininity that she herself has witnessed in industry. By dismissing the possibility of larger women being on magazine covers, Gabrielle seems to be teaching a narrow construction of not only beauty, but also power. When Gabrielle denies the possibility for larger women to have that industry success, she is robbing financial and social statuses from larger women.

However, when taking a closer look at the episode, and considering the campy, satirical nature of the genre of *Desperate Housewives*, we can also read Gabrielle's ridiculous claims as meant to be parodied. As discussed previously, Gabrielle's character is one of the most

exaggerated women in the series. Therefore, the tone of her statements about weight can actually be understood as more humorous than serious. This leads the audience to be able to interpret her message as something that is so heightened that it could not possibly be taken seriously. Vern explains to Gabrielle that she has been a bad influence. He says: “This morning, Mrs. Hayes caught Donna with her finger down her throat, trying to barf up her toaster waffle. And Mrs. Horowitz found Isabel behind their garage smoking. Apparently, she thought cigarettes would help her lose a few pounds” (“Beautiful Girls”). This dialogue shows that women’s behavior of striving for an unattainable ideal is actually being satirized. The visual element that stands out the most in shaping parody in this episode is acting style. Vern and Gabrielle’s facial expressions and tone of voice are loud and exaggerated. Their acting style helps send the message to viewers that it is not supposed to be realistic.

*Desperate Housewives* is not endorsing young girls to have eating disorders through Gabrielle’s “teachings.” Rather, it is showing how ridiculous it would be to take Gabrielle’s words seriously, as the show often mocks the depiction of inappropriate behavior.

However, the lessons of ideal image that Gabrielle teaches the girls are not only far reaching within the content of the characters, but in the real life audiences watching at home. The ramifications of Gabrielle’s exaggerated messages are even addressed in the show itself. At the beginning of the episode, Vern says to Gabrielle: “These girls need help finding the Promised Land to beauty and style! Please, Gabrielle, be their Moses!” (“Beautiful Girls”). Though this can be dismissed as parody, we could also read it as destructive. The nuanced nature of meaning on *Desperate Housewives* is what makes it so interesting as a show to investigate. The beauty ideal is put on a godly pedestal, a notion that is depicted worthy of religious language. Judith Butler explains the fiction surrounding “the inner truth of gender” as imagination that is written

as culture on bodies. It is a social construct that has been created and controlled. Therefore, holding ideal femininity to such an unquestioned ideal is nothing more than a falsehood, an invention (378).

The episode “Beautiful Girls” is therefore filled with contradictions embedded in the narrative. It is only one of many examples that show inconsistencies surrounding the central message of *Desperate Housewives*. On one hand, power that seems real at first is still power nonetheless. However, this agency is constrained as a result of sociological structures that place gender in the context of consumption. At the end of “Beautiful Girls,” Gabrielle says to the mothers to try to win back their approval, “I don’t think I’m better than you, I envy you. You have husbands and families and reason to wake up in the morning. Teaching your kids about confidence and beauty is the most useful thing I’ve done since I don’t know when. You ladies talk it over, and I’ll work on posture with the girls” (“Beautiful Girls”). Gabrielle explains that having a family can be more important than embodying a beauty ideal, only to end with the statement of going to mold the girls towards hegemonic femininity once again. Therefore, while it may seem that “Beautiful Girls” ends on a moral note, dismissing beauty myths, when taking a closer look at the narrative, it actually ends by reinforcing them once again, despite some satirical moments along the way.

Through consumption and self-modification, women strive for power and status through their bodies and appearance. But appearance is not enough. Gabrielle also discusses the specific attitude and fiery personality that also contributes to the notions surrounding ideal femininity.

Though Gabrielle’s constant striving for beauty ideals makes her limited and powerless due to reliance on consumption, it also gives her agency within her relationships with men. The character of Gabrielle Solis either achieves dominance, or settles for sharing it, within her

relationship with Carlos Solis. During the second season in “You Could Drive A Person Crazy,” Gabrielle fights for her right to be part of the financial decisions within her marriage. This episode highlights a scene where Gabrielle visits Carlos in jail.

Gabrielle explains that by Carlos denying her financial power, she feels out of control in the marriage. She begins by complaining that Carlos is taking away her access to their financial account, and Carlos responds by saying that he thinks that doing that is the only guarantee that she will come visit him. By the characters engaging in this dialogue, the show sends the message that Gabrielle is materialistic. Carlos assumes that his money is a driving factor in what keeps Gabrielle married to him. Again, *Desperate Housewives* highlights the importance of wealth in relation to identity – sending the message that with wealth, love and romance are more easily achieved. Carlos then references Gabrielle’s affair with her high school gardener as proof that her love for him faded. Gabrielle tells Carlos with a sarcastic remark about how she does get lonely in their bed, and Carlos explains that Gabrielle’s sly comments like that are why she will no longer have access to their finances. The conversation ends with this interesting exchange:

GABBY: Why are all rich men jerks?

CARLOS: The same reason all beautiful women are bitches.

Gabrielle strives to avoid being submissive to her husband through her sarcastic language to attain her status. The fact that Carlos does not divorce Gabrielle after finding out about her affair with John says a lot about how she succeeds in maintaining control. At first glance, it may seem like Carlos’s masculinity (through his physique and high-powered business career) would make him the unquestionably dominant one in the relationship. However, the power in their relationship is often negotiated. Gabrielle fights for her share of responsibilities and access to decision-making. Gabrielle is witty and uses her appearance to gain control. For example, the



last thing that Carlos says in this dialogue sequence above, demonstrates how he will put up with her personality, partially because she is so physically attractive and alluring.

In addition to the dialogue between Gabrielle and Carlos depicting a struggle for power within the marriage, other visual cues send the same message. The facial expressions of the characters are key signifiers that generate emotions from the viewers. During scenes depicting arguments between Gabrielle and Carlos, sympathy is often evoked for not one, but both characters. This tone sends the message that both characters are worthy of respect, and therefore, a struggle for power is apparent. Eva Longoria, the actress who plays Gabrielle, masterfully makes her eyes fill with sadness and pity, while Ricardo Antonio Chavira's Carlos is often seen with fierce, stern eyes that highlight his masculinity. The character of Carlos is also portrayed as hyper-masculine through his strong muscles, low voice, assertive attitude, and business savvy career, while Gabrielle is portrayed as hyper-feminine through her long hair, make-up, high heels, tight fitted clothing, and sensitive nature.

In "You Could Drive A Person Crazy," Gabrielle wears a shiny, tight, short yellow dress, long and sparkly earrings, and part of her hair pulled back from her face. Even in a scene such as the one where Gabrielle is visiting her husband in jail, a mundane activity, her image is prime to the way in which we read her character. We also see close ups that highlight the facial features and expressions of the characters. Had this scene been shot with the camera far away from the couple, the intimate and emotional nature of the argument would be lost.

Gabrielle uses her appearance to satisfy the frustrations she is experiencing in her own marriage. Gabrielle is also portrayed as struggling with satisfying her independence, which leads to her affair. Eveliina Salomma gives insight as to how the portrayal of women who stay at home can be defined on *Desperate Housewives*. "As women tried to adjust to the role of the housewife,

they lost their own individual identities little by little because the role did not include anything that would have required individuality or unique creativity” (Salomma 7). To make up for being alone in the home all day, the character of Gabrielle continuously searches for ways to stay fulfilled. During season one, when Gabrielle constantly longs for attention, and when Carlos is unable to give it to her due to his career, Gabrielle has an affair with her teenage gardener. Season one’s “Pretty Little Picture” depicts Gabrielle as feeling neglected when Carlos tells her he will be working late. Carlos responds to Gabrielle’s loneliness by saying:

CARLOS: You know what you’re problem is? You’re very tense. You should go to a spa or go shopping. Find a way to relax.

Carlos telling Gabrielle to relax motivates her to call up the teenage gardener, John. One of the reasons that Gabrielle is able to achieve dominance within her relationship with Carlos, is partially through her desire to be a sexually free woman. She is able to satisfy her cravings through lying to Carlos, and seeking attention from John. Radway explains that in the conventional romantic narrative, the man is known for his previous sexual escapades and therefore, this male experience translates into sexual maturation. The woman, on the other hand is portrayed as innocent, and vulnerable, waiting for a man to teach her about sexuality (Radway). However, Gabrielle is already sexually awake. She does not need a man to come and show her the ropes. She is the instigator, telephoning John so she can satisfy her urges to “relax” and rebel against her frustrating husband. Gabrielle challenges hegemonic ideas of the romance narrative by having an affair and being the perpetrator of emotional pain for her husband, rather than the one to accept it. **Storey** discusses Radway’s findings and explains:

....the ideal romance is one in which an intelligent and independent woman with a good sense of humour is overwhelmed, after much suspicion and distrust, and some cruelty and

violence, by the love of a man, who in the course of their relationship is transformed from an emotional preliterate to someone who can care for her and nurture her in ways that are traditionally expected only from a woman to a man....it is a fantasy about reciprocation” (Storey 122).

Gabrielle is the rebel, bringing out this distrust and cruelty in her husband. In the end, Carlos and Gabrielle both learn to care for each other in a seemingly equal way. The reason Gabrielle cheated was because she felt unloved in the home because Carlos was always at work. In later seasons of *Desperate Housewives*, Carlos realizes that his job is unethical, and decides to spend more time at home. But even then, Gabrielle gets frustrated by the lack of money and status that she grew used to before Carlos’ transformation. Regardless, she does stay faithful to her husband and caring for him becomes prime.

Through Gabrielle’s image is central to her identity, and her behavior towards her husband, we can see the nuanced ways in which she is both powerless and a character with status. Gabrielle represents a character highly dependent on consumption as part of a way of striving for ideal femininity. She teaches young girls what it means to be a conventional woman in society, but her lessons are also parodied because they are based in the satirical genre of *Desperate Housewives*. Despite this exaggeration, the character of Gabrielle offers insight into the ways that gender is displayed on television. However, the themes within narrative and visual elements of the series provide clues regarding what we value within contemporary society.

## CHAPTER II. INTERROGATING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THE DEPICTION OF HOUSEWIVES WITH EMPLOYMENT OUTSIDE OF THE HOME

One of the most concrete examples in which we can unpack the concept of empowerment in *Desperate Housewives* is through the portrayal of a woman working in the professional, corporate world. This chapter focuses on the character of Lynette Scavo who struggles to balance her professional role in an advertising firm, and her role as mother and wife. This section will also focus on her as manager of her husband's restaurant, showing examples of her rejection of passive femininity.

*Desperate Housewives* can be read as occasionally portraying real life struggles between characters. For example, the character of Lynette may be interpreted as representing challenges that mothers face balancing their careers and domestic lives. She is not a heightened caricature, like Gabrielle or Bree, but a character based more in reality. "Indeed *Desperate Housewives* is one of the first series to actively critique the cult of "New Momism:" a deluge of cultural images representing contemporary super-women who unite demanding professional jobs with selfless childrearing. *Desperate Housewives* demonstrates that being a superhuman "new mom" is not quite as easy as contemporary media would suggest" (Richardson 158). Lynette strives for an egalitarian marriage in terms of the division of household labor. She is portrayed as using manipulation with her husband to try to achieve a more democratic marriage.

However, it is important to remember that the characters on *Desperate Housewives* are not meant to reflect the real world experience, as they are nothing more than images on our television sets. They are often parodies of characters we are familiar with throughout culture and television. They may speak to television's history too. For example, Bree is reminiscent of June Cleaver on the sitcom *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963), who kept the house tidy and the food cooked and served on the table at all times. Bree's character, especially in the first few seasons,

is so exaggerated that we can observe the implied tone of her behaviors as something not to take seriously. On the other hand, the challenges that Lynette faces to balance her professional and domestic life are less heightened, and more true to life in tone. Therefore, it is easy to forget that Lynette's character is also based in fiction.

*Desperate Housewives* portrays women in a limited number of careers. The notion of attaining power through a career is based in liberal feminism. In other words, this feminism supported women being able to seek and maintain jobs outside of the domestic space. Liberal feminism pushed society to acknowledge women having as smart an intellect as men who would serve in more prestigious scientific professions. However, *Desperate Housewives* does not depict its leading ladies as surgeons, lawyers, or financial consultants, for example. Rather, the series portrays women as bakers (Bree), personal shoppers (Gabrielle), artists (Susan), and in the focus of this chapter, advertisers, who are the most powerful of the three (Lynette). Lynette also works as a manager at a pizzeria, to support her husband's business. The professions that women are depicted in on *Desperate Housewives* are conventionally labeled as feminine. This notion is based in essentialism, a concept frequently discussed in feminist theory. Elizabeth Grosz explains:

Women's essence is assumed to be...universal and...identified with women's biology and "natural" characteristics... in nurturance, empathy, supportiveness, noncompetitiveness and so on. Or women's essence may be attributed to certain activities...observable in social practices, intuitiveness, emotional responses, concern and commitment to helping others, etc (para. 6).

We see this essentialism throughout the series. For example, Bree is depicted as a woman who defines her domestic role as cooking and cleaning. In many scenes throughout the series,

Bree is shown putting hours of time and effort into maintaining her home. When she feels as though she has failed in her domestic role, she feels like she is failing her womanhood. She sees these activities as part of her femininity and essential to being taken seriously by her family. However, her obsession with a tidy home is what eventually drives her family away from her, due to the superficial exterior of her personality. When Bree does get a career in the series, it is having her own baking business. Portraying women characters on television that are restricted to the kitchen in their professions is based in historical oppression that women only belong as homemakers. However, Bree's character is often a parody of this depiction. Having Bree's character revealed as a satire does change the overall meaning of the show. There are sarcastic and playful undertones to her mannerisms, speech, and behaviors. For example, there are close ups of her facial expressions that heighten the melodrama. However, the fact that she is constantly seen confined to the home, especially in the first few seasons, does still support women's oppression. Unlike Lynette or Gabrielle who are seen in careers outside of the kitchen, Bree is confined to the domestic space, even within a professional context. The challenge of Bree's character is that audiences can forget that her character is meant to be ironic.

I will now discuss the depiction of Gabrielle and her career as a personal shopper. Her profession fits with her personality and distinctness as a character that values her image above anything else. Her desires differ greatly from Bree's. Gabrielle rejects the notion of being confined to the kitchen, or the home. In later seasons we see Gabrielle attaining a career as a personal fashion shopper. As chapter one discussed, because of Gabrielle's identity as a former model, she is therefore only allotted another career tied to the body. We also see her using the characteristics that Grosz explains in her discussion of essentialism: "intuitiveness...and commitment to helping others" as relevant to being a personal shopper. We see the character of

Gabrielle as knowing naturally, because of her appearance, which clothes fit which bodies in the most stylish manner. It is interesting that Gabrielle is depicted as the most selfish of the four leading women characters on *Desperate Housewives*, but is viewed in a position of helping others through style. She is the woman that is the most fixated on how she looks; her clothing, make-up, and hair styles. She is depicted as self-indulgent when she frequently boasts about her attractive appearance. For example, In “Beautiful Girls,” Gabrielle’s friend Vern describes coaching the pageant trainees is a type of service to others. Essentialism through women’s careers is also noticeable in the character of Susan. In addition to Susan’s role as mother, she is also depicted as an artist. It is interesting to note that the type of art she is seen practicing is illustration for children’s books. Susan’s character is portrayed as absent-minded, highly emotional, and often flighty in her personality. Therefore, it seems fitting that she is not given an art career that is prestigious, but one that could be viewed as playful and whimsical, like the identity of her character. Furthermore, illustrating children’s books can be considered as part of the domestic space. Artistic expression is a quality that is often associated with femininity. It rejects science and logic, which, historically, have been male dominated. However, with the rise of crime and medical dramas on television, we do see more females portrayed in careers that are not based in artistic expression.

But within the context of *Desperate Housewives*, it is interesting to note that Susan’s artistic skills are often not taken seriously, much like her status as a character. In the final season of the series, in an episode titled “The Art of Making Art,” Susan desperately tries to win the respect of her art teacher, a renowned painter. Her teacher dismisses her as a bored housewife who is just taking painting classes to fill time. He claims her reasons for attending class are nothing but trivial pursuits, not attempts to enhance her skill as an artist. Therefore, even though

Susan is defined as an artist, her proficiency is often questioned. Her teacher asks why she would possibly be taking the class. From that fact, we can conclude that Susan's power in the series is lacking.

The most striking example of the women's struggle to attain power can be seen in Lynette's strength to balance her roles as mother, wife, and career professional. "Most women these days have an ongoing internal struggle when dealing with their gender role identity. Are they a career woman? Are they a mother? Are they the perfect wife? Are they the sultry sex-kitten? Or are they all of the above? How can they be everything? These are the issues that modern day women face" (Morgan 112).

To try to sort out her own gender identity, Lynette can be found frequently arguing with Tom about the division of household labor. This labor is not limited to housework, but also includes raising children. Unlike the character of Gabrielle, who settles for sharing dominance with her husband, Lynette strives for complete authority within her marriage. Therefore, when she is absent from the home, it leaves her feeling powerless.

During season two, while Lynette is working on her high-powered career in advertising, her husband Tom stays home to care of the children. Serafina Bathrick theorizes Lynette's desire to work outside of the home historically by suggesting that: "By the mid-nineteenth century...a belief in individualism replaced the needs for collectivity, and rigidly imposed sex-gender difference helped explain the schism between private and public life" (155). We can situate Bathrick's quote when analyzing women's aspirations to work outside of the domestic space. *Desperate Housewives* attempts to depict Lynette's craving to go back to work as representative of her desire to retain uniqueness, rather than only being defined as a force within the family. This relates to the individualism versus collectivism that Bathrick discusses. *Desperate*



*Housewives* is filled with these binaries. Lynette wishes to be a part of the public arena, versus the private confines of the domestic space. She wishes to maintain her own sense of self and purpose, which is detached from her social role of mother and wife.

During season two, in an episode titled “You Could Drive A Person Crazy,” Lynette and Tom have an argument about the state of the messy, chaotic home. The scene takes place in the kitchen where Lynette explains to Tom that the house is looking filthy. Tom dismisses her claim, saying that he cleans but by the time she gets home from the office, the children have disrupted it again. Lynette asks Tom to try to keep the house clean and then Tom challenges her confrontation:

TOM: Well it sounds like you are criticizing me. How many times did I come home to a mess and I never said a word?

LYNETTE: Please don’t take this the wrong way. I think you are doing a terrific job, but when you came home it was to clutter. I mean, come on, this is more than that.

Through gender theory surrounding language, analyzing arguments between couples is a key framework for identifying power. We can use the same tools for investigation characters on television. Language is coded with meaning in relation to the construction of masculinity and femininity. Julia Wood provides some important ways to theorize everyday conversation and arguments between men and women, which can be applied to how we understand the message of power in *Desperate Housewives*, as seen through marriage.

Lynette challenges conventional characteristics of femininity through the way she uses language, and her aggressive and direct attitude. Through her behavior, she defies hegemonic constraints of women as passive to their husbands. Barbara Risman explains that “perspectives

on gender assume that work and family structures create empirically distinct...female behavior..” (335). I interpret Risman’s quote as the fact that women have been taught to act a narrow amount of ways within the domestic or the corporate sphere. Lynette’s defiant attitude pushes her outside of these norms, allowing her to challenge submission. Language is crucial to this resistance. Wood suggests that “For feminine people, talk *is* the essence of relationships. Consistent with this primary goal, feminine people use language to foster connections, support, closeness, and understanding” (128). Rather than keeping feelings repressed (like the character of Bree, discussed in my next chapter), Lynette approaches Tom with a conversation to try to articulate her disappointment. However, her language is direct, unlike the language characteristics in femininity which Wood describes. In other words, the way she used language is an apparent threat to hegemonic femininity. Lynette talks to Tom in a straightforward way, frequently avoiding being vague. She is a character that knows what she wants and needs and is not afraid to express it.

Contrary to hegemonic constructions of femininity, Lynette’s confrontation is not overly expressive. Wood references Mapstone who explains that “...Women’s arguments are sometimes dismissed as emotional when in fact they involve evidence and reasoning” (qtd in Wood 122). Lynette does not talk for prolonged minutes, but rather states the facts. This factual speech is considered a more masculine than feminine way of communicating. Wood cites Rasmussen and Moley who suggest “Women who use assertive speech are frequently described as rude, or bitchy, whereas men who employ emotional language may be described to be ‘wimps’ or weak” (qtd in Wood 122-123). Tom, on the other hand, is viewed as a passive male, which often frustrates him within their marriage. In fact, the driving reason on the show for Lynette and Tom almost getting divorced at the end of the series is due to Lynette’s overly

aggressive confrontations. In other words, Tom felt that his masculinity was being threatened at multiple points in his relationship with Lynette. Lynette almost losing Tom is an example of the repercussions of trying to attain masculine power.

In addition to language, the visual elements of scenes where Lynette and Tom argue help to shape the overall meaning of how power gets defined on *Desperate Housewives*. During the confrontation that I have just analyzed, Lynette is standing up, and wearing a suit. She stares at the dishes, while Tom is sitting at the kitchen table in a sweatshirt and pajama pants. The clothing that the characters wear sets the tone for who has more status through their image. Lynette's body is a visual marker that the viewers are supposed to view her as professional and aggressive in this scene; a higher status. We see Tom sitting down, with his casual clothing reflecting his apathetic attitude in regards to the cleaning. He is also focused on reading a newspaper at the beginning of the interaction, which sends a message that he is not engaged in the conflict. The way that Lynette stands up while Tom sits down marks Lynette as having more power, as she inhabits the space in a different way; having more control. In addition to clothing and placement of characters, eye contact and facial expressions also set the mood. Actress Felicity Huffman who portrays Lynette does a convincing job of acting contemptuous to try to attain status. Her eyes are sharp and display a condescending emotion to her husband. Doug Savant, the actor who plays Tom, reveals a compelling performance with his facial expressions and eye contact appearing defensive and hurt by Lynette's aggressive attacks.

In addition to the acting, having this scene take place in the kitchen, among the dirty dishes, is also noteworthy. Having the argument take place in the kitchen sets the tone regarding power structures of the division of household labor. As Lynette confronts Tom, she can hold up a dirty dish as evidence of his behavior. It is also interesting to note that Lynette and Tom do not

yell at each other in the way that Gabrielle and Carlos occasionally do. Lynette can assert authority through soft words, facial expressions, and sarcastic demeanor.

Another scene from “You Could Drive A Person Crazy” that demonstrates Lynette’s need for dominance takes place one evening when Lynette arrives home from a long day at the office. In this scene, we hear narration explaining: “When Lynette went back to work, she was aware her new job would be demanding. What she hadn’t anticipated was the night shift.” The camera then cuts to Lynette and Tom in bed, and Lynette explains to Tom that the reason he heard her downstairs was that she had to load the dishwasher. Extreme close ups of Tom and Lynette’s face are used to generate intimacy by the camera, before the argument. Tom apologizes for falling behind on the housework, making an excuse that he had errands to run and did not have time. He promises that he will make up for it tomorrow, and tells Lynette that the beauty of his cleaning system is that it is flexible. Lynette then says “For the sake of our marriage, please don’t mention the system again.” Lynette then discovers that Tom has placed a towel over their baby daughter’s spit up on the sheets. Tom then begins to yell at Lynette telling her not to change the sheets. He declares: “I am not yelling at you and this is not about spit up. It’s about control and as you and I both know, you have some issues in this area.” Lynette then hits Tom with the pillow multiple times and storms out of the room. We hear the narration: “Normally Lynette would have spent a sleepless night telling herself that she didn’t have control issues. But she couldn’t, she was too busy trying to figure out how to bend Tom to her will.” Lynette resorts to deception, and decides to infest the kitchen floor with a rodent, to get Tom to clean the house. Eerie music plays during this shot, and the audience is able to predict that Lynette is going to manipulate Tom, through the sound effects and through the devious look on her face. Lynette uses her clever intellect and wit to remain in control within her marriage.

Janice Radway's argument can be used to identify Lynette's frustration with the romantic narrative, where the woman is traditionally viewed as less powerful than the man. She explains: "The romance expresses women's dissatisfaction with the current asymmetry in male-female relationships" (Radway 129). Lynette does not settle for the typical romance narrative of inequality, which Radway suggests, contributes to her disappointment and her motivation to change her situation. Unlike the other housewives portrayed in this series, Lynette has no trouble defining her husband as more passive in nature than she is. Despite the countless arguments and problems with Lynette and Tom's marriage as each person strives for control, they do not end up divorced in the series finale. This supports the fact that Lynette's rejection of femininity through language, attitude, and tactics is successful. In other words, her marriage does not fall apart due to her aggressive, more masculine gender role.

However, during season three, Lynette is depicted in another career, as a result of her husband's new business venture. Tom decides to open a pizzeria and Lynette manages it. Unfortunately, because of Lynette's desire for authority, problems in the marriage arise. The battle for control is even more prevalent when the couple owns the business together. For example, in an episode titled "I Remember That," Lynette fires a teenage employee for working at the restaurant under the influence of marijuana. However, because the teenager is a nephew of their neighbor, Tom hires him back. Upon seeing this, Lynette yells at Tom in front of his fellow employees and Tom then takes her into the back room and assertively asks: "What the hell are you doing talking to me like that in front of my staff?" The couple then proceeds to have an argument about how someone is always more in control in the marriage. This is not only in the working environment, but in the domestic sphere too. Tom reprimands Lynette, telling her that at the pizzeria, he is the boss. He explains: "At home, you get to be in charge. You decide how we

discipline the boys, what car we buy, everything.” Lynette responds by telling Tom that she does consult him. Tom then says “Oh sure, and if you disagree, you ignore me. Look, when I go home, basically I check my balls at the door. And that’s fine. It works. But for this to work, when you walk through that door, you have to check yours.” As discussed previously, Tom’s identity in *Desperate Housewives* demonstrates a character that frequently feels like his masculinity is being attacked.

Lynette’s body language reinforces her attempt to remain in charge of the decisions at the restaurant. She is seen pointing at Tom, calling him out on his behaviors. Her entire body is depicted as tense and filled with rage. Her eyes are wide and her mouth is gasped open. Lynette’s voice is also lower in tone, challenging conventional femininity that includes women having high-pitched voices. Tom, on the other hand, has a higher voice in comparison to Lynette’s. He is portrayed as having a sensitive, non-threatening nature through not only his language and tone of voice, but overall personality.

In the argument at the pizzeria, Tom wears a dark, navy blue shirt, while Lynette wears a vibrant red jacket. The color of the costumes of these characters says a lot about who is striving for more of the focus in the marriage. The vibrant red stands out to the viewer, while the drab blue fades into the environment of the room. Lynette and Tom represent the important way that the dialogue and the nonverbal communication of characters portrayed on television work in tandem to create a central message. In this case, the message directly challenges hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity. Lynette takes on more masculine coded roles through behavior, language, and body language, while Tom takes on more feminine coded attributes.

The struggle for mothers trying to balance their career life and their domestic life is an issue that television dramas and sitcoms frequently address. Though *Desperate Housewives* is a genre hybrid, borrowing elements of heightened drama, comedy, and even soap opera, real world issues are still often portrayed. However, they lack detail and are often one-dimensional. Characters rarely have to face the consequences of their actions. For example, characters often heal from trauma or crisis quickly without showing long journeys back to health and recovery. When characters get into arguments, they are often portrayed as forgiving each other quickly, maintaining their friendship or romance once again.

How then, do these characteristics of narrative inform genre? As discussed in the introduction, *Desperate Housewives* challenges traditional conventions of genre. The series does not exist in a fantasy world with a made-up environment, but exists in the suburbs, a familiar and an often perceived safe space. Characters get sick, killed, and emotionally hurt. Characters fall in love, have arguments with their friends, and struggle with finances. That is what I mean by *Desperate Housewives* depicting real world issues. However, *Desperate Housewives* is still a show focused around characters experiencing the reality constructed within the world of television. It is no surprise that certain real world struggles of mothers balancing their careers are not addressed in the series. For example, only briefly is the issue of maternity leave addressed. Since the issues seem to be so prevalent in Tom and Lynette's marriage, *Desperate Housewives* could have had an episode centered on the problems with the time off after pregnancy. In addition, the episode could have addressed the demands placed on mothers to get back to work. Leaving out these issues can serve as reminders that the characters on screen are contained within the television universe. Though at times *Desperate Housewives* takes a break from satire

and heightened, unrealistic narratives, even when the series tries to portray real world issues, it is important to remember that the series is anything but reality.



### CHAPTER III: ALTERNATIVE DEPICTIONS OF FEMININITY: MAINTAINING STATUS THROUGH THE REPRESSION OF EMOTION

Said to have been inspired by *Desperate Housewives*' creator Marc Cherry's mother Bree differs most from the other wives, in terms of her values, as well as behaviors (Pierce). She is known for concealing her emotions and maintaining traditional, old-fashioned values. Bree aims for perfectionism in her domestic life, in fear of failing her husband and children. Morality is central to Bree, being the woman that attends church the most frequently. However, during seasons seven and eight she begins to have wild one-night stands with men, and battles alcoholism. Her story is the most tragic, as her first husband is murdered, her second husband spends time in jail, and she has an unstable relationship with her children, to name a few of her struggles. However, even when Bree is at her lowest point, she is still depicted as a woman with an obligation to be a master in the kitchen, and in the home. Aside from the final season of *Desperate Housewives*, Bree is the opposite of uninhibited Gabrielle in her depiction of morality. As discussed in chapter two, Bree is the ideal desperate housewife trope, who stays home all day to cook and clean, and defines her self worth by completing her duties as wife and mother. Her failures within this role reinforce the myth of the perfect housewife.

However, it is important to note that her character is the most heightened of the four and is often based in satire and parody. It can be a struggle as a viewer to know when to take her behaviors and words seriously, and when to dismiss them as campy humor. "Camp representation will draw attention to gender roles as actually being gender roles. In camp, both masculinity and femininity, through hyperbole, exaggeration, parody or irony, are represented as constructs of performances" (Richardson 159).

But regardless of the distinction, she has the most fluctuation between reality and a mockery of familiar 1950s housewife characters. She follows in the footsteps of women like

June Cleaver in *Leave it to Beaver*, and Margaret Anderson in *Father Knows Best*. These women refer to the “suburban middle-class family sitcom of the 1950s and 1960s centered on the family ensemble and its home life....structured within definitions of gender and the value of home life for family cohesion” (Haralovich 69). Especially during season one and two, Bree is portrayed as an exaggerated perfectionist. When she doesn’t create what she defines as elegance and beauty in her domestic life, she feels like a failure in her personal life. However, more than simply prescribing to wholesome values, Bree makes it her life’s mission to conceal her emotions from other people, especially men.

Bree represents an alternative depiction of femininity due to her mastery of hiding her emotions to try to maintain power over men. Usually in hegemonic femininity, women are taught to express their emotions. They are told that it is socially acceptable to open themselves up freely. “Most of our cultural imagination still depicts feeling in a feminine image, because women have been socially sanctioned to retain their emotional bodies. Men, however, tend to split off their feeling function in their quest for identity through heroic autonomy. When the feeling function is split off, it becomes layered with...social and psychological repression” (Kipnis 41). Bree therefore uses the conventionally masculine behavior of trying to deny feeling.

We can better understand the character of Bree and the way she attempts to gain agency, by comparing her to other characters in the series. It is interesting to parallel Bree to Susan as they are depicted as opposites. Susan is portrayed as over-emotional, and the “girl next door” fantasy that has been socially constructed through popular media as desirable. Her personality can best be described as flighty, unorganized, and over-emotional. Her flaws are more minor in comparison to Lynette’s narrow-mindedness, Gabrielle’s selfishness, and Bree’s perfectionism and phoniness. Aside from the final season when the housewives become frustrated by Susan’s

emotionality about a murder, her flaws are depicted as amusing. Susan fits Janice Radway's description that "No matter how much emphasis is placed on her initial desire to appear a man's equal, she is always portrayed as unusually compassionate, kind, and understanding" (Radway 127). None of the other housewives seem as sensitive and nurturing as Susan is. She is represented as a good listener who is always well intentioned.

In season one, Bree tries to compensate for her failing marriage by creating irresistible meals, and manufacturing a happy home. However, it is clear that her perfectionist nature is exactly what drives her family away. In fact, in the pilot episode, Rex confronts Bree, asking for a divorce, explaining "he just can't live in this detergent commercial anymore." Later in the episode he clarifies:

REX: I'm sick of you being so damn perfect all the time. I'm sick of the bizarre way your hair doesn't move. I'm sick of you making our bed in the morning before I've even used the bathroom. This plastic, suburban housewife with her pearls and her spatula who says things like 'We owe the Henderson's a dinner.' Where's the woman I fell in love with, who used to burn the toast, drink milk out of the carton, and laugh? I need her. Not this cold, perfect, thing you've become.

Rex's monologue is only one way that this episode reveals Bree's attempted ideal image as a barrier within her marriage. The episode also contains visual and auditory elements that set mood and tone. Bree wears a tidy, sophisticated sweater, and her pants, silk scarf, and hair are neat and shiny. As Rex talks to her, her smile fades and we can see the concern in her facial expressions. Rex and Bree both fit intimately in the frame with close ups to highlight their acting. Actress Marcia Cross skillfully conveys how Bree is trying to show the opposite of what she is feeling. Sad string music plays in the background to evoke a sentimental and non-satirical moment. With

Bree's character, when it is often challenging to know when she is meant to be read as more of a parody or more realistically, the music can be a key clue for making the distinction. In this next quote, the narration begins with a more serious statement, but ends within dark comedy once again: "Bree sobbed quietly in the bathroom for five minutes. But her husband never knew. Because when Bree finally emerged, she was perfect." The narration points to the fact that Bree cannot always repress her emotions completely. She walks out of the restroom with a wide, elegant, smile, concealing her devastation. When her character succumbs to her emotions, it is in private.

Bree not only hides her feelings from her husband, but her friends as well. During season one in "Pretty Little Picture," Bree orders Rex not to drink alcohol. She explains that when he drinks he will reveal secrets, like the fact that they are in couples therapy. Rex scolds Bree for always concealing her problems and being so private about personal matters. By trying to control Rex's alcohol consumption, Bree's character can remain confident and in power within her social circle. For friends to find out that she is in counseling would be the biggest defeat of all for her. It would prove that she hurts and has flaws.

But perhaps the most defining scene for Bree's character is when the audience learns how she learned that showing emotion was dangerous. During the final season of *Desperate Housewives*, in "Women and Death," Bree's mother explains how becoming a woman involves "the mask":

MOTHER: It's what my mother called it. It's the face you wear when you don't want people to know what you're feeling. All well brought up women conceal their emotions. It's very useful, especially when dealing with men. If a man knows what you're thinking, it gives him

power over you. For example, if a man knows how much you love him, he'll take you for granted. He'll hurt you. Carelessly. Cruelly. Constantly.

BREE: Does daddy know that you love him?

MOTHER: Yes, I have told him repeatedly that I cannot live without him.

BREE: If you are so upset with him, why are you making his favorite pie?

MOTHER: Because after all these years, I have forgotten how to wear my mask. So now I must do things to distract daddy. Like this pie. When I bring it out, he'll be so excited, he won't notice the devastation in my eyes. Practice your mask. (*Bree smiles*)

MOTHER: Oh no, honey that's too much. All you need is the hint of smile. (*Bree smiles again*) Perfect. With an expression like that, no one will ever know what you're really thinking

BREE: And I'll have power over men?

MOTHER: God, I hope so.

In addition to dialogue, the visual aspects of this scene convey its seriousness. Because the scene is a flashback, the lighting is dim, creating a foggy and eerie mood. But the lighting and dark color tone of the camera shots are not only due to traveling back in time. Though the kitchen walls are green, the color tone is dark and uninviting. The windows let in some light, but only to reveal patches of darkness throughout the area where the characters interact.

Acting and costumes give further insight into the aura of the scene. Bree's mother wears a dark purple long sleeved shirt and apron over her skirt. However, in certain lighting, the shirt appears black. Her hair is curly and slightly disheveled and her eyes reveal sadness. The actress who plays young Bree is innocent, and wide-eyed, eager to learn the lessons regarding gender identity from her mother. During the final moments of the episode, dark, mysterious music plays

to show that the dialogue has led up to a climactic moment. The music is loudest when Bree's mother says "the devastation in my eyes," as a clue to the audience to feel emotion.

The scene is one of the most serious, disturbing ones that Bree's character has been involved in. It depicts compelling issues regarding the expression of emotion within a more realistic context. Though women are often taught that expressing emotion is socially acceptable, some women have learned that vulnerability can be a way to lose power. In addition, while women can show feeling, it is also self-contained. Crawford and Unger remind us that:

Gender differences in emotion are also a product of social construction....Stephanie Shields has demonstrated that women....who are described as 'emotional' are viewed more negatively than comparable to men, and that men are expected to have more emotional control than women. Such beliefs are maintained largely by excluding anger—an emotion much more frequently expressed by men" (82).

Crawford and Unger continue to address how women are socially perceived by society to be able to express happiness better than men (82-83). Bree's exterior certainly demonstrates a false happiness, and her character tries to suppress her feelings, not letting her anger or sadness show. However, Bree challenges traditional feminine constructions of emotion, as she does not overtly display emotion at all. This quote also addresses the negative connotation of showing too much emotion, which is what Bree's character is most fearful of. She learns from her mother what can happen when men can tell how attached or infatuated a woman is.

In his discussion of Radway's work, Storey explains "The ideological power of romances may be great, but where there is power there is always resistance" (125). In this case, the "resistance" can be applied to Bree and her mother challenging women's need to express themselves fully. However, this lack of honesty does result in an ambivalence about love.

Because Bree's mother does not confront her husband about why she is unsatisfied in the marriage, she remains a woman who settles. However, the bottom line is that witnessing her parents failed marriage taught Bree to strive to maintain control through "the mask" that the episode addresses. She takes her mother's word as truth, and models her life after this conversation.

To better understand Bree's behaviors in regards to striving to gain agency as a woman, we can consider the character of Susan, who is depicted as the opposite of Bree in her expression of emotion. Susan maintains status within her relationships by telling men exactly how she feels. Susan's character uses the same values of trust and openness in her relationship with her second husband, Mike, and brief love interest, Doctor Ron. When men hear of Susan's honesty, they usually can't resist her truthful charm. In "There's Something About A War," Susan confronts her doctor, whom she is dating, about the state of their relationship. She explains that she needs to express her thoughts to him, and she chats about her internal conflict and instincts in a candid way. Susan succeeds getting Doctor Ron to listen to her and desire her romantically. Her truthful manner in the conversation is an attempt to reclaim her power. Her facial expression generates sympathy and the tone of her voice is innocent and cute, to evoke the "girl next door" character type. In response to hearing Susan, Doctor Ron reciprocates with some honesty of his own. He showers her with flowers and candy, based in chivalry and traditional values. The other women do not get the same level of gifts that Susan receives, and the discourse surrounding Susan's relationships is continuously coded with "prince charming" language. She gets married in a forest with Mike and refers to the occasion as a kind of dream, and in a relationship with wealthy Ian, Susan refers to his mansion as a castle, and mentions royalty. Even the music that plays in "You Could Drive A Person Crazy" in a scene where Susan walks down the driveway with her

bathrobe on, and her hair disheveled, says a lot about the cues that the audience is supposed to pick up about her. It is whimsical and playful, just like Susan. Her character is depicted as lovable, and virtuous.

Susan does not deal with nearly as many obstacles and challenge as the other housewives. Despite her husband Carl walking out on her, and Mike dying from a hit and run accident, these consequences are not the results of her actions. This is contrary to Bree who flirts with her pharmacist, leading him on, so that he ends up poisoning her husband to romantically attain her. In addition to Susan using honesty to express dissatisfaction in her own relationships, she also uses it in reference to other's relationships, when it may affect her.

In "You Could Drive A Person Crazy," Susan complains that her ex husband Carl is sleeping with a neighbor on the lane, Edie Britt. Because they are divorced, Carl has free reign to date and be romantic with whomever he chooses. However, Susan carries on about how embarrassing it is, that people will see they are together; people like her daughter Julie. We, as the audience, may feel sorry for Susan. There is no reason that Susan's husband cannot see other women, but because the creators of *Desperate Housewives* have made Susan such a loveable character, conventional rules do not apply to her. Susan approaches Carl about the situation:

SUSAN: Edie was gloating about sleeping with you

CARL: So you were jealous?

SUSAN: No, we were married and she's trying to make this...little affair at par with that, and I got mad....I want to be happy first. Mike and I were supposed to move in together, this was supposed to be my time.

CARL: I can promise you this much. I've never loved another woman the way I've loved you.



This dialogue is another example of how Susan tells men how she honestly feels, to get them to respect her. And in the end, after she pours her soul out to them, they usually respond with an extremely romantic statement. Unlike Bree, Susan's character is depicted as believing that happiness in relationships is a result of each person maintaining sincerity in their emotions. Susan raises her voice and her facial expressions are overly expressive. Actress Teri Hatcher, who plays Susan, has a unique way of channeling a spunky energy into her dialogue and body language. When yelling at Carl about Edie, Susan is once again overly emotional, portraying a forceful vitality, and a use of feminine power.

Another reason that Susan is arguably the most likeable housewife is her strong relationship with her daughter, Julie. Susan feels closest to her role as a mother than the other women. They do not discuss what mothering means to them as much as Susan does. Hays et al. explain that conventional narratives suggest, "Motherhood is the ultimate fulfillment of a woman. It is a natural and necessary experience for all women. Those who do not want to mother are psychologically disturbed, and those who want to but cannot are fundamentally deprived" (qtd in Crawford and Unger 318). Motherhood is idealized on *Desperate Housewives*, even when mothers face struggles and are frustrated with their children. Motherhood is still seen as part of womanhood and an ultimate display of affection and success. Throughout many episodes, we see the bond she shares with her daughter. She and Julie joke about how they tell each other everything, and they scheme and plot together about how to find out information about Mike, new neighbors, and other social dramas.

Bree, Gabrielle, Lynette, and Susan are all depicted as having different relationships with their children which represent how they mother. Bree has a dreadful relationship with her son and daughter. For a large portion of the show, she basically disowns her son when she finds out

he is gay and also rejects her daughter when she becomes pregnant and married. Lynette is portrayed as a caring mother. However, she is seen yelling at her children to clean the house, more than having intimate talks with them, like Susan and her daughter Julie do. Gabrielle also has two daughters, whom she disciplines, and makes jokes about that could be seen as offensive. Gabrielle's mockery of her daughters' appearance or weight is another way that the conventions surrounding the satirical genre of *Desperate Housewives* play out. Gabrielle is shown being affectionate and loving to her daughters, but also approaches parenthood with some sarcasm. It is in this way that motherhood is satirized. Susan and Julie are rarely depicted as arguing. A single mother with a strong relationship with her daughter is a trope that we see within the media, as a character that needs sympathy, a character who has been broken down and built herself up through family. Susan is depicted as an artist but that is certainly not a driving focus of the show. Family is central to her, allowing viewers to root for her priorities of children over appearance or even success.

Comparing the characters of Bree and Susan shows examples of two distinct ways that women on *Desperate Housewives* attempt to gain power within their marriages. However, their quest for agency is not only seen through their relationships with others, but also through the way they treat themselves. Bree represses emotion to try to have power over men, just like her mother had taught her, while Susan expresses her feelings in hopes of being understood through her honesty. We can conclude that Susan's tactics work better than Bree's in maintaining agency. Bree's husband desires to divorce her due to her lack of openness, while Susan's lovers seem to be enticed by her overly expressive nature.

Therefore, *Desperate Housewives* does not challenge hegemony in its depiction of alternative feminine social roles. The repression of emotion is considered a more masculine

attribute, and by Bree failing within her marriage, *Desperate Housewives* dismisses women concealing their feelings. While the characters of Lynette, Gabrielle, and Bree often try to challenge conventional gender constructions through their sarcasm and language, Susan remains embedded in gender conformity. Gabrielle also conforms to ideal femininity through the image of beauty. Susan's adherence to conventional femininity may be why she is often referred to as the hero and "girl next door" of the show. She does not push boundaries regarding what it means to be an ideal woman in American society.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis used a textual analysis to discuss the varying ways that power takes form through the characters on *Desperate Housewives*. I investigated how narrative through dialogue and storyline shapes the way we interpret the construction of femininity in relation to agency and status. I focused attention on the aesthetic and formal elements of the show, considering acting styles, cinematography, editing, music, lighting, costumes, and make-up. Though *Desperate Housewives* draws on sensationalism and heightened melodrama to shape its content, the power struggles are still apparent. We see the show as both satirical through a mockery of genre, as well as moments that encourage viewers to view scenes more realistically. I situated the show in a genre context, noting how conventions of drama, comedy, soap opera, and satire, etc. inform the genre hybrid of *Desperate Housewives*. I discussed how the concept of hegemony was central to my argument. Hegemonic constructions of idealized femininity shape expectations and assumptions surrounding power and agency on the show. The goal of my analysis was to reveal the contradictions and ambiguities of how we perceive strong, dominant women on television. I also considered how too much aggression or authority could hurt women through their marriages and relationships.

I considered how image and beauty define norms and values surrounding what it means to be a successful woman in our society. The character of Gabrielle Solis represents the ways that agency is both robbed from and allotted to women. Striving for a particular attractive appearance is an example of powerlessness due to the economic reliance on consumption. However, on the other hand, the status and benefits that a beautiful woman gets from this specific appearance are vast. Whether it is professional status, or a romantic mate, physical appearance is central in creating agency. As a fashion model, Gabrielle teaches ideals surrounding the body and

appearance to her students. She does this through discussing the proper clothing, make-up, weight, and way of physically inhabiting the space (like walking) that are specific to femininity. Like in all of my chapters, I discussed how the costumes, make-up, and aesthetic foundation of the show shape how characters gain control.

I also highlighted the socio-economic distinction of Gabrielle's life through her ability to afford maintaining the beauty ideal. The act of having a personal shopper is a symbol of privilege. The upper class lifestyle that *Desperate Housewives* constructs is central to how power gets expressed on the show. Elaborate houses, fashion, and opportunities are fundamental to the shows visual aesthetic and narrative formula.

I also referred to how the implications for purchasing femininity ideals can be analyzed through what Mary Ann Doane refers to as women putting on a "masquerade." In other words, the norms are nothing more than a performance, and something we put on based on a superficial exterior. Gabrielle also teaches the girls about the particular kind of sassy attitude that supports the feminine image. This attitude and image can both be reinforced as a myth that confidence and an attractive appearance will automatically make women successful and able to achieve what they desire. We know that there are other boundaries and roadblocks for why some women cannot get ahead. For example, economic factors and privilege are a primary part of that.

On *Desperate Housewives*, Gabrielle is depicted in a career that is based in the body, rather than the mind, due to her attractive appearance. Using the modeling and pageant world is the most ultimate way to teach lessons surrounding femininity. Though it is heightened, the values that are found in modeling then trickle down to everyday lives for women.

Though many of the ideals that Gabrielle teaches her students in their pageant training have far reaching implications, it is also important to consider the satirical tone of the show that

frequently makes it a parody of reality. Another way that we see the sarcasm and wit of the show is through Gabrielle's relationship with Carlos. Gabrielle uses clever language and exaggerated behaviors to try to remain in control, whether it to be through financial decisions, or sexual temptations and desires with other men.

My next chapter discussed the challenging balance between the domestic family life and the professional corporate world. I considered Lynette and Tom's marriage and Lynette's rejection of passive femininity. She is portrayed as using manipulation with her husband to try to achieve a more democratic marriage regarding the division of household labor. Unlike the character of Gabrielle who settles for sharing dominance with her husband, Lynette strives for complete authority within her marriage. She takes on certain characteristics that are hegemonically coded as masculine. This is evident through her language within arguments and an aggressive attitude. Lynette expresses herself in a more assertive manner than conventional femininity suggests.

I also explored the importance of visual elements in Lynette's marriage, specifically the way that she inhabits the physical space and the cinematography creating close up shots of facial expressions. I also considered how Lynette's assertive nature and power is a threat in her marriage, and how that is actually seen as a negative consequence on the show. Her romance suffers as a result of her authoritative nature in her relationship.

Lynette is depicted in a career vastly different from Gabrielle, Susan, and Bree. My thesis discussed the ways that certain women get more power through their careers. Lynette gets the most power through defining her intellect, working in an advertising firm, while Bree is confined to the home in a career as a baker.

My final chapter addressed how both the repression and overt display of emotion gets linked to power in the characters of Bree and Susan. Bree's perfectionist, traditional values encourage her to conceal her feelings, which create turmoil in her marriage. However, these values also help her maintain morality and agency. Her character is reminiscent of the ideal 1950s housewife trope that we saw in such shows as *Leave it To Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. Because Bree draws on this housewife convention from traditional sitcoms, it is frequently noticeable that her character is a parody; nothing more than a shallow construction. However, in other scenes, Bree's experiences are read as more realistic. For example, Bree's mother teaches her about "the mask" that women must use to conceal their true emotions. This is actually a threat to hegemonic femininity, as women are generally taught that it is acceptable to cry, or display affection, distress and struggle. In season one, Bree tries to compensate for her failing marriage by creating irresistible meals, and manufacturing a happy home. However, it is clear that her perfectionist nature is exactly what drives her family away.

Bree's clothing, make-up, and lighting that her character exists in are all crucial to the agency she is granted. The acting style seen in her facial expressions; concealing the smile, for example, is primary. Like in other episodes with the other protagonists, music also helps shape the overall meaning of how audiences are supposed to respond emotionally to the characters.

Contrary to Bree, I discuss the way that Susan expresses herself to men in confiding in them about exactly how she feels. This is a way that Susan establishes trust and commitment. Therefore, the interesting conclusion is that both Bree and Susan are successful in their varying emotional techniques; whether it be repression or display. They are also portrayed as struggling with these characteristics at times as well. For example, Rex begins to fall out of love with Bree due to her perfectionist nature.

It is important to explore the depiction of female characters on television to consider the implications that their ideals and values have on audiences. Though scenes in *Desperate Housewives* and other shows can be parodied and meant to mock reality, there are still many scenes that are not read that way. Audiences connect to characters through identification. Though characters may come in to an audience's home on their television sets only once a week that is enough to create a feeling of intimacy towards them. Viewers that watched *Desperate Housewives* for all eight seasons might have felt like they knew the characters. They related to them. Mothers, wives, daughters, and friends could all draw parallels in their own lives with the female protagonists on *Desperate Housewives*. Issues that the show discussed such as the balance between being a mother and a professional outside of the home, weight and body image, pressures to be physical attractive, and romance, marriage, and family are issues that can have a universal appeal to women. However, when idealized femininity is portrayed as unrealistic it has consequences for viewers at home. It creates unattainable standards that women feel like they need to meet.

In addition, because of the upper class lifestyle that *Desperate Housewives* constructs, this excludes women of other socioeconomic backgrounds. It is also a mostly white cast on the show. In the future I'd be interested in focusing my *Desperate Housewives* research on race and notions surrounding white privilege.

*Desperate Housewives* is an example of the contradictory messages that television sends to viewers regarding women in positions of power. Power is a complicated notion, as the implications of having it can be both positive as well as harmful. For example, in our culture today, women who are seen in strong positions of power in the business and political world can often be considered too aggressive. Rejecting polite, passive feminine characteristics can have



far reaching consequences for women in their social and professional lives. Power is therefore often negotiated in everyday life, as well as through media representations like television characters. Too much power is dismissed as too forceful, and too little power is dangerous in preventing women from gaining opportunity and agency.

I'd be interested in future research in media studies and popular culture studies that interrogates the notion of power, empowerment, agency, and status in other television shows where women's professional careers are central to the narrative. For example, contemporary shows like *Nurse Jackie* and *Homeland* portray women working in professions such as nursing and working for the Central Intelligence Agency. I'd like to see research that investigates how women in these professions both benefit and suffer from having power. How are women characters repressed in their careers based on their femininity? How do they challenge the status quo through their aggressive nature?

In addition to the professional world, I'm also interested in future research that examines how active women are through their agency when it comes to sex, romantic relationships, and even friendship. One of the most talked about contemporary shows, *Girls*, seems to be the next show that features four female protagonists and their life experiences. First, *Sex and the City* paved the way for this kind of discourse, then *Desperate Housewives*, and now *Girls*. All three of these shows deal with the struggles and joys of women navigating their lives, which include romantic elements. *Girls* is different from *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* in that it highlights women in their post college identities, rather than in their thirties. I'd like to explore how age difference is a factor in the negotiation of power dynamics. *Girls* also draws on women's professional, emotional, and beauty image ideals. However, its realistic approach differs from sensationalist drama on *Desperate Housewives*. *Girls* is more documentary-like in

its stripped down conventions. It does not deal with murder mystery or natural disasters for example.

I'm also interested in future research addressing how definitions of power shift with new professions, technologies, and opportunities for women. We have come a long way since the domestic 1950s housewife trope in popular media, but there are still plenty of women on television who do not have careers being central to their storyline. I'm curious to continue to see research that addresses women as featured characters, and how the push for gender equality and feminist perspectives affects popular culture studies.

Through investigating power on *Desperate Housewives* through the body, consumption, image, careers, and emotion, the ambiguous ways that power gets negotiated, claimed, and lost is evident. While characters on television are mere pixilation on a screen, the values, norms, and expectations that they represent can be grounded in reality.

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