“Big Little Lies:”

Using Hegemonic Ideology to Challenge Hegemonic Ideology

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Drama is the most popular television program genre in the United States (Stoll 2021). As such, as cultivation theory suggests, it has the potential to greatly influence the way viewers see the world and the other people in it. In a more specific sense, the influence drama has is salient when considering the way it, and other forms of mass media, represents gendered stereotypes in society. Gender, or the range of characteristics, norms, and behaviors which pertain to the socially constructed spectrum of masculinity from femininity, is one of the most fundamental lenses through which we view the world around us. It functions both as a way for people to categorize others into distinct groups in order to understand them with more ease, and as a tool for placing someone in a certain spot in the social hierarchy. Subsequently, one’s gender can be used to help them understand the power – or lack thereof – which comes with its prescribed social status. In the U.S. patriarchal system, the gender designation of “woman” gives people labeled with it less power than those labeled “man.” While intersecting identities do influence where exactly each individual falls within the social hierarchy, this paper focuses on the dynamics of gender. Because the perceived superiority of men over women and masculinity over femininity is such a subconsciously accepted and deep-rooted belief in the patriarchal U.S., overt challenges to and disruptions to these ideas about gender can be uncomfortable, at the very least. However, when considering the representations of gender in fictional television dramas, and how television can affect the audience’s perceptions of the world, the question is raised as to whether it is possible for a television show to present a comfortable, accepted, yet largely oversimplified ideology about women alongside an ideology which challenges these perceptions without being overtly feminist. In this paper I analyze the representation of women in the first season of the

television show *Big Little Lies* and argue that it presents hegemonic ideologies about gender and women, and then erodes this hegemony in an indirectly feminist way.

Artifact and Methodology

Television is one of the most popular pastimes in America (Krantz-Kent, 2018). According to the American Time Use Survey (2020) data from 2019, American citizens spend more time watching television than any other reported leisure activity, accounting for over half of the average leisure time. Mass media, including television, has the power to influence how people live their lives, from what ornamentation they adorn their body with, to what they actually put into their body, to what hobbies and interests they have (Palczewski et al., 2019). Furthermore, as cultivation theory suggests, the more people consume mass media, television in particular, the more their worldview may start to reflect the reality they see on screen. (Gerbner et al., 2002, as cited in Sink & Mastro, 2017). The narratives found in television – particularly in fictional programming, but also in news programs, reality television, and game shows – do not offer an unfiltered lens of reality; still, they mold the way we interpret the people and world around us, as well as ourselves (Buckingham, 2003, as cited in Van Damme, 2010; Palczewski et al., 2019). Some scholars go as far as to say that mass media, and television in particular, shapes – or is largely constitutive of – our society (Newsom & Costanzo, 2011). That said, television does not often explicitly embed a worldview within a viewer in a single viewing by stating what they should believe. Instead, it promotes both overt and subtle ideologies that can be reflective of the world around the viewer as it "relays, and reproduces, and processes, and focuses" them (Gitlin, 1982, p. 510, as cited in Dow, 1996, p. 13). Because its reoccurring nature allows for more reinforcement of ideologies, looking at a series is best to analyze the ideology present in a television program.

Big Little Lies is one of Home Box Office's (HBO) most popular television shows (Clark 2020). The first season reeled in 8.5 million viewers per episode and 10 million in the second season (Porter, 2019a), averaging just a few million under the per-episode viewership of *Game of Thrones,* one of the most popular television shows in history from the channel (Porter, 2019b). Additionally, a clear testament to its critical acclaim this are the 54 awards it has won, including a 2020 Golden Globe for best drama television show and several other big-ticket awards for best series as well as for acting, directing, and design, out of 90 nominations ("Big Little," 2020). There are seven episodes in the first season, all of which will be utilized in this analysis: "Somebody's Dead", "Serious Mothering", "Living the Dream", "Push Comes to Shove", "Once Bitten", "Burning Love", "You Get What You Need" ("IMDb.com").

Perhaps one of the most alluring parts of *Big Little Lies* is its star-studded cast, no doubt part of what lead to its impressive effect the on the entertainment industry as illustrated by Berman's (2019) explanation, "since *Big Little Lies*' 2017 debut, the hierarchy of film over TV acting has ceased to exist" (para. 3). This show is stacked with the names Laura Dern, Reese Witherspoon, Nicole Kidman, Zoë Kravitz, Shailene Woodley, and Meryl Streep. Each of these women, along with their esteemed co-stars, have impacted the film and television industry enormously, consistently land massive roles, and retain large fanbases. As such, *Big Little Lies* is attractive to a large audience who recognizes these names and idolizes them, and it keeps these same viewers unbreakably immersed in *Big Little Lies'* captivating world of murder, mystery, and scandal.

In order to understand how, in fictional drama programs, hegemonic ideas of women can be used to posit a feminist worldview, I will conduct an analysis on the series *Big Little Lies* using feminist ideological criticism. Ideological criticism seeks to understand the ways in which

someone's internal framework of beliefs about the world are reinforced by the presented elements embedded in an artifact and what those elements suggest (Foss, 2018). In particular, the focus of ideological criticism is on how the hegemonic ideologies, or belief systems, of society are presented and reinforced through rhetoric (Foss, 2018). Hegemonic ideologies are the privileged and dominant ideological perspectives that are seen as common sense but often subordinate and symbolically annihilate the views and experiences of minority or historically oppressed groups.

A form of ideological criticism, one which seeks to answer feminist questions and see how rhetoric is used to challenge hegemonies of gender, is known as feminist criticism. Feminist ideologies, then, focus on "[decolonizing] minds or [disconnecting] from hegemonic ways of believing, acting, and being," serving as disruptions to hegemonies (Foss, 2018, p.144). To conduct a feminist ideological analysis, I identify the presented elements – or observable features exactly how they are presented – as they relate to the presentation of women characters within all of the episodes of the first season of *Big Little Lies*, and from those determine what is being suggested in terms of hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic ideologies, or ideologies which express a different view.

I utilize the first full season of *Big Little Lies* in order to capture the entirety of the mystery plot and the character arcs present within the evolution of the murder investigation. I look through the lens of four hegemonic forces or ideas that relate to the themes of the story: *women as essentialized, women as catty, women as mothers, and representations of women as victims of domestic abuse*. Within each of these categories, I offer examples of presented elements which suggest that the show's ideology is in line with these ideas. Then, I offer an

analysis of how these elements are eroded over the course of the season, suggesting that the show is offering an underlying feminist ideology that chip away at the hegemonic order.

Big Little Lies presents female characters who meet the hegemonic expectations of what it means to be a woman, but then viewers watch these expectations slowly erode, over the course of the first seasons. Throughout the show, viewers are met with montages of the ocean crashing against rocks as the plot or title scene is moved forward. This suggests a more natural and subtle decomposition of hegemonic ideologies, much like the way water slowly erodes rocks as it moves over them. This metaphor, though naturalistic, seems to align with the depiction of femininity we see over time – there is a surface, a hegemonic order, but also a depth and complexity, a something else. In the first episode, we see Madeline McKenzie walking to her expensive car sporting perfectly feminine platinum blonde hair, a hot pink trench coat, bare legs, and heels (Kelley, 2017a). Although she looks like the picture of perfection, the illusion breaks when we see her take a tumble, at the fault of her high heels, and twist her ankle. Here, her less-than-masterful execution of a simple walk in high heeled shoes is a subtle metaphor of the constraints of prescribed femininity, and the dangers of not wholly conforming. In that moment, the audience is presented with a catalyst for the erosion of the comfortable atmosphere in which women are seen as mothers as well as graceful, visual objects. This is further perpetuated by Jane, who Madeline refers to as her very own "knight in shining armor," rescuing her "like a wounded dog in the street" – as opposed to the predictable male-savior – subtly wearing down the expectations for the usual damsel-in-distress trope (Kelley, 2017a). While Madeline fits the bill for a physically perfect woman and devoted, caring mother, the presented tableau of the mess of pink and blonde on the ground clutching at a pesky heel is a foreshadowing which suggests that this representation of women has more to it than what first meets the eye. As the storyline of

season one persists, we begin to see shifts in the presentation of several hegemonic ideas of women, from stereotypical to something more.

Review of Literature

Mass Media, Television, and Gender

The effects of television, as noted by Newsom and Costanzo (2011), are almost always indirect. Vande-Berg et al. (2004) notes that television dramas in particular teach their audience about "social values and attitudes towards sex, family, and school" (p. 4). Even so, television viewers see tv programs as simply there for entertainment, and do not believe they can subconsciously affect them, furthering the possibility of negative effects of exposure to ideologies presented in the medium. This is best described by what is known as the "third-person effect." This phenomenon presents itself when a receiver of a persuasive message which is deemed unfavorable believes that others may be adversely affected by it, but that they themselves will not (White & Andsager, 2017). Conversely, if a desirable message is presented, the viewer might then believe that they are affected positively by it when others are not (White & Andsager, 2017).

Because of television's popularity, its ability to shape reality, and its socially educative content, it has become a principal source of information and socialization surrounding gender (Gerbner et al., 1994, as cited in Vande-Berg et al., 2004). Social learning theory points out that people learn by watching other people, and, logically, that includes television characters (Palczewski et al., 2019). Often, characters on television are symbols for the world they live within (Bandura, 2001), and that often results in stereotypes which serve to maintain the social order of world, one that often seems to greatly resemble our own. Smith and colleagues (2017, as cited in Bray et al., 2020) posit that these stereotypes usually rely heavily on already established

gender norms and therefore influence audience's ideas and beliefs about how people of different genders should function in society. Because gender is created, learned, and taught socially through repetitious interactions between people, as well as the fact that ideas of gender shape the social order of our society (West & Zimmerman, 1987, as cited in Van Damme, 2010), people can look to television characters to make sense of gender and understand their place in the world (Palczewski et al., 2019). Therefore, television, in some ways, has the power to create and maintain oppressive social structures, such as the United States' patriarchal system which is built upon protecting the interests of men. In the patriarchal worldview presented on television, girls tend to be exposed to constructs of the ideal version of womanhood that they are told to strive to attain (Palczewski et al., 2019). As such, it is important to look at the presentations of gender – particularly femininity – on television as they have societal implications. *Big Little Lies* is a particularly interesting artifact, as it – in some ways – serves to be educative in its representation of women and controversial subjects (Shoos, 2017).

Suburban Gothic, the Female Gothic, and Domestic Noir

The Suburban Gothic genre is a subgenre of the American Gothic and is focused on addressing anxieties which arose in response to the creation of suburban communities and cultures across the United States after World War II ("Suburban Gothic"; Murphy 2009). Some characteristics which distinguish this type of media include an idyllic neighborhood setting, picturesque families, usually a single family of color from which the protagonist seldom, if ever, comes from, and the idea that this "pristine appearance conceals a deep rot" ("Suburban Gothic" para. 4). *Big Little Lies* fits these criteria, as it is set in the affluent suburb of Monterey Bay, California, and centers around the lives of five women, four of whom are white and one of whom is Black, and she seems to be more of a peripheral character for most of the first season. As

viewers watch the first episode of this show, the idea of a deep "rot" becomes evident when it is revealed that these wealthy suburban women are, in some way or another, involved in a murder.

Furthermore, Murphy (2009) notes that the Suburban Gothic is highly concerned with "closely interrelated [sets] of contradictory attitudes, which can clearly be expressed as a set of binary oppositions" (p. 3). If *Big Little Lies* is a show rooted in suburban gothic, it makes sense that there are conflicting ideologies—both hegemonic views of women and more complex feminist representations. What sets *Big Little Lies* apart is that the conflicting ideologies are not necessarily at war with each other, but rather revealed across the entirety of the first season of the show. Instead of the surface ideology, which presents stereotypical women, maintaining throughout, it slowly decomposes until the stereotypes themselves are almost completely broken altogether.

Murphy (2009) also argues that the most common themes within the Suburban Gothic have to do with "issues of personal identity and the paradoxical comforts and perils of conformity" (p. 4). This is a prominent theme in *Big Little Lies*, evident when we hear the mothers – most explicitly, Renata – express their frustration with balancing their expected roles as mother and who they feel they are outside of that label (Kelley, 2017a). We also see it when Celeste and Madeline admit to each other that although motherhood is not enough for them, though they would never say so outside of the bounds of their friendship (Kelley, 2017d).

It is noted that, as a subgenre of the American Gothic, Suburban Gothic media also includes "highly stereotyped characters […], homes and families which are […] troubled in some way [… and] organized in a complex way, structured around flashback sequences, memory montages, and other narrative interpolations" (Murphy 2009, p. 186). This is evident in the surface ideology of the show, which I will argue presents women as stereotyped and depicts

women as trapped within some sort of filial conflict, ranging from rape, to domestic violence, to adultery. Notably, the show is also stitched together through intertwining montages and flashbacks depicting their lives.

The theme of anxieties surrounding paradoxical identities, as well as that of the home as an inescapable place of distress, extends into what this paper argues is a subset of the Suburban Gothic. This genre is most commonly referred to as the Female Gothic. The Female Gothic, as introduced and defined by Ellen Moers (1976), is a genre popularized during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which stories focused on expressing anxieties over the domestic entrapment of women (as cited in Ledoux 2017). This genre is focused on reflecting the powerlessness of women within a system of patriarchy and thus centers on a woman in this society's point of view, often utilizing "impressionistic [montages] of images from the past, present, and the future of the drama" which often occur during moments of tension or crisis for the protagonist (Wheatly as cited in McVeigh 2020 p. 76). This is seen in the opening credits of *Big Little Lies,* as well as in the flashbacks of Madeline's affair and of Jane running down the beach the night she was raped.

As the Female Gothic is a subset of the larger genre, many shows within the Suburban Gothic center around women who are left home to maintain domestic life and care for the children, remaining deeply dissatisfied but motivated to maintain an outward picture of perfection, while men work out of the house and earn money for the family (Murphy 2009). Murphy (2009) also describes the picturesque "Feminine Mystique-era" housewife in a way that fits within the context of the Female Gothic as described by Moers (1976; as cited in Ledoux 2017) and also describes the majority of the leading women of *Big Little Lies* (p. 171). He writes that she is, "intelligent […] attractive, and deeply dissatisfied with her supposedly perfect life"

(p. 171). The presence of the Female Gothic is, however, challenged in *Big Little Lies*. One example of this is Renata working outside of the home as a successful businesswoman (Kelley, 2017c). In this show, we see her struggle to balance expected maternal duties and her identity as a working woman; so, while Renata experiences dissatisfaction, much of it seems to be a dissatisfaction with trying to find a balance that works for her as a working mother rather than being an entrapped housewife.

Similar to the Female Gothic is Domestic Noir, which also focuses on the female domestic experience and entrapment of women characters trapped in "troubled families and dark secrets that wait to be revealed" (McVeigh 2017, p. 3) with major themes including motherhood, love, sex, and betrayal (Peters cited in Joyce and Sutton 2018, as cited in McVeigh 2020), all themes are prominent in *Big Little Lies*. Though these themes are prominent, particularly that of betrayal, they do not serve to define and explain a woman's place in society in *Big Little Lies*. Instead, the show allows the women to betray not each other, in the end, but betray the stereotypes placed upon them in order to come together and protect each other. We see this most explicitly when Bonnie, who is represented as the most nurturing, caring, and peaceful of the women, is also the woman who pushes Perry down a flight of stairs to his death (Kelley, 2017g).

Big Little Lies is a story which presents the deeper complexity of women is best understood within the context of Suburban Gothic, Female Gothic, and Domestic Noir. That is, we can see how understanding the history and context surrounding these genres situates the show in familiar terms and allows us a starting point from which to understand and analyze the show However, we can also see that though this show maintains roots in these genres, it seems to challenge and upset them in some ways, suggesting that this show may be doing something a bit different from its predecessors.

Desperate Housewives

One of the most notable examples of Suburban Gothic, Female Gothic, and Domestic Noir is the series *Domestic Housewives*. In many ways, it would seem that *Desperate Housewives* acts as source material through which we can better understand the structure and themes of *Big Little Lies* (Ettenhoffer 2019). Marc Cherry, the creator of *Desperate Housewives*, responded to a question regarding the reason for the show's success by stating, "no one's ever written about that aspect of female existence […] you get the life you want – and it still makes you crazy" (Power 2020). It is likely there is a similar explanation for the success of *Big Little Lies*.

Desperate Housewives, however, revolves around "women who had made a conscious choice to lead old-fashioned lives" (Little, 2019, para. 9). Conversely, *Big Little Lies* is about women who do not choose to fit into that box, but want to find a way to dip into all facets of life. This difference is evident through the focus on women within the house and tied to a largely man-made, constructed community in *Desperate Housewives,* and the focus on women living outside of the house, and in a more modern and natural setting – which offers in a more holistic, balanced view of their existence– in *Big Little Lies*. Additionally, as Ettenhoffer (2019) argues,

> *Big Little Lies* has already evolved into something deeper and greater than its source material [… it] sets itself apart from other shows […] like *Desperate Housewives* […] by choosing to dig deep and boldly into the fears and desires of women. (para. 8).

Consequently, it can be argued that *Big Little Lies*, while certainly similar to *Desperate Housewives*, offers a more natural and organic representation of entrapped women, and thus merits further investigation.

Feminism and Television

Feminism comes in many different forms. In this paper, feminism is defined as the effort to identify, reveal, and dismantle systems of inequality and oppression which promote one group's interests over the well-being and equality of another (Foss, 2018). These systems of inequality are rooted in ideologies of domination, or hegemonic ideologies. Hegemonic ideologies refer to the worldviews of a dominating group which are taken as common-sense views of reality (Palczewski et al., 2019). According to prominent feminist theorist bell hooks, these are beliefs that most people in the United States "believe in their heart of hearts" are natural (Foss, 2018, p.142). Hegemony, and how it is maintained, is largely the focus of feminist media criticism because hegemonies require constant reinforcement and defense (Palczewski et al., 2019) through various media forms. This means that it needs to be consistently presented as normal and ideal across channels to be accepted as hegemonic. A facet of hegemonic ideology, in the United States, is the superiority of men over women, or patriarchy.

Many scholars across disciplines, including Bryson (1992), assert that gender is culturally constructed through rhetoric (as cited in Vande-Berg, et al., 2004). Rhetorically constructed gender, then, divides the world into behaviors and traits that are arbitrarily assigned as either masculine (male) or feminine (female) (Vande-Berg, et al., 2004). This not only reinforces the disproven yet still socially hegemonic theory of biological determinism, which states that biological markers are the sole determinant of gender, but it allows for the legitimization of a hierarchy, largely perceived as natural, of socially constructed categories which place men as more valuable to society than women (Vande-Berg, et al., 2004). This idea lays the basis for the systems of oppression set in place to deny women equality with men. As such, feminist media

studies are largely concerned with what perpetuates the powerful existence of this ideology, which exists even in those who are subordinated and oppressed by it (Vande-Berg, et al., 2004).

In turn, it is important to investigate popular media which seems to promote hegemonic views of women in order to understand how they play a role in the perpetuation of oppressive systems. Feminist theory posits that the repeated portrayals of women in traditional gender roles in television are partially to blame for the perpetuation of patriarchal ideology. These roles present women as emotional, nurturing, and submissive as well as subordinate to men, and men as authoritative, leaders, and productive (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Coltrane & Adams, 1997; Tuchman 1978; as cited in Kircher 2007). Almost in response, some television shows such as *Mary Tyler Moore* have informally introduced parameters for television programming that claims to be feminist (Dow, 1996). These shows focus on working women, women without romantic partners, and women who are "feminists" (Dow, 1996). Even so, as Dow discusses, in order to get a diverse audience to engage in certain media, it cannot be overtly feminist. That is, if a viewer is feminist, it is easier to read and engage in a show that is directly feminist. However, if a viewer does not identify as feminist and a show is trying to push feminism, the viewer may resist the program in various ways. This is important when considering the way *Big Little Lies* is read in this analysis. Here, the show is considered one in which a viewer who is not traditionally feminist might not think it is feminist, but still have their biases challenged in a way that undermines hegemony.

It is interesting to wonder, if there is a way to present feminist ideology within hegemonic ideology in order to seemingly placate but also educate audiences who participate in domination ideology? Or is there at least a way for television program creators to use hegemonic ideology to also challenge hegemonic ideology and serve up feminist ideology on the backs of

hegemonic gender roles? This analysis seeks to understand the responses to these questions by looking at the dichotomy between the surface, hegemonic ideology presented by *Big Little Lies* and a different feminist ideology that erodes the hegemonic order presented.

One of the most interesting things about the show is its purposeful representations of women who, at first, seem like the stereotypes viewers are used to seeing in media, but whose identities also seem to resonate as more complex the more they learn about them. Evidence of this intentionality include the creators' collaboration with a domestic abuse organization (Shoos, 2017) and the fact that David E. Kelly, a writer for and creator of the show, has spent much of his career focusing on crafting careful representations of women while writing shows regarded as feminist, such as *Ally McBeal* ("Ally McBeal," 1997). However, although this representation might be intentional, that does not mean that it resonates in the same way with everyone. That is, the show could offer polysemous understandings, guiding some people to read it one way, and guiding others to read it another. For example, Sullivan (2018) criticizes the show by essentially arguing it is not feminist enough, and that any hints of feminism are glossed over by stereotyped behaviors. In essence, Sullivan is arguing that because of this reading, the show cannot be categorized as feminist at all. However, as polysemy allows, I disagree. In response to this, I posit the question: is it productive at all to argue if a show is feminist enough? As Dow (1996) alludes to, it is not necessary to have overt feminism in order to disrupt hegemonic ideologies. In fact, the less overt, the more effective it may be to the audiences that might need it the most.

Representations of Women on Television

Historically, the representation of women on television has been a popular subject to study across disciplines. Scholars have indicated that women are written into television as a type of caricature or cartoon and that these portrayals are limiting at best (Newsom & Costanzo,

2011). However, recently, research has fallen largely silent on the status of women's representation in contemporary television (Sink & Mastro, 2017). In response to this research gap, Sink and Mastro (2017) conducted a study that included a quantitative as well as qualitative analysis of depictions of women on television in 2013. They determined that representation of women on television has not improved much, if at all, since the 1990s.

Sink and Mastro (2017) found that women made up less than 40% of characters in their sample of television shows despite the proportion of women in the United States being over 50%. From 2015 to 2016, women made up less than 40% of speaking characters on television, and even fewer major roles (Lauzen, 2016, as cited in Palczewski et al., 2019). This is especially significant because what we see on television can construct the reality around us, when entire groups of people are reduced to oversimplified stereotypes or symbolically annihilated from the world of television, their experiences become somewhat annihilated in real life (Newsom & Costanzo, 2011). The representation of women on television has effects on the audience's values and mindsets, and as such can alter or reinforce ideologies regarding gender norms and the patriarchal hierarchy. Some scholars, like Dow (1996) have looked into this issue through the lens of different television programs. However, seldom present in recent research are television shows that are almost exclusively about women's experience, featuring female leads.

Not only did Sink and Mastro (2017) find that women were less present in television programming, but a large portion of their presence was made up of women much younger than their male counterparts, and they were portrayed as less dominant than the men on screen. Additionally, women on television are usually in their twenties and thirties, which is a misrepresentation of the real demographic diversity of women in real life and leads to skewed and negative perceptions of aging women (Newsom & Costanzo, 2011). When older women are

portrayed, there are often obstacles connected to womanhood – such as being a mother – which prevents them from going out and experiencing the world as a young woman might (Dow, 1996).

Other studies have also found that women are less likely to be portrayed as working professionals than men (Lauzen, 2017; Lauzen et al., 2008; as cited in Bray et al., 2020). In general, men are usually shown doing something, whereas women are usually passively having things done to them (Jhally, 2009, as cited in in Palczewski et al., 2019); that is, "men act and women appear" (Berger, 1972, p. 47, as cited in Palczewski et al., 2019, p.230). Connell (1987) suggests that these roles reinforce a hegemonic, desirable masculinity that exists to asserts men's control as well as dominance over women (as cited in Sink & Mastro, 2017). In turn, many contemporary representations also reinforce an ideal, yet still inferior, femininity. Femininity, or a "set of traditional, patriarchal, notions of ideal qualities of womanhood," is often associated with purity, virtue, dedication to the domestic life, and subordinate submissiveness (Vande-Berg, et al., 2004, p.452). When these ideals are broken, it usually amounts to a singular character who is the token feminist representation of a woman, and she is usually isolated from equality with her subordinate woman and superior male counterparts (Dow, 1996). In contrast, *Big Little Lies* focuses on five women, four of whom are in their forties or fifties, who are working mothers and are also represented with lives outside of their families; they are seen as leaders calling the shots, people experiencing lust and desire, and individuals with a mix of both masculine and feminine characteristics.

Women, Stereotypes, Archetypes, and Television

Despite societal challenges to hegemonic ideas of gender in media and calls for change, stereotypes are still largely prevalent in television (Bray, et al., 2020). Stereotypes, or "overly simplistic, one-dimensional, and generally negative [characterizations] that are used to define an

entire group," are at play in larger categories of preexisting behavioral patterns of characters known as archetypes (Ruggerio, 2012, p. 50). In fact, television typecasts women into various archetypes as a regular practice (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000, as cited in Kircher 2007). These archetypes polarize the existence of women through presenting them "through patterns of antithesis such as good/bad, saint/sinner, and virgin/whore" (Horner & Zlosnik 2016, as cited in Ledoux 2017, p. 3). There are many simplistic archetypes women fill in media including what some refer to as, "the fighting fucktoy" who makes her own decisions and has some semblance of agency but ultimately lives for a man (Newsom & Costanzo, 2011), the vulnerable "beautiful soul" who needs a man's protection (Kramer, 2017, p. 17), and the "bitchy boss" who forfeited family for career and success (Newsom & Costanzo, 2011). Other archetypes include, but are not limited to, the goodwife, the iron maiden, the bitch, the sex object, the ever-present victim, etc. (Ruggerio, 2012). These are presented over and over again in infinite, or perhaps all too finite, variations (Newsom & Costanzo, 2011).

The most prominent and simplistic way women seem to be categorized, however, is as a "good" or "bad" girl (Kramer, 2017, p. 25; Day, 2017; Young, 2017). There are several ways to look at this archetype. Important to the present analysis, however, is the idea of woman as either good or evil, often referred to as the "Madonna-Whore" dichotomy (Bareket et al., 2018). This archetype, dating back to the creation of the story of Adam and Eve, is used in almost every form of media today, including in popular television shows such as *Supernatural* and *Gilmore Girls* (Ruggerio, 2012). Reducing women to this realm of a black and white world in television implies that women are simplistic and one-dimensional off the screen too (Ruggerio, 2012). *Big Little Lies* presents seemingly archetypal women which eventually break through the barrier of their own stereotypes. The show also disrupts the binary of women as good or evil through the

changing perceptions of the responsibility and motivation of the main characters in relation to the nature of, and their involvement in, the murder which is the culminating plot point of season one.

Hegemonic Forces: Women and Competition, Motherhood, and Domestic Violence

Competition

Women in television are often represented as opposing and competing with each other (Dow 1996). Day (2017) asserts that the idea of females as catty and unkind towards each other is a stereotype which has withstood the test of time. Furthermore, television presents the female experience as "conflict-oriented and survival-driven" (Day, 2017, p.137). Day (2017) also asserts that the "mean-girl" archetype in this omnipresent conflict is often blonde, rich, and highly sexualized. Dellasega (2005) goes as far as to say that not only do programs portray this, but they actually encourage women to adopt extreme competitive behaviors aggressively and publicly (as cited in World, 2010). Television emphasizes this challenge to women's rights by placing women as natural enemies who are decorative pieces of dramatic, untrustworthy, bitchy, and catty entertainment (Newsom & Costanzo, 2011). In reality, female competition seems to be a result of women feeling the need to protect the limited safety and power they may find in a hegemonic patriarchal society from other women. This further perpetuates hegemonic ideology about gender and therefore society, but what happens when, in the end, the women are friends, and even their supposed enemies, come together? These questions are explored in the evolution of the plot of *Big Little Lies.*

Motherhood

This practice of women in competition bleeds into different facets of the hegemonic, essentialist view of womanhood. One of the staples of the essentialized female experience is the role of being a mother (Palczewski, et al., 2019). Television, in some ways, acts as a force to

restrict women to the home by only showing women appearing in the home (Lauzen, 2017, as cited in Bray et al., 2020). In fact, television was largely used to domesticate women after their entrance and subsequent removal from the workforce in the twentieth century (Newsom & Costanzo, 2020). Warner (2005) suggests that motherhood, much like womanhood, is also separated into divisions of good and evil, partially determined by biblical and traditional ideas of morality (as cited in Walters & Harrison, 2014). The options of classification in this false binary are mothers who are ideal representations against other mothers who are classified as monsters, almost by default (Walters & Harrison, 2014).

Debates surrounding this issue are not going away. The media is constantly portraying versions of "mommy-wars" which pit stay-at-home moms and their stereotypical enemy, working moms, against each other (Walters & Harrison, 2014). On one side, there is the mother who stays at home and fulfills traditional duties as homemaker, putting her children and husband's needs and wants before her own (Ruggerio, 2012). On the other side, there are career mothers who are criticized for choosing to work and essentially "ignore" their duty as a mother and therefore a woman. In fact, there was a "crisis in motherhood" in the 1980s which arose from assertions that separation between a mother and a child for too long is dangerous for both parties (Dally, 1982, as cited in Ruggerio, 2012, p.28). Furthermore, female morality on television is often equated with motherhood, and a character's credibility and likeability can be guided by their fulfilment of this role (Ruggerio, 2012). This binary representation of women as either good or evil mothers simplifies the demanding and complicated role as mother into an unrealistic standard against which women – and others – can judge and validate their identity as women.

As suggested, these romanticized versions of motherhood are nearly impossible to attain (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; as cited in Walters & Harrison, 2014). In turn, people who consume depictions of this representation may be more likely to see a person's identity as a woman as irrevocably tied to their inevitable objectification as metaphorical baby-ovens. When women are portrayed as fulfilling this role and being satisfied and genuinely happy, it is often presented as the American Dream. However, this raises the question of how the role of woman as mother influences other facets of society? All of the lead characters in *Big Little Lies* are mothers and while at first they evaluate each other's – as well as their own – fitness as mothers and tie that to their identity as a "good-enough" woman, they offer different variations of what constitutes motherhood – some are stay-at-home moms, have part-time jobs, work full time, are single, divorced, or married both happily and unhappily. Additionally, while all of the leading women show immense love and dedication to protecting and building up their children, they also talk candidly about their dissatisfaction in being expected to solely mother rather than pursue other passions (Kelley, 2017d).

Domestic Violence

Shoos (2017) notes that societal norms surrounding motherhood serve as a way to trap women into a submissive domestic role which puts them at higher risk of being victims of domestic abuse. According to the Center for Disease Control (2014), male-perpetrated intimate partner violence (IPV) against women is the top reported form of domestic abuse (as cited in Shoos, 2017). Shoos (2017) asserts that while women's submissive role in media and therefore society puts them at risk of victimization, the endpoint of patriarchy – which asserts that men must be strong, dominating, and in charge – is logically a man who asserts his power violently.

Patriarchy, in turn, produces domestic violence by encouraging men along the path towards asserting dominance at any cost.

Domestic abuse affects anywhere from 28% to 50% of women but is seldom justly represented in television (Palczewski, et al., 2019; Shoos, 2017). The sporadic and problematic representations of domestic violence on television can cause people to be unsupportive of victims and uneducated on the urgent, grave nature of the issue (Shoos, 2017). These representations often depict abuse as an isolated incident, not something tied to a larger cultural issue (Post et al., 2009; as cited in Shoos, 2017). Hollywood portrayals of domestic violence ignore the complexity of the issue, offering easy solutions and clean-cut outcomes (Shoos, 2017). As such, depictions of domestic abuse in television tend to portray a female who is either a victim or an agent in her own life, but seldom both. This often results in unrealistic depictions of empowerment from the victim, which subsequently erases her trauma (Shoos, 2017).

Representations of IPV also promote the idea that women who are subject to the abuse are solely responsible for finding a way to fix it, oftentimes requiring the woman to become an unrealistic action heroine through standing up to her abuser, which, as we see in *Big Little Lies,* can actually just perpetuate the cycle (Shoos, 2017). Shoos (2017) posits that there are almost no stories in Hollywood which resist this hegemonic ideology of women as the party responsible for leaving, the party who can prevent as well as cure the issue of abuse, and there are almost no narratives that acknowledge the social, economic and psychological factors that complicate leaving an abusive relationship. This extends out to popular television and film only portraying affluent white women with the means to escape, reinforcing the idea that all women have an option to leave an abusive relationship while simultaneously ignoring the fact that abusive relationships often become more dangerous when the woman tries to leave. Shoos (2017) also

notes that women who do fight back against their abuser to escape are seen as going against the hegemonic idea that women are passive, and are subsequently thought of as "fake" victims, and therefore are often legally sanctioned. She also states that men are rarely shown as an agent responsible for the abuse; instead, they are often offered a justifying motivation or characteristic, or seen as obvious "wife-beaters" – that is, not respectable, clean-looking men, which perpetuates a stereotype that battered-women are guilty of picking a bad man. As a result, the reality of women's emotional attachment to their partner in spite of the abuse is often delegitimized and ignored in the media, including television (Shoos, 2017). Additionally, Shoos (2017) asserts that women utilizing, or even being aware of or offered resources such as therapists, advocates, shelters, and hotlines, are absent from most television narratives. Despite the disappointment Shoos has for representations of domestic violence up until 2017, the release of *Big Little Lies* was before her book about representations of domestic violence in film was published and so she added a brief footnote which noted that this show "replicates the mainstream media's focus on abused white women, but also goes against received ideas about abusers and abused women" (Shoos, 2017, p. 165). The team of *Big Little Lies* also collaborated with domestic abuse experts (Shoos, 2017), seemingly to first present a familiar, more common domestic abuse narrative that viewers used to the hegemonic media depiction of IPV can locate, and then complicate and disrupt the expectation of what domestic abuse looks like and how it involves the woman. Consequently, it depicts a more realistic view of a women's experience with domestic violence, and thus makes this show a pioneer of IPV representation (Shoos, 2017)**.**

Analysis

Women as Essentialized

Popular media presents women in oddly oppositional ways. Sometimes, all women are

seen to be simple, at other times, women are seen as mysterious and unable to be understood. In either situation, women are frequently presented as being the same simply because they are all women. That is, womanhood in media is essentialized. The decision to invoke one of these stereotypes over the other is largely due to what is convenient to the patriarchal structure at that time. Furthermore, even when women are presented as "mysterious," it seems to be in a way which still implies a lack of dimension, suggesting that even if women cannot be understood, it is due to their innate "alien" nature, not due to the presence of complexity.

Initially, *Big Little Lies* suggests simply that women are able to be understood through one collective lens. They are bound and defined by their relationships to others, one-dimensional, and void of complex development, completely made up of the stereotypes they emulate. In some ways, women in *Big Little Lies* even seem to exemplify and build off of a stereotype of their own. Bonnie is defined by her nurturing and gentle nature. Jane is in distress and in need of help. Madeline is ferocious and competitive, but in ways that tie her to an essentialist view of women, akin to a mother bear. Celeste is often viewed through the lens of others as a sexual being or object. Renata is ambitious, bossy, dramatic and catty. It is clear, then, that this show does not erase stereotypes of women. In fact, it seems as though they use these very stereotypes to draw in viewers by presenting the show under the guise of "just another Suburban Gothic" in which viewers know what to expect. However, it is prudent to note that the show also often presents these stereotypes though the eyes of others. For instance, Renata's husband, Gordon, after she confides in him, states, "women, you all want to be the envy of your friends, but god forbid you garner too much of it" (Kelley, 2017a). In other scenes, the audience is presented with a random assortment of characters, both men and women, responding to police interrogations with generalizations about women such as, "I believe women are chemically incapable of forgiving"

(Kelley, 2017f). Within at least the first episode, the people responding to questioning can be seen as narrators who can be trusted to guide us into the story. Thus, what they say affects viewers' perceptions of the world, and subsequently create perceptions that build off of the presented overgeneralizations. When viewers learn, however, that these people are virtually nonexistent in the storyline and therefore do not truly know the women or what happened, they may begin to feel the slow erosion of their own ideologies, consciously or subconsciously, calling to focus how easy it was to fall into these ideas of womanhood.

At the beginning, it is easy to write this show off as "just another suburban drama." However, as the series progresses and we learn more about the lives of the leading women, these presented moments which adhere to overgeneralizations about women begin to shift. In fact, at the series end, each woman has somehow irreversibly breeched her set stereotype. The most explicit example of this being Bonnie who breaks her nurturing relationship to the world when she kills Perry by shoving him down a flight of spike-ridden stairs. This shift does not happen suddenly, however. Instead, much like the way water eats away at stone, the audience slowly begins to learn about the lives of the women behind closed doors, organically leading them to understand the human lives behind the constructed, man-made stereotypes. This is seen through a certain sophistication of verbalized self-awareness shown in the characters seldom see in other media, the assertion that women are sexual beings rather than objects, and the exemplification of women's issues as multi-dimensional and complex.

The women in *Big Little Lies* seem more capable than many other female television characters of verbalizing a sophisticated level of self-awareness. In the first episode, as Jane gets to know her new friends, Madeline and Celeste, at a coffeeshop, she begins to describe her feeling as an outsider looking in and feeling as though the moment happening before her does

not belong to her (Kelley, 2017a). She tells them, “you guys are just right, you’re exactly right, and for some reason that makes me feel wrong” (Kelley, 2017a). Furthermore, not only does she explain this sensation, but it is shared by Celeste. This implies that the women in this show are multifaceted, and it is not represented in one token character, but something shared among others. The idea of a multi-dimensional character is explicitly furthered in a conversation between Madeline and her husband, Ed. She tells him, “it is entirely possible for me to love you with all of my heart and still feel…” to what he finishes, “hurt over your ex” (Kelley, 2017a). Additionally, when Jane and Madeline discuss the topic of owning guns, it becomes clear that while owning a gun empowers Jane, it would not empower Madeline. This shows that not all women are the same; that is, they are not essentialized in their beliefs and behaviors.

In the second episode, Celeste also opens up to Madeline about the unusual nature of her relationship with Perry. She notes that, despite people believing they have the perfect marriage based on what they see from the outside, that they actually argue quite often, which she admits often leads to irate sex (Kelley, 2017b). She also mentions that sometimes she thinks she might like it. This presents the idea that while women, like men, are in some ways sexual beings, their sex lives are not black and white. Celeste, by saying she thinks she likes it, implies that there is a chance she does not like it. This alludes to the idea of consent and shows that not all women want to have sex whenever and with whomever they can, a common stereotype found in media. It also shows that they are capable of having more thought about it than simply attaching to the man they sleep with. While this seems like the bar is still being set low for multi-dimensional women in media, Renata adds further complexity to the idea of woman as more than sexual object by telling her husband, “it’s not just sex, it’s wanting to be desired” (Kelley, 2017c). This adds dimension to how women may view sex, suggesting that to some it is more about equal

power dynamics and intimacy – because desire for another gives them power and facilitates intimacy – than it is about women being the toy to fulfill a man's fantasy or protect their feeling of masculinity.

The women also erode the stereotype of women's problems being shallow and easily fixable. Jane's admittance of her hope that her rapist is truly a good person is emblematic of this (Kelley, 2017f), as is the complex nature of Celeste's pursuit to stay in and mend her and Perry's relationship. Both of these examples show the layered nature of issues which affect women disproportionately to men, including sexual assault and intimate partner violence. In each scenario, the women present reasons to be sympathetic towards those who have experienced these issues and their response to them by showing rational characters who reason through their feelings on camera. Celeste also alludes to how society's expectation of women is internalized in her and affects her ability to accept her state as a victim and move forward to accepting help when she says, "perhaps my self-worth is made up of how other people see me" (Kelley, 2017f).

The shift in the idea of women as essentialized suggests that while at the surface, women seem to be known and understood easily, they truly lead more complex lives than people allow them to express. That is, this show suggests that the experience of women cannot be reduced to caricatures of humans, but it is reflected in actual multidimensional humans themselves. Furthermore, this overall shift from women as essentialized to multidimensional and diverse, or "complex," is not to give men permission to ignore them or not try to understand them, as may be present in other media which represents women as "mysterious." Instead, the complexity exists to empower the women themselves. This can be seen through the metaphor of the ocean. The ocean – as a largely unknown and untamable force – acts as a mirror to the women and allows them to reason with the complexity of their lives. It also suggests that their complexity is

naturally and organically within them because they are natural beings. We are constantly seeing the women of this show tied to the ocean in one way or another and connected to each other through it, finding familiarity as well as power and respite in the idea that what is on the surface is nothing compared to what lies underneath.

These presented elements suggest several things. First, because most of the assertion of simplicity came from outside sources evaluating others, it suggests that those on the outside of someone's life are not credible sources of information on people's personal qualities and lives. The temporal relationships between these comments and what was happening in the storyline affected perceptions of what was happening, of the women, and of who was involved in the trivia night incident. This leads to cognitive dissonance between what viewers are told they should be seeing in these women and what they actually see themselves. Thus, viewers are invited to reflect on why it does not feel right and what implicit biases they might have. In turn, what they hear and see is not always reliable, as the perception of reality is shaped by experiences and knowledge about a situation. Later in the show, viewers may begin to realize how listening to the people being interrogated by the police may have led them astray.

Another meaning that can be derived from this erosion is that women can abide by stereotypes as society dictates them, but they are still humans and lead complex lives. Viewers do not know *all* women because of what people say about women and their surface actions, just like they cannot say they know what lies beneath the surface by simply looking at the ocean.

Women as Catty

Another hegemonic representation presented in *Big Little Lies* is women as competitors, and in particular, women as catty (Day, 2017). Catty can be defined as, "a sexually biased way of describing an unhealthy way women act on an otherwise healthy feeling of competitiveness"

(Firestone, 2012, para. 4), which often comes out in petty or gossipy remarks, but can also – as described later – manifest itself physically as well. There are several moments in this show where we see women pitted against each other in ways which cause them to deal with their conflict and competition in an unhealthy manner. In fact, in the first episode, the murder itself is presented as the logical endpoint of the catty relationships between the leading ladies themselves. This is explicitly presented in the interrogation scenes littered throughout the show which guide audience perceptions, particularly when someone says – in response to the beginnings of the Madeline and Renata rivalry – "the battle lines were drawn right there" to which another person follows up directly after, "we've never had a trivia night end in bloodshed before," suggesting that it is logical to create a link between the women's competition, and their responsibility for the murder (Kelley, 2017a). Through these interspersed narratives, the audience is guided to understand the story and perceive the women as guilty through the use of the characters in the interrogation clips as a sort of Greek Chorus. Only in the final episode is it revealed that the women's cattiness really had little to do with the murder, in contradiction to what the investigation would lead viewers to believe.

Early in the first episode, viewers see Madeline interacting with the other parents at her youngest daughter's school. As she takes Jane around and introduces her to people, she engages in a pleasant conversation with another mother. After the interaction, she leans to Jane and whispers, "[she] is such a gossip, we don't like her" (Kelley, 2017a). Here, viewers see Madeline exemplifying a classic example of women as catty, or petty and gossipy; Madeline herself even acknowledges her tendency to tend to her grudges "like little pets" (Kelley, 2017b). The audience is often a witness to her overreactions and calculated attacks on other mothers. In particular, we can consider the evolution of the conflict between Madeline and Renata in depth.

The conflict between these two began when Renata's daughter, Amabella, accused Jane's son, Ziggy, of choking her. Ziggy denies the allegations, Jane believes him, and Renata does not, causing Madeline to stand up for him. An onlooker states, "the battle lines were drawn right there" (Kelley, 2017a). This implies that women are hotheaded and unable to have civil disagreements. Furthermore, in the second episode, Renata hands out birthday party invitations to all of the students in her daughter's class, with the exception of Ziggy, the newcomer whom she believes assaulted her daughter. The characters recalling this to the investigator state, "Renata was sending a message" (Kelley, 2017b). This implies Renata was calculated and attempting to hurt Madeline and Jane's social standing through her daughter and her party. In the same episode, we also see Madeline looking for ways to retaliate and hurt Renata back. This results in her inviting the kids in the class to Disney on Ice at the same time as Amabella's party.

Though much of the cattiness plays out between Madeline and Renata, a physical altercation between Jane and Renata over the same issue culminates in what can literally be described as a cat fight, in which Jane legitimately claws at Renata's eye in a moment of anger (Kelley, 2017f). The presence of the catty stereotype is further and explicitly evidenced later in the series by a person being questioned plainly stating in reference to the rumor of Jane and Renata's reconciling of their differences, "I believe women are incapable of forgiving" (Kelley, 2017f).

Even so, later, viewers are offered a different perspective on that same situation, a clear decomposition in the presented idea of women as catty. In the sixth episode, after what seems like months of constant feud and the physical altercation, Jane arrives at Renata's house to apologize and make amends (Kelley, 2017f). She explains that she does not believe Ziggy had hurt her daughter, but that she did take the allegation seriously – that is, she took him to be

evaluated by a child psychologist who found nothing wrong with him. Instead of simply defending her side, however, Jane admits that she understands Renata's actions as a mother trying to protect her daughter and apologizes for lashing out at her when she was doing and feeling the same thing. In return, Renata offers the same kindness, suggesting that they are both saved from the catty stereotype. This is when we see that, rather than a mother sending a calculated and intentionally hurtful message to another mother by not inviting their son, Renata was doing her best to create what she thought would be a safe and enjoyable birthday party for her daughter. The audience is invited to reconsider the actions of Renata, who was often painted as the villain throughout the season, and reflect on this new information. That is, the audience begins to see that while Renata and Jane were catty at some points, there were reasons behind their actions, not erasing their misguided nature, but allowing the sexist label of catty to erode and be replaced with something more akin to "assertive".

We also see an erosion of the hegemonic view of cat-fighting women when we see collaboration and friendship between them, stemming from somewhere deeper than mutual dislike for another woman. In one scene, while Jane and Madeline are at Jane's house, Jane opens up to Madeline about being raped (Kelley, 2017c). She notes that she has never even said it out loud before, much less told anyone about it, and later she says that doing so made her feel free from the trapping feeling of her rapist's actions. This is a clear example of women making each other stronger and acting as support systems rather than competitors. Additionally, in the last episode, moments before Perry is killed, we see Renata, Jane, Madeline, and Celeste begin to make amends as they seek to understand each other (Kelley, 2017g). Then, when Perry attacks Celeste and is revealed to be Jane's rapist, the rest of them put themselves in harm's way to

protect each other. This illustrates the power of women when they stand together, which is shown to be much greater than when they stood apart.

At first, the representation of women in this show suggests they are catty, competitive and incapable of forgiveness. However, when this decays enough to reveal that the bones of the stereotype is the result of artificial forces pushing them towards competition, rather than from a natural part of womanhood, viewers see that women are capable of being nasty, but often as a misguided result of a reasonable and valid concern, such as the safety of their child. Moreover, the tendency to be vicious when reacting, in particular, seems to stem from their frustration at expectations of women presented to them through their own life. These are presented through experiences of being controlled and trapped– as Celeste and Jane have felt – not being self-sufficient or respected – as Madeline alludes to – and not being understood past the stereotypes and expectations of women – as Renata describes in the first episode when speaking to her husband. Bonnie's exclusion from this list is not to be ignored, however. Her transcendence of the catty stereotype ties *Big Little Lies* to the expectations of the Suburban Gothic as it readily presents the only Black character as the one character who breaks stereotypes, with that character functioning as a sort of token which encompasses all of both gender and racial diversity in a single piece of media. In this show, Bonnie is the peacemaker and nurturer, yet this representation of her is eventually eroded as she is also the murderer. Her otherness remains throughout season one as she seems to hover on the edges of the main plot points until the final episode.

By presenting the reasons for catty behavior, and offering representations of alternative, non-catty and supportive behaviors, the audience is asked to renegotiate their assessment of women's expressions of anger as "catty." Thus, the surface ideology presented is that women are

competitive, catty drama queens. However, this representation ultimately decomposes, suggesting that women are not innately catty but made to be so in order to deal with the limits of a patriarchal society and even the most nurturing and non-competitive woman can become dangerous in a world which preserves masculinity above all else.

Women as Mothers

The most obvious common factor between the leading women in *Big Little Lies* is their role as mothers. This role brings with it many expectations and pressures, and thus can be considered a presented hegemonic force. In fact, their role as a mother is the very first thing viewers learn about the main characters. In the first scene after viewers are introduced to the murder investigation in episode one, they are introduced to Madeline McKenzie (Kelley, 2017a). She is driving her young daughter to school while speaking to her through the use of several well-known clichés about life and growing up. Suddenly, at a stop sign, she notices a distracted teen-driver ahead of her. She fills the role of "mother to everyone" by leaping from her car, marching up to the teen, and scolding her as well as her own daughter who, to her surprise, is in the back seat. This introduces us to the well-known archetype of overzealous, helicopter mothers, sometimes referred to as "supermoms," a concept linked to that of intensive mothering. The presence of this archetype necessitates the "do-it-all" mother in society, pushing women to compete with others and evaluate their abilities to mother based on their abilities to constantly parent as well as do other things (Oliver, 2011). At the conclusion of this interaction, Madeline trips and falls, consequently leading her to meet Jane, who offers to help her and then drives Madeline and her daughter to school. During their conversation in the car, Madeline discusses the social structure and relationships between the moms in Monterey. She paints those who she refers to as the "career mommies" – that is, those who both work and pass a three-digit income

threshold without their partners' salary – as the enemy to her and Jane, both of whom only work part-time and act as stay-at-home moms the rest of the time. According to Walters and Harrison (2014), this competition between working and stay at home mothers is a common trope. Already, Madeline is presenting the stance of the media prejudice towards working moms based on stereotypes about mothers who work and spend less time at home. In Madeline's eyes, the mothers who work more care for their children less.

In the following scene, viewers are introduced to Renata who almost immediately tells Madeline about her recent business venture of joining the board of directors at PayPal. This not only identifies Renata as a working mother, but a "career mommy" who makes a lot of money (Kelley, 2017a). In that sense, the audience is led to believe that Renata is the enemy of the episode's apparent protagonist, Madeline, and is the enemy because she is a working mother. This allows for the audience to briefly operate on their own implicit biases towards working mothers. In the United States this is linked to the late 1970s and early 80s. As more middle-class women began to work there was increasing cultural anxiety surrounding the potentially negative effects of mothers spending time away from children in order to work (Dally, 1982, as cited in Ruggerio, 2012, p.28).

This anxiety still circulates in contemporary culture and is surfaced throughout this show. For example, later in the season viewers find out that Celeste used to be a lawyer and retired at her husband's request so that she could stay home with their children. When she starts expressing interest in working again, however, Perry suggests they have another child (Kelley, 2017d). In another episode, after a brief breakfast with their kids, they are seen making out while the nanny makes the kids' lunches (Kelley, 2017a). This implies that Celeste's value in her family is that of sex-object and baby-maker, rather than former lawyer. Perry is also shown as the

authority of the family as there are several scenes shown in which he is the parent who is able to control the children. So, though Celeste has given up career for motherhood due to her husband's wishes, he is also depicted as the more influential parent, as many people traditionally believe the father should be when it comes to family discipline (Carrillo, et al., 2016).

Not only are there expectations of what kind of mothers women should be and how much it should matter to them in relation to the other aspects of their identity, but there are also expectations on how easily and innately motherhood should come to women. That is, mothers are not only expected to be satisfied and devoted, but always good at the job. This is supported when we see Jane, who is having nightmares of rape and death, gets woken up by Ziggy (Kelley, 2017d). Although she, in that moment, is dealing with triggers and flashbacks about her past trauma, she gets up and carefully tends to Ziggy without a second thought. Another way to look at this scene, however, is not a depiction of a mother acting on her maternal instincts, but rather a woman who is strong enough to simultaneously keep reliving her trauma and tend to her young son.

While viewers see the women in this show adhere to some traditional stereotypes about motherhood, they also see them crash through the surface of those generalizations. In particular, they see the struggle with the conflict that stems from the clash of other aspects of their identity with the expectations placed upon them in their roles as mothers. For example, Renata explains, "it's one thing to be demonized for having the temerity of a career, but look at this, look at our life. What kind of person chooses to work? Certainly not a mother, by any acceptable standards" (Kelley, 2017a). In this scene, we see Renata struggle between her identity as a businesswoman and as a mother. This exemplifies the reality of the complexities of motherhood and the limitations placed on it that not only limit people's views and ideas of women, but women's

ability to negotiate their own identity, another marker of the Female Gothic and Domestic Gothic genres (Murphy 2009).

However, while we see these women struggling with this identity, we also see them succeeding in balancing it, too, as competent communicators. One example of this is when we see Celeste come out of retirement to act as a lawyer to help Madeline put on a controversial production of *Avenue Q* (Kelley, 2017d). She is presented as calm, witty, intelligent, and overall, an excellent negotiator and lawyer. If viewers consider the representation of Celeste overall, she seems almost more competent in this scene as a lawyer than in several scenes where her children do not listen to her, but do listen to Perry. This is in sharp contrast to the usual assumption that women – especially mothers – are too emotional, irrational, or hormonal to be successful at communication. Another example of a challenge to this idea that a woman is either a good stay at home mother or a bad working mother is in the third episode when we see Renata on a business call, acting as the boss, and making important and what seem like bold decisions (Kelley, 2017c). Then, we see her ability to code-switch almost instantaneously when she hangs up and then walks into her husband's office and begins to engage in a conversation about their daughter and the best way to parent her.

When looking at the women in this show as an aggregate social circle, the audience also has the opportunity experience the hardships and benefits of many renditions of motherhood and maternal femininity. This supports Dow's (1996) idea of feminism which is a variation that calls for support empowering the choices of all women, seeing each one as an individual with different needs and desires. That is, viewers see the good and the bad parts of the experiences of stay-at-home moms, working moms, single moms, and stepmoms. That said, even though the characters are allowed a fairly expansive list of options for versions of motherhood, they

acknowledge that they are limited by the expectations of finding satisfaction in *only* motherhood. That is, they struggle with the idea that they are supposed to be fulfilled as a woman and person by becoming a mother. This is exemplified when Celeste and Madeline agree that, "being a mother just isn't enough for me" as they talk excitedly in the car after Celeste defends the production of *Avenue Q* (Kelley, 2017d). When looking at expectations of motherhood, particularly ones which suggest that being a mother is a natural instinct and an essential experience to be a woman, this can be considered a controversial statement. That said, it is a stance that many women no doubt feel but cannot say due to societal expectations. In this way, the free and fearless admittance of this is an obvious overturn of the idea that women are born to be satisfied as mothers.

Initially, the presented representations of women as mothers first and foremost suggests that a woman's role in life is to be a committed mother, solely focused on her children, and to be satisfied by that role. The narrative at the beginning of the season also suggests that mothers cannot also be something else and still be good mothers. That said, the shift in how we see the characters communicate about motherhood suggests that motherhood is layered and is not the sole way in which women must identify themselves. We see working mothers who care deeply for their children and stay at home mothers who are drawn to the idea of returning to work. While most of the women do show some satisfaction in motherhood, viewers learn that there does not seem to be one right way to be a mother and that different kinds of mothers may struggle in the role in different ways, but that this does not make them good or bad mothers. Again, viewers see a slow erosion of the idea that there is a single right way to mother.

Women as Victims of Domestic Violence

Though the prominent pattern in this show is to present a hegemonic view (ie: women as

catty) and then erode it in various ways as the show progresses, the challenge to domestic violence represented in this show is more straightforward than the dismantling of simplistic and limiting representations of women. In part, this is because the hegemonic understanding of IPV is based on its under-representation in media. According to Shoos (2017) domestic violence is often either not represented or grossly misrepresented in media, supporting the hegemonic view that domestic violence is easily identified and understood, as well as easily escapable. When viewers are first introduced to Celeste and Perry, they see a couple in love with an intimate relationship—a father who knows how to get through to his kids, and a mother who is devoted to husband and children alike (Kelley, 2017a). It also is implied that Celeste gave up her job willingly to be a mother, which viewers later learn is not true. The perceptions presented by those from outside of her relationship looking in function to show that Celeste and Perry seem to have the perfect relationship (Kelley, 2017a). However, the first part of this hegemonic view of domestic violence – that assumes it is easily identifiable or only happens to certain kinds of people – is deteriorated as the episodes progress, when we see Celeste and Perry get into increasingly vile and physical arguments and not even Madeline, Celeste's closest friend, knows about the extent of the violence occurring in their relationship.

As the audience continues to view the relationship between Celeste and Perry, they begin to understand that these altercations are not the exception, but the norm in their relationship, and begin to associate Perry's consistent promises of getting better as empty and manipulative rather than hopeful and sincere. We see Celeste continue to get grabbed, thrown, and kicked. At one point, Perry emblematizes the demoralization of Celeste by pouring a box of Legos over her head (Kelley, 2017e). We also learn that Celeste stopped working and was largely cut her off from her friends so that Perry could gaslight her into needing him. As Shoos (2017) points out, this is not

an unfamiliar story: woman gets hurt by husband, husband promises to do better, the abuse worsens, women does not leave, and the story culminates in the murder of either the woman or the man at the hands of the other, and a clean break ensues.

However, that is not the story we get here. Instead, the second part of the hegemonic view of IPV – which assumes domestic violence is easily understood – is also weakened. This is shown when viewers are taken through each stage of Celeste's acceptance that she is a victim of domestic abuse, which, despite popular opinion, is not a linear process (Shoos 2017). Rather, the audience sees Celeste act as the emotional manifestation of the ocean's tides, taking one step forward in accepting her situation, and then two steps back, struggling with the love she feels for Perry and the life that she has. We also see Celeste and Perry go through counseling, until Perry stops attending, and she secretly continues to go alone. During her solo sessions, viewers also get a rare glimpse into the support systems available to victims and survivors of IPV, while also getting a closer look into how Celeste is actually processing the reality of her relationship. The complexity of even comprehending what is happening to her is exemplified in the struggle viewers see the therapist have in getting Celeste to admit there is an issue. The conflict over admitting the problem, a seemingly simple stage in the process, suggests that even the smallest of steps in situations like Celeste's can be incredibly difficult to navigate. Celeste believes that Perry truly intends to get better, citing his attendance at a counseling session as proof, and uses that as justification to hold on to her relationship with him while viewers watch the episodes of violence escalate across the season. Additionally, not only do we see Celeste being abused, but we see her try to fight back in some instances, weakening the assumption that victims of abuse are passive, or complicit in domestic violence.

Along the same lines, we see the final part of the hegemonic view of domestic violence – which assumes that women can easily escape an abusive relationship if they want to – discarded when we see Celeste attempt the solution which many blindly offer, and blame women for not doing, when she tries to leave Perry (Kelley, 2017g). This, instead of being the simple solution that is her responsibility to take – as it presented as in many forms of media – almost culminates in her own death. It also culminates in the death of any agency she had left in the relationship. This is exemplified when Perry drives straight through the trivia night parking instead of stopping to get out (Kelley, 2017g). In this moment, Celeste no longer has control over her life, and her survival is in the hands of the man who abuses her. Lastly, after Perry is killed by Bonnie (Kelley, 2017g), Celeste is not magically cured like some depictions of domestic abuse situations would have you believe. Instead, the second season follows the horrific struggle she endures after his death.

Initially, the presentation of the relationship between Perry and Celeste suggests that Celeste is lucky Perry will have her, and thus that women who do not seem independent – particularly economically – should not complain if a younger, wealthier man wants them, no matter the circumstance. When viewers start to see the smaller altercations, this also suggests that Celeste could easily leave, that abuse is not as bad as it seems, and that she is complicit in it by staying and defending him, and, some could argue, by participating in what Palczewski et al. (2019) refer to as violent resistance. Her engagement in sexual acts after these events even begins to suggest she is fine with them herself. However, as the series continues the audience is offered a rare glimpse into a realistic portrayal of the emotional manipulation that accompanies physical abuse. The depiction of Celeste struggling to come to terms with the fact that the man she loves and the man she fears are one person, and the illustration of dangers of trying to escape

domestic abuse suggest a more accurate story, one that even for someone with financial resources, seems uncertain.

Big Little Lies' portrayal of domestic violence suggests that that abuse is not always obvious. This is explicitly emphasized in the opening credits, with sex scenes overlaying videos of the ocean, suggesting that there is more to them than what is on the surface. *Big Little Lies'* representation of IPV brings awareness to the fact that victims cannot always get away, there are resources for them, that they can still love their partner even though they are an abuser, and that abuse is first and foremost perpetuated by sophisticated emotional manipulation that is not easily understandable, identifiable, or escapable. Overall, the surface ideology is based in the representations of media from media outside of this show, although the show itself does call these representations and perceptions to the minds of the audience though the interrogation scenes in which people being questioned comment on the perfection of Celeste and Perry's relationship. Conversely, the deeper ideology presented erodes this view and suggests that no one can understand the complexity of and judge a woman's experience with domestic abuse unless they are involved or bear witness to all of it.

Conclusion

It is clear that *Big Little Lies* challenges several hegemonic ideologies through the use of slow erosion, akin to the way moving water, like in the ocean, slowly eats away at even the strongest of materials. On the surface, the show implies that women are easily generalized – that they are essentially the same, that they are catty, should be satisfied and devoted mothers, and must be somewhat complicit in domestic violence if they do not escape it. This is shown through the varying evidence discussed in this paper which support these forces. However, when one analyzes the rhetorical construction of the show, it is obvious that the women do not fit neatly

into these boxes. While time certainly plays a role in that some could argue that any story about anyone is complex if it is long enough, the purposeful influence on audience's perceptions of the women through the interspersed interrogation clips suggests a more intentional establishment of a hegemonic world which viewers understand and with which they are likely familiar. This allows people to settle into the comfort of their own worldview, but then a sort of slow decomposition of the hegemonic representations occurs. Of course, the show does not completely discard stereotypes to challenge audience understandings of women, but it does erode them and invites viewers to renegotiate ideas about women and how they relate to one another. Although, as noted previously, the show itself does offer the opportunity for polysemous readings, which may allow some to deem it *not feminist enough*. However, I still might argue, what is the benefit of critiquing a show based on the level of overtness in its presentation of counter-hegemonic views? Overall, this analysis presents a possible interpretation of the presented elements in *Big Little Lies.* It is based in the assumption that this show seeks to challenge the media system which seldom tells the stories of women's lives as they happen behind closed doors (Sidortsova, 2018, para. 30). Through telling these stories, people are presented with a more organic and complex ideology which persists that women are like the ocean; they seem graceful and simple on the surface, but underneath, are diverse, complex, and powerful.

Ideological critics are not always interested in the direct effects of media or the intentionality behind them. As such, this analysis did not focus on this. However, the argument in this research functions as evidence that television shows can present ideologies which slowly decompose hegemonic views. Presenting more disruptions to television audiences' implicit biases can have an effect on their views and could subsequently change how society views

women, over time. A study conducted in China by Yue et al. (2019) looked at the effects of a television show produced in China that was intentionally created to be used as an artifact of entertainment- education about domestic abuse. They found that the representations of domestic violence in the program were "highly effective in [...] getting the public's attention on domestic violence, [spurring] public conversations on this taboo topic, and [fostering] a favorable policy climate for the eventual passage of anti-domestic violence legislation" (Yue et al., 2019, p. 42). This suggests that fictional television programs that are created with the goal of being educative representations of stigmatized subjects to widespread audiences can be effective in creating tangible changes in perception. These changes could lead to long-term support for victims of domestic abuse in the form of passing supportive legislation. Looking past domestic abuse, this study suggests that television can be used as an instrument for feminist social change. As such, future research should surround how society might use television shows like *Big Little Lies* to promote social change regarding gendered norms in the United States. This research should also seek to consider how the usefulness of the show in creating social change is related to the intentionality of the creators.

There are a myriad of tools which could act as the ocean does in *Big Little Lies* to erode hegemonic ideologies. One that can be used within television to facilitate the resistance of hegemonic gender ideology in audiences is intersectionality of characters. Intersectionality is a theory which argues that at a person's various facets of identity, and the power or subordination which accompanies each one, are intertwined with each other; it is the idea that "identity is "multiplicative" rather than additive" (Palczewski, 2019, p. 9). In a study looking at viewer's perceptions of mental illness in the television show *Empire*, Smith-Frigerio (2018) finds that intersectionality provides the audience with a sense of narrative "probability (form) and fidelity

(resonance)" (p. 399), which, according to Fisher (1984), is what the audience needs to change their "moral understanding of mental illness" (as cited in Smith-Firgerio, 2018, p. 399). However, this can be qualified by saying that the popular solution of establishing one character as the "other" who contains all of the counter-stereotypical and counter-hegemonic characteristics is not sufficient to truly create social change (Meyer, 2015).

Applying this to gender and representations of women on television, lower levels of complexity in a woman – meaning less prominent representations of intersectionality – can lead to the objectification of her. When women consistently see simplistic and stereotypical representations of women in media, which are the norm, they can begin to self-objectify, or participate in the objectification of themselves (Palczewski, 2019). This self-objectification can lead to their submission to the stereotype threat in which they begin to believe and conform to the stereotypes set out by society (Palczewski, 2019). Subsequently, they stop pursuing the right to meaningful representation of their community on television and other mass media, and thus change does not occur. For example, men tend to be represented on television in ambitious leadership positions, while female characters are often discouraged from pursuing them (Newsom & Costanzo, 2011). As cultivation theory explains, women who regularly watch these representations on television might begin to see themselves as unable to pursue leadership positions. In turn, they cultivate lower ambition which is linked to self-objectification (Newsom & Costanzo, 2011). Self-objectification is linked to lower levels of political efficacy (Newsom & Costanzo, 2011). As such, women who regularly see hegemonic representations of women on television can be expected to be less likely to become involved in politics and advocacy for social change, which allows the patriarchal society, and the media which perpetuates it, to remain intact. Thus, future research should also attempt to systematically categorize and define elements

which create indirectly feminist, or polysemic, shows, and should further focus specifically on how the presented level of intersectionality within the characters affects the shows perceived status as feminist.

Last, it is important to note that *Big Little Lies* does not do away with every stereotype it presents in the first season. For example, Bonnie (as the only person of color in the group of leading women) retains her position as the token character filled with stereotype-breaking qualities, as the suburban gothic genre calls for. This is exemplified when, in contrast to her nurturing and calm spirit, she kills Perry, breaking her stereotype more explicitly and extremely than any other character. Throughout season one, Bonnie also does not have a developed back story, and her personality is the most underdeveloped. Further research, then, should consider both seasons of *Big Little Lies*, and should also explore the difference between how white and person of color experiences are presented in both season one and two.

"The media can be an instrument of change, it can maintain the status quo, or it can hopefully change minds" (Newsom & Costanzo, 2011). Reese Witherspoon, who was the executive producer of *Big Little Lies*, notes this as a mission of the show in an award acceptance speech by saying that the show explores the idea that the life "we present to the world could be very different from the life we live behind closed doors" (Sidortsova, 2018, para. 30). This, and *Big Little Lies*' ocean-like corrosion of stone-faced dominant representations discussed, make it a significant artifact of analysis, particularly when looking at themes of essentialized womanhood, motherhood, competition, and domestic abuse.

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