

GIRLS WHO (DON'T) WEAR GLASSES: THE PERFORMATIVITY OF SMART GIRLS ON
TEEN TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation takes a feminist view of television programs featuring smart girls, and considers the “wave” of feminism popular at the time of each program. Judith Butler’s concept from *Gender Trouble* of “gender as a performance,” which says that normative behavior for a given gender is reinforced by culture, helps to explain how girls learn to behave according to our culture’s rules for appropriate girlhood. Television reinforces for intellectual girls that they must perform their gender appropriately, or suffer the consequences of being invisible and unpopular, and that they will win rewards for performing in more traditionally feminine ways.

1990-2006 featured a large number of hour-long television dramas and dramedies starring teenage characters, and aimed at a young audience, including *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *My So-Called Life*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Freaks and Geeks*, and *Gilmore Girls*. In most teen shows there is a designated smart girl who is not afraid to demonstrate her interest in math or science, or writing or reading. In lieu of ethnic or racial minority characters, she is often the “other” of the group because of her less conventionally attractive appearance, her interest in school, her strong sense of right and wrong, and her lack of experience with boys. She nearly always experiences a makeover to become more normative, and she leaves behind the life of the mind in order to become more popular, and loved by boys. New media may offer competing images of smart girls.

To Carla

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INTRODUCTION

Foreword

In the first episode of the show *Beautiful People*, (2005-2006) the audience is introduced to sixteen year old Sophie Kerr (Sarah Foret), who has just moved with her newly divorced mother and older sister from New Mexico to New York City to attend a prestigious private school where she has won a scholarship. She is concerned about the school's higher academic standards, but her family assures her she is brilliant and will do just fine at the new school. When she arrives, she meets Gideon, a "nerdy" boy who falls instantly in love with her and warns her away from the crowd she is staring at, known as the "Beautiful People," who are rich and popular. Of course, Sophie is only interested in Gideon as a friend, and has eyes for one of these "BPs," Nicholas, who makes a bet with a friend that he can get Sophie to lose her virginity by the end of the year.

Even frequent viewers of teen television shows may not have heard of this show because it was shown, not on the traditionally teen-centric WB television network as originally planned, but on the basic cable channel, ABC Family (Littleton 2005, 273). It ran for only eight episodes in late summer of 2005, and eight more six months later in 2006, much fewer than the 22 episodes most hour-long series run each year, and it was not renewed for a subsequent season (Lewis 2006, 12). The script was derivative of multiple teen movies and television shows, and it was shot with the warm glow that so many shows on teen-centric WB network were, but lacked some of the qualities that made such shows successful. Pointing out that the show is positioned as an edgier *Gilmore Girls*, Eakta Khangura of Ann Arbor's *Michigan Daily* writes that the show "serves as a perfect homage to our image-obsessed culture. It reminds you of a standard Monet. From far away, the show looks like a refreshing take on the role beauty plays within our culture.

A closer look, however, reveals that it utterly lacks the panache or unified execution to make up for the absence of substance, ultimately making it a vapid primetime soap opera” (Khangura 2005, np). It is a by-the-numbers retelling of a story that teen television has repeated over and over again. A smart girl starts with admirable goals, such as excelling in high school and going on to a top college, making a difference in her community and making her own decisions about sex, and having a strong sense of self, but she is swept into the popular crowd and along the way changes significantly, stops working toward her goals, and compromises her personal values to spend more time with friendship and romance.

Beautiful People is only one of many similar programs that television has broadcast since 1990, when the Fox network first began airing dramas starring teenaged characters and aimed at teenagers. All of these shows share characteristics, following the escapades and angsts of predominantly white middle class teens, and sometimes their parents. The genre is replete with stereotypes, and in nearly every hour-long television show featuring teenagers in the major roles, there is a group of seemingly dissimilar characters who spend time together, with each representing a particular type of high school student. Each program has a designated smart girl.¹ Although of course, there are many kinds of smart, for the purposes of this dissertation, “smart girls” refers to characters who identify as intellectuals, and who are more “book smart” than street smart or people smart. The smart girl is the one character who is not afraid to demonstrate her interest in math or science, or writing or reading. In lieu of ethnic or racial minority characters, she is often the “other” of the group because of her less conventionally attractive appearance, her interest in school, her strong sense of right and wrong, and her lack of

¹ A note on terminology: For the purposes of this dissertation, I am defining “girl” as anyone up through college aged, and continue to analyze any show that goes beyond college. Although recent trends suggest using gender-neutral words such as “actor” or “hero,” as this paper specifically considers the function of girl characters, I prefer to use “actress” and “heroine” when I am talking about them.

experience with boys. Although the producers initially depict her this way, and she remains perpetually the “smart girl,” she experiences a makeover to become more normative, and she leaves behind the life of the mind in order to become more popular and loved by boys. In many ways the presence of these girls on so many programs is a positive development, and sends the empowering message that “nerdy” girls can get love too; however, these programs frequently transmit to girl audiences the message that they too can find love and friendship if they act like the girls on the shows, who make themselves over, give up schoolwork and causes, and have sex.

The media in general prioritizes consumerism and the allure of popularity over academic interests. Many teen movies involve a nerdy girl who is made over and has a romantic relationship with the most popular boy in school, with her seemingly frivolous interest in art or science taking a backseat to romance, and magazines aimed at teenagers may have one or two articles about career or school, they are generally devoted to profiling attractive actors and actresses, and recommending clothing and cosmetics for the reader to purchase.

This dissertation fills a gap in the literature that connects girls’ studies and television. It considers the messages that teen drama as a television genre sends to girl viewers, and attempts to determine if these messages influences them to use their minds, or discourages them from it. It also considers if and how these messages have changed over time, and examines how the type of feminism most popular at that time a given show aired was made manifest on the programs. While the primary period I investigate is 1990-2006, what I am calling the “teen-show era,” which includes such shows as *Beverly Hills, 90210* (*90210*), *My So-Called Life* (*MSCL*), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*Buffy*), *Freaks and Geeks*, and *Gilmore Girls*, I am also interested in what

came before those shows were aired.² For each character, I examine how she has been made over physically, how changes in feminism have influenced the ways brainy girls are portrayed when they relate to their communities, how each girls' sex lives is shown, as well as how girls of color and Jewish girls who fit into those roles are treated.

The portrayal of the smart girl on television has changed significantly from early television, when Princess and Kitten of *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) or Gidget (1965-1966) were strongly encouraged by the rest of the cast to act “more like a girl” and chastised for forays into fields that American society considered the domain of boys. Girls like the less perky and more thoughtful Buddy of *Family* (1976-1980) and the brainy and bespectacled Becca of *Life Goes On* (1989-1993) were strides in the right direction, but they still learned lessons about the importance of attracting boys, at the expense of other parts of their lives.³ The post 1990 shows on which I concentrate all exist in an uncomfortable tension between the clear artistic missions of most of the producers, writers, and actors—to make smart girls cool—and the needs of the network and advertisers. This tension exists because the show must be interesting enough, and more precisely sexy enough, for people to keep watching, which means that all characters who

² The first three shows have abbreviations by which viewers commonly refer to them when speaking, the last two are generally called by shortened names only online. Arguably, some of the programs I am considering could be considered “family shows.” Family shows tend to pay attention to adults and teenage children in roughly equal amounts of screen time, as the featured shows *My So-Called Life* and *Gilmore Girls* do, as well as *Everwood*, *The O.C.*, and *Joan of Arcadia*, which also aired during the teen-show era. Teen shows might be considered mostly those where the teens are the stars, and the parents supporting characters, or barely there at all, including *90210*, *Buffy*, and *Freaks and Geeks*, as well as *Party of Five*, *Dawson's Creek*, *Felicity*, and *Veronica Mars*. However, both teen audiences and adult audiences watched all of these shows, so that both have an equal opportunity to transmit messages about how to perform as a girl to teenagers.

³ Although suddenly, many more of these programs are available on DVD or online than there were even in 2006, frequently the older shows were not easily found, and even archives such as the Library of Congress did not have all episodes. During their runs, I viewed every episode of the five shows I analyze the most, as well as teen show-era programs *Party of Five*, *Felicity*, *Dawson's Creek*, *Beautiful People*, *Everwood*, *Joan of Arcadia*, and *Veronica Mars*, plus the first three seasons of *Smallville* and *The O.C.* In the case of the older shows mentioned in Chapter 2, I viewed, on DVD, every episode of the entire series of *Gidget*, the first two seasons of *Family*, and the first season of *Life Goes On*, all that were available. In most other cases, I may have only viewed, or when the episodes were not available, read scripts or transcripts of the episodes I cite. I also examined online episode guides that indicate the series-long trajectory of each character for all of the historical shows.

are “regulars” must be conventionally attractive: thin, clear-skinned, and wearing hairstyles that flatter their faces and make them look “sexy,” but especially must comply with the rules that surround femininity or masculinity. This requirement means a smart girl (much like her cousin the tomboy) who begins outside the boundaries of conventional femininity must experience a makeover.

The shows exist to serve the needs of the advertisers. Therefore, the most conservative choice, or the most popular choice nearly always wins over the way the story seems designed to go. Because these programs are ongoing, there is a “promise” that begins each series that the audience expects to come to fruition by the series finale. This promise, which in a movie or novel would have the girl succeeding at love and succeeding in school by the end, is frequently thwarted for a number of reasons. The show may receive poor ratings and be canceled before these things can happen. Creators and writers may leave the show, and others’ visions take over. Actors playing “love interests” leave the show for various reasons. In each of these cases, storylines fizzle out, or are radically changed. Therefore, the program cannot keep the promise.

The need for dramatic tension requires that the girl’s goals of attending top colleges or having brilliant careers be thwarted in order to create more storylines. The requirements of keeping the “gang” together on the show means they must attend school or work in the community the shows are set in, which are not usually where the mentioned colleges are. Sometimes she attends a local school at least one character will call “Ivy League quality,” but the presence of her less brainy friends at the same institution makes this suspect. The need for dramatic tension also requires that couples that are clearly destined for each other must be kept apart by artificial means and/or must break up. This often involves the girl or her partner

cheating, or her partner having some sort of emotional problem. As the girl often stays with her partner, this makes her judgment seem questionable.

Sexually, although popular girls may have a romantic past that precedes the show (ex-boyfriends we hear about or meet and perhaps even a sex life), a smart girl is always not only a virgin, but has never had any kind of relationship with boys other than platonic friend or unrequited crush. Although the sexy or popular girl is often “discovered” to be a virgin so that her first time can be a compelling onscreen moment, the smart girl almost always loses her virginity much later than her friends (the sole exception being the girls brought up in very religious families), and must often be the initiator of sex with a partner. She rarely is attracted to another smart boy, but is much more likely to have relationships with a bad boy, an ethnic boy, or another girl.

The Origins of this Project

This project had its genesis in 1994 when one of the characters on *My So Called Life*, the brainy boy character Brian, looked around his high school and wondered when everyone had suddenly started dating, and how they knew how it worked, asking, “Was I absent that day?” (“The Zit”). I was already well out of college, had a Master’s degree, and had been working in a large corporation for several years by the time that episode aired. However, I remembered that feeling from high school, but had never seen anyone on television explicitly articulate it. I became interested in finding ways that culture represented the experience of trying to understand how the popularity system worked, and how cultural artifacts showed intelligence as a barrier to popularity.

Mary Pipher’s book *Reviving Ophelia* also came out in 1994, causing a renewed societal interest in girls’ behavior that had been dormant since Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* was

published in 1982 (I had read it myself for a feminist theory class in 1987). I had a vague notion that I would do something with this idea, but did not know what until I began reading academic studies of television shows and popular movies and realized that it would be possible to study them professionally. It took nearly a decade before I felt ready to go back to school, but when I did, I looked for doctoral programs that would allow me to study media from a cultural studies perspective, emphasized popular culture, or media studies, and would allow me specifically to study representations of girls on television. At Bowling Green State University, I was able to do just that.

It is important to note, however, that although I grew up watching television, and often did see girls my own age, I had just graduated from college when *Beverly Hills, 90210* premiered, and I did not start watching it until a year into its run when I was working in an advertising agency, and living on my own as an adult. Therefore, even though I watched all of the teen-show era shows for the first time during their original runs, I am coming to teen shows as an adult viewer and can only surmise how an actual teenage viewer takes the messages the shows send.

The History of Teen Dramas

Although all television eras have included television shows with teenage characters, the period of 1990-2006 is particularly significant for teen dramas. Until this period, there were only three broadcast networks: ABC; CBS; and NBC, (plus the noncommercial PBS).⁴ Cable channels predominantly aired movies, videos, reruns, or non-fictional content. The period from early television until 1990 is generally marked by two types of prime time shows on the big three networks: half-hour comedies generally aired in the early hours and were aimed at the whole

⁴ There was a fourth network, Dumont, in television's early days, but it did not last long.

family; and hour long shows, which were aired past 9PM Eastern time and had more adult themes. However, in 1989, the Fox network began with the mission to reach what its executives thought of as underserved viewers and created shows designed to appeal to each market. Daniel Kimmel writes in *The Fourth Network: How Fox Broke the Rules and Reinvented Television* that Daniel Fessel, the researcher in charge of finding out who these underserved viewers were said:

There was a very strong theme of very repetitive complaints about the three networks that indicated to us that if we had innovative programming, if we had programming that focused on particular age groups, if we had programming that we really stood behind, then we thought we could really appeal to a very strong need and interest the consumers were indicating to us that they had. (Kimmel 2004, 22)

Among these underserved groups were young viewers and “urban,” viewers (a term television networks use to mean primarily African American and Latino/Latina audiences). *Beverly Hills, 90210* started in 1990 on Fox, and was the first hour-long drama both starring and aimed at teenage audiences. Although most adults did not even know *90210* was on at first, “in the 12-17 teen demographic it was pulling a 40 share, meaning that an estimated 40 percent of all American teenagers watching television Thursdays at 9 were tuned to Fox” (Kimmell 2004, 109). It included, along with a variety of rich and image-obsessed teenagers growing up in *Beverly Hills*, the brainy Andrea Zuckerman. She was the editor of the school newspaper, was extremely driven, from a poorer community than the rest, and was Jewish, which made her an “other” even after she became a part of a group of friends. In many ways, her persona delineated the stereotypes that many of the subsequent smart television girls would follow.

After Fox had success with this show and a number of others aimed at the teenage market in 1997, The WB and UPN “netlets” were created with similar missions of attracting youth.

These broadcasters were smaller than the big three or Fox. Each programmed fewer hours than the other networks, and neither had a news division. Many communities had only one or the other, and some had neither. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was a surprise hit for The WB and lasted for five years on the network. *Buffy* was a show about a girl who kills vampires and demons, and her group of helpful friends, including the brainy Willow who first helped Buffy by contributing computer and science skills, but later became a witch. However, creator Joss Whedon used the supernatural activity as a metaphor for the trials and tribulations of high school life using the concept “high school is hell.” In an online interview, he said:

I designed the show to create that strong reaction. I designed Buffy to be an icon, to be an emotional experience, to be loved in a way that other shows can't be loved. Because it's about adolescence, which is the most important thing people go through in their development, becoming an adult. And it mythologizes it in such a way, such a romantic way—it basically says, ‘Everybody who made it through adolescence is a hero.’

(Robinson 2001, np)

Buffy was smart television for smart people. In a sense, it was the anti- *90210*. Whedon said, “I don't enjoy dumb TV. I believe Aaron Spelling has single-handedly lowered SAT scores” (Nussbaum 2002, 6).⁵ There was a definite feeling on the show that smartness was valuable, as evinced by having not only a smart girl, but also a middle-aged male librarian as primary characters. Many who watched it during while it was on The WB felt they were reading a show the way one would read a novel, and many wrote papers and books on the program,

⁵ Aaron Spelling was the executive producer of *90210*, as well as the wildly popular *Charlie's Angels*, *Dynasty*, *The Love Boat*, *Melrose Place*, and many other shows that television critics and feminist critics alike deem campy or “dumbed down” programming (even as many admit to receiving pleasure from them). He also produced *Family*; however, the only show in his portfolio that critics did like.

which was possible due to all the layering, subtext, symbolism and other literary ideas Whedon inserted.⁶

The network went on to develop other popular shows aimed at younger, mostly white, female viewers. These shows have included the story of naïve but book smart college student Felicity Porter of *Felicity*, and *Gilmore Girls*, about a very brainy girl and her relationship with her young single mother. Of this show, creator Amy Sherman-Palladino was also trying to counter the shows that had come before. In an NPR interview she said:

At the time that I put [*Gilmore Girls*] on the air, teenage girls on television, in my view, were reflected in two categories. There was the pretty cheerleader who was secretly anorexic, or they were the angry, dark-haired, Doc Marten wearing, disenfranchised girls who hated the cheerleaders, but secretly wanted to be the cheerleaders. And there didn't seem to be any room in the middle, didn't seem to be room for the girl who wasn't having sex at twelve and a half, wasn't dressing like a whore, and who wasn't dying to be popular. There wasn't a girl who was comfortable in her own skin, wasn't part of any group and was OK with that. Books and reading and education and her future were the most important thing. Way more important than boys. (Gross 2005, np)

⁶ This dissertation could not have been written without several fan web sites, including Television Without Pity (TWOP), which started as Dawson's Wrap when *Dawson's Creek* premiered in 1997 (the founders changed the name to Mighty Big TV as they expanded into multiple other shows, but were forced to change the name). The site recaps approximately 30-35 drama and reality shows per season, each with its own discussion forum as well as fora for miscellaneous other television-related topics. I have followed discussions, all by people who tend to be thoughtful and are required to use correct grammar and spelling and follow strenuous rules of netiquette, of *Buffy*, *Freaks and Geeks*, *Gilmore Girls*, nearly all the other teen programs I mention from 1997 on, as well as gender on television and race and ethnicity on television. Although I rarely post, for many years I did not feel that I had really seen or understood an episode of a show without reading the discussion that people on that site conduct. Prior to that site, from about 1993-1997, I was an active member of the community (along with the TWOP founders) of Danny Drennan's Mediarama board, on which we discussed *90210*, and *Melrose Place*. I was referred to that board through people I had met on America Online's similar fora in 1992.

The WB seemed to tire of its girl-centric model, however. It first widened its scope to try to attract more boys so that shows like *Dawson's Creek*, which was about a young filmmaker, *Smallville*, the story of the young Clark Kent, and *Everwood*, about a piano prodigy all featured teen males as the main characters, with girls in supporting roles. More recently, The WB faltered when, just as the characters on most of the formerly high school oriented shows moved into college, it developed shows to attract "women 18-49," and launched a number of very low-rated shows.

UPN was slower to catch on with the teen market and included many more shows aimed at the urban market until 2001 when it poached *Buffy* from The WB. Although fans online expressed anger at many of the changes to the show at the new network (which were in part because Whedon essentially left to develop other shows), and felt the production values seemed much lower than they had on The WB, it was a ratings success for UPN. The influx of new female viewers allowed UPN to have success with the reality show *America's Next Top Model*, and when *Buffy* ended two years later, the netlet launched a new teen drama with a smart female heroine, *Veronica Mars*, which lasted three seasons as a critical darling and was beloved by a select few, but earned some of the lowest ratings in prime time. Few other UPN shows made impact; however, and other attempts at dramas with teen appeal had such low ratings, and were panned so vehemently by critics, that they were quickly canceled.

Although Fox is still successful with the youth market, and has had success with a number of post- 90210 shows with similar themes, including *Party of Five*, and the present day *The O.C.*, the larger networks have not had the same sort of success. ABC launched *My So-Called Life*, a show with a teen girl as the protagonist, in 1994. The plan was for what creator Winnie Holzman called, "an 'uncensored' depiction of teenage life" (Jensen 2004, np). Although

critics loved it and it had a fanatical following, the show was up against the juggernaut of *Friends* and *Mad about You*, moved around and preempted constantly by the network, received low ratings, and ABC canceled it after nineteen episodes, mid-cliffhanger. It was clearly a case of the right show on the wrong network at the wrong time. The year it was canceled the movie *Clueless* (1995) would start a “girl power” movement in the mass media, and show that girls had huge buying power that would extend to shows like *Buffy*. Despite its short tenure on television, this show made a bigger hit a few years later when it was rerun on MTV, has sold very well on DVD, and most of the subsequent show creators invoke it as an important predecessor to their shows. For example, Marti Noxon, an executive producer of *Buffy* said in an interview on the season 6 DVD, “I’m basically trying to write *My So-Called Life* with vampires” (Whedon 2004, np).

Freaks and Geeks, which was set in 1980 premiered on NBC in 1999. The show split its time evenly between Lindsay Weir and her geeky brother. Brainy teen Lindsay gave up math to hang out with students who appeared less studious but more fun than other teenagers, the “freaks.” The creators wanted to do something different from The WB’s “wish fulfillment” script, which places its characters in an idealized world. Executive Producer Judd Apatow, who, like the characters, attended high school in the early 1980s, says, “A lot of shows have soap opera elements or fantasy fulfillment . . . We wanted to do a show that was exactly what it was like” (Jacobs 1999, np). Writer Mike White, who had previously written for The WB’s *Dawson’s Creek*, in which every character had unrealistic successes said, “It’s doing something different and interesting. I’m so tired of writing about kids who are too extraordinary for words. It’ll be good to have a show on the air that actually makes teens feel like winners compared to the

people they're watching" (Jacobs, np).⁷ Once again, however, a teen drama received poor treatment and low ratings on a more established network and the show was canceled after sixteen episodes. However, this show too an made impact, particularly on a crowd that appreciated brainy, sarcastic humor, and its stars and creators have returned to other television and movie projects, although it has not had the kind of success in reruns that *MSCL* did. Lindsay was a particularly brilliant girl, and she is important to discuss because most of the other main girls, except for Willow, are identified with reading and writing. Lindsay's ability for math makes her a very unusual heroine.

Early in 2006, The WB and UPN networks, facing falling profits, and after a television season in which the only new girl-centric dramas were on cable, announced that they were merging into a new network called The CW, which was once again aimed at the youth market. The 2006-2007 television season consisted of the two networks' most popular shows, including *Gilmore Girls* and *Veronica Mars*, (but not *Everwood*), and three newly developed programs, with the duds of the 2005-2006 season canceled. This could have meant either that the teen-oriented shows were now on a "real" network that most viewers can watch, and could expect the ratings of the other four networks, or it could have meant that even the combined resources of these netlets cannot compete with the bigger networks, in which case most teen-oriented programming could be banished to cable (or possibly only available on DVD or through Internet downloads). As the CW did not do well in the ratings in the 2006-2007 season, the second choice seemed to be the case.

⁷ White is alluding to his experience writing for the first season of *Dawson's Creek*, whose characters were often accused of talking like dictionaries, and which had characters who had successes in filmmaking and writing that were unlikely for people of their ages.

Young people were already eschewing network television in favor of reality shows, cable, Internet and video games, so even the teen shows that still existed likely had far less impact on teen behavior than they may have in the past. In either case, this clearly demarks a turning point for teen shows. This is an excellent time to take stock of what has occurred in the past seventeen years and to consider what might be next.

What's Next?

Chapter 1, “A List Of Quotations From Minds Profound: Framing the Smart Girl” includes a review of the literature, introduces the shows and characters on which this dissertation focuses, and asks the primary research questions.⁸ Prior to this project’s beginning, and even during most of the time it was written, teen television had not been given much attention by academics, and what existed were studies of individual shows rather than the whole genre, and there were not many references to characters’ intelligence. Therefore, there was not a large expected body of literature to draw on that explicitly considered teen drama as a genre, and the smart girl in particular. Instead, the chapter reviews a variety of collections of literature, including examples from Feminist Media Criticism and Feminist Television Studies, but also academic literature from the relatively young Girls Studies movement, as well as the journalistic studies of real life girl behavior that started this project. The original research question of what sorts of messages the shows were sending about smart girls, and how it might influence real girl viewers’ behavior, came from reviewing this literature.

⁸ The title of this dissertation, and a number of the chapter titles are variations of quotes by Dorothy Parker. For the complete title and Chapter 1, the quote is from her poem “News Item” and reads, “Boys seldom make passes, at girls who wear glasses (Parker 2001, 109). For Chapter One, the full quote, from her short story “The Little Hours” is, “I might repeat to myself, slowly and soothingly, a list of quotations beautiful from minds profound; if I can remember any of the damn things” (Parker 2001, 258). For Chapter Three, the full quote is, “Beauty is only skin deep, but ugly goes clean to the bone” (ctd. in Bloch 2003, 163). For Chapter Five, the quote is from her poem “Bohemia” and reads “People Who Do Things Exceed My Endurance” (Parker 2001, 223).

Chapter 2 is called “Girls who Wore Glasses: The History of the Smart Girl” and takes a historical look at smart girls on television ranging from Kitten and Princess of *Father Knows Best* through Becca Thatcher of *Life Goes On* (which started a year before *90210*). It traces the development of girls on television from almost invisible, as the early family shows had mostly boy children, through the very good girls of *Father Knows Best*. It then goes on to examine the temporary importance of teen girls in the mid-sixties when *The Patty Duke Show* and *Gidget* aired, through the “nerds” represented by characters on *The Brady Bunch*, Lisa Loopner (Gilda Radner) from *Saturday Night Live* and by Sarah Jessica Parker’s Patty on *Square Pegs* in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Next, it analyzes sitcom girls such as Carol Seaver (Missy Gold) of *Growing Pains*, and Jennifer Keaton (Tina Yothers) of *Family Ties*, who learned lessons about “dumbing down” in the mid 1980s, and the more enlightened late ‘80s and early ‘90s represented in the ABC drama *Life Goes On*, and the animated comedies *The Simpsons* and *Daria*, which aired during the teen-show era, but dealt with smart girls quite differently than the dramas have. What pressures did girls have on these shows when it came to demonstrating their intelligence, and what were the solutions the other characters offered them? How much have things changed, and are the changes entirely positive? What happened when smart girl characters stopped wearing glasses and went on to use different signifiers of her intelligence?

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 all consider the five main shows, each according to a different facet of the characters’ storylines. Chapter 3: “Beauty is Only Skin Deep: The Place for Smart Girl” discusses the physical makeover of these girls and how it nearly always involves a rejection of school work and a movement from marginal status within the social structure of high school to a more pivotal role as her love life begins to take center stage. The needs of the romantic plot and the need for the girl to be consumed as a sexually attractive figure make the makeover a

necessity on these shows. Over time, however, the method of the makeover has changed as we move from the literal removal of glasses, through an appearance change accompanied by metaphorical removal of glasses, through the more post-feminist sensibilities of *Gilmore Girls* which has the brainy girl approached by a boy even before any sort of makeover, but which still have characters turning away from academic and career goals in favor of romance and more typically feminine behavior. In part, the social life of girls necessitates the change, and this chapter will discuss some of the studies of girl behavior and “mean girls” theory.

Chapter 4: “People Who Do Things: The Smart Girl, Feminism, and Activism,” discusses the how changes in feminism affect how the smart girl is portrayed. It also demonstrates how the smart girl is the moral center of her group and describes her activist activities. The teen-show era took place as the form of feminism embraced by popular culture changed a number of times. The late 1980s/early 1990s saw a backlash against feminism, during which television and other media reinforced the importance of motherhood and domesticity as seen frequently on *90210*. In the early 1990s, the underground Riotgrrl movement showed girls they could make noise and make change, much like characters on *My So-Called Life*. In the mid 1990s, the mass media took Riotgrrl and sold it to the masses in diluted form as Girl Power, exemplified by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, featuring a truly powerful girl. By 2000, feminism was no longer taboo, but became Third-wave feminism, and postfeminism. *Freaks and Geeks* simultaneously reflects the second wave feminism of 1980, when it is set, and the Third-wave feminism of 1999, when it aired, which stresses being strong but also being “girly” and embracing sexuality. In 2000, *Gilmore Girls* represented a post-feminist universe, where gender was simply no impediment to any endeavor, so that feminism is not necessary.

The brand of feminism in use influences how each girl reacts politically. Often, just as they are discovering new friends and boys, these girls also have a political awakening as well that makes them feel the need to speak truth to power, cause a rethinking of public memory, lead protests, and compel their peers and communities to think and act differently. They may have to convince their friends or their parents that their fights are worthwhile, and run the risk of losing the new friends or romantic partners they have finally acquired, and the programs often deal with this by having the girl forget the original cause in the service of the romantic plot. How has feminism changed during this time? What political changes may have caused the changes in how these girls relate to authority?

Chapter 5 is “Never Been Kissed: Sex and the Smart Girl.” The smart girl on these shows appears much less sexually experienced and informed than her peers. She is most often contrasted with the normative girls and the ones who appear to have much more sexual experience. However, the shows often take great pains to level out these differences, pushing the smart girl and the sexually experienced girl closer to normativity. These shows say that in order to perform as a normative girl, it is appropriate to engage in sex young—since teen relationships on the programs are nearly always “true love”—and the shows position this as normal and desirable, emphasizing few of the potential side-effects and encouraging the viewers to root for teenage sex. How have the changes in sex education and US social policy about teen sex over the time period affected how these programs depict teen sex?

Because characters on these shows are nearly always white and nominally Christian, I have chosen in the sixth chapter to concentrate on the few teen girls who have ethnic or racial minority status on these shows and a few others in “The Invisible Girl: Race and Ethnicity on Teen Television.” While the Latina or Native American smart girl does not exist, and the African

American smart girl is nearly invisible, appearing only in *Felicity* as a regular character, and on other shows only as guest stars, young Asian and Jewish women are most often automatically assumed to be smart, and the smart girls, including Andrea, Willow, and Paris, are frequently Jewish. The television networks' fears of miscegenation is even stronger on teen television than on other types of programs and causes there to be relatively little diversity in terms of skin color.

The Conclusion is a summation of what messages these shows send to girl viewers, how girls are treated in popular culture today, and an analysis of how New Media affects what is available to viewers. Watching television mediated by Digital Video Recorders, which allow time-shifting and fast forwarding through commercials, or on DVD, which can be viewed at any time, in any sequence, and with no commercials at all changes the way the shows are framed. These technologies may alter the messages sent by the programs when they are part of broadcast television's traditional model of "flow" for a while night of programming that includes two or three hours of shows scheduled to attract similar audiences, interspersed with commercials and network promotions. Even further, it asks the question, how do online web sites, blogs, and Internet video and video series created by the public, and placed on sites like YouTube, provide spaces where there can be alternative images of smart girls? This subject deserves further academic study, and I consider some ways to accomplish that.

CHAPTER 1. A LIST OF QUOTATIONS FROM MINDS PROFOUND: FRAMING THE SMART GIRL

Introduction

This project combines several disciplines: Girls' studies; Feminist Television Criticism; and Cultural Studies. Girls' Studies is a relatively new field, one that many believe should remain a subset of women's studies, but which others believe is quite different. The work done by women's studies scholars is invaluable, and the purpose of exposing the ideologies transmitted by these shows from a feminist perspective is important because "tween" and teenaged girls will grow up to be women. Girls' Studies is particularly focused on what happens to girls as they are being indoctrinated into womanhood. While many Girls' Studies scholars study poor girls, disabled girls, or girls of color and the traumas they encounter in their home lives or cities, this dissertation specifically concerns concepts that are uniquely problems of high school—popularity, "coolness," first love, and sexual initiation, and how intelligent teen girl characters contend with them. Therefore, the literature surrounding girls' studies has specific uses that other women's studies texts do not, although they often cite women's studies texts, particularly those that deal with body image and consumption.

Feminist media studies, and by extension, feminist television studies, seeks to determine what televisual representations say about our culture, particularly its view of women, and how it influences our culture. It looks to exhume representations that the media repeats, and to "read" these representations to discover what cultural messages are being sent by the media, and particularly what they are saying about women's lives and their presumptive roles in society. As Melissa Milkie, the author of "Contested Images of Femininity: An Analysis of Cultural Gatekeepers' Struggles with the "Real Girl" Critique writes: "It is here-in assessing girls'

resistance to images in contest with the responses and practices of cultural gatekeepers who produce images of girls and women—that the struggle over defining femininity can be explored. Indeed, understanding contested definitions of femininity is the central problematic in feminist media research . . . and can extend knowledge about gender stratification” (Milkie 2002, 839). In other words, there is an intended message, although the viewer may or may not read the message that way.

However, feminist television scholars are hardly monolithic in their approaches, and my approach resembles discussed by communications scholar Amanda Lotz and television scholar Sharon Marie Ross who write that feminist television criticism’s “theoretical complexity can be traced to the incorporation of multiple intellectual influences including feminist film criticism, British cultural studies, and feminist-inflected mass communication research. The approaches and methods central to feminist television criticism illuminate factors related to the theorization of institutions and industry, neither of which has occupied a persistently central place in US feminist film studies” (Lotz and Ross 2004, 185). To this end, within the text, I cite scholarly articles and books from a variety of disciplines, as well as considering those that are more popular, such as *Entertainment Weekly* and newspaper articles, in addition to information, such as ratings charts, cast lists, episode guides, and interviews found exclusively on the Internet. The images seen on screen cannot be separated from the industry that creates the programs, the media that critique them, as well as the culture as a whole that may influence, or be influenced by, these shows.

When we look at smart teenage girls on television as a particular character type, examining the representations and narratives surrounding the characters, we can begin to determine the messages the shows are sending to their audiences. Discussion of representation is

important for cultural criticism from a feminist perspective because such depictions influence cultural perception and the performance of gender of those in our culture who see and hear these repeated messages. Exposing the repeated and contradictory messages of these representations will allow for what Suzanna Danuta Walters in *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory* calls “. . . a critique of existing (patriarchal) representations as well as a construction of alternative or oppositional cultural images and practices” (Walters 1995, 24). This dissertation seeks to interrogate those repeated messages in order to consider what other images of smart girls on television might be possible.

The messages that these shows send affect the lives of girls in our culture. For instance R.A. Botta, in a study of how television watching affects body image found that “media do have an impact on body image disturbance, both directly through body image processing and indirectly by encouraging girls to endorse a thin ideal and by establishing what they see as realistic ideals” (Botta 1996, 36). The multiple representations of brainy girls that television portrays throughout viewers’ lifetimes affect how they feel about themselves and their bodies, and how they are treated. Timothy Shary writes in a discussion of the “nerdly” girl in the movies, “The association of girls’ intelligence with ugliness, neurosis, intimidation, and immorality has only served to disenfranchise and discourage young women who aspire to great intellectual achievements and social acceptance” (Shary 2002, 249).⁹ Are there ways these characters could be created, and stay interesting, that defy these stereotypes?

Cultural studies is also a useful method for examining these texts. As a cultural studies scholar, I am primarily interested in the *cultural work* done by televisual images and representations. Cultural work is the process by which cultural objects, including media objects,

⁹ There are many teen movies, of course, that reinforce this idea of the outsider girl, who is often brainy, being made over to become a bombshell, including *She’s Out of Control*, *She’s All That*, and *Never Been Kissed*.

reinforce current structures of how people feel, think, and act, in a society, or enable members of that culture to rehearse new patterns of feeling, thinking or acting that comply with historical changes. These programs seem to feature teenage girls as rational agents who are there to provide a good story and some solid entertainment, but are much more products of commerce and indoctrination.

Along with the advertising that accompanies them, they serve to sell the advertiser's products, and to instill in the viewers a wish to shop, as well as providing for all viewers a discourse of "eye candy" that can involve the always new and always up to date clothing and accessories the girls wear, the lovely homes in which many of them live, and their faces and bodies. Actors and actresses are cast strictly by how appealing they are to the producers, casting agents, and network executives, most of whom are men, and how appealing they believe audiences will find them. It is not teenage girls who are making these calls, and their opinions primarily matter in terms of their buying power.

Cultural Studies often considers power relationships. Teenage girls are hardly the most powerful population in our society, even if advertising makes it seem as if they have the most buying power. Their power as consumers, however, hardly entitles them to make decisions about their schooling, their bodies, and their lives. The unequal power relations between men and women, boys and girls, and in particular the power adult men have over teenage girls is one of the arenas I discuss. Early teen movies and television, as Ilana Nash says, "Uniformly support the ideologies that uphold patriarchy, and thus benefit a social arrangement that ultimately favors mature men" (Nash 2006, 13). The repeated, if subtle, extortions to the girls of today to shop, to stay polite and quiet, and to begin having sex young seem to suggest that this inequality has not changed.

Nash writes, “One of the foundational arguments in cultural studies of marginalized populations holds that the discursive field surrounding a fetishized yet reviled Other provides fantasies of difference that constitute the imagined identity of the oppressor’s culture. The project of representation, then, reveals as much about its texts creators as about its topic” (Nash 2006, 4). The presence of so many sexually active girls, with the holdouts made to seem abnormal, as well as the overrepresentation of white, thin, physically attractive girls is a direct result of the power imbalance that allows a few men to dictate what is “normal” and what is “attractive” on the airwaves, and therefore in society. The fact that teenage girls should be sexy, but not too sexy, should make their voices heard, but not to the extent of direct action, and that their first role in life is to look like a “hottie” are direct mandates from the mass media.

These “common knowledge” dictates take the form of cultural norms that we believe are natural. Among our culture’s mythologies that are ingrained in our minds is the idea of gender as biological, rather than culturally constructed. Judith Butler’s concept of “gender as a performance” helps to explain how girls learn to behave according to our culture’s rules for appropriate girlhood. Television reinforces for intellectual girls that they must perform their gender appropriately, or suffer the consequences of being invisible and unpopular, and that they will win rewards for performing in more traditionally feminine ways. How do teen shows in particular do that?

Review of the Literature

There has been relatively little written about smart girls on television and nearly all writing on teen television has happened in the past few years. There has been a fair amount of recent writing on teen television shows, and “Buffy Studies” has become a cottage industry, but most scholars still write about individual shows, ignoring patterns and trends within the genre,

and few emphasize the smart characters on these shows. Additionally, despite sociological, primarily quantitatively-based studies, cultural studies scholars have not studied the smart teenage girl as a type. It is important to look at the entire genre as a whole, and the smart girl in particular, in order to determine the type of message being sent about “acting smart,” and the messages sent to smart girl viewers.

Primary questions include “How have feminist and cultural studies scholars written about girls?” “How have other people written about television as a medium?” “How have feminist and cultural studies scholars in particular written about the mass media, particularly television?” “What has been written about the particular shows and characters on which I concentrate?” Answering these questions allows me to construct a framework through which I can discuss television’s hegemonic power and historical changes, the ways that television empowers or disempowers women and girls, how girls are perceived by and depicted in the media, how particular shows function to influence audiences, and theorize what experiences real life girls may bring to television viewing and what influence it has over their lives and their perceptions of the world.

Girls’ Studies

Girls’ Studies is a new field and is an offshoot of Youth Culture Studies. While there is a great deal of controversy over dividing girls from women, I choose to consider girls’ studies a separate category from Women’s Studies. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*(1979), Dick Hebdige investigated ways that young British boys created their own subcultures through clothing, speech, and manners. Yet, he left out the girls almost entirely, causing feminist scholars to fill in those gaps. There have been a number of influential studies on girls and popular culture since 1990, starting with Australian Angela McRobbie’s *Feminism and Youth Culture: from*

“*Jackie*” to “*Just Seventeen*,” a study of girl culture from the British Cultural Studies tradition that counters the male bias of Hebdige.

McRobbie started with the premise that, since unlike the boys Hebdige studied, girls were not out in the public sphere as much, fighting, dancing and forming large alliances, and when they were they were engaged in activities like shopping that cultural studies scholars found beneath study, saying the “more modest practices of buying and selling have remained women’s work and have been of little interest to those concerned with youth cultural resistance” (McRobbie 1991, 137). More recently, she has discussed “third wave” feminism in which sexuality is presented as one of a girls’ talents, and postfeminism, which begins with the idea that the battle against sexism has been won, happened during this period. These forms, McRobbie says, “successfully drive a wedge between women, which sets off the mother, the teacher, and the feminist into the realms of a bygone age” (12).

Since McRobbie’s work, more cultural studies have concentrated entirely on images of girlhood, including Sherrie Inness’s anthology *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth Century American Girls Cultures* in which she suggests that “too often girls’ culture is shunted aside by scholars as less significant or less important than the study of adult women’s issues, but girls’ culture is what helps to create not just an individual woman but all women in our society” (Inness 1998, 11). Although there are no articles in the anthology about television, Angela Hubler, writing of girls’ reading practices, notes that girl readers, “commonly focused on aspects of texts that confirmed female behavior they found desirable while ignoring or forgetting aspects that undermined these behaviors,” and ends with “it is clear that girls are not blank slates that unthinkingly reproduce the ideological messages written upon them” (Hubler 1998, 281).

Another important text for girls' studies scholars is the film studies text *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood* edited by Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance. The authors write that women's lives have been secret for quite some time and "even more deeply hidden has been the experience of the girl. It is the girl who is the most profound site of patriarchal investment, her unconstrained freedom representing her threat to male control" and that this is surprising because "six of the ten highest grossing movies of all time, adjusted for inflation, are principally about adolescent girls—either their experience or the treatment they receive in male culture" (Gateward 2002, 14). Many of the articles are interesting, as, of course, there is a relatively fine line separating filmic and televisual images and much of the audience for the teen shows also enjoys teen movies. This anthology includes the earliest study I have found of smarter girls in the visual media, Timothy Shary's "The Nerdy Girl and Her Beautiful Sister." Shary writes that most teen movies "actually suggest to girls that intelligence is a burden more than an asset; more valuable assets . . . are fashion sense, physical beauty, agreeable attitude, and the attainment of a boyfriend" (Shary 2002, 236). Most teen dramas, alas, do the same.

As few studies as there have been on smart women on television, there have been a significant number on supernatural, and "action" heroines. Elyce Ray Helford's *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television* was an anthology of writings on fantasy women on television in the 1990s including *Buffy*. She writes, "The late '90s offered some of the most developed and compelling (if contradictory and sometimes even reactionary) televisual representations of gender politics and debates over (and within) feminism" (Helford 2000, 6). While she and the other authors in the book are more concerned with Willow and other characters' engagement with the supernatural and the physical than their brains, her treatment is important because supernatural girls are pushed toward normality, much

as smart girls are. They begin as “kick-ass” characters with boundless strength, but later temper their behavior to attract love interests and get along with friends, as well as being attractive to the viewing audience.

Kent Ono’s chapter in Helford’s book, “To Be a Vampire on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: Race and (“Other”) Socially Marginalizing Positions on Horror TV,” demonstrates how whiteness and femininity are connected on the show. He discusses the few ethnic characters that appeared on *Buffy* writing that, “The valorization and heroification of a white female protagonist is constructed through an associated villainization and demonization of people of color” (Ono 2000, 164). He also writes a character’s race, or their difference from the norm, may cause their “violent expulsion from the show—the ultimate form of marginalization” (164). This is useful when examining the whiteness of teen television, which overwhelmingly privileges white, nominally Christian characters, and marginalizes characters of color, frequently excluding them altogether from the ranks of regularly appearing characters, and killing off many guest stars of color who do appear.

Dawn Heinecken in a monograph, *The Warrior Women of Television: A Feminist Cultural Analysis of the New Female Body in Popular Media*, discusses action heroines in *Buffy*, as well as *La Femme Nikita* and *Aeon Flux*. She argues they each of these heroines is a “contradictory figure” who simultaneously serves as both “eye candy and as a figure of power” (Heinecken 2003, 29). Sherrie Inness, in another anthology, *Action Chicks: New Images of Women in Popular Culture*, writes that feminism “questioned the notion that women are “naturally” not aggressive, incapable of handling the same challenges as men” (Inness 2004, 5) and “how tough women are frequently toned down to make them more palatable to a mass audience” (Inness 2004, 9). We can compare the assertiveness that the smart girl may show to

the physical aggressiveness shown by these more physical characters. My argument that smart girls are simultaneously valorized for their smartness, and required to be “hotties” seems like a logical extension of the arguments scholars have made about action or fantasy girls.

Aside from their representation on fictional television, there has been a great deal of recent concern over girls’ behavior in the popular press. Starting in the mid-nineties, along with concerns about girls being shortchanged in school, worries that poor body-image brought on by the mass media was causing epidemics of anorexia and bulimia, and concerns over school children’s behavior in general in the wake of school shootings like the one in Columbine, Colorado, journalists and sociologists, predominantly female, began to study girls in order to find out if something about the way they interacted with each other was causing them to have serious problems in adult life, and was contributing to the breakdown of society. Many of the resulting books became best sellers, countless articles were written about the behavior of “mean girls” in the popular press, and the ideas were even incorporated into mainstream movies such as *Mean Girls* and back into the teen shows themselves.

Sociological and journalistic studies of girl behavior start much earlier with Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982) in which the author argues that as girls move into adolescence, they lose their senses of selves and their voices. She explains that, because studies of human development were nearly always studies of male development, our culture considers women “unformed.” She argues, working from concepts written about by Nancy Chodorow (1978), that our society values male behaviors and that girls are discouraged from succeeding and encouraged to value and nurture relationships. She believes this is partly due to the way men and women think—men have an intrinsic “ethic of justice” (Gilligan 1982 126), and women live with “an ethic of care” (Gilligan 1982 126). She writes, “The relational crisis which men

typically experience in early childhood occurs for women in adolescence” (Gilligan 1982, xxiii). Many feminists have discredited the idea that men and women are “naturally” different, deeming theories like Gilligan’s “essentialist” and calling for scholars to consider the influence of culture more; however, her study was influential as it was among the first times anyone had considered why girls who may have been bubbling with life, and smarter than the boys in school, upon reaching puberty became shadows of their former selves.

Mary Pipher picked up this idea in 1994’s *Reviving Ophelia*. She asked why American adolescent girls fall prey to depression, eating disorders, and suicide attempts at an alarming rate, and determined that it is because, we live in a “dangerous, sexualized and media-saturated culture” (Pipher 1994, 12) she calls “girl-poisoning” where girls struggle to find their true selves amidst a culture that hectors them to be perfect and sexy. Peggy Orenstein was inspired by a study by the American Association of University Women, which showed that girls’ self-esteem went down as they moved into adolescence to observe and interview girls for *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self Esteem, and the Confidence Gap*. She discovered that both boys and girls believed that assertiveness was the domain of boys and that girls should be reserved and restrained and were therefore much less likely to demonstrate their aptitude for such skills as math and science. Many of these girls felt that they had to be the “the perfect girl’: the girl who has no bad thoughts or feelings, the kind of person everybody wants to be with . . . The girl who speaks quietly, calmly, is always nice and kind, never mean or bossy. . . . In addition to being nice, [she] must be perfectly smart” (Orenstein 1995, 37).

Rachel Simmons’ *Odd Girl Out* argues that girls are taught to be sweet and value friendships and are socialized not to express their anger. Therefore, girls have developed within their groups “a hidden culture of silent and indirect aggression.” Girl bullying is quite distinct

from boy's bullying because it is more insidious. She writes that "our culture derides aggression in girls as unfeminine . . . Bitch, lesbian, frigid and manly are just a few of the epithets an assertive girl hears" (Simmons 2002, 18). On teen television, along with smart girls frequently a "mean girl" is the most popular girl in school. At the beginning of the series she alternates between belittling and ignoring the smart girl. Although sometimes the smart girl professes she does not care, nonetheless she is transformed more closely to normativity, and her looks and behavior seem to come closer to reflecting that of the mean girl and her acolytes.

Rosalind Wiseman's *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence*, divided girls into a number of social tropes, including the Queen Bee, the Wannabe, and the Target, who is more often than not the "nerdy" type. Wiseman's central concern is popularity. She writes that for some teenagers "popularity is magical. Popularity conveys an illusory sense of power. Some girls think that if they can achieve it, all their problems will disappear" (Wiseman 2002, 21). This idea was embraced by many academics and journalists as "mean girls theory." They have used girls' lust for popularity at all costs to analyze the difficulties girls face.

These studies, particularly Wiseman's, have their detractors who find the ideas anti-feminist. Gabrielle Moss of *Bitch* magazine writes, that "although its tenets are beneficial to girls, mean girls theory also has a dark side, where harmful female stereotypes are given a Girl Power-savvy spin and spouted by the very people who claim to be working in girls' best interests" (23). This notion has been embraced by popular culture, particularly in the 2004 movie *Mean Girls*, a fictional story based on Wiseman's book, which tells the story of Cady Heron (Lindsay Lohan) and her struggles with popularity. Cady grows up in Africa, is home schooled and has not gotten to know many girls. She begins attending school for the first time at age 15,

becoming a member of the group called “The Plastics”—a group of girls led by the popular Regina George (Rachel McAdam). Cady learns the importance of following the rigid rules of “girl world:” dressing to conform; attracting boys; and treating those who are not popular with disdain. It echoes the story of any number of teen television dramas and movies, particularly 1989’s “Heathers.” However, unlike that movie, the film becomes didactic when, in the climax of the movie, Cady and all the other girls learn the importance of girls’ solidarity and equality, while the evil Regina is hit by a bus.

Despite the possible destructiveness of mean girls theory, and its commodification in a major studio movie, these books are nonetheless important to examine for this project. Each volume shows that girl culture is quite different from other types of culture, and the ethnographic work these authors have done gives some ideas of what real life girls are like, and how they are perceived in the public imagination. Girls’ Studies gives us one avenue to look at smart girl characters on teen television. Those who study girls are assembling a picture of how girls have lived and do live, and how society’s pressures and expectations cause them to suffer from low self-esteem, poor body image or have difficult adult lives. There are many influences on them, one of which is television. Therefore, it is important to look at how people have studied the media, particularly from a feminist viewpoint.

Semiotics and the Media

This dissertation uses semiotics as part of its foundation. Semiotics is a mechanism for looking at culture that says anything can be a “sign” that carries meaning related to the culture, and that these signs work together to form a “text.” These signs and texts can be examined using a method similar to linguistics. In other words, “Everything in a culture can be seen as a form of communications, organized in ways akin to verbal language, to be understood in terms of a

common set of fundamental rules and principles” (Hodge and Kress 1988, 1). When studying teen television, for example, each character, or the school hallways, or accessories such as clothing or glasses can be a sign, which all come together to make a text, which can be analyzed at the level of a single scene or episode, season, series, the genre as a whole, or every message sent by the media to teenagers.

Kaja Silverman’s work on semiotics shows how our “selves” are constructed by culture, so that each of us is a “subject.” She explains that, “the term ‘subject’ challenges the value of stability attributed to the individual. The value of the conception is that it allows us to ‘open up’, conceptually, the inner world of humans, to see the relation of human experience to cultural experience, to talk cogently of meaning as something that is structured into our ‘selves’” (Silverman 1983, 130). As popular culture is, of course, a part of culture, this theory helps to explain how the messages transmitted by television work to influence our minds and, for the purposes of this study, why the messages presented by teen television may influence the audience, particularly the teen audience, to perform in certain ways.

Julia Kristeva (working from theories of the film theorist Christian Metz) introduced the concept of “intertextuality,” the idea that texts, such as television shows, must be read in terms of other texts. Rather than examining a single text, she writes it is more important to examine “the intersection of textual surfaces” (Kristeva 1980, 65) to see how they relate to each other and the culture as a whole. Marcia Kinder, author of “Playing with Power in Moves, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,” explains that, “in contemporary media studies, intertextuality has come to mean that any individual text (whether an artwork like a movie or novel, or more commonplace, text like a newspaper article, billboard or casual verbal remark) is part of a larger cultural discourse and therefore must be read in

relationship to other texts and their diverse textual strategies and ideological assumptions” (Kinder 1991, 2). Television, and of course, teen television, does not exist in a vacuum, but is only one apparatus for sending messages to viewers. It reinforces the similar messages of movies, advertising, and magazines, often supported by institutions such as schools, that girls should be feminine.

Cultural theorist Roland Barthes expands the notion that there are signs that can be read for meaning, to consider how genres work to reinforce messages by sending them repeatedly through narrative. In his essay “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” he discusses, “the following dilemma: either a narrative is merely a rambling collection of events, in which case nothing can be said about it other than referring back to the storyteller’s (the author’s) art, talent or genius—all mythical forms of chance—or else it shares with other narratives a common structure which is open to analysis, no matter how much patience its formulation requires” (Barthes 1977, 80). Televisual messages people receive influences that way they think, and Barthes’s ideas can be used to describe mass culture as a discourse that perpetuates hegemonic messages, and explain how television viewers are lured into believing its cultural messages, rather than being forced to believe them. As television scholar John Fiske describes the process:

Discursive power, that is, the power to make common sense of a class-based sense of the real, is held by the same social groups who exercise economic power. But the difference between the exercise of power in these domains is crucial: economic power is open and obvious, discursive power is hidden, and it is its hiddenness, its ‘repression of its own operations,’ that enables it to present itself as common sense, as an objective, innocent reflection of the real. (Fiske 1989, 42)

This explains, in part, how the teen shows influence girls to believe that what they are seeing is “real” and that therefore, if they act like the characters on the show, they can expect similar results.

In particular, Barthes’s ideas can be used to show how to resolve the conflict between the fact that many teen shows often give a quasi-feminist message of “girl power,” while actually advancing an agenda of reinforcing traditional gender performances. He uses the concept of inoculation, writing that “One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion (Barthes 1972, 150). When girls on the shows work for feminist or activist movements and have success, it seems to be “real,” yet these successes do not generally translate into change for the culture as a whole.

Women and girls receive semiotic messages that may appear empowering, but in fact reinforce the status quo, in which men have all the power, because so many of the creators, producers, and writers of television shows, including teen television shows, have traditionally been men. This has begun to change quite recently, but traditionally male show creators are creating women who are already “other” (and in many senses inferior to male characters as sexual objects) even aside from such differences as race, religion, sexuality, class, or disability.¹⁰ Feminist film critic Teresa De Lauretis described “woman as bearer of economic, positive value, and woman as bearer of semiotic, negative value, of difference” (De Lauretis 1984, 110). As teen girls are considered as the “subject” of teen television both as characters, and in terms of how

¹⁰ This is changing. Amy Sherman-Palladino, co-creator of *Gilmore Girls* (she left the show before the 2006-2007 season but will have a new show for 2007-2008), Barbara Hall who created *Joan of Arcadia* (2003-2005), Barbara Hampton, who created *Seventh Heaven* (1999- 2007), and Shondra Rhimes of *Grey’s Anatomy* have all created, and been executive producer and head writer (also known as a show runner) on their own shows on network television. Tina Fey is the Executive Producer, head writer, and star of situation comedy *30 Rock* (2006-present), while Marti Noxon, who acted as show runner on *Buffy*’s last two seasons, will helm the *Grey’s Anatomy* spin off *Private Practice* in the 2007-2008 season.

viewers consume the show and the advertised or “product placed” products, it is important to realize that the messages sent are unlikely to be real or empowering.

Feminist Film and Television Studies

Feminist television studies helps to explain why it is important to study teenage girls in particular, and the messages they receive from television. The discipline was developed specifically to look at women’s connection with, and depictions on television. Feminist television studies began as an offshoot of Feminist Film Theory, which started with Laura Mulvey. Mulvey’s 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” suggests that because so many films were aimed at men, were created by men, and starred men, that women spectators had to essentially take a male role as the camera looked the women on screen up and down, and the male characters all looked the women. Her goal was to use psychoanalytic theory “as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (Mulvey 1975, 483), and to analyze pleasure in order to confront the form that has pervaded women’s lives. Men in society are in a position to look, but the female form exists on film, Mulvey says, for her “to-be-looked-at-ness” (487). Although the article has been criticized, and Mulvey has even revisited it herself in recent years, her notions, including the idea that women can and do receive pleasure from films, even while they are objectified by them, has been foundational for psychoanalytic and feminist scholars of film and television. This is key to understanding the ways that teen television gives pleasure to girl viewers, despite giving such a reductive view of them.

Lynn Spigel writes, “Feminist television studies in the humanities grew up in the late 1970s through the mid-1980s when feminist cultural critics such as Angela McRobbie and Trish McCabe (1981), Tania Modleski (1982), Janice Radway (1984), Ien Ang (1985), Michelle

Mattelart (1986), and Patricia Mellencamp (1986) offered ways to think about why female-targeted genres like soaps, sitcoms, or romance novels are meaningful to so many women” (Spigel 2004, 1210). Ien Ang was one of the first feminist scholars to look at women’s relationship to television in particular. Following the lead of the pioneers of British Cultural Studies, and Janet Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1985), which investigated how women related to romance novels and the pleasure they found in them, Ang, an Australian, studied women’s relationships to the nighttime soap opera *Dallas*, in *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (1985). She interviewed women asking them their opinions of the show and its characters, to discover why it was so pleasurable for them and theorized how entertainment is constructed. She determined that, in part they watched to identify with characters. In a later article, “Melodramatic Identification: Television Fiction and Women’s Fantasy,” she writes, “these characters are products of fiction, and that fiction is not a mere set of images to be read referentially, but an ensemble of textual devices for engaging the viewer at the level of fantasy” (Ang 1990, 162).

Andrea Press’s *Women Watching Television* conducted an ethnographic study of women of various classes and discussed how they related to television. Her goal was to “attempt to construct an alternative to the dichotomies . . . between those who, on the one hand, might argue that all television works to strengthen hegemonic values in its viewers and those who, on the other hand, argue that resistance to domination is always a part of the viewing experience” (Press 1991, 26). She found that working class women read the images on television quite differently from middle class women and that this was influenced by their relationship to power.

Bonnie Dow’s *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement since 1970* shows how cultural attitudes, particularly towards feminism, are reflected

by television, and how they can be seen as “interpreting social change and managing cultural beliefs” (Dow 1996, xv). Dow follows the trajectory from “lifestyle feminism” in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to *Murphy Brown*’s postfeminism personified and into the more contemporary “maternal feminism” of *Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman*. Her work is an interesting precursor to that done on teen shows, particularly much of the work on *Buffy* and its “Girl Power” ethos.

Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader, edited by Charlotte Brundson, Julie D’Acci, and Lynn Spigel (1997) is an anthology that incorporates many of the major issues relating to feminism and the production and reception of television, and includes chapters by many of the prominent scholars in the feminist media studies field. These scholars concentrate, in large part, on genres of television that are considered “women’s” genres—soap operas and situation comedies. Although the anthology is essential reading when approaching a subject from a feminist television studies perspective, it concentrates almost entirely on images of grown women and leaves out the female children and teenagers.

Teen Television

Scholars in the past have turned their attention to studies of some of the teen programs in this study, but for the most part, each writer concentrates on only a single program, and most of the work has been done quite recently. Two books study the genre of teen television. One, Roz Kaveney’s 2006 monograph, *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film and Television from Heathers to Veronica Mars*, which makes references to most of the shows mentioned here is interesting, and does take the generic approach, but is not scholarly, consisting primarily of Kaveney’s ideas and opinions and very little research.

However, she alludes to a criticism I have of the shows, which is that media representations of the way popularity and status work in high school have stayed static, while society has changed. In the 1980s, John Hughes's movies *Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *The Breakfast Club* seemed to a teenager, when it came to relations between the popular and the unpopular, nearly to be *cinéma vérité*, but it seems somewhat retro to see the same power relationships in more modern movies like *She's All That* and *Mean Girls*, and in shows like *Veronica Mars*. Kaveney writes that for many viewers of teen movies and television, "Many of us are acquainted with an adolescence that has nothing in common with anything we actually experienced. The boys are all handsome the girls are all beautiful, even the ones who wear glasses and talk of themselves as geeks and losers . . . yet sometimes it seems as real to us as our own lives" (Kaveney 2006, 2). The people writing and producing teen shows between 1990 and 2006 grew up in the 1980s or early 1990s, and hence their models become the "realistic" ones, thus perpetuating these images.

The other book, *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity* is a 2004 anthology edited by two British lecturers in film and screen studies, Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson. *Teen TV* as a book looks at teen television in terms of its genre, but most chapters deal primarily with a single show. One exception is Bill Ogersby's "'So Who's Got Time for Adults?' Femininity, Consumption and the Development of teen TV—from *Gidget* to *Buffy*" He writes that for teen-oriented programming of the 1960s, "These texts were characterized by many tensions and contradictions. In particular, their privileging of hedonism and commodity consumption can be seen as offering enticing glimpses of a femininity distinguished by an ethos of dynamic self-expression and autonomous pleasure—an ethos that has been amplified and extended in contemporary cultural texts such as *Buffy*" (Ogersby 2004, 72). His point, that female

empowerment on television did not begin with *Buffy*'s Girl Power ethos, is a good one, but it is hard to see how the implicit encouragement to shop and consume from *Gidget* was one the show's more progressive elements.

Another important chapter in Teen TV is "Dormant Dormitory Friendships: Race and Gender in *Felicity*" by Sharon Ross. This chapter represents seemingly the only sustained consideration of the single regularly appearing African American teen girl character on teen dramas during the teen-show era. She points out that although Elena Tyler of *Felicity* is supposed to be a main character, for three out of the four seasons of the show she is marginalized, as "the storylines and structure of the show effectively downgrade her status as a lead character, and also completely ignore the issue of her 'race,'" (Ross 2004, 141) leading to her marginalization and invisibility.

Despite their lack of attention to teen television as a whole, each study of individual shows contributes to an understanding of the genre. E. Graham McKinley conducted an ethnographic study of *90210*, and published *Beverly Hills, 90210: Television, Gender, and Identity* concluding that the show gave girls bad messages. She writes that although "its drama highlighted salient social issues. . . . it represented a typical Hollywood effort: superficially liberal in its treatment of individual rights, but ultimately perpetuating conservative values (McKinley 1997, 2). She "tried to examine not only what was said, but also where the silences were; to look at what identities were articulated, and what was so taken for granted it did not need to be mentioned" (4). Her analysis of the "otherness" of smart girl Andrea Zuckerman is particularly important.

"Saving Our So-Called Lives: Girl Fandom, Adolescent Subjectivity, and *My So-Called Life*" by Susan Murray, published in the anthology *Kids' Media Culture*, followed teen girl fans'

attempts to save the struggling show. She writes that the ability of these fans to discuss their show on the Internet made their fan experience completely different from that of earlier shows saying that the “fight to save Angela may be interpreted as a struggle for control over representation. Many girls feel just a silenced by, and invisible to, television networks as they do by the culture at large” (Murray 1999, 233). She also suggests that Angela Chase was a new kind of televisual girl who could really be a role model to girl viewers were experiencing the “unstable nature of teenage girls’ identity during a time of shifting expectations, body transfiguration, and intense socialization. In witnessing a parallel instability in the character of Angela . . . These fans were able to recognize and give voice to their own inner turmoil” (224). Angela was a different kind of heroine than the generally self-confident types seen before, and the device of having her narrate the show gave more insight than earlier shows into how a teenage girl’s mind might work.

Due to its narrative complexity, blending of styles, and witty dialogue in which viewers find multiple meanings, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has been a significant area of study for many scholars, to the extent that “Buffy Studies” has become a field in itself. Writers have used a variety of critical perspectives, ranging from feminism, to cultural studies, to postcoloniality, to postmodernism. The volumes continue to proliferate but of the earliest two, Roz Kaveney’s *Reading the Vampire Slayer: An Unofficial Critical Companion to Buffy and Angel* is the inferior, but still useful book. In the introduction, Kaveney discusses Buffy episodes as “complex texts, the conceptual and verbal wit of the surface, the sheer loopy romanticism of the emotional plots and visceral excitement of the action plots, the range of cultural references, high and pop, sustaining deep readings of the shows’ underlying implied discussion of feminism, religion, politics and so on” (Kaveney 2001, 3). There are no chapters specifically about Willow;

however, and mentions of Willow in various authors' chapters concentrate much more on her magic and her turn to lesbianism than her intelligence.

The superior book was Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery's *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In Wilcox's chapter, "Who Died and Made Her the Boss? Patterns of Mortality in *Buffy*" she discusses feminism in *Buffy* and says that many "of the underlying structures of the series also work against stereotypical depictions of male interactions" (Wilcox and Lavery 2002, 3). She goes on to write that "the series counterbalances the idea of the lonely hero with the presentation of a community of friends—a more typically female method of operation (as Carol Gilligan, among others, has pointed out)" (4). Once again, no chapter is specifically about Willow and she is mentioned in her magical and lesbian contexts a number of times, and as "smart" only once. In fact, on *Slayage: The Online Journal of Buffy Studies*, run by these two authors, there are very few articles about Willow, and none about her as a smart girl.

Featured Television Shows and Characters

I have chosen to use hour-long dramas as texts, rather than situation comedies, "tween shows," or reality shows, because they have more emotional resonance and allow for longer character arcs and storylines. It is actually possible on a long-running drama to see a girl grow from early high school to adulthood, and to witness her reactions to the changes, rather than simply hearing jokes about them. Few comedies make time for this. In addition, hour-long shows allow for more digression than comedies, which are timed carefully. Much of the most important dialogue serves not only to propel the plot but also to build viewers' understanding of characters.

These shows teach girls that their gender is a performance and that any girl can be as popular and attractive to boys as she likes if she works at it through consumption. If she refuses

to perform, however, she will be punished, not by detention or physical harm but by ostracization or invisibility. A smart girl is making a serious choice not to be popular and loved if she continues to embrace academic life or a life of the mind. On television, smart girl characters often refuse to comply with traditional notions of femininity; yet, as characters on network television, they are still “hotties” who are there to be consumed by the audience. The demands of the romantic plot and the demands of network television, which include keeping the show’s ratings high and selling the sponsor’s wares, always supersede the possibilities of the smart girl’s success.

Television has shown girls this makeover story since its inception; however, during the teen-show era; there was been a rash of hour-long shows starring teenage characters, specifically aimed at teenage audiences. This means that there are many more teenage characters on television and a wider variety of teenage types. Because of this, teenage girl viewers have had many more potential role models than the generations before, who had Gidget of her eponymous show, or Mallory Keaton of *Family Ties*, or the *Cosby* girls, none of whom were especially brainy or interested in academic life. The fact that similar makeover stories occur in practically every teen show indicates that the phenomenon of the smart girl’s makeover occurs across a wide variety of genres, and has been seen multiple times during many girls’ teenage lives. Hence, the story is part of the mythology of girls who watch television and influences their thoughts and actions.

Each of the shows I consider in the four thematic sections has a designated smart girl, with the exception of *Gilmore Girls*, which has three, (as well as a pre-teen genius added in the sixth season as a recurring character.) I selected these five shows in particular because they all have teen girls as central characters, they are all shows I watched faithfully while they were on,

they are evenly distributed over the 16-year period on which I am concentrating, and represent multiple television networks. When we first meet the characters, they are new at school or have just met a new person who will change their lives.

Andrea Zuckerman (Gabrielle Carteris) is the school newspaper editor at West Beverly High on *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Fox 1990–2000) whose life is changed by Brandon and Brenda Walsh, newcomers from Minnesota. During her five years on the show, although she interacts with members of the cool group, she is never really part of it. Despite her crush on Brandon, she is the only one in a highly incestuous group who does not date anyone else in it. Andrea's hair gets lighter and the glasses sometimes disappear, but twenty-nine-year-old Carteris cannot approach the glamour of actresses Shannen Doherty (Brenda) or Jennie Garth (the rich and sexy Kelly Taylor). Andrea gets pregnant her first year of college (a plot development to coincide with Carteris's real pregnancy), marries the father who is a regular for one year, and leaves the show in the fifth to be replaced by more alluring "smart girls" who never wear glasses and have stick-thin bodies and fashionable hairstyles. One of these is Janet Sosna, a Korean woman who works with, and has a baby with male character Steve Sanders, to much parental disapproval, before deciding to turn down a high-powered career to spend more time with the child.

Angela Chase (Claire Danes) on *My So-Called Life* (ABC 1994) quits the yearbook staff and dyes her hair "crimson glow." She leaves behind schoolwork and her best friend Sharon to hang out with Rayanne Graff (A.J. Langer) and go out with bad boy Jordan Catalano, snubbing Brian, the smart boy with a crush on her. Rayanne turns out to be bad news and sleeps with Jordan, and she and Angela stop speaking while Sharon becomes a better friend again. Brian helps Jordan write an apology letter to Angela, which she only realizes at the last second of the show. ABC cancels the show before she can make a choice between them.

Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan), of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB 1997–2001, UPN 2001–2003), is a childishly dressed and quiet girl who Cordelia (Charisma Carpenter) and her “Cordettes” enjoy taunting, and has an unrequited crush on her best friend Xander who sees her only as friend and tutor. Title character Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) turns to her for help with school, but she ends up helping Buffy slay vampires and demons first through her computer hacking and research skills and later through witchcraft. Along the way, she finds first a boyfriend and then two girlfriends, and takes her magic to the dark side, unable to resist its power, and calling the “old Willow” a “loser.” She spends the final season of the show treating her magic as an addiction—afraid to cause trouble or to use her witchcraft to help her friends.

Lindsay Weir (Linda Cardellini) of *Freaks and Geeks* (NBC 1999–2000) has just quit the “mathletes” in order to hang out with the “freaks” on the school smoking patio. She ignores her old friend Millie in favor of hanging out with bad boy Daniel and his girlfriend, the tough Kim Kelly (Busy Phillips). While she clearly has a crush on Daniel, Lindsay instead dates his friend Nick, and considers having sex with him, briefly but she helps Daniel cheat on a math test. NBC cancels the show in its first year with the last episode showing Lindsay and Kim climbing into a van to spend the summer following the Grateful Dead.

Rory Gilmore (Alexis Bledel) of *Gilmore Girls* (WB 2000–2006, CW 2006–2007) is a big reader who has just transferred from small-town Stars Hollow High School to the prestigious Chilton School where she meets the ambitious Paris Geller (Liza Weil). In the seven years of the show, Rory moves from being Stars Hollow’s town sweetheart and Chilton’s valedictorian, to a passive-aggressive Yale student whose romantic relationships seem to overwhelm her interests in school, until the final episodes when she chooses career over marriage. Paris, who is much more aggressive than Rory, seems to lose out to her at every turn. She remains ambitious, loud,

strident, and powerful all through the series but we she rarely appears on screen. Rory's friend Lane Kim (Keiko Agena) is also very bright, and indications are that she was a good student in high school; she drops out of the Seventh Day Adventist college her mother has chosen for her in order to wait tables and drum in a rock band, and marries young, ending up with twin babies before age 21, and having to turn down an opportunity to travel with a famous band. She is Korean, and does not demonstrate many of the smart girl traits, therefore I consider her in my discussion of race and ethnicity, as girl of color on television who can be smart, and also cool, at the same time as a girl, but must be domesticated as a young woman.

Other similar girls include Julia and Claudia Salinger (Neve Campbell and Lacey Chabert) from *Party of Five* (Fox 1994-2000) who go through their teen years as orphans. The virginal Felicity Porter (Keri Russell,) who cannot decide between two boys and between art and medicine, and African American pre-medical student Elena Tyler (Tangi Miller) from *Felicity* (WB 1998-2002) are college students. Joey Potter (Katie Holmes) is a poor girl who becomes a writer, and Andi McPhee (Meredith Monroe), suffers from mental health problems before leaving *Dawson's Creek* (WB 1998-2003). Grace Manning (Julia Whelan) and Jesse Sammler (Evan Rachel Wood) from *Once and Again* (ABC 1999-2002) are thrown together as stepsisters despite their different rungs on the popularity ladder. Sam McPherson (Carly Pope) and her unpopular brown-haired friends on *Popular* (WB 1999-2001) similarly compete with Sam's more popular new stepsister and her blonde friends.

Chloe Sullivan (Allison Mack) of *Smallville* (WB 2001-2006, CW 2006-present) is nearly a clone of Andrea Zuckerman as she pines away for Clark Kent, the future Superman, who only has eyes for the "preternaturally pretty" Lana Lang. Amy Abbott (Emily VanCamp), is a ballerina who is accepted to Princeton, but is nevertheless the most popular girl in school, who

meets writer and glasses wearer Hannah Rogers (Sarah Drew) on *Everwood* (WB 2002-2006). Grace Polk (Becky Wahlstrom) from *Joan of Arcadia* (CBS 2003-2005) is a much more rebellious type of smart girl who refuses to do certain school assignments because they conflict with her moral and ethical code. Veronica Mars (Kristin Bell) from *Veronica Mars* (UPN 2004-2006, CW 2006-2007) is a teenage private eye who is smarter than anyone she knows, with the possible exception of her computer hacking friend Mac (Tina Majorino), and is a contender high school valedictorian and receives accolades in a college criminology class, but is not frequently seen engaging in school-related activities.

As there are hardly any teen girls of color as regular characters in dramas, the “Invisible Girl” section, which concerns girls of color and Jewish characters, includes, aside from vignettes, sometimes including guest stars, from the aforementioned shows, discussion of situation comedies *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992), *A Different World* (NBC 1987-1993), and *All-American Girl* (ABC 1994-1995).

Cartoon girls Daria from *Daria*, (MTV 1997-2001) who wears glasses and views the world with ironic detachment, and Lisa Simpson of *The Simpsons* (1990-Present) who is the smartest, most moral, but most unpopular girl in Springfield, are also important to illustrate televisions varied representations of smart girls.

These brainy girl characters often start out as very active and involved with intellectual life. In early episodes we see Andrea Zuckerman effortlessly edit a school newspaper, Angela Chase talk about Ann Frank, Willow Rosenberg hack into schematics of the town sewer system, Lindsay Weir solve extremely difficult problems to win a math contest, and Rory Gilmore describe her wish to be a broadcast journalist. While Angela seems to have few goals beyond popularity, and Andrea does not want friends because she is hiding the secret that she lives out of

district, the rest have their futures all mapped out and have had a circle of friends to whom they are close. For Angela and Lindsay, their sudden realization that these goals and friendship are not enough occurs just before the show begins. For Andrea, Willow, and Rory it happens in the first episodes.

Each girl experiences what Ilana Nash, who writes about *Gidget*, *Nancy Drew* and other girls of the 1960s and before, calls “a chrysalis moment,” which she describes as “the carefully manipulated scenario in which an adolescent female is shown crossing a threshold of sexual maturity, like a caterpillar’s transition to butterfly” (Nash, 23). Viewers see the characters come to this realization, even as they see how interesting and cool the characters already were and the story must convince the viewers of the need for change. Most often, a boy causes the wish for change, but also it is often the desire for a new female friend that makes it happen.

The portrayal of all teenagers on these shows, but particularly the smart girl, is ambivalent. These programs simultaneously valorize the brainy girl for her intelligence, and punish her. She is constrained by societal standards that suggest that normative girls are attractive, unassertive, unchallenging, and nice. The show creators initially envision brainy girls to be somehow more intelligent, morally better, and more serious than their friends and at first they are good role models for girl viewers. Yet, the demands of series television: that the action be endlessly involving; that the romantic plot be key; and that the “gang” stay together, require that they become more interested in friendship and romance than school. The shows portray the girl’s behavior as almost entirely fabricated—although she is “smart,” we discover that her more popular friends are covering up their intelligence, and actually have top SAT scores and good grades. Although the smart girl is “plain,” it only takes the removal of glasses or its metaphorical equivalent—a new hairstyle, a new dress, and some makeup—to make the object of her desire

notice her. Although she has sound reasons for not wanting to, the show makes the audience root for her to have sex. Although she is “determined,” her mind can easily be changed by superficial factors, and she will end up staying home rather than going off to the Ivy League or other top college she has always wanted to attend.

Main Research Questions

My purpose is to discuss the ways teen television as a genre sends messages to smart girls who are watching that they must perform their gender more heteronormatively or face the consequences, which I do by using incidents and quotes from each show. It also considers the repeated representations, images, and storylines that reinforce this message throughout the genre and demonstrates the ways the portrayal of the smart girl has changed over time, both from television’s first sitcoms and dramas featuring teenagers, such as *Father Knows Best* through more recent times, and from the beginning of the teen-show era to the present. I also show how changes in society influence the ways each girl is portrayed on her show to reflect her cultural moment.

Because one of the most consistently problematic features of these programs is the depiction of nearly all the teenagers as white, I also consider why this must be so, and how those “other” girls that are shown are represented. I also consider ways that the “model minority” concept often applied to Asian Americans and Jewish Americans allows some Asian and Jewish characters to be the smart girl, but still ensures she will not be the main character. This is also an area in which tracing the development over time is useful, because there was a period in the middle of the teen-show era when characters from minority groups were becoming more central. However, many of those advances were eroded after the millennium.

In certain cases, I considered both the most likely reading of these texts, but also some alternative ones as well as the meanings the writer/producers or the network actually intended. The Internet allows me a great deal of ability to see what other viewers believe, as they post in online posting boards. Although a fan study was not my primary goal, I am nonetheless informed by online postings. However, given that it was not my primary goal to study fans, I did not keep an archive of poster's opinions, and the coordinators of sites like Television Without Pity frequently "purge" all previous posts every few months. In addition, many interviews with network executives, show creators and writers and cast members are available online and often show the ways that these groups are in contention, and how these conflicts influence the ways messages are transmitted. Once again, as this was not my primary goal, I have not interviewed those involved in creating the programs, and have used interviews from the Internet.

In order to begin to answer these questions I looked at cultural studies theories to find one that represented the ways girls on television are portrayed. In Judith Butler's notion of performativity, I found a model for how these girls are pressured to perform as more normative girls and therefore lose the smartness that makes them special.

Theory: The Performance of Gender

Judith Butler asserts in *Gender Trouble* that gender is constituted by a series of repetitive performative acts and that such "acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed are performative in the sense that the essence or identity . . . are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (173). Gender itself is not "natural" but is something that is performed by people because of cultural imperatives. She is saying that the ways that women are expected to behave are an artificial construct, brought on by fear of punishment. The

sorts of clothing and accessories, ways of speaking, ways of moving, and the ways people relate to each other are all cultural constructs.

Society has sanctions in place for those who do not follow the rules and who do not fit into the normative categories of “male” or “female.” Frequently, gay, lesbian, or transgender people are more difficult for many people in society to accept, and therefore receive more of society’s insults, exclusions, and physical punishments, but even young girls who do not act in traditionally feminine ways, perhaps because they prefer to wear “boy’s clothes,” go by “boy’s names,” or engage in activities such as athletics and intellectual competition that were traditionally considered male, receive their share of these sanctions.

Television sends messages to its viewers that nearly everyone acts in some particular stereotypical way that depends, primarily, on what they look like. I appropriate Butler’s discussion of how the categories of gender as we understand them limit the ways we can consider gender—so that people like lesbians or the transgender are often considered unintelligible in our culture—to the idea that there is a continuum of potential girlhood, with only the normative girl considered totally intelligible. Dialogue, costume, face and body style, hairstyle, and behavior all contribute to how viewers read these texts and how one knows one is looking at a “smart girl” or another type of character. Viewers understand her as a recognizable type as soon as they see the glasses or the less fashionable clothing, or a book in her hand, but the other characters, at least at first, usually see her as someone who needs to be changed, or may not see her at all until her transformation.

The generic structure of television presupposes that television shows within a genre share iconography, storylines, and character types. Therefore, many viewers who watch one teen show will find things to attract them in others as well, and therefore experience these messages about

how normative girls perform multiple times. Butler writes in *Bodies that Matter* that the “rules that govern intelligible identity . . . rules that are partially structured along matrices of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, operate through repetition” (Butler 1993, 185), which indicates that if a viewer sees a particular view of girlhood over and over, it will begin to constitute what “true” girlhood is for her and she will begin to perform as the sort of girl she sees on these programs.

What is at stake for girl television characters, and indeed real life girls, who do not comply with gender norms is invisibility. A girl television character can become invisible in several ways. If viewers are not interested in the character, the program may be canceled, and if they do not like the character, the actress may be written off the show. Television viewers are always questing for novelty. The surprising success of *Ugly Betty* (which started in the 2006-2007 season)—a show with a Latina female with glasses and braces as the central character—shows that viewers will watch a character they have never seen before if the conditions are right. For its premiere episode the show had 16.3 million viewers, four to five times as high as even the most popular teen show (de Moreas 2006, np). However, for the most part, viewers prefer characters that are familiar and predictable, and they are very hard on female characters who do not fit the norm. Certainly, girls from minority groups have traditionally been either absent in teen shows, or marginalized, and their behavior circumscribed to the point that they are nearly always domesticated in the end if they remain on the program. Butler would say this is because they simply do not “matter” the same way the white girls do. This is yet another message sent to girl viewers that reinforces the very limited gender codes they must follow in order to be as popular and loved as the girl characters on teen shows.

When Butler writes in *Undoing Gender* that “The feminist framework that takes the structural domination of women as the starting point from which all other analyses of gender must proceed imperils its own viability by refusing to countenance the various ways that gender emerges as a political issue, bearing a specific set of social and physical risks” (Butler 2004, 9), she is discussing the safety of transgender people who actually must fear for their lives or live lives so abject that they suffer social death. However, for many teenagers being unpopular or unloved is a similar social death, or at least that is what teen shows suggest. As teenage girls on these shows are rarely without a love interest, and rarely not surrounded by friends, this perpetuates the idea that a girl in the audience must perform like these characters in order to live a “real” life that seems to matter. Therefore, when the smart girl transforms herself, she is choosing to be seen, rather than to be invisible, and to be real rather than socially insignificant, and this sends a message to girl viewers to do the same.

Butler finds “doing gender” to be political, and writes that by complying with gender norms we sustain them. She writes, “individual agency is bound up with social critique and social transformation. One only determines ‘one’s own’ sense of gender to the extent that social norms exist that support and enable that way of claiming gender for oneself. One is dependent on the ‘outside’ to lay claim to what is one’s own. The self must, in this way, be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself” (Butler 2004, 7). Thus, when a girl viewer sees these characters and copies them she is reinforcing the tropes set out by the shows, ensuring that they remain in society. Of course, even if a given girl has never seen one of these shows, she still lives in the society that produced them and interacts with people who have internalized the programs’ messages about gender and intelligence. Therefore, most girls in our society receive these messages in some form.

Conclusion

It is clear from the sheer number of texts from which I have to choose that the “smart girl” character is a very common trope, one that extends to literature and film as well as television. Yet academia has ignored how teen television transmits a model of femininity to young women that encourages them to act less smart. The writings on television studies indicate that television is a big influence on our culture, that it transmits ideologies and mythologies that viewers may take to be natural, and that the networks’ quest for money limits the messages the medium can show. Feminist television criticism has sought to bring these ideologies and mythologies to light, in part by conducting textual analyses of television programs featuring female characters and focusing on their representation; but has spent significantly more time analyzing adult women than teenagers.

Feminist television scholars who have written about young women and teenage girls have written much more about the characters of earlier times. More recently, scholars have written about girl characters associated with supernatural or action roles that make them explicitly powerful, rather than focusing on their intellects and the more subtle ways they may have of influencing others and taking a stand. The writings on individual shows have been quite limited until very recently, and have tended to concentrate on fan studies or high-level analyses, rather than studies of individual characters. Although it is common in the social sciences to compare a number of similar programs to determine their effects on subjects, no one has compared these texts from a cultural studies perspective.

Even though many of the viewers of these shows are adult women, or men, or boys, and, in fact, in the case of some of the shows, there are twice as many adult viewers as teen viewers, I am especially focusing on what messages these shows send to teen viewers about popularity and

their own places in the popularity system and how they may affect girls. Girls are bombarded from all sides by messages about “how to be a girl.” Scholars have considered what our “girl poisoning culture,” (Pipher 1994, 12), as Mary Pipher refers to it, does to their self-esteem. They have considered the media messages particularly in terms of the negative messages they get about their bodies and how the images they see in magazines and on television and movies cause them to feel inadequate and may result in body dimorphic disorders, eating disorders, feelings of inadequacy, and even very young girls going on diets or wanting plastic surgery. What does this sort of representation do to their feelings about their minds?

Stupid Girls as Role Models

As this is not an ethnographic study, I cannot answer that question for all girls. However, I can discuss what a few girls have learned. I give students in my Introduction to Popular Culture class the opportunity to write about celebrities. I have received several papers (from female students) discussing how the singer Jessica Simpson is a wonderful role model, or how much the student admires heiress and party girl Paris Hilton and would love to be like her. Both of these women have become famous for espousing the character of the “dumb blonde.” Many people seem to feel that they are not nearly as dumb as they appear but are in fact canny businesswomen trading on this image, but others believe they actually are dumb. Either way they are omnipresent on television (both have had “reality shows” since 2000), in magazines, and even on the radio and in the movies (both have put out records, and both have starred in movies). Therefore, any girl who pays the slightest attention to any facet of popular culture sees their images constantly held up as paragons of womanhood.

As the singer Pink put it in her song “Stupid Girl,” the video for which includes the singer dressed as these two celebrities as well as others with similar personae:

What happened to the dreams of a girl president?

She's dancing in the video next to 50 Cent.

They travel in packs of two or three.

With their itty bitsy doggies and their teeny-weeny tees.

Where, oh where, have the smart people gone?

Oh where, oh where could they be? (Mann et al, 2006, np)

At the end of one term, I received a paper in which the student said she had admired Paris Hilton before taking my class, but was now embarrassed to have done so. That she had to take a college course in order to see why a woman who makes public sex tapes, is known for her skinny body, dyed blonde hair, and the extravagant wardrobe she affords through a trust fund, and for her foolish and callous behavior on a "reality" television show (and since that essay for driving drunk with a revoked license and being sentenced to prison) is extremely disturbing. When even the actually smart role models for young women are "dumbed down" on teen television, this only reinforces the ideas that being smart is a sucker's bet.

Not only do girls see dumb blondes becoming powerful, but powerful women are being put in their place, much as they were during the Backlash era. Hillary Clinton, for example, is constantly vilified in the press, while Condoleezza Rice is criticized as much for her hairstyle and her love life as she is for her political views and actions. Some groups believed the 2006 television show *Commander in Chief*, starring Geena Davis as the first female President of the United States, was designed as a test case for one of these women to become the real President. The show concentrated much more on the President's domestic life than it did on her political life, and was canceled after 18 episodes. Many of the present day dramas, such as the top-rated

Grey's Anatomy and *Desperate Housewives*, portray women who feel entirely incomplete without a man, even as they carry on successful careers.

The media, when taken in aggregate, simply discourage women and girls from acting smart. On television, although women doctors and lawyers have become commonplace, they don't tend to spend a whole lot of time learning more about their own professions, unless they are an "oddball" like Eliot Reid of ABC's *Scrubs*. Although becoming educated because it will help you earn more money is something that most people in society appear to support, learning for its own sake is considered a strange way to want to spend one's time. Although "geek chic" is alive and well for some, many people in our society do not read and do not care to become enlightened, well-educated citizens. Certainly fewer people read books that are not school or reference books than in the past. In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts reported the number of adults who never read for pleasure increased by more than 17 million between 1992 and 2002. Girls who never see their own parents or peers reading may not even think to do so, given that they can watch television, see movies, play videogames, or surf the internet instead, where they are often permitted to post using whatever sorts of grammar and spelling they choose.

Without role models in their own communities, girls who have the potential to excel may not even discover that they do. In theory, those who do not see their own parents or friends celebrating their intelligence have potential models in the mass media, whether real-life successful women they see on the news, or fictional creations in movies and on television. However, when these women's accomplishments are diminished by the newscasters, or by other characters on fictional television, potentially brainy girls have nowhere to turn. Without role models to inspire them, those girls who are interested in intellectual activities may suffer from diminished self-esteem and depression and may not have the motivation and energy to follow

their dreams. Schools are progressively “teaching to the test” and not allowing students the time to explore and be creative. Having role models on television may encourage them, but only if they are truly smart girls who do not sacrifice their interests to consumerism.

We need girls like the television smart girls as they originally appear to become our future leaders. Television is one of a number of institutions and media that have pedagogical function, and its teachings tend towards the status quo, so it is important to see what it is teaching young people. When these potential smart women are repeatedly encouraged to spend their time obsessing over appearance, are discouraged from taking a stand, and are encouraged to value romance above school, society is at risk. Making these phenomena manifest is a step towards changing this tradition.

It is certainly not only the media of the current time, or of the teen-show era, responsible for girls not wanting to demonstrate their intelligence. Television has been complicit in discouraging brainy behavior in girls for over fifty years. The next chapter, “Girls Who Wore Glasses: The History of the Smart Girl on Television” discusses how television has depicted girls who acted brainy, or even simply studious and serious, since television began showing teen girls in fictional form. As teenagers having a significant presence on hour-long dramas is a relatively recent phenomenon, it includes many examples from the world of situation comedies and animation as well as drama. The chapter traces how such girls were shown in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, as preambles to the teen-show era itself, as well as discussing the ways they have been shown during the teen-show era in such genres as animated comedies and situation comedies, and how these differ from the characterizations on more dramatic shows.

CHAPTER 2. GIRLS WHO WORE GLASSES: THE HISTORY OF THE SMART GIRL

Introduction

In 1960, on the long-running situation comedy *Father Knows Best*, oldest daughter Betty, who is academically gifted, faces a dilemma. In the episode “Betty’s Career Problem,” she competes with a boy for a job. The interviewer turns her down flat and offers her a modeling job instead, saying, “Miss Anderson, take inventory of yourself—are you after a job or a man? You can’t have both” (“Betty’s Career Problem”). At the end of the episode, Betty models a wedding gown and says to the boy, “I’ve found something that you could never do better than I can—be a bride” (“Betty’s Career Problem”).

Betty is taught a lesson in performing like a normative girl. She learns that normative behavior is the only acceptable behavior, and that even if she is smarter than a boy, it is against society’s conventions to act as if she is. The punishment proffered to her is dire—if she chooses the path of occupational success, she is choosing to live a lonely life without romance. In 1960 (at least on television) the rules were clear-cut, as were the consequences. While in the succeeding decades of television cultural conventions would become more flexible, and no character would dare put the choice as starkly as “work or love,” nonetheless the predicament is still true for many smart girls on television. They must choose between acting brainy, and having popularity and romance.

This chapter discusses how smart teenage girls have been portrayed throughout television’s history until 1990 when the first teen dramas were aired. Once early television moved from predominantly variety and educational shows to featuring the sorts of situation comedies and dramas that have made up most prime time drama since then, children had a role

on television. Most of them were boys, however, so girl characters, including those who had some of the typical smart girl characteristics, did not have much presence for quite some time. Once she did become more common, she tended to learn lessons about how to be a girl that showed that acting too smart would prevent her from finding love and popularity.

A female character who does not dress fashionably, does not have a “hip” hairstyle, or wears glasses is refusing to perform a part as a sexually available girl who will do whatever it takes to attract boys. Judith Butler’s theory is that gender is not natural, but instead is a manifestation of cultural norms. When an individual does not comply with these norms, she is somehow punished. Teen television repeats the message over and over again, which Butler says is necessary for a cultural norm to be reinscribed. She writes:

Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. . . . The regulatory norms of “sex” work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative. (Butler 1993, 2)

On shows featuring teenagers, any girl who is not trying hard to be pretty and make boys like her is performing in a way that defies the “heterosexual imperative.” The smart girl, who is more focused on her books than on boys, is working against society’s conventions. While some of the girls in the teen-show era have been allowed to remain smart, while still attracting boys, girls in earlier television for the most part could not, and had to change their looks and personalities before boys could even see them. This means that television sends frequent messages to girl viewers that if they want to be popular and loved, they must perform as

normative girls. While the form of the message changed over the decades leading up to the teen-show era, as did the form of the makeover, the message itself stayed consistent. Girls who performed more normatively and who looked “prettier” were the ones girls wanted to be friends with, and boys noticed.

Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell observe in *The Makeover in Movies*, “Only beautiful women are visible” (Ford and Mitchell 2004, 35). The archetypical brainy, bespectacled, nerdy teenage girl who sheds her awkwardness along with her glasses has been a staple of American media for decades. As the country moved from the *Father Knows Best* ‘50s through the women’s lib generation to today’s Third-Wave and Post-Feminism, the archetype itself has evolved, reflecting society’s changes. More recently, we have seen the emergence of a new breed of brilliant girls and women who often use glasses to see more clearly and comment more sharply on the world and who are even allowed to have a kind of “cool.”

The brainy girl is portrayed as someone who cannot be intimidated into following the rules. This chapter traces the chronological changes that have occurred regarding society’s attitudes to smart girls and women and how the mass media have depicted them. The first section will give a short history of brainy women, and how they have been treated by society and depicted by the media. Next I discuss how early television treated “grinds” or ambitious girls, and “brains” or studious girls, starting with guest stars on shows like *Gidget* and *The Brady Bunch* who are made over by the main characters. As subsequent makeovers of smart girls frequently accompanied the removal of glasses, the following section traces the development of glasses through history and the negative associations popular culture made between glasses and women’s appearance.

In the next section, I deal with the rise of “nerds” in the late 1970s and early 1980s and

how they were treated on their shows, and the ubiquity of the “bookworm” on situation comedies in the 1980s. The chapter goes on to consider the changing role of the brainy girl over time and how she becomes a truly intelligent young woman who can find both love and academic success, but has to remove her glasses on the way, as on *Life Goes on*, which paves the way for the changing role of the smart girl during teen-show era. The final section discusses how more recent bright girls in genres other than teen drama, like sitcom girl Darlene Connor of *Roseanne*, and the animated glasses-wearing Daria Morgendorffer of *Daria* and Lisa Simpson of *The Simpsons*, avoid being made over and remain happily outside the mainstream, able to see everyone else more clearly.

A Short History of Brainy Women

There have been punishments and criticisms throughout history for women who chose to perform as intellectuals, well before there was television or any sort of mass media. Throughout history, brainy women have been called names by much of society, and some have used these names as signs of liberation. This matters because, as Judith Butler puts it in *Excitable Speech*, “In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned. But the name holds out another possibility as well: by being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call” (Butler 1997, 2). Often those women embraced the names that were intended to be insults, and names like bluestockings, grinds, nerds, bookworms, and geeks have been embraced by those given the titles.

Women through much of history, in many societies, were often prohibited from becoming educated, and in other cases it was not socially sanctioned, even when permitted. In the eighteenth century, for example, it was suggested that girls should not be educated after age

twelve and that her mental health and her romantic future were in doubt if she was. Prior to the Revolutionary War, they were mostly excluded from higher education but when they did attend high school or college, many worried about male classmates corrupting the women (Rury 1987, np).

After the war, as women were supposed to be in charge of educating their children and the moral development of both their children and their husbands—what historian Barbara Welter in 1966 called the “cult of true womanhood” (Welter 1966, 151)—higher education for women was considered more important, but educators were quite concerned over the corrupting influence boys could have on girls. Single sex education was too expensive; however, and boys and girls were educated together. Those who chose to pursue a life of the mind at that time were called “bluestockings.” Originally, the term was applied to both men and women, but “by 1782 referred to a learned, pedantic lady. The evolution of the word and concept from learned person to a pedantic lady reveals society’s bias: ‘That a man should be learned and show it was well within the nature of things, but except in the case of a beauty, for a women to assert, however modestly, a claim to intelligence was an unpardonable sin’” (Scott 1947, 197).¹¹ Women in France and England who did wish to discuss intellectual subjects started their own salons, but were still prohibited from University Life.

After the Civil War the bluestocking label was still applied to women who sought further education. In addition, at the time, some experts alleged there was a biological reason women

¹¹Bluestocking originally referred to a man, Mr. Stillingfleet who appeared at a gathering of intellectual women in overly casual, blue stockings, which he could afford, unlike the black silk ones generally required for evening affairs. The term was then applied to other the women of that group, and others like them. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines bluestocking as: 1. attrib. Wearing blue worsted (instead of black silk) stockings; hence, not in full dress, in homely dress. (contemptuous.) . . . b. Applied depreciatively to the assemblies that met at Montagu House, and those who frequented them or imitated them. . . . These societies were denominated Blue-stocking Clubs. . . . c. Hence, Of women: Having or affecting literary tastes; literary, learned 2 Blue Stocking lady: orig. one who frequented Mrs. Montague's ‘Blue Stocking’ assemblies; thence transferred sneeringly to any woman showing a taste for learning, a literary lady (*OED*).

should not study too much. (Rury, 1987) One well-known physician, Edward Clarke claimed in his 1875 book, *Sex in Education, or, A Fair Chance for the Girls*, that girls could overtax their reproductive systems by too much study, and it might make them anemic and even infertile. Therefore, women should not work as hard at their studies than men in order to preserve their femininity. Although some educators objected, and feminists, who thought coeducation would lead to social justice, believed Clarke's comments were outrageous, for the most part schools attempted to give women an education that did not require them to work as hard as men, despite the fact that girls generally did better than boys in school. Some educators believed that coeducation was threatening to boys, who were outnumbered in schools by girls by the end of the nineteenth century. "Worried about the low rates of marriage and childbirth among well educated elite women—which some called "race suicide"—and bothered by the challenge that women in the professions and public life posed for the traditional roles of wife and mother, critics of the advanced education for women sought ways to reassert the notions of true womanhood" (Hansot and Tyack 1988, 37).

In Victorian America (from the early nineteenth century to 1900) many people believed that men were motivated by "powerful sexual drives" and that women were "morally pure" (Rury 1987, 44). Men's education was planned in order to rein in their sexual energy while women's was "intended to shield or protect them from the corrupting or otherwise threatening influences of the male world" (44). There were concerns during the Progressive era (1890s-1940s) that girls who continued with school became unhappy, and possibly too masculine (Hansot and Tyack 1988).

A few US universities began offering education to women in the nineteenth century. Among the first were Franklin and Marshall (which began as coeducational in 1787 but became

all male early on), Oberlin College, which opened in 1835 was the first University to grant undergraduate degrees to women, and the University of Chicago, which first held classes in 1892, began as coeducational. The first woman in the United States graduated with a medical degree in 1840, the first law degree in 1846, and the first Ph.D. was awarded in 1877 (Case Western University Web Site). However, while acceptance to graduate school was not that difficult for women, actually getting the doctorate, “involved not only the professors and the department but also the president and board of trustees, many of whom long refused to award higher degrees to women or even acknowledge their presence on campus” (Rossiter 1982, 161).

By the twentieth century, intelligent people in general were objects of fear or derision. Barbara Kerr, author of *Smart Girls: A New Psychology of Girls, Women & Giftedness* writes:

The popular psychology of the early 1900s in America abounded in stereotypes of the intelligent. Many people believed in ‘early-ripe, early rot’: that the precocious child would certainly wither by adolescence. Bright children were characterized as sickly and puny, nearsighted from reading too much, clumsy and incompetent at physical and athletic activities. Common belief held that intelligence went hand in hand with personal social maladjustment. Little wonder then, that a negative and disapproving concept of giftedness emerged. The more intelligent a child, the more physically, socially, and psychologically deficient he or she was expected to be.” (Kerr 1994, 96)

By the mid 1950s, as the mass media began to have more influence on people, the expectations for brainy girls were made more explicit. As Lynn Peril writes in *College Girls: Bluestockings, Sex Kittens, and Coeds, Then and Now*, by the early 1950s, “Long before girls reached campus, they encountered a mystique in women, in articles and stories that told readers to value social relationships, to study, and to hide their intelligence lest boys find them

competitive, bossy, and unattractive” (Peril 2006, 207). A girl who liked to study through the early 1950s was labeled ‘a grind,’ a label that was mocked by many. For example, a study in 1952 reported that the grind is:

A girl with flat shoes, horn-rimmed glasses, and a shiny nose which she keeps buried in Shakespeare, Schopenhauer and Shelley; a girl who is not interested in dancing, sports, or small talk; a girl who has the musty air of the library instead of a drop of perfume behind the ears. To date her or court her would be like having to stay after school, and therefore unthinkable. Obviously, while her former classmates traipse off one by one to be fitted for their wedding gowns, she will be sitting home reading a good book. (Peril 2006, 209).

Television came of age during the time this sort of information was being reported.

Throughout the television era, our culture’s ideas about school-oriented young women have been reinforced because of the medium’s reliance on stereotypes. Due to the generic similarity of many shows and the consistent messages television gives about good behavior and bad, right and wrong, and appropriate and inappropriate ways to live, the medium acts not only as a mirror of our culture, but also as an influence on it. Messages are constantly repeated until they seem natural. From television’s first shows until quite recently, bright girls and women either were absent, or were taught a lesson early on about performing as a normative girl by minimizing their intelligence. This meant that any brainy girl character was someone who needed to learn these lessons.

As discussed in the previous chapter, teen television is especially didactic and sends lessons about the right and wrong ways to be a girl. Since television started featuring teenage girls, their stories have been primarily about popularity. Television has always dealt in stereotypes, so it teaches that there are limited ways a girl can act. Viewers who watch

contemporary shows featuring female teenage characters learn that those who act in appropriately girlish ways have fabulous friends and a cool bad boy to love them. Yet this is an improvement over earlier times.

In the 1950s and 1960s girls were in a double bind. While the country was encouraging all children to work harder in school, so the US would not fall behind in science and technology, they were also encouraged to remain feminine. As Susan Douglas, author of *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media* writes of growing up in that period, “While exhortations to study hard, make something of myself, and extend democracy throughout the world were going in one ear, resonating with sales pitches that reaffirmed that, as a girl, I had been born into the very best of times, retrograde messages about traditional femininity were going in the other” (Douglas 1994, 25). Child oriented television in the late 1950s, she continues, “was a bastion of sexist assumptions” (Douglas 1994, 25). From the 1950s until the 1990s, roles for girl characters on television were even more limited and constrained than they are today, and there was a narrow view of appropriate girlhood that included not being too ambitious, too sexy, or too smart. Characters in that period, for example those in programs such as *Father Knows Best*, *The Patty Duke Show*, and *Gidget*, seemed to believe wholeheartedly that girls should stay in their assigned place and perform as normatively as possible.

The Grind and the Brain

Most early situation comedies featured boy children. The very earliest situation comedies, *I Remember Mama* (1949-1956) had three children, Nels, Katrin, and Dagmar, and *The Goldbergs* (1949-1954) included *Sammy and Rosalie*, two “active teenagers” (Brooks and Marsh 2003, 471), but from published reports none of the girls seem particularly brainy, or even

studious.¹² On later family situation comedies such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (which started on the radio in 1944 but was on television from 1952-1966), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963), and *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968) there were children, and even teenagers, but the main young people were boys.

Even when there were girls, the smart girl as she is now was a relatively recent phenomenon. The closest some earlier television girls might get was “studious” or ambitious and interested in subjects that, as far as other characters were concerned, more properly belonged to boys. However, *Father Knows Best* (1948 on radio, 1954-1960 on television) was about the Anderson family, which had two girls, the pre-teen Kathy (Lauren Chapin), often called Kitten, and teenage Betty (Elinor Donahue), also known as Princess. Beyond the infantilizing nicknames, there was a definite spirit to the show that girls should be girls and stay out of the realms of boys, meaning practically any place in the outside world. Lynn Spigel discusses the didactic messages of the show when she writes, “*Father Knows Best* focused on the problems of young Bud’s failed attempt to become a newspaper boy, little Kathy’s preteen angst about being a tomboy, or daughter Betty’s lessons in becoming a woman who choose between a ‘male’ career as an engineer or dating her boss” (Spigel 1992, 178).

Despite the fact that Betty is such a good student that she makes life harder for the more aimless Bud, at that time there was no chance of a girl on television having ambitions beyond marriage and motherhood, as seen in the example that begins this chapter. As Douglas puts it when commenting on “Betty’s Career Problem,” “So much for Betty’s delusions about working outside the home” (Douglas 1994, 38). Although Betty’s parents are excited about her going to

¹² Although cited in many books of television history, these two programs are not available for viewing as they were “telecast live, rather than filmed” (Brooks and Marsh 2003, 728), except for the 1955-1956 syndicated season of *The Goldbergs*, which was filmed.

college, in “Betty Goes to College” she chooses to stay home and attend junior college, proving that, although she is an excellent student, she is not a grind. In the 1950s, any girl who strayed from her appropriate sphere and did not act normatively was taught the error of her ways, so there did not need to be grinds to contrast with the other girls. However, by the 1960s, the perky girl did need a foil—the studious girl.

The rules changed a bit in the 1960s, although there were still many ways in which girls were circumscribed by their roles. In 1963, the *Patty Duke Show*, the first television show starring a teenage girl, premiered. This program starred actress Patty Duke as “identical cousins.” Cathy, who had grown up in Europe “loved the minuet, the *Ballet Russe*, and *Crepes Suzette*,” while the very American Patty “loved to Rock and Roll, a hot dog [made] her lose control” (“The Patty Duke Theme (Cousins)”). For the most part, Patty did not try to make Cathy over, but they frequently traded places, with Patty straightening her clothes and flipping her hair a different direction in order to better impersonate her cousin.

Susan Douglas writes of the show, “The purpose of [the Patty Duke show] seemed to be to provide girl viewers with two points of identification, Patty and Cathy, both of them deliberately asexual and providing two outlying points on the spectrum of teen girl femininity” (Douglas 1994, 109). Yet, upon viewing, that does not really seem to be true. Although both girls have boyfriends and neither girl is sexy, there is a definite feeling that Cathy is uptight while Patty seems to be having a lot more fun. As Ilana Nash, author of *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Contemporary Popular Culture* puts it, “the American teenager (as opposed to European Cathy) is a slangy trickster who hates to work, loves to chatter, and navigates her life by the North Star of the opposite sex. . . . [Patty] underscores the representation of the teenage girl as a resourceful and determined person with big ideas—as when, in a 1964 episode, she

decides to join the Peace Corps” (Nash 2006, 189). Cathy, the studious girl just sits around and reads. Cathy represents the “brain,” the late 1950s-1960s version of the grind. One knew a brain by, “any number of attractive things—sneakers, black worsted stockings, thick glasses,” (Wescott 1958, 8) as a “humorous” 1958 essay in *Seventeen* magazine said.

A year later, *Gidget* (1965-1966), premiered in the time slot just after *The Patty Duke Show*. The show only lasted one season but has been in reruns frequently since then. *Gidget*, played by Sally Field, was not a brainy type herself. Although in the 1959 movie the series was based on, also called *Gidget*, Frances Lawrence was a very studious girl who gave up studying in favor of surfing and boys, in the television series she was already popular and, while she had plenty of school spirit, did not spend a lot of time worrying about schoolwork.¹³ There was no way, in the mid-1960s, that a young woman who demonstrated her interest in academics could possibly be the central character in her own show, because the stereotypes of the decade could not possibly be perky or feminine enough to meet viewer’s expectations.

A guest star on *Gidget*, however, went through a makeover, which has become a standard trope for teen television. Ilana Nash observes that for white baby boomers, “*Gidget* was arguably the reigning exemplar of the all-American girl” (Nash 2006, 342). Susan Douglas describes her as “perky,” a sort of femininity between masculine and feminine that was “assertiveness masquerading as cuteness” (Douglas 1994, 108). Teens who did not act perky were gender transgressors who needed to be taught a lesson on proper female behavior. The notion of a brilliant girl was considered so intimidating for television viewers, or possibly just so unlikely, that the few such characters were “studious” rather than actively brainy, and hardly central to the

¹³ The movie was based on a 1957 novel, *Gidget, The Little Girl With the Big Ideas*, by Frederic Kohner. There were movie sequels as well: *Gidget Goes Hawaiian* (1961) and *Gidget Goes to Rome* (1963), as well as later TV movies and a television show *The New Gidget*, (about *Gidget* as a wife and mother) which ran from 1986-1988. Each iteration has starred a different actress.

series.

For example, the episode “Gidget’s Foreign Policy” introduces a character who takes her schoolwork seriously. Inga (Brooke Bundy) is a Swedish exchange student and “a drudge who carries her own luggage, constantly volunteers to cook and clean, and spends the rest of her time studying” (Douglas 1994, 110). Gidget makes Inga over. She teaches Inga to flirt, and in turn, Inga flirts with all of Gidget’s male friends, including her boyfriend, and even her father. “Gidget,” Douglas opines, “has created a monster” (Douglas 1994, 111). Gidget, who throws a dinner party at which she becomes self-effacing while Inga acts spoiled, teaches Inga a lesson. She is taken to task by her own boyfriend, Gunnar, who wants her to act more like Gidget and actually spansks her. She has learned a lesson about acting girly, as has Gidget, whose boyfriend says he likes her in a more domestic mode.

A similar story takes place in a 1973 episode of *The Brady Bunch* that also concerns a bookish, but not necessarily brilliant, character. There is a big difference, however. Although Inga is self-effacing and hard working, she is hardly frumpy and her makeover is less physical than social. The girl in the *Brady Bunch* episode also wears glasses, which became an indicator of bookishness on television for many years. Although Jan, the middle Brady girl, at one point gets glasses, the Brady girls would never be mistaken for the brainy bunch.¹⁴ They are significantly more interested in popularity and romance, and being “groovy,” than they are in reading, writing, math, or science. However, in the episode “My Fair Opponent,” Marcia, the oldest Brady girl, helps an intellectually-focused girl train for a competition to be hostess on

¹⁴ The episode in which Jan gets glasses, “The Not So Rose Colored Glasses,” involves her taking the wrong bike from the playground. The family concludes that she needs glasses, which she resists because she’ll “look positively goofy.” The bulk of the episode, however, is concerned with getting a large photo of the family remade after Jan, not wearing them, rides a bike into it. Unlike Marcia’s similar episode in which she gets braces on her teeth, or Cindy’s attempts to rid herself of a lisp, Jan’s attractiveness to a boy is not at issue in this episode.

Banquet Night.

Molly is a “wipeout” who hides behind giant cat’s eye glasses, wears an absolutely enormous dress, has her hair in an unfashionable ponytail, and can barely speak to the Brady boys. She demonstrates her interest in literature by crediting her best time at school to the “Readers and Writers Club.” Marcia has her remove her glasses and exclaims, “You’ve got beautiful eyes!” (“My Fair Opponent”). This starts her on a journey of transformation. Marcia not only changes Molly’s clothes and hair, but teaches her how to perform in a more girly way as well. Molly, predictably, becomes a knockout and begins to rise in the ranks of popularity and power to the point that she is becoming more popular than Marcia. Of course, no one can be more popular than a Brady girl. Barry Williams, who played Greg on the show, comments on the episode in his memoir saying that things “start to boil when Marcia attempts to stop the monster by beating it out for Banquet Night hostess. But when Molly swipes Marcia’s brilliant campaign speech, she also swipes the election out from under her” (Williams and Kreski 1992, 278). As Mimi Marinucci writes in her article “Television, Generation X, and Third-wave feminism: A Contextual Analysis of *The Brady Bunch*,” “In addition to teaching the importance of self-improvement through cosmetic makeover, *The Brady Bunch* teaches the importance of moderation and restraint” (Marinucci 2005, 517). Since it is *The Brady Bunch*, Molly realizes her error and arranges for the girls to be co-hostesses. They both perform as normative girls in the traditionally feminine role of hostess.

This is a typical Cinderella story on television shows featuring teenage girls. Gidget and Marcia act as fairy godmothers, and Inga and Molly both have their triumphs until the clock strikes twelve and they must face the consequences of their actions. The message of their stories is that while a girl should attempt to be pretty and popular, it is just as important to be nice.

Assertiveness is frowned upon—getting what one wants should be accomplished through womanly wiles. Braininess is something to be disguised. The smart girl who goes for what she wants is “a monster” who needs to change, but just enough. Unlike in Gidget’s time, by the early 1970s there was an assumption that a girl could change her looks drastically, and if she did not she was not performing the way a girl should. For example, with improvements in contact lenses, it was a viable option for a girl not to wear glasses if she needed them. Glasses became a signifying trope for intelligence on television that was ubiquitous until quite recently. Why are glasses so semiotically meaningful? The next section shows why.

The Glasses Case

For women, the negative linking between glasses and appearance has been true since they were invented in the late 1200s in both Northern Italy and China (“Historical Tour of Ophthalmology” 2005, np). The use of glasses was originally considered vanity itself, but once their value was established, the use of glasses spread throughout Europe and, along with aiding the spread of scholarship, became indicators of intelligence and of fashion. In 1679, one courtier visited Spain and saw women wearing large glasses but noticed that “they made no use of them when they were really necessary—they only talked when they had them on. . . . It was done to make them look serious” (Corson 1980, 47).

In most parts of Europe, however, women who needed glasses during the Renaissance would not wear them in public due to “vanity. One simply did not admit that one could not see unassisted in public. . . . Vision aids were designed to be pulled out and put away quickly, yet still maintain some semblance of style for the few minutes they were in use” (Pemberton-Sikes 2005). For this reason, women who wanted to be fashionable and to fit into the dominant society were more likely to use monocles or lorgnettes they could put away than glasses that were

constantly on the face. This practice continued through the eighteenth century. Even large lorgnettes were eventually considered vulgar, and by the end of the century became so small they would be incorporated into other objects such as fans or perfume bottles. In the nineteenth century, fashionable women could still not afford to be seen wearing eyeglasses and pince-nez were “never truly elegant when worn by women” but were “tolerated on informal occasions by fashionable ladies” (Corson 1980, 142).

Things did not change much more in modern times. Until the 1920s, glasses designers paid little attention to aesthetics. At about the same time that rimless glasses and those framed in tortoiseshell became all the rage, Dorothy Parker published her 1926 poem “News Item,” which consisted only of the couplet, “Men seldom make passes/At girls who wear glasses” (Parker 1976, 109). In the 1920s and 1930s, fashion designers took up the cause of making glasses attractive. Although sometimes the combination of fashion and glasses “led occasionally to extremes of eccentricity, it made possible the wearing of glasses . . . without embarrassment.” (Corson 1980, 199). This may have been true in real life, but it did not extend to the mass media. Twenty-five years later, “Marilyn Monroe’s character Pola Debevoise preferred walking into walls to being seen in glasses in the 1953 movie *How to Marry a Millionaire*” (Pemberton-Sikes 2005). Women who wanted men to see them as attractive had reasons for wanting to appear less serious and less brainy, and not wearing glasses was an easy way to start to accomplish this.

Glasses have long connoted brilliance and brilliance has traditionally been, with few exceptions, associated with masculinity. Women who demonstrated their high intelligence, whether through taking high school offices, university spots, jobs, or awards that many thought should have gone to men were suspect. Glasses are an indicator that a girl might have large ambitions, and teenage boys reacted in those days by preferring girls without them. For many

girls who have worn glasses, they are a stigma that seemed to ruin their lives. For one girl who got her glasses at age twelve, they “earned me an instant nerd label in the schoolyard and, later on, comments about how great I’d look without them” (Tant 1999, 76).

Up until the early 1960s, however, people with poor eyesight did not have much choice. They could wear glasses or be visually impaired. Although glass contact lenses were invented in 1888, and plastic ones in the 1930s, both styles were uncomfortable for many users and could not be worn for long. However, by 1963 contact lenses became refined to the point that they were a viable alternative to glasses. For teenage girls, choosing to wear glasses became tantamount to a declaration that they did not care about their looks or social standing. It also meant that they were willing to be seen as brilliant, and hence they would give up their ability to attract boys. For many young women who did care about appearance, and did not want to be automatically categorized as brainy, contact lenses were a godsend. They took away the dreaded “nerd” stigma.

While there were doubtless girls for whom the doffing of glasses revealed just how plain they really were, those with the raw materials could go from ugly duckling to beautiful swan with a trip to the eye doctor. However, with the availability of contact lenses came a social weeding-out process. Those girls who continued to wear their glasses could be considered socially deficient because they were not taking all the available steps to become as attractive as possible. They were not even attempting to perform normatively. If all it took was a few minor cosmetic changes for girls to become “hot,” why did not they do it? If they did not trade their glasses in for contact lenses, they were likely not interested in their appearance and only worthy objects of desire for the boys lowest on the social totem pole—those bookish types who wore glasses themselves.

This attitude persists today and starts early. Children learn well before their teen years

that the bespectacled are perfect objects of scorn. A study published in a 2005 issue of *Review of Optometry* notes: “Preadolescent children who wear glasses . . . are more than one-third more likely to be bullied than other kids. . . . Interestingly, the numbers were the same regardless of social class, gender or the child’s visual impairment” (“Kids who Wear Glasses are Bully Magnets” 2005, 6). Brainy children, many of whom are bespectacled, are perceived as far less socially acceptable or popular than the non-glasses wearers in their schools. This, of course, has been, borne out in the media’s depiction of teenagers, especially teenage girls. Timothy Shary writes in “The Nerdy Girl and Her Beautiful Sister,” which discusses teen movies about smart girl characters, that most movies “suggest to girls that intelligence is a burden more than an asset; more valuable assets . . . are fashion sense, physical beauty, agreeable attitude, and the attainment of a boyfriend” (Shary 2002, 236). Girls who attend movies and watch television are bombarded with the message that showing off one’s brilliance is far less useful than being pretty, and that glasses are far from attractive.

Along with glasses as a sure-fire man repellent, however, there is another thread in culture. Glasses on women have been seen as one of many obstacles to sexual availability along with constrained hair or complicated clothes. Charles Taylor of the online journal *Salon* asks why even the best movies show glasses as a barrier to sex, discussing “the bookstore sequence in *The Big Sleep* [1946], one of the sexiest scenes on film. Bogart’s Philip Marlowe takes refuge from an afternoon rainstorm in a Los Angeles bookstore and offers a bottle of “pretty good Rye” to the comely young thing manning the shop.” After she closes the store, “Bogart tentatively asks her if she has to . . . and hesitates, indicating her glasses. Turning away, she removes them, lets down her hair and, when she turns back to him, is greeted with a friendly, lascivious ‘*Hell-lo*’” (Taylor 2002). The image of the librarian or bookstore clerk wearing thick glasses and

restraining her hair in a bun who lets down her hair for the right guy and becomes a raging nymphomaniac is endemic in our culture. However, the idea of the prim librarian who becomes naughty implies that if she does not find a man to awaken her sexually she will end up like Donna Reed's Mary in the "alternative" scenario in *It's a Wonderful Life*: frumpy, lonely, and terrified. The message this dichotomy sends to the vision-impaired woman is that she must not wear glasses, but if she does they are simply another fashion accessory she can use to lure a man with the promise of what lies behind them. Even if she is actually brilliant, popular culture says, she is still just waiting for the right man to wake her from her boring life of the mind.

The Nerd and the Bookworm

A smart girl in the 1970s and the early 1980s had few role models in popular culture, however this would soon change somewhat.¹⁵ The few brainy girls on television in the late 1970s and early 1980s were primarily "nerds" with glasses, like Patty (Sarah Jessica Parker) from *Square Pegs* (1982-1983) who swore to become popular, but could not, and Lisa Loopner (Gilda Radner) in sketches on *Saturday Night Live* whose only friend was the even more socially awkward Todd. Both Patty and Lisa were intelligent and musically talented, but this was overshadowed by their social deficiencies.

Square Pegs creator Ann Beatts was also instrumental in creating one of the first nerdy, glasses wearing girls regularly appearing on television. From 1975-1980, Gilda Radner played a number of recurring characters on *Saturday Night Live*, including thirteen sketches, starting in 1978, in which she played the glasses-wearing Lisa Loopner. Lisa was not only bespectacled, but

¹⁵ There were several hour-long shows in the 1970s and early 1980s with many children, some of whom were teenage girls. *The Waltons* and *Little House on the Prairie*, (featuring the obviously smart Laura Ingalls,) were both historical shows, and therefore did not precisely reflect the era in which they aired. *Eight is Enough* featured a family of eight children (and later added a male orphan, as so many of these shows did), quite a few of whom were girls or young women, but most were well past high school, and the only one with smart girl characteristics was Mary, a medical student, already 21 when the show began.

perpetually had the sniffles, wore unflattering cardigan sweaters, and had a mother who was equally nerdy (played by Jane Curtin). On one hand, the fact that a bespectacled girl had someone in love with her was a positive message, yet the fact that it was the extremely nerdy Todd partially negated this. Although never mentioned explicitly, like Radner herself, Lisa Loopner was clearly Jewish (she was saving herself for composer Marvin Hamlisch, who not only is Jewish, but “looks Jewish”), a trope that would be used for a significant proportion of the smart girls after her.

However, that was just a sketch. Beatts would take the idea of the nerdy girl, and turn it into a whole series. The bespectacled Patty Greene and her chubby friend Lauren, who had braces, begin *Square Pegs* with Lauren saying, “I’ve got this whole high school thing psyched out. It all breaks down into cliques. . . . Yeah, you know. Cliques. Little in-groups of different kids. All we have to do is click with the right clique, and we can finally have a social life that’s worthy of us. . . . I tell you, this year we’re going to be popular. . . . Even if it kills us (“Pilot”). Although Patty is dubious at first, saying “No way, not even with cleavage!” the rest of the short-lived series involves the girls’ attempts to become popular.

The wealthy and preppy Muffy Tepperman (Jami Gertz) and the vapid valley girl Jennifer DeNuccio (Tracy Nelson) sneer at them, while the popular boy Patty likes barely notices her, until, that is, she takes off her glasses and sings in the school musical. The show was one of the first instances of geek chic, as, despite starring nerds, guest star included such cutting edge alternative figures as *Saturday Night Live* star Bill Murray and the punk rock group Devo. Although the show only lasted one season, it was perhaps the first time that a girl with glasses was involved in a “cool” endeavor in popular culture.

However, the trope of glasses signifying ugly was in full force during casting. Sarah

Jessica Parker, who played Patty, went on to play the glamorous Carrie Bradshaw on *Sex and the City*, and was hardly a nerd even as a seventeen-year old. An article from *People* magazine includes this story: “‘I said that she was too pretty,’ says creator Anne Beatts of Parker, then only 17. ‘But the casting person took a pair of cheap sunglasses, broke the lenses out and put them on Sarah and said, ‘Okay, now look at her.’ She still looked pretty, but she was just so good.’” (Dam 2001, np). The fact that a simple pair of glasses was all it took to make a girl look like a nerd shows the power the trope had at that time, and to an extent still holds. Although nerdy, Patty and Lisa were heroines who never “dumbed down” for any boy. It seemed that with characters like those available that things might begin to change for brainy girls.

Shortly after these characters were gone from television, however, the country went through a “backlash” against feminism that was made manifest on television. Judith Butler, discussing power in general, writes that “The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to be caught up in the same terms, a phenomenon that gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: The prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble” (Butler 1999, xxvii.) Susan Faludi writes that the media in the 1980s used such threats to keep women in their place. The message from the powers that be, she said was that the reason women were so unhappy despite gains in their rights was that “it must be all that equality that’s causing all that pain. Women are unhappy because they are free. Women are enslaved by their own liberation. They have grabbed at the gold ring of independence, only to miss the one ring that really matters. . . . The women’s movement . . . has proven its own worst enemies” (Faludi 1991, x). The mainstream media, including television, as a way of regaining its power over women, bore this out by warning women and girls in multiple ways that if they did not toe the line they would end up alone forever. Suzanna Danuta Walters, author of *Material Girls*:

Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory writes there was a “trend in television programs . . . representations that have the veneer of feminism but are actually encoding reactionary ideas about women and women’s lives” (Walters 1995, 135). During the backlash era of the mid to late 1980s, a retro sensibility ensured on television that girls would learn lessons about being smart, and performing their gender properly by acting feminine, that would not necessarily be positive developments.

In the 1980s it seems as if every show with teens had a resident girl bookworm who was made over at some point. Although these girls were a lot more “normal” than the nerds, having friends of their own and confidence in their achievements, and mostly did not wear glasses, their stories are all about popularity and not being too ambitious. For example, *Family Ties* (1982-1989) features a smart, tomboyish, girl in the guise of the pre-teen Jennifer who is quite different from her older sister Mallory, who acts silly and stupid and is predominantly interested in fashion. Yet, this does not last; once Jennifer gets older she, too, falls for the allure of popularity and boys. In a 1987 episode of *Family Ties*, “D is for Date,” Jennifer “dumbs down” to impress a boy. When he calls her “the brain” she replies, “You’re wrong about how smart I am. I’m as dumb as you are. . . I’m so smart at science but there’s a lot of things that you’re smart at that I don’t know anything about . . . Like baseball, you are so much smarter than I am at baseball I can’t even begin to tell you half the stuff you know about it” (“D is for Date”).

As Jennifer is a know sports fan and athlete, this is clearly a fabrication, but she does get a date out of it. Mallory supports her, saying, “it’s so simple, guys do not go out with girls who are smarter than they are.” However, one major difference from the earlier smart girls is that Jennifer actually learns the lesson that playing dumb is not a good idea. Her mother tells her to be herself, and she admits to Tim, (who has lost his place on the baseball team because of his bad

grades,) that she is very smart and he seems to like her anyhow as the episode ends. It seems as if Jennifer learns that performing as a dumb girl has its drawbacks, but in addition, she also learns that performing as a dumb girl *works*. As the series progresses she gets more and more frivolous and more interested in popularity.¹⁶

There were also lessons about ambition in the 1980s. Carol Seaver was the “genius” sister on the show *Growing Pains* (1985-1992). When the show begins, she wears glasses, is a bit chubby, and has a typical “nerd” look, although that changes later on in the series.¹⁷ In the 1985 episode, “Choices,” Carol, who is often positioned against her mischievous and popular brother Mike, has an opportunity to skip tenth grade. Her mother, a journalist who dropped out of a prestigious journalism job to raise her family, but returns to work at a local newspaper in the series’ first episode, is all for it. However, when Carol says she “won’t make the same mistake as you did with the wife and motherhood thing” her family works together to convince her that family is more important than her ambitions. After seeing a videotape of herself being born, she decides, “I do not want to skip this grade!” (“Choices”). She is tacitly making the decision to choose romance and motherhood over her career potential.

It is a surprisingly retro message that harkens back to *Father Knows Best* days but complies with the message many shows were sending during the backlash period of the 1980s. Home and family were of major importance in that period. As Susan Faludi writes in *Backlash*,

¹⁶ There is a two-part episode called “It’s My Party,” which also aired in 1987, in which Jennifer wants to be popular and is schooled in talking like a Valley Girl by Mallory.

¹⁷ Tracey Gold, who played Carol, suffered from Anorexia, brought on, in part, by network pressure to lose weight, and the “fat” references the scripts had Mike make in nearly every episode. She missed the final season of the show because she was battling the disease. This is recounted in many articles and in her own book, *Room to Grow: An Appetite for Life* by Tracey Gold and Julie McCarron ((2003) New York, New Millennium.). Many subsequent teen actresses have report network pressure to lose weight, including the girls on *The Facts of Life*, and many have developed eating disorders, including Kellie Martin of *Life Goes On*, Candice Cameron of *Full House*, and Sara Michelle Gellar of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (three women are mentioned on (<http://www.eating-disorder-information.com/mediacelebrities.asp>)).

many fewer women were major characters in dramas in the late 1980s than in previous decades, and that “Women were also losing ground in the one television genre they had always called their own: situation comedy” (Faludi 1991, 143). She goes on to describe how single fathers began to be the most common stars, while the mothers were dead.¹⁸ Although shows with strong heroines *Roseanne* and *Murphy Brown* premiered in 1988 Faludi writes, “By the following season, prime time reverted to traditional feminine icons, as the new series filled the screen with teenage models, homemakers, a nun and –that particular prototype of the last TV backlash—the good suburban housekeeper witch . . . Only two of thirty-three new shows were about women with jobs; on the rest they were housewives, little girls, or invisible” (Faludi 1991, 146). Carol’s choice not to give up the idea of becoming a wife and mother was indicative of such programs.

For most of the 1980s, shows featuring teenagers advocate romance over all, and the smart girl, generally a supporting character, does not have much to do and is given short shrift in favor of the girls who perform as silly and stupid (though they are frequently discovered to have hidden depths or untapped intellectual ability).

The Glasses Wearing Heroine

In 1989, there was a seismic shift. A brainy, glasses-wearing girl had an important role in the cast of a quality family drama.¹⁹ The show was *Life Goes On* (1989-1993), and it revolved

¹⁸ She is referring to shows such as *Who’s the Boss?* (ABC 1984-1992), *Full House* (ABC 1987-1995), *My Two Dads* (NBC 1987-1990), and *Blossom* (NBC 1991-1995), all of which featured single fathers, and sometimes older brothers or uncles, raising children whose mothers had died.

¹⁹ I am using the term “quality” to differentiate *Life Goes On* from earlier hour-long family shows *The Waltons*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *Eight is Enough*. These were all extremely wholesome shows that, in general, used the “problem of the week” formula. While *Life Goes on* may have started as such a show, it quickly became more of a serial and dealt with much more serious issues in a more complex manner than those earlier shows. There was an earlier hour-long show, *Family* (ABC 1976-1980), that began to have some of the quality attributes and featured a refreshingly “normal” and self-confident teenage girl, the tomboyish Buddy, who worried a bit about her lack of breasts early in the first season, but had quite a few boyfriends after that, and frequently rejected changing herself to get them to like her. The first two seasons are out on DVD. The show added a pre-teen genius in its last two seasons but unfortunately, even the Library of Congress does not have those seasons of the show.

around a working-class family dealing with a son with Down's syndrome. While at first Corky (Chris Burke), the son, was the main character, more viewers were attracted to his sister, the brainy Becca (Kellie Martin). As an *Entertainment Weekly* article put it, just before the beginning of the second season of the show,

Martin's beleaguered Becca has become the unofficial star of *Life Goes On* . . . Last year, ABC's promotion centered on Chris Burke, who plays Becca's 19-year-old brother, Corky, and, like his character, has Down's syndrome. Early episodes focused on Corky's traumatic adjustment to high school, but because his role is written with a minimum of dialogue, Martin found herself doing a lot of the talking, and Becca—bright but not bookwormy, generous, wry, and endearingly impatient—soon became more prominent. (Harris 1990, np).

Becca does very well in school and struggles with teen embarrassments and her wish to be part of the popular crowd. In the early seasons of the show, her ability to become popular is hindered both by her brother and by her reputation as a brainy girl without the ability to measure up to the more conventionally attractive young women. She does not take these indignities without a fight, however. John Leonard of *New York Magazine* called Becca “a wonderful, bespectacled bundle of internal contradictions, of pubescent seething” (Leonard 1989, 76). She fights for what she wants, whether it is respect for herself, respect for her brother, or a boy, and uses her brilliance to try to get it.

Her glasses are an extremely important part of her makeup and are used by the show to trace her development from outcast to confident young woman. In the first season's opening credit sequence, we see the family in the morning getting ready for school and work.

Becca is wearing her red-framed glasses and looks down at her chest and asks “Where

are you guys already?” When we meet her, she is shy, awkward, and unpopular. She pines for football player and Big Man On Campus Tyler Benchfield (Tommy Puett). Everyone knows a girl who wears glasses cannot “get” him, but this series is different. In the closing episode of the first season, “The Spring Fling” she attends a school dance without her glasses (and with another date). At the dance, Tyler admits he likes her and tries to kiss her. In the opening credit sequences of later seasons, we see the glasses on a wig head on Becca’s dresser as she, apparently wearing contact lenses, bounds out the door to meet Tyler. Later she meets a different boyfriend, looking glamorous in sunglasses. The removal of Becca’s glasses is as sure a sign of sexual maturity as are the “guys.” She is a brainy character who, nonetheless, becomes popular and attractive to boys. If we use only the changing opening credits to represent the course of the show and Becca’s development, it is clear she learns the rules of performativity and that when she acts more feminine and changes herself to “look pretty” or “like a girl” she gets the popularity, love, (and even the breasts) she lacks in the earliest episodes predominantly because she has learned to internalize girliness and perform it for her peers.

By the third season, however, the show takes some risks that allow her to become a character never before seen on television. An *Entertainment Weekly* article from just before the final episodes aired, says, “Since early last year, however, the show has taken an even more daring turn, focusing on Corky’s sensible sister Becca and her growing passion for classmate Jesse, who got the AIDS virus through unprotected sex with an unnamed woman. With this plot line, *Life Goes On* has become the only series on television to feature a regular character who has the AIDS virus” (Carter 1993, np).

This plot line allowed the program to do several things with Becca’s character. It allowed her to have an interest beyond schoolwork that was not frivolous (even if it was still about a

boy), and it dodged the bullet of teenage sex by making the boy literally too dangerous for them to engage, (although they do discuss it and come very close a few times.) Co-executive producer Michael Nankin said, “we found a really compelling romance, in which two people were passionately in love with each other, but couldn’t have sex. And so as writers we had to focus on other aspects of a relationship, like responsibility and loyalty” (Royce 1998, np). While we see in the final episodes in 1993 that Becca becomes a doctor, and marries someone else, the “soul mate” paradigm that so many shows of the teen-show era will use is present here.

Becca changes, but she is not made over entirely. As she grows up, she does not change her personality like Jennifer Keaton, or have to suffer insults for her braininess from her own family like Carol Seaver. When Becca works, it is in a bookstore, and her interests stay intellectually focused, even as she concentrates on Jesse. Unlike earlier incarnations, smart girls could admire her, and aspire to be like her, but she still was not an icon of “cool,” and it did not mean that smart girls had an all-new reputation. A year after *Life Goes on* premiered, *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000) featured Andrea Zuckerman, a brainy girl who the “gang” never noticed until she appeared in a fashion show, sans glasses. The rich kids, however, accepted her only partially, and she never even got the object of her affection, Brandon Walsh (Jason Priestley). While Becca was a new kind of glasses wearing character, her social success did not extend to the rest of popular culture and Andrea’s story was still a cautionary tale for girl viewers who liked to demonstrate their intelligence.

Parallel Lines

Although smart teen girls would slowly make strides on dramas during the 1990s, as shown in the next three chapters, situation comedies and animated shows actually had more space for smart girls. Darlene Connor of *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997) was a very atypical smart

girl. She differed significantly from the type of girls seen on previous situation comedies or on dramatic television because she was allowed to have much more realistic problems. Darlene's parents are struggling and working class, and this changes how she thinks about education. While at first she is the "tomboy" while her sister Becky is the straight-A student, once she enters high school Darlene changes. She goes through a serious depression, dresses in black, reads *Catcher in the Rye* and books by Kurt Vonnegut, and enjoys writing, particularly a disturbing comic book.

In the 1991 episode "Darlene Fades to Black" Roseanne asks Darlene what she is going to do this weekend. Darlene replies "nothing" and when Roseanne asks, "Isn't that what you did last weekend," Darlene replies, ironically, "I'm not finished." Yet, soon after this she gets a boyfriend. A girl who does not want to go out and be social, and is not obsessed with boys or popularity, and does not even attempt to perform normatively or girlishly, yet still gets love, is a very new type of character.

As an unhappy high school student, she plans to take a college equivalency exam and cannot wait to leave home for college, yet she faces different challenges than the girls before her. An article from *The Nation* says, "Class permeates every aspect of Roseanne Class-consciousness accounts for the show's consistent irony, its realistic presentation of characters, even its set. Or take the show's treatment of money. Other sitcom characters complain about their financial state but somehow continue to lead very pleasant lives. But money is serious in *Roseanne*" (Cole 1993, 879).²⁰ This translates into very different types of challenges to ambition than earlier girls experienced.

²⁰ There were quite a few working class sitcoms in the 1980s, including *Grace Under Fire* (1993-1998) and *The Drew Carey Show* (1995-2004) in which money and class were overriding considerations. Once shows like *Seinfeld*

Roseanne, herself, was hardly a career woman. The real-life Roseanne created characters for whom working in a corporate office was extremely unlikely, and made her seem more real than other television moms. As Susan Douglas puts it Roseanne, “took aim at the class biases around media images of motherhood. . . Most moms are not corporate attorneys . . . nor do they fit into a size six, carry a briefcase, or smile most of the time. They are waitresses, or work in factories, or in tiny office cubicles, or in other dead-end jobs” (Douglas 1994, 285). Much of the show was about transcending these class issues for parents, Roseanne and Dan, and for their daughters.

Unlike Carol Seaver, Mallory and Jennifer Keaton, and even similarly the working class Becca Thatcher, college is not a foregone conclusion for either Becky or Darlene Connor. Becky, who plans to go, is shocked to discover there’s no college fund waiting for her and elopes with boyfriend Mark. Darlene gets a scholarship to an art school in Chicago and has to beg her mother to let her go. When she is offered a high paying job as an advertising copywriter and turns it down to complete college, her family is shocked. Even Becky, who by then has given up on school, says, “You go to college so you can get a job like that” (“The White Sheep of the Family”). Roseanne is concerned that Darlene is going to become “one of them” and become too good for the family. It is all moot; however, as Darlene has a baby and marries young, and the family wins the lottery in the final season, which completely changes the dynamic of the show.

Yet through it all, Darlene wisecracks and keeps up with Roseanne Barr. She wears lots of black, tyrannizes her boyfriend (and later husband), and has a cynical outlook on life no TV smart girl had had before. In many ways, she represents the Generation X mentality and is the type of girl many smart girls might want to emulate. Irony would be the way smart girls would

(1990-1998) and *Friends* (1994-2004), about single people in big cities seemingly living well above their means, became supreme, this sort of class consciousness pretty much disappeared from the most popular situation comedies.

face the world in the late 1990s. Through irony, girls could put on a performance that was simultaneously humorous and defensive, and made them seem as if they did not care about the opinions of others. This was a situational shift in the way a smart girl could be portrayed that was strongly influenced by cultural changes. Starting in the 1980s humorists like David Letterman had begun to demonstrate smart humor through ironic detachment. This transformation was possible because “the ‘youth’ revolts in the 1960s and 1970s were already on the wane, and Letterman replaced the politics of confrontation represented by the satire of such shows as *Saturday Night Live* and *SCTV* with a politics of accommodation, removal, and irony” (Erler and Timberg 2005, np).²¹ Darlene faced life through irony, and so did Daria.

The bespectacled Daria Morgendorffer (voiced by Tracey Grandstaff) is the high school heroine of MTV’s animated series *Daria* (1997-2001). She is one of the few televised smart girls who does not conform to the traditional “remove glasses and instantly become beautiful and popular” story line. In contrast to most of those heroines, she resists the lessons that those around her try to teach her about beauty and appropriate girlhood and is back to being her own iconoclastic self at the beginning of each episode. Her glasses are a big part of her character. Daria, like other fictional characters through history, uses her glasses purposefully as a mask that separates her from the rest of the world. She also uses them to see more clearly than anyone she knows.

²¹ This sort of humor was also practiced by comedians like Jerry Seinfeld, the writers of *The Simpsons*, and the glasses-wearing comedian and actor Janeane Garofalo, who appeared in the Generation X movie *Reality Bites* (1994) in which she and Winona Ryder shared sardonic smart-girl quips. Garofalo’s persona was clearly very influential to the writers of *Daria* to the point that many people believed she acted as the voice of Daria, though she did not. Garafalo wrote in her satirical self-help guide, *Feel this Book*, (written with the similarly ironic actor Ben Stiller), “Many people feel that mass acceptance and smooth socialization are desirable life paths for a young adult. Many people are often wrong. Don’t bother being nice. Being popular and well liked is not in your best interest. Let me be more clear; if you behave in a manner pleasing to most, then you are probably doing something wrong. The masses have never been arbiters of the sublime, and they often fail to recognize the truly great individual. Taking into account the public’s regrettable lack of taste, it is incumbent upon you not to fit in” (Garofalo and Stiller. 1999, 119). This is very similar to many of the things Daria says.

Daria, who wears a skirt, clunky boots, and big glasses in nearly every episode, is shown as smarter than her peers, teachers, and parents, and almost completely uninterested in popularity. She is content with one good friend, Jane, an artsy girl with a tough Goth look, who similarly rejects the vapid image-obsessed society at Lawndale High. One writer calls Daria the teen-age girl she wished she had been, describing her as “smart, bitter and animated, a blend of Dorothy Parker, Fran Lebowitz, and Janeane Garofalo, wearing Carrie Donovan’s glasses” (Gates 1999, np). Daria’s command of wordplay, her immunity to societal standards, and yes, her big glasses, make her a real role model for both brilliant girls and brilliant women, who wish they had had as much courage of their convictions as Daria.

The episode, “Through a Lens, Darkly” presents Daria’s own view of her glasses. Mrs. Morgendorffer is teaching her to drive. With her thick glasses, she has poor peripheral vision and nearly hits a dog. Her mother encourages her to get contact lenses, but Daria thinks her mother has ulterior motives and says, “You think if I get contacts I’ll suddenly turn into the homecoming queen” (“Through a Lens”). Contact lenses do not fit her persona. As a sardonic outsider, Daria is reluctant to substitute her spectacles for contacts. She expects that she will experience the sort of scenario she has seen on television and in the movies, in which the ugly duckling removes her glasses and becomes a beautiful swan. Most American girls have read *Seventeen* magazine, which “has been doling out makeover tips to teens for years, [reinforcing] the magic: one good haircut can turn a Plain Jane into a knockout” (Ford and Mitchell 2004, 28). The same is true for glasses. If her experience is anything like those, suddenly she will become very popular. The cool kids of the school will want to be her friend, and a sexy bad boy will fall in love with her. However, that is not what happens. Although she does get many compliments, the contact lenses hurt and become blurry, and she ends up walking into walls.

However, she learns from the experience that glasses are actually good and are, in fact, a huge part of her personality. In her words, she “can see things other people can’t” (“Through a Lens”). This is a far cry from the girl who has to remove her glasses before she can make an impact. Daria’s acceptance of her glasses and her essential self marks a change that could only occur because society had changed. This marks one of the first times viewers could admire a glasses-wearing girl without reservations. Daria has seen the makeover story and wants no part of it because, she feels, it just might turn her into a “regular girl” who is susceptible to the allure of popularity. Yet, at the same time, she is curious about what might happen. Girls grow up with this mythology in popular culture. Despite her ironic detachment as a teenager, a girl like Daria would be aware that many of the movies and television shows she has seen “are specifically designed to speak to teens with one thing in mind: attracting the every-popular, always hunky, brutally hot Prince Charming” (Ford and Mitchell 2004, 67). Even the girl who considers herself completely immune from peer pressure is bombarded by messages that say romance is the most important thing. No one hears repeated messages that brilliance is valued for girls.

Daria resembles, at least in personality, cartoon girl Lisa Simpson of *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-present). Lisa is often sarcastic like Daria. Lisa, though, is more of an outsider than Daria, having no Jane of her own. Even though she is only eight, she sometimes shares Daria’s cynicism, but, at other times, is much more likely to be idealistic. Like Daria, Lisa is a product of the postmodern moment, when activism seems to have little result, and many people have become complacent. Chris Turner observes that because of this, “Lisa is the most world-weary Simpson, the one with the greatest sense of what’s wrong with the world, the one who vacillates between optimism and despair” (Turner 2004, 203). Lisa frequently takes a stand, even when it makes her unpopular. Although many smart girls and women love her, a 1998 online poll

revealed that, “Simpsons fans rated Lisa their fourth-favorite character” (Turner 2004, 191), behind Homer, Bart, and Ralph. She is not an icon of hip, and in part because she is so young, not necessarily a role model for teen girls.

Despite her literal age of eight, however, the fact that Lisa is animated allows her liberties no live action show with an eight year old could. Unlike Daria, she has many of the same sorts of experiences as most television girls before her. The creators of *The Simpsons* seem to have mixed feelings regarding feminism and female identity in the contemporary age. . . . What *The Simpsons* offers viewers regarding female identity is a complex combination of ‘strength’ and ‘weakness’; in other words, of activism and submission, of protest against and acquiescence to male dominance and patriarchal structures” (Henry 2007, 299). She dates the local bully, Nelson Muntz in one episode reminiscent of *My So-Called Life* in “Lisa’s Date with Density,” (1996) and, from time to time, falls for the teenage allure of popularity. She is made over in several episodes. For example, in “Summer of 4 Ft. 2,” she makes herself over while on vacation with the family. She “replaces her red dress and pearls with hip threads and sunglasses, and abandons her brainy diction and intellectual pursuits for the ‘like, you know, whatever’ indifference of the hip pre-teen” (Turner 2004, 204). She makes some cool new friends, but once they find out she used to be a nerd, they realize “that Lisa was until recently a yearbook editor, spelling-bee queen, and bookwormish teacher’s pet—that in short, Lisa does stuff, she *cares*—her aura of cool is gone forever” (Turner 2004, 205). The episode ends with her new friends accepting her after all, but it does not really matter because she will never see them again, and she will be back to her old self in the next episode *not* having learned a lesson, and not having grown and changed. Although she goes through what other girls do, she does not perpetuate an anti-feminist message, because she simply cannot “stay in her place.”

These two animated girls show that a brainy girl can be a great heroine who will never disappoint her audience by changing her behavior, at least for long. Their ability to resist these pressures is influenced in large part, by the fact that they are animated. In live action shows, viewers see actresses who are already conventionally attractive. Since animated characters do not age in the same way as actresses, do not have realistic bodies, and rarely change physically, to the point that they wear the same clothes in nearly every episode, means they face different pressures than characters on live-action shows. Kathy Newman calls Daria “an animated girl without a bust line” (Newman 2005, 195). They can remain consistent in their attitudes because they are drawn consistently from episode to episode.

Daria became the reigning example of geek chic for young women who like to wear a lot of black, make sarcastic comments, and wear large black framed glasses. Like the glasses-wearing Janeane Garofalo, Daria is almost entirely immune to the allure of popularity, “lookism,” or efforts to change her clothes or hair, or remove her glasses. The main part of the show involves her commenting on the fact that practically everyone else at school, save Jane, does not see what she sees through her glasses. Daria, writes Newman, “was verbally disdainful of the corruption, consumerism, and commercialism that surround(s) her” (Newman 2005, 187). Lisa too, resists any attempt that she change her behavior, often taking unpopular stands. These shows send a message that a brainy girl can really be secure about herself and that it is a good thing to perform as brainy, even if it makes one less popular.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown changes in how the smart girl was shown on television before the teen-show era. At first, as in *Father Knows Best*, she was absolutely unthinkable, and even a girl with an ambition to work outside the home was socially sanctioned and taught the error of her

ways. Later, studious girls had a presence, but only as guest stars to be made over by far perkier or groovier stars of the shows such as Gidget or Marcia Brady. The nerd became the repeating trope in the 1970s on shows such as *Square Pegs* and *Saturday Night Live*, while every eighties sitcom, such as *Family Ties* and *Growing Pains*, seemed to have one brainy character to be positioned against a bubblehead or a rebel. At the end of the eighties a brainy girl was finally made central to a family drama on *Life Goes On*, and would in many ways set the standard for the girls in the next four chapters. During the teen-show era itself, there were some intriguing new types of brainy girls on situation comedies and on animated shows such as Darlene Connor of *Roseanne*, Daria of her eponymous show, and Lisa Simpson of *The Simpsons*.

Things seem to have improved significantly for the smart girl and the later examples seemed to be far better role models for girls than the earlier shows. However, television, like politics, is cyclical and over time it is one step forward, one step back for any female character who demonstrates ambition and displays her brains. The 1980s saw what Susan Faludi described as a backlash against feminism that reduced many female characters to mothers and wives, and not much else, and new forms of feminism were slow to come and young women tended to be loath to identify themselves as feminists.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s there was a new type of feminism starting among the Riot Grrls, who would eventually be co-opted into the Girl Power movement. Characters on television reflected their time periods in terms of performativity, acting girlier or less girly according to the type of feminism being demonstrated and sometimes these gave positive messages about multiple ways for being a girl. Buffy, for example, was a main representative of the Girl Power movement, and was very assertive and powerful, yet had love interests and popularity. At the same time, however, these programs were on the low-rated WB network, or

were on programs the major networks did not promote well, so there were fewer models teen viewers might see or attempt to emulate.

Situation comedies at that time were predominantly of the “single people in the big city” type, such as *Friends* and *Frasier*, or the arguably third-wave feminist *Sex and the City*, which featured only childless women until the final season. There was also a rash of the “fat man married to skinny wife” type of situation comedy, such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* or *According to Jim*, which showed very traditional nuclear families. Both types excluded teenagers from having much of a role, particularly when compared with the rise of the teen drama. In addition, with what many have been calling the “death of the sitcom” in favor of reality shows and game shows, few of the situation comedies still running feature teenagers and those that exist are fairly minor characters. At the same time, movies also reinforced the importance of girls performing their gender, as when the bubble headed Cher of *Clueless* found love, and magazines presented models that were so slender, and airbrushed to such a degree that no girl could measure up.

While the smart girl was a clear outsider throughout most of television’s history, in the 1990s they became more central to the text on many teen shows. The next four chapters discuss how the depictions of smart girls on hour-long shows changed during the teen-show era of 1990-2006. During the teen-show era there are much more progressive portraits of smart teen girls, it appears, on shows such as *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *My So-Called Life*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Freaks and Geeks*, and *Gilmore Girls*. This is somewhat illusory; however, as each girl begins with noble goals and a strong interest in schoolwork, but nearly always gives up her interest in school in favor of friendship and romance. The next chapter describes the Cinderella-type makeover many of these girls experience, which may occur through the old trope of glasses

removal, by having the girls wear new clothes, or simply through personality changes.

CHAPTER 3. BEAUTY IS ONLY SKIN DEEP: THE MAKEOVER OF SMART GIRLS

Introduction

The WB drama *Everwood* (2002-2006) is a family show about a widower who quits his job as a high-powered surgeon, and takes his children, teenager Ephram, a piano prodigy, and tomboyish Delia, to live in small town Colorado where they meet another family with teenagers. The program introduces a new character early in the third season. Hannah is a high school girl who wears glasses and has red hair that she wears in an unfashionable style. She is also a writer of short stories and a compulsive journal keeper. In short, Hannah is a bespectacled smart girl of the type seen in the last chapter, but seen only rarely during the teen-show era itself.

Commenting on Hannah's arrival, Karen Templer, who runs a website called Readerville, devoted to people who love reading and writing, said in an online posting, "They added a character this year who's clearly meant for the remove-glasses-add-lip gloss moment . . . Hopefully I'll happen to catch it when she has her transformative moment, though I almost hope she doesn't because she's so charming as she is" (Templer 2004, np).

Sure enough, in the next episode, with the help of Amy, the most popular girl in school, Hannah removes her glasses, brushes out her hair and goes after Amy's brother, a cute "dumb jock" type. She gets him. This scenario is only the most recent in a string of such moments in literature and the media, but is notable because Hannah's function was so transparent: to be the archetypical smart girl who is made over and wins the cute guy. In future episodes, it seemed safe to assume, not only would the glasses disappear more often, but the journals would be hidden away, and Hannah would replace them (at least in public) with some more mainstream sort of activity like cheerleading or "partying."

Even though viewers know a young woman can be both smart and popular—Amy herself receives a 1400 on her SAT and is accepted at Princeton University, but identifies herself as “popular” rather than smart—the program tells viewers that Hannah must change her style to conform with standards, or she risks ending up perpetually on the margins of the high school hallways, friendless and invisible to members of the opposite sex, at least those who matter. Hannah manages to resist some of the pressure to choose popularity over a life of the mind, and continues to wear glasses in most of her subsequent scenes; however, dating Bright changes Hannah in several fundamental ways, and we never actually see her involved with school, or writing, again (For more on Hannah, see Chapter 4).

The shows of the teen-show era emphasize that the most important part of high school is having a group of friends and being attractive to boys. As we saw in Chapter 2, this idea has been repeated since practically the earliest television programs. Betty of *Father Knows Best* may have been a great student, but she learned that marriage was much more important than ambition. Gidget’s and the Brady girls’ friends were completely made over and learned not to be too popular. The “nerds” of the 1970s, like Lisa Loopner of *Saturday Night Live* and the girls of *Square Pegs* were doomed to be social pariahs. Smart girls in the 1980s in shows like *Family Ties* and *Growing Pains* learned lessons about being feminine, and about the dangers of ambition. However, brainy girls from 1990 on appear, on the surface at least, to have been accepted, and even valorized, for their intelligence, yet on further examination they still have to learn lessons about appropriate girlhood and performing more normatively by changing their appearances and performing in a more feminine fashion. Boys frequently still do not see them until they remove their glasses (or take similar metaphorical steps), and become visible. The

messages being sent still reinforce the idea that only the most normatively attractive girls will find love and popularity, and that it is easy to become such a girl through consumption.

Few girls on programs aired during the teen-show era learn in obvious ways to hide their intelligence in order to attract boys, and most are never told not to seem smarter than a boy does. Yet they are nonetheless changed. Ford and Mitchell write: “Modern American women are inundated by and obsessed with images of becoming. Our language even provides a word for transforming one’s personal appearance: *makeover*” (Ford and Mitchell 2004, 2). While not all the smart girls on television dramas go through a complete Cinderella-type makeover that “sticks,” and the glasses removal trope disappears for much of that time period, all of them at some point or other consider the importance of the right clothes, the right hair, and the right behavior. They all deal with the popularity system, “mean girls,” and concerns about visibility and invisibility. Most learn, eventually, that if they want love and popularity, they have to perform more normatively.

For the audience, the smart girl’s makeover seems to be a wonderful thing. For the first time she is allowed to be the pretty one, not the plain one. She has boys noticing her who previously did not, other girls take her more seriously, and she learns she can be as pretty as the popular girls can if she just works a bit. She gets to be the princess this time. However, in reality, she is being transformed into a normative girl who has learned how to perform her gender in a way designed to encourage group cohesion. In Judith Butler’s 1988 article, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” she writes: “Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of doing one’s gender, but that one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter” (Butler 1988, 276). On teen shows, in order to keep the story going over twenty-two or more episodes over multiple seasons, the group of

seemingly disparate students must find ways to continue to interact. In order to do that, they must become more like each other, even as they appear to hold their separate roles within the group.

Each of the smart girls analyzed in this project learns lessons about performativity, and how to become intelligible both to the other girls, and to boys. If she performs like the type of girl who is closer to the feminine ideal than she is, the “normative” girl, other students will take her seriously, and boys will see her. As televisual smart girls invariably start apparently invisible to most of the school, they must find ways to make themselves visible. They often choose to do this by transforming themselves into a more traditional type of girl who matches what the boys are used to perceiving as attractive and sexy. As Judith Butler says in *Gender Trouble*:

To the extent the gender norms (ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies, ideals and rule of proper and improper masculinity and femininity, many of which are underwritten by racial codes of purity and taboos against miscegenation) establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be ‘real,’ they establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression.” (Butler 1999, xxiii).

A girl who is both bookish and sexy does not exist in the lexicon of either the boys on the show, the girls on the show who act as the smart girls’ mentors, or the perceived viewer of the show. She must move from displaying the traditionally masculine characteristic of demonstrating intellectual behavior into a more feminine role. Therefore, the smart girl must change in a number of ways, including her clothing, her hairstyle, or her behavior.

Show producers and networks attempt to create characters that audiences will want to emulate, at least in terms of the clothing they wear, the music they listen to, and the cars they drive, (and make the shows involving enough so that viewers will stay for the commercials).

This is ubiquitous on television. Television executive Jeff Greenstein stated that teenagers see television characters as “the people they’d like to be. [They say] I’d love to look like that. I’d love to have those great clothes. I’d love to have that kick-ass job. I’d love to have that groovy apartment. I’d love to be dating that hot guy or hot girl” (Mitroff 2004, 42).²² Therefore all regularly appearing characters on a program designed for young viewers to watch must be attractive and hip and must dress well, even if the character represents a type of teenager that, in real life, might pay little attention to outward appearances or (practically unheard of on television) might actually be heavy, disabled, an ethnic minority, or simply still not look pretty or sexy, even after a makeover.

This chapter examines the external transformations these characters experience, their relationships to popularity, and movement towards performing as normative. Like the three chapters following this one, it primarily concerns brainy girls on five shows: *Beverly Hills, 90210*; *My So-Called Life*; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; *Freaks and Geeks*; and *Gilmore Girls*. The first section shows how each smart girl is framed as a “brain” and an outsider on her show. Next, it considers cultural factors that have made these makeovers an increasing part of our culture, even as the smart girl becomes less of an “other.” The subsequent section considers “mean girls” theory, popularity, and how this plays out in the programs. The chapter goes on to consider alternative makeovers that some smart girl characters have undergone. Finally, it discusses the messages these shows are sending to girl viewers.

²² He is speaking, in this case, of the NBC situation comedy *Friends*, in the context of explaining why teenagers watch it although the characters are in their twenties. The same can be said, however, of reasons why young viewers of teen shows, who range from “tween” (10-13) and up through actual teenagers and adults would watch teen dramas.

Introducing the Modern Smart Girl

Andrea Zuckerman (Gabrielle Carteris) is presented in the first episode of *90210* as the glasses-wearing intellectual whom the rest of the characters sneer at or ignore. She is obviously very much a smart girl in the mold of the type from the earlier decades. She is a brunette (smart girls traditionally nearly always have brown or red hair), and her outfit is much plainer than those of Brenda (Shannen Doherty), Kelly (Jennie Garth), and Donna (Tori Spelling), who shop for clothing as a recreational activity in the same episode. She is clearly marginalized from the start. She runs the school paper as a tenth grader, apparently without much help or faculty supervision, and keeps as much to herself as she can, saying, “I never go to parties . . . Because hanging around with a bunch of people acting stupid is not going to get me into the Ivy League” (“Pilot”). West Beverly High School does not appear to offer a group of smart students for Andrea to join. One is either part of the in crowd, or completely invisible. While new transfers from Minnesota Brandon (Jason Priestley) and Brenda, who got good grades at their old schools but are not flamboyantly brainy, are instantly sucked into the cool crowd, Andrea takes much longer for them to notice her.

E. Graham McKinley talked to girl viewers of *90210* during the early seasons, and some said, “She’s a great character, she really is . . . you never see her in bikinis . . . she’s very down to earth . . . Yes! She’s the realistic one who does not, like, have her ribs showing” (McKinley 1997, 86). It would appear the show is trying to show her as just as good as the other girls. However, romance with Brandon is “set up” by the show early on, and subsequently knocked down as he dates much more traditionally attractive girls. When he is ready to have a serious girlfriend it is the very blonde Kelly, who is voted “best dressed” and “best looking” of the

senior class, while Andrea dates only guest stars until college, at which point she gets pregnant and married (and is soon written off the show altogether). Andrea's is by far the most frustrating smart girl story of the teen-show era.

After *90210*, the rigid rules of brainy girls on television changed somewhat. First of all, from the time that Andrea left *90210* in 1995, until Hannah arrived on *Everwood* in 2004, no subsequent regularly appearing smart girl on teen dramas wore glasses.²³ They also were not required to wear outright frumpy wardrobes as Andrea did, even if they did not turn into fashion plates or sexpots. Angela Chase of *My So Called Life* is already transformed when the audience first meets her. Feminist television scholar Michelle Byers writes that Angela Chase is different from prior heroines because she was not “presented as a blond with large breasts, a tiny waist, and thousands of dollars worth of tight designer clothes (e.g., *Beverly Hills, 90210*)” (Byers 1998, 711). She was, we see in flashbacks, a blonde shy-looking girl who has never had a boyfriend and is “starting to like Anne Frank” (“Pilot”). She chooses to transform herself not by removing literal glasses, but by removing them metaphorically. She does this by dying her hair “crimson glow” wearing grunge-inspired outfits, and spending her time with the rebellious Rayanne Graff (A. J. Langer) and the sexually ambiguous (at that point) Rickie Vasquez (Wilson Cruz) rather than with her popular former best friend Sharon Cherski (Devon Odessa).

She explains her choices by saying, “It just seems like, you agree to have a certain personality or something. For no reason. Just to make things easier for everyone. But when you think about it, I mean, how do you know it’s even you?” She also confesses (in her role as narrator), “I had to hang out with Rayanne Graff or I would just die” (“Pilot”). She sets her sights on handsome, but not terribly bright, Jordan Catalano, whom she notices because of the way he

²³ Daria Morgendorffer, of the animated *Daria* (1997-2001) does wear glasses, as described in Chapter 2, but animated characters are not held to the same beauty standards as live action characters.

“leans against things.” Despite the “alternative” hair and wardrobe makeover, her smart girl demeanor nonetheless clearly marks her as virginal. While Jordan eventually does appear to be attracted to her, he is quite surprised that he is, asking, “Why are you like this?” To Angela’s obvious question, “like what?” he can only answer, “Like, how you are” (“Life of Brian”).

Angela’s subtle braininess can be contrasted with red-haired Willow Rosenberg of *Buffy*, who is, like Andrea, flamboyantly intellectual. When we first meet her she is shy, dressed in a childish grey jumper that covers her completely, and describes the new librarian as “really cool.” This is not a recipe in American culture, either in a real-life public high school, or in most television shows and movies featuring high school students, for popularity. She also has a crush on her friend Xander (Nicholas Brendan), who asks Willow for help with math, but is clearly interested romantically in new girl Buffy. When Buffy arrives and asks for help with schoolwork, Willow is surprised that such a popular seeming girl would want to spend time with her. As the girls socialize, she admits “I-I-I don’t actually date a whole lot . . . lately. . . . When I’m with a boy I like, it’s hard for me to say anything cool, or, or witty, or at all. I-I can usually make a few vowel sounds, and then I have to go away” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”). At Buffy’s encouragement, she ends up talking to a boy at hangout “The Bronze.” However, the encounter goes wrong, *Buffy*-style. The boy turns out to be a vampire who Buffy kills. When Willow is able to use her computer-hacking skills to track the other vampires in that group, she begins a new life as part of “The Scooby Gang.” Over time, she will change her clothes and hair somewhat, but will never dress revealingly like Buffy or popular Cordelia.

Lindsay Weir of *Freaks and Geeks* follows a similar trajectory to Angela’s, in that when the show begins she is already wearing an old green Army jacket, has her hair in her face, and clearly has begun to question her past choices. Journalist Ellen Grey writes, “NBC’s *Freaks and*

Geeks, which covered some of the same ground as *My So-Called Life*, was deemed too dark to survive, even perhaps by some of its target audience, more used to escaping into the comfortably plastic lives depicted on *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Dawson's Creek*, with their manufactured emotions and high-class problems” (Grey 2002, np). Lindsay has experienced a makeover, because life without one is just too traumatic for her. However, we do see her first approach the “smoking patio” (where no one actually smokes) it would seem in part, to get closer to Daniel Desario (James Franco), a cool bad boy type who already has a girlfriend, Kim Kelley (Busy Phillips).²⁴ In the first episode of the show, she meets Daniel’s friends, including Nick Andopolis (Jason Segal). When Nick is introduced and they realize they have had the same biology class, he exclaims, “You’re that girl that got an A!” Instead of being proud, of course, Lindsay, who wants to fit into the freak group replies, weakly, “Well, what are you gonna do?” (“Pilot”). She also tells her old friend Millie Kentner (Sarah Hagan), that she no longer wants to be a member of the team of students who compete yearly in the Academic Decathlon, despite the fact that she is the “best mathlete.”

As viewers are so used to the makeover story, it appears initially as if Rory Gilmore (Alexis Bledel) of *Gilmore Girls* is also going to go through such a transformation. The first time we see her in school, she is in study hall, surrounded by girls who are gossiping and polishing their nails. They look over to see what she is doing, and are surprised to discover it is homework. On the same day, however, we see that someone perceives her as an attractive, if unusual girl before any sort of makeover has taken place. She is approached by Dean Forester (Jared

²⁴ *The Primetime Mediascope 2004* notes: “For example, Judd Apatow referred to the power of television to engender direct imitation. He talked about a decision not to show the characters in *Freaks and Geeks* smoking cigarettes, even though in the 1970’s (when the show was set) many high school students smoked. Describing the lead characters in the show as ‘so likable,’ Apatow said, ‘If I was a kid, I would smoke if that guy was smoking.’ Clearly Apatow’s decision not to show the series’ central characters smoking cigarettes was motivated by his belief that viewers can imitate the behavior modeled by attractive television characters” (Mitroff, 60).

Padalecki), who seems to fit the mold of the tall, good-looking, but not terribly bright, WB boy mold.²⁵ However, he surprises the audience by admiring Rory's concentration when she reads, saying:

After school you come out and you sit under that tree there and you read. Last week it was *Madame Bovary*. This week it's *Moby Dick*. . . . Last Friday these two guys were tossing around a ball and one guy nailed the other right in the face. I mean, it was a mess, blood everywhere, the nurse came out, the place was in chaos, his girlfriend was all freaking out, and you just sat there and read. I mean, you never even looked up. I thought, "I have never seen anyone read so intensely before in my entire life. I have to meet that girl." ("Pilot")

The same day, Rory discovers she has been accepted to the prestigious Chilton School, and is even happily anticipating a clothing makeover, saying, "And we get to wear uniforms. No more having people check you out to see what jeans you're wearing 'cause everyone's dressed alike in boring clothes and just there to learn" ("Pilot"). However, she discovers quickly that there are mean girls everywhere and the only difference between the giggling public school girls and Paris Geller is that Paris is at least as smart as Rory, and twice as ambitious.

Each of these young women is shown instantly as intellectually oriented, outside the mainstream, and not the kind of girls boys have been attracted to before the shows begin. Andrea

²⁵ There is a very typical look for boys on teen shows. Many of the main love interests resemble Dylan McKay (Luke Perry) of *90210* who in turn was based on James Dean. Jordan Catalano, Daniel Desario, and Buffy's boyfriend Angel are all this smoldering bad boy type. Subsequent WB boys, like Rory's boyfriend Dean, and the boys of shows like *Smallville*, *One Tree Hill* (which co-stars another one of Rory's love interests, Chad Michael Murray) and *Supernatural* (which co-stars Jared Padalecki,) however, are taller than Dylan, but not nearly as threatening as the wealthy alcoholic Dylan or the clearly abused Jordan or Daniel. Wesley Morris of *The Boston Globe* writes of the "WB boy", there was "a growing list of adolescent love interests. They're cute. They're sort of bland. But they're always there when a girl needs some attention, sometimes never to be heard from again" (Morris 2004, np). (Now that the shows are on The CW, Veronica Mars' sometimes boyfriend Logan is very much of the first type.)

is defined as both brainy and unpopular in the first episode when she answers the teacher snottily in Spanish when Brandon cannot, and gives him challenging assignments when he wants to write for the newspaper. Angela has given up on braininess already and says boys raise their hands more because they are “less afraid of being wrong” (“Pilot”), while Brian, who has no friends, raises his hand in every class. Willow, on the other hand, helps Xander with his math, and throughout the series tutors nearly all the major teen characters in every subject (including American history, French, and composition), but is totally tongue tied with boys. In the first season she not only does not get Xander, she gets no boyfriend at all. Although Lindsay has already changed at the beginning of the series, when she returns to type briefly, she is a shark in the math club, knocking her former best friend out of the running for a spot in a competition. Rory makes no friends at Chilton for most of the first year, and Paris, who answers every question the teacher asks and threatens everyone, is not initially invited to join secret society The Puffs, despite being a legacy and, despite having acolytes, has no real friends.

At the same time each girl is shown as smart, she is also framed as plain, except for Rory. Yet, each actress is, of course, a Hollywood actress and as such complies with television’s guidelines for what is attractive and sexy. They are all Caucasian characters (despite the fact that Bledel is actually has a Mexican parent and an Argentine parent) as are nearly all the girls on these shows (See Chapter 6 for more on this). There is a distinct homogeneity in the body styles of these girls—nearly everyone is thin.²⁶ In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo discusses how women and girls become anorexic, writing that it represents “her indictment of a culture that disdains and suppresses female hunger, makes women ashamed of their appetites and needs, and

²⁶ In the original pilot for *Buffy*, a heavier actress (Riff Regan) played Willow, but The WB network insisted on a cast change. According to the commentary track on the first season DVD, creator Joss Whedon wanted a cast exhibiting a wide range of looks and types; however, the network wanted a “supermodel in horn rims” to play Willow. The waify Hannigan was a compromise that made both sides happy.

demands that women constantly work on the transformation of the body” (Bordo 1993, 176).

Thinness is ubiquitous on television, and many teen actresses, including the tiny Kellie Martin of *Life Goes On*, Tracey Gold of *Growing Pains*, and Sara Michelle Gellar of *Buffy* have admitted to having eating disorders while starring on their shows (www.eating-disorder-information.com). When the shows begin, however, the characters are simply slender, which is already one way that a teen viewer may not measure up.

These actresses also have perfect hair, teeth, and skin, and do not go through the growing pains, oily hair, braces, and acne most teenagers do.²⁷ Part of the reason for this is that the actresses themselves are almost always significantly older than the characters they play. Kellie Martin was actually fourteen, playing her own age when *Life Goes On* began and Claire Danes was a year younger than fifteen-year-old Angela in the pilot for *MSCL*. However, Alexis Bledel was nineteen, Alyson Hannigan and Liza Weil were twenty-three, Linda Cardellini was twenty-four, and Gabrielle Carteris was twenty-nine when their shows began.²⁸ the Fox and WB shows in particular subscribe to a “wish fulfillment” script which causes networks choose these older actresses who are already women. Girls on television are supposed to be the ones other girls want to be and boys want to date. Part of this aspiration is instant and constant beauty as well as the erasure of normal teenage growing pains. This is often accomplished by giving the smart

²⁷ An episode of *MSCL* is entitled “The Zit” and concerns Angela’s feelings of being “ugly” because she has one pimple.

²⁸ All birthdays found on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com). Other actresses on teen shows playing teen characters have similar differences between their real ages and that of their characters. Significantly, perhaps, no girl beyond Becca Thatcher plays a ninth grader in high school despite the fact that most of their high schools appear to be four year schools, although David Silver and his friend Scott Scanlan of *90210* were nerdy freshman foils for the rest of the gang in the first season. There are several reasons for this. First of all, many adult actors and actresses with younger faces, including Carteris, lie about their ages (Woodrow 2004, np). Second, television networks are loathe to sign teen actresses because of child labor laws limiting hours they can work and requiring them to attend school every day. Third, teenage boys really look very young and in order to find the sort of “hunks” the shows are looking for, they need to be older, and therefore the girls need to follow suit so that older women are not seen kissing younger men. As Josh Schwartz, one of the creators of post-millennial teen show *The O.C.* put it, “Have you seen a 15-year-old lately? They look like they’re 10 (10-year-olds, weirdly, still look 10). No one wants to watch real 15-year-olds lose their virginity. It’s uncomfortable” (Simmons 2006, np).

girls a physical makeover. Makeovers have growing part of American media since the teen-show era began.

Making Over American Culture

Makeover stories are not new. The ideas in *Cinderella* were hardly new when Perrault first wrote them down, and a similar “transformation was found in the ancient “Yeh-hsien” recorded in China in the ninth century and thought by many folklorists to be the oldest Cinderella story” (Ford and Mitchell 2004, 30). Movies and television have both embraced Cinderella-type stories from their infancies as media, starting at least as early as the first of many film version of *Pygmalion* in 1909. Walt Disney’s *Cinderella* (1950), *Sabrina* (1954), and *My Fair Lady* (1964) are just a few of the earlier American versions of this story. The movie *Gidget* (1959), showed a brainy girl made over and *Grease* (1978) showed a studious girl who changed externally to get a boy. By the 1980s and 1990s the makeover was ubiquitous in teen movies including *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Heathers* (1989), *She’s All That* (1999), and *Jawbreaker* (1999).

Recent cultural changes, however, have changed the complexion of these makeovers, and how the programs deal with them. The first is the meta-awareness of our culture, which means on the very recent *Everwood*, Bright can make reference to the ubiquity of that story when he says, “When we first met and you said you liked me, it was really weird, you know, but then we started hanging out and we became friends and—you got hot. And I’m not talking in the take off your glasses kind of way” (“Where the Heart Is”). Naomi Klein discusses how brands (which include television shows) become cool in this postmodern context, writing, “for brands to be truly cool, they need to layer this uncool-equals-cool aesthetic of the ironic viewer onto their pitch: they need to self-mock, talk back to themselves while they are talking . . . fill up that brain space occupied by irony with preplanned knowing smirks” (Klein 2000, 78). While the girls in

the pre-teen-show era, and even early on into it act as if they have never watched television or seen a movie, writers on shows like *Buffy* and *Gilmore Girls* pepper dialogue with pop-culture references that make it clear that makeover stories are part of their cultural lexicon.

Girls throughout the teen-show era have felt the need for makeovers for two main reasons. The social pressure from the popular girls is one reason, and our culture's increasing obsession with makeovers is the other. These two factors are related. According to one pair of Girls' Studies scholars, in the more recent studies of girls' relationships and bullying, "The site of change has moved from the collective, to the individual. Strategies [for making girls' lives better in school] now focus increasingly on changing the girl herself (or sometimes her parents), rather than changing the culture to accommodate her developmental needs" (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2004, 19). The notion that there is nothing to do about the system itself, but that personal transformation is possible and even desirable, increased significantly through the teen-show era. As Butler writes, "The transformation of social relations becomes a matter, then, of transforming hegemonic social conditions rather than the individual acts that are spawned by those conditions" (Butler 1988, 276), which indicates that the trend towards encouraging girls to act more like each other, and like the girls they see on their televisions in order to improve social cohesion is a method of continuing social control.

There are reasons for girls to want to change their appearance and perform more normatively that have nothing to do with pleasing boys. As Angela Chase of *MSCL* puts it, "School is a battlefield for your heart. So when Rayanne Graff told me my hair was holding me back, I had to listen. 'Cause she wasn't just talking about my hair. She was talking about my life" ("Pilot"). Girls on these shows give each other advice constantly, and each one of the smart girls finds a mentor, usually one who is more popular and more experienced with boys, who

helps her in her transformation, acting as a fairy godmother. Of course, many real-life girls' friendships do revolve around shopping, reading fashion magazines, and considering ways to change themselves to bring out the best in each other. However, there are also more insidious reasons for these programs to show makeovers.

As shown in the previous chapter, the first part of the makeover involves the removal of signifiers of geekiness or ugliness like glasses as well as mousy hair and unflattering clothes. In teen movies, the "remove glasses" trope is still in effect throughout much of this era, as seen in *She's All That*, *The Princess Diaries* (2001), and *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001). Teen movie scholar Timothy Shary writes of such films, "the image of nerd girls has been used as shorthand for the torment that awaits smart women later in life if they do not find a way to become more physically attractive, and thus the narratives about nerdy girls are built on an inverted Pygmalionesque pathos, as the character attempts to redirect her intellectual sophistication into social sophistication" (Shary 2002, 239).

However, the girls on teen dramas since *Andrea* rarely wear glasses, and their hair and clothes start out much less different from those of their peers, so the transformation is much more subtle. Yet many of the smart girls on teen dramas still change their hair and their clothes in order to fit in and to be seen. The message is change your clothes, change your life. While this is hardly a new trope, and nearly every Audrey Hepburn movie is about exactly such a transformation, making oneself over has become a cultural mandate that can be applied to everyone in America, not just teen girls.²⁹ According to Anthony Giddens, "Identity has become a 'project of the self: something we are all knowingly engaged in, endlessly working to refine

²⁹ Audrey Hepburn is made over, (or has already been made over,) in *Roman Holiday* (1953), *Sabrina* (1954), *Funny Face* (1957), *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), *My Fair Lady* (1964), and *Two for the Road* (1967).

our sense of who we are” (in Bell and Hollows 2006, 5). We are what we desire to be, we are what we work to be, but we are especially what we choose to buy.

While material consumption has long been part of the American Dream, making oneself over is the new American mandate, and for many a hobby. It is possible to have class mobility, and to change one’s life from mediocre to perfect, with changes in clothing and home. Our culture also insists that it is easy, and that if you acquire the accoutrements of the identity you wish for, you will become somebody else. By acquiring the symbols of success, sexiness, and glamour, therefore you will become successful, sexy, and glamorous. Baudrillard discusses how “consumption also becomes individualized as we come to inhabit a world in which consumer goods no longer have any use value and instead only have sign value . . . we are encouraged to play with the signs to assert our identity in a world that has lost any “real” meaning” (in Bell and Hollows 2006, 4). No one is stuck in the working class, and no girl is entrenched in invisibility and unpopularity. Acquiring new clothes is all it takes to change one’s identity.

The proliferation of “tastemakers” like Martha Stewart and makeover shows such as *Extreme Makeover*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *What Not to Wear (WNTW)*, give the idea that in order to change one’s entire life completely, all one needs is a mentor unafraid of demonstrating “tough love.” Stacey London begins each episode of *WNTW* as the “mean girl,” but by the end of each episode she is the kindly mentor. Guests on the show are nominated by their friends or families, based on their terrible wardrobes, and given \$5000 to shop in New York if they give themselves “body, mind and wardrobe” to Stacey and her co-host, Clinton Kelley.

Although the “victims” almost invariably come out looking better, and they nearly always tearfully tell Stacey and Clinton that their lives are totally changed and how thrilled they are, it is through sheer bullying that the changes in wardrobe and hair are accomplished. The

guests on *What Not to Wear* are decidedly normalized. The audience often sees them first wearing unique clothing, often acquired over many years, and guests often state they dress the way they do because they do not want to look like everyone else, yet each ends up wearing wardrobes of fashions from the current season purchased at a few well-known shops. Although every guest looks better, (as new clothes that fit will always win over the shapeless and tattered rags many of them wear,) there is a distinct effect of homogenization. Although Stacey and Clinton say they design their mannequins, attired in suggested outfits, to each guests' personality, they have a very narrow range of what they consider acceptable.

This narrow range of looks represents the possibilities on teen television, as well. On the television shows studied for this project, the popular girl, who usually starts of "mean" but is later humanized, is often the one who helps the smart girl with her changes. She can turn her, if not into a clone of herself, into a more acceptable model of femininity. Although the audience does not usually see the "fairy godmother" helping the smart girl purchase new clothes, or buy contact lenses, or enter the hair salon, clearly consumption has occurred and this demonstrates to viewers that in order to change, girls must assert their purchasing power. The need for consumption is only part of the pressure teen girls today face. The importance of popularity is at fault, too.

Mean Girls

Carol Gilligan and others (Pipher 1994, Simmons 2000, Wiseman 2002) have discussed the ways that girls lose themselves at adolescence. They lose their senses of who they are and their enthusiasm for other pursuits. In part, this is because of the pressure to be “cool” and the need to be accepted. Sometimes this is a positive thing, but other times it is due to what Girls’ Studies scholars call “relational aggression,” but more people are calling “Mean Girls theory.” Teen movies continue to show the opposition between popular and unpopular girls as quite obvious, visible, and hierarchical. Examples include *She’s All That*, in which Lanie Boggs is clearly underclass in every way until “rescued” by the most popular boy in school, who originally approaches her because of a bet but falls in love, or in *Clueless*, in which the popular Cher takes “adorably clueless” Tai under her wing as a good deed. However, high school girls on teen television shows are much less likely to specifically call someone names or disparage their clothes aloud than mean girls in the movies or in the earliest programs of the teen-show era.

Although many scholars believe that mean girls theory was designed in order to divide girls from each other (Chesney-Lind and Irwin, Moss), there is a definite discourse of mean girlism in several of these shows and competition between girls is rampant even in those that do not follow the script. Kelly of *90210* only approaches Brenda in the first episode because she thinks she looks like a more appropriate lab partner than a fat girl, and for most of the first season is contemptuous of nearly everyone except her closest friends. *Buffy* begins with Willow actually tyrannized by Cordelia who is trailed by a group of girls called the Cordettes. Paris of *Gilmore Girls*, who has her own acolytes, Madeline and Louise, sets out to make Rory’s life quite difficult from the start, saying, “You’ll never catch up. You’ll never beat me. This school is my

domain and the Franklin is my domain. And don't you ever forget that" ("The Lorelais' First Day at Chilton").

The smart girl must win over the mean girl, and she generally does this by being temporarily made over. In the seventh episode of *90210*, Brenda and Mrs. Walsh are set to appear in a "mother-daughter" fashion show hosted by Kelly's mother. Brandon suggests to Brenda that they invite Andrea, whose mother cannot attend, to appear with them. Kelly, who at that point is in full mean girl mode, is dubious, sneering "Andrea *Zuckerman*?" but despite Brenda's desperation to impress Kelly, she invites Andrea anyway. Andrea appears in what the show suggests is a fashionable dress, without her glasses, and makes a big hit. When Kelly's mother appears onstage under the influence of cocaine, the others see that the glamorous and popular Kelly does not have the perfect life. After the fashion show, the following exchange occurs, demonstrating the priorities of this group. Andrea, of course not wearing her glasses says, "I never knew you were so strong" to which Kelly replies, "And I never realized you were so pretty" ("The Mother Daughter Fashion Show").

While Andrea is always part of the group when they socialize, she never seems to be entirely within it. She comes from a lower-class section of Los Angeles, and secretly lives with her grandmother so that she can attend the prestigious West *Beverly Hills* High School. Of the regular characters, she is the only one whose parents cannot afford to live in *Beverly Hills* and the only character whose parents have no voice at all (though her grandmother is a recurring character). She is also one of the two Jewish characters (the furthest any character gets from "white" until the fourth season), along with David Silver. She is multiply "othered" by her class and her ethnicity, but clearly also by her academic interests in contrast to the flighty Brenda, the

sexy Kelly or the sweet, but not very bright, Donna. *In Beverly Hills, 90210: Television, Gender and Identity*, the author describes:

The outspoken down-to earth Andrea. Ambitious, talented, and driven to succeed academically, Andrea speaks for the hard worker impatient with frippery. As mandated by the demands of network television, however, her persona typically is undermined by her marginalized status: with her simple clothing and glasses, Andrea is Jewish, poor, intellectual, “other” . . . The alternate voice, the “other side” is present, but it is subsumed under the emphasis on, and the seductive attraction of, the gossip-and-fashion world of Brenda, Kelly, and Donna (McKinley 1997, 29).

There are also class issues at work here and the smart girl is often less wealthy than her popular peers. The show positions Andrea as poor through her attire even before the audience knows her story. Although her clothes are always different in each episode, and they are as perfectly clean and ironed as the rest of the cast’s, they are clearly less expensive than those of the other girls. She appears to be above caring. While Brenda is shown shopping, and being envious of Kelly and Donna’s money, Andrea never is. The message sent is that real girls shop. In “Logics of Consumption,” Angela McRobbie suggests the “image of the teenage girls constructed in . . . narratives of market expansion is one of the nascent consumer who can discipline her fickle habits and so “build brand loyalty” for a lifetime’s consumption of goods and services” (McRobbie, 78). Andrea’s disinterest in girliness and consumption others her perhaps more than the rest of her characteristics.

Andrea is not entirely unsusceptible; however. During high school, at one point she asks Donna to help her with her hair, and says that she wants highlights. Newly coiffed in the reddish highlights Donna says will be better than blonde for Andrea’s dark hair, she goes up to the boys

and asks them if they notice anything different, but the change is so subtle, neither they nor the audience can tell she has done anything to her hair (“Back in the High Life Again”). Yet the change gives her self-confidence that she, too can be one of the attractive girls. She performs by preening and so mentally transforms herself. It works. She gets a new boyfriend in the next episode, an African American student from a rival high school who, like Andrea, has earned admission to Yale University.

On *Buffy*, Cordelia initially influences Willow through ridicule. Cordelia is the typical popular girl: a cheerleader, expensively and revealingly dressed, wealthy, sexy, and physically mature. Buffy has many of the same characteristics. On Buffy’s first day of school, Cordelia naturally gravitates to her, and Buffy finds it easy to pass Cordelia’s “coolness test.” We quickly see, however, that Buffy may not be just like Cordelia when we see concern pass across her face when Cordelia snaps at Willow, “Nice dress! Good to know you’ve seen the softer side of Sears” and tells Buffy, “You wanna fit in here, the first rule is: know your losers. Once you can identify them all by sight, they’re a lot easier to avoid” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”) as she glares at Willow. In Cordelia’s eyes, Willow’s lack of fashion aptitude makes her automatically less important than other girls.

Willow’s clothing changes much more than the other girls’ over the course of the series. Leigh Clemons writes in “Real Vampires Don’t Wear Shorts: The Aesthetics of Fashion in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” “Characters may reflect certain clothing trends, but clothing first and foremost serves as a reinforcing agent for the character’s development and change . . . Television characters are free to hold onto significant character clothing choices for as long as they serve to reinforce the ideas of the character within the given universe. For example, Willow can continue to wear Peter Pan collars and overalls long after a “real” girl her age (especially one with a friend

who has as much fashion sense as Buffy) might have opted for trendier threads. Because clothing reflects the overall development of the show, the story may place a character into a sequence that falls outside of fashion trends, yet is integral to the show's story arc" (Slayage 2006, np). From the beginning of the series, Willow is positioned as less fashionable than others, and with her growth comes fashion change.

According to Rosalind Wiseman, many girls who thrive in the competitive world of high school, so-called "Queen Bees," are like Cordelia. They are seemingly confident about their places in the school and have protection from other students.³⁰ Willow, on the other hand, is what Wiseman calls a "Target"—the type of students that girl groups pick on to demonstrate their own popularity and power. Cordelia picks on Willow because she can, and because Willow reacts the way she does—by apologizing and running away. However, in due time they become friends, and co-members of "The Scooby Gang." Yet, even as Cordelia herself is replaced as most popular by Harmony, a former "wannabe" (in Wiseman's terms), Willow never forgets her treatment.

In the second to last season of the show, Willow becomes hooked on "dark magic" which the show uses as a drug metaphor and although there are many reasons for her behavior, the treatment she received at school was one of them.³¹ Apter and Josselon suggest that women's "lives remain shaped by past patterns of threats, which we thought were left behind in high school" (Apter 1998, 77). Willow confirms when she says, "Let me tell you something about

³⁰ In real life, the idea of every group of girls having a Queen Bee and a Target leaves out the many girls who are not really part of any group, or have their own friends and are not that interested in or influenced by the popular students. For a period in 2002, the popular press was discussing "Gamma Girls" who were happily unswayed by popularity. See (Meadows, 2002). It would also appear that groups like these are more appropriate to middle school than high school.

³¹ As this show is about the supernatural, her trajectory is different from the other girls. She moves from computer hacker to witch and, in the sixth season, uses her power to try to destroy the world. Although she goes on her rampage because her lover is killed, and she has become "hooked" on the dark magic, it becomes clear that the treatment she received from Cordelia and her friends was at least partially the cause of her action.

Willow: she's a loser. And she always has been. Everyone picked on Willow in junior high, high school, up until college with her stupid mousy ways and now—Willow's a junkie." ("Two to Go"). This Willow is suicidal and determines to destroy the entire world because of the pain she feels in it. The supernatural story, as wild as it sounds, is not unlike what many young women find as they grow up and realize they did not need to experience such taunting. The show, which has the motto, "High school is Hell," suggests the treatment of mean girls will influence those who were former targets for life.

Girls like Kelly and Cordelia begin by bullying the brainy girls on their shows. Simmons writes that girl "bullying is epidemic, distinctive, and destructive. It is not marked by the direct physical and verbal behavior that is primarily the province of boys" (Simmons 2002, 3). Therefore, teachers and administrators rarely intervene, and this can continue indefinitely. Girls who are systematically taunted can have psychic wounds that last for years and influence their adult lives profoundly. Watching these shows, it is clear that without either bullying, or fairy godmothering from a more traditionally feminine and normative girl character, the brainy girl will have no life.

On these programs, while we see a lot of real friendship and emotion, frequently even the "popular" kids complain about how hard it is to live up to expectations. At the same time the brainy girl is made over, the popular girl too must change so she is not *too* mean. For example, Cordelia Chase of *Buffy* says, "Hey! You think I'm never lonely because I'm so cute and popular? I can be surrounded by people and be completely alone. It's not like any of them really know me. I don't even know if they like me half the time. People just want to be in a popular zone. Sometimes when I talk, everyone's so busy agreeing with me, they don't hear a word I say." When Buffy asks Cordelia why she works so hard at being popular, she responds, "Well, it

beats being alone all by yourself” (“Out of Sight”). This speech is a variation of one that Rona Lieberman gives in the pre teen-show era program *Life Goes On*, and reflects Kelly’s early experiences on *90210*. Each of these girls is made over in order to become more relatable, as she becomes closer friends with the main character. In addition, Cordelia, and *Gilmore Girls*’ Paris have fathers who embezzle and lose their money, so that they are forced to make their way in the world like a more normative girl.³²

Yet, the popular girl is also often smarter than she seems; she just hides it well as part of the performance of being normative. It becomes clear she has been performing her role the whole time. Although Andrea is the valedictorian of her class, Brenda is in the honor society and Kelly gets into college and becomes a serious student of psychology. Buffy receives a 1430 on her SATs, and Cordelia also does very well and is accepted by several selective colleges.³³ The popular girl’s makeover promotes group cohesion in the same way the smart girl’s makeover does. It allows her to become more normative and allows the group to stay together by making everyone more alike and more likable. Peggy Orenstein describes “‘The perfect girl’: the girl who has no bad thoughts or feelings, the kind of person everybody wants to be with . . . [she is] the girl who speaks quietly, calmly, is always nice and kind, never mean or bossy. . . . In addition

³² This trope is also used for Jackie Burkhardt of *That ‘70s Show*, who is similarly rich and popular and is somewhat normalized to spend time with a poorer and more countercultural group.

³³ The SAT is a test many American high school students take before applying to college. Until recently, the two sections were Verbal and Math, on which a student could earn from 200-800 points, for a combined score of maximum 1600. According to a website compiling SAT percentiles in 2000, (the most recent I could find before the test added a writing component), Buffy’s 1430 places her in the 97th percentile. Amy Abbot’s 1400 places her in the 96th. Willow only mentions that she receives 740 on the verbal part of the exam, for which she dubs herself “Cletus the Slack-Jawed Yokel.” This score places her in the 98th percentile. It seems likely she received a perfect score on the math section. (http://usfweb2.usf.edu/UGRADS/EANDT/sat_percentiles.htm). *90210*, strangely, had the students be high school juniors (10th graders) for the first two years. Therefore, some characters took the test twice. When they first take the tests in the first of their two junior years, Brenda and Brandon both earn 1190, Kelly receives 1050, and Donna gets 620, and is diagnosed with a learning disability. Andrea’s/Cordelia’s, scores are not given, we only know that they are “high.” Summer Roberts of *The OC* proves that this idea is alive and well on teen TV as, during the 2005-2006 season, she receives a much higher SAT score than her dizzy earlier behavior would indicate, and wins acceptance to Brown University, while her brainy boyfriend Seth does not.

to being nice, [she] must be perfectly smart” (Orenstein 1994, 37). Once again teen television reinforces the idea that the best way to be a girl is to be nice, docile, popular but not mean, sexy but not too sexy, middle class but not too rich, and smart but not too smart.

Alternative Views of the Smart Girl

On the two shows that were canceled quickly, *My So-Called Life* and *Freaks and Geeks*, although there is definite competition between girls—Angela’s old friend Sharon even asks, “Why do girls have to tear each other down?” (“The Zit”)—there is not the sort of mean-girlism as on *90210* and *Buffy*. While Sharon is popular, in part because of her large breasts, and in part, because she is the sort of person who organizes dances, she is not mean, and eventually she and Angela have a rapprochement. Rayanne’s choice to sleep with Jordan is presented as something she does because she is troubled, not mean. Moreover, while Kim of *Freaks and Geeks* is certainly hostile and scary, and does not warm to Lindsay in the first few episodes, she also lacks wannabes who do her bidding and her occasional targets, the geeks, are boys, and hers alone.

Angela and Lindsay do not care so much about this monolithic popularity because they choose subcultural groups to join that are outside of the high school center. Thomas Hine discusses teenage subcultures, which “are the tribes of youth. The typical suburban high school is occupied by groups of teens who express themselves through music, dress, tattoos and piercing, obsessive hobbies, consumption patterns, extracurricular activities, drug habits and sex practices. . . . Once it was possible to speak of a youth subculture, but now there is range of youth subcultures” (Hine 1999, 277). Rayanne’s and Rickie’s outsiderhood, and the freaks’ antiestablishment ethos makes these viable subcultures for the transformed smart girls to join. As mentioned in Chapter 1, however, girls’ involvement in subcultures differs from that of boys. In 1976, McRobbie and Garber felt “that when the dimension of sexuality is included in the study

of youth subcultures, girls can be seen to be negotiating a different space, ordering a different type of resistance to what can at least in part be viewed as their sexual subjugation” (in Thornham 2002, 63). The girls on the shows being analyzed become part of new subcultures, but it is their sexual awakening that causes them to join the new group. Although each also finds a female friend, the change is clearly for the boys.

In a sense, the change is necessitated because of the way each girl is framed as not quite up to the beauty standards of the popular girls. Michele Byers writes, “Throughout the text Angela Chase is constructed as plain, when in fact the actress who portrays her is very attractive. The viewer comes to believe in the reality of Angela’s plainness, becomes connected with it, because it is a wonderful fantasy. The plain girl getting the most handsome boy in school grasps the viewer with much greater strength than would a more traditional narrative structure . . . and that come to acts as methods of social control, inscribing and constructing the bodies of its dreamers” (Byers 1998, 715). Joining these groups makes their beauty, which of course Claire Danes and Linda Cardellini possess, stand out amidst the other “slackers.”

However, joining these new groups nonetheless makes school activities and a life of the mind fall by the wayside for these girls as well, and sometimes causes them to engage in illicit activities. While positive developments for Angela include her publication of a poem in the school’s literary journal and her stand against the principal, who tries to censor the journal because of a sexually explicit poem another student wrote (“The Substitute”), such plots are much less important to the story than some of the more friendship and romance-oriented ones. Angela skips classes frequently, and engages in activities that her parents or the school administration would not sanction if they knew about them. Although she is already well aware of him when the show begins, Jordan notices her for the first time, in fact, when she is being

loaded into a police car after she and Rayanne tart themselves up, go to a club they are too young to get into, and flirt with much older men in the parking lot. Although the police officer simply takes Angela home, Jordan does not know this. He asks her if she is, “Out on bail?” (“Pilot”). Schoolwork itself suffers. For example, in the episode “Self Esteem,” Angela makes out with Jordan in the boiler room rather than attend the geometry class she is failing. This is in sharp contrast to the mousy girl who tells the audience in her opening narration in the first episode, that she has only been “kissed three times.” She and another girl, Abyssinia, who has failed a math test on purpose in order not to seem smarter than the boy she likes, end up studying together, and seem assured of success on the next test, but Angela ends up back with Jordan and skips the geometry review after all. Love conquers all, including math.

Angela and Rayanne do not fit in with any recognized subculture. Rayanne dresses in a much more eclectic style than Angela’s grunge look. Yet they reflect a certain rebellious crowd in the high school. Angela’s new crimson glow hair unsurprisingly gets a rise out of her uptight mother, which is part of its purpose and prompts a teacher to suggest, “Your appearance has altered” (“Pilot”) and ask probing questions. Susan Murray writes the narrative suggests that “Angela’s change in hair color is a physical manifestation of her desire for agency in the creation in her own persona” (Murray 1999, 228). Angela certainly does not know what she wants, at this point, only to be different, and the hair is a significant way of positioning herself as “other,” without being ugly or invisible.

Beyond the hair dye, Rayanne is responsible for more of Angela’s physical makeover and subsequent visibility. Rayanne, a self-described exhibitionist, arrives at school for Halloween dressed in a very sexy witch-type outfit, but Angela comes in her everyday clothes, even though most other students are wearing costumes. Rayanne is prepared for this, however, and supplies

her with a nineteen fifties-style outfit, complete with cat's eye glasses. Angela does not even act surprised, but simply puts on the outfit. In a sense, this masquerade gives her confidence. Mary Ann Doane writes that masquerade "constitutes an acknowledgment that it is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask—the decorative layer which conceals a nonidentity. . . . it works to effect a separation between the cause of desire and oneself" (Doane 1991, 26). If she cannot be a visible girl as herself, she can perform as someone else and be seen that way.

Lindsay, too, struggles with her wish for a new kind of visibility. In the episode "Looks and Books," when her experiences with the freaks get her in trouble, she once again dons her old skirt, frumpy sweater, and headband, attends a slumber party at her former best friend Millie's house, and competes with the (oddly all female) Mathletes. She is a huge success in the competition and her new friends even come to cheer her on, but she ultimately decides that she cannot integrate both sides of her life. She turns her back on math and returns to the army jacket, and the freaks, although they do go off to see "a foreign film," which seems to be her influence. The show seems to demonstrate, however, that even though the schoolgirl is out of place in high school, in college she may be able to return to a life of the mind, while still being attractive. Lindsay is much more dressed up than usual, and wearing tighter clothes, when at a family party she encounters the college student brother of one of the geeks. He makes it clear that college will be much better than high school and kisses her. This episode definitely suggests that Lindsay does not have to give up on education if she wants love.

Lindsay is the only one of the characters studied in this project to join a recognized subculture. Although the *90210* group often calls itself "the gang," and Buffy and her friends are "the Scooby Gang," these are not groups that exist in every high school. Angela cannot even articulate why she wants to hang out with Rayanne and Rickie, much less assign them a moniker.

However, freak type groups exist in nearly every high school, (although they have various names). They are the kids who find a place to be together, like the smoking patio, and sit and make fun of the conformist nature of everyone else. In 1980, when *Freaks and Geeks* is set, the hippie movement was well over, and the punk movement was just reaching Middle America. In the 1970s, those who smoked pot had an identity as “drug freaks,” which later became “freaks.”

³⁴ The freak group on the show is formed of misfits, and it is not entirely clear why Lindsay wants to join this group composed of three boys and one initially very hostile girl. Yet, as Lorraine Leblanc points out in her study of girls who joined the punk movement, “By joining male-dominated youth subcultures, girls construct forms of resistance to the dominant cultural models of femininity, and they do so at a critical time in their development” (Leblanc 1996, 13). Lindsay is able to identify herself clearly as part of a group, and by doing so shorthands her need to assert her identity.

The green army jacket subverts femininity by itself, identified as it is with the military and masculinity. By wearing this signifier, Lindsay is proclaiming her right not to be a good girl, a girly girl, or a schoolgirl. However, by performing the freak role, she also has to accommodate the fact that most of the freaks are less influenced by institutions than her old friends. All of the freaks, and Rayanne, Rickie, and Jordan, are shown to be working or lower class, and most have either neglectful single parents, abusive parents, or (in the case of Rickie), no guardian at all. For them the subcultural group is a refuge, less a performance than a substitute family. Although Angela and Lindsay’s parents do not understand their choices, either, and the smart girls feel just as oppressed as the other teenage characters, they are both portrayed as coming from “good

³⁴ It is clear that all of the kids on the show are looking to define their identities, including the freaks. Viewers even see one of the freaks, Daniel, attend a punk club, with attendant spiked hair, and play Dungeons and Dragons with the geeks, and his friend Nick joins a band as a drummer and dances in a disco contest.

homes” in opposition to their peers. Both come from homes where two parents live together (although Angela’s dad considers affairs), and where the girls eat dinner with their parents and younger siblings, while Rayanne’s mother drinks margaritas and offers her leftover Chinese food or raw cookie dough for dinner. The programs make it clear the smart girls are “slumming.”

James Poniewozik writes in *Time* magazine that class is unusually present in *Freaks and Geeks*, and that “this In crowd-obsessed setting comes as close as is Nielsen-feasible to admitting that class is still in session: that it does matter where you were born and what you own, that there are invisible psychological obstacles to moving outside your circle, that social mobility is hardly frictionless. When school brain Lindsay Weir on *Freaks*, for instance, mixes with a crowd of rebels, she is dallying with kids who, as one puts it, ‘shoplift in her daddy's store.’” (Poniewozik 1999, np). However, while they are with their groups, they perform like the others, which means skipping classes, defying parental rules (Lindsay, for example, tries marijuana), and dressing or styling their hair in ways designed to annoy adults. Since both girls acquire a group of friends and get boys to notice them, the shows make this seem like the most productive way to attend high school.

Rory Gilmore alone wears fashionable clothes from the beginning of her show, although her mother Lorelai makes fun of her for being too covered up, calling her baggy sweater “a muumuu” (“Pilot”) . During the high school years, for Friday night dinners with her wealthy grandparents, she wears dresses that are very flattering, although not particularly sexy, and clearly more expensive than her mother’s salary as manager of an inn would suggest she could afford. Although at school Rory is initially mistreated by Paris and her friends (who all wear the same uniforms) incidents of peer pressure only prove to make her more herself. In “Like Mother, Like Daughter” Rory is upbraided by the principal for reading alone during school and not

socializing with her peers. When she joins The Puffs, a secret society, she finds herself in trouble for going along with the group as they break into the school for an initiation ritual. When they are caught and threatened with suspension, Rory complains that she is doing exactly what the headmaster said she should, that she is fine and has friends and a boyfriend in her hometown. The headmaster acknowledges, reluctantly, that this is true, and revokes Rory's suspension. In the final scene of the episode, Rory returns to reading her book at lunch while another girl sits down at her table, smiles at Rory, and starts reading as well. She does not need to be made over, the show is saying, the system does. This is the sort of triumph Andrea never had. It shows that at least some television has made improvements over the teen-show era.

Yet, what of Paris? Rory constantly shows her up, and things always go badly for her. The show posits that assertive brainy girls are less popular than nice brainy girls are. Paris in a sense represents the "unruly woman." Kathleen Rowe writes that with her "body and speech, the unruly woman violates the unspoken feminine sanction against 'making a spectacle' of herself" (in Brundson 1997, 76). Although slender, Paris throws what weight she has around, making demands, demanding excellence, and questioning authority. Despite her efforts, however, she is consistently penalized in favor of the quieter Rory. Paris is the high school newspaper editor, while Rory is just a writer, and she becomes president of the student body while Rory is vice president (recruited by Paris specifically because she is uncontroversial). This pattern is repeated in the sixth season when Paris is made editor of the *Yale Daily News*, but thanks to her fanatical methods is not only replaced as editor, but replaced by Rory who has just returned from her semester away from school.

While Lorelai (who the audience can imagine was popular in high school before she became pregnant and dropped out) helps Rory dress for her first date, Paris's clothing makeover

is, in fact, courtesy of Rory. For her first date, she goes to Rory, even though they are not really friends at that point. Paris even makes a connection between intelligence and lack of fashion sense, saying, “I don’t know what to wear. . . . On my date with Tristin. I’m not trendy girl, OK? I don’t haunt the boutiques hoping to find that one fabulous little top. I study and then I think about studying and then I study some more” (“The Third Lorelai”). It is Rory who helps her decide what to wear and even lends her Lorelai’s skirt. This changes the dynamic somewhat as a smart girl gets to be the Fairy Godmother for once.

Conclusion

In shows like *90210*, the idea that the most popular students are the tastemakers of high school was alive and well. The girl voted most popular in the senior poll, Kelly, is the one the others turn to for aesthetic assistance and guidance. Andrea, who we never see scantily clad, is “written out” at the end of the fifth season after pregnancy and young marriage, while the show goes on for five more years, always keeping someone in the “smart girl” slot, but casting her with more model attractive actresses who are much flirtier and sexier than Carteris.³⁵

Of course, because Andrea does move into the inner circle, with the others depending on her for good advice, and she does find love at last, the show seems to be saying that smart girls are just as cool and lovable as the Kellies and Donnas, and she does not even have to make herself over much to do it. Because of her marginalization and eviction, however, the message of *90210* is that those who are not stick-thin and conventionally pretty do not deserve love and deserve to be forever peripheral. Being smart and ambitious is a waste of time. Because Andrea, or Carteris, could not perform her femininity to the extent the other actresses could, there was no

³⁵ Kathleen Robinson’s promiscuous teen genius Claire Arnold, Emma Caulfield as recurring character and college newspaper editor and girlfriend for Brandon, Susan Keats, and Lindsay Price as Janet Sosna, staffer on the newspaper Brandon and Steve start after college are all brainier than the others, but much more traditionally attractive. Janet, however, breaks the mold somewhat by being Asian.

space for her on the show. Therefore, there is no space for an Andrea in the in-crowd, and the brainy girl who wants to keep acting brainy may just as well give up.

There is nothing new about the idea that looks mean everything in Hollywood. Andrea's real makeover was due to extratextual factors. Gabrielle Carteris, the actress who played Andrea, was 29 years old when she got the job playing 16-year-old Andrea. She did not have the model good looks of most of the other cast-members and Andrea's pregnancy on the show was written to coincide with Carteris's actual pregnancy. An interview in the Hofstra Chronicle with Carteris explains why she left the show:

Chronicle: Once you said that you were doing a cast photo and began to cry because the other women on the show were thinner and younger than you and they had never had children. Did your experience on *90210*, playing the brainy, not-so trendy character lead to you feeling self-conscious?

Carteris: It's hard not to be stick-thin-perfect in this business. I felt that it was unfair that others were judging me. I believe in celebrating your body and having other people constantly judge you is hard. But there was a direct correlation between my weight and my work. I was told by every agent I talked to that I needed to lose weight. I even had to lie about my age to get the job on *90210*. There's a lot of age discrimination in this business. The show was so looks oriented, if they knew it was going to turn into that, I wouldn't have gotten the job. (Woodrow 2004, np)

Josh Schwartz, the creator of *The OC*, agrees with an interviewer when he says that because of the influence of the Internet, where fans can instantly post comments about how old or unattractive an actress looks, Andrea lasted much longer in the early 1990s than she would today. He says, "things would've gone very badly for Andrea Zuckerman in a TV-without-Pity

universe” (Simmons 2006, np). *Beverly Hills 90210* was clearly begun with the radical idea that there could be a smart girl integrated within the group of rich and fashionable students, but because the program quickly moved from wholesome-Walsh-family-from-Minnesota-moves-to-Beverly-Hills to teen soap opera and so “became looks oriented,” the smart girl remained the perpetual other. Carteris’s hair was lightened and the glasses disappeared, but she was still not model-attractive, and so Andrea fell by the wayside.

The two shows that subscribed least to the mean girls paradigm, *MSCL* and *Freaks and Geeks*, were both great shows, and *MSCL* “influenced an entire generation of television writers” (Jensen 2004, 126). The girls least interested in school, Rayanne and Kim, both seem influenced by their brainy friends and seem to look up to the smart girls. Rayanne’s mother even says Rayanne “wants to be Angela” (“Guns and Gossip”). With more time, perhaps these programs would have allowed the heroines to integrate their school and romantic lives. However, as it stands, the message is that schoolwork is, ultimately, a waste and that if you want to grow up, and have a boyfriend, you have to perform more like a girl boys will notice, and less like a schoolgirl.

Willow is disempowered in the final season of *Buffy*. She is not allowed to use her magic for most of the season, and is punished by her friends for her anger. She seems not only unable to use her magic, but her earlier skills at research and computer hacking are forgotten. Ironically, she dresses better in that season than she did in previous seasons, but she also fades into the background much more and reverts back to the hesitant, insecure personality she had in high school. When “slayer in training” Kennedy is instantly attracted to her, she is just as surprised as she would have been in early high school, saying, “I just—I still don’t get it. . . . Why you like me. I mean, you don’t even know me” (“The Killer in Me”). Despite the fact she has become

popular within her own group, had romantic relationships with both men and women, and helped to save the world several times, Willow still sees herself as a loser.

While things have gotten better for smart girls on the most recent teen television programs, they have only gotten better for a very particular type of smart girl. Sweet, lovable Rory gets her heart's desire, and constantly has boys fighting over her, while ambitious, driven Paris does not find love until late in her high school years and never dates one of the typical WB boys. She mostly has unusual love interests in college—first a professor who dies, and in the final seasons, the former editor of the *Yale Daily News*, whom Rory finds annoying and who is shorter than most television men. While Rory's makeover takes longer than that of the other girls, and the show makes it seem like she will never undergo one, starting in the fourth season Rory is made over into an upper class princess, who steals a boat, spends time with an irresponsible boyfriend, and drops out of college for a year, but she does not have far to go. Paris has no fairy godmother. She does not give anything up in her pursuit of academic success, but she does not get anything either and as her parents lose all her money, she even has to become poor, while Rory moves further into the upper class. Paris is punished for her hubris.

What sort of message is Andrea's story sending to smart girl viewers? They may learn that the smart girls have no real space in high school. They have to wait until college to find romance. They also learn that family sacrifice of various types is worth more than education and career, and of course, that motherhood is always the best option. While Angela and Lindsay seemed not to be normalizing themselves, and if anything they were behaving in less traditionally feminine ways, the fact that neither of these shows lasted a full television season means that, like Andrea, they were "disappeared." Willow changes the most over her time on her

show, but the fact that she becomes evil and then essentially powerless tends to dilute much of any positive message her transformation might send.

It seems as if we have gone a long way from the peripheral Andrea to the very central Rory. Yet, the message to smart girls is the same. There is no space for a smart girl in the in-crowd unless she is willing to adapt herself to normative styles of appearance, behavior, and manner and suppress her intelligence. The *Gilmore Girls* characters learn that they can be bright, but not too assertive. Rory is a particularly disheartening case as she began as a character who found reading cool, and loved learning, but during college has become someone hard for viewers to like. Despite stealing a boat and not speaking to her mother for nearly a year in the sixth season, she has a wealthy boyfriend who gives her extremely expensive gifts (including an ostrich Hermes Birkin bag that retails for \$14,600), and is extremely irresponsible, while she lives a life of upper class privilege with her grandparents when she drops out of Yale, seemingly not cracking a book the whole time. When she is ready, and without learning any real lesson, she is able to return home to her mother, and return to school and become editor of the Yale newspaper, all in the name of drama. Paris (who admittedly does demonstrate some insane behavior), has a real commitment to school and the paper, but is penalized for it.

The major exception in this case would seem to be Veronica Mars, of her eponymous show (2004-present). Veronica is a teenager who, in the first season, works for her father, a private eye and frequently helps those around her by using her powers of deduction and her skills. She is very smart, and the private eye angle gives the show a structure unlike the other shows (with the possible exception of *Buffy*) and gives the character a reason to be brainy without being particularly concerned with schoolwork (although she is only kept from becoming valedictorian by her “cause”). She is clearly considered sexy and desirable from the first episode,

and has a sexual past no other smart girl has.³⁶ The only physical makeovers she experiences occur when she wears costumes to solve crimes.

Nonetheless, the show still revolves around popularity. When the show begins, Veronica, who comes from the poorer side of town, has been ostracized by the rich and popular crowd when her rich boyfriend suddenly breaks up with her and when her father is ousted from his job as sheriff. Although plenty of other students want to be friends with her and many boys and men comment on how attractive and cool she is, she still feels like an outcast and much of the first season's mystery involves finding out who killed one of the wealthy girls. She ends up dating another of the wealthy boys, and spending time with the rich group once again, never seeming to show up at the poor kids' parties. Veronica's problem, however, is far from invisibility and she is definitely a step in the right direction.³⁷

It would seem that many the producers of these shows do not intend to promote the message that the smart girl must become more normative. While *90210* apparently had no ambition but to be entertaining, many of the shows cited are witty, extremely well written, and the writers are clearly highly literate and many even have a mission to make "smartness" cool. For example, to quote the creator of *Gilmore Girls*, Amy Sherman-Palladino, "This is a series where we've said, implicitly, 'Read a book, read the classics; I know you're cute, but you can still wear lipstick and read Dickens'" (Tucker 2005, np).³⁸ Yet the networks have a mission,

³⁶ See Chapter 4 for more on the sex life of the smart girl.

³⁷ *Veronica Mars* was brought to the new CW network despite low ratings on UPN (where it had a rabid cult fan base) and even now many young people have not even heard of the show (one student of two classes of 35 students in my Introduction to Popular Culture class I asked knew what the show was and none had seen it,) and the ratings are not much higher now that it is on a new network and teamed with *Gilmore Girls* on Tuesday nights. If my students are any indication, the impact on at least college students, positive or negative, is minimal.

³⁸ Amy Sherman-Palladino left the show in a contract dispute and the 2006-2007 season was headed by a new showrunner and written by new writers. The tone, at least, is somewhat different, almost entirely centering on Rory's and Lorelai's love lives at the expense of any other plotline, and the two teams clearly have different writing styles and perhaps priorities.

which is to get viewers to watch, and the advertisers and those businesses that have their products placed on the show have a mission, which is to get consumers to buy products, and these missions conflict with the message that it is acceptable to be smart. The “sexy” choice or the choice that benefits the network most or causes the least controversy for it will ultimately win. The message to smart girls, therefore, is put away the books and pull out the credit card.³⁹

The next chapter discusses how changes in feminism over the teen-show era have changed the depictions of the smart girl. As the country moved from the Backlash era of the late 1970s and 1980s, to Riotgrrl feminism, which became the diluted Girl Power feminism, which transformed into Third-wave feminism. At the same time, many believed they were experiencing Post-feminism. The way the smart girl is treated on teen dramas is affected by these changes. Each brainy girl has a commitment to improving the world through activism of some type, and the way she approaches it changes as feminism changes.

³⁹ Product placement is increasingly driving some of the script choices. While in the past a band represented by the same network or production company as the show might have come on and played in the 90210-ers Peach Pit After Dark nightclub for a few minutes, more recently some shows are practically being taken over by such stunts as when two characters on *Dawson's Creek* were locked in a K-Mart all night and had to find “supplies.”

CHAPTER 4. PEOPLE WHO DO THINGS: FEMINISM, ACTIVISM, AND THE SMART GIRL

Introduction

Shy, brainy college sophomore Felicity Porter of the show *Felicity* is working at the reception counter of the University of New York's health center when a girl comes in looking for the "morning-after pill." When Felicity finds out that the health center, thanks to some meddling from a board member, has stopped prescribing the medication, she calls all her friends to come have a sit-in. It is fun. Everyone, including the girl who needed the morning-after pill, who has already acquired one from Planned Parenthood, and her boyfriend, as well as most of Felicity's friends, play jacks, make posters, sing, sit around and talk, have a big slumber party, and even get interviewed for the TV news. This is Girl Power in action. Ultimately, despite Felicity's complete inability to articulate her position, the protest is successful. At the end, Felicity's boss at the health center, a college pre-med student who initially objected to the protest, kisses her and becomes her next boyfriend ("Revolutions").

This episode illustrates how television shows featuring young people treat ethical dilemmas and activism. When teens have a problem, they must make the most dramatic choice to solve it—a choice that allows them to perform as "active" girls, while still behaving in a traditionally feminine manner. Although they must do the right thing, ultimately, they have to consider the moral implications of a choice in terms of how it will affect their friendships and romantic lives. If they see a problem that requires intervention, they may take action, but protest must be fun to watch, non-destructive, and advance the romantic plot.

Once again, the smart girl is learning how to perform normatively. As Judith Butler writes, "The very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a

good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once” (Butler 1999, 185). Performing as a normative girl, according to this theory, means complying not only with the law, and not only within the rules of the high school or college the character attends, but also with the rules of femininity.

Within each group of young people on teen shows, the smart girl is the one most likely to have a political awakening and encourage her friends to behave ethically. These smart girl television characters perform as normative females, even when they seem to be working against the system. In addition, the way these girls interact is influenced by the brand of feminism embraced by popular culture at the time the show is aired. In dramas featuring teenagers in major roles, teenagers live, essentially, in their own microcosm. Although they have parents with opinions, and teachers and administrators have their own agendas, for the most part, the young characters influence each other in what Nancy Fraser would consider “just one [of] a number of public spheres” (Fraser 1993, 518), as opposed to the “official public sphere,” which is “constituted by a number of significant exclusions” including gender (Fraser 521). Teen girls, of course, are not only excluded from political life because of their gender, but because of their age. Neither the characters, nor much of the putative audience for these shows, can vote, run for office, or otherwise make real political impact. In the absence of the nationwide protests girls in the 1960s and 1970s might have participated in, there is no organized way for teen girls to become involved in politics, except in very local contexts.

While for the most part, characters on most of these shows are primarily concerned with their love lives and their relationships with each other, the smart girl alone is aware of global concerns, although she may be ridiculed or ostracized for it. She often is more interested in

political causes than her peers. In a sense, she acts as the “moral compass” of the group, often coercing her friends into doing the right thing. She takes a stand, in order to make her values known, even though she may risk the friendships or romantic life she has just struggled so mightily for in order to do it. She may be the one who questions those in power and the inequalities that exist in our system and functions as an activist, bent on changing the world around her for the better by pointing out truths that her peers may not see, or she may conduct the research, write the newspaper articles, or make the speech that allows a rethinking of public memory. She does this at the risk of further othering herself from her peers, from her parents or from those in power. As each of these characters is part of a television show, she often makes choices or faces consequences that are less than ideal because the episode must fit the needs of the essentially romantic plot, whether it is designed to move her closer or further away from her friends, or to create or destroy a bond with a love interest.

This chapter discusses the ways in which the brainy teenage girl performs as the moral center of her social group, and illustrates the ways in which her initial activism and strong ethics are curtailed by the need for her to perform in a feminine manner and the demands of the romantic plot, while reflecting the politics of the day. Politics and feminism have both changed significantly over the teen-show era. How the smart girls perform within the political context of the time has also changed. Her relationship to feminism entirely depends on the climate of the country at the time the show begins. Like the last chapter, this chapter includes smart girls from the teen shows *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Fox, 1990-2000), *My So-Called Life* (ABC, 1994-1995), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1997-2001, UPN, 2001-2003), *Freaks and Geeks* (NBC, 1999-2000), and *Gilmore Girls* (WB, 2000-present) with considerations of several contemporary

shows. Unlike the previous chapter, however, this chapter takes a chronological look at these shows to directly show the changes in both politics and feminism over the sixteen-year period.

The first section focuses on how Andrea Zuckerman of *90210* makes her ethical decisions based on the conservatism of the Reagan years and the “backlash” to feminism. The second section discusses how Angela Chase of *MSCL* reflects the Riot Grrl era, and how the choices she makes reflect a new model for girls, and influenced real life viewers. The third section illustrates how the characters on *Buffy* helped Riot Grrl morph into Girl Power, and how Willow makes choices according to a defanged feminism that appears to highlight girls, but simply makes them more commodified. Next, the chapter considers how *Freaks and Geeks* harkens back to the politics of 1980, and second-wave feminism, while also reflecting the Third-wave feminism of 1999, and explains how that allows Lindsay Weir to behave in an unusual way for girls of that part of the teen era. Next, the chapter describes the post feminist bent of *Gilmore Girls* and how feminism has almost no place in Rory’s or Paris’s lives. Finally, the chapter considers what messages these programs send to girls and some recent changes.

Andrea Zuckerman, Rebel with a Cause

Beverly Hills, 90210 begins on the heels of the Reagan years (1981-1989), and continues through the first Bush regime (1989-1993) and through most of the Clinton years (1993-2001). Actress Gabrielle Carteris, who played Andrea, leaves the show in mid-1995, relatively early into the Clinton administration, so her role on the show is decidedly a product of the earlier era. The show begins in a period in which the lifestyles of the very rich were intriguing to many, as the rich got richer. Andrea comes from working-class Recita, rather than ritzy *Beverly Hills*, where all the other students live (and she lives with her grandmother in a one-bedroom apartment in order to attend West Beverly High School). The show works within a discourse of class

inequalities in which Andrea often finds herself in uncomfortable positions. It also accompanies the era of the backlash against feminism.

The backlash was demonstrated strongly in the mass media, including television. Susan Faludi writes:

As the eighties television backlash against independent women proceeded in fits and starts from season to season . . . overall, it succeeded in depopulating TV of its healthy independent women and replacing them with nostalgia glazed portraits of apolitical “family” women. This process worked its way through television entertainment in two stages. First in the early eighties, it banished feminist issues. Then, in the mid-eighties it reconstructed a “traditional” female hierarchy, placing suburban homemakers on the top, career women on the lower rungs, and single women at the very bottom.

The way *90210* depicts mothers matches Faludi’s description well. As the Walsh twins’ stay-at-home mother is revered, Kelly’s former model mother, Steve’s actress mother, and Dylan’s flaky New Age mother, who are all divorced from their fathers, are villanized, at least until Kelly’s mother remarries and has another child. While high school students, of course, are not supposed to be married, they are supposed to be in relationships, and Andrea weighs many of her decisions according to how Brandon will react. In college, Andrea makes her choice of early marriage and motherhood over abortion, adoption, or single life with a child within this ethos.

In her study of girls who watched *90210*, E. Graham McKinley writes that marriage is primary for single women in popular culture, and “*90210* provides an addendum: she must use passive-aggressive tactics to attract and keep a man. Thus, ultimately, the women are superficially presented as equal to males, but in many ways they relegate themselves to the pre-feminist roles of inferiors, incomplete or at least marred if they don’t have a man” (McKinley

1997, 110). She goes on to note that, “This role arguably infects Generation X television more virulently than pre-feminist television because the gender inequalities are unstated” (McKinley 1997, 110). Andrea is the most overtly political of all the girls in this study, getting involved a number of controversial issues. However, as a supporting character, her function on the show is to question, and to act primarily as catalyst for the more central characters to the narrative, such as Brandon, with whom she is in love. The upshot of any plot is how it affects their (promised by the pilot and early episodes, but never realized,) romance. The show posits Andrea as working for good causes, but easily discouraged by her peers, and distracted by her romantic interests. Therefore, despite being the most active on the surface, she sometimes comes across as a weak personality who functions only on the margins of her group of much more popular and glamorous friends.

Andrea also questions the need for a new mall that all her friends want, asking important questions about noise abatement, the environment, and traffic, while Brandon (also a journalist) asks scathingly, “Do we have to bring journalistic ethics and professional integrity into everything?” (“The Pit and the Pendulum” 1992) and dates the daughter of the man who wants to open the mall. No one listens to Andrea, and it is only when Brandon realizes that the mall will be in the exact spot their hangout, The Peach Pit, stands on that he begins to question the motives of the planners and saves the day by scotching the deal.⁴⁰ Despite the fact that Andrea is

⁴⁰ He receives all the credit both in this case, and when Donna nearly does not graduate because she is caught drinking Champagne at the prom, and the seniors state a protest in one of the most famous episodes of the series. Most viewers who watched the show did not watch because they wanted to learn about politics and most will probably not recall the mall episode or the condom episode unless prompted. However, nearly any regular viewer from that time will remember the first half of the two-part high school graduation episode. As the online columnist Amy Amatangelo (under the name TV Gal) writes, discussing the recent death of series creator Aaron Spelling, “Say ‘Donna Martin Graduates’ to almost anyone and they’ll know exactly what you are talking about” (zap2it.com). David’s dad offers the gang champagne before the prom, and Donna gets drunk enough for the school administration to tell—which a school policy strictly forbids and will lead to not being allowed to graduate with the class. Brandon and Andrea corral all the juniors and seniors to chant repeatedly “Donna Martin Graduates! Donna

frequently the one who urges the right thing, and she works as hard as anyone, Brandon is the more central character and somehow everyone always seems to think things are his idea. This is yet another way the smart girl is marginalized.

During high school, Andrea alone seems aware of gender inequalities. In a third season episode, a new teacher decides that Brandon should edit the school newspaper Andrea has run for at least the previous three years. He says it is because Andrea is too much of an overachiever, and Brandon is a natural leader who needs encouragement. Andrea complains of sexism, saying, “If men are determined to get to the top, then they are aggressive. If women are determined to get to the top, then they are bitchy” (“Song of Myself”). For her trouble, she and Brandon are made co-editors, which appears blatantly unfair, as Brandon had originally planned to quit the paper and enjoy his senior year. Of course, this plot serves to show how Andrea is normalized as she flirts with the teacher in later episodes, and bickers with Brandon, Hepburn and Tracy style.

Andrea also is involved in several activist campaigns, which also serve to advance the romantic plot and to cause her to perform more normatively. For instance, in “Everybody’s Talkin’ Bout it” (1992), when the high school principal, egged on by angry citizens, refuses to let students take part in a health survey that includes sex questions, Andrea calls this “the triumph of ignorance over knowledge” and decides she knows “how to make them take us seriously.” She stages a protest over the objections of some of her friends. However, Brandon is concerned that Andrea is alienating her friends and tries to talk to Andrea rationally. Instead, he ends up

Martin Graduates!” outside the school board meeting and, of course, they win. Donna is allowed to graduate because she is a “good” girl who never makes trouble and it is Brandon she thanks. Not only is it clear all over the Internet that fans consider this a pivotal moment on the show (a Google search for the phrase yields 19,100 hits), but television writers have been influenced by it as well. In 2006, Summer Roberts of *The OC* wears a t-shirt with the slogan (which was commercially available on the Internet before she wore it) only one episode before she and her friends take action to get Marisa Cooper back into their private school, from which she has been expelled for shooting someone in self-defense. In both cases, the protests are entirely local, and allow our heroines to circumvent rules that anyone not rich or not white might have to live by. While feminism gets its due, it is just as empty as any of the rest of *90210*’s (or the very similar *The O.C.*’s) politics

snapping, “Maybe you should get a life of your own before it’s too late.” When she shoots back a list of statistics about AIDS and teen pregnancy (Andrea, as journalist, always arms herself with facts), Brandon retorts, “What you don’t want to admit is that you don’t know that much about the other part of it, the part that doesn’t show up in statistics or surveys, the feelings of sex. If you had a little more experience you’d know that love is not a public health issue” (“Everybody’s Talkin’ Bout It”). This takes the “important issue” of this plot and places it soundly in the romantic realm because, as far as Andrea is concerned, the reason she has not had sex is that Brandon refuses to love her back.

She simply backs off, deciding not to even attend the outing she organized herself to pass out brochures about birth control on the street, , remaining disengaged until the managing editor, John Griffin (Andy Hirsch), changes her mind. It has been clear to the audience from the beginning of the episode that Griffin, who falls clearly into the “non-threatening boy” character type, is attracted to Andrea. After Griffin reveals that he has written the anonymous personal journal, “OK, So, I’m a Virgin,” he and Andrea agree to go to the protest together and later on a date (the character does not appear on the show again). This is among many times that Andrea takes a moral stand that the others do not find important and backs off in favor of keeping what marginal space she has within the group.

During college, most of the characters become involved in politics. As Michelle Byers puts it, “*90210* is quite successful at demonstrating some of the breadth and complexity of University life. Its major shortcomings arise from its insistence on portraying middle-of-the-road politics, authoritarianism, moralism and the omission of difference from campus life. Despite this, moments of resistance occur” (Byers 2005, 84). For example, Andrea and the other girls take a class in feminist theory, which seems like an opportunity to send positive messages to the

audience. However, the teacher, who espouses “serial monogamy,” turns out to be a married woman with designs on both Brandon and Dylan. The female characters turn against her, “and, it seems, all the empowering moments they had experienced in her class” (Byers 2005, 74).

Practically the entire cast participates in a “Take Back the Night” rally (in an episode of the same name in 1993). When Andrea’s then-boyfriend says he is speaking for the feminist position, Andrea (whom the audience roots for against the guest star), retorts that no, *she* is speaking for the feminist position. Once again, the show is, at least superficially, endorsing feminism, but undercuts it at the same time. Marilyn Elias writes, “In Andrea’s life, U.S. Teens finally could watch the adventures of a smart, together female role model. . . . The only *90210* girl whose self-esteem didn’t rest on the shaky ground of male flattery. I loved her gutsy school newspaper exposes, her self-possession and ambition, her work on the rape hot line and passionate concern for justice. But no more. Andrea the wunderkind is dead” (Elias 1994, 3D). Despite her countercultural ideals, Andrea falls victim to conservative ideas and the backlash, as she becomes pregnant, gets married, and her story devolves into marriage and motherhood to the exclusion of much else.

Brandon runs for president of the student government and Andrea is his campaign manager, but is clearly frustrated with her inability to be more involved because she is pregnant. Her character is written off the show, to be replaced by, among other smart girl characters, journalist Susan Keats (Emma Caulfield), who writes about an abortion in her past, for which she ends up apologizing to both the father and to Brandon (“Nancy’s Choice” 1996). When Andrea returns to the show for a visit in a later season, she talks primarily about how her daughter is doing and her failed marriage, not how she is doing in medical school at Yale.

The whole show is primarily concerned with the lives of the rich and glamorous, and with romance, so actual political discourse can only come within the context of plotlines that focus on these issues. The show considers political issues such as racism, AIDS, lesbian rights, and date rape, in a way they have not been on many subsequent shows, but only when the arguments advance the romantic plot. As Andrea is ushered off the show because of her looks, and the feminist theory teacher turns out to be a promiscuous and vengeful character, any commitment to feminism the producers might have espoused should be viewed with suspicion. The potential feminist Andrea simply cannot perform normatively within the show, or within the time the show aired, and there is no space for her.

The stage is set, however, for shows to reflect a new world. Many scholars and journalists saw the falseness in the way adolescent life was presented on shows like *90210* and most teen movies, and began to write about real girls' experiences. At the same time, a few media professionals suddenly attempted to create shows that were more "real." One of the first of these shows was *My So-Called Life*, which represents a new kind of feminism.

Angela Chase Goes Wild like a Blister in the Sun

The short-lived *My So-Called Life* heralds the coming of the Riot Grrl. Meredith Guthrie describes the Riot Grrl movement:

In 1991, a group of young women banded together in the Washington state and Washington D.C. areas, determined to start a "girl riot." Harnessing the energy of a political riot and putting the growl back into Grrls' voices, Riot Grrl demanded "Revolution Girl-Style Now!" Riot Grrl combined the energy of punk rock and direct feminist action, and offered girls the opportunity to participate in bands, zines, conventions and encounter groups. In all of these arenas, girls and young women could

discuss the hidden (as far as mass media was concerned) lives of girls. Further, Riot Grrl demanded that mainstream culture take girls seriously. (Guthrie 2005, 201)

While Angela herself is not involved in this movement, and is far too passive and shy to join a band (at least according to her friend Rayanne, who actually does), her appearance on television coincides with the rise of this group.

As one writer puts it, “Riot Grrl was an anger-based feminine subculture, exposing and celebrating the anger young women were usually encouraged to hide, directed mainly at societal institutions, expectations, and pressures. Riot Grrl also focused on a clear conveyance of the teenage female experience, and how it differed from the one depicted by the media” (Moss 2001, np). The fact that Angela narrates most episodes of the show demonstrates that among the program’s goals was to examine the real inner life of girls.

An article in *Entertainment Weekly* states, “The origins of *My So-Called Life* date back to 1976, when [producers Edward Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz] were writer-producers on the TV series *Family*. ‘We found ourselves often confined to a more appropriate and decorous presentation of adolescence,’ says Zwick. ‘*My So-Called Life* is based on some unspoken vow to reexamine adolescence per our vision’” (Jensen 2004, np). In fact, when the show was so low-rated that ABC considered canceling it, Zwick told ABC executives “You are giving a voice to hundreds of thousands of people in this culture who are utterly disenfranchised—teenagers and particularly teenage girls—who have no voice of their own. You should keep the show on for no other reason” (Jensen 2004, np). The “realness” of *My So-Called Life* reflects this new attention toward teen lives, particularly those of girls, although as explained in the Introduction, it came just a bit too early to have the kind of societal impact *Buffy* would.

Angela makes choices for reasons that are not always entirely clear to her. She does not express them in Andrea's clear-cut way, and her friends do not act the way the characters on *90210* do. It is her sometimes-faltering attempts to explain her motivation that give *MSCL* its drama, as when Angela says, "People always say how you should be yourself, like 'yourself' is this definite thing, like a toaster or something" ("Pressure"). In another episode ("Betrayal"), she gets over Jordan Catalano (briefly) by performing a wild dance to the Violent Femmes' song of freedom, *Blister in the Sun*. She is exercising a type of agency by dancing, and her freedom is unusual for television girls of past eras, who were traditionally more constrained in their movements.

Angela does exercise political agency when she has a run-in with censorship. A substitute teacher (Roger Rees) throws away the poems their regular English teacher had had them write. When Angela asks the teacher why he says, "I did it to clear the slate. I did it to wake you up. I did it to do *something* to find you. And now, guess what? Here you are, wide-awake, right in front of me!" ("The Substitute") When he inspires his students to write intriguing poetry for the school literary journal, one sexually provocative poem causes the principal, Mr. Foster, to suppress the journal before it most students can see it. Angela feels compelled to act. She tells her parents (Bess Armstrong, Tim Irwin) that the teacher told the class they could file a lawsuit against the school for violating the students' constitutional rights, or stage a walkout. She continues, "Cause, you know, *Nazis* burned books. So, I mean, is that what Foster's saying—that a school should burn books, like *Nazis*?" which, while not the most apt example, shows that Angela can not only link her current lessons to others (in the first episode she is "really getting into Ann Frank" ("Pilot"), whose diary she read for school,) but is also considering it global and historical terms.

When her mother implies that Angela only wants to protest because it is exciting, she replies, “Exciting? It’s not exciting, it’s important. It’s an important issue. What, you think I’m doing this for excitement? For fun? . . . What about all those boring stories I’ve had to sit through my whole life about how committed you were in the sixties, about how you believed in things?” Although the principal has announced that anyone caught with a copy of the literary magazine will be suspended, Angela cuts class to make copies and hand them out. When she is, inevitably, hauled to the principal’s office, she says to her parents, “You told me to pick my battles. Well, this is it! It may not be a war protest or a civil-rights demonstration, but it’s all I’ve got. Well, that’s not completely true. There are a couple of truths. You said I needed to decide what to fight for, and I decided. I just think it’s wrong to censor people and I’m willing to get suspended for it” (“The Substitute”).

Ultimately, she is not suspended. It turns out that the substitute teacher turns out to be a deadbeat dad running from child support payments. Strangely one message the show seems to give is that he is a morally corrupting reason Angela acted out. Angela, however, has learned a lesson about taking a stand. She has learned that there are issues more important than whether Jordan Catalano is ever going to like her and that school, which is “a battlefield for your heart,” does not have to be entirely about dull lessons and safe poems about oak trees. This story is not about the romantic plot (although it is the episode in which the audience first discovers that Jordan cannot read, a plot turn that will be utilized by Angela in future episodes as a way of getting close to him) and her friends and parents are, while not interested in helping her in her quest, basically on her side. Unlike Andrea Zuckerman, no one belittles Angela’s choices, and she does not change her behavior because of Rayanne’s indifference, or Brian’s actual hostility

to the poem. She uses her anger to do something productive and through it becomes a Riot Grrl, even if she does not know it.

While *MSCL* was not around long enough for Angela to stage more protests, girl viewers used her adolescent rebellions as a jumping-off point of their own. The rise of the Internet in the early '90s changed the way many viewers watched television, and an unsuccessful campaign to save the show was conducted primarily online, predominantly by girls and young women. Susan Murray described the campaign, writing, "Within the safe space of the computer and television's narrative atmosphere, a girl can express anger and discontent with her life without fear of threat of intimidation" (Murray 1999, 232). Although *MSCL* did not last even a full season, it became extremely popular when re-run on MTV and on DVD, and is now considered an extremely influential show by viewers. It is also cited by other television writers, as when Greg Berlanti of *Everwood* says, "It had a tremendous impact on me . . . We reference the show at least once a week in the writers' room here" (Jensen 2004, np). Angela's Riot Grrl spirit of this show lived on, in a less forceful way, in shows like *Felicity*, *Buffy*, and *Veronica Mars*.⁴¹

The turn to Riot Grrl-ism among a certain subculture of girls coincided with the general public's new awareness of girls' inner lives as evinced by the books that came out in that period,

⁴¹ The other major teen show of this time, Fox's *Party of Five*, featured smart girl Julia Salinger along with her brothers and sisters. It took the genius move of eliminating parents altogether, as well as their restrictions, by killing them off before the show ever began, leaving the Salinger children, who ranged from babyhood to a high school sophomore, orphans in the care of their twenty four year old brother Charlie. I say genius move, because many of the slower and less involving plotlines on both *90210* and *MSCL* involved the parents. The Walsh parents on *90210* and *Buffy*'s mother are even written out of the shows during the college years. More recent shows, however, have managed to strike a better balance, with *Gilmore Girls*, *Everwood*, and *The OC* incorporating parents, children, and often grandparents, all with integral storylines. Although she has many responsibilities to her siblings, Julia is able to get a late night job at a bar, where she stands up for the waitresses' right not to wear the dominatrix-like outfits the manager wants them to. She has a degree of freedom that no previous television girl does, and, like Angela, in the first episode decides to reject being a schoolgirl in order to attract a bad boy. Without parents, Julia can just invite him to move in, which she does. At first, she seems very much like Angela. However, the show lasts six seasons, and along the way, her character is tamed. She marries quite young, and later becomes involved with an abusive boyfriend. Most of her storylines involve romance, and the show becomes increasingly melodramatic as the seasons roll on. For example, Julia's brother Bailey becomes an alcoholic, older brother Charlie contracts Hodgkin's disease, and Charlie's erstwhile girlfriend Kirsten deals with manic depression and infertility.

including Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*, Peggy Orenstein's *Schoolgirls*, and Rachel Simmons's *Odd Girl Out*. Through this growing support, however, came commodification. The Riotgrrl movement was changed into something far less potent—known as Girl Power. The lives of girls became a major engine in popular culture, and producers found ways to appeal to teen girls and their pocketbooks. *Buffy* is one of the first of the Girl Power shows and does show girls different, if fantastic, ways to be active. Angela may have been unclear on her motives, and may have expressed her anger through something as seemingly unconstructive as dance, but Willow Rosenberg's anger is applied to saving the world on *Buffy*, and she has far more impact on her high school and the world around her than Andrea or Angela with their small protests.

Willow: This Year's Girl Power

Buffy turns the Riot Grrl into “Girl Power” feminism. As Anna Gough-Yates describes it, “So, riot Grrl morphed into Girl Power which in turn gave birth to the Spice Girls which then became glittering slogans on baby tees at J.C. Penney. The culture industry appropriated the rebellion of bands such as Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, wrapped it up in a cute, easily marketable package, and sold it to the masses . . . without ever explaining where it came from or what it meant to the people who most needed to know” (Gough-Yates 2001, 83). *Buffy* has been considered as one of the reasons for this shift. As Jeffrey L. Pasley describes *Buffy*'s relationship to feminism, the show invokes “not the more radical, overtly politicized feminism of the 1970s, of course, but rather the more marketable, sex-positive, “Girl Power” feminism of the 1990s. Girl power was built into the very premise of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and formed a key aspect of its early publicity appeal” (Pasley 2003, np). Of course, it is not entirely that simple. Elyce Rae Helford writes, “Generally speaking, the 90s offered some of the most developed and compelling (if contradictory and sometimes even reactionary) televisual representations of gender politics

and debates over (and within) feminism” (Helford, 2000, 106). Despite the fact that the female characters of *Buffy* are, of course, extremely active agents, they nonetheless are very conscious of themselves as girls. Buffy, for example, frequently discusses her wish to stop slaying vampires and start shopping for clothes. The fact that most of the men of *Buffy* are not nearly as powerful as the women illustrates that it is the consummate Girl Power show.

The most obvious use of Willow’s Girl Power is her ability to use witchcraft, similar to Buffy’s ability to kill vampires and demons using physical strength. This decidedly illustrates the potency of girls on television during this period. By the end of the series Buffy agrees that Willow is her equal in terms of saving the world. Certainly, once Willow decides to practice witchcraft, she applies the same diligence to mastering it as she has to her schoolwork, and her computer hacking. However, as Willow’s power is curtailed when she becomes too angry and uses her witchcraft for evil, there is a limit to what Girl Power will allow a girl to do.

The rise of The WB network also introduces many teenage characters who have a strong concern about ethics. While the students at West Beverly High School on *90210* wrestled with doing the right thing all the time, they did not tend to talk about it as much as denizens of subsequent teen shows. As Jane Rosenzweig, discussing WB shows in general in 2000, asked, “Is this because of the times in which we now live? When *90210* came on the air, we were at the end of the Reagan era of vast greed among the few and economic recession for everyone else; a preoccupation with rich people and their stupidity may have been appealing to liberal Hollywood and frustrated viewers. Now, when money is more plentiful, is it possible we’ve turned to other plots because we have the economic luxury to contemplate—and value—moral behavior?” (Rosenzweig 2000, np). The kids of WB shows like *Buffy*, as well as *Felicity*, *Dawson’s Creek*, and *Everwood* discuss their choices using extremely sophisticated vocabulary (the characters of

Dawson's Creek in particular have often been accused of speaking like dictionaries), and each aspires "to grow up and be a good person and to understand what doing so entails" (Rosenzweig 2000, np). Although there is as much action as talk on *Buffy*, Willow is the one most likely to point out the right thing to do.

It is the way Willow's intellectual abilities are used to determine her ethical choices that are at issue here. Aside from the witchcraft, Willow, like all the smart girls, is the moral center of her group. In the fourth season *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode "Pangs," Willow is the only one who objects to Thanksgiving when Buffy, left alone by her mother, wants to host a dinner. The gang attends the opening of a new institute at the University, and an anthropology professor begins to speak about the "melting pot." Willow refers to postcoloniality when she says, "What a load of horse hooey. Thanksgiving isn't about blending of two cultures. It's about one culture wiping out another. And then they make animated specials, about the part where . . . with the maize and the big, big belt buckles. They don't show you the next scene where all the bison die, and Squanto takes a musket ball in the stomach" ("Pangs"). This episode has been considered in light of its racial message by Dominic Alessio, who writes, "Not only is this particular episode ideologically loaded, addressing directly the issue of race relations in America (namely the treatment of California's indigenous Chumash peoples), but 'Pangs' also appears a little ambiguous in its treatment of 'race'" (Alessio 2001, np). It is true that the Native Americans in the story are bad, but they are also vengeful ghosts who have good reason to be upset.

However, the point is not to discuss the racial story, which was likely well intended by series creator Joss Whedon and episode writer Jane Espenson, but to demonstrate how hard Willow has to work to make herself heard. She is the curator of public memory for the group, reminding them of facts that the newspapers often whitewash, and the exclusions in the

traditional history books they doubtless had at Sunnydale High School. If she does not remind them of these facts, the gang will simply slay the spirit, as they so frequently have slain vampires and demons (who are often symbolic representations of minority groups).

When Xander (Nicholas Brendon), who is working on a museum construction crew falls through into a long-forgotten mission, a Chumash Indian spirit (Tod Thawley) appears, bent on vengeance. Buffy tries to slay him, but first has to justify herself to Willow, who has armed herself with a number of huge books about the Chumash. While Willow's role in the group has been variously computer hacker, tutor and magical helper, among her greatest skills is a broad variety of knowledge ranging from math to history to chemistry and physics, and a fascination with finding out more. Jon Stratton writes that Willow "is on her way to being an intellectual" (Stratton 2005, 188). Steven Russell cites Foucault when he writes how witches use "'relentless erudition' to operate on 'a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times' . There is probably no more apt description of the nature of witchcraft studies" (Russell 2001 121). Willow applies the same diligence to witchcraft she has to other subjects.

Willow uses the knowledge she has acquired, about the Chumash having experienced "imprisonment, forced labor, herded like animals into a mission full of bad European diseases," and goes on to say, "And it gets better. The few Chumash who tried to rebel were hanged. And when a group was accused of stealing cattle, they were killed—Men, women, and children," ("Pangs") to explain to Buffy why she is "not on board" with Buffy's plan to slay the spirit. She must defend herself not only to Buffy, who feels guilty already, but fend off objections from Spike, the antagonistic (and British) vampire they are protecting. Ultimately, the spirits attack the gang, one of them turning into a very large growling bear in the process, and they have no choice

but to retaliate. Buffy figures out how to kill it, and all goes back to the way it was before (as normal as anything ever gets on the Hellmouth) and Willow, who tried as hard as anyone to fend off an attack, says, “I folded like Custer,” as she digs into turkey with the rest of the group. This takes away from her stand, but is necessary to allow the plot to move forward without significant harm to anyone in the main cast.⁴²

Girl Power wins over ethics in this case. Willow makes a statement, and certainly seems as if she is taking action, but does not really rock the boat. Nothing changes in society because Willow protests against Thanksgiving. Creator Joss Whedon disavows any political agenda when he says, “I never court controversy . . . I don’t really care about issues. . . . I cared about narrative and what I needed to do to Willow” (Pasley 2003, np). As the smart girl of the group, like Andrea before her, she arms herself with facts in order to sway public opinion, but her ability to influence others, as so often on *Buffy*, is minimized in favor of kicking some demon ass.

Girl Power feminism, and in particular its merchandising potential, was demonstrated to a lesser extent in other teen era shows of this middle period. During the *Buffy* era, Girl Power became even less about physical power, and more about consuming. Abigail Bray and Elizabeth Reid-Boyd write, “Girl Power of the 90s, like punk in the 70s, quickly becomes a brand, a logo, a marketable id. If we wanted to be pessimistic we could argue that the mass marketing of Girl Power was a typical assimilation—feminist rhetoric was diluted into a pop poster advertising all the nasty evils of the beauty myth which amounted to the same dull clichéd freedom for the gorgeous only” (Bray and Reid-Boyd 2006, np). Marketers easily marketed t-shirts with slogans like, “Girls Rule” that girls snapped up. Heather Havrilesky asks, “Why take on a political label

⁴² Interestingly, although Willow might be risking her friendships with Buffy and Xander by her insistence on fairness, there is no romantic intrigue for her this episode as her boyfriend Oz (Seth Green) has just left the show two episodes before, and it is two episodes until Tara (Amber Benson) who will become her girlfriend for the next two seasons, is introduced.

when you can wear a cool-looking T-shirt that says the same thing, but without any of the negative associations? Is she a feminist? Oh, no! She just loves those Powerpuff Girls!”

(Havrilesky 2002, np).⁴³ Girl Power waned toward the turn of the millennium, and in its wake came Third-wave feminism.⁴⁴ The show *Freaks and Geeks* introduced a character who represented both second and Third-wave feminism at the same time.

Lindsay Weir Doesn't Give a Damn 'Bout a Bad Reputation

Freaks and Geeks reflects back to second-wave feminism while still existing in the wake of Third-wave feminism during the prosperous Clinton era, and the rise of the “geek” during the dot.com boom. Like *My So-Called Life*, it did not last long; unlike it, *Freaks and Geeks* does not seem to have had much impact on girls or society. Perhaps this was because it was not on the teen-centric WB network, but rather on NBC. One critic wrote, “The teen years are portrayed on The WB not as they are (more realistic portrayals like ABC’s critically acclaimed and quickly canceled *My So-Called Life* and last season’s *Freaks and Geeks* proved that too much reality is

⁴³ Girls on other shows of this period, too, face times when they need to take action, but do not have supernatural powers so must also deal with challenges using only their brains and bodies. While these girls act as if they have achieved economic and social power in society, they are less likely to fight for a cause and win than their predecessors and are more likely to be eye candy when trying. *Felicity*, (1998-2002) as evinced above, works for reproductive rights while wearing super-cute sweaters, and gets a boyfriend from it. Smart girl Joey Potter (Katie Holmes) of *Dawson’s Creek* (1998-2003) protests against the firing of the principal while wearing an entire wardrobe from American Eagle Outfitters, and has all the boys fighting over her as she moves from tomboy to normative girl. This is important to point out because during this period, sponsorship becomes progressively more involved with content. Early *Buffy* episodes showed a “card” at the end, which told viewers how to acquire the music heard on the episode. Other WB shows followed suit. However *Dawson’s Creek* actually had a deal, first with retailer J. Crew, and then from 1999 on, American Eagle Outfitters, to supply clothes for the characters, for which the retailers paid. (Brooker 2001, 456). One episode is particularly egregious as it takes place entirely in a K-Mart and does a fine job of showing everything the store can provide. Most recently, in one of the final episodes of *Everwood*, Amy and Hannah have a lengthy discussion about the Mercury Milan Hannah’s mother has just purchased for her, during which Hannah extols the headlights and exclaims, “Wanna see the cup holders? They’re really fancy” (“Lost and Found”). Along with *Buffy* as an “ass-kicking” girl, the 1990’s brought Fox’s similarly themed *Dark Angel* (2000-2002), and ABC’s *Alias* (2001-2006), which begins as a show about a graduate student who moonlights as a spy (the school angle is quickly dropped) and who can punch and kick as well as *Buffy*, seemingly without any of her supernatural endowments. The cartoon *Powerpuff Girls* (1998-2005) also showed three girls who could save the world.

⁴⁴ Many people conflate Girl Power, Third-wave Feminism, and/or Post-feminism. There is little consensus on these terms, but I choose to use them as distinct movements.

too much to take on a weekly basis), but as we adults would like to remember them” (Rosenzweig 2000, np). Some felt the show was just too harsh, both in terms of how these characters were treated, and how they dealt with changing times. However, the way Lindsay is shown dealing with ethical dilemmas and taking action is refreshingly different from earlier smart girls.

While Lindsay is certainly an ethical character, her entire plotline is based on the fact that she has just lost her faith in God and other social institutions. An article in *Time* magazine says, “What Lindsay Weir has is a prodigious brain that she's slightly uncomfortable with, an olive-drab jacket weighing on her shoulders like chain mail and—something rare enough among prime-time adults, let alone teens—a genuine crisis of faith. Having witnessed, alone, the death of her grandmother—who told Lindsay, as she slipped away, that she saw ‘nothing’ beyond—Lindsay is questioning the justness of the world and her own place in it (*Time* 1999, np).

She is questioning her entire life, and her performance as a girl, which is why she chooses to turn her back on the Mathletes and her old friends and spend time with the counter-culture freaks. She does not spend a lot of time discussing what she should do the way the kids on WB shows do, but takes action based purely on emotion. Much of what she does is as much a surprise to her as it is to those around her, and not because it is the “right” thing to do. She is aware of the world of politics, and while she does not say she is a feminist, she nonetheless is, and does tell her parents she is “a Democrat,” something none of the other smart girls, who live in a world that is not quite real, would do.

Not that that makes her life easier. While Donna Pinciotti, of the similarly retro *That '70's Show*, discusses what will happen after the ERA passes in an early episode set in 1976, by the time *Freaks and Geeks* begins in 1980, Lindsay would already know it did not have much

chance. Although Lindsay never mentions feminism, the “bible” for the show (the back-story the writers created for her) says, “She has a home ec class that she has mixed feelings about. The feminist in her thinks it’s an antiquated class . . . and yet she really likes things like cooking and sewing. After all, she’s her mother’s daughter. And so she usually complains to any of the freaks and cool kids in class about how dumb home ec is and yet she excels in it”

(freaksandgeeks.com). Perhaps if this show had lasted, more girls would have become interested in the issues the second-wave feminists dealt with. A likely plot point might have had Lindsay attempting to take shop class instead of home economics, and she would have invoked feminism to do it. In many ways, she makes her choices based on what a girl in 1980 would do.

While Lindsay has a rough start with her new freak friends, particularly the only other girl in the group, Kim, and tends to hide her intelligence from them, by the end of the series they have developed a strong respect for her and her willingness to take a moral and ethical stand. She may no longer have to convince her friends of her worth, but must prove herself to those in actual political power. In “The Little Things” Lindsay has a chance to ask a question when then Vice President George H.W. Bush comes to town. At first she demurs because she is a Democrat, but her often-overzealous hippie guidance counselor Mr. Rosso (Dave “Gruber” Allen) convinces her by saying, “Come on, Lindsay, I was so excited for you to do it! You’re a special person and it’s your destiny—if you like it or not—to be interacting with world leaders.” She and Kim discuss controversial questions she might ask, considering the Iran hostage crisis and “trickle- down economics.”

The audience never finds out what question she ultimately submitted, but when she runs into the guidance counselor again, he angrily says, “Bush’s people rejected your question, so they’ve written one for you,” handing her a slip of paper, that says, “What is your favorite place

to eat in the state of Michigan?” which infuriates her. Her parents do not share her outrage, and in fact, seem to miss her moral point entirely. At dinner that night, Lindsay’s father, who owns a sporting goods store that is being threatened by the “big mega-stores,” wants her to kowtow to corporate interests, suggesting, “When you ask your question, you can mention my store.” Lindsay does not like this much. When the Secret Service will not let Mr. Rosso attend the meeting because of his past “radical” activities, she becomes even more driven to take a stand and when it is her turn, asks. “Why did your staff reject my question? Are you afraid of an open discourse with the students?”

The show ends with her father looking shocked, her freak friends cracking up, and the guidance counselor looking proud, calling her “One of McKinley’s finest.” For the audience, however, especially an audience who has seen the smart girl simper and back down so many times, it is a terrific televisual moment that makes the audience think, even if just for a moment, that a smart girl can take a stand and still win. (Of course, this is the last scene of the episode, and the second to last episode of the show, so we don’t see any negative fallout that doubtless occurs among Lindsay and her parents or the school administration.)

Despite the retro theme, Lindsay and Kim do reflect Third-wave feminism in many ways. As Amanda Lotz writes: “Conversations about both Third-wave feminism and Post-feminism remain difficult due to the lack of shared understanding of what the terms delineate, so that the terms are largely useless unless the user first states his or her definition” (Lotz 2001, 106). In the context of this dissertation, Third-wave feminism assumes that any woman can do anything, and any choice is valid. Unlike the rigidity many believe second-wave feminism prescribed, Third-wave feminism gives a “you can do whatever you want” message that accounts for women who want to get married and stay home to raise children, as well as those who want to make it big in

the workplace and those who wish to try to do both, as well as variations in ethnicity, race, sexuality, and disability. Knitting is an acceptable behavior for a third-wave feminist, but so is tarding oneself up like Britney Spears, or kickboxing and using one's muscles, or deploying one's intellectual talents.

Many third-wave feminists felt that second-wave feminism was "victim feminism." As Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards describe it, "It is a progression of feminism that younger 'third-wave' women (and men) are embracing girliness as well as power" (Baumgardner and Richards 2004, 59). They go on to say that for girls growing up in earlier times, "in order to 'be a 'good girl' you had to master 'boy things.' That girls should do this while rejecting femininity. *Go to work, play sports, be tough, but don't do it while wearing nail polish, pink uniforms, or crying*" (Baumgardner and Richards 2004, 59). Third-wave feminism however, says it is fine to be 'girly' while working for political action, though one does not have to if she does not want to.

The fact that neither Lindsay nor Kim is concerned in the slightest about appearing feminine reflects that model. Just as Lindsay dons a green army jacket that would normally be marked as masculine, she also does not give up math because it is something associated with maleness (the entire team of Mathletes, in fact, is female) and has no fears of spending time with a group consisting primarily of boys. Kim, too, is attractive, but does not care about seeming feminine, frequently threatens to beat people up, and wears mostly jeans and a ski jacket. The freak boys do not seem put off by this androgyny, and in fact are proud of their girlfriends' abilities. Nick says to Daniel, "Hey, man, I heard Kim got an A on her world civ test. That's great. Oh, no, that's right, that was MY girlfriend . . . You know what though? Lindsay got

detention for flipping off her gym teacher. Oh no, that's right, that was YOUR girlfriend. Oh ho ho" ("Girlfriends and Boyfriends").

In the eyes of these freak boys, being good at school and being a rebel are not mutually exclusive, nor is being either of these and still attractive. Neither boy pushes Lindsay (or Kim) toward normalization, or to perform like a real girl, and both girls are both considered sexy and attractive. As the show was somewhat abruptly canceled (although unlike *MSCL* the writers had the opportunity to write a real finale in which Lindsay and Kim take off to travel with the Grateful Dead for a summer), it is impossible to know how the show would have dealt with the politics of the 1980s while existing after the millennium. Murray Forman, who writes about teen shows that premiered right after the shootings at Columbine High School, notes:

The explicit violence and rage displayed at Columbine High School have been excised in *Freaks and Geeks*, *Popular*, and *Roswell*, displaced in favor of the exhibition of social and psychological forces that engender contemporary eruptions among disenfranchised teens. . . . The failure among television producers and programmers to more directly engage with the themes and lessons of Columbine can be regarded as a missed opportunity, (Forman 1999, 80).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ While it is impossible to know how *Freaks and Geeks* would have dealt with politics or feminism if it had lasted, or if there would have been network pressure to become more conservative, the case of another show that also began in 1999 might give us an indication. While as a half-hour show it is considered much more comedic, Fox's *That '70s Show*, also had an episode in which a character (in this case, Red, one of the parents) had to ask the president a question and was given a "softball" substitution. The series, which began with Donna extolling feminism and the ERA, but seemed to back off any actual political issues early on. While early shows dealt with real issues from the late 1970s, such as Red being laid-off from his job, and the accompanying recession, the show devolved into broad comedy with only the marijuana smoke and the clothes left to remind the audience that it was set in the 1970s and not in the present day. While Kitty Forman is a nurse, she is clearly a mother and wife above all, and cooks nearly every meal for the family. Although the show briefly explores feminism through Donna's flaky mother Midge, characters do not consider issues such as economic equality for women, and Donna gives up college to stay home with Eric and works as a disc jockey under the name "Hot Donna." In the final episodes, she finally realizes that college is more important to her than dating, and she does plan to go.

Considering the renewed Puritanism that took place on television after Janet Jackson bared her breast at the Superbowl in 2004, if *Freaks and Geeks* had lasted as long as many teen shows, the show may not have been able to ask important questions either. *Gilmore Girls*, for example, never even seems to try, preferring to exist in a post-feminist, nearly apolitical wonderland.

Rory Gilmore Thinks to Herself, What a Wonderful World

Gilmore Girls is a solidly post-feminist show that, although including characters who are quite liberal, reflects the moral climate of the country. This is, no doubt partially as a reaction to the resumption of a conservative regime when George W. Bush became President in 2001. While Third-wave feminism acknowledges that there are still strides to be made, Post-feminism is, as Angela McRobbie writes, “the notional consent, frequently invoked across popular culture—that gender equity was a not unreasonable claim, now happily achieved” (McRobbie 2004, 4). She goes on to describe “the unfolding of television and other popular narratives, where the field of new gender norms emerges in which female freedom and ambition appear to be taken for granted, unreliant on past struggle . . . certainly not requiring any new fresh political understanding, but instead merely a state into which young women appear to have been thrown, or in which they find themselves, giving rise to ambivalence and misgiving (McRobbie 2004, 4). The women of *Gilmore Girls* never mention feminism, and never admit that there might be any reason that their gender could keep them from doing anything they desire, if they work hard enough.

Rory’s mother Lorelai supported herself as a young single mother by working in the traditionally female field of housecleaning, but moved up to managing the inn she once cleaned, and now owns an inn of her own. Any financial issues she encountered had nothing to do her

status as a woman. That rock and roll drummer Lane is a girl is not an issue for her band mates, nor is Paris's desire to be a doctor and researcher, or Rory's to be a broadcast journalist. If they fail (and they do not) it is because of some other reason than gender. It is simply never mentioned, nor, for the most part, is any spirit of changing or improving more than the limited sphere in which they move. When one of them makes a choice, it is nearly always about how it will affect her personally and not how it will affect society at large.

The characters on *Gilmore Girls* live simultaneously more in the world of real life, and less in it than the characters on the other shows. They alone refer to the political regime of the time, as when Lorelai's boyfriend tells her to wear something "completely evil" on a date and she suggests "horns, tail, and my Wolfowitz t-shirt?" ("Ted Koppel's Big Night Out"), or when she exclaims in an uncomfortable situation that she hates President Bush, and that, "He's stupid and his face is too tiny for his head and I just want to toss him out" ("Christopher Returns"). Yet they live in a world of what executives of The WB network describe as "wish fulfillment" (Richmond 2005, np) and, as such, exist in a utopia in which, although there may be tension within the town meetings, led by the laughable Taylor Doose (Michael Winters), there really are no true political impediments to the Girls living life just as they choose. There is need for neither feminism nor activism in Stars Hollow, where making a point just causes trouble, and the fact that nearly everything is played for laughs makes it impossible to consider this show in light of any true political consciousness, though it is, admittedly, often more fun to watch, and decidedly less didactic than some of the other shows when they deal with the public sphere.

Rory finds this out when she sees some little boys ogling the cover of a movie (it looks like *Showgirls*), at the local video store and suggests, seemingly reasonably, that some movies should be kept on a higher shelf, which causes her to be elected "Citizen of the Month" and Taylor and

company to place nearly every video in the shop behind a velvet curtain. When her friend Jess (Milo Ventimiglia) finds it just more of the absurdly funny town doings, she replies, “No, being the poster girl for censorship is not a little funny. The only videos not behind that curtain are *Bambi* and *Dumbo*. I mean, they actually had a meeting earlier about whether or not *Babe* should be behind the curtain so as not to offend people who keep kosher” (“Richard in Stars Hollow”). While Rory continues to attend the meetings the town frequently has, primarily to eat popcorn and heckle Taylor with her mother, she certainly does not make the mistake of speaking out again. What she does learn is that everything she does will be lauded (she is the sweetheart of the whole town, winning such honors as “Ice Cream Queen” without even wanting them), and nothing ever holds her back at home. The outside world has been more difficult, but Rory still lands on her feet.

Paris, as the more assertively intellectual of the two private school girls on *Gilmore Girls*, is more likely than Rory to engage with the works of government. When Paris and Rory, who have been elected president and vice president of their student government (through which they deal with such controversial issues as skirt hemlines and senior gifts), spend the summer in Washington, Paris takes her chance to speak with Senator Barbara Boxer (appearing as herself) saying, “As one of our foremost Democratic leaders, I ask you—do you really think it looks good to have the American Secretary of the Treasury traveling around with Bono? I mean, I know apparently he’s a saint, he’s going to save the world, yada, yada, yada, but my God! . . . We have an image to maintain, don’t we? I mean, aren’t we at least trying to pretend we’re the superpower in this world? (“Those Lazy-Hazy-Crazy Days”). Perceptive, perhaps, but primarily meant to add levity.

Rory, despite work on both her high school and the Yale paper, and stated goal to “be Christiane Amanpour,” demonstrates relatively little awareness about the larger world, caring much more about the goings on in her small town. Unlike the tractable, malleable Rory, Paris is constantly working towards her goals. In the second season episode, “Hammers and Veils,” Rory volunteers for “Rebuilding Together,” a Habitat for Humanity-like group. Paris tells her about the huge amount of volunteer work she has done because it looks good for college applications. When Rory, who has never even considered such a thing, asks her when she has time for herself Paris replies, in an echo of Andrea Zuckerman, “I’ll have a life after I graduate from Harvard” (“Hammers and Veils”). In neither case do these girls show much of an awareness of the actual people who might be living in the house or seem to feel any responsibility towards the disadvantaged. It is all played to show the differences between the tractable Rory and the aggressive Paris, and for some laughs.

Once at Yale, the girls (who have become roommates and even friends of a sort over the years) plan to spend their first spring break showing their support for Burmese prisoners, and Rory even says, “Look at all these hypocrites passing by. Everyone claims to be so politically aware, but not one person can stop by for two seconds to sign a stupid petition” (“Girls in Bikinis, Boys Doin’ the Twist”), while Paris insists, “A great injustice is being perpetrated on our watch, and we’ve got to do something to stop it.” However, the apathy of their peers, the destruction of their prop bowl of rice, and freezing rain send them running in the direction of Florida, where their minds are on having fun. Despite the clear political views of its creators, this show does not show girls how to be activists or moral compasses for their communities or their friends, and, in fact, makes it clear that they risk ending up looking silly if they even try.

This final period of the teen-show era demonstrates that while girls have come an

incredibly long way on television, and have gotten a lot of freedom, they are still primarily there to have romances and to be pretty. These shows, far from encouraging or discouraging girls to be politically active, are simply ignoring that anything is wrong in the world at all. Just as Post-feminism declares that the Women's Movement is over because women have achieved equality, these shows pretend that issues are really not anything girls should be worrying their pretty little heads about.

Conclusion

When looked at one way, when it comes to politics and feminism, things have gotten much easier for smart television girls. Rory has much more power to do whatever she wants than any of the other girls, never had to change her looks in order to be noticed by boys, did not demonstrate that girls should be having sex in high school, and does not have to fight to make herself heard the way earlier girls did. *Veronica Mars*, too, shows a very smart, independent girl at the center of a show. Veronica is very active—in fact, she is a private detective who is constantly helping her classmates and others in the community. She is a top student (she misses being valedictorian only because a case supersedes a final exam) and is perhaps the most capable person on television. In fact, fans took up the slogan “Veronica Mars is Smarter than Me” and used it for a fan campaign to ensure the show went to The CW network (Television without Pity).⁴⁶ Aside from Rory and Veronica, however, there is a distinct sense that girls should not be too powerful, and in fact should not be stars of television shows at all. Since 2000, other than the two season *Joan of Arcadia* (2003-2005), on CBS, the three season *Veronica Mars*, which started on the little-watched UPN network (2004-present), and the one season *Beautiful People*,

⁴⁶ Veronica writes this statement in the episode “Clash of the Tritons” and it is read by the corrupt, and often stupid, Sheriff Lamb.

on cable channel ABC Family (2005-present), no new show has starred a teen girl in a primary role.⁴⁷

As the Bush years have worn on, much of network television has been defanged. Television explored many progressive ideas 1990s. For example, Ellen Degeneres came out as lesbian on her sitcom *Ellen* in the 1995/1996 television season, only to have the show canceled after having storylines that dealt frankly with gay issues and gay rights. *Will and Grace*, which began in 1998 and continued until 2006, gave a much more homogenized view of gay people, and main character Will was able to “pass” for straight, and hardly ever had a serious relationship or kissed on screen, while his friend Jack was stereotypically, and often insultingly gay. At the same time, the cable reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* featured gay men as “helpers” to straight men.⁴⁸ Therefore, there was more presence, but far less controversy than there had been in prior eras.

In this environment, depictions of teen girls and young women, which had become progressively emancipating since the earliest girls on *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), and particularly made impact during the 1990s, when the majority of the important teen shows aired, , became much less of a presence after the millennium. Of the shows that starred teens during the teen-show era, all of the programs have either been canceled, or the girls have grown up to become college students or older, with the only teenagers as members of large ensembles (the

⁴⁷ Joan Girardi of *Joan of Arcadia*, meets God in various guises, and goes on various missions that teach her lessons. She is not a smart girl according to the definition I am using. Although she clearly could do well when she tried, she is the consummate underachiever, eschewing schoolwork, and acting silly when she could have been brainier. Even the actress who played her, Amber Tamblyn, complained about this, saying, “Joan is digressing. Joan is backtracking. Joan is more confused She learns something in [one] episode, but then she seems to redo [her mistakes] in another, so she never seems to learn anything” (Murphy 2005, 8). The network canceled the show after two seasons. The Friday night time slot, when many young people go out, and the network’s insistence on having teen star Hilary Duff and her sister Haley guest star did not help its case. NBC replaced it with a show with a similar concept, *The Ghost Whisperer* starring former *Party of Five* co-star Jennifer Love Hewitt, (who is primarily known for her large breasts.)

⁴⁸ Willow comes out as lesbian on *Buffy* in 2002. See Chapter 5 for more.

short-lived *Invasion* (2005) and *The Nine* (2006), for example, each had one teen girl, as does *Heroes* (2006-present), which features an indestructible cheerleader), or supporting characters to parents (as on *Desperate Housewives* (2004-present), where the teens are rarely seen). In the near future, it seems, the teen girl's revolution will not be televised.

The next chapter considers how the smart girl's sexual awakening is featured on these shows. The smart girl starts out with no sexual or romantic background, which allows the show to show every step of her journey from virgin to sexually active. There are a number of minefields along the way. Along with a makeover, and a muted social conscience, smart girls on teen shows learn how to be sexy, without going too far. They are normalized in the process.

CHAPTER 5. NEVER BEEN KISSED: SEX AND THE SMART GIRL

Introduction

The WB drama *Everwood* (2002-2006) introduced a new smart girl in 2004. Hannah Rodgers is a shy girl who likes to write. Although the show's resident popular girl, Amy Abbot, at first worries that Hannah is interested in her own boyfriend, the piano prodigy Ephram, it develops that Hannah is more interested in Amy's brother, Bright, a jovial "dumb jock" type who is partial to one-night-stands. When they, inevitably, do start to date, Bright is surprised to learn from Hannah that she does not intend to have sex until she is married because of her religious values. He plans to break up with her, but changes his mind because he likes her too much. During a make-out session, however, he asks her to "define sex." Her reply: "Anything with the word sex in it is probably out," to which Bright responds, "What about the word 'job'?" ("Getting to Know You").

Yet a few episodes after this incident, in the last broadcast of 2005, after Bright extols her beauty, Hannah decides that they will shower together naked. The question of whether they actually had sexual intercourse is left in a fadeout while the show goes on a lengthy hiatus of several months. After the hiatus, Hannah's resolve to abstain is firm and it is clear to Bright she is still not ready for sex. Bright cannot handle abstinence, and cheats on her. They break up, bringing her more emotional angst.

This storyline raises several questions about teen shows' approach to the sex life of smart girls. Why would the show's producers determine that showering naked is distinct enough from sex for this to be a justifiable decision in light of Hannah's sensibility, faith, and moral code? Why does the show punish Hannah for not being ready to have further sexual experience?

Although showing more nuance than most of these shows, which imply no middle ground between kissing and sex, this is a traditional example of the teen show's ambivalence toward the smart girl character and her sex life, and towards virginity for all girls. The sexy choice will always win over the choice for a girl to wait, and for her boyfriend to wait with her. This gives girl viewers the message that sex is natural for teen girls, and that it is the only way to have a full and exciting life. Teen girls should appear sexual and be ready to engage in sexual activity early, or at least to seem so as part of their makeovers. This "rule" must, therefore, apply to the made-over smart girl. Timothy Shary writes of similar teen films when he says, "Given the sexualized imaging of female characters in Hollywood history, the neutered role of nerd does not comply with the traditional version of screen "girls" (Shary 2002, 33).

As has been shown in earlier chapters, in teen television shows the smart girl characters have very romantic experiences, and the smart "ugly" duckling very often "gets" the cool, gorgeous guy, which allows her to blossom into a beautiful swan. The message is clearly that smart girls can have love, too, and that they can have love with the coolest boy in school—and change him at the same time. He may be elusive, he may be tough, he may be James Dean reincarnated, yet he ends up chasing the made-over smart girl, often with an extremely romantic statement that sets the new couple—brainy girl and bad boy—up as eternal soul mates.

Looked at one way, this is a great message for girls. It says a smart, shy girl who likes books, or writing, or science, or math can have love, romance, and sex just like sexier and more popular girls. She may even deserve it more than they do. For the wallflower, this is an emancipatory message that flies in the face of the experience of many real schoolgirls, of being ignored in favor of the more flamboyantly attractive or sexy girls (except, perhaps, by nerdy boys). It is only when we look deeper that we see that the message is also, change to perform like

the normative girl by appearing to be sexually available, and you will have love, sex, and your life will change completely.

Hannah is the typical television smart girl. Because she is academically oriented, by definition she has little prior experience with romance or sex. Both her interest in writing and her inexperience with boys make her non-normative. She is an “other,” because girls on television are assumed to be outwardly sexual but privately prudish, unless marked otherwise. Both smart girls and what I will call “sexpots” work against the norm by demonstrating too little or too much interest in sex for its own sake.⁴⁹ Yet most smart girls change their aura of sexual desirability, just as they earlier changed their clothes or hair. As Shary writes, “Romantic and sexual competence may have little relation to social stature in reality, but in youth films the characters’ level of acceptance is integrally linked to their attractiveness, which is often (mis) taken as an index of sexual and amorous ‘skills’” (Shary 2002, 213). While teen television is more subtle, and the boys are unlikely to discuss those “skills” explicitly, nonetheless the more traditionally attractive characters are marked as more sexually experienced when the shows begin, whether they actually are, or not.

As shown in the preceding chapter, the smart girl is always made over and ends up performing as a more normative girl. As will be shown, the televisual smart girl’s sexual interest is as much a put-on as the rest of her gender performance. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler writes, “The very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes. . . . To be a heterosexually desirable object” (Butler 1999, 185). In order to be desirable within the discourse of a high school show, the smart girl must be girly. She becomes convinced that being

⁴⁹ While a sexually active girl is most often accused by boys, and often other girls as a “slut,” and reclaiming the word is part of the third-wave feminist objective, it is an offensive word and I choose not to use it unless in appropriate context, and hence have chosen “sexpot” to substitute for it.

desired is the most important thing because it defines her as a girl, rather than because sex might be pleasurable. She convinces herself that she is interested in sex, although evidence, including her fear, her religious preference, and her age, suggests that she is not ready. The audience is only rarely privy to any surge of sexual desire she might have. For the most part, she finds a love object, and the text suggests she is intrigued by romance, but she rarely verbally expresses an actual interest in sex.

The smart girl, unlike her friends, has no sexual history at all prior to the first episode, not even kissing. She is *tabula rasa*, ready for her life to start when a boy begins to pay attention to her. If the smart girl is Cinderella when it comes to her appearance, which must change for her to become visible and integral to the story, when it comes to sex, the smart girl begins life as Sleeping Beauty, still waiting for her prince to awaken her and her life to start. Fairy tales like “Sleeping Beauty,” as Rowe says, “implicitly yoke sexual awakening and surrender to the prince with social elevation and materialistic gain” (Rowe 1979, 246). Sex, or at least the possibility of it, which only comes about once an eligible boy becomes interested, is part of the smart girl’s transformation into popular and normalized.

Many of these shows perpetuate the myth that only boys really want sex, and that girls (particularly those still in high school), or at least those who are good, only have sex to make their boyfriends happy. Only a “slut,” vixen, or bitch actively wants sex, pursues sex, or uses sex to become more popular. Yet, despite her misgivings, the newly normative smart girl succumbs, and the shows present this as a wonderful experience that was “worth the wait.” The smart girl rarely has sex as early as her friends, but all teen girls characters in the main credits either have

sex or consider it strongly early in the show's tenure and, if the show stays on long enough, all girl characters have sex.⁵⁰

This chapter seeks to consider several questions about girls in the teen-show era, including, "How is the smart girl portrayed as non-normative in relation to the other girls on the show in terms of sexuality?" "In what ways is sex presented and what kind of educational component is there?" "What are the various ways girls are punished for their sexuality?" It will first consider how girls are in a double bind in real life and on television, as they are extolled to seem sexy, but not too sexy. The next section will look at how *90210* sets up the paradigm that puts all the girls in opposition to each other in terms of their sexuality. It will then consider the confusing way these shows talk about sex, by showing how the characters on *MSCL* have sexual discussions, without actually making anything explicit. Next, it will consider how sexier characters than the smart girl are miraculously revirginized in order to make them closer to normative and how the smart girl character is differently sexualized as on *Buffy*. Next it considers how, as on *Freaks and Geeks*, smart girls frequently must make the first move, and how this others them from the mainstream. The next section will consider how *Gilmore Girls* uses its post-feminist philosophy to give warnings about sex, while simultaneously treating it as part of a normal teen's life. Finally, the chapter concludes with discussion of studies of sex on television and more recent developments in newer shows.

Best Slut Potential

Real-life girls walk a fine line between being too prudish and too promiscuous. Peggy Orenstein, who met with real girls for her book *Schoolgirls*, writes that the typical story of sex for girls is "the story of male aggression and female defense; it is the story of innuendo serving

⁵⁰ Lane Kim from *Gilmore Girls* did wait, but opted for early marriage. As a girl of color, her role is to be domesticated or disappear. For more about Lane, and other girls of color on teen shows, see Chapter 6.

as consent of fixation, much too young, on intercourse as the fulcrum of sex; and it is a story, most of all of shame” (Orenstein 1994, 55). Girls are intrigued by sex, but are afraid if they have it, they will acquire the label of “slut.” At the same time, they often receive little information, or misleading information, about what sex involves, what it feels like, and what the consequences are.

Early in the teen-show era, episodes sometimes conveyed useful information through storylines and discussion (in the latter years of *Life Goes On*, and on *90210* and *MSCL*), yet, for the most part, the amount of useful information has decreased significantly since then.⁵¹ The fact that these shows keep sex so oblique is likely due in part to the increased prudishness of our institutions during the George W. Bush era, and the protests against sex education at school, with the accompanying call and federal funding for “abstinence only” education that began in 1999.⁵² The mass media increasingly shows girls that performing as sexy, which means both looking alluring and actually having sex, is desirable, and third-wave and Post-feminism have made sex just one part of expressing girliness. At the same time there are fewer sanctioned ways for girls to get solid information about the real consequences of sexual activity.⁵³

Michelle Fine, who twenty years ago wrote about teens and sex education in “Sexuality, Schooling, and the Missing Discourse of Desire,” warning against abstinence- only programs, has recently updated her work in “Sexuality Education and Desire: Still Missing After All these Years.” She writes that in 1988, she “worried about the splitting of sexual danger from pleasure, the educational fetish with the former and silencing of the latter. Today, we have a different kind

⁵¹ See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of *Life Goes On*.

⁵² *The Washington Post* reports, “Congress first allocated money for abstinence-only programs in 1999, setting aside \$80 million in grants, which go to a variety of religious, civic and medical organizations. To be eligible, groups must limit discussion of contraception to failure rates” (Connolly 2004, A01).

⁵³ See Chapter 4 for a more detailed description of how the various phases of feminism functioned in these shows.

of problem. Adolescent desire continues to be severely under-theorized, -taught and -researched even as it is over-scrutinized, -performed and commodified” (Fine 2006, 4).

At the same time that young women are packaging themselves for the male gaze in ways that are more sophisticated and at younger ages than in the past, schools are ensuring that abstinence is the only option they can discuss with their teachers. Fine writes, “Neither pleasure nor danger are getting a fair share of educational resources. In the discourse of abstinence-only-until-marriage, the presumed risk of non-marital sex, the honor of virginity, and the failure of condoms deflect the more complex discussions of how gender roles and expectations influence both young people’s behaviors and the policies that are positioned to ‘protect’ them from themselves” (Fine 2006, 4). Girls are more available for men’s pleasure than they have been in the past, and yet still ignorant, particularly about how the culture’s entrenched roles and expectations influence their lives.

Teen shows throw this deeply into relief. These shows decidedly do not promote abstinence, but instead advance the idea of the “soul mate” and sanction sex with soul mates. The shows make it seem that relationships the characters begin in high school will last forever, so that when the couple has sex it is an expression of true love. The characters, however, nearly never discuss the mechanics or the potential consequences of sex.⁵⁴ The sexiest shows are the most popular shows among young people because they show sex through a romantic lens, designed to intrigue viewers, but keeping many of the more complicated and messy aspects invisible. The (ever waning) role of “Standards and Practices” departments and the networks’

⁵⁴ The earlier shows sometimes had condoms as plot points. Andrea Zuckerman of *90210* lobbies to get them into the schools, and Angela Chase of *MSCL* discusses them briefly with her friend Sharon, but these days the most that might happen is a condom appears in the background. Paris mentions “being safe” with Rory but not what that means. The pill, diaphragms, and other forms of birth control have not been discussed since Brenda on *90210* asked her mother to take her to the gynecologist. Comedies have been much franker, with Becky asking her mother to help her get the pill on a fourth season episode of *Roseanne*, (“A Bitter Pill to Swallow” 1991), and Donna in a first season episode of *That ‘70’s Show* (“The Pill” 1999) taking it.

fears of boycotts by parent and religious groups, assure that viewers learn just enough about sex on these shows to appear educational but not so much that the networks can be accused of inculcating in young people a wish to actually engage. The shows dole out enough bad consequences to make viewers apprehensive, but not so many as to make the show appear didactic and hence no longer enjoyable.⁵⁵

Most of the time teen shows present sex as a distinct milestone during a romance, with no intermediate steps, and no mess or anxiety. There is a first kiss, and an occasional fully-clothed make out session, but then the relationship becomes routine until the boy can no longer resist expressing his sexual interest or “making a move,” and the girl has to put on the brakes. For the most part, the raging hormones that make it hard for teens to concentrate are simply not a part of these shows, at least for girls. As Simon Philo reports of one study, the prevailing sense of teen sex on television is “ambiguity. Television . . . seemed ‘scared to death of ambivalence’ preferring to wherever possible to ‘answer all the questions.’” Just as Angela describes her first days with Jordan as, “Kissing. And not kissing” (“Self-Esteem”), on most teen television there is only sex, and not sex. Before Hannah defines sex as “anything with the word sex in it,” no teen girl character makes more than the most oblique reference to oral sex, mutual masturbation, or other forms of foreplay.

⁵⁵ Once again, comedies are not quite as prudish as dramas and dramedies. While it is not entirely surprising that on the Clinton-era situation comedy *Roseanne*, the pre-teen DJ begins to lock himself in the bathroom, and the entire family realizes that he is, as smart girl sister Darlene says, “playing with his instrument in band” (“Homeward Bound” 1993), it is very unusual when something similar happens during the George W. Bush era despite the fact that many “adult” shows have become much franker. *That ‘70s Show* (1998-2006) shows the sexual progress of Eric and Donna’s relationship, starting with his inability to unhook her bra. Eric and Donna each describes the first time to a same-gender friend in a frank manner, and the show does consider some of the awkwardness. For instance, in a 2001 episode entitled “Who Wants It More?” Donna appears to win the couple’s contest to see who can “hold out” the longest. At the end, she reveals that she is having as much trouble abstaining as Eric. There are also frequent mentions of foreign exchange student Fez hiding in closets to watch girls undress or couples have sex, presumably while masturbating. However, the hour-long shows do not deal with such topics.

This, reportedly, runs counter to the trends that are occurring in real-life American schools. *The New York Times* reported in 2000 that Dr. Cynthia Pegler, a specialist in adolescent medicine, had many thirteen-year-old patients who were not yet having intercourse, but who were engaging in oral sex. She says: “They tell me oral sex is no big deal . . . They don’t see it as sex, but as safe and fun and a prelude to intercourse, where before, it used to be the other way around” (Jarrell 2000, np). A recent study from the National Center for Health Statistics reported, “The proportion of teenagers who have given or received oral sex was slightly higher than the proportion who have had intercourse, the survey found, with 55 percent of the boys and 54 percent of the girls having given or received oral sex, while 49 percent of the boys and 53 percent of the girls have had intercourse” (Lewin 2005, np). The teen shows, however, have not acknowledged such a trend. As these programs, especially the more recent ones, almost never mention AIDS and venereal disease, and never show girls getting the disease (only males), there is no reason to believe that girl viewers will learn anything on the shows to dissuade them from these ideas, despite the occasional reference to “safe sex.”⁵⁶

The conservatism of these shows means that there is generally even less quasi-nudity than on network shows aimed at adults, and, like movies during the age of the Hayes Production Code, the sex act is presented as two fully-clothed actors kissing heavily while music swells, which leads into a commercial break. Once the commercial has ended, we see the couple, still mostly dressed, wrapped in each other’s arms, beaming. No one ever asks the common movie

⁵⁶ The final season and a half of *Life Goes on* (1992-1993) is devoted to Becca and her boyfriend Jesse (Chad Lowe), who got AIDS from a heterosexual sexual encounter and gets sicker in the episodes that conclude the series. In the finale we find out he has died. It is a very nuanced and sensitive treatment of the disease. *90210’s* was less subtle. In the seventh season (1996-1997), Kelly has a friend who dies from AIDS, but his character, Jimmy Gold, played by Michael Stoyanov, is only a guest-star on three episodes, and he is gay. Although a particularly didactic episode makes the point that heterosexual characters could get the disease as well, it seemed as if this man was dying because of his lifestyle. For an analysis of this character see: Hart, Kylo-Patrick R. “Retrograde Representation: The Lone Gay White Male Dying of AIDS on *Beverly Hills, 90210*,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies*, Vol. 7, 1999.

and TV question, “Was it good for you?” and we are not privy to whether either partner has climaxed. The girl has had sex with the boy she loves, and is clearly completely satisfied, or if she is not, it is for emotional reasons. Questions of pain or mess are ignored. While college student Felicity Porter of The WB’s *Felicity* buys a book entitled *The Big “O”* (without ever stating what that stands for), even the most experienced high school girls on these shows never mention that part of the sexual experience. Teen shows leave the mystery of why sex is pleasurable for the viewer to solve according to her own level of experience and knowledge.

What the teen shows do show is the transition from girl to woman that seems to happen once a girl has sex for the first time. She moves from one place within the group to another. At the same time, the more experienced girls either disappear, or their sexual knowingness is discovered to be an act. Girls at both ends of the spectrum are normalized in the service of group cohesion. The first teen show this happens on is, of course, *90210*. The next section will discuss the way the show divided girls based on their sexual experience and willingness.

Andrea: It’s No Fun Pining over Someone Who’s Not Interested

Beverly Hills, 90210 is an excellent baseline example because it sets out the archetypes subsequent teen dramas will emulate. As the smart girl, Andrea not only has no boyfriends when the show begins, she has no friends at all, declaring that she does not have time for parties because she is more concerned about “getting into the Ivy League” (“Pilot”). Andrea is placed in contrast to Kelly, the sexpot, who, the show makes it clear from the start, has been around, and Brenda as the “central normative girl” who manages to be sexy without being too sexy. This show also included Donna, the naïve girl with the religious background, an archetype only a few

other shows will include.⁵⁷ While Brenda is the first to have sex on the show, the show never portrays her as a sexpot, because her first time is with her soul mate. Andrea and Donna's status as virgins, however, is never far from central to their plots. In Donna's case, her virginity is due to her religious upbringing, not lack of opportunity, as she, too, gets a serious boyfriend and soul mate in regular character David, who suggests sex early on. Andrea's virginity, however, is predicated on the fact that Brandon, who she loves, does not love her back. As she puts it, "It's no fun pining over someone who's not interested" ("The Back Story"). Yet she continues to pine after him for quite some time, while dating other boys.

On the teen shows, the sexpot is closer to the normative girl than the smart girl, because she is more popular with boys and more conventionally attractive. While Orenstein found that in real life there "is only one label worse than "schoolgirl" . . . and that's her inverse, the fallen girl, or in student parlance, the slut. A "slut" is not merely a girl who "does it," but any girl who—through her clothes, her makeup, her hairstyle, or her speech—seems as if she *might* (51). On teen television, however, particularly on *90210*, this is hardly true. Although Kelly is also singled out for her bad reputation, at least she is having fun, and the boys are coming to her. Yet, she is still stigmatized for actually wanting to have sex.

Deborah L. Tolman explains our society's views of teen sexuality when she writes that, as "a society, we parcel sexuality out, assuming that normal boys but not girls have "raging hormones"—and that normal girls but not boys long for emotional connection and relationships" (Tolman 2002, 5). She goes on to write, "Constructions of girls' sexuality leave out their sexual

⁵⁷ Although many characters are Jewish, and we see the mother characters on *MSCL* involved in church-related activities and the Chase family attending a Christmas service (but only because Rickie has hidden in a church basement), there is no sense that any of these characters believe in God or make decisions based on religion. Catholic Donna, however, makes her decision not to have sex based on religion, as does the Christian Hannah of *Everwood* (her denomination is never defined), and Lane of *Gilmore Girls*, whose mother is Seventh Day Adventist. Hannah does double-duty as her show's smart girl, while Lane is also smart, though not in the traditional way, and this is a nod to her Asian-ness.

subjectivity. By sexual subjectivity I mean a person's experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being" (Tolman 2005, 5). Girl television characters who do actively appear to want sex are most often the very knowing sexpot types, like Kelly, who often act as godmothers to the smart girls, who clearly need help because, despite their book smarts, smart girls like Andrea do not know anything boys.

Kelly has a reputation for promiscuity that is among her defining characteristics from the first episode, along with a snotty meanness she will shed later in the series. As Michelle Byers puts it, "Boys and girls are created differently in the world of *90210*. The boys make mistakes as they grow up, but generally they do the right thing in the end. The girls are more complicated. They are more obviously rebellious against the world they live in; they lie, cheat, steal and use sex to get what they want" (Byers 2005, 80). The Kelly the audience meets in the first episode is capable of all of these things. These girls are only slightly more normative than the smart girl, because they have betrayed their sex by not playing "hard to get." They are gender transgressors, and the normative girls and boys of the school look down on them. It is just as bad to want sex, and to have it with a boy who is not that special soul mate as it is to be prude.

The normative girl on teen dramas is coy. Brenda Walsh of *90210* loses her virginity to Dylan on the show in the first season. Earlier in the relationship, after the school holds a Safe Sex lecture, she has decided they need to slow down, and that the experienced Dylan will be tested for AIDS, but this is presented as practical, not prudish. When they do have sex, it is clear they are soul mates, and their relationship has been leading up to this. It is also a credit to Brenda's central role that they do it in a luxury hotel room after a school dance, rather than spontaneously or someplace tawdry like the back seat of a car, or even Dylan's house (where,

despite being a high school junior, he lives alone.) She has kept him waiting for several months, but not endlessly the way David waits for Donna. She alone is able to tread that fine line between prude and sexpot.

Donna Martin, who is not only not smart, but turns out to be learning disabled, wears very revealing clothes that show every inch of her surgically enhanced chest. While initially she appears as just one of Kelly's friends, doubtless with a similar sexual background, once she starts to date David she confesses she is a virgin and intends to stay that way until marriage. Despite previous tussles, her Catholic mother's religious fervor turns out to have transferred to Donna. Despite a wide variety of suitors, she remains a virgin for the first seven seasons of the show, through both the high school and college years. She is rewarded in her commitment by finding David in the arms of another girl at the end of the fourth season.⁵⁸

Somehow, the smart girl almost always seems to end up having to make the first move if she wants to date or to have sex, in a way the sexy girl and the normative girl do not. Andrea, for example, decides to "offer herself" to Brandon when the Walsh family plans to move away at the end of the first season. This is despite the fact that he has never really demonstrated any interest in her and has slept with other girls since moving to *Beverly Hills*. He agrees to this idea, but they are thwarted when it turns out their friends have thrown a big party for them at the teens' regular hangout, the Peach Pit. The party is so successful, in fact, that Mr. Walsh decides the family will not move away after all because they have such wonderful friends in *Beverly Hills*. The whole experience has been forgotten by the time the show returns late in the summer, as if it were impossible for Andrea to have sex with the Brandon who is staying. The idea of doing it

⁵⁸ Donna subsequently dates a number of other boys/young men with her virginity an issue in all of the relationships. She and David reunite long enough to have sex on the day of their college graduation at the end of the seventh season, and, after she dates someone else (she has sex with him), Donna and David get back together in series finale, which ends with their wedding.

after the party seems not to occur to these two fictional characters. Andrea wanted to do it, however, it seems, to “prove something” to herself and to Brandon. Brandon and Andrea’s flirtation with sex was a plot point, shown to reinforce the idea of soul mates, which ironically never came to fruition with those two characters.

Despite a few guest stars who show up in a few episodes to play her boyfriend, these are not long lived or serious, and Andrea is in no real position to have sex until college. College is different, however. Not only do males there seem to find Andrea more attractive than high school boys did, but Andrea simply seems tired of being a virgin and by then she and Brandon have truly decided to be friends. She thinks she is ready to have sex with Dan Rubin (Matthew Porretta), her dormitory’s resident advisor, a graduate student who is also her English teacher. They are on her bed in a torrid make out session, when she admits she is a virgin.

Kathy Newman describes how, “Increasingly, on such TV shows as *Beverly Hills 90210*, graduate student teaching assistants are cast as manipulative he- and she-devils who seduce their students. . . . Andrea is seduced by her male TA: a nerdy, long-haired, ‘politically correct’ guy with questionable teaching mores” (Newman 1996, 101). Yet, this is not really what happens. At that point, Dan stops and says they should slow things down and that her first time should be special. A “good guy” (“Strangers in the Night”), he continues, just does not do that, and he leaves. It seems like a humiliating experience, but that is not the end of it. Once again, as in high school, Andrea must make the decisive move. After tossing and turning, she must approach his room, where (thankfully) he welcomes her and they do have sex.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ It is important to note his status—this is not another college freshman, but a graduate student and a teacher. See (Newman 1996) for an analysis of this episode. It would seem that if anyone is going to have a relationship with an older authority figure, it is the smart girl. Along with Andrea also having had an earlier flirtation with a high school teacher, Elena Tyler of *Felicity*, who is discussed in Chapter 6, and Paris Geller of *Gilmore Girls*, have relationships with much older professors.

Because these stories are dramas, sex usually leads to conflict, because that is what keeps the programs interesting. This conflict frequently leads to negative consequences for the girls.⁶⁰ Teen shows do not punish smart girls for their sexuality in the same way they negatively depict the sexpot. The two forms of punishment for either the smart or the normative girl are having the relationship go south, or pregnancy. While the sexpot often experiences humiliation, for the smart girl, respect of the boy who was her sexual partner in question is not an issue. Kelly and later Val (who is much more sexualized than Kelly ever was) of *90210* are “dumped” in favor of less overtly sexual girls. The smart girl, on the other hand, is more likely to face either guilt or pregnancy (and the guilt and/or humiliation that goes with it), which is resolved in some safe manner.

Pregnancy never results in abortion (except in the case of very short-term guest stars who often receive severe punishment).⁶¹ Although Brenda Walsh’s first sexual experience is joyful, she must have some consequences. *Slate Magazine* reports, “After the episode aired, angry parents called network affiliates to complain. Clearly, the problem was that a female character was enjoying sex, because Brandon had lost his virginity earlier in the season with no backlash. The producers were forced to create a mea culpa episode for Brenda—by the beginning of the

⁶⁰ In a survey of sexual consequences on teen shows, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey divided the types of consequences into four categories, “Emotional consequences included disappointment and guilt/anxiety. Social consequences included humiliation and rejection. Physical consequences included unwanted pregnancy, contraction of an STD, and physical abuse by a sexual partner. Punitive consequences occurred when characters were literally punished by others for engaging in a sexual act, such as the case when a teacher gave detention to a couple for “making out” in a school hallway” (Aubrey 2004 509). Although she only looks at three programs from this study (*90210*, *Buffy*, and *Gilmore Girls*) and her study is quantitative, these appear to be useful categories of analysis. Sociological studies prior to hers generally looked only at the physical consequences of teenage sex on television.

⁶¹ The worst punishment goes to the far-from-brainy guest character Missy (Keri Lynn Pratt) of the short-lived *Jack and Bobby* (2005), who dies when she is a passenger in a car involved in a drunk-driving accident one episode after having an abortion.

next season, she has a pregnancy scare, decides she's not ready for sex after all, and breaks up with Dylan" (Melzer 2006, np).⁶²

While Andrea and Dan are happy for a few episodes after having sex, she discovers that they do not have enough in common and that he does not believe in marriage. In his last episode, after Andrea has rejected him for the Latino Jesse, Dan, the same character who earlier dubbed himself a feminist, makes a racist comment, sneering "*Adios, muchacha*," ("Windstruck"). He moves out of the dorm, and disappears forever. Three episodes later, Andrea learns she is pregnant (enough time has passed on the show for her to be sure it is Jesse's and not Dan's). It is an opportunity for another lesson, but not the one that could have been. Critic Lisa Schwartzbaum comments that "Unmarried, career-minded Andrea is exactly the kind of young woman who would have made the agonizing but very real choice of abortion a believable and powerful drama for *90210* to pursue" (Schwartzbaum 1994, np).

Katherine DePasquale describes the strangeness of what happens instead when she writes, "Andrea briefly considers an abortion; at least, we're to believe she's considering it, as all sorts of pseudofeminist dialogue spews from her about the rights women before her have struggled to give her, how she's not ready for a baby, and how it's all a mistake. Then suddenly, inexplicably, she decides to keep the baby *after* all; why, she'll marry Jesse, and they'll make a

⁶² This, like many episodes of *90210* in the first few seasons, is used as a chance to provide information to the audience. As Charles Rosin, one of the producers says, "We can have some impact (a) to entertain and (b) when it's over, to get them to think about what they have seen, for maybe about five seconds" (Simonetti 1994, np). Marie-Claire Simonetti points out how the dialogue is often didactic, saying, "Waiting for her first gynecologic exam, [Brenda] wonders what the stirrups on the examining table are for" (Simonetti 1994, np). Abortion is mentioned, but because it is only a pregnancy *scare*, rather than an actual pregnancy, Brenda does not have to make a choice of what to do about a baby, making this an easy out for the producers. A paper written for the *Duke Law Journal* says that in fact, television stations used this episode to satisfy the requirement that a certain number of hours be applied to educational/information television for children 16 and under. The description in the programming report from WFLA reads, somewhat misleadingly, "In this episode of *90210*, the gang at West Beverly High goes to the prom after which Brenda and Dylan confront the responsibilities and potential repercussions of having sex" (Hamilton 1996, 1196).

go at it!” (DePasquale, nd, np). She does consult sexpot Kelly, asking her if she has ever had a pregnancy scare, as is appropriate for the smart girl/sexpot dyad, but Kelly seems quite offended as she says she has not.

Despite the fact she is four years older than Brenda was at the time of her potential decision, abortion is not really an option for Andrea.⁶³ The result is that sex was the beginning of Andrea’s demise. E. Graham McKinley writes that, “As viewers I interviewed readily predicted on the basis of Carteris’s pregnancy—the scripts had her get married and deliver the child, leaving abortion ‘the last pregnancy-related taboo left on TV’” (McKinley 1997, 22).⁶⁴ As this show, as described in Chapter Four, fell firmly in the Backlash era, it is not surprising that domesticity wins over all, marriage is the answer to all problems, and that abortion is not a valid choice.

Andrea’s storyline diverges significantly from that of her friends, and although she does cheat on Jesse at one point, for the most part her role is desexualized even further, as she deals with young motherhood and an interracial relationship. She is, in fact, so far from normal for a teen television girl, that she is banished from the show all together. Without the opportunity for sexiness, there was no space for Andrea on the show, and the only characters who carry babies to term in the next six years of the show are peripheral. While *90210* actually lasted long enough for characters to graduate from college and get married as full-fledged adults, it is the one season *My So-Called Life* that would add some nuance to teen sex, presenting it as less of a rite of passage necessary for young soul mates to stay together, and more of an urge teenagers just

⁶³ Although the producers planned this story because Gabrielle Carteris was pregnant, Jennie Garth, who played Kelly, got pregnant, but continued to play Kelly as not pregnant, hidden behind shopping bags and wearing baggy overalls. Therefore, it was not necessary for Andrea to be pregnant simply because the actress was.

⁶⁴ Julia Salinger of *Party of Five* actually does plan an abortion in 1996, but miscarries before the actual appointment, an increasingly typical trope. Ten years later, and little has changed. Even adult characters, like Christina Yang of *Grey’s Anatomy* conveniently miscarry, as she did in 2006.

cannot deny themselves. The audience learns this because of the dialogue and Angela's voiceover, as she communicates things that Andrea and her friends would never consider saying aloud.

Angela: Sex or a Conversation, Ideally Both

Unlike any of the *90210* characters or the girls on teen shows after her, Angela Chase actually says she wants to have sex; yet even she expresses her desire ambivalently. In the first episode of *My So-Called Life*, she shows interest in the enigmatic Jordan Catalano, in an oblique way, saying she likes the way he "is always closing his eyes, like they hurt or something" and continues, "I just like how he's always leaning. Against stuff. He leans great" ("Pilot"). It is her sexpot friend Rayanne who must say, "You want to have sex with him," to which Angela responds, wryly, "Well, either sex or a conversation. Ideally both" ("Pilot"). Later she admits to Brian, "I think about it. All the time," and when he expresses surprise that girls think about sex, replies, "Yeah, shut up! Boys don't have the monopoly on thinking about it!" ("Pressure"). This is much franker than the *90210* girls were.

Talking about sex with each other is, of course, something girls do. Terri Apter and Ruthellen Josselson, who studied real life teen girls say, "The emergence of sexual feelings and sexual anxiety is one of the most powerful forces that bind girls with one another. Beyond 'did he kiss you?' is 'but how did you feel when he kissed you?'" (Apter and Josselson 1999, 101). Much of the relationship between girls on these shows is built through talking about boys, as when Buffy first helps Willow gain confidence in meeting boys on *Buffy*, when Paris, despite her previous hostility, goes to Rory for help before her first date on *Gilmore Girls*, or when *Freaks and Geeks*' Kim, hearing that Lindsay has kissed Nick, admiringly says, "You are such a slut!"

(“I’m with the Band”). These conversations, however, do not generally include graphic descriptions of sex itself.

Most of the time the audience never even hears the smart girl say she has hormonal urges, only that she wants to attract, and keep, the object of her desire. When she actually has sex, the shows portray it entirely as an expression of love, and not as a pleasurable or physical act. The real consequences of having sex, these shows suggest, is a complete change in personality. Sex itself is a performative act that will change a character from a “virgin” to a “real girl.” Friends of girls on television who have sex often tell them they are “glowing or that they “look different.” As Angela puts it as she talks to her sexually active old friend Sharon, “There’s this dividing line, between girls who’ve had sex, and girls who haven’t, and all of a sudden, we realized that we were looking at each other across it” (“Pressure”). Once they have sex with the first boyfriend, they believe, every subsequent relationship will be different, somehow easier, and much more adult. Of course, television’s need for drama assures life will simply be difficult in a different way.

Angela actually expresses fears beyond the *90210* model of worrying about pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. When Angela and Jordan begin to date, he makes it clear that he wants to have sex. Angela makes a joke about Jordan sneaking into her house at night after her parents are asleep, which he takes seriously and shows up. When she says she was not serious, he announces, “This is the whole reason I didn’t want to start this the first place.” Angela replies, “Why, because you knew you wouldn’t get sex? You’d just be wasting your time?” and Jordan explains, “Because you just don’t get it, okay? You’re *supposed* to! It’s accepted. It’s what you’re supposed to do! Unless you’re . . . like . . . abnormal” (“Pressure”).

Angela tries to justify her choice, and gives an overly adult speech that is one of the few false notes of the series. She says, “It is a big deal. I mean, because sex made your whole life start, and if you think about life as like a circle or something, then sex and death are the same” (“Pressure”). She makes a connection between sex and death that, while common in literature, seems unlikely for even the brightest and most articulate teenager. It explains her fear, and yet does not really explain it in a fashion that goes along with the Angela the viewer has come to know. Just a few episodes later when she says, “I feel so stupid, my entire relationship with Jordan Catalano, every minute of it just completely sucked. And now it’s over. I should have just had sex with him. Why not? It would’ve been so simple” (“Pressure”), she sounds more like herself.

While Angela actually gets much closer to Jordan than Andrea ever got to Brandon, she does not have sex with him, or with anyone before the network canceled the series. In a sense, this is empowering. As Michelle Byers puts it, Angela “chooses innocence. The power of the position is evidenced in the construction of Angela’s position as that of choice rather than contradiction” (Byers 1994, 722). Their relationship is illicit at first—that Jordan only associates with Angela in the boiler room at first makes it all the more exciting when he is convinced to treat her well and takes her hand in public. Unlike Andrea, Angela chooses virginity, not because of lack of opportunity, but simply because she knows she is not ready. This show broke new ground on the teen television landscape.

Angela is still a “type;” however. As Byers writes, the girls of *My So-Called Life* “represent an obvious spectrum of known and acceptable female heterosexuality.” She describes how, while Sharon has sex with a serious boyfriend, the sex is acceptable because it is “true love.” It also allows Sharon to act in the godmother role, telling Angela, “It’s OK to ask me

things” (“Pressure”). On the other hand, Angela’s new friend Rayanne wins the category “Most Slut Potential” in a poll developed by sophomore boys and drunkenly has sex with Jordan when Angela will not. The audience excuses Rayanne, Byers says because, “Rayanne’s promiscuity is accepted because her character is read as misguided, both morally and emotionally” (Byers 1994, 722). Joyce Millman says, “There’s a little Angela in every woman. And a little of the messed-up Rayanne, and the goody-goody Sharon, and the chubby, bubbly Delia, the girl who had a crush on Rickie even though he was gay” (Millman 1998, np). Yet, it is the “good-goody Sharon” who writes an explicit poem (for which Rayanne takes credit), and has sex with her boyfriend even after deciding to break up with him (because they are watching a Brad Pitt movie). Clearly the roles of girls on *MSCL* are much less cut and dried than on *90210* and later shows like *Dawson’s Creek*. The genius of *MSCL* is that it broke barriers, yet because it was canceled so soon it is impossible to know how long it would have continued to do so. The show ends with the all but illiterate Jordan giving Angela a love letter written by smart boy Brian (who also loves Angela). When Angela climbs into Jordan’s car in the closing moments of the show, no one knows if she would have chosen to have sex with Jordan, or if she was still not ready.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this show’s brand of feminism reflects its time. The Riotgrrl ethos of this show allows Angela a choice to have sex with Jordan or not, and gives a space to a character like Rayanne who drinks, and does drugs, and sleeps with Angela’s boyfriend, yet still has sympathetic qualities and is not simply positioned as the “slut” who must be punished. The show’s precipitous ending, however, means that Rayanne is severely punished, not by pregnancy or a breakup, but by losing Angela as a friend.

MSCL allowed television characters to have franker discussions about sex than previous shows ever did. Susan Murray says girls who watched the show and posted online, “repeatedly

articulate the pleasure they get from the text's verisimilitude, finding Angela's construction as one that speaks to their own. They understand Angela's play with and confusion over shifting identity positions" (Murray 1999, 231). The use of voiceover allowed girl viewers to identify with Angela more than they ever could with Andrea or anyone on *90210*. In contrast to *MSCL*, characters on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* lived more in the realm of fantasy, and did not have the same sort of frank sexual discussions those on *MSCL*, although many of the supernatural elements were used as metaphors for sex.

Willow: We Could Do That Thing

Buffy the Vampire Slayer also presents us with a triad of girls in the high school years. There is Cordelia, the mean girl, who by definition appears to be the sexpot, Willow, the smart girl, and Buffy, who, as a former popular girl turned vampire slayer, balances sexy with street smarts to become central and normative. Of course, normativity on *Buffy* means something different than it does on other shows. Buffy is only normative in the way she relates to boys, but is, in fact, a supernatural figure in love with a vampire. Willow begins to learn witchcraft at about the time her first romantic relationship begins with Oz, who proves to be a werewolf. Cordelia is the only girl who is entirely from the realm of the real, and she only dates non-supernatural humans.⁶⁵ Yet the show complies with its high school roots by keeping Buffy in the central role, with the sexpot and brainy girl as sidekicks. In all cases, however, each girl is changed to become more normative. As Mary Alice Money writes, Buffy's themes include "the undemonization, and rehabilitation of supporting characters who had first become known to the

⁶⁵ Until she shows up on *Angel*, where she has a number of supernatural romances and gets her own powers of prediction. As the central female on that show, Cordelia is revirginized, and her bitchiness is replaced, for the most part, by compassion.

audience as annoyingly obnoxious or thoroughly evil creations or simply different” (Money, 98). Part of this relates to virginity and sexuality.

As popular (or formerly popular) girls, it is clear that both Cordelia and Buffy are quite knowing about the world of boys, and it is Buffy who advises Willow to “seize the day” when it comes to meeting them. Cordelia and Buffy are, it would seem, much like Kelly, and have been around. They dress in skimpy outfits and show an awareness of how boys react to them that Willow does not. Cordelia, for example, makes out in a car in the woods and says that her father “still thinks I’m a good girl” (“Phases”). Yet, in later seasons (the second season of *Buffy* for Buffy, the first season of the spin-off *Angel* for Cordelia), we discover that both are virgins.⁶⁶

While on *90210* Kelly’s past is minimized and, as many viewers see it, she is sanctified so she can become central and girlfriend to nice boy Brandon, Buffy’s virginity, and later Cordelia’s revirginization as she becomes the central female on *Angel*, are absolutely necessary for centrality on teen television. As Money puts it, “By the time the character leaves Buffy at the end of the third season, she is ready to be developed into a strong co-star in the spin-off series *Angel*” (Money 2003, 102). However, there are virgins, and there are virgins. As on *90210*, the brainy girl still needs to make the first move. Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, who studied consequences of sex on television found that, although “the difference between men and women receiving consequences was not statistically significant, young viewers might still learn that it is more appropriate for men than for women to make the sexual “first move.” A scene was more

⁶⁶ Similarly, although fifteen-year-old Marisa Cooper has been dating her sexually active boyfriend for four years when *The O.C.* begins in 2003, and her classmate Summer Roberts initially appears dressed provocatively, indulging in drugs, and flirting with multiple boys, each reveals her sexual inexperience in the first season of the show. Marisa sleeps with her boyfriend only when she is afraid of being attracted to Ryan, the boy from the other side of the tracks, and Summer admits she is a virgin when smart boy Seth confesses his virginity and worries he will not know enough for her. This is especially striking in Summer, because she started only as a recurring character. These days, recurring characters are allowed to have been sexually active before the show begins, but girls the audiences are intended to have sympathy for are not.

likely to end in a negative consequence (to either men or women) when women initiated sex than when men initiated sex (Aubrey 2004, 512).

In the third season, Willow decides that she wants to have sex with her guitar-playing boyfriend Oz (who turns into a werewolf every full moon). They have just gotten back together after a short breakup, after he catches her kissing Xander, her long-time crush (and Cordelia's boyfriend). She follows Buffy's advice to "show Oz that he comes first" ("Amends"), dressing up in a short skirt and a cleavage-revealing top, chilling soda in a champagne bucket, and playing Barry White's song, "Can't Get Enough of Your Love." Willow is the typical television brainy girl, however, and loses her ability to articulate when it comes to sex. She says, "Well, you know, we're alone. We're both mature younger people. And so . . . we could . . . I'm ready to . . . with you. [whispers] We can do that thing." Oz, however, is not comfortable. He replies, "You look great. You know, and, and you got the Barry working for you, and, and it's all . . . good. But when it happens . . . I want it to be because we both need it to for the same reason. You don't have to prove anything to me" ("Amends"). It seems he genuinely does not feel the relationship is strong enough for sex.

As Carolyn Cocca writes, "One can read Willow's relationship with Oz in more than one way. Liberal feminists might say she was the vulnerable party because she was the younger party; radical feminists might say the same because of the 'threat of the wolf,' and sex radicals might say she was making well-considered decisions about someone she was very close to. But each of these aspects of a situation can be occurring at the same time" (Cocca 2003, np). On the surface this seems like an extremely romantic scene, proving that Oz is a completely noble boyfriend. In reality, the rejection seems just as embarrassing for Willow as it was for Andrea—more so, in fact, because Willow and Oz do not have sex that night at all. While it is true that the

fact that Willow is not able even to say the word “sex” implies that she is not ready to have it, and a boy should not be pressured into sex any more than a girl should, Willow does have her own agency. If she is in fact ready, and the audience does not get enough insight into her thought process to prove that she is not, Oz is unfairly putting the brakes on, not because he does not want sex, but, in part, because it is not his idea.

Series creator Joss Whedon has said of *Buffy*, “The very first mission statement of the show [is] the joy of female power: having it, using it, sharing it” (Gottlieb 2002, np). Yet, as Gwyneth Bodger writes of the show, “The message seems clear; female power is acceptable only when authorized by men. Strong femininity is only permissible when governed by a stronger masculinity” (Bodger 2003, np). In this case, Willow’s ability to initiate sex is curtailed. Additionally, the idea that a couple that chooses not to have intercourse can still be intimate is not considered. They just kiss with all their clothes on. Willow and Oz do finally have sex while awaiting their high school graduation day (and impending apocalypse that Buffy and the gang must stop), but Oz is the initiator. While Anya is permitted in the next season to simply drop her dress, and seduce Xander, this is not how smart high school girls act. Willow’s partner still must have the control over the relationship.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ The only way for Willow to get control, it seems, is by becoming something else, either a stronger witch, or a lesbian. While seemingly quite feminine at first, Willow is as Susan Owen writes, subtly “re-gendered as a creative and fearless computer hacker” and again when she becomes a witch. This is made manifest when, in the fourth season of *Buffy*, she discovers herself attracted to another woman and from then on defines herself as “gay now” (“Triangle”). By doing so, she takes herself far in the direction of “other” yet within the show becomes even more central. On the other hand, while her relationship with Tara is good, there is only one major kiss between them. In a major sense, this subverts the traditional teen show paradigm. As Bodger writes, “Kisses and eroticism between Buffy and Angel, Buffy and Spike, and Xander and Anya for example are momentous occasions in the Buffy narrative, yet lesbian sexuality is denied this significance afforded to heterosexual couplings. The fact that lesbian sexuality is inextricably bound to the figure of the witch is particularly interesting. Sexuality has always been central to the representation of the witch in history, and this sexuality has always been recognised as threatening to men” (Bodger 2003, np). Much has been theorized about Willow as lesbian, and witch, and the issue is too complicated, and too far from the generic issues of the other programs, to go into here. See Playdon, Zoe-Jane. “‘What Are You, What’s to Come’: Feminisms, Citizenship and the Divine.” *Reading the Vampire Slayer: An Unofficial Critical Companion to Buffy and Angel*. Ed. Roz Kaveney. New York: Tauris Park, 2001. 120-47, Caroline Ruddell, “I am

Willow's need for assertiveness when it comes to Oz is framed as out of character, yet is clearly the smart girls' bane. As the "Girl Power" text, it should be completely appropriate for a girl to choose to have sex, or not to have sex, yet despite Girl Power's commodified role, it does not entirely match the retro sensibility of teen television. Lindsay Weir of *Freaks and Geeks* encounters a similar situation, but at least there is an excuse for retro behavior, as the show takes place in 1980.

Lindsay: Do You Want to Make Out or Something?

This show presents less of a variety of girls than the other shows. While, conceivably, one could look at Lindsay's friend Kim Kelly (Busy Philipps), who critic Ken Tucker describes as, "a hoody, heavily mascaraed girl whose two prizes in life are her cool boyfriend and her car, a rusting Gremlin" (Tucker 1999, np) as a sexpot, Lindsay's brother Sam's crush Cindy Sanders (Natasha Melnick), the cheerleader, and Lindsay's old friend, the nerdy and religious Millie (Sarah Hagan) as different manifestations of girlhood, none but Lindsay are in the opening credits, and they are not even close to a group, as they are rarely in scenes together.

the law' 'I am the magics': Speech, Power and the Split Identity of Willow in Buffy the Vampire Slayer" *Slayage* (20) slayageonline.com, J. Lawton, Teen Witches, Wiccans, and "Wanna-Blessed-Be's": Pop-Culture Magic in Buffy the Vampire Slayer. *Slayage* (1) slayageonline.com .There have since been other girl-girl relationships on teen shows, Jessie Sammler of *Once and Again* begins a lesbian relationship shortly before ABC abruptly cancels the show. This, like Willow's is a responsible and nuanced portrayals of a coming-out story. On the contrary, three stories, all on Fox, were specifically there to boost ratings among young males, and the network promoted them suggestively. These include a 1994 storyline in which a lesbian with whom popular girl Kelly is trapped in a fire on *90210* falls in unrequited love with her, and smart-girl Julia Salinger's short same-sex relationship, complete with kiss, on *Party of Five* in 1999. There is also popular girl Marisa Cooper's similar short-lived affair and onscreen kiss on *The O.C.*, in 2005, in which viewers see Mischa Barton (who also played Jessie's love interest on *Once and Again*,) smile and look happy for a few episodes in a way she never does with her on-again-off-again boyfriend Ryan. This storyline ended sooner than planned, which may have contributed to its seeming shallowness. Josh Schwartz, creator of the show, says "the network was very nervous—it was an extremely conservative time in our country (thank Janet Jackson for that) and everyone was freaking out. We had a whole episode where every kiss between them was cut out, just so I could get one kiss in the "Rainy Day Women" episode. I was literally on the phone with Broadcast, Standards and Practices bartering for kisses. It was a battle, and The Powers That Be are part of a big corporation, and were going in front of Congress at the time (every network was)—so I understand they are all good people who were under a lot of pressure. But they wanted that story wrapped up as fast as humanly possible and Alex moving on out of the OC (Simmons 2005, np).

As the major female character, (if somewhat less normative than Cindy) Lindsay is worried about sex in the traditional smart girl way. Millie finds out that Lindsay is dating Nick and demonstrates a surprising understanding of schoolyard politics, saying, “Freaks only date freak girls. And you’re not a freak girl. . . . Freak girls go all the way” (“Girlfriends and Boyfriends”). This show, however, was all about subverting expectations. Instead of pressuring Lindsay for sex, Nick instead says he has done that before and is much more interested in falling in love. He sings an excruciating version of Styx’s power ballad “Lady,” designed to make the entire viewing audience viscerally embarrassed for him and for Lindsay. In order to shut him up, she asks, “Do you want to make out or something?” He replies, “No, all guys want to make out. But not me, I just want to hold you” (“Boyfriends and Girlfriends”). In the closing image of the episode, Nick has his arms around her, happy while she stares at the ceiling, clearly discomfited and wanting to find a way out. She breaks up with him in the next episode.

This is funny, of course, but is also quite curious. All of the mass media suggest that adolescent males are perpetually ready for sex. There is no way to “turn them off.” Situation comedy characters like David Healy of *Roseanne* and Eric Forman on *That ‘70s Show* even say explicitly that they are *always* ready for sex. *Freaks and Geeks* presents Nick’s unwillingness to have sex as an abnormality. Not only is he not acting like a freak should, but he is not complying with the media rules of boyhood, which state, “All boys want to have sex all the time.” He must act unrealistically in order to control the show’s ability to show Lindsay losing her virginity in a “very special episode,” which, of course, never happened because the show was canceled.

In real life, in 1980, it may have been appropriate that a boy wants to wait, and it is only because she is an aspiring “freak” that Lindsay does not. Benoit Denizet-Lewis writes about

teens' changing attitude toward sex, saying, "By the late 60's and early 70's, the rituals of high-school dating had taken on an almost prehistoric cast. The 'rules' —boy calls girl, boy asks girl out, boy drives to girl's house, boy talks to girl's dad, boy takes girl to movies, boy has her home by 11 (or else)—were viewed as restrictive and old-fashioned, not to mention sexist. And that's pretty much how things stood until the Reagan era, when dating made a serious comeback" (Lewis 2004, np). In 1999, when the show was airing, however, teens were just about to find the Internet, and young people would go from dating to "hooking up," which can mean anything from kissing, to oral sex, to intercourse, but comes with no strings.

This is not in the slightest true of teen television, however. Third-wave feminism would say that Lindsay should be able to have sex or not, and that in fact, as Jennifer Baumgartner, who with Amy Richards wrote *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* puts it, "Young women's primary expression these days is a joy and ownership of sexuality, and that's a form of power, a type of energy" (Straus 2000, np). This type of attitude is not available to Lindsay as a television smart girl, and there is no chance she will have sex with someone she does not love. Murray Forman, writing of *Freaks and Geeks* and other shows that started after the shootings at Columbine High School, writes, "While many contemporary teen programs do address controversial issues such as sex, drug use, and peer aggression, they tend to do so in a restrained manner via scripts that generally reinforce dominant prosocial values and contain the threats posed by dangerous or destabilizing social elements" (Forman 2004, np).

Lindsay may seem to be charting her own course, but still must follow the rules of appropriate teen femininity by not having sex with Nick, who she ends up breaking up with quickly. The major characters are still looking for true love before they have sex, and only a bad

girl like Kim would actually have it in high school. Similarly, during the high school years of *Gilmore Girls*, only the “bad” Paris would actually have sex, while the good Rory would not.

Rory and Paris: I had Sex, but I’m not Going to Harvard

As in the other chapters, it is clear that *Gilmore Girls*, although it follows much the same trajectory of smart-girl-getting-first-boyfriend in the early years of the show, is a very different show from the others in the genre because it is so strongly about “wish fulfillment.” Although there is a triad of girls in the main cast, they do not represent the same poles of the other shows, and as Lane Kim continues at public school, the three girls are rarely in the same scene, so are hardly a group. They are all smart and none is popular in the traditional high school way. The sexpot type is present at Rory and Paris’ school, in the characters of Paris’s sidekicks Madeline and Louise, who do appear to date a lot, but they are just that, sidekicks, nearly interchangeable (few viewers could tell you which is which), not in the main credits, and never with storylines of their own. Paris herself is, as has been shown, somewhat of a Mean Girl, but this does not make her a sexpot and, in fact, while Rory acquires a serious boyfriend right away, Paris has only one date until the girls’ senior year in high school, when she gets an out-of-town boyfriend who exists almost entirely off screen.⁶⁸

While a smart girl, Rory simply never faces rejection, and unlike the other girls, she does not ever have to make the first move. Although college has brought more trouble for Rory, as well as sex, in the high school years her home life was nearly ideal, and except for the natural stress of academics and the continuing friction between her grandparents and mother, pressure-free. Even the crime/punishment paradigm is turned on its ear, because Rory’s mother was pregnant at sixteen and clearly cannot preach teen abstinence without caveats, and has had many

⁶⁸ For more on Lane, see Chapter 6.

troubled relationships. As Laura Nathan writes, “At a time when President Bush and the GOP are promoting abstinence and hetero-marriage, the *Gilmore Girls* offer a less traditional model, finding strength and sustenance in each other rather than men, challenging the assumption that teen pregnancy has to end in regret and catastrophe” (Nathan 2004, np).

In high school, the fact that Rory demonstrates nearly no curiosity about sex can be chalked up first, to Lorelai’s frankness on the subject, and second, the fact that Rory is the “more responsible and adult” of the two. Alexis Bledel herself says of her character, “Someone who grows up with a constant reminder of what having sex as a teenager brings to you in life is going to be extremely cautious before becoming sexually active” (Weiner 2002, np). At one point in high school Rory does mention to her mother that she is considering sex with Jess, and Lorelai seems much more concerned about making sure that Rory tells her first (so that birth control is accessible), than dissuading her from having sex. Once Rory does have sex in college, Lorelai’s problem is more about the fact that Rory has had sex with the now-married Dean, and without talking to her about it, rather than the fact that her college-aged daughter has had sex. It is more about the violation of their extreme closeness and is one of the factors that begin the chinks in their relationship that leads to their later rift.

The third wave feminist ethos that allowed Rory to be pretty and stylishly dressed when the show begins, and not go through the sort of makeover the other smart girls did, and that kept her from feeling the need for political awakening the other girls felt, also applies to her sex life. During the high school years, although she moves from one boyfriend to another with no break, sex is barely an issue. Dean never pressures her for sex, and Jess only once in a very confusing

scene.⁶⁹ It is another example of *Gilmore Girls*' unique place in the teen show pantheon that no girl character experiences a pregnancy scare, until Lane gets pregnant as a married adult, perhaps because the whole show is about a woman who became pregnant at age sixteen and kept the baby. The show goes to great lengths to show how wonderfully Lorelai's and Rory's lives have turned out, which is not an anti-abortion statement, but makes the question of choice moot. Instead, the potential punishments are both humorous and emotional. In addition, while Rory does not have sex in high school, Paris does with her serious boyfriend. When she hears Paris confiding to Rory that she has had sex, and Rory confirming that she has not, Lorelai is actually given the line, "I've got the good kid" ("The Big One"). Lauren Graham, who plays Lorelai, opined in an article, "I didn't like that judgment about girls and the decisions they make. But they wanted me to say that, so I did" (Hewitt 2003, np). The culture as characterized on television has moved back into heavy conservatism, and even a seemingly liberal show like *Gilmore Girls* shows the consequences of teenage sex.

Paris, of course receives punishment, even if it is in a very funny way. The day after she and Jamie have sex, she and Rory have to give a speech on cable channel C-Span to which she arrives late and unkempt, having gotten bad news in the mail. She states:

"I'm not going to Harvard. I got the tiny envelope, the one that reads, 'sorry, Paris. We're not interested. Try again next year. Love, Harvard.' And the thing that's really funny here is, who in the world deserves to go to Harvard more than me? . . . I had sex, but I'm not going to Harvard. . . . And I have to tell you that if you asked me which of those two

⁶⁹ In the third season episode "Keg! Max!" The school principal tells Rory's boyfriend Jess that he has skipped so much school he will not graduate. Jess does not tell Rory this, but when they attend a keg party, he is rude to everyone, including her. When they find a quiet bedroom and she confronts him about his behavior, he reaches for her belt. Even though four episodes earlier, she has told Lorelai she might want to have sex with Jess, she instantly bursts into tears and runs from the room. The whole episode seems to be catalyst for Jess and Dean [Rory's first boyfriend] to get into a fist fight and, a few episodes later, for Jess, whose character was supposed to get his own spin-off (but did not), to leave town for good, leaving Rory without a prom date.

events I thought would be the least likely to happen, it would not be the not going to Harvard . . . I'm being punished. I had sex, so now I don't get to go to Harvard. ("The Big One")

This is a satire of the typical sex-punishment relationship, but girl viewers may not see it as such. They may assume the connection is true. The smart girl can have sex, but only in college or later, and there needs to be an object lesson. When Rory actually does have sex, it is at the end of her first year in college, and with Dean. Unfortunately, Dean is already married, so it is a recipe for heartache, after all, and it does change Rory. However, since he leaves his wife, what eventually happens is they realize they have grown apart. This is a very different problem from the other girls considered in this chapter. Rory has few ramifications from the relationship, other than a dressing down by Dean's wife and her mother.

Rory's next relationship marks her clear transformation from independent character to male-obsessed collegian. Thus, while Rory does originally tell college boyfriend Logan that she is fine with having a sexual but non-exclusive relationship, he still takes her on dates and it does not take too long before she demands fidelity and he gives it. Elisabeth Donnelly writes Rory is "no longer the self-possessed teen who in the second season told off her meddling headmaster. It culminated in a drunken night on the bathroom floor in her mother's home, with Rory crying, "Why doesn't he like me?" over Logan's *He's Just Not That into You* snubs. Even as Rory insisted she was fine with Logan, the audience saw her coming apart at the seams" (Donnelly 2005, np).

Rory's choices make her devolve, and her romantic life almost completely subsumes any school or career-related storylines. On the other hand, Paris thrives at Yale, and finds new romantic relationships, but they are both quite unusual, one a sixty-something professor, the

other the age appropriate (but short and annoying) editor at the *Yale Daily News* who is not on Rory's dating radar at all. As Paris dates, it is clear she has not forgotten her ambition, while Rory seems to be drifting, yet it seems likely that Rory will end up with an equally, if not more, fabulous career. This suggests that all of Paris's attention to her future is wasted time. Rory's devotion to romance above all will surely be rewarded.

Conclusion

E. Graham McKinley, who studied *90210*, wrote that the show was “superficially liberal in its treatment of individual rights, but ultimately perpetuat[ed] conservative values” (2). This was somewhat true in 1997 when she was writing, but as the genre has coalesced, the treatment of sex seems to have cycled away and then back. University of Arizona professor Dale Kunkel, who led research on a study of sex on television for the Kaiser Family Foundation, repeating a study in 2005 first done in 1998, said, “The increase in the number of TV shows with sexual content, combined with the increase in sexual scenes per show, has led to a dramatic overall increase in sexual content on TV since 1998. . . . During the same period, the percentage of these shows that include ‘safer sex’ messages has also increased significantly, but has leveled off in recent years” (CBC Arts 2005, np). The same article states that the number of scenes of sexual content on television in general went from 1,900 in 1998 to nearly 3,800 scenes with sexual content in 2005.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ The report from the Kaiser Family Foundation States: “For the purposes of this study, sexual content includes both talk about sex and depictions of sexual behavior. Sexual behavior includes depictions of sexual intercourse, scenes in which sexual intercourse is strongly implied, intimate touching, passionate kissing, and physical flirting. . . . All scenes containing sexual content were analyzed for any mention of issues concerning the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity, including any reference to contraception, condoms, safer sex, emotional consequences of sex, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, abortion, abstinence, or waiting to have sex. The study counted all such references and noted the proportion that were primary, substantial, minor or inconsequential (Kaiser Family Foundation 2005, 14).

The study, which included *Gilmore Girls*, did note that “89 per cent of TV characters involved in sexual intercourse appear to be adults aged 25 or older, up from 2002” (CBC Arts 2005, np), which indicates on first reading that the teen shows were exempt. However, considering the increased representation of parents, grandparents and other adults in the main casts of on teen shows, and that by 2005 most of the younger characters were at least college aged, the statistic does not really indicate that young people are seeing any less sex than adults who watch prime time television.

The teen show wish-fulfillment script means that every character will be obsessed with romance and it will be a much more central part of the characters’ lives than school, politics, family, or any other aspect, except for friendship. It is no revelation that love and sex are important to adolescents, both male and female. These shows depict romance as something every character wishes to experience, and sends the message that any teen who never has a boyfriend or girlfriend is deficient. Television is an unreal world in which ridiculously melodramatic things may happen to people, but no character is ever just ignored. Invisibility is the worst possible consequence for a television teen. In the poll in which Rayanne receives “most slut potential,” and the boys single Sharon out because of her breasts, Angela receives a worse designation. She is not on the poll at all. She feels, in that instant, much like a character in the first season *Buffy* episode, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind,” which features a girl who no one notices, and who therefore becomes invisible. The idea that Jordan Catalano might not be interested in Angela is troublesome, but not as much as his not knowing she exists. She feels herself not seen as a sexual subject. When someone spreads a rumor that Jordan and Angela slept together, however, the whole school seems to be looking at her. A boy in her gym class stares at her breasts and gives her a lewd look. She trades invisibility for a bad reputation.

More recently, teen shows have begun to deal with some more explicit sexual topics, such as Willow's turn to lesbianism, and that of Jesse on *Once and Again*, Buffy's kinky sexual affair with the vampire, Spike, and Veronica Mars' date rape and subsequent venereal disease, and a series of rapes on her college campus. Change comes slowly, however, and WB shows like *Gilmore Girls* and *Smallville* exist in their own worlds that barely reflect the real one. In an article about the legacy of *My So Called-Life*, Timothy Shary, assistant professor of screen studies at Clark University, discusses recent changes in the messages of subsequent teen shows, saying, "Our culture is more comfortable watching teens handed easy lessons that they can solve at the end of the episode, like 'don't do drugs,' 'don't have premarital sex,' 'don't carry guns to school'" (Mendoza 2007, np). The changes that Angela Chase seemed to be heralding have rolled back and the message on many shows is back to sex as mysterious, with mess and consequences unexplained.

Whether girls actually believe what the shows are saying is, of course, up to the individual viewer. Angela Hubler, writing of girls' reading practices, notes that girl readers "commonly focused on aspects of texts that confirmed female behavior they found desirable while ignoring or forgetting aspects that undermined these behaviors," and ends with, "It is clear that girls are not blank slates that unthinkingly reproduce the ideological messages written upon them" (Inness 1998, 281). Viewers will, of course, not all see a smart girl on television having sex and instantly decide that is what they should do. However, the portrayals certainly influence their lives. These shows teach that in order to become visible, girls must perform as sexual, and that sex at sixteen will lead to the storybook ending, or at least a story.

The next chapter considers the role of girls of color and Jewish girls who perform the smart girl role on teen show. Because most of these shows have almost entirely white casts, and

most of the characters of color in regular casts have been boys, there are only a few occasions when a girl of color can simultaneously be a smart girl. On the other hand, Jewish girls are always the smart girl. In all cases, the girls are sidekicks to white, nominally Christian girls. Chapter Six seeks to consider why this would be.

CHAPTER 6. THE INVISIBLE GIRL: RACE, ETHNICITY, AND THE SMART GIRL

Introduction

Elena Tyler (Tangi Miller) shows up in the second episode of The WB drama *Felicity*. Like the title character, the blonde, blue-eyed Felicity Porter (Keri Russell), she is a freshman taking college courses in the pre-medical program at the “University of New York.” Like Felicity, she is intelligent, driven, and ambitious. Yet, unlike Felicity, she is not a friendly, open girl looking to make friends and find the perfect boyfriend. She is tough, and defensive, and takes it amiss when the Resident Advisor, placing Halloween decorations around the dormitory floor, inadvertently chooses to put the wrong cardboard cutout on Elena’s door. She upbraids him, and appears to take it personally, barging in on the RA in the men’s room and saying, “I could get a skeleton, a pumpkin, a ghost, but I get a witch?” (“Spooked”). While the actress says that Elena was brought into the show “to create conflict, because she’s different and she’s a New Yorker with a different perspective” (America Online Interview 1999, np), it is clear that Elena was also added to the show for another purpose, to be the token African American character.⁷¹

Many programs with predominantly white casts have had one or two minority characters, but Elena is important because within teen television, she is the first (and so far only) smart African American girl character to have a regular role on an hour-long series aimed at teenagers.⁷² She is also one of the very few girls of color on these programs at all, as many of the shows’ regular casts have been entirely Caucasian, with characters of color present only in guest

⁷¹ I have chosen to use the term African American when discussing these girls instead of Black, as it is more standard. However, this it is not actually correct in the case of Kendra from *Buffy*, as she is from Jamaica.

⁷² *Veronica Mars* had Jackie Cook (Tessa Thompson) as a regular character in the 2005-2006 season, which is important as she was an African American high school girl, but she was more mean girl than smart.

roles. The closest thing to an “other” within these shows’ casts are the Jewish characters who, when present, always possess the characteristics associated with smart girls or boys.

For reasons that this chapter will explore further, along with dressing provocatively, playing dumb, acting selfish, and appearing to be sexually available (without being “a slut,”) the other major aspect required for true teen femininity and “normal” performativity on these programs is whiteness. Richard Dyer in his essay “White” writes that, “White people ‘colonise the definition of normal’” (Dyer 1988, 45). For teen girl characters, this means not only having pale skin, light hair, and “regular” features, but also demonstrating an unthreatening and unspoken Christianity that goes along with the rules for a character who is White and Christian and hence a “normal” American girl. Anything else, including African American-ness, Asian-ness, or Judaism, automatically connotes “otherness” and makes it much less possible for the character to perform normatively.⁷³ Although the non-white or non-Christian girls also make friends, find love interests, and have adventures, they are perpetual sidekicks to the more central characters.

They are also different from normative white characters because their behavior is frequently stereotypical. As Dyer writes, “There is a specificity to white representation, but it does not reside in a set of stereotypes so much as in narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception” (Dyer 1988, 12). As has been shown in earlier chapters, there is a wide variety of white teen girl characters, including brainy girls, popular girls, rule followers, rebels, rich girls, poor girls, “sluts,,” and central normative girls. For characters from a racial or

⁷³ Although since the year 2000 there have been Latino/Latina characters added to television casts, and 2006’s *Ugly Betty* stars a Latina character, none of the teen shows has had a regularly appearing Latino/Latina character except for Andrea’s law student (and hence non-teenage) husband on *90210* who was a regular character for the fifth season of the show. Native Americans have had almost no presence on television other than as the adversaries in Westerns and sitcom episodes about Native American issues, and in the program *Northern Exposure*, which had no Native American teen girl character.

ethnic minority group, however, each has to essentially represent an entire category of people, and as such need to behave in what are considered normative ways for that character type. A problem arises because they therefore have to reach two different standards, that of normative femininity, and that of their own ethnicity. As Judith Butler explains it, “the symbolic domain, the domain of socially instituted norms, is composed of racializing norms, and that they exist not merely alongside gender norms, but are articulated through one another. Hence, it is no longer possible to make sexual difference prior to racial difference, or, for that matter, to make them into fully separable axes of social regulation and power” (Butler 1993, 182).

Frequently, these axes are in conflict, and hence one or the other wins out. When it is femininity, the ethnicity is ameliorated. When it is femininity, the character is therefore marginalized because she is too far from normal to be central. Does she then, as Judith Butler says, matter? Butler writes, “it will be as important to think about how and to what end bodies are constructed as it will be to think about how and to what end bodies are not constructed and, further, to ask after how bodies which fail to materialize provide the necessary ‘outside,’ if not the necessary support, for the bodies which, in materializing the norm, qualify as bodies that matter” (Butler 1993, 16). She is saying that only certain bodies are really seen in culture and only certain people seem to have significance. This applies well to television and leads to the question, why do “other” girls seem to matter so much less than white characters?

Feminist media studies, which looks for repeated images and tropes, is helpful but not entirely so. “Other” characters simply have more at stake than simply whether they are being held back because of their sex. With such a small sample of characters, each one needs to be analyzed in terms of ethnicity, and with attention to the particular issues of girls and women in each of these groups experience and the feminism of those groups. Few theorists of Black

Feminist Thought, Asian American Feminist Theory, or American Jewish Feminism appear to have analyzed teen characters on television and their invisibility and marginality. However, it is possible to consider these characters on their own terms.

Black Feminist Thought considers not only gender, but also race, and believes neither can be separated from a society that is designed for the benefit of white men. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins writes, “Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable . . . certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. . . . The supposedly seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control” (Hill Collins 2000, 5). There are reasons that African American women do not appear as often as white women, or in roles that are as powerful—because their rise is even more threatening to white male supremacy. For this reason, the few that do appear are marginalized to the point of invisibility.

Asian American feminism also struggles with the axes of race and gender, but adds imperialism to the mix, and a long tradition of an extremely patriarchal culture. Franklin Ng writes that although there are a number of Asian cultures, and so Asian women cannot be considered as part of one cohesive culture, “Domination by men is a commonly shared oppression . . . These women have been socialized to accept their devaluation, restricted roles for women, psychological reinforcement of gender stereotypes, and a subordinate position within Asian communities as well as in the society at large” (Ng 1999, 274). He goes on to explain, “The Asian family . . . is characterized by a hierarchy of authority based on sex, age, and generation, with young women at the lowest level, subordinate to father-husband-brother-son” (Ng 1999, 274). This means the younger Asian woman or girl has almost no power to change her

fate and explains why, when looking at Asian American girls on television, it is important to examine the family dynamics and see in what ways the teen girl is domesticated and marginalized.

While Jewish feminism has been devoted primarily to issues of equality within Jewish religious culture, concerning what sort of access Jewish women have to places in the temple, leadership roles, and ceremonies on par with those of males, “Jewish feminism faces particular challenges in the contemporary American Jewish community. Many communal leaders consider feminist issues secondary to more pressing concerns, such as assimilation or communal unity. Often they present feminism as a danger to ‘Jewish continuity,’ the current buzzword for Jewish survival” (Hyman 1997, np). When looking at modern-day Jewish women on television, this means the amount of assimilation the character appears to experience is important, as is whether or not she is paired romantically with a Jewish character, who, implicitly would provide her with a Jewish child.

The few African American teen girl characters, such as guest characters on *My So-Called Life* and *Buffy*, or Elena from *Felicity*, are portrayed as either worried about seeming “too smart” or categorized as “angry,” and can therefore not be the show’s dedicated smart girl. Asian characters, such as Lane Kim of *Gilmore Girls*, and Janet Sosna of *90210* always have issues with their parents and huge amounts of ambition, which makes them by definition smart, although their excellence at academia seems not to be of their choosing, and Jewish characters, including Andrea Zuckerman of *90210*, Willow Rosenberg of *Buffy*, and Paris Geller of *Gilmore Girls*, who are automatically smart, are nearly always “good,” “brilliant,” and “unsexy,” in ways that make them appear ambivalent and assimilationist, and tend to use their Judaism as a personality quirk, rather than an actual ethnic or religious identity.

Writers and producers of course, create these characters, and their behavior is often circumscribed by network and advertiser demands. As nearly everyone involved with these shows is white (though many are Jewish), it simply may not seem vital for there to be a wider variety of characters, and it is likely much easier for these writers to write for Caucasian characters. Peggy McIntosh suggests that white people, and hence white characters, have it easier than minorities, saying, “White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools , and blank checks” (McIntosh 1988, 291). When the shows deal only with white characters, those behind the scenes can avoid any number of problems including negative stereotyping and interracial relationships.

Viewers, or at least the ones who write angry letters and boycott sponsors products, are also partially responsible for the lack of racial and ethnic diversity on television. As Richard Dyer writes, “Whiteness has been enormously, often terrifyingly effective in unifying coalitions of disparate groups of people. It has generally been much more successful than class in uniting people across national cultural differences and against their best interests (Dyer 1997, 19). This is an issue in culture because not only are white viewers offended when, say, an African American character dates a white character, but frequently African American viewers also have a problem with the African American character dating outside their race, as do Asian and Hispanic groups when characters from those ethnic groups have romances with white characters. Therefore, teen television tends to avoid many of these problems by simply not having many characters of color. For these multiple reasons, teen television has been nearly deracinated and in general racial and ethnic issues are simply ignored. As Naomi Rockler says in her study of *90210* viewers, “This marginalization of people of color reinforces that the idealized beauty norm is thin, fashionable, and almost always White” (Rockler 1999, np). Television’s power means that

not only does programming reinforce the idea of female normativity, but the idea of whiteness as normal is also reinforced.

This chapter will discuss the historic absence of ethnicity on television in general, and teen television in particular, how African American girls are precluded from being smart on teen television, how Asian women are forced into that role and are forced to live a double life in order to have a separate existence from “schoolgirl,” and how Jewish characters are similarly semiotically the brilliant girl and therefore must divest themselves of Jewish characteristics in order to be “seen.” Finally, it concludes by discussing the potential impact of these constructs of race on viewers.

The Whiteness of the Television Screen

While Jewish characters have been present since the dawning of television, and many early programs had characters or hosts who announced and reveled in their Jewishness, this changed by the 1960s. In the 1970s, many television shows explicitly considered race in storylines. Historically, African American characters have been marginalized on television, and change has been slow to come. Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis write in *Enlightened Racism*, “Any attempt to change the form or content of mainstream television will come up against two powerful bastions of conservatism: the profit-oriented predilections of network and advertising executives, and the expectations and tastes of well-conditioned TV audiences” (Jhally and Lewis 1992, 3). Networks have long believed that viewers have a very narrow view of what is acceptable, and this is reinforced in the viewers who never have an opportunity see anything else.

The “breakthrough” show was *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), which featured an African American family, yet was a mainstream hit. It was so popular, in fact, that many critics felt the

upper middle class family was “idealized and whitewashed” (Patton 2001, 234). Jhally and Lewis say that white audiences were comfortable with the Huxtable family because, “The Huxtables appear to reflect an African American culture that white audiences enjoy being exposed to (in many cases because of its familiarity rather than its difference)” (Jhally and Lewis 1992, 37). The Huxtables, who included a doctor father and a lawyer mother, were middle class and were far from the ghetto dwellers of *Good Times* or *Sanford and Son*, or the *nouveau-riche* Jeffersons. They lived like most white families on situation comedies, with few real economic or family problems.

There were five children in the Huxtable family, four of whom were girls ranging (in the first season) from five-year-old Rudy through college-aged Sondra. Although all of these girls worked hard at school because it was a family expectation, only Sondra had typical smart girl characteristics. Yet, she dropped out of Princeton Law School to get married, open a wilderness store, and have twin babies. The next oldest daughter Denise (Lisa Bonet) was a mediocre student who also dropped out of college and got married to a man with a three-year-old daughter. Domesticity seemed to be more important than career.

The Cosby Show spin off *A Different World* (1987-1993) originally revolved around Denise’s exploits as college freshman, but other characters became more central, including male math whiz Dwayne Wayne (Kadeem Hardison) and brainy pre-medical student Kimberly Reese (Charnelle Brown). This show showed young African American characters who were ambitious and did not have to give anything up to be happy and successful in both love and life. Herman Gray writes that the show showed a different view of African American life than earlier shows because creators used “existing television conventions to construct the world of black life at Hillman College. The producers and writers explored, a remarkable range of themes, situations,

stories, sensibilities and characters from within African American social and cultural experiences” (Gray 1995, 95).

Yet even though viewers of many races accepted that show, its power did not extend to other shows with African American casts, which were viewed mostly by African American audiences. Where “mainstream” situation comedies could sometimes incorporate a token minority character, dramas seem to have more trouble. This could be because of the “realness” of drama, or the potential for more romance, and hence more sex, between characters. When teen television began in 1990, African American and other characters of color were entirely absent. On those rare occasions when they were there, they were extremely marginal. Why would this be?

Even on teen shows that do include an African American character who appears in the opening credits, the part is often a smaller or supporting role who gets less screen time than most white counterparts. As Tracey Owens Patton states, “Visibility does not necessarily equate to equity in mediated representation of the other” (Patton 2001, 113). There is no point in having more African American characters on television if they are rarely on screen, or are characterized in such a shallow way that they are stereotypes. She goes on to quote bell hooks, who explains, “For the most part television and movies depict a world where African Americans and whites co-exist in harmony although the subtext is clear; this harmony is maintained because no one really moves from the location white supremacy allocates them on the race-sex hierarchy” (hooks 1996, 113). She is saying that although everyone seems to get along like equals, yet no one really changes the traditional world order. It simply seems normal to viewers for racial minority characters to have less screen time on teen television.

Teen shows similarly portray a world in which there are minorities, and they are there to cause conflict and in many cases for the major characters to “help” and to demonstrate their own inclusiveness and lack of racism while showing “diversity,” yet the teen shows have traditionally not cast non-white, non-WASP characters in regular roles. As delineated in Chapter 1, The Fox network originally catered to both the “youth market” and the “Urban” market, and had a number of shows aimed at and starring African American characters, but once the network became more successful ceded these programs to The WB and UPN networks. With the merging of the two networks into The CW, the number of both teen shows and “urban” shows has decreased by half, with the girl oriented *Gilmore Girls* and *Veronica Mars* on Tuesday nights and the male starring *Supernatural*, *Smallville*, and *One Tree Hill*, all of which have entirely white casts, on other days of the week. Only Monday night still features the “urban” shows.

In 2006, Lori Openden, an executive of The CW said, “UPN was the best of all six networks at minority casting . . . The WB was not the best or even second best, and so we’re inheriting and combining a lot of shows that are not committed to minority casting the way we were. We’re going to be adding that kind of casting to The WB shows, but obviously we have to do it slowly. We can’t just fire everyone on *One Tree Hill* and put in minority actors.” (Horwich 2006, np). This is indicative the long time systemic reasons why the television networks have taken so long to increase minority representation in general both in front of and behind the camera, and the fact that this representation has increased is due, in large part, to the concerted efforts of a few minority advocacy groups.⁷⁴ These days, in many opening credit sequences,

⁷⁴ In 1999 the NAACP and other minority groups threatened to boycott the “big four” television networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC) if they did not increase minority representation both in front of and behind the camera. NAACP President Kweisi Mfume “rebuked the four major television networks for a 1999 prime-time programming lineup that he said was ‘a virtual whitewash’ of actors, directors, producers and writers. ‘This glaring omission,’ he said at the time, ‘is an outrage and a shameful display by network executives who are either clueless, careless or

there appears to be a virtual rainbow of characters with shows such as *ER* adding minority characters, and shows like *Lost* and *Grey's Anatomy* have casts which are approximately half white and half “other” types of characters, although in all three cases the leads are still white. Even when minority actors are cast, there is also no guarantee that the characters will be seen. *Gilmore Girls*, which has man of color (Black, but French), and the Asian Lane, and *Veronica Mars* which features the African American Wallace, and Latino Weevil in the opening credits rarely show any of these characters for long, and they do not appear at all in many episodes.

Despite the fact that, “African Americans continue to watch more TV than any other demographic group, an average of 76.8 hours a week . . . compared with 53.1 hours a week for whites” (Levin, 2003), their buying power is considered “less than,” and so shows are still pitched to the audience who is most likely to respond to the advertiser’s products. Therefore, shows tend to cater to one demographic to the other, either having a predominantly African American cast or a predominantly white cast, but rarely any kind of parity.

Much of the problem with prominently featuring ethnic characters in major roles may come from the fear of miscegenation that seemed as if it disappeared decades ago. Yet interracial relationships are still extremely rare and the majority of the minority male characters are somehow sexless.⁷⁵ As television is in many ways more conservative than movies, it would appear that part of the problem for the network and producers of these shows is that if they are going to have an African American character, and this character is going to have a romantic

both” (Wickham 2003, np). An article in The Toronto Star in 2000 reported, “The networks subsequently signed various agreements with the NAACP without actually committing to quotas” (Kloer 2000, np). The networks then added a number of minority characters to mainstream dramas. At the time of Mfune’s complaint, The WB and UPN networks were not considered part of the problem, because they had a large number of shows aimed at minority audiences. However, The WB was almost completely white by the 2005-2006 season, its last.

⁷⁵ For example, Wallace on *Veronica Mars*, and Pete on the early seasons of *Smallville* and decidedly non-threatening and do not have serious relationships, and the Latino Rickie of *MSCL* is gay, but has no romantic relationships beyond crushes.

relationship, then another minority character must be added to the show, which tips the balance to more minority representation than the networks or advertisers are comfortable with.

There is a very narrow spectrum of what television executives believe Americans consider beautiful. Frequently the seeming whiteness is actually a matter of appearances. As discussed in Chapter 3, even when there is a female character from a racial or ethnic minority group, the actress playing her often has at least one white parent, several actresses of color or ethnicity play white characters, and non-Jews often play Jewish characters (and vice versa). The amount of impersonation of course, depends on the “visibility” of the difference in the character. Rory Gilmore, whose upper class grandmother’s ancestors came to the United States on the Mayflower, is played by the Mexican and Argentine Alexis Bledel who “looks white,” with her very blue eyes and straight, light brown hair.

When women of color do appear, they are often those who look relatively white. Black feminist scholar Jacqueline Bobo writes of the “big butts” that keep most African American women from attaining the standard for beauty in mainstream media, saying, “Such explicit focus on the behind counters mainstream definitions of what constitutes a sexually attractive female body. American culture, in defining its female sex symbols, places a high premium on long thin legs, narrow hips, and relatively small behinds. . . . The aesthetic hierarchy of the female body in mainstream American culture . . . positions many Black women somewhere near the bottom” (Bobo 2001, 249). Therefore very few African American girls can be the “hotties” these shows require.

Asian women have long been fetishized in the media as exotic dragon ladies or geishas, but on the teen shows they are neither. Anne Anlin Cheng writes of, “the racialization and commodification of Asian and Asian American women in Hollywood, which has historically

ensured that the only access to any kind of stardom for a woman of color must be through her gender (that is, her feminine beauty that compensates for her racial lack)” (Cheng 2000, 205). In the cases of the Asian teen girls on television, they are considered attractive, but certainly “less than” their Caucasian peers.

Of course Jewish is not a visible minority, but there are typical characteristics that have long denoted a Jewish character in the media, many of which are anathema to the rules of televisual beauty for teens. Sylvia Barack Fishman, who studied mixed marriages, writes, “Focus group participants were quite clear on the details of what it means to ‘look Jewish’; the ubiquitous ‘big’ Jewish nose, ‘heavy’ features rather than ‘chiseled’ features, large amounts of dark and curly hair, striking dark eyes with big eyebrows, short, buxom, somewhat overweight, an appearance often accompanied by a kind of physical ineptitude. . . perceptions of Jewish women on television were ‘outside of the mainstream of what is considered beautiful’” (Fishman 2004, 110).

Although Gabrielle Carteris who played Andrea Zuckerman on *90210*, and who is Jewish, has the brown curly hair and (for television) somewhat zaftig build that are common characteristics in Ashkenazi Jewish women, neither the red-haired and waify Alyson Hannigan (who some reports say is also Jewish, and others say is not), who played Willow Rosenberg on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, nor the blonde Liza Weil (who is not) who plays Paris on *Gilmore Girls* “look Jewish.” Liese Spencer describes, “conventional wisdom among studio heads and casting directors being that Jewish women just ain’t sexy. Or at least, those that are don’t look Jewish—think of honorary WASPs such as Gwyneth Paltrow, Alicia Silverstone and Patricia Arquette—and certainly shouldn’t start playing Jewish roles. No, leave that to gentiles like [the non-Jewish actress Minnie] Driver” (Spencer 1998, 13). Even when the “ethnicity” is correct,

often the origin is not, as when the Japanese Keiko Agena and Emily Kuroda play the Korean Lane Kim and her mother, and when half Korean and half German-Irish Lindsay Price played the Japanese Janet on the final season of *90210*.

There is also little equality in terms of how often these characters are seen and how many lines they speak. While Willow appears on every episode of *Buffy* and tends to be integral to most plots, Elena and Andrea are often relegated to the “C” stories on their shows. Lane Kim and Paris Geller frequently do not even appear in episodes of *Gilmore Girls* and when they do, it is in only a few scenes and often also in a “C” plot. In no cases are “other” girls the lead character. The first group to consider is African American girls, who in many ways have the roughest time on teen television, because they are so rarely visible.⁷⁶

African American Girls

In order to discuss the African American smart girl on TV, it is important to discuss the issues around her absence because with a few exceptions, she does not exist. She is invisible. In fact, if this chapter were to stick to the main five shows, and actual cast members who appear in the opening credits on those shows, this section would not be possible, because there has never been a regularly appearing African American female character on any of them. It must consider either guest characters on those shows, and/or expand the sample to include *Felicity*. It is important to examine the girls that do appear, however, as Christine Griffin puts it, “If girls and young women have been and remain relatively invisible in most youth research, then some girls and young women have been more invisible than others” (Griffin 2004, 30). Perhaps, due to television’s reliance on stereotypes, because viewers have seen so few smart African American

⁷⁶ *Freaks and Geeks* is entirely devoid of characters of color and the only Jewish character is a boy, hence it will not be discussed further in this section. On the DVD commentary, the creators even point out the single African American male extra while laughing that he is the coolest guy in school (*Freaks and Geeks* DVD). The school is meant to reflect the creator’s own high school experiences in a largely white suburb of Michigan.

girls on television, the networks feel that viewers would be unable to recognize such a figure. As bell hooks writes, “race talk” in the media, “repeatedly tells us that blacks are inferior to whites . . . if we put on airs and act like we fancy intellectuals there is always some pure soul let the world know we ain’t as we seem” (hooks 1995, 4). It is simply unimaginable to many that an African American girl gets by on brains.

As the only African American smart girl in a regular role on a show featuring teenagers (though college-aged ones) in the post-*Cosby/Different World* era, Elena of *Felicity* represents a lot. Over the four-seasons of the show she moves from antagonist to best friend of the lead character. In a sense, she’s yin to fellow smart girl Felicity’s yang, the “smart-ass” counterpart to Felicity’s more restrained and nice smart girl.⁷⁷ While both are pre-medical students at the fictional prestigious “University of New York” and both study hard, Elena is much more driven and competitive than the helpful, suggestible, sometimes flighty Felicity (who changes her major from medicine to art and then back again). Elena is allowed to be this way in part because she is not the main character, but perhaps also because she is already an outsider due to her race (and also due to her social class, which is lower than that of the other characters.) In Elena’s early episodes, however, her role is to be “the angry black woman.” *The Boston Globe* says, “Stereotypes about black women have coursed through pop culture for centuries. . . . But the one getting a major workout these days is the angry black woman. . . . The black woman who’s achievement-oriented, kind of no-nonsense, overworked, exhausted, not particularly kind or compassionate, but very driven” (Jones 2004, F1).

This describes Elena, who misses her first date with (African American) love interest Blair because she must stand in line for three hours to get reserve readings for a pre-medical

⁷⁷ I have earlier pointed out this same sort of division of labor between two smart girls in contrasting the more passive Rory Gilmore and the aggressive Paris Geller of *Gilmore Girls*.

class, who sleeps with a male professor and subsequently gets an A, and who wants to break up with her next boyfriend when she finds out he wants to “wait until marriage.” Although attractive and capable of having a good time, she spends much less time than Felicity—who is enmeshed in a love triangle for the entire tenure of the show—on frivolous pursuits. Therefore, we have the conflicting tropes of the “angry Black woman,” and the “smart girl.” These concepts are too dissimilar for television to represent them at the same time.

Unlike a typical smart girl, Elena is not a virgin when first introduced, and has a level of street smarts that none of the other girls possess. Part of her role is to be the oversexed city girl. Yet, midway through the season, when she meets a man she is interested in she says to Felicity (who, predictably for a television smart girl has never even had a boyfriend before the show starts), “I had my life pretty well figured out, that goes for the guys in my life, too, the ones I *usually* get with. Things are pretty clear from the start. They have needs, I have needs. And sex happens when it happens. And when I want to end something with a guy it’s the same thing. It’s . . . There’s no guilt, no tears, nothing. I just squash it and kill it dead” (“Cheating”).

Her anger and frustration is due to a past of deprivation as a poor girl, and a record of discrimination as African American. Her drive has to do with beating the odds and making something of herself that society is not prepared for her to have. Debbie Weekes writes that, “Though there are historical associations between Blackness and sexuality, discourses of silence and shame surround the expression of Black female sexuality. . . which is linked as much to the tension between respectability and deviance . . . as it is to the contradictions between lived African American female experience and public imagery” (Weekes 2004, 144). Television, with its reliance on comforting stereotypes, cannot handle the conflicting needs of a character who is more sexually mature than the others, but also more academically driven. Ultimately, after

appearing mysteriously little in the last season of the show (either not appearing at all, or showing up to say two or three lines and then disappearing), she is accepted to medical school but is killed off in the final episode. There may have been behind the scenes intrigue involved, or perhaps Tangi Miller had other work that kept her off screen, but the message to viewers was that Elena somehow mattered less than her (white) companions, Felicity, Noel, Ben, and Meghan. Her stories became progressively less important as the show went on. *Felicity* was created during the “girl power” era of feminism, and Elena does appear as a strong woman unlike many seen on television, but her disappearance undercuts her power.

There are two other cases in which an African American girl does appear as “the smart girl” in a sense, though each is a guest-starring role. On *My So-Called Life*, in the episode “Self Esteem” Angela is failing geometry because she makes out with Jordan Catalano in the boiler room rather than attending class. She sits in the restroom before a quiz, realizing that she will certainly fail it. Abyssinia is also there, but for a different reason. She is an excellent math student and receives a 98 on the quiz Angela fails, but has told a boy she likes that she received a grade of “60,” two points less than he earned. She decides to skip the quiz saying she is, “Sick of being the little schoolgirl. It’s just not worth it” (“Self Esteem”). In the next scene Abyssinia is teaching Angela the geometry, and Angela appears to be catching on. While Angela does not take the quiz (because Jordan takes her hand in public for the first time and they go off to “talk”) it seems almost certain that Abyssinia does, and earns another A.

Although Abyssinia does not make any reference to her race in her few scenes, and there is no reason this character could not have been white or Asian, the “schoolgirl” comment actually makes this “a Black thing.” To be called a “schoolgirl” is often a major insult among African Americans and is tantamount to telling a girl she is “acting white.” As Midge Wilson

and Kathy Russell point out, “For some adolescent Black girls, doing well in school can actually make them feel worse about themselves” (Wilson and Russell 1996, np). Signithia Fordham, a Rutgers University professor who writes about “acting white” says African American girls can “adopt one of two demeanors at school: they can become silent, in effect acting like those docile White girls whom the teachers seem to adore, or they can become one of ‘those loud Black girls,’ . . . who always mouth off, crack jokes, and disrupt class” (Wilson and Russell 1996, np).

While the first strategy allows an African American girl to pursue academic excellence, she does so at the risk of social rejection and hostile accusations from other African American students that she is acting White. The second strategy thus holds much appeal for a smart African American girl, as she is better able to preserve her popularity with her African American peers, albeit at the risk of getting poorer grades, being suspended, or even dropping out. By becoming one of “those loud Black girls,” she can avoid, in Fordham’s words, “the perceived ‘nothingness’ of White middle-class notions of womanhood and femininity.” If Abyssinia had been louder, she might have echoed the Riotgrrl ethos of the show. As she appears in only one other episode of *MSCL* before NBC cancels it, and has only a few lines in it as a member of the cast of *Our Town*, it is impossible to know if she would have broken out of her role, and instead she remains invisible.

The third girl in this grouping is Kendra (Bianca Lawson), who appears on *Buffy* in three episodes in the second season.⁷⁸ Buffy “dies” briefly at the end of the first season, and Kendra, who comes from Jamaica and speaks with an accent, arrives as the new Vampire Slayer, and begins to work with Buffy and the group. She has many of the smart girl characteristics. Like

⁷⁸ The final season of *Buffy* features a host of “slayers in training,” several of whom are from minority groups, but since each has only a few lines, and they are hardly differentiated from each other and none is shown as particularly smart or studious, they are not useful for this analysis.

Buffy, she is supernaturally strong and has quick reflexes. Unlike rebellious Buffy, however, she has actually read a “Slayer’s Manual” and has been trained from birth to follow the rules. She says, “The things you do and have, I was taught, distract from my calling. Friends, school . . . even family . . . Emotions are weakness, Buffy. You shouldn’t entertain them” (“What’s My Line Part 1”). She has never talked to boys, and appears to have had no social life at all before coming to Sunnydale. Buffy determines, “Your technique, it’s flawless, it’s, hmm, better than mine. . . Still, I woulda kicked your butt in the end. And ya know why? No imagination” (What’s My Line Part 2”). There is a distinction here between smart and creative, and simply studious, that reflects much older television.

Kent Ono believes that when there are minority characters on the show, “*Buffy* relies on what have now come to be conventional depictions of racial (and other) marginalized characters, depictions that may appear to be harmless, if one simply blocks out the similar way marginalized characters appear in everyday news discourse” (Ono 178). However, with only Kendra to demonstrate how an African American girl can behave, how she is shown matters a great deal.⁷⁹ Kirkland writes that although she is “Initially perceived as a threat, Kendra’s eventual acceptance . . . is contingent upon adopting Buffy’s (white) attitudes and perspectives, although ultimately doomed to failure.” (Kirkland 2005, 9). Kendra is not only less successful than Buffy, but dies. Parks writes, “What is interesting about *Buffy* is that many episodes suggest the white teen characters’ desire for racial/ethnic integration . . . But The WB network itself is simply unwilling to embrace such a policy. Characters of different ethnic backgrounds are always killed off at

⁷⁹ Lynne Edwards has called Kendra a “tragic mulatta” in her 2002 book chapter, “Slaying in African American and White: Kendra as Tragic Mulatta in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” considering her an example of the common literary archetype of a character caught between the African American and white worlds, and therefore sad or suicidal. Although she is not white, Kendra is played by the light-skinned African American actress Bianca Lawson, and hence can fall into this trope, particularly as she dies in her final episode.

WB” (Parks 2003, 157). As the best representative of a Girl Power show, *Buffy* has shown that “Girls Rule,” but only if they are white.

“Black” is, of course, the opposite of white. Of all the minority groups, African Americans are furthest from “normal” and cannot become any whiter through a makeover. The African American girl, and particularly the smart African American girl, is entirely doomed on teen television. She will die, be written off the show, or be marginalized. In any of those cases she is invisible. Her lack of ability to become normative like the other smart girls means there is just no space for her. Like African American girls, Asian girls also have a “look” that cannot be altered, but fit somehow in a liminal space between African American and White. This will be considered in the next section.

Asian Girls

Most Asian American characters on television in the last several decades comply with the idea of the “model minority.” Although, as Frank H. Wu explains in *Yellow*, Asian Americans are not quite “American” to many people, they “are said to be intelligent, gifted in math and science, polite, hard working, family oriented, law abiding, and successfully entrepreneurial” (Wu 2002, 40). In general, when Asians are on television, they are doctors, judges, or shopkeepers, are unfailingly hard working and ambitious, and rarely cool, creative, or criminal. *Children Now* also reports that, “Asian Pacific American and Latino characters on prime time were the least developed of all characters of color” (Children Now 2000, 18). They conform most strongly to their stereotypes.

Asian American feminism adds imperialism and colonization to the axes of gender and race. Sonia Shah writes in *Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breath Fire* that Asian American women must deal with two cultures, that of the United States and that of the various

Asian American communities, which often have values and requirements that are in opposition. There are two ways Asian American women have been depicted in the media. The first way Asian American women are shown on television serves to “validate a vision of assimilated, integrated Asians happy to have their unequal share of the pie. As always we are welcome as long as we claim to be just like everyone else” (Shah 1997, 20). She goes on to discuss how even among some newer, hipper images, “In the ongoing repackaging and commodification of Asian female-ness, difference is superficial, only skin deep, and influence is measured in dollar signs, purely by market value. The pleasure we derive from seeing ourselves in the spotlight comes at the price of more visible marginalization” (Shah 1997, 20). While modern Asian female characters do not fit the old-fashioned stereotype either of the “dragon lady,” or of the “geisha,” they all struggle to assimilate to the modern world against the wishes of their parents.

There have been only two regular Asian characters in the teen shows, and no significant Asian teen guest stars. Janet Sosna is a brainy Japanese-American newspaper editor who comes to work at Brandon and Steve’s newspaper on *90210* after graduating from college. Janet begins as a guest star in the ninth season and is a regular in the tenth, but her storyline is predominantly devoted to her being the Caucasian Steve Sander’s girlfriend. She has no real storylines of her own apart from her relationship with Steve and she is not really part of “the gang.” A major facet of being Asian on television is secrecy when it comes to romance. She and Steve have sex, and she becomes pregnant and decides to get married. Her parents actually disown her for this, not because she got pregnant out of wedlock but because she wants to marry a man who is not Japanese. She turns to subterfuge and rebellion and does marry Steve. Of course, she and her parents end up making up in the end. In the last few episodes of the show and Janet turns down a

high-powered magazine editing job in order to work where she can stay with her daughter—a typical storyline during the backlash to feminism. Like Andrea Zuckerman’s story on the same show, motherhood comes first over ambition. Whether this is because she is “other” is not clear, but none of the white girls on the show become mothers.

Lane Kim of *Gilmore Girls* is the only one the audience meets while she is still in high school. Lane’s “double life” is one of the more intriguing parts of the show, yet as a character in a supporting role to Rory and Lorelai, it takes almost four seasons for her story develop. While she is clearly as smart as Rory, and earned straight A’s while in high school because her mother would accept nothing less, her story has as much to do with ethnicity as with intelligence. As a rock and roll drummer who rejects college, Lane is seemingly unlike a typical Asian girl. In part, this is because she is based on one of the show’s co-producers, Helen Pai, who grew up with creator Amy Sherman-Palladino. Many of Lane’s experiences come from Pai’s stories, so Lane can be seen as not so much of a stereotype but as more of a well-rounded character (Tsai 2006, np). Yet in many ways, Lane does echo many Asian American female television characters because her storyline is about conflict with her mother, subterfuge, and rebellion, and she, too, chooses young motherhood.

In the first episode of the series, Lane’s dilemma is put forth: she does not want to conform to the typical Asian American stereotype. While her parents want her to attend a hayride with a nice Korean boy of their choosing, she does not want to, although she does so. When away from home she wears hip t-shirts, and listens to what Rory jokingly calls “the evil rock music” (“Pilot”). During the high school seasons of the show she is frequently shown in an extremely tidy bedroom whose blandness belies the “secret closet” which Lane has equipped with a black light, CDs, and various Rock and Roll accessories she keeps buried under her floor.

At one point, she has Rory help her dye her hair purple, and loves it, but dyes her hair back to black before her mother can see.

Finally, in the fourth season of the show, the band she has joined as a drummer has an opportunity to play CBGB, the legendary New York rock club. Lane, who is still living at home and attending the Seventh-Day Adventist college her mother chose for her, ponders a way to ask her mother if she can go, but realizing there is no way her mother will agree, just goes. In the meantime, Mrs. Kim enters Lane's room and finds the CDs kept under a loose floorboard. She asks how long Lane has been keeping secrets and Lane replies, "I started it when I was six, the day you told me the Cookie Monster was one of the seven deadly sins. . . . Yes, gluttony. . . . I want to please you so badly, but I can't" ("In the Clamor and the Clangor"). She asks her mother to let her attend a non-secular community college and to allow her to stay out late only on nights the band plays. Mrs. Kim replies, "Children do not make the rules. You may . . . move out and live like that somewhere else" ("In the Clamor and the Clangor").

Lane has been shown to be weak and secretive, and Mrs. Kim unbending. Mrs. Kim in many ways does reflect the idea of the model minority. She owns her own antique shop, and drives a hard bargain. She is also very active in her church and in the community, mostly contributing very unpleasant-sounding health food alternatives at town festivals. The relationship between Lane and her mother reflect the common stereotypes about Asian American families perfectly. As Korean-Americans, the Kims have gone through life assuming that a daughter obeys her mother, and that she must be kept on the straight and narrow against the temptations of modern day America. However, it is television's rules, which keep ethnic girls almost out of sight, which make this storyline so challenging for viewers. It is not a problem that Lane and her mother argue after her mother finds her secret life—in fact, such a confrontation has been

building since the first episode. What is at issue is how this storyline is so minor a part the show that for many episodes Lane either does not appear at all, or has a very tiny scene with a few lines. It is nearly impossible to get closure.

Like other Asian characters on television, Lane also feels she must keep her romantic life from her mother. Unlike African American women, who generally are paired with African American men on television, Asian women are somehow in an in-between place where they can be attractive to white men or African American men, although rarely Asian men, who barely exist on television, and are generally quite sexless when they do.⁸⁰ Gary Y. Okihiro asks in his book *Margins and Mainstreams*, “Is yellow black or white? . . . Implicit within the question is a construction of American society that defines race relations as bipolar—between Black and white—and that locates Asians (and American Indians and Latinos) somewhere along the divide between Black and white. Asians, thus, are ‘near whites’ or ‘just like Blacks’” (Okihiro 1994, 33) depending on who is deciding and under what circumstances. It is not terribly surprising then that the three important Asian female characters from the present day medical shows *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy* have had relationships with both African American and white men.⁸¹

Lane’s first romance is with Henry, a Korean boy she meets at Rory’s school, and her subsequent ones with Caucasian young men in her band. Despite Henry’s obvious eligibility,

⁸⁰ Once again very recent shows have changed this a bit. Sun and Jin Kwon (Yunjin Kim and Daniel Dae Kim) of *Lost* are a Korean couple, although early on it looked as if she would have a relationship with the African American Michael. Although Hiro of *Heroes* and his sidekick Ando are not sexy characters (they are predominantly comic relief), Hiro had a short romance with a white woman.

⁸¹ Jing Mei Chen of *ER* becomes pregnant by an African American nurse who she does not marry, and she feels she must give up the baby for adoption because her parents would object to a biracial baby. Later she is romantically paired with the African American doctor Greg Pratt, which also causes friction between Jing Mei and her parents. Neela Rasgotra of the same show does not have a romantic relationship in her first season on the show, but does flirt with the African American doctor Michael Galant, whom she will later marry when he returns from the Gulf War. She is then placed in a “love triangle” between two white men. Christina Yang of *Grey’s Anatomy* begins a relationship with African American attending surgeon Preston Burke early on in the series. While her mother does not appear to object, his mother does have a problem with her son having an interracial romance.

Lane keeps all of these intrigues secret from her mother at first. The relationship with Henry never even gets off the ground because Lane's goal of keeping secrets from her mother means they cannot meet without complicated machinations. She says, "Ok so he's really good in school, he's going to be a doctor, pediatrician to be exact, his parents are extremely involved in their local church. He, himself, helps out with Sunday school. He speaks Korean fluently, he respects his parents, and he's also really cute, very funny, and surprisingly interesting." This seems good, both to the audience and to Rory, but Lane goes on, "I'm falling for a guy my parents would approve of! They'd love him, they'd go crazy! There'd be dancing in the Kim house! Dancing! Followed by a lot of praying but initially there'd be dancing. This is horrible. This can't happen. I have to stop it" ("The Breakup, Part 2"). When the plans to go on a date never materialize, Henry finally decides it is too complicated and invites someone else to his school dance.

Lane and a member of her band get married when she is 21, she becomes pregnant on their honeymoon, and her story becomes about juggling her mother's intrusiveness with her wish to be alone with her new husband and bring up her babies her own way. The initial sexual experience is horrible and she never has an opportunity to be the sexy girl, which sends an inadvertent message that Asian smart girls are not sexy, and there is no point in waiting for marriage. In addition, her husband is given the opportunity to play guitar for a successful band. While the original plans are for Lane to go as well, and she fantasizes she will be asked to replace the drummer, she realizes that twins are too much to handle on tour, and she is left at home, domesticated and trapped. This storyline belies the Post-feminism of Rory and Paris's storylines, which give them each a career.

The Asian girl or woman, when she exists, is put in a position where she has to hide her true self, as she has a job or place in school she did not necessarily choose for herself, and has

relationships of which her parents or those of her romantic partner do not approve. The idea that one must evade one's parents, and that confrontation is to be avoided at all costs is troubling. Like Janet, Lane, too, gives up her ambitions to take care of the children and this is presented on the show as the appropriate thing, while Rory and Paris get careers. This is the story of Asian women and girls on television.

Once again, the dual requirements to be Asian and to be feminine make the Asian girls' position untenable. Because she is so limited in her potential storylines, she cannot be the central character. Like African American girls she cannot "pass" and is therefore doomed to be a supporting character. However, there is a minority group whose characters can pass, and that is Jewish girls.

Jewish Girls

Unlike the story of the angry African American girl, who cannot be smart, and the duplicitous Asian girl, who is not smart because she likes to be but because her parents insist, the story of the smart Jewish girl is primarily about ambivalence and assimilation. Since Jewish characters are from a "non-visible" minority group, they are vocal about their otherness when it suits the story, do not mention it at other times. This assimilation is possible because while most televisual stories of African Americans and Asian Americans are created by writers, directors and producers who are not from those racial groups, stories of Jewish characters are different. Like Asians, they too inhabit a somewhat liminal space, but are far less clearly identifiable and subject to prejudice that is less clear cut than that against African Americans and Asians as they are, themselves white. Richard Dyer writes that the concept of "White":

Creates a category of maybe, sometimes whites, peoples who may be let in to whiteness under particular historical circumstances. The Irish, Mexicans, Jews and people of mixed

race provide striking instances: often excluded, sometimes indeed being assimilated into the category of whiteness, and at others treated as a 'buffer' . . . between the white and the African American or indigenous. On the other hand, whiteness as a coalition also incites the notion that some whites are whiter than others. (Dyer 1997, 19)

Although it may appear that anti-Semitism has abated, looking up "Jews in Hollywood" on the Internet brings up a host of very hostile web sites and comments. The hostility against the notion that "Jews run Hollywood" often causes Jewish people who are, in fact, powerful in the film and television industries to attempt to erase their ethnicities in an effort to assimilate and stay under the radar.

As is well established, many people working in Hollywood, including on teen television, are Jewish themselves, including Aaron Spelling and Darren Star, creators of *90210*, Marshall Herskovitz, Edward Zwick, and Winnie Holzman, the creators of *My So-Called Life*, Judd Apatow, creator of *Freaks and Geeks*, and Amy Sherman-Palladino, the creator of *Gilmore Girls*, as well as many of the other writers, producers, and network executives who influence the shows. When working on television shows, many creative people have to be careful not to include too much that is Jewish, and hence the protagonists of hour-long dramas almost never are Jewish. Those characters that have been allowed to lead shows been men (for example, the leads of *Northern Exposure*, *thirtysomething*, and one of the co-leads of 2006's *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* are all adult men).⁸² Perhaps this is why the Jewish smart girls considered the most in this dissertation are all "sidekicks" to the main characters.

For many decades, television executives resisted even putting Jewish characters on screen. David Zurawik writes in *The Jews of Prime Time* that CBS claimed to have done

⁸² Although once again, of those three only Rob Morrow of *Northern Exposure* is Jewish. Ken Olin of *thirtysomething* and Matthew Perry of *Studio 60* are not.

research saying that Americans did not want to see “Jews, divorced people, people from New York or men with mustaches” on their television screens (Zurawik 2003, 15). There is also an issue with putting Jewish characters on screen because the Jewish characters must represent the creative people behind them in a positive light. As Marshall Herskovitz, who was instrumental in dramas like *thirtysomething*, *My So-Called Life*, and *Once and Again*, put it, “you just feel the sense of fear in the room of what it means to be a Jew, the fear of putting yourself too far out there—that you will in some way make a spectacle of yourself, you will embarrass. In these meetings, people still say, ‘Is it good for the Jews?’ You hear that all the time. There is this sense that we are an endangered minority” (Zurawik 2003, 15). Therefore, television producers become extremely careful of what they put on screen.

When Jewish characters have been present, it has primarily been in situation comedies. As Vincent Brook writes in *Something Ain't Kosher Here: the Rise of the 'Jewish' Sitcom*, the comedy form possesses “a quality of subterfuge purportedly inherent to the form: precisely because the sitcom, like broad comedy generally, discourages individualistic identification with well-developed characters and is not to be taken seriously makes it an ideal means for contesting dominant cultural values and breaking normative taboos” (Brook 2004, 9). In dramas, however, there is a sense of “the real” that shows like *Seinfeld* and *Mad about You* lack, and hence viewers expect to identify with the characters. It is unlikely; however, that most viewers would want to identify with a character like *MSCL*'s Brian Krakow, who is socially clueless and apparently has no friends at all. Michelle Byers writes that, “Brian is specifically constructed as Jewish only after several episodes of the show. But in reviewing earlier episodes, a pattern of Jewish stereotypes appears in the construction of Brian's character: he is a ‘brain,’ his parents are a psychologist and a psychiatrist, he is upper middle class, he is anxious and high-strung and

uptight” (Byers 1998, 716). All of these things make him “other” and he is similar to the smart girls in many ways.

However, it is more complicated for the girl characters, because they are on television to be attractive and sexy. Brook writes, “Gender differences further complicate the notion of Jewish identity, with gendered stereotypes ranging from the *fin de siecle* feminized Jewish male to the modern Israeli ‘Muscle Jew,’ and from the exotic/erotic femme fatale of Sarah Bernhardt’s day to the sexually frigid (if voraciously opportunistic) Jewish Princess of the post-World War II era” (Brook 2004, 13). While the Jewish American Princess has been seen occasionally on television, most notably on the situation comedy *The Nanny*, and as demonstrated by Rona Lieberman, Becca’s romantic rival in *Life Goes on*, for the most part Jewish teen girls are not so much frigid as, like all smart girls, the most sexually inexperienced and least romantically adept of their circles, (with the exception of the very religious Christian girls.) They also have a reputation for being plain. Zurawik writes that television has shown that Jewish women are less attractive than WASP women since the 1970s, particularly as Jewish men on television rarely dated them. He writes, “In the 1970’s we’d see that message about Jewish women reproduced in Rhoda Morgenstern who was pretty enough but certainly no Mary Richards. And, starting with Bridget of *Bridget Loves Bernie* in 1972 and going straight through to *Mad About You*, we see it reproduced and, in fact, reified in the choices generally made by the Jewish men of prime time when it comes to object of their desire” (Zurawik 2003, 38).

Therefore lead characters Brenda Walsh and Kelly Taylor of *90210*, Buffy Summers of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Angela Chase of *My So-Called Life*, Lindsay Weir of *Freaks and Geeks*, and Rory Gilmore of *Gilmore Girls* have no obvious religion or ethnicity at all beyond white and nominally Christian. They can each, however, have a male or female sidekick who

identifies as Jewish and can therefore be the “other.” Brook writes that being Jewish is complicated as it is, “a religion, a race, an Ethnicity, a culture, a sensibility, a unique historical consciousness” (Brook 2004, 11). The Jewish characters are strictly ethnic Jews, tossing off references to Bat Mitzvahs, but rarely discussing what it means to be Jewish.⁸³

Andrea Zuckerman of *90210* does have several storylines related to her Jewishness, though they are all during the college seasons of the show. When she and the other characters first go to college, all the girls in the group attend sorority rush. After one member suggests that she hide her Jewishness, Andrea attends the next event wearing a necklace with a Jewish star on it in order to test the sorority’s anti-Semitism. This member turns out to be Jewish herself, but has hidden her identity from the rest of the sorority, who tell her they would not have rebuffed her because of her Judaism, and welcome Andrea with open arms, though she decides not to join a sorority at all. This is particularly notable because it is based on a true story and exemplifies Hollywood’s ambivalence. Sherrill Kushner reported that, “Gabrielle Carteris, the ‘real life’ daughter of a Jewish mother and Greek father, plays a socially conscious, Jewish identified student on the popular television series *Beverly Hills, 90210*. When she decided to wear a Jewish star during filming, ‘the higher-ups’ asked her to remove it ‘because Middle America is not into that.’ Carteris responded that she would take it off if everybody else she worked with took off their crosses and the executives agreed” (Kushner 1994, np). The fact that the episode aired does suggest some progress in the mid-1990s.

⁸³ This is in contrast to the few truly religious characters, such as the Catholic Donna Martin of *90210*, *Everwood*’s unspecified but devout Hannah, the similar Millie of *Freaks and Geeks*, and Lane of *Gilmore Girls*, whose upbringing is Seventh Day Adventist. In each of these cases, the girl commits to not having sex before marriage for religious reasons, even if she does not comply with the rest of her religion’s strictures. Donna, who dresses more sexily than practically any other character, does decide to have sex late in the show’s run, after the characters have finished college.

Most of the stories are about similarly closeted racism and assimilation. Her first sexual relationship on the show is with Dan Rubin, her Jewish Resident advisor who hopes at first, she does “date Jewish guys.” When she breaks up with him in favor of the Latino man she will eventually marry, the feminist, seemingly liberal Dan suddenly becomes a bigot, calling out “*Adios muchacha*” (“Windstruck”) as he leaves the dormitory and the show.

In another story, she spearheads a campaign to bar a Louis Farrakhan-like character from speaking on campus. She works with other Jewish students on campus, but has to convince David Silver, a far more assimilated Jew who does not care much about the issue but ends up joining the protest. Ultimately, however, after talking with a member of the African American Student Union, she decides to go and takes her Holocaust survivor grandmother, who has also urged her to hear what the man says. Jonathan Pearl writes, “While an effort, perhaps, to soothe some very real tensions that exist between the communities, this denouement is nonetheless highly troubling, as it seems to undermine legitimate concerns about anti-Semitic demagoguery by having a Holocaust survivor urge a calm hearing of such views and having Andrea standing ultimately aloof from the acts meant to counter such views” (Pearl 1999, 83). The message is tolerance and assimilation, not otherness, will save the day. It is hardly surprising that after getting involved in this case, David Silver does not pay attention to Jewish issues again. It is also not a shock that, in the backlash era where women who are too strong, Andrea cannot exist on the show. By standing so strongly by her Judaism, Andrea has pigeonholed herself and it hardly seems astonishing that she is written off the show, and replaced by smart girl characters with no particular religion or ethnicity.

Willow Rosenberg of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* mentions having had a Bat Mitzvah in one episode, but for the most part, as Jon Stratton puts it, “Willow has not been given any

obvious Yiddish identifying markers. In her physical appearance, her accent, her lack of Yiddish grammatical constructions in her speech, lack of Yiddish words and phrases, lack of “uncivilized” excitability, and so on, Willow passes for white. From the point of view of her presentation of self, Willow could be Anglo-American” (Stratton 2005, 187). Hannigan’s appearance, not to mention her last name, is so non-Jewish, that most scholars make the point that the actress is not, although according to some published reports her mother is actually Jewish. Yet she is clearly other, and in the first few seasons her Jewishness is enough to explain why.

In an early episode of the show, when Buffy wants to place a crucifix on Willow’s bedroom wall to protect her from vampires, Willow objects, saying that her father would definitely not approve and that due to his beliefs, “I have to go over to Xander’s house just to watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas* every year” (“Passion”). Yet the very need for crosses on the show is a common issue among fans. When Willow is a vampire herself as she is in one episode, she is afraid of the Christian cross. Kirkland writes, “Willow’s Jewishness might problematise this analysis were it not so marginalised, only occasionally mentioned, and never permitted narrative centrality” (Kirkland 2005, np). While the crosses are never invested with religious significance, and the characters do not attend church, nonetheless the other characters on Buffy are clearly Christian in the sense of being mainstream white. Alderman and Seidel-Arpaci write:

Despite the show’s (for a primetime TV series) rather impressive grappling with all sorts of “difference” and “otherness,” . . . we will find a lingering preference against the “non-white” or “non-Christian,” which subtly undermines the shows’ message of individual empowerment. . . . “multiculturalism” often means homogeneity, and “acceptance” of the

“outsider” is often dependent on the erasure of their “otherness.” (Alderman and Seidel-Arpaci 2003, np)

Despite the clear Christian symbolism of the vampire, god and religion are rarely mentioned and once again, it is in the service of group cohesion.

The fact that Willow realizes she is a lesbian in the fourth season of the show also mitigates her Judaism. She is other because she is smart, other because she is Jewish, because she is a witch, and other for her sexual preference. Yet she is integral to the group. In a sense, when Whedon wanted to add a lesbian character in the fourth season, Willow was the obvious choice, as she was already so othered that it could not further alienate her friends, or the audience, from her. As Culp explains it, “Willow has always been on the outside of Sunnydale’s cultural norms. Marginalization, as well as association with the other members of the Scooby Gang, turns out to be a fertile environment for Willow to establish her own personality and interests” (Culp 2006, 12). Willow is the complete embodiment of what it is to be Jewish and other. In the later seasons of the show, Willow is more allied with “Magick” and her Judaism is rarely mentioned. In addition, as she becomes more central, becoming the “big bad” of season six, her Judaism is almost entirely erased in favor of a much stronger Girl Power.

Paris Geller of *Gilmore Girls* only mentions her Judaism a few times. She does not fast for Yom Kippur, although she does fast for Ramadan because she is writing a newspaper article about the holiday, or appear to do anything to acknowledge her Judaism, although she says, “One time I asked my mother for a Hanukkah bush and she made me watch *Shoah* for a week” (“That’ll Do Pig”). Where Paris “seems” Jewish is in her rabid ambition and her fast-talking style, which she shares with Lorelai and Rory. The creator of the show, Amy Sherman-Palladino attributes the speaking style of the show to Jewish humor. In an article, Naomi Pfefferman

writes, “Sherman-Palladino grew up in Van Nuys with a mom and a dad and a living room full of ex-Catskills comics. ‘There were six or seven of them at my house at all times, all trying to outdo each other. . . They had a rhythm, an energy, a fatalistic way of looking at life—’so you’re gonna die, have a sandwich’ —that eventually seeped into my writing” (Pfefferman 2003, 31A). However, Paris’s personality does not appear to reflect Palladino’s (in interviews she is very much like Lorelai) the way Lane’s reflects Helen Pai’s. On another show, Paris’s fast-paced speaking style might make her stand out, (as it does for the character of Seth Cohen on *The O.C.*), but on *Gilmore Girls* it is unexceptional. Her ambition, too, is not so different from Rory’s, who started the show wanting to be “Christiane Amanpour,” it is only her aggressive approach that makes her “the Jewish one.” As mentioned in earlier chapters, Paris is perpetually punished for her aggressive style in favor of the more passive Rory. She loses out at every turn, yet continues to persevere. As she gets ready to graduate college, unlike Rory, she has lists and charts and applies for multiple graduate schools, fellowships, and jobs in a wide variety of areas and ultimately is accepted to quite a few medical and law school, and chooses Harvard Medical School. Yet she is the figure of fun in contrast to Rory, has one discussion with an editor at the *New York Times*, and one other job interview for a job she turns down because she believes she will get the fellowship at the *New York Times* she wants, which she does not, and has otherwise not been planning for her future.

Like Andrea, Paris, too is domesticated although given the post feminist nature of *Gilmore Girls*, she is assumed to be able to juggle both domesticity and career. She breaks up with her boyfriend, Doyle, when she is accepted to graduate school because she believes it is too early to have found “the one” and wants to make her decisions without worrying about someone else. However, he declares he will follow Paris wherever she goes, and Paris realizes she is in

love with him, but is bittersweet about being tied down too early. When Rory has an anxiety dream about her future, she sees Paris and Doyle, who are clearly hugely successful, famous enough to have met Hillary Clinton and Bono, and also have two children. Despite the fact neither Rory nor Paris ever in seven seasons mention wanting to have children, and Paris is certainly the least maternal character imaginable, nonetheless, this is the measure of success in Rory's mind and the show once again sends a message that an "other" girl is not complete without a family. Like Lane, Paris is on the show so rarely and her character is presented so one-dimensionally, that she might as well be invisible.

The lack of differentiation between the Jewish characters and the other characters serves to show that the only real difference is fanatical ambition and the tendency to concentrate on the less pleasurable parts of life. The nominal attention given to Judaism on these shows makes Judaism less "other" but also less unique. If the matter of being Jewish comes down to being the smart girl who is less attractive to boys, less sexy, and less normative, what is the point? While the depictions are not negative, they are also not positive. Joyce Antler writes that when the media shows Jewish women "erasure and exaggeration remain the dominant characteristics" (Antler 1998, 243). Andrea disappears from her show, Willow becomes evil and is then disempowered, and Paris is frequently the butt of jokes, despite the fact that she, and not Rory, plans ahead for a future after Yale and is destined for early marriage and motherhood. Is it good for the Jews? It is good that all of these girls expect to achieve and seem to be able to continue to thrive academically despite the pressure of their storylines. However, it also means that the Jewish girls are unlikely role models for smart girl viewers.

Conclusion

Things are nominally getting better for non-white and non-Christian characters. A report writes, “As networks add diversity to their prime-time casts, African Americans and whites share more favorite series than ever. Nine of the top 20 series among African American households also are favorites among whites, the most overlap in at least 10 years, because so many shows are multiethnic” (Levin 2003, np). Yet it is still difficult to find characters of color with whom to identify, particularly on the few remaining teen shows. This is important for young viewers. Sonia Manzano, who has played Maria on *Sesame Street*, for nearly forty years, and is Latina, believes it is important for young people to be able to see characters of their ethnic identity. She says, “I can remember when I was a kid in the Bronx watching hours and hours of television, and never seeing anyone who looked like me or spoke like me . . . I know if a child spends his childhood not seeing himself reflected in society, which is mostly on television, it will wear him down . . . If he does not see himself in the media, he does not see himself as part of the society” (Zurawik 2003, 224). Ethnic girls have to go far from network television to see full-blown, three-dimensional images of themselves.

The fact that there can be a character like Betty Suarez (America Ferrara) of ABC’s *Ugly Betty*, one of the 2006-2007 season’s top-rated new shows, is encouraging. Betty is smart, college-educated, and even wears glasses. She is also Latina and the star of a mainstream network show. On the other hand, she dresses terribly, has braces, is overweight, especially by the standards of the staff at the fashion magazine she works for, and does not flirt, act sexy or seem to have as much fun as those around her. She is the voice of common sense, good to her family, and clearly a role model for smart girls, ethnic or not, but does not make them look cool,

and, while not a sidekick on her show, as an assistant, she is in a subordinate position to nearly everyone else at the magazine.

Much of her storyline is devoted to her Latino family, and their class-based issues, including the fact that her father is an illegal alien in contrast to the much sexier murder storyline going on in the male lead's wealthy family. Rebecca Trasker writes, "The U.S. version of *Betty* offers a bracing look at how those class struggles are further fraught by cultural diversity and intolerance The scorn with which Betty is treated at Mode has less to do with her looks than with her place of economic and cultural origin" (Trasker 2007, np).

In short, she cannot be divorced from her ethnicity, and just be young woman on the show, but a Mexican woman. In addition, she is in her 20s, and although certainly teenagers watch the show, it is not a teen show. As no similar attempt has been made to cast an African American, Asian American or Jewish girl or young woman as a lead role, and only the rapidly growing number, and huge economic influence, of Latino/Latina people in the US made a space for *Ugly Betty*, it is hard to see if she will make it any easier for other racially or ethnically "other" main characters.

The message is that racially and ethnically different characters do not matter as much as white characters. They learn that if they want popularity and romance that the best strategy is to become deracinated and assimilate as much as possible. The message is similar to that of the girls who get makeovers, have sex, and give up their activism. During the teen-show era there were very limited ways to be a girl. The conclusion gives a summation of the arguments, discusses some better and more recent television images of smart girls, some new trends for real-life television viewers, and looks for images of smart girls in new media.

CONCLUSION

The End of Teen Television and the Failure of Feminism

In many ways, things have been on an upward trajectory for teenage girls on television when it comes to consistently performing as smart, while also being popular and loved. Rory Gilmore has shown it is possible to be the best student at school and still find love and friendship, and even be the central character of a network drama, not just a sidekick. Paris Geller of *Gilmore Girls* has also shown it is possible to be extremely ambitious, aggressive, and brilliant, with a brilliant career ahead, and have a boyfriend, too. There also appeared to be one bright spot on the horizon when it comes to smart teen girls on television that started after *Gilmore Girls*.

Veronica Mars begins by showing the exploits of a high school junior who works for her private eye father, and frequently solves problems for her high school peers while tackling season-long mysteries as well. Veronica did the same in college during the 2006-2007 season, although there were two separate mysteries and several freestanding episodes. In one episode, she leaves a note for someone up to no good that reads, “Veronica Mars is smarter than me” (“Clash of the Tritons”). She is smarter than everyone around her, does well enough in high school to just miss becoming valedictorian, and is such a good student in her college criminology class that her teacher recommends her for an internship at the FBI. At the same time, she is extremely popular with boys, and although in high school she considers herself a pariah, is clearly a much-admired figure among everyone but the wealthy students, and has had an on-again off-again relationship with the series’ male lead, another smoldering James Dean type.

However, *Veronica Mars* never did well in the ratings, and a number of changes were made, designed to make the show more viewer-friendly and make it more compatible with lead-

in *Gilmore Girls*. These adaptations included removing many of the film noir aspects of the show, such as the dark setting and the morally complicated people, making the mysteries shorter, having free-standing episodes that were not part of an ongoing mystery, and somehow making it so that Veronica was not only not always right, but nearly always wrong, and capable of accusing any number of people of crimes with which they were not involved. She was also made cheerier and perkier, and was given a much more “normal” love interest.

In the end, even the girls of *Gilmore Girls* and *Veronica Mars* are as much slaves to capitalism’s distaste for the feminist as any characters. As both series conclude, writers are commenting on the feminism of these programs. Richard Leader writes in “Rory Gilmore as the Feminist Ideal,” “If *Gilmore Girls* was a show about characters, tragically, Rory was never allowed to be one: she was more of a vehicle, a blank slate of quiet, effortless perfection for launching one boring romance after another” (Leader 2007, np). Although Rory’s life may seem perfect most of the time, Leader continues, “Paris was a deliberate commentary on that perfection, or at least its unattainable nature for women: she was the person Rory would have been were it not for the necessities of network marketing. (Liza Weil had originally auditioned for Rory)” (np). *Gilmore Girls* ends with the girls making major life choices having to do with choosing between career and domesticity. Rory determines that she would rather have a career on her own terms, than the “avocado tree” Logan has imagined for the two of them in California, and turns his marriage proposal down flat, while Paris, with misgivings, ends up with a serious boyfriend who promises to get a job in Cambridge, or wherever Paris chooses to go, and the show suggests that marriage and children are in the cards for the couple. Lane Kim realizes she must stay home with her twins, and that her music career must be sacrificed.

Writers like Mary Pipher, Peggy Orenstein, and Rosalind Wiseman believe real girls are in crisis. In *Reviving Ophelia*, Pipher describes how girls, as they become adolescents, lose their sense of selves. They become tentative and so worried about offending and not fitting in that they become passive, and lose their interest in activities like sports, science, or reading. She writes, “Girls face enormous cultural pressures to split into false selves. The pressure comes from schools, magazines, music, television, advertisements and movies. It comes from peers. Girls can be true to themselves and risk abandonment by their peers, or they can reject their true selves and be socially acceptable. Most girls choose to be socially accepted and split into two selves, one that is authentic, and one that is culturally scripted” (Pipher 1994, 38).

Peggy Orenstein, in *Schoolgirls*, discusses how girls in adolescence lose their self-esteem and reports gender bias in the classroom that makes school a minefield for girls. Wiseman’s book, *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, is perhaps the most disturbing, as she describes girls as pathologically mean. She discusses the hierarchies among girls and the way they play roles in relation to the “Queen Bees” of the school, so worried about the scorn of other girls they embrace only socially sanctioned interests.

There is controversy over whether these findings reflect the total reality, and currently, only a few years after girls were in the news all the time, the focus of pop-culture attention is on how the educational system short-changes boys. There is no doubt, however, that for many girls, school feels like a prison where they are closely monitored, and deviations from the feminine norms are cause for ridicule and harassment. They learn that unless they perform more like normative girls, they will experience some form of punishment, which may be blatant teasing, harassment, ostracism, or simply invisibility. The same girls may also come home from a day of school and watch television aimed at their own age group. On the surface, this should be a

positive step for smart girl viewers. Unlike the shows of earlier eras, during the teen-show era of 1990 through 2006, each teen show has a smart girl who is also popular and successful with romance, which is something the girls may not see much in real life. It is the underlying messages these shows send that turn out to replicate the messages the girls hear and see at school.

Sally Reis wrote in 2002 in the article “Internal Barriers Personal Issues, and Decisions Faced by Gifted and Talented Females,” “Too many talented females spend their lives trying to be perfect. In addition to investing considerable energy in trying to be the best athlete, the best dancer, the best scholar, the best friend, and the best daughter, young girls and women often feel that they must also be slender, beautiful, and popular. This perfectionism is often a result of parental pressures, as well as pressures from the media” (Reis 2002, np). This form of feminism can be toxic, and the models introduced by the media may be destructive.

Third-wave feminism and Post-feminism have short-changed girls. Television scholar Lynn Spigel writes, “Having been there and done that, the third-waver rolls past the past, and while she might pay her respect to the waves before her, somehow prior feminisms are represented as something we have ‘overcome.’ To be sure, the . . . figures of the postfeminist and ‘girl’ have become primary subjects of popular culture itself” (Spigel 2004, np). Despite the supposed advances of feminism in its many guises, girls are feeling increased pressure to be stick-thin, bosomy, hairless, flawless, and sexually available at all times. In a new trend the press is calling “the supergirl phenomenon,” girls are supposed to be gorgeous, nice, and also smart and successful, in short, perfect. An article in *The Nation* states, “The transmutation of go-girl feminism into the supergirl phenomenon reveals the way in which feminist challenges to gender roles have played out in the world, where our commercialized and still highly gendered culture

twists feminist goals into a new set of imperatives. Each successive ‘wave’ of feminism did not radically shift traditional expectations—to be pretty, domestic, maternal, etc.—but simply added to them. The freedom to aspire very quickly becomes the duty to perform, to perfection” (Chaudhry 2007, np). When girls on television are gorgeous, irresistible to boys, popular, and also brilliant, perfect students, they cease to be role models and start to be just another indicator that real-life girls cannot measure up.

Television constantly reinforces this for girls, and it is important to study what girls are viewing that might cause them to feel this pressure. As Andi Zeisler, editor of the feminist *Bitch* magazine, sees it, “We’ve tried to get people to see that pop culture is a critical locus of feminism. Most young girls are not reading *Ms.* They’re watching *The OC* or *Veronica Mars*. It makes sense for us to talk about those pop-culture products, because those are the conversations that girls are having among themselves. They’re not talking about how many seats women have in Congress. They’re not talking about public policy” (Solomon 2006, 13). In this light, it truly does matter what happens on the teen show, and their disappearance makes the few messages that are left for the networks to send, have even more impact.

The message about smart teen girls on television is that being brainy is simply not enough. A life of the mind is shown as a younger girl’s substitute for “real life,” which she must grow up to attain, as she performs more normatively. This life includes frequent socialization with a large number of friends, and a “hot” love interest. When looked at separately, many shows have positive messages for and about smart girls, but when examined as a genre, the findings become more dire. As has been shown, smart teen girls on television have long been invisible, marginalized, or forced to change to comply with normative behavior for girls and to perform as more feminine. In the earlier days of television the message was blatant, but more recent

programs aimed at teenagers have become insidious, promoting a seemingly feminist agenda, while nonetheless putting smart girls in their places and sending messages about appropriate behavior as consumers.

For example, in his article, “Rory Gilmore as the Feminist Ideal” Richard Leader writes that many of the creators of teen shows (such as Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy*) are given “a lot of credit for crafting ‘feminist-friendly’ fare. And to a good extent, it is, even if scare-quotes are still necessary. Thematically, cinematic ‘feminism’ has to differ from its real-life inspiration. Yes, some of these contortions are necessary to get female-centered programming onto the screen at all. But men like Whedon also have their own ideals of what a ‘real’ feminist is” (Leader 2007, np). While *Buffy* and *Willow* were active and strong, they still managed to look quite pretty while saving the world, and were often punished when they got too strong, as when *Willow* is disempowered for most of the final season of the program.

When it comes to *Veronica Mars*, things get even more complicated. *Veronica* is brilliant, active, and does not take any guff from anyone. However, she never calls herself “a feminist,” and the program has an unusual relationship to feminism. In the third season of the show *Veronica* is involved in solving a series of rapes on her college campus. While she does, and two male students are responsible for a number of them, it turns out that the “Lilith House,” a feminist house on campus, has faked at least one of the rapes. Leader continues from his comment about Whedon, that *Veronica Mars* creator “Rob Thomas drives that stake even deeper with his *Veronica Mars*, where his feisty girl-detective is out tasing the bad guys while the school feminists are navel-gazing over theory and leveling false accusations against frat boys” (Leader 2007, np). The Lilith members come off looking petty, shrill, and even vindictive as they assault one of the not-guilty fraternity members, while unaffiliated *Veronica* is meant to be the

voice of reason. That she performs as a feminist, without actually identifying as one, suggests that this is the way to become popular and loved, rather than disliked and ridiculed, like the Lilith House denizens.

Television theorist Lynn Joyrich that the show is “not quite generically a soap . . . and not quite a detective show . . . it is framed by a female voice-over (thus suggesting an exploration of female consciousness) but, engaging many elements associated with ‘men’s genres’ and spaces, it’s not a ‘girly’ show; indeed, Veronica Mars (both program and character) can’t be classified as ‘masculine’ or “feminine” (or, for that matter, any other stable, stipulated category)” (Joyrich 2007, np). This raises the question of whether Veronica Mars is a Third-wave or Post-feminist text. Veronica’s willingness to use her looks and sexuality to solve a case at first suggests she is a Third-wave feminist. Yet, the show may not be feminist at all. Despite other characters repeatedly pointing out that Veronica is “a girl,” this is rarely a problem for Veronica and if anything, it is her youth rather than her gender that is the problem. The show, *Gilmore Girls*, is post feminist.

In addition, like all television dramas, since twenty-two episodes is not nearly enough to air new episodes each week throughout the eight month television season, and since serialized shows like *Veronica Mars* do not do well in the ratings when repeated, the show had a long hiatus in the Spring of 2007. To replace it, The CW network aired a reality series, *Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll*, a show in which scantily clad women sing, dance, and writhe around stripper poles, competing to join the famous girl group. This group started as a “burlesque troupe” and has since become pop stars, singing songs with lyrics like “Don’t Cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me? Don’t Cha wish your girlfriend was a freak like me?” (“Don’t Cha”). The Pussycat Dolls are popular with many pre-teen girls, much the way the Spice

Girls were in the 1990s, yet do not even attempt to give a girl power and girl solidarity message the way the Spice Girls did.

Feminist media scholar Lynn Spigel opines “The new waves of postfeminism and postnetwork media systems are connected in complex ways. Unlike the older three-network broadcast system, the new multichannel, multinational television system is based on ‘narrowcasting’ (programming designed for niche tastes and demographics). In this narrowcast media context, programs . . . market themselves according to a postfeminist logic that embraces femininity and ‘girliness’ in the name of enlightenment and female empowerment” (Spigel 2004, np). *Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll* posits itself as a feminist empowerment reality show.

At a press conference, McG, one of the executive producers of the program, said in “Don’t Cha” The Pussycat Dolls are not talking about sex, they are just asking a question. He stated, “It’s just like saying, ‘Don’t you wish your girlfriend could be free and comfortable in her own skin and do her own thing, like me?’” When a reporter asked if this was a step backwards for feminism, the producer replied, “Women celebrating one another being beautiful and, frankly, being appreciated by me, has been around for a long time. Under no circumstances is it shameful. Being a step backwards for women suggests it’s in the service of men. Under no circumstances is this in the service of men . . . There’s even a position to take [that] this is, frankly, Third-wave feminism” (Wyatt 2007, 3). Even if one subscribes to the third-wave feminist rationale that stripping is a way of embracing one’s sexuality and power, this program reinforces competition between women, and clearly is something male viewers enjoy for other reasons than its politics.

Feminist television scholar Heather Havrilesky writes of the program:

But look, let's not jump to conclusions. Maybe these girls are just exercising their power by strutting their stuff. Maybe some of them are post-feminist scholars and they're subverting the dominant paradigm of objectification by taking ownership of the terms and symbols of the whore and repurposing those terms and symbols in deeply empowering ways. . . you know, like by imitating the storefront prostitutes of Amsterdam. Even so, it's hard not to want to . . . explain to them that, even when you're "confident" or you're subverting the dominant paradigm, even when you're talented and extremely nice and you can do whatever you want and who cares what anyone thinks anyway, it's still not ultimately great for your self-respect to wear butt floss and make porno faces in public. (Havrilesky 2007, 2)

Braininess is probably not what the winner had over the other contestants in the program. Evidently, both male and female viewers in The CW's desired target market approved of the show and its messages. *Pussycat Dolls* received significantly better ratings than *Veronica Mars*, and was renewed for the 2007-2008 season, while *Veronica Mars* was canceled.

Teen television as the world has known it since 1990 is nearly gone. By the end of the 2006-2007 television season, *Gilmore Girls*, too, ended its run. Of the dwindling numbers of teen shows that still existed in that season, Fox's *The O.C.* ended in March of 2007, and The CW network has only *Smallville*, whose characters have moved on to college, and *One Tree Hill*, which will "fast forward" four years to the characters' twenties when it returns in the Fall.

One year into its run, The CW is not doing at all well in the ratings, and its top shows are reality shows. Of its three new dramas for the 2007-2008 season, only one stars teenage characters: *Gossip Girl*, a "drama based on the popular book series, about the world of privileged teenagers attending elite private schools in New York City as told through the eyes of an

anonymous blogger” (theFutonCritic.com). Other shows on the network like *Supernatural* feature young adults past traditional school age. No show on the major four networks will star a teenager in the primary role for 2007-2008, other than shows like NBC’s *Heroes* (2006-present) which has an “indestructible cheerleader” as part of the large ensemble, or on family shows like ABC’s *Desperate Housewives* (2004-present), or ABC’s upcoming *Dirty Sexy Money*, in which girls are in supporting roles. Cable channels like ABC Family, The “N,” and the Disney Channel may soon be the only places to see teenagers as the stars of their shows.

However, during the same seventeen-year period since *90210* began, American culture has become increasingly obsessed with the doings of stupid girls. The activities of Paris Hilton, Jessica Simpson, and Lindsay Lohan make up a significant proportion of the entertainment news. These young celebrities seem to live in a constant party, showing up at movie premieres, dance clubs, and awards show parties. They also land at trendy rehab centers, the hospital, and possibly even jail, yet the consequences seem light, as Hilton is still invited places, Simpson still makes records and movies, and Lohan still makes movies. Certainly Hollywood and the culture industry can easily justify this, by calling them secretly smart and savvy businesswomen. An article in the advertising industry “bible” *Adweek* claims, “In an age of international terrorist threats and global warming, the giggly “dumb blonde” stereotype is the cultural equivalent of comfort food: a frothy, empty-calorie pleasure that harks back to an earlier, less intimidating era . . . Plus, it’s a relatively innocuous stereotype. After all, it’s not as though there aren’t plenty of intelligent and powerful roles for women, including blondes like Diane Sawyer, Hillary Clinton and Martha Stewart” (Foege 2004, np). It is acceptable to present stupid girls for humorous purposes, the culture industry says, but there is decidedly another side to this.

Irene Nexica, who teaches media-oriented classes in the ethnic and women's studies departments at UC Berkeley says, in an newspaper article "Stupid is as 'stupid girl' does," "The audience that pays to see Paris Hilton's sex tapes are not the teenage girls who people are worried about being corrupted . . . They are these 40-year-old men who have daughters nearing the same age. So it's short-sighted to blame Jessica Simpson or whoever for their image when it's really clear that there's another power dynamic not really getting explored . . . Wasn't it her dad—who's also her manager—who said he'd date her if she wasn't his daughter? I think that's far more harmful" (Yadegeran 2006, np). As girls are discouraged from being brainy and simultaneously sexualized at earlier ages, television has become a minefield. There simply is no place where real teen-girl viewers can see smart teen girls retaining their smartness on network television.

New Media and the Smart Girl

Why, after more than a decade and a half of teen shows would this be? It is partially because teenagers do not watch television the way they did only a few years ago. Starting in 2002, shows like *My So-Called Life* and *Buffy* became available on DVD and by 2007 nearly every program that lasts most of a season, as well as a rapidly increasing large number of older programs, are available. As a frame of reference, this dissertation was written over a period of five years. Until 2006, most of the shows mentioned before the late 1990s, including *90210*, were completely unavailable except in archives such as the Library of Congress, or occasionally in bootleg form, but now at least the first season of practically all the programs mentioned is easily available to purchase through legal channels.

This format allows for watching all the episodes on television or computer, at any time. Viewers can watch all the episodes of a show on the same day, commercial-free, in order, often

with extras like commentary tracks, and often with edits made for syndication purposes returned to the original product. Almost as soon as that medium found its footing, the practice of uploading and downloading digital files of the shows, which had started illegally early in the 2000s, was sanctioned by the television networks. Now it is possible to watch quite a few programs, older and newer, on computer or a portable device like a video iPod for free, or in certain cases to download them for approximately two dollars per episode. Even when viewers do watch the programs on television, they may use Digital Video Recorders, like TiVo, which allow the recording and storage of hours and hours of programming, and the watching of those shows at any time while fast-forwarding through the commercials.

Unlike the clumsier VCRs that came before, these devices have completely changed the television landscape, and consequently how young people watch television programs. According to a report from Nielsen Media Research, television viewing is up, especially by teenage girls, but an article noted that “increases among teenage girls were particularly high during early morning (6:00 a.m. To 9:00 a.m.) and late night (11:30 p.m. To 2:00 a.m.) viewing” (PR Newswire US 2006, np), not the prime time of teen dramas on the networks. What has long been the case for the “tween” market of ten-to thirteen-year-olds now appears to be the case for teenagers as well. They have their own televisions and electronic devices, and see no need to comply with anyone else’s schedule.⁸⁴ Television scholar John Fiske says in an online interview, “What TiVo does is it enables each person, each individual viewer, to construct their

⁸⁴ *The Washington Post* reports, “The average American tween lives in a world of electronic opulence, inside his or her own media bubble. According to a recent survey by Nickelodeon, 77 percent of 9- to 14-year-olds have TVs in their bedrooms, with about half this group enjoying cable or satellite access. Some 59 percent have video-game systems, 49 percent have a DVD player and 22 percent have computers connected to the Internet” (Farhi and Frey 2006, A01). Another study, from Arbitron and Edison Media Research reported that “23 million (Forrester Research) to 27 million (Arbitron) American homes now said to have access to one or more on-demand media devices, such as Digital Video Recorders such as TiVo or an iPod player, about 43 million Americans choose to record TV programming to watch at a different time (using a VCR or TiVo/DVR) and 76% of consumers own at least one DVD player; while 39% own 20 or more DVD titles” (Ebenkamp 2005, np).

own TV channel, a TV channel that is precisely aligned to their interests and preferences. And this may be a little bit scary when we think about it, because as you say, potentially it does away entirely with the communal effects of TV, and part of it, again, we want to relate, if you like, to the rise of the Me generation, part of it we want to relate to the shift in marketing, from mass marketing to niche marketing, and the smallest niche being the individual consumer who can be precisely targeted with ads here” (O’Regan, 2002, np). There is even less opportunity for anyone to “share” the experiences of watching television when discussing the show the next day, as so many other viewers have the program saved up, ready for later consumption.

Further investigation will be required to determine how the messages of these shows differ when viewed away from the commercials, promos, and other programming that have traditionally been part of the “flow” of television, and without the “what happens next?” aspect of following a show over the thirty-six-week television season. The fact remains that, despite all of the technical advances, the actual shows still present the same content, regardless of how they are viewed. The same basic smart girl with the lack of social skills and limited sex appeal is what is available. It is clear viewers need to step away from the traditional model to find a radically different type of smart girl character.

In theory, and sometimes in practice, new media seems to allow for an environment where smart girls have a venue to make themselves heard. On the web site YouTube, viewers put up their own videos, ranging from clips from favorite television shows, movies, or ads, to fan videos taking creations from other media and editing clips together, to video logs in which regular people sound off on whatever they choose to discuss. Smart girls wanting a soapbox have it for the price of a computer and a video camera or camera phone.

Some of the most viewed videos on YouTube, in fact, appear to be from a character who signs on as lonelygirl15. This fifteen-year-old girl, Bree, is well spoken and brainy, but also cute and funny. Since June of 2006, she has appeared several times per week, in episodes of two to four minutes, sometimes discussing her parents or her love life, but other times reading interesting facts she appears to find in very large books, or conducting faux scientific experiments. The series is similar to television in that it is an ongoing story, but dissimilar because of the interactivity possible in the medium. Lonelygirl15's male friend makes reaction videos that tell a different side of the story, and other viewers create their own video responses or write comments.

This would all be very encouraging, except for the fact that it turns out to be a hoax. In August of 2006 web users discovered that Bree is not a home-schooled and isolated girl looking for an outlet, but an actress, Jessica Rose, and the actual filmers and editors are not, in fact, her nerdy boyfriend, but professionals working through the talent agency CAA. In addition, rather than simply being the diary of a smart girl, the story turns out to be a mystery about an obscure (and fictional) religious sect the girl and her parents belong to, and the focus moves away from her intelligence.

A number of writers have written about the genius of this fraud and how it commodifies the smart girl in what appears to be the free zone of YouTube. Brian Flemming writes on his blog, "There's this 16-year-old girl named Bree. She's supercute. She's also supersmart—for fun, she reads books like Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*. She's also sheltered—she's been homeschooled most of her life, which means she's fairly innocent and doesn't meet a lot of guys. *In other words, she's exactly the kind of girl that the young male YouTube demographic would fantasize about*" (Flemming 2006, np). He goes on to discuss the interesting fact that her

alleged camera holder and love interest is hardly the hunky Jordan Catalano type, or even the “only unattractive on television” type many of the seemingly nerdy boys on teen shows are, when he writes, “Enter Daniel. Daniel is Bree’s friend. He’s not really good-looking. He’s kind of awkward. He’s a computer geek. And Bree likes him. Holy crap. *That’s exactly the kind of thing that the young male YouTube demographic would fantasize about* (Flemming 2006, np). In other words, the series is far from real, and is every bit as artificial, as fictional teen television. And it is more insidious because it is presented as real, but does not even have the excuse of fancy editing so-called reality television does.

Looking for real smart girls online, whether on video, websites, or blogs, proved disappointing. Several hours looking at videos that came up for keywords such as “smart girl,” “intelligent girl,” “books,” and similar phrases on YouTube netted what appeared to be pornographic videos, a few commercials showing women getting the best of men, a great many videos of small children being smart, and a few of teens acting purposefully stupid. The real girls who create responses to lonelygirl15, some of whom are heavier, less perky, and far less well lit than Bree, feel it necessary to announce up front that though they are smart, they are not attractive, as they know in advance there will be comments on the site alluding to their beauty, or lack thereof, and critiquing their bodies.

Yet they nonetheless put themselves out there. Emily Nussbaum, who writes about television and new media in the popular press, writes that the under-30 generation is used to being constantly surveilled, so that going on YouTube and being critiqued for one’s looks seems normal to them. She points to a turning point of “that primal national drama of the Paris Hilton sex tape, those strange weeks in 2004 when what initially struck me as a genuine and indelible humiliation—the kind of thing that lost former Miss America Vanessa Williams her crown

twenty years earlier—transformed, in a matter of days, from a shocker into no big deal, and then into just another piece of publicity, and then into a kind of power” (Nussbaum 2). Teenagers today are simply used to being looked at, and having anything they say and do archived, seemingly forever, to the extent that being looked at, for whatever reason, seems to be better than invisibility.

Jessica Valenti, author of the book *Full Frontal Feminism*, responds to this phenomenon in an interview in *Salon* magazine in which she discusses being an online feminist. She says, “Putting yourself out there leaves you very exposed. . . . When you’re getting hundreds of comments and you don’t know who’s sending them, it’s 10 times as scary. . . . It’s the same lesson a lot of girls learn in high school: If someone wants to shut you up all they have to do is call you a whore. It’s the quickest way to humiliate someone” (Traister 2007, np). What this may result in is smart girls staying offline altogether. An article in *The Washington Post* about women who have suffered harassment and threats on their blogs stated that some women simply stop blogging and that, “other women have censored themselves, turned to private forums or closed comments on blogs. Many use gender-neutral pseudonyms. Some just gut it out. But the effect of repeated harassment, bloggers and experts interviewed said, is to make women reluctant to participate online—undercutting the promise of the Internet as an egalitarian forum” (Nakashima 2007, A01). Although there are still many smart women out there making videos, those who cannot take the criticism are the least likely to keep creating them.

A number of web sites have been created particularly for smart girls. However, although there is often advice on them, forums, and links to other sites, some good, some meaningless, there are very few profiles or first-person stories of actual smart girls. The site www.smartgirl.org includes the same sort of features long found in teen magazines, such as

horoscopes and a series of silly questions aimed at “career forecasting,” interactive, and not at all helpful. They are also as commodified as any business on the Internet. A seemingly promising site called Educating Jane, while featuring some good links and a few decent feature articles, has as its first link, “Girls Shop,” which sells books about women and college planning, but also Crocs Shoes, iPods, and other consumer goods that do not seem to have much to do with being smart or with success. The promised “just for girls” self tests are simply links to other sites’ IQ and aptitude tests online, which are poorly adapted versions of those intended to be administered by qualified psychologists or career counselors, some of which cost money.

Smart girls looking for role models online can, of course, find them. There are tons of interesting blogs by interesting and smart people, as well as sites like Television Without Pity, where television is discussed on a high level, and Readerville.com, where people of all ages (though primarily older than teenage) gather to talk books and all things literary. However, it takes a lot of work to find such sites amid all the blather of the World Wide Web and along the way one encounters a great deal of idiocy, insulting, stupid, and poorly designed web sites, and pornography.

Summation

For many years, television ignored brainy girls, or taught them lessons about proper performance as normative girls. Starting in the very late 1980s, with *Life Goes On*, there were a number of shows where the brainy girl could take center stage. Once the teen-show era began in 1990, images of smart teen girls were frequently projected into American homes. In some cases the messages were positive, as when girls like Becca Thatcher of *Life Goes On*, Daria Morgendorffer of *Daria*, and Lisa Simpson of *The Simpsons*, as well as Andrea Zuckerman of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, Angela Chase of *My So-Called Life*, Willow Rosenberg of *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer, Lindsay Weir of *Freaks and Geeks*, Rory Gilmore and Paris Geller of *Gilmore Girls*, and *Veronica Mars* of her own show were presented as brainy, often brilliant girls who rarely dumbled down. Often, though, these messages were undercut with storylines in which the girls turned away from their schoolwork in favor of popularity and romance, and learned to perform more normatively. The prevailing image for girls who were lead characters on teen television, smart or not, remained thin, pretty, physically mature, white, and nominally Christian. Those girls who were African American, Asian, or Jewish were perpetual sidekicks to the more central normative girls. However, they existed, and in the near future those images may not be available to viewers of network television.

While some teen shows are still available on cable, and new media offer exciting new opportunities to see smart girls as they really are, at this point it is still hard to locate and analyze them. For a future study, I would be interested in examining how smart girls are depicted on YouTube and other sites, and how the ability of other viewers to comment via posting or their own video changes the way the girls present themselves as “smart girls.” I may also examine how real girls online find images of smart girls to admire, and what messages and behaviors they take away.

I am also interested in getting involved in new media theory, discussing in what ways viewing traditional television programs using new media forms such as DVD, DVR, and via digital downloading, and the interactivity of posting about the shows on the Internet allows for a transformation of the message. I would be interested to see if girls watching these shows effectively without commercials, in short bursts on computers or tiny iPod screens see the shows differently than those who watch the shows interspersed with commercials for makeup and movies. In the mid-1990s through early 2000s, when I was heavily involved with discussing

television shows online, the industry simply did not care what online posters thought. These days, however, television networks pay attention to what posters on fan forums say, and make changes on casting or storylines accordingly. I would be interested in examining what sorts of influence teen girls and young women who post have over their own depictions in fictional television.

As of the end of the 2006-2007 television season, there are simply too few smart girls to see. During the teen-show era of 1990-2006, despite the flaws of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *My So-Called Life*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Freaks and Geeks*, and *Gilmore Girls*, as well as more encouraging programs such as *Daria*, *Life Goes on*, and *Veronica Mars*, there has been a place to see smart girls who are capable of reading, writing, doing math and conducting scientific experiments and still find success, popularity, and love. Where will future girls go to find role models like that?

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