

[SAC Course] Writing Sample: Feminism on Television

As time passed and the feminist movement seemed to die down as women made gains in both their private and public sectors of life, women on television became even more popular. As the 90's came, a resurgence in the feminist movement grew with "girl power" penetrating every aspect of culture. Women now had a voice in media, and with it came interesting, new television shows that tackled more sensitive, and sometimes racy, subjects. *Sex and the City* has been hailed for its progressive stance on female sexuality and the focus on exclusively female characters. Although this is not the first time that a television show has tackled an all-female main cast or had risqué views on female sexuality, *Sex and the City* combined all of these into a whirlwind of thirtysomething female powerhouses that had the freedom to make their own choices and be incredibly strong. The show was to follow the behavior of women in their thirties, living a fabulous life in Manhattan, rather than be about the jokes of a typical female sitcom. (Blake)

Premiering in the late 90's, the show has often been hailed as a manifestation of third wave feminism. While quite difficult to define, third wave feminism is stated as starting in the 90's and doesn't really have a set of goals, which differed from the first two waves. (Rampton) Rather than an overarching movement, third wave feminism focus on differences between individuals, and what was important to one group of females might have been different to another. (Henry 71) Unlike *That Girl* and the second-wave feminists who had a defined goal in mind, third wave feminists – like their television shows – seem to run all over the grid, from deconstructing ideas of what it means to be a woman, body image, to sexuality and heteronormativity. (Rampton)

Like *That Girl*, the show is centered on a lead single female protagonist that works in New York City. But what differs in *Sex and the City* and *That Girl* is a matter of focus. *That Girl* as a reflection of the second wave feminist movement was concerned about getting women in the work place and achieving equality for all, so Ann Marie spends more time in the office than gossiping with girlfriends. In this “new wave” of feminism, all is well and women are working. As Samantha Jones, one of Carrie’s friends in the show says, “we have it all New York City!” (“All or Nothing” 3:10) The four girls of *Sex and the City*; Samantha Jones, powerhouse PR agent with a distaste for monogamy; Miranda Hobbes, a successful lawyer who loves pessimism; Charlotte York, the classic WASP from the Upper East Side; and Carrie Bradshaw, the loveable protagonist; are past the era for debates about equality in voting and are instead wrapped up in a life full of opportunities, shoes, and cosmopolitans. Like the third wave feminists, they can have push-up bras and still openly discuss their sexuality while waking up the next morning for their powerful positions in major business. (Rampton) The idea that they wouldn’t even be allowed to work at these jobs, or openly talk about the orgasms they enjoy wouldn’t cross their mind, as the movement suggests. (Gerhard)

That’s not to say that issues that were still brought up in the era of *That Girl* aren’t relevant, they are just approached from a different angle, one that concentrates less on the policy and the women’s right to do so, but instead talks about the outcome of the situations and the individual woman’s life that goes along with these outcomes. (Henry 71) In the third season, when Miranda unexpectedly gets pregnant, abortion is brought up and discussed as a viable option, not one to be done in shame or in secret. Carrie and Samantha reveal that they have had them themselves and the issue isn’t whether or not its

morally right for Miranda to have an abortion because of the act itself, but focuses on Miranda's life issues. Is it wise for her to have a child even though she has a demanding work schedule? Miranda isn't a young girl in her twenties with plenty of reproductive years left, and she seriously considered that as a factor and how that will play out to affect her life is taken more seriously than the "oh my, is she seriously considering an...*abortion!*" attitude that was perceived around previous feminism movements. ("Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda" 4:11) Although shows around the second feminist movement would recognize female reproductivity as a legitimate issue, with *Roe vs. Wade* right on the cusp of the 1970s, the third wave movement has already integrated these attitudes and attacks the issue from a different point of view.

However both *That Girl* and *Sex and the City* still focus a lot of the time on men. *That Girl's* Marlo Thomas didn't want her character Ann to even have a love interest, but by the end of the 5th season, Ann was engaged to a man who pursued her throughout the series. (Spangler 89) *Sex and the City* sets the focus for some of the most important relationships as the ones between the females, yet most of the conversations that are held are about men, whether its boyfriends, hookups, or husbands. Miranda even remarks on this in an episode when she gets furious at the girls for only talking about men, exclaiming "how does it happen that four such smart women have nothing to talk about except boyfriends? What about us? What we think, we feel, we know. Christ. Does it all have to be about them?" ("Take Me Out to the Ball Game" 2:1)

Although Miranda, later in the episode, goes on to apologize for her outburst, she has touched on a very important aspect of these two television shows. Even though both have strong female main characters and tote the idea that it is a show about women, for

women, there is a strong male presence in both. In the very first episode of *That Girl*, Ann meets Donald, her future romantic interest, and the two at first don't seem to hit it off very well. After working late, he believes that Ann is being kidnapped by two actors and tries to "rescue" her, which results in a fight, but ends with them sharing a dessert at the end of the episode. ("Don't Just Do Something, Stand There." 1:1) This seems to mirror how Donald's presence in the series would go; there would be a misunderstanding between Donald and Ann, which would usually lead to a fight and then a resolution.

Sex and the City treats men with a different attitude, though men are still very much a presence in the four girls' lives. Although Donald and Ann in *That Girl* seem to be questionably chaste during their relationship for living through a sexual revolution, Carrie and friends don't mind touting their relationships out in the open. The girls have many sexual encounters, meeting with all different types of men, with only one resulting in a happy marriage by the end of the series. But these men are the source of their happiness – if the relationship isn't going well, they aren't happy. Regardless of their jobs or their affluent lifestyle, week after week, Carrie and friends crow on about men and how unhappy they make them, yet none of them actively try to live on their own for longer than a few episodes. Even Samantha, the girl who cringes at the idea of marriage, settling down, and having children can't help but get tangled up when three of her four short-term relationships (one being with a woman) start to get complicated. She often resorts to drastic measures in order to deal with her unhappiness, including flyering an entire neighborhood when her boyfriend cheats on her. ("Anchors Away" 5:1) Each episode seems to be entirely set up around problems in dealing with men, and if it's not in

Carrie's A storyline, then the men are looming in the background of the B, C, or D storylines.

Though relationship drama is an interesting part of most women's lives, there are complications that play into effect when a show that is advertised for women to be about women's lives is entirely centered around men, especially when these shows are compared to their countering feminist movements. Engrained patriarchy and the system that upholds it is constantly questioned in feminist thought, but if popular programs that are supposed to let women finally have a voice on television are centering each weeks episodes on men, or have an overarching father that disapproves of a young woman living on her own, then women don't really have a voice in television at all. Each week, these women are watching these two television shows and hoping to hear more about the issues that face them, yet all they see are characters that are being controlled by men in every aspect of their lives. It's not enough to have an extremely, almost unattably affluent life in New York City where the alcohol flows and the shoes are plentiful, there must be a man in their lives to "complete" them. Carrie's friends all have incredibly high paying jobs, with Miranda eventually making partner in her law firm, but until she has the perfect boyfriend/husband, this isn't something to be happy about. Instead, they all spend a half an hour wishing their lives would be better if a man on a white horse would take them away and be everything they need and more. While showing the true problems of a woman does include relationship drama and the plight of finding someone to love, Miranda hits it exactly on the head when she angrily, yet rightfully, accuses "does it have to be all about them?" ("Take Me Out to the Ball Game")