

Mary, Roseanne, and Carrie: Television and Fictional Feminism

By Rachael Horowitz

Television, as a cultural expression, is unique in that it enjoys relatively few boundaries in terms of who receives its messages. Few other art forms share television's ability to cross racial, class and cultural divisions. As an expression of social interactions and social change, social norms and social deviations, television's widespread impact on the true "general public" is unparalleled. For these reasons, the cultural power of television is undeniable. It stands as one of the few unifying experiences for Americans.

John Fiske's *Media Matters* discusses the role of race and gender in US politics, and more specifically, how these issues are informed by the media. He writes, "Television often acts like a relay station: it rarely originates topics of public interest (though it may repress them); rather, what it does is give them high visibility, energize them, and direct or redirect their general orientation before relaying them out again into public circulation." ¹ This process occurred with the topic of feminism, and is exemplified by the most iconic females of recent television history.

TV women inevitably represent a strain of diluted feminism. As with any serious subject matter packaged for mass consumption, certain shortcuts emerge that diminish and simplify the original message. In turn, what viewers do see is that much more significant. What the TV writers choose to show people undoubtedly has a significant impact on the understanding of American female identity. In *Where the Girls Are*, Susan Douglas emphasizes the effect popular culture has on American girls. ² American women, however, should not be left out of such analysis. Portrayals of women necessarily promote women's reflections about their own values and their own identity.

This paper will focus on three television shows that took risks in their portrayals of women: "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Roseanne," and "Sex and the City." These

shows were not only selected because they featured women leading lives not previously suitable for television. Additionally, the three decades these shows span reflect the broad changes in common perceptions and attitudes about women, and moreover about what it means to be a feminist – how narrowly defined that role truly is or how expansive it potentially can be.

In the midst of the feminist movement's "second wave," CBS introduced Mary Richards to television audiences on September 19, 1970 . "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" found instant popular and critical success. The unique nature of the show was the circumstances in which it placed its lead character – a single working woman. The life and choices of Mary Richards spoke to the widespread impact of feminism on society. Mary was attractive and likeable, and also was unmarried at thirty and concerned as much with her career as with finding a husband. "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" dealt with attitudes about marriage and relationships (with sex as a subtle subtext), in addition to the role of career in a woman's life. Mary's experiences often tested traditional values. But the sitcom's likeable star secured a popular acceptance of new possibilities for American female identity – not radical, but still, unconventional in mass media.

"The Mary Tyler Moore Show" encouraged, in some ways, a broadening of American female identity. Mary was shown in her home (a studio apartment) as often as she was shown in her place of work (the newsroom). She often rejected men who did not meet her standards, and valued her close relationships with her female friends. While validating Mary's life choices, the show surprisingly did little to challenge traditional gender roles.

Mary Richards was not the only woman in 1970 to live alone and work to support herself. However, the show rather explicitly highlights her decision to go out 'on her own' as though it were particularly unique and risky. This move served to almost signal the significance of the image being presented to the American public. This was seen particularly in the opening credits – the public's very first introduction to Mary Richards. The audience met Mary as she drove alone in her car to a new city and a new life. The theme song asked, "How will you make it on your own?" The viewer knew that Mary Richards was new to this life; she lived in new time that was filled with possibilities for

women.

Second wave feminism – often linked to “radical” feminism – emerged around the time of “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” in the late 1960's, and continued through the 1970's. This moment in feminism concentrated largely on economic equality for women and issues pertaining to minority women, in comparison to “first wave” feminism's focus on education access and suffrage. Cellestine Ware explained in her 1970 primer, *Woman Power* :

Feminism, having died after the passage of the 19th Amendment, arose again in the late 60's to proclaim self-determination the ultimate good...The feminist movement, with varying degrees of intensity, is organizing itself to combat obstacles to this actuality. When women finally gained the self-respect to consider their unhappiness a political issue, they began to deny that the ability to have children is the sum of a woman's capacities and needs. [3](#)

However, “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” did not share the political agenda of second wave feminism. Though it did much to advance progressive ideas about women's roles, it restricted its characters from full “liberation.” At times, the writers smartly documented a still largely sexist society not yet ready to change. But watching the show 30 years after its debut, it is easier to see those moments when it simply does not question certain ideas about gender, or the way in which society viewed, thought, and talked about women. The theme song warned, “This world is awfully big. Girl, this time you're all alone.” Though Mary was 30-years-old, the song which introduced her in each episode referred to her as a ‘girl.’ When the theme song asked “How will you make it on your own?” this question was not rhetorical. The answer was “Love is all around.” Mary Richards was a sweet “girl” who was smart and pretty and there would be plenty of people who would like her and help her “make it.”

Mary's character made her predicament more palatable for any person doubtful that a woman of her age should be “on her own.” Not only was she humble and soft-spoken, but she looked pretty good in a tight sweater, mini-skirt and knee-high boots. She faced off with her outspoken and quick-witted neighbor Rhoda Morgenstern in the first episode as

they fought over Mary's apartment.

Mary: You think I'm some kind of a pushover, don't you.

Rhoda: Yeah.

Mary: If you push me, I might just have to push back. Hard.

Rhoda: Come on, you can't carry that off.

Mary: I know. 4

Mary sighed as she admitted that she would not stand up to Rhoda because she was literally unable to. Mary was the anti- version of all that popular culture despised about feminists, though she lived a life that was paved by the work of feminists before her. However, Mary was aware of her shortcomings – and she certainly saw these qualities as flaws. Her choice to move to Minneapolis and to start a life on her own was almost seen as a conscious departure from the way she used to be. Regardless of how outspoken she was or was not, the control Mary exerted over the direction of her own life was, nevertheless, a powerful statement.

Mary moved to Minneapolis , leaving a 2-year relationship that was not moving towards marriage. When Mary said a final goodbye to her long-time “fiancé” Bill and decided to move on with her life without him, he told her to take care of herself. She replied, “I think I just did.” 5 This empowering statement was at the heart of the television audience's introduction to Mary Richards. This woman was a pushover, she was polite and mild mannered, but she was beginning to realize that she had put certain values in front of her own happiness.

The show spoke to a very realistic paradox: Mary still *wanted* to get married, even though she was happy being single and she knew marriage was not everything. She commented to Rhoda about the plight of the single woman in American society: “Sometimes I think I could discover the secret of immortality and people would still say, ‘look at that single

girl discovering the secret of immortality.” 6 Though she still aspired to a traditional life, she was smart enough to realize how much she was influenced by society's views about women.

“The Mary Tyler Moore Show” also depicted Mary's peers – other women struggling with the same decisions she faced. Rhoda was also single, but she did not have the same charms as Mary had. She was a feisty woman with a thick New York accent. She was self-deprecating and, according to the writers, unattractive. Phyllis was Mary's married friend and served an important role as such. Though the audience met Phyllis and her precocious daughter Bess, it did not get to see her husband Lars. It was clear from the first episode that Phyllis' marriage would serve comedic purposes. Phyllis told Mary: “I want to see you married. Because I'm married.” She literally bit her tongue and took Mary's hands in hers. Her voice almost quivering, she continued,

I know how beautiful it can be if you look at it realistically. Face the fact that it means a certain amount of sacrificing, of unselfishness. Denying your own ego. Sublimating. Accommodating. Surrendering. 7

Phyllis struggled with her attempts to act as smart and savvy mother. She consulted the newest research on child psychology to aid in parenting Bess. She objected when Mary called Bess a “little girl,” and instead wanted her to be referred to as a “young person.” But it was Mary who had more success in communicating with Bess. 8 The writers used this situation to privilege Mary's traditional and more conservative views. When Bess locked herself in the bathroom, Phyllis told Mary to consult “Chapter Eight: Right to Privacy.” 9 Phyllis' attempts to be an educated parent were taken to the extreme and mocked as absurd. Later, the audience learned that Phyllis had her master's degree, though she did not work. She tried to help out at her husband's dermatology office; however Lars had to fire her when she treated patients on her own. Mary agreed to hire Phyllis as her assistant. Even though Phyllis practically begged for this job, she thanked Mary by saying: “I have my master's degree. You left college after two years and I'm your assistant. Cute.” Phyllis was incapable of doing the menial filing work that Mary needed her for, just as she was unable to simply “help out” at Lars' office. When Mary was forced to fire her, Phyllis excused herself, stating: “You know how touchy career

gals get when you're married and they're not.” ¹⁰ Mary was not angry because Phyllis was married and she was not. She was angry because she was a “career gal,” had work to do, and Phyllis did not help. In the end, despite being an educated and well-spoken woman, Phyllis defined herself in opposition to Mary as “married.” In its portrayal of a married woman, the show was almost surprisingly skeptical. Phyllis' character was the most clueless and most laughable of a particularly funny ensemble cast.

Mary was often shown in her workplace – the WJM-TV newsroom where she worked as associate producer of the 6 o'clock news. She was the only woman in her office and her relationship with her boss Lou Grant was a defining aspect of the show from the first episode. Though her work was vital to the functioning of the newsroom, her presence did not challenge traditional gender roles. Mary was often found making coffee and running into Mr. Grant's office when he called for her. No other characters did this, nor did they refer to Lou as “Mr. Grant” as Mary did.

Hindsight may suggest dismissing “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” as a diluted, uncontroversial and ineffective version of 1970s feminism. Though Mary Richards was not a paragon of feminism, the show is an important artifact of the time period in which some of the ideas of feminism were becoming truly mainstream. Its mere presence on air signaled an important shift in acceptable roles for women. Though it often reinforced stereotypical gender roles, it also often challenged traditional ideas about women's lives. It made fun of married women and mocked the single men who vied for Mary's attention. It gave radical principles a moderate face, and made single, working life a viable option for everyday American women who watched Mary Richards on TV.

Bonnie J. Dow labels “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” an example of “lifestyle feminism,” drawing attention to the non-politicized nature of a show dealing with very real political issues. For second wave feminists, personal issues such as sex and marriage became political ones. Mary's choices did not reflect, “systematic oppression or social transformation. Even Mary's rejection of the possibility of marriage at the end of the first episode is a rejection of a *particular man* who has been inconsiderate and unreliable. Her decision is *individual* rather than political.” ¹¹

“The Mary Tyler Moore Show” spoke to the personal choice that every woman has the right to make – whether to prioritize marriage and family, or to put career and individual growth first. The show's focus on the choice to work or not to work was particularly explicit in its depiction of Phyllis – the educated homemaker. Rhoda and Mary mocked Phyllis' unforgettable comical blend of aloofness and ditzy-ness, as a trademark feature of this married woman who did not work. None of the women mentions, however, that Phyllis does not have to work because her husband can support her. This notion is taken for granted. The fact that Mary works is due to the circumstance of her being single – she must work because she has nobody to support her.

The opportunity to make a choice to work is rarely framed as a middle-class luxury, particularly on television where characters are mostly economically comfortable, and the struggle to pay bills is not often illuminated. Roseanne was a working woman who did not even have time to consider the feminist implications of her “choice” to work and earn money for her family. She had to work; her husband was a struggling contractor and they had three kids. She was not bitter because she “had” to work – she was bitter about the crummy jobs available to her and the low pay. There was no question about whether Roseanne would work outside of the home. The expectation that she helped the family financially was not a controversial one for her and her husband Dan.

“Roseanne” is a particularly interesting case study because of the highly polarized responses it elicited from viewers. Unlike Mary Richards, whose controversial life choice to be single at 30 was buffered by her appearance and her congenial character, Roseanne was one of the most unapologetic women to appear on television. Roseanne's voice was loud, nasal and grating. She had hysterical, yet harsh, one-liners. She was the boss of her family. And moreover, she was overweight and not particularly attractive. While the show was hugely successful, the media often treated Roseanne particularly maliciously. The August 1989 issue of *Esquire* had a short piece entitled, “Roseanne Nay!” (opposite “Roseanne Yea!”) which argued that audiences felt obligated to like Roseanne because she was overweight. Peter Freundlich wrote, “Television is chockablock these days with melodramas about afflictions overcome...we've been convinced that fat is an affliction, and so we celebrate now the heartwarming triumph of Roseanne Barr over fat.” [12](#)

Such comments in the media were not uncommon – just as Freundlich did, others reduced the show to the issue of the star's weight. At the same time, however, another man wrote an article, opposing “Nay!” entitled “Roseanne Yea!” Peter Nelson expressed his admiration for Barr – although he also described her as “Samoan.” But he recognized the significance of the show as an antidote to the ubiquitous family-sitcom, and as one re-writing the boundaries of television motherhood. He called Roseanne one of the moms he wished he had when he was a child, explaining: “Look at her TV house. It's *Cosby* with laundry...The adults win battles, but they seek to avoid them as much as the kids do. Unlike the folks on *Cosby*, mom and dad actually *do it* instead of just making goo-goo eyes about it.” [13](#)

In *Where the Girls Are*, Douglas describes the phenomenon of “Roseanne:” why this show was so perverse to some, and more importantly, why it truly resonated with most viewers:

Despite the incredibly hostile treatment she has gotten in the press – because she's four things TV women are not supposed to be, working-class, loudmouthed, overweight, and a feminist – Roseanne became a success because her mission was simple and welcome: to take the schmaltz and hypocrisy out of media images of motherhood. [She] spoke to millions of women who love their children more than anything in the world but who also find motherhood wearing, boring, and, at times, infuriating. [14](#)

The real “choice” that Roseanne embraced, the one that made her a feminist, was not to work, but rather, the choice to express herself – to her husband and to her children, to her friends and even to her bosses. Her choice was to not hide behind the image of traditional, proper wifehood or motherhood, but to exercise her right to speak freely about her feelings. She and her husband spoke honestly with one another, making choices about money and the kids as a team. Roseanne told her children that they bothered her sometimes in addition to telling them that she loved them. Her daughters, Becky and Darlene, fought over the bedroom they shared and wanted Roseanne to get involved. She suggested they fight each other to the death before offering the more practical solution (one that recognized that family problems are not solved in years, let alone half-hour time slots) to put a piece of masking tape across the floor to divide their space in half. After

the girls left the kitchen, Roseanne turned to DJ, her youngest child, and stated: “I’m getting my tubes tied.” [15](#)

While “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” avoided a political or social “agenda,” “Roseanne” did not. The writers made certain points very explicit, especially in early episodes. In particular, the fact that the Connor family was working class was constructed as a crucial aspect of the show and central to its “argument.”

The unrelenting efforts to remind the audience of the Connors' blue-collar-ness sometime bordered on caricature (Roseanne and Dan always drinking beer, family trips to the bowling alley), but the point was critical; this was “real life” feminism. It was a feminism not just for women who went to college or women who continued their careers despite the fact that their husbands could support them financially, but a feminism that included working class.

When Dan, in a later episode, claims that he does not “need” Roseanne (she was insisting that he eat healthy food after having a heart attack), she brought up the fact that he did, indeed, need her, and in a very real way:

Dan: I manage to get along fine without any of your help.

Roseanne: Without any of my help? Well, what the hell do you think I was doing all those years at Wellman's, and Rodbell's, and the beauty parlor and the diner? You think I was just earning enough to go out and buy new hats? If it wasn't for me the bank would've come and took this house a long time ago. [16](#)

Roseanne's feminism was for women who have to work because bills must get paid, who assert their role as head of the house despite the degrading work they often do during the day to pay for their kids' food and clothes. Roseanne's feminism challenged what often becomes the pop-culture shorthand for feminism – that the most empowering decision a woman can make is to work (and have or not have a family). “Roseanne” reminded an expansive audience that working-class women are left out of “feminism” when it is framed this way. She broadened the accessibility of feminism in a way that “The Mary

Tyler Moore Show” could not have, and emerged as a surprisingly on target portrayal of an unrepentant feminist.

When feminism is constructed simply as a choice to work or to stay at home, class inextricably binds its potential impact, and, as evidenced by “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” it is stunted in its ability to transform gender roles. Roseanne was a strong woman, not because she worked, but because she respected herself, asserted herself and stood up for her feelings. Her role as a working woman did not make her a feminist. Her role in the home did, however. This fact is seemingly antithetical to conventional ideas about feminism, but perhaps more powerful in its ability to reconstruct ideas about women's identity. With Roseanne in mind, the memory of Mary Richards is alarmingly un-controversial. (Did we really call her a feminist icon?) Roseanne and Dan were equals in the Connor house. Though they joked about Roseanne's role as head of the household – the woman to whom everyone answered – the audience could clearly see that Roseanne respected Dan and his opinions. They stood in the garage staring at a mess:

Dan: Let's just clean.

Roseanne: All right, you're the boss.

Dan: [pretends to faint] I'm sorry, for a minute I thought I heard you say I'm the boss. [17](#)

Dan questioned Roseanne's decision to give each of the kids five dollars when they go to the bowling alley. (Notably different from many sitcom-family interactions, he only did so after the children had left the room.) In a comedic interchange, the couple at once reiterated their open relationship and the not-often-talked-about-in-public mock-hatred parents can only feel for children they truly love:

Dan: Five bucks a piece for them little beggars? That's a lot of money.

Roseanne: But look at it this way, for five bucks they're out of our hair all night.

Dan: Well hell, let's give ‘em a hundred. Maybe they'll move to Cleveland . [18](#)

Roseanne's progressive vision of female identity was particularly powerful in its unexpectedness. She inhabited the most traditional female aspirations: being a wife and a mother. Unlike Roseanne, Mary Richards was a somewhat obvious tool for understanding some of the changes ushered in by the women's movement. The fact that Mary's character's mere existence challenged commonplace portrayals of women on television, left the show doing little else to transform gender roles, and in the end, it largely paid homage to convention. Roseanne's premise was within convention, but it allowed for real-life additions that, in the end, truly defied her predecessors.

While the question of whether Mary Richards and Roseanne Conner were feminists seems a somewhat obvious and necessary one, this question becomes less relevant in terms of "Sex and the City." While "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and "Roseanne" emerged at points when "feminism" as a highly prevalent issue, "Sex and the City" came at a time when pop culture was less obsessed with this specific term. Rather, the show's novel portrayals of women seemed to inspire (rather than reflect) a rebirth of discussion about the meanings of feminism, or at least, how the concept had unfolded in modern life. While woman found more equality in the workplace, the questions that remained were the more traditional ones – those for which feminist theory never satisfactorily answered for everyday women – about when and if one should marry, when and if one should have children. In the 80s, the media used the conflict between traditional yearnings and the advances of the women's movement to set the stage for "post-feminism." In the post-postfeminist 90s, "Sex and the City" (thankfully) did not shock its viewers with its successful, powerful and self-made women. What the show did was push the boundaries of propriety. And just like with "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and "Roseanne," strides were made for women by depicting that which already existed, but which the public was never shown.

Audiences seemed at once shocked and refreshed by the women on "Sex and the City" who had sex, might not get married or have children, and who talked about it all, rather frankly, over cocktails. When "Sex and the City" debuted on pay-cable in the early summer of 1998, the reviews were somewhat consistent. Critics recognized the significance of this show in terms of where it would stand in TV history, but at the same

time, they asserted that it was often trite, and it was often obvious that men wrote it.

The first season of “Sex and the City” highlighted the newness of the genre – women speaking candidly about sex. While their lunchtime conversations were certainly unheard of for television, the aspirations (conscious and unconscious) of each of the women to marriage were very familiar. The show constructed four female characters, their obvious differences served as tools with which to examine the issues at hand: again, marriage and relationships, sex and career. Miranda was the cynic, Charlotte the romantic, Samantha the sex-aholic and Carrie, the best friend to them all, the likeable woman who encompassed all of her friends traits. They were all educated, well-employed, “single and fabulous.” 19 However in the first season of the show, as the characters were introduced to the public, their fabulousness was often undercut by the fact that not one of them could seem to find a decent man.

“Sex and the City” largely addressed single life for women in their 30s: who knew enough to not settle for less than they deserved, who had established themselves in their careers and who were competing with women ten years younger than they for the bachelors in their 30s (and older). The show's exploration of relationships rested on a premise one character called “the mid-30s power flip” from women to men. In the pilot episode, the protagonist (sex-columnist Carrie Bradshaw) pondered a question that she compared to the riddle of the sphinx (for her crowd): “Why are there so many great unmarried women and no great unmarried men?” 20

Carrie described these women: “We all know them, and we all agree they're great. They travel, they pay taxes. They'll pay \$400 on a pair of Manolo Blahnik strappy sandals. And they're alone.” 21 Apparently, these are the qualities of a great woman. “Sex and the City” added a new component to feminism – the ability to out-consume men. Samantha Jones, the show's foremost advocate of casual sex and condemner of marriage and commitment, offered her solution to the quandary in which these great women found themselves, (expensive shoes and no man to marry them in?): “If you're a successful single woman in this city, you have two choices: You can bang your head against the wall and try and find a relationship or you can say ‘screw it,’ and just go out and have sex

like a man.” [22](#)

Carrie called Samantha, “a New York inspiration,”[23](#) though her friends did not aspire to her lifestyle. Miranda instead referred to her as a “dime-store Camille Paglia” [24](#) when Samantha attempted to justify sex for money as a legitimate exchange of power. Samantha's sexual hyperactivity floats between feminist and anti-feminist – complete confidence and control versus desperation and need for attention. The writers often put Samantha, the sexy blonde, and Miranda, the suit and tie wearing, short-haired attorney, head to head in mini-debates about feminist ideology. After a one-night-stand left \$1,000 for Carrie on the nightstand, she called Samantha and Miranda for their insight:

Samantha: Men give, women receive. It's biological destiny.

Miranda: Do you really want to be saying that? It is the kind of argument men have been using since the dawn of time [begins to raise her voice]...

Carrie interjected at that moment, so as to prevent her humiliation from becoming an argument about sex roles, telling them that she planned to “write it off as a bad date with a cash bonus.” [25](#)

When “Sex and the City” first aired, *The Village Voice* expressed dismay with scenes that seemed obviously written by “testicle-sporting suspects including series creator Darren Star,” and insisted that the audience “could see the seams where [the female author of the book “Sex and the City” from which the show was adapted] Bushnell's inside angle leaves off and their guesswork or worse kicks in.” [26](#) This scene, in which a potentially thoughtful discussion about feminism is thwarted, begged the same assumption: that this may have been one of those male-penned moments that ultimately shortchanged the show's female characters and the viewers in general. One of the barriers the audience faced with “Sex and the City,” with its beautiful and overtly sexual female characters, was being able to believe that it was not watching a male fantasy. However, the rounding out of the characters, which began by the end of the first season, enhanced the female-minded believability of the show.

When Carrie ended her relationship with “Mr. Big” at the finale of the first season, her reasoning mirrored the reasons Mary Richards left Bill to head for Minneapolis : Mr. Big would not tell Carrie that she was “the one.” However, Mary's realization was more introspective than Carrie's – it made her move to a new city , after all. Where Mary had put up with dissatisfaction for too long, a negative reflection of her weakness, Carrie knew just when she would no longer be happy in her relationship, and she ended it. At the end of the first season of “Sex and the City,” a more potent theme emerged than the implausibility of the husband-hunt for thirty-something women in New York : the idea that not only did these women not need husbands, but they might not have wanted them either. Miranda bought an apartment for herself in season two, a strong statement of content single womanhood. She encountered resistance to her decision, from her realtor who, upon hearing that she planned to live there alone attempted to fix her up with her son, to her mortgage broker who assumed that her father was providing the down payment, to her more traditional friend, Charlotte :

Miranda: I'm telling you, if I was a single man, none of this would be happening.

Samantha: If you were a single man, I'd date you.

Miranda: I've got the money, I've got a great job, and I still get, “It's just you?”

Carrie: they're just threatened. Buying a place alone means you don't need a man.

Miranda: I don't

Charlotte : Everyone needs a man. That's why I rent. If you own and he rents, then the power structure is all off. It's emasculating. Men don't want a woman who's too self-sufficient.

Samantha: I'm sorry. Did someone just order a Victorian, straight up? [27](#)

This interchange was a particularly effective one in which the writers indicated the diverse attitudes of women about issues of independence and the roles that men should

have in their lives.

In another episode, the four women know a couple that announced their engagement a week after meeting. They are all thoroughly disturbed by this happening, aside from Charlotte who finds the news reassuring. Carrie explored the notion of “love at first sight” for her column, and offered man-on-the-street type snippets as part of her research. One man offered a harsh analysis of why women cannot succumb to instantaneous love: “Love at first sight is too flaky for New York . Here women want to see a blood test and an ATM receipt before they'll talk to you.” ²⁸ This feeling described the new “Sex and the City” bred woman, and the audience sympathized with this man's condemnation of superficial women. The women on “Sex and the City” talked about eligible bachelors as being rich and good-looking, bought \$400 shoes because they could, and were highly concerned with getting seated at the best restaurants, rather than discussing political or social issues, lusting after men because they were smart and kind, or even sharing with their friends what they did all day at work.

It's very tempting and somewhat accurate to call Carrie and her friends “feminists.” They were in control of their own sexual gratification, and they were also successful career women. Samantha owned her own public relations firm; Miranda was a corporate lawyer; Charlotte an art dealer; and Carrie a writer with a column in a New York newspaper. The audience believed that these women respected themselves. So much so that when Carrie called Samantha “insecure” in a voice-over, it was not only surprising, but it was unsettling. ²⁹ After all, if it were true about this character, the argument of “Sex and the City” would seem to topple. While insecurity in the boldly sexual Samantha seemed misplaced, it advanced the complexity of Carrie as a feminist character. If Mary Richards' choice was to put marriage aside and go out “on her own,” and Roseanne's choice was to speak her mind, it seemed Carrie's choice was, often, uncertainty. She told a couple that she was not sure she was “the marrying kind.” The statement intentionally came across as hollow; Carrie seemed almost as if she were “trying on” the words, seeing what they sounded like escaping her mouth. When her new boyfriend Mr. Big told her that, after one failed marriage, he planned to never get married again, she found herself truly saddened. Carrie later confronted Big, explaining that she felt like there was no “point” in

dating a man who would not get married. Though they criticized the women who had crossed over the boundary dividing single and married women, Carrie, Charlotte and Miranda all toyed with the idea that they too might want to get married one day.

The audience watched Carrie struggle with questions about sex and marriage - she doubted herself and was not quite sure where she stood. As feminism is often framed in terms of the choices women make for themselves, Carrie's choice was to put herself and her happiness first. She allowed herself to waiver and to be uncertain; she gave herself permission to make, sometimes selfishly, decisions about her own life – from breaking up with Mr. Big to maxing out her credit card to buy a dress for an event where she “might” see him. ³⁰ The women's focus on finding their own happiness became a wholehearted embrace of single life.

In 2000, *Time* featured the “Sex and the City” cast on its cover, above a headline that asked: “Who Needs A Husband?” ³¹ The cover story offered this explanation: “The embrace of singlehood is, in some ways, a logical result of the expanding possibilities for women brought on by the women's movement.” ³² The statement once again points to the question of whether the protagonists of “Sex and the City” are feminists. It seems simple enough to state that the characters undoubtedly benefited from and welcomed the advances of the women's movement. But they do not quite fit as models for the future of feminism or for understanding average women's roles in modern society. “Sex and the City” dealt honestly with the conundrum women still find themselves facing: the “what if” fears that come with putting off marriage. These valid concerns were felt before the 1980s, and any time that women had to negotiate how they would live their lives. The show highlighted the inevitability of these fears, arguing that, in the end, the women can lead incredibly satisfying lives on their own.

“Sex and the City,” most prominently, added an important aspect of feminism to its portrayals of women, and one that had been mostly ignored by television until that point: sex. Certainly, nobody thought Mary Richards was a virgin, but audiences never heard her talk about sex with Rhoda. The most forceful argument of “Sex and the City” was women's rights to their sexual pleasure, honing in on the societal double standard which

labels women who have lots of sex as “sluts,” and men who have lots of sex as “bachelors.” The problem with “Sex and the City,” is its only other strong statement is about consumerism. While the audience learns little about the women's backgrounds, their families or their careers, it becomes most fascinated with learning about the most popular hotspots, the newest trends in high fashion, and the raunchy slang terminology the show, often quite cleverly, invented.

In this vein, the transition from “Roseanne” and then to “Sex and the City” seems like a regression of substantive notions of female identity on television. Carrie and her friend's strength comes from their honest approaches to sex and their ability to look “fabulous.” (The word, present in nearly every episode, cannot escape discussions of the show.) In *Where the Girls Are*, Douglas notes two distinct icons of 60s and 70s feminism: Helen Gurley Brown and Gloria Steinem. The differences between these women seem to mirror the waves of feminist portrayals on television. Brown's feminism, “liberation through sex, by throwing the double standard out the window” is the new, “Sex and the City,” feminine attitude. ³³ The show's title, [borrowed from the book on which it was based] is an obvious throwback to Brown's 1962 book, *Sex and the Single Girl*. ³⁴ However, Brown existed within the context of the movement, during which she could rightfully tackle just one aspect of women's liberation. Douglas writes that, “The bottom line of [Brown's] message has always been the absolute importance of pleasing men.” ³⁵ It is often difficult to view the women of “Sex and the City” as feminist icons when they have seemingly abandoned the other elements of the women's movement, and have perhaps even embraced ideals antithetical to the movement (“landing” a rich man, spending massive amounts of money on one's appearance).

Douglas a chapter in *Where the Girls Are*, “Narcissism as Liberation,” – a particularly useful phrase for examining the portrayal of the “modern” woman on television. A legitimate longing for a certain kind of selfishness is rooted in the feminist movement and the broadening of possibilities from which women could choose – the kind of work to do, whether to get married, whether to have children. However this aspect of the women's movement is one easily distorted by television and mass media. Both Roseanne and Carrie Bradshaw fed into the image of the narcissistic feminist, although arguably, one in

particular deserved this title. While Roseanne's critics may have deemed her outspoken nature a selfish expression, unmoved by the feelings of those around her, such would be a gross misunderstanding of the purpose of her often-harsh words. In terms of Carrie and "Sex and the City," *Time* once again asked the question "Is feminism dead?" in a 1998 cover story that directly implicated the selfishness of the supposed new ideals of feminism. In a satirical play-on-words, the magazine mocked narcissistic feminism with a headline which re-worked the ubiquitous feminist handbook, *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. It asked: "Want to know what today's chic young feminist thinkers care about? Their bodies! Themselves!" ³⁶ It noted that while: "the feminism of the '60s and '70s was steeped in research and obsessed with social change, feminism today is wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession." ³⁷ The materialistic portrayals of "Sex in the City" almost manipulate the feminist roots of self-fulfillment. At the same time, however, they represented a group of women who made good money and had every right to spend it as they pleased. They were women who dominated in formerly male-driven professions (Miranda became a partner in her corporate law firm) and celebrated their success without apologizing for it. Women similar to Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and perhaps even the caricatured Samantha, existed before "Sex and the City." The popularity of shows like "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Roseanne," and "Sex and the City," relied on their abilities to portray a version of the lives real women lived but never got to see on television. There was a touch of fantasy involved, perhaps most women only wish their sex lives were as good as Samantha's, or that they could actually afford half of Carrie's clothes and look as great as she did in them. Female audiences could relish in Mary's befuddlement. Roseanne had the fantastic zingers that wives and mothers only dreamed they could come up with, and have the guts to say.

"The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Roseanne," and "Sex and the City," all crossed boundaries as they welcomed new women, and new ideas about female identity, into the television landscape. They solidified the advances of the feminist movement by broadcasting fictionalized versions of its results to the entire population. They created a dialogue about the definition of feminism by portraying some of the most pressing issues surrounding women. The shows examined the choices that women have been able to

make in the wake of the women's movement of the 1960s about their bodies, their relationships and their careers, and the ways in which they can express themselves. The shows said: this is female identity. Sometimes the notion was particularly inclusive and other times it proved more restricting. But what these shows all had in common was that they truly resonated with American women. They stood as evidence of the truly expansive cultural power of television to widen the boundaries of the mainstream.

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