

VOICES OF A GENERATION: HBO'S POSTFEMINIST  
ANTI-HEROINES

by

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My research focuses on Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) and Hannah Horvath from *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017). Both series elicited a range of responses from viewers and critics who called into question the “likeability” of the protagonists. Out of this extra-textual discourse, Carrie and Hannah were conceived of as anti-heroines.

Television anti-heroes like Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*, HBO, 1999-2007), Walter White (*Breaking Bad*, AMC, 2008-2013), or Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*, Showtime, 2006-2013) are characters who skirt the boundaries between regular life and outlaw culture. They uphold hegemonic masculinity by reasserting their power through the form of vigilante justice. Carrie and Hannah are complete departures from the anti-hero trope. They are unabashedly feminine, and oftentimes, remarkable passive and ambivalent characters. In the past, female characters existed as complacent counterparts to a male lead. *SATC* and *Girls* construct a new space for complex and dynamic women on television.

There is a wide breadth of scholarship on the postfeminist nature of *SATC* and *Girls*. My research intervenes to explicitly link the characterization of Carrie and

Hannah as anti-heroines to the “postfeminist sensibility” (a concept defined by scholar Rosalind Gill). I argue that Carrie and Hannah’s unpalatable performance of femininity is due to the distinctly postfeminist ethos of both series. Essentially, Carrie and Hannah are too traditional for feminists, and too progressive for misogynists. My thesis ultimately suggests a strategy for reading *Girls* as an extension of *Sex and the City*. Together, the texts provide insight into shifting feminist relations and the politics of representation.

**KEYWORDS:** anti-hero, postfeminism, quality television, HBO

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## Introduction

“I don’t want to freak you out, but I think that I may be the voice of my generation. Or at least, *a* voice of *a* generation.”<sup>1</sup>—Hannah Horvath

Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) and Hannah Horvath from *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017) lead vastly different lives, but their experiences intersect around their encounters with friendship, careers, and love. Both series are set in New York City and feature all-female ensemble casts. Carrie is a successful newspaper columnist and fashion savant in her early thirties. Hannah is two years out of college, thrift-store clad, and intermittently (and often disastrously) employed. The shows are stylistic opposites; if *Sex and the City* (hereafter *SATC*) is glittery pink lip gloss, *Girls* is chapstick stuck underneath a couch cushion. Differences aside, Carrie and Hannah are intrinsically connected through multiple shared spaces. Their stories take place in the same city, *SATC* and *Girls* both exist in the quality television universe, and, most importantly, the protagonists also share a theoretical space; a distinctly postfeminist ethos that underpins their outlook and actions.

Both series elicited a range of positive and negative responses from viewers and critics. Numerous articles concerning the “likeability” of the main characters were published on various popular press sites. Carrie and Hannah were thus born as anti-heroines; not by design, but through the extensive extra-textual conversation that surrounds both series. This thesis launches from a breadth of television and gender studies scholarship that explores feminist relations and the politics of representation.

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<sup>1</sup> Season 1, Episode 1

My research intervenes to explicitly link the postfeminist sensibility of *SATC* and *Girls* to Carrie and Hannah's anti-heroine construction.

All too often, critics and fans reduce the series to guilty pleasures or junk television.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of Carrie and Hannah's "anti-heroine" behavior alongside the onslaught of academic and journalistic responses illuminates the texts as more than just lighthearted entertainment. *SATC* and *Girls* offer a wealth of cultural insight during a period of renewed inquiry for feminist and postfeminist discourse.<sup>3</sup>

The first section of my thesis establishes the concrete features of postfeminism, and justifies the sensibility's social and political significance as a theoretical framework. The second section discusses the rise of the Home Box Office (HBO), what has come to be known as "quality television," and the conventional anti-hero trope. The purpose of this section is to provide background on the media landscape in which *SATC* and *Girls* premiered, and to understand how the women depart from their male equivalents. The last two sections are case studies of *SATC* and *Girls*. The case studies assess the cultural impact of the two series and draw upon popular and academic discourse in conjunction with textual analyses to build the link between postfeminism and the anti-heroine. This thesis ultimately proposes a new strategy for reading *SATC* and *Girls* in cross-generational conversation with each other. My strategy offers an evaluative framework that comprehends female television protagonists as agents entangled in their own successes and failures rather than merely reactors and

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<sup>2</sup> Ablondi-Olivo, Lauren. "Why Sex and the City Is Still the Ultimate Guilty Pleasure Show." *Her Campus*, 11 Sept. 2017, [www.hercampus.com/school/u-conn/why-sex-and-city-still-ultimate-guilty-pleasure-show](http://www.hercampus.com/school/u-conn/why-sex-and-city-still-ultimate-guilty-pleasure-show).

<sup>3</sup> Gill, Rosalind. "Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2016. 615.

complements—sidekicks—in the overwhelmingly male universe of dramatic television.

## **Postfeminism**

Postfeminism is a widely-contested term that addresses a range of ideologies. After the feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s, some women felt they had achieved equality and activism was no longer necessary.<sup>4</sup> The prefix post- is slightly misleading as it suggests postfeminism arrived after the death of the second wave movement, which oversimplifies the complexity of the viewpoints at the time.<sup>5</sup> I argue it is more productive to consider postfeminism and feminist movements as existing simultaneously, informing and challenging each other. My understanding of postfeminism draws primarily from Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie, two feminist media studies scholars. Rather than a movement, Gill conceives of postfeminism as a sensibility with distinct characteristics tied to neoliberal politics of the self.<sup>6</sup> She posits that postfeminist discourse often contains contradictions, as the sensibility “entangles” feminist and anti-feminist viewpoints.<sup>7</sup> In *Postfeminism media culture: Elements of a Sensibility*, Gill presents the “stable features” of postfeminism:

These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that a woman’s age, race, class, and sexuality affect her ability to successfully participate in postfeminist politics. My analysis of *SATC* and *Girls* takes an

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<sup>4</sup> McRobbie, Angela. “Postfeminism and Popular Culture.” *Interrogating Postfeminism*, Dec. 2007, 257.

<sup>5</sup> McRobbie, “Postfeminism and Popular Culture.” 255.

<sup>6</sup> Gill, Rosalind. “Postfeminist Media Culture.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2007, 148.

<sup>7</sup> Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture.” 149.

<sup>8</sup> Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture.” 149.



intersectional approach by understanding postfeminism as an exclusionary term. Intersectionality refers to the overlapping spheres of oppression an individual may experience because of their identity.<sup>9</sup> For instance, a black woman might face discrimination because of both her race and gender. Postfeminism perceives the achievement of gender equality, but fails to account for the persistence of racism, ableism, or any other facet of identity. Carrie Bradshaw and Hannah Horvath are both white, straight, and relatively privileged. Because of this, they are ideal neoliberal bodies to navigate a postfeminist system of thought.

The features Gill describes make visible a contradiction inherent within the postfeminist sensibility. Postfeminism negotiates female empowerment within the power structure of capitalism. By design, capitalism upholds hegemonic ideologies, and therefore privileges white, wealthy, straight men. Female empowerment cannot be fully actualized if complicity within an inherently oppressive system is required. Thus, postfeminism attempts to neutralize the political terms of past feminist movements (that worked to disrupt and dismantle dominant power structures) by offering the illusion of power and choice through consumerism.

To elaborate on the link between the postfeminist sensibility and capitalism, I turn to Gill's assertion that postfeminism has a deep relation to neoliberalism. She writes, "Neoliberalism is understood increasingly as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating, and self-regulating."<sup>10</sup> Neoliberal ideology manifests in the mainstream media through language of the self. The "self" is

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<sup>9</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew." *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, Routledge, 1997. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture." 163.

constructed as a project to be constantly evaluated and improved upon. There is a deluge of literature (books, online blogs, magazines, etc.) covering topics such as self-help, self-care, and self-improvement. The postfeminist female body is “a window to the individual’s interior life.”<sup>11</sup> Women must outwardly project their value and success to the world. However, this intense pressure for women to maintain their appearance is further complicated by the constant judgement that they are shallow, vain, and self-absorbed for doing so.

One effect of the increased pressure to self-regulate is the reevaluation of Laura Mulvey’s concept of the gaze. In *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey describes the gaze as the process by which women are positioned as passive objects to be consumed by men.<sup>12</sup> Now, in what Gill identifies as the shift from objectification to subjectification, women portray themselves as “desiring sexual subjects” so that they invite the external male eyes with their own “narcissistic gaze.”<sup>13</sup> This shift is present in *SATC* and *Girls* as an underlying tension. Both texts are revolutionary in their progressive depiction of women’s sexual autonomy, but Carrie and Hannah are never given the option to opt-out of subjectification.

Most of the encounters the characters have with men are predicated on a sexual subtext. Even if there is clearly no romantic intention between a male and female character, the woman is still expected to present herself as sexually viable. The characters, particularly Hannah and her friends, struggle to reconcile their feminist

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<sup>11</sup> Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture.” 150.

<sup>12</sup> Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Feminisms*, 1975, pp. 438–448.

<sup>13</sup> Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture.” 151.

viewpoints with societal expectations around how women should behave during sexual encounters with men.

Thus far, I have presented a case for the regressive and harmful aspects of postfeminism. But the postfeminist sensibility is a powerful analytical tool that can be used to gain insight into a distinct social and political moment. In my opinion, the quality television landscape is a rich and under-examined site of complex gender performances.<sup>14</sup> The proliferation of the anti-heroine trope is one example in a sea of new representations.

Perhaps the most salient feature of the postfeminist sensibility regarding the anti-heroine is the grammar of individualism and agency. Carrie and Hannah (and their respective friend groups) are aware of and empowered by their agency, but they consistently make decisions grounded in traditional notions of femininity. Carrie knows she can stay single, but she gets married. Charlotte knows she can keep working, but she quits her job. Hannah knows she can have an abortion, but she chooses to keep the baby. They are too traditionalist for feminists, and too progressive for misogynists. The case studies that follow trace instances of “choice” in greater depth to challenge the characters’ ability to navigate a postfeminist world.

Gill says, “One of the strengths of postfeminism as a critical concept is that it attends to and makes visible contradictions.”<sup>15</sup> These contradictions, I argue, are at the core of the anti-heroine trope. Unlike the anti-hero, whose actions tend to be concretely unethical, Carrie and Hannah must negotiate a new performance of femininity, rooted in

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<sup>14</sup> Gill, “Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times.” 620.

<sup>15</sup> Gill, “Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times.” 622.

feminist and postfeminist beliefs, which intentionally upsets the viewer's expectation for how women are supposed to behave. It is up to the viewer to take the character's actions at face value or use the series to reflect on and interrogate hegemonic femininity.

## HBO, Quality Television, and the Anti-hero

“It’s always been fashionable to say at a cocktail party, ‘I never watch TV.’ That’s nonsense. Everybody watches TV”—Steve Bochco, television writer and producer

Charles Dolan founded The Home Box Office network in the mid-1970s. Dolan, a young and ambitious entrepreneur, had a vision to introduce a subscription-based television service into American homes. For a monthly fee, viewers could access a library of commercial-free films and sporting events.<sup>16</sup> In the 1990s, the network began to produce original television content. HBO was not regulated by the Federal Communications Commission, nor bound to advertisers. This put the company in the unique position to produce cutting edge television at low risk. HBO funneled an unprecedented amount of money into production, and shortened the typical number of episodes per season. The product was of cinematic quality, with the appealing structure of serialized narrative storytelling.

In 1996, HBO debuted the tagline, “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO.”<sup>17</sup> This tagline exemplifies the brand’s identity as a differentiator from viewer expectations about typical network fare. HBO framed its original content as a cut above “regular” television. The network cornered their audience and produced shows tailored to a niche market. HBO was at the forefront of what critics now deem to be television’s Third Golden Age. This era of television is defined by the proliferation of “quality” television series and technological advancements.<sup>18</sup> Quality television is a category that loosely refers to series with narrative complexity, high production values, and rounded

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<sup>16</sup> Edgerton, Gary Richard. *The Essential HBO Reader*. N.p.: UP of Kentucky, 2009. Print. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Edgerton, *The Essential HBO Reader*. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Marcus, B.K. “TV’s Third Golden Age.” *Foundation for Economic Education*, 9 Oct. 2013, [fee.org/articles/tvs-third-golden-age/](http://fee.org/articles/tvs-third-golden-age/).

characters with obvious psychological depth.<sup>19</sup> Scholar Deborah Jermyn observes that HBO, “extends a difficult conundrum for television studies and its conceptualization of quality, since in promoting itself as ‘quality’ television HBO actually seeks to deny being television at all.”<sup>20</sup> This is evident in both the aforementioned tagline and the network’s name—Home Box Office.

Today, quality television extends beyond the Home Box Office network. Exemplars of quality television from a range of networks include: *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-), *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-), *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Hulu, 2017-), and *Black Mirror* (Netflix, 2011-). In *Difficult Men*, Brett Martin argues, “Television was becoming a kind of food court—made up of many kiosks selling individual cuisines—rather than one.”<sup>21</sup> Martin credits HBO’s smash hit *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) as spurring a creative revolution within the industry. *The Sopranos* introduced one of television’s first anti-heroes: Tony Soprano.

Tony Soprano—mobster and family man—was a revolutionary character. He behaved in ways previously unseen on television. Of course, stories about the mafia had long existed in the cinematic world, but Tony was the exact type of character the television industry was resistant to portraying.<sup>22</sup> Network executives and advertisers held the misconception that Americans would not invite unethical characters into their homes, and so such violence was reserved for the cinema. Martin identifies the moment this all changed: when Tony strangled a man to death while taking his daughter on a

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<sup>19</sup> McCabe, Janet, and Kim Akass. *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. I.B. Tauris, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Jermyn, Deborah. *Sex and the City*. Wayne State University Press, 2009. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Martin, Brett. *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad*. N.p.: Penguin, 2014. Print. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad*. 89

college tour. It was not so much the murder that shocked viewers, but the absolute lack of forethought or remorse Tony exhibited. Executives were furious about the episode because they were convinced it would ruin a series that otherwise showed promise.<sup>23</sup> The risk was rewarded, and Tony Soprano laid the foundation for contemporary television anti-heroes like Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*, Showtime, 2006-2013), Walter White (*Breaking Bad*, AMC, 2008-2013), and Don Draper (*Mad Men*, AMC, 2007-2015).

Anti-heroes are men who act in concretely unethical ways, but are still sympathetic characters. They are characters who trade on fulfilling the audiences' dual desires for entering vicarious worlds of violence and crime while wanting assurances that the fabric of these worlds have moral codes and ethical boundary lines perversely in line with the viewers' own sense of right and wrong. For example, Dexter Morgan is a sociopathic murderer—but he only kills people who committed heinous crimes. This type of vigilante justice is typical of the character trope. Amanda Lotz, television scholar and author of *Cable Guys* (2014), identifies the social landscape in which these characters rose to prominence:

The fact that so many of these men—uniformly white, straight, and either physically or intellectually formidable—must transgress the bounds of law and order suggests that all is not well in the lives of men. This turn to illegality may be assumed to be a reaction against fading patriarchal power, but the intricately constructed characters and their stories reveal a far more complicated engagement with changing gender roles and social norms than might be presumed.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad*. 89.

<sup>24</sup> Lotz, Amanda D. *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-first Century*. N.p.: NYU, 2014. Print. 83-84.

These characters struggle with the duty they feel as men to provide. And yet, the anti-hero is sympathetic because he reinforces hegemonic masculinity. At the beginning of *Breaking Bad*, Walter White is thoroughly unhappy and emasculated. When he discovers he has cancer, he puts his knowledge of chemistry to use by cooking meth to make money for his family. Walter reclaims his agency and, thus, his masculinity. Although his actions are ethically reprehensible, the viewer roots for him because he is fulfilling his societal duty as a patriarch.

HBO and the advent of quality television also generated new roles for women—albeit still fewer than those available to men.<sup>25</sup> Margaret Tally understands the anti-heroine trope as a product of the post-network era. She says, “It may be helpful to similarly locate her existence in the new television landscape. She is a reflection of the capacity of television to now portray flawed female characters that exhibit a degree of complexity that was not available to them in earlier eras.”<sup>26</sup> That is to say, Carrie Bradshaw is just as revolutionary as a character like Tony Soprano, whether or not viewers and critics digest her in the same way.

Carrie Bradshaw and Hannah Horvath are both labeled as anti-heroines in popular discourse and academic scholarship.<sup>27</sup> However, their behavior completely

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<sup>25</sup> Oria, Beatriz. *Talking Dirty on Sex and the City: Romance, Intimacy, Friendship*. Rowman Et Littlefield, 2014. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Tally, Margaret. *The Rise of the Anti-heroine in Tv's 'Third Golden Age'*. N.p.: Cambridge Scholars, 2016. Print. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Tally, *The Rise of the Anti-heroine in Tv's 'Third Golden Age'* 3, 82; Nussbaum, Emily. “Difficult Women.”

*New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 22 Aug. 2017, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/07/29/difficult-women](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/07/29/difficult-women);

Juergen, Michelle. “Why Critics Can't Handle the Female Anti-Hero.” *Mic*, Mic Network Inc., 22 Jan. 2018, [mic.com/articles/79047/why-critics-can-t-handle-the-female-anti-hero](http://mic.com/articles/79047/why-critics-can-t-handle-the-female-anti-hero).



departs from the anti-hero trope. Where anti-heroes are unethical or immoral, Carrie and Hannah's flaws are more intrapersonal. They make frustratingly bad decisions and, above all, are huge narcissists

. Other anti-heroines such as Selina Meyer (*Veep*, HBO, 2012-) or Annalise Keating (*How to Get Away with Murder*, ABC, 2014-) are inserted directly into the conventions of the anti-hero trope. They leverage qualities coded as masculine to assert their own authority (e.g. emotional detachment, brashness, etc.). Carrie and Hannah do the exact opposite—they unabashedly embrace their femininity and sexuality in a manner deemed unruly by societal standards, and in doing so, introduce a new iteration of the anti-hero trope.

In *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, Kathleen Karlyn explores female characters who break the rules, joke, and make a spectacle of their bodies. Karlyn's concept of the unruly woman is a precursor to the anti-heroines who grace television today. She first discusses how women have traditionally been excluded from serious dramatic roles, and tend to be relegated to plots about love, motherhood, or loneliness.<sup>28</sup>

An unruly female character operates within a comedic structure to bring visibility to women's issues. Karlyn argues, "Sexuality and humor in film is a weapon of great political power which women should cultivate for its revolutionary potential as a deflator of the patriarchal order and an extraordinary leveler and reinventor of the dramatic structure."<sup>29</sup> This is exactly what Carrie and Hannah accomplish as anti-

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<sup>28</sup> Karlyn, Kathleen Rowe. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. University of Texas Press, 2005. 97.

<sup>29</sup> Karlyn, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. 9.

heroines. However unlikeable the personalities and actions of the protagonists are, *SATC* and *Girls* are female-centric shows dedicated to exploring issues women face in the postfeminist era.

## Case Study: Sex and the City

*Sex and the City* is a critically acclaimed series about four thirtysomething professional women who explore Manhattan's dating scene. At the center is Carrie Bradshaw—the show's protagonist and witty narrator. Carrie is a sex columnist who writes about the various romantic predicaments she and her friends encounter. The high production value of the show reflects the women's glamorous world of six-inch designer heels, morning cocktails, and disposable incomes. Darren Star, creator of the series, was decidedly against the classic sitcom model. *SATC* was shot on film without a live studio audience.<sup>30</sup> Much to the surprise of HBO executives, fans and critics were immediately drawn to the show's audacious characters and frank discussion of sexuality. In response to *SATC*'s popularity, HBO committed close to \$1 million per episode.<sup>31</sup>

The series, spanning six seasons and two feature films, had a tangible influence on popular culture. Sarah Jessica Parker, the actress who played Carrie, became a real-life fashion icon. Her bold looks on *SATC* influenced trends such as nameplate necklaces, fabric corsages, and flat caps. The show even popularized cosmopolitans as the “cocktail du jour.”<sup>32</sup> It became popular vernacular for viewers to proclaim, “I’m a Carrie!” or “I’m a Samantha!” to identify with the distinct personalities of the ensemble cast. Nearly two decades after its premier, the show lives on in the popular imaginary (see, for example, the rise of the “#wokecharlotte” meme, or articles: “15 Important Life Lessons *Sex and the City* Taught Us,” and “20 years on: The Complicated Legacy

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<sup>30</sup> Edgerton, *The Essential HBO Reader*. 194.

<sup>31</sup> Edgerton, *The Essential HBO Reader*. 194.

<sup>32</sup> Jermyn, *Sex and the City*. 6.

of *Sex and the City*").<sup>33</sup> Websites still publish "Which Sex and the City Character Are You" quizzes, which suggests the characters' relatability endures.<sup>34</sup> *SATC* also inspired such later shows as: *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* (ITV2, 2007-2011), *The Mindy Project* (Hulu, FOX, 2012-2017), *Gossip Girl* (The CW, 2007-2012), *2 Broke Girls* (CBS, 2011-2017), *Don't Trust the B in Apartment 23* (ABC, 2012-2013), *The Carrie Diaries* (The CW, 2013-2014), *Broad City* (Comedy Central, 2014-), and, of course, *Girls*.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond popular culture, *SATC* is a touchstone in serious contemporary conversations about feminism and television. The show serves as a testament to postfeminist culture, and the difficulty of navigating romantic relationships amidst evolving feminist viewpoints. Given its ubiquitous impact, it is a wonder how quickly the show is reduced to guilty-pleasure status. Emily Nussbaum offers an explanation in her piece for *The New Yorker*. "It's a classic misunderstanding, I think, stemming from an unexamined hierarchy: the assumption that anything stylized (or formulaic, or pleasurable, or funny, or feminine, or explicit about sex rather than about violence, or made collaboratively) must be inferior."<sup>36</sup> *SATC* presents an unabashedly glittery perspective that satirizes social mores. However, the show also championed privileged

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<sup>33</sup> Levine, Nick, et al. "The Genius #WokeCharlotte Meme Is Rewriting Sex and the City's Problematic Past." *Woke*

*Charlotte Meme Sex And The City Progressive Modern*, [www.refinery29.com/2017/12/186231/woke-charlotte-meme-sex-city?bucketed=true&bucketing\\_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](http://www.refinery29.com/2017/12/186231/woke-charlotte-meme-sex-city?bucketed=true&bucketing_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F); Sweeney, Tanya. "20 Years on: the Complicated Legacy of Sex and the City." *The Irish Times*, The Irish Times, 21 Apr. 2018, [www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/20-years-on-the-complicated-legacy-of-sex-and-the-city-1.3459922](http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/20-years-on-the-complicated-legacy-of-sex-and-the-city-1.3459922).

<sup>34</sup> See Articles: Bailey, Alyssa. "Quiz: What Sex and the City Character Knows Your Soul?" *Cosmopolitan*, *Cosmopolitan*, 16 Mar. 2018, [www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a26968/sex-in-the-city-quiz/](http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a26968/sex-in-the-city-quiz/); BrainFall. "Which Sex and the City Character Are You?" *BrainFall*, [brainfall.com/quizzes/which-sex-and-the-city-character-are-you/#ryiGcWrhM](http://brainfall.com/quizzes/which-sex-and-the-city-character-are-you/#ryiGcWrhM); Yapalater, Lauren. "Are You A Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte, Or Miranda?" *BuzzFeed*, [www.buzzfeed.com/lyapalater/are-you-a-carrie-samantha-charlotte-or-miranda?utm\\_term=.lpme74Q16#.sIBIREOMv](http://www.buzzfeed.com/lyapalater/are-you-a-carrie-samantha-charlotte-or-miranda?utm_term=.lpme74Q16#.sIBIREOMv).

<sup>35</sup> Oria, *Talking Dirty on Sex and the City: Romance, Intimacy, Friendship*. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Nussbaum, "Difficult Women."

white women as the ideal liberated body, and positioned freedom of choice within capitalistic terms.

The concept of choice is a distinct feature of the postfeminist sensibility. Carrie and her friends feel they are empowered to proactively make decisions in matters of sex and relationships, professional mobility, and consumerism. Yet, there is a disconnect between the characters' rhetoric of choice and the reality of their actions. When faced with a dilemma, the women consistently choose the most conservative solution. When Miranda accidentally gets pregnant, she speaks openly about abortion, only to choose to have the baby. Carrie dates an openly bisexual man, but his sexuality ultimately makes her too uncomfortable and she chooses to end the relationship. Samantha dates a black man (one of the few characters of color on the show), and breaks up with him because his sister dislikes interracial dating. Like the anti-hero, the women's actions make visible what boundaries exist in society. Where the anti-hero reinforces masculinity by transgressing ethical boundaries; Carrie and her friends uphold postfeminist values through the network of decisions they make.

Carrie's status as an anti-heroine is in part due to the "entanglement" of feminist and anti-feminist beliefs within the postfeminist framework.<sup>37</sup> Carrie is too radical for some audiences, and not progressive enough for others. Viewers disliked her flagrantly materialistic lifestyle and proclivity to make the wrong decision, especially around the men in her life (as I will discuss later in the example of her on-again-off-again relationship). *SATC* aired contemporaneously with *The Sopranos*, and both protagonists are now considered transgressive figures. Yet Carrie could not be more of a departure

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<sup>37</sup> Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture." 147.

from Tony. In Nussbaum's words, "High-feminine instead of fetishistically masculine, glittery rather than gritty, and daring in its conception of character, 'Sex and the City' was a brilliant and, in certain ways, radical show. It also originated the unacknowledged first female anti-hero on television: ladies and gentlemen, Carrie Bradshaw."<sup>38</sup> *The Sopranos* is rarely criticized for being "fetishistically masculine," but *SATC* is frequently condemned for its glitz.

Comparing Carrie to anti-heroes like Tony exposes a double standard that exists within popular discourse. As EJ Dickson argues:

To recap: Walter White sold meth. Tony Soprano strangled a man in cold blood. Carrie Bradshaw slept around, bought lots of shoes, and maybe used the first-person a little too much for people's liking. Also, she wore really ill-advised du-rags occasionally. But I have yet to see anyone argue that Bryan Cranston or James Gandolfini 'set men back.' Anyone still want to argue that culturally entrenched sexism is no longer a thing?<sup>39</sup>

As Dickson indicates, the critics of the show disliked the ultra-feminine lifestyle of its protagonist (see articles: "35 Reasons I think Carrie Bradshaw is Kind of an A-hole," "21 Reasons Carrie Bradshaw is Actually Really Annoying, and "Why I (Really, Seriously, Truly) Hate Carrie Bradshaw").<sup>40</sup> This subset of the criticism *SATC* received is integral to understanding how sympathy and likeability are gendered issues. Dexter murdered people every episode, and yet Carrie is criticized for, "That one time she went to the country with Aiden and wore heels."<sup>41</sup> Carrie is an anti-heroine because she

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<sup>38</sup> Nussbaum, "Difficult Women."

<sup>39</sup> Dickson, EJ. "In Defense of Carrie Bradshaw." *The Daily Dot*, 11 Dec. 2015, [www.dailydot.com/via/carrie-bradshaw-satc-chris-noth/](http://www.dailydot.com/via/carrie-bradshaw-satc-chris-noth/).

<sup>40</sup> Samotin, Perrie. "35 Reasons I Think Carrie Bradshaw Is Kind of an A-Hole." *StyleCaster*, 11 Aug. 2016, [stylecaster.com/reasons-i-think-carrie-bradshaw-is-annoying](http://stylecaster.com/reasons-i-think-carrie-bradshaw-is-annoying); "21 Reasons Carrie Bradshaw Is Actually Really Annoying." *BuzzFeed Community*, [www.buzzfeed.com/hlmccarthy/21-reasons-why-carrie-bradshaw-is-actually-really-o2px?utm\\_term=.wf1Wlr9b7#.jnA8wbV6o](http://www.buzzfeed.com/hlmccarthy/21-reasons-why-carrie-bradshaw-is-actually-really-o2px?utm_term=.wf1Wlr9b7#.jnA8wbV6o); "Why I (Really, Seriously, Truly) Hate Carrie Bradshaw." *TheGloss*, 10 Jan. 2011, [www.thegloss.com/culture/why-i-really-seriously-truly-hate-carrie-bradshaw/](http://www.thegloss.com/culture/why-i-really-seriously-truly-hate-carrie-bradshaw/).

<sup>41</sup> "21 Reasons Carrie Bradshaw Is Actually Really Annoying."

embraces her own complexity as an autonomous woman who occasionally makes the wrong decision. She is not a role model by the standard of feminist thought, but she does exhibit flaws that make her more nuanced than a one-dimensional “perfect” character. Carrie’s imperfections are what make her a fascinating subject of interrogation into feminist and postfeminist practice.

Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha each personify different postfeminist qualities. Miranda is a cynical high-powered lawyer with a hardheaded view of love. Her caustic tongue is contrasted with Charlotte’s relentless optimism and occasional naivety. Charlotte is an art dealer turned housewife, and consistently the most traditional of the group. She is frequently shocked by Samantha’s libertine approach to sex. Samantha, owner of a public relations firm, is by far the most brazen, at one point calling herself “a try-sexual”—as in she’ll try anything once.<sup>42</sup> Carrie is designed as an amalgam of all three—a strategy that makes her less polarizing and more palatable as the lead character.<sup>43</sup> The women have wildly different perspectives on any given situation they encounter as they traverse the perils of dating in a big city. Given the comedic structure of the show, viewers are encouraged to laugh at but also identify with each of the characters.

Kim Cattrall’s Samantha is a critical figure in this examination of womanhood. Samantha is perhaps the character who best embodies Karlyn’s concept of the unruly woman. She is strong, unapologetic, and sexually liberated. Whether her relationships last one night or several years, Samantha always holds the power. Karlyn’s work explains how unruly female characters—anti-heroines—use transgressive behavior and

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<sup>42</sup> Season 3, Episode 4.

<sup>43</sup> Jermyn, *Sex and the City*. 60.

the comedy genre to claim their agency and collapse patriarchal order. Samantha reclaims the pleasure of objectification by making a spectacle of herself, which exposes the man's gaze—and the gaze of the viewer.<sup>44</sup> Samantha is the oldest in the crew, but her sexual viability never diminishes. She chooses to never get married or have children, and lives in celebration of herself, therefore exemplifying the postfeminist grammar of individuality and choice.

Carrie does not always exhibit the same level of agency in her relationships with men. Throughout the series, she has a hot and cold romance with a man nicknamed “Big.” The relationship is a source of great anxiety for her. At one point after spending time with Big, she tells Miranda, “I’m not like me. I’m, like, Together Carrie. I wear little outfits: Sexy Carrie and Casual Carrie. Sometimes I catch myself actually *posing*. It’s just—it’s exhausting.”<sup>45</sup> This sentiment harkens back to the postfeminist feature of self-improvement. Self-improvement might seem like an individualistic pursuit, but in Carrie’s case she gauges what adjustments need to be made in relation to societal expectations and the preferences of the men she dates. Thus, the changes she makes are not authentic, merely “poses” she performs to please those around her. I would go as far as to argue that Carrie’s development is halted when she’s in a relationship, and her character is only able to grow upon reflection after a break-up or argument (as evidenced in her conversation with Miranda about Big).

Carrie’s relationship with Big betrays the conventions of the romantic comedy genre. In any other romance, Big would clearly be Carrie’s happy ending and the finale of the series. But, in Nussbaum’s words, he is a man “practically woven out of red

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<sup>44</sup> Karlyn, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Nussbaum, “Difficult Women.”



flags.”<sup>46</sup> He is emotionally detached and unwilling to fully commit to Carrie. Carrie goes as far as to have an affair with Big while in a relationship with an arguably better man. The antagonistic nature of Big’s character complicates the viewer’s sympathy for Carrie. Every time she returns to him, his bad behavior becomes her character flaw. This is a gendered phenomenon specific to the anti-heroine trope. For example, Walter White’s wife is horribly unlikable at the beginning of *Breaking Bad*, but if anything, her behavior only increases the viewer’s sympathy for him. Every time Carrie returns to Big, it affects her ability to improve on herself, and builds her case as an anti-heroine.

Carrie’s self-improvement is further complicated by how her desires conflict with societal norms. Aside from Charlotte, the friends claim to reject the notion women must be married and have children to be fulfilled. Carrie does not secretly ache to be a housewife, but she does yearn to conform in general. As Beatriz Oria argues, “Individualization processes force us to make our own decisions, but it also induces sameness in these very choices: it puts considerable pressure on the individual to conform and behave in a standardized way.”<sup>47</sup> Carrie searches for happiness amidst a setting imbued with preconceived standards of what the “right” decisions for women are. She knows a relationship with Big will not fulfill her, but she cannot resist the pull she feels toward him.

One of *SATC*’s greatest contributions is that it validates ambivalence and lack of certainty as a signifier of female complexity rather than a sign of weakness. Carrie constantly retraces steps she’s already taken. She changes her mind, about Big, about

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<sup>46</sup> Nussbaum, “Difficult Women.”

<sup>47</sup> Oria, *Talking Dirty on Sex and the City: Romance, Intimacy, Friendship*. 85.

friendships and work, about nearly everything, which in the show's terms is a statement less about her failures than about her comfort with gaining and maintaining control over her own choices, regardless of whether they remain fixed or change—sometimes overnight. Carrie's label as an anti-heroine reflects the depth of her character. She is not a villain by any means, but she is flawed in a manner that obfuscates the viewer's sympathy.

The episodes "Just Say Yes" and "Change of a Dress" illustrate Carrie's ambivalence in action. In "Just Say Yes" Carrie's boyfriend, Aiden, has just moved into her apartment. Disgruntled by his mess, she shuffles through one of his suitcases and finds a little black velvet box. Carrie sees what might be her future engagement ring, and immediately runs to the sink to throw up. In the next scene, Charlotte beams, "You're getting engaged," to which Carrie replies, "I threw up. I saw the ring, and I threw up. That's not normal." Samantha nods knowingly and quips, "That's my reaction to marriage." Charlotte's eagerness and Samantha's snide comment are typical responses from the two women. For such a momentous development, Carrie needs the different perspectives of her three friends to parse out her own feelings.

One of Carrie's issues with her impending proposal is that she hates the ring Aiden picked out. She laments to her friends, "How can I marry a guy who doesn't know which ring is me?" Carrie's fashion choices are iconic. She boldly accessorizes with pieces like sequined beanies, fur accents, and garish fake flowers. Whether it be Charlotte's preppy headbands or Miranda's power suits, all four women use their wardrobe to express themselves. To Carrie, if Aiden cannot pick out a ring she likes, he does not understand her essence.

Near the end of the episode, Carrie accompanies Aiden to walk his dog. She sports tiny gym shorts and a cropped tank top. Aiden gets down on one knee to pick up his dog's poop, and hands Carrie the little black box she previously discovered. He has purchased a different ring, which Carrie takes as a sign that he *does* know her. She says yes. Carrie feels she owes it to Samantha to tell her first. "I'm engaged," Carrie says, to which Samantha replies, "Fuck you. Oh, let's have a drink and celebrate." Samantha reveals she helped Aiden pick out the new ring that Carrie adores. Although Samantha is openly against marriage, she will always support her friends and their decisions. Her ability to choose the perfect ring for Carrie shows that she understands Carrie better than Aiden.

Above all, *SATC* is about the power of female friendships. The women consistently fulfill each other in ways the men in their lives fail to. Carrie is arguably more anti-heroic in her relationships with men than in her friendships. By contrast, the anti-hero figure operates alone. He rarely opens himself emotionally as a power move to maintain control. For instance, at point Dexter Morgan has a significant love interest. He never dares to reveal his identity as to not risk exposing his horrible actions. The dramatic irony fosters Dexter's image as a deeply misunderstood character and nurtures the viewer's sympathy, because, as outsiders, we understand what he sacrifices to act for the greater good of society. Carrie is emotionally available and in tune with the needs of her friends. This depiction of healthy female friendships is one way in which Carrie departs from the male trope.

Later in the season, in an episode titled "Change of a Dress" we see Carrie falter in her decision to accept Aiden's proposal. Carrie and Miranda jokingly try on gaudy

wedding dresses with puffy sleeves and lace frills. Carrie sees herself in the mirror, and immediately has a panic attack. A rash covers her body, and she cannot breathe. Later, at brunch with her friends, Carrie proclaims, “My body is literally rejecting the idea of marriage...it’s not him, it’s me. I’m missing the bride gene. I should be put in a test tube and studied.” She believes something is wrong with her for not wanting to marry Aiden. Miranda says, “Carrie, I’m going to ask you an unpleasant question now. Why did you ever say yes?” Carrie replies, “Because I love him. When a man you love kneels in the street, and offers you a ring, you say yes, it’s what you do!” Carrie is ambivalent about one of the biggest decisions a person makes in life—marriage. She felt pressured to say yes because she has been conditioned to believe it is the “right” thing to do, regardless of what is in her heart.

The episode ends with a voice over as Carrie writes her article for the week. She says, “I tried to get my mind around the concept of happily ever after. As progressive as our society claims to be, there are still certain life targets we’re all supposed to hit. Marriage, babies, and a home to call your own. But what if instead of breaking out in a smile, you break out in a rash? Is something wrong with the system, or is it you?” Carrie’s article topic perfectly summarizes the issue at stake. The women believe they have achieved equality, but their choices are still consistently driven by supposedly outdated beliefs and practices. Their empowerment is fixed in sex and consumerism, which creates the illusion of choice. When it comes to major life decisions, all except for the unruly Samantha revert to the most traditional option (which, in some cases causes pain, like when Carrie must break off her engagement to Aiden).

In the example of Carrie and Aiden, some might blame what Carrie calls “the system” (and I call the postfeminist sensibility in action) where others might see the situation as a personal failure on Carrie’s part. The latter group villainized her for making what seemed like an obvious mistake (she clearly did not want marriage, and still had romantic chemistry with Big), which contributed to her characterization as an anti-heroine (see articles: “Why Carrie & Big Should Not Have Ended Up Together on ‘Sex and the City,’” “Why Carrie and Mr. Big Were Never Supposed to End Up Together,” and “Mr. Big Syndrome Ruins Lives”).<sup>48</sup>

Carrie’s ambivalence, as expressed in her relationship with Aiden, is a consequence of the postfeminist mindset. To support this claim, I turn to two of *SATC*’s signature narrative techniques: Carrie’s columns and the brunch scenes. Carrie’s columns serve as an access point into Carrie’s mind and frame the theme of each episode. Her writing is inspired by the conflicts she and her friends face. Carrie became notorious for her signature line, “I couldn’t help but wonder...”<sup>49</sup> The questions she poses range from the ludicrous, “Are men in their twenties the new designer drug?” to slightly more profound, “...do we really want these things (marriage and children), or

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<sup>48</sup> Donelan, Loretta. “Carrie Was Not Supposed To Be With Big On ‘SATC’.” *Bustle*, Bustle, 19 Apr. 2018,

[www.bustle.com/articles/136072-why-carrie-big-should-not-have-ended-up-together-on-sex-and-the-city](http://www.bustle.com/articles/136072-why-carrie-big-should-not-have-ended-up-together-on-sex-and-the-city); Lindig, Sarah. “Why Carrie and Mr. Big Were Never Supposed to End Up Together.” *Harper’s BAZAAR*, Harper’s BAZAAR, 28 Mar. 2018, [www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/film-tv/a13732/why-carrie-and-mr-big-were-never-supposed-to-end-up-together/](http://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/film-tv/a13732/why-carrie-and-mr-big-were-never-supposed-to-end-up-together/); “Mr. Big Syndrome Ruins Lives.” *Clutch Magazine*, [clutchmagonline.com/2011/09/mr-big-syndrome-ruins-lives/](http://clutchmagonline.com/2011/09/mr-big-syndrome-ruins-lives/).

<sup>49</sup> See articles: Diamond, Amelia. “Carrie Bradshaw Asked the Hard Hitting Questions.” *Man Repeller*, Man Repeller, 25 Mar. 2016, [www.manrepeller.com/2015/03/sarah-jessica-parker-carrie-bradshaw-satc.html](http://www.manrepeller.com/2015/03/sarah-jessica-parker-carrie-bradshaw-satc.html); Sharma, Neha. “Everything Carrie Ever Wondered About on Sex and the City.” *Vulture*, 13 Mar. 2013, [www.vulture.com/2013/03/carrie-sex-city-couldnt-help-but-wonder.html](http://www.vulture.com/2013/03/carrie-sex-city-couldnt-help-but-wonder.html).

are we just programmed?”<sup>50</sup> This narrative styling shows how Carrie becomes a passive observational actor in her own life, as she rarely fully answers the questions she poses.

The questions also illustrate the complexity of navigating romantic interactions amidst changing conceptions of female empowerment. Their power—or lack thereof, is still defined by their encounters with men. Carrie writes as if two versions of herself exist: the “single self” and the “relationship self.” Neither is completely whole—each has what the other lacks. The central conflict is whether Carrie can reconcile these two distinct identities to ultimately reach fulfillment. Her strategy is largely trial and error, as she and her friends date a wide range of men (differing in age, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, and race) and collectively reflect on their experiences.

The brunch scenes are key moments in which the women come together to debrief about their lives. Deborah Jermyn refers to these scenes as “chat-and-chews.”<sup>51</sup> The chat-and-chews express the postfeminist underpinning of the series, as the conversations are layered with class privilege specific to a group of white women. The characters’ frequent ability to meet up for brunch in the middle of the day suggests professional, financial, and personal freedom. They are not tied to their desks or familial obligations. Their brunches are a public performance of affluence that is distinctly postfeminist in nature, as it outwardly projects their success via leisure and consumption to the world.

During the shared meals, each woman gives her perspective on whatever the theme of a given episode is. The women bring out different sides of each other. Jermyn argues, “...*SATC* successfully constructed a program rich with opportunities for

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<sup>50</sup> Season 4, Episode 15.

<sup>51</sup> Jermyn, *Sex and the City*. 22.

multiple points of audience identification. With these various outlooks in place, it was able to facilitate an endless debate, both textually and extratextually, comprised of different perspectives on women's lives under third-wave feminism."<sup>52</sup> The women never "pose" in front of each other—they are candid about their desires and the problems they face.

Some viewers were turned off by *SATC*'s candidly feminine perspective. For the most part, those people were male. According to Hilary Weaver, *SATC* receives an average rating of 8.1 out of 10 from women, but an "underwhelming" 5.8 out of 10 from men.<sup>53</sup> The show does not feature very dynamic male characters, but why should it? There are numerous television shows dedicated to masculine interests, and this single franchise should not be villainized because it refuses to pander to the male demographic. If Carrie must be villainized, let it be because she and her friends reap the benefits of a feminist movement they refuse to acknowledge.

Almost two decades after its premier, *SATC* continues to play an important role in contemporary discussions about feminism and television. Carrie did not originate as an anti-heroine; she became one through the extensive conversation that surrounds *SATC*. My analysis of this discourse demonstrates how her anti-heroine characterization is explicitly connected to the postfeminist framework of the series.

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<sup>52</sup> Jermyn, *Sex and the City*. 62.

<sup>53</sup> Weaver, Hilary. "IMDB Is Dominated By Dudes Who Hate Sex and the City." *The Cut*, [www.thecut.com/2016/05/men-are-asserting-opinions-on-womens-shows.html](http://www.thecut.com/2016/05/men-are-asserting-opinions-on-womens-shows.html).

## Case Study: Girls

Hannah is one of the most disliked characters on television, and that's including all the villains, anti-heroes, and sociopaths.<sup>54</sup>—Erin Whitney

Carrie Bradshaw's closet is full of tutus and high heels; Hannah Horvath's resembles a disorganized thrift store. Carrie's sense of humor is witty and situational; Hannah's is self-deprecating and cringe-worthy. Manhattan versus Brooklyn; columnist versus intern; the differences are endless. However, it is the similarities between the two protagonists that makes for a compelling analysis. Carrie is nearly a decade older than Hannah, and *Girls* premiered over eight years after the finale of *SATC*. Yet, the ideological underpinnings of the series are remarkably similar. Both shows transgress decades-old stereotypic portrayals of female television characters as exclusively complementary to male stars (husband, boss, neighbor). But beyond that, Carrie and Hannah push past the notion that female protagonists must be role models. Both characters, in a sense, are deeply flawed, but flawed in widely divergent ways. Their differences suggest that the contemporary political landscape necessitates a range of complex characters to fully actualize postfeminist relations in action.

Moreover, the characteristics critics and viewers identify as “flawed” are distinctly coded in gendered expectations about how women should behave. For example, this case study undertakes a wide range of popular press discourse that villainizes Hannah for being a narcissist. Because female characters previously existed as one-dimensional complements to a male lead, there was no space for narcissism. The

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<sup>54</sup> Whitney, Erin Oliver. “Why We Hate Hannah Horvath But Love Larry David.” *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 25 Mar. 2014, [www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/25/hannah-girls-larry-david\\_n\\_5023921.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/25/hannah-girls-larry-david_n_5023921.html).



movement toward female-centric television introduced characters like Hannah who outwardly ruminate on their own needs and desires. In the context of the anti-hero, say Don Draper, the language of “narcissist” is retooled as “leader” or “boss” because viewers respect his authority as a patriarch. Thus, Carrie and Hannah’s characterizations as anti-heroines are symptomatic of how dominant society systematically privileges and champions hegemonic male behavior (the anti-hero), and shames female characters who exhibit similar nuance. This case study positions *Girls* as an extension and reevaluation of the postfeminist politics presented in *SATC*. Together, the texts argue for the enduring relevancy of the postfeminist sensibility and the anti-heroine in contemporary quality television.

In interviews, Lena Dunham, creator and star of *Girls*, says that her show is inspired by *SATC*, but also intended to “fill the gap” of issues Carrie’s story does not address.<sup>55</sup> Dunham hoped to portray a more “realistic” depiction of life as a young woman. Hannah is not beautiful by conventional standards, but she is frequently nude throughout the series. Her nudity was met with a variety of responses; some found it excessive and unnecessary to advancing the plot, others lauded her for making visible a female form that is common in everyday life but rarely represented on screen.<sup>56</sup> The focus on Dunham’s naked body returns to the feature of postfeminism that examines

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<sup>55</sup> Goldberg, Lesley. “TCA: Lena Dunham Says HBO's 'Girls' Isn't 'Sex and the City'.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 13 Jan. 2012, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/tca-lena-dunham-says-hbos-281483](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/tca-lena-dunham-says-hbos-281483).

<sup>56</sup> See articles: Lang, Niko. “Lena Dunham, Keep Your Clothes off: Why the Nudity on 'Girls' Is a Revolutionary Act.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 13 Jan. 2014, [articles.latimes.com/2014/jan/13/news/la-ol-lena-dunham-girls-nudity-revolutionary-act-20140113](http://articles.latimes.com/2014/jan/13/news/la-ol-lena-dunham-girls-nudity-revolutionary-act-20140113); Nydailynews; “‘Girls’ Producers in Uproar over Question Involving Lena Dunham Nude Scenes - NY Daily News.” *Nydailynews.com*, New York Daily News, 10 Jan. 2014, [www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/girls-tca-panel-uproar-question-involving-lena-dunham-nude-scenes-article-1.1575406](http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/girls-tca-panel-uproar-question-involving-lena-dunham-nude-scenes-article-1.1575406).

femininity as a bodily property. The feminist relations in action are focused on Hannah's external performance of womanhood rather than the systemic forces that actively disadvantage women. The politics of the female body amplify the postfeminist messaging within the show, and in the responses.

Another significant difference between the two series is that *Girls* shifts the focus from consumption (excessive shopping and midday brunches) to production (unpaid internships and barista jobs). Hannah and her friends openly discuss their financial troubles. Carrie is an exemplary postfeminist body because she has the capitalistic means to consume. Hannah desires wealth and leisure, but struggles to achieve professional success in a competitive market. This does not dismantle the postfeminist framework of the show, but rather provides commentary on the challenges millennials face in the so-called "real world" compared to Carrie's generation in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is important to note that New York City is an important site of consumption and production for female characters. *SATC* and *Girls* fall into a longstanding history of female protagonists who live in New York. The city is constructed as a space where women are awarded more professional and sexual agency.<sup>57</sup> By setting *Girls* in Brooklyn, Dunham builds on this legacy, but also updates and critiques it.

Hannah moved to Brooklyn after graduating from an elite liberal arts college. For the first two years, her parents paid her rent, insurance, and other bills. In the opening scene of the series, Hannah's parents have decided to cut her off. Hannah

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<sup>57</sup> Lehman, "All Adventurous Women Do: HBO's *Girls* and the 1960s-70s Single Woman." 22.

responds, “This is nuts...I could be a drug addict. Do you realize how lucky you are?”<sup>58</sup>

This conversation immediately establishes Hannah’s sense of entitlement and an imminent shift about to occur in her lifestyle. When her parents try to make plans with her before their trip ends, she replies, “I don’t want to see you tomorrow...I have work, and then I have a dinner thing, and then I am busy trying to become who I am.”<sup>59</sup>

Hannah is immediately ambivalent about spending time with her parents after they cut her off.

Later that night, in an opioid tea induced state, Hannah decides to confront her parents. Her father offers her coffee to sober up, to which she says, “Coffee is for grown-ups!” When he insists, she replies, “I’m 24 years old. Don’t tell me what to do!”<sup>60</sup> These two scenes illuminate how Hannah feels entitled to both her independent lifestyle in the city and unchecked emotional and financial support from her parents. Margaret Tally argues, “One of the recurring themes of the show is how difficult it is for young women to navigate the issues they face as millennials and the ways in which they make mistakes and deal with their ambivalent feelings about themselves and the people in their lives.”<sup>61</sup> Like Carrie, Hannah is characterized as an anti-heroine because of her ambivalent attitude.

Male characters are anti-heroes because of their actions, but Hannah is an anti-heroine because of her inability to act—her passivity. In “Girls Recap: Hannah the Anti-hero” Scott Meslow addresses this issue:

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<sup>58</sup> Season 1, Episode 1

<sup>59</sup> Season 1, Episode 1

<sup>60</sup> Season 1, Episode 1

<sup>61</sup> Tally, *The Rise of the Anti-heroine in Tv's 'Third Golden Age'* 83.

But the really remarkable thing about *Girls* isn't its (admittedly copious) amount of naked flesh; it's the show's *narrative* bravery. Shows like *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad* convinced us to root for their antiheroes because those antiheroes are very, very good at what they do—even if what they do tends to be bad. But Hannah is the least competent antihero on television: Lazy, self-absorbed, and riddled with anxieties that would make her sympathetic if she didn't go out of her way to tear down others.<sup>62</sup>

A male character who behaved like Hannah would not be considered “brave” or villainous, they would simply be acting the way men on television have for decades.<sup>63</sup> Hannah is not afforded the same treatment as anti-heroes like Dexter Morgan or Walter White (see articles: “Why Girls' Hannah Horvath Still Inspires Intense Hatred,” “Why Hannah Horvath from GIRLS Is the Actual Worst,” and “Why 'Girls' Made Us Hate Millennials”).<sup>64</sup> She is revolutionary in her disruptive and unpalatable performance of femininity, but incongruously contained in an ambivalent postfeminist attitude.

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<sup>62</sup> Meslow, Scott. “Girls Recap: Hannah the Antihero.” *The Week - All You Need to Know about Everything That Matters*, 27 Jan. 2013, [theweek.com/articles/468322/girls-recap-hannah-antihero](http://theweek.com/articles/468322/girls-recap-hannah-antihero).

<sup>63</sup> Juergen, Michelle. “Why Critics Can't Handle the Female Anti-Hero.” *Mic*, Mic Network Inc., 22 Jan. 2018, [mic.com/articles/79047/why-critics-can-t-handle-the-female-anti-hero](http://mic.com/articles/79047/why-critics-can-t-handle-the-female-anti-hero).

<sup>64</sup> See articles: Blevins, Joe. “Why Girls' Hannah Horvath Still Inspires Intense Hatred.” *News*, [News.avclub.com](http://News.avclub.com), 13 Apr. 2016, [news.avclub.com/read-this-why-girls-hannah-horvath-still-inspires-int-1798246205](http://news.avclub.com/read-this-why-girls-hannah-horvath-still-inspires-int-1798246205); Evans, Mel. “Why Hannah Horvath from GIRLS Is the Actual Worst.” *Cosmopolitan*, 1 May 2018, [www.cosmopolitan.com.au/lifestyle/why-hannah-horvath-is-the-actual-worst-20919](http://www.cosmopolitan.com.au/lifestyle/why-hannah-horvath-is-the-actual-worst-20919); Wright, Jennifer. “Why 'Girls' Made Us Hate Millennials.” *New York Post*, New York Post, 10 Apr. 2017, [nypost.com/2017/04/08/girls-was-a-great-show-but-it-gave-millennials-a-bad-rep/](http://nypost.com/2017/04/08/girls-was-a-great-show-but-it-gave-millennials-a-bad-rep/).

Lauren Duca sees Hannah as informed by the popular man-child trope.<sup>65</sup> Hannah's anti-heroine status is achieved through her refusal to take responsibility over her life. For years, actors like Adam Sandler and Seth Rogen played into a similar arrested development. They profited off "extended adolescent" behavior like excessive drinking, laziness, and immaturity.<sup>66</sup> When a man behaves like a child, he is rewarded with laughs. But when a woman behaves the same way, she is out of control and toxic. Duca quotes communications professor Jennifer Clark, "Something is set up as ostensibly wrong with the woman-child, while the male version is explained away with the idea that 'boys will be boys.' The difference between the man-child and the woman-child is that there is more of a sort of trauma associated with her."<sup>67</sup> But this trauma is not necessarily a weakness. *Girls* co-opts the man-child trope, and in doing so, reveals a powerful double standard about how audiences expect different behavior from male and female characters. Hannah forges a new space for female protagonists on television—one in which women can be at the center of the narrative even if they are self-involved or unruly. However, this space is obviously not free from the burden of criticism.

The contempt critics and viewers have for Hannah is often projected onto Lena Dunham. Dunham writes, stars in, produces, and directs *Girls*. She is also vocal about political and feminist topics—sometimes problematically. These factors blur the line between what is fact and what is fiction. In "Embracing the Awkwardness of AUTEURship in *Girls*" Erika Nelson defines the "auteur" as the director of a project

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<sup>65</sup> Duca, Lauren. "The Rise Of The Woman-Child." *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 12 May 2015, [www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/12/woman-child\\_n\\_7191258.html?cps=gravity\\_1787\\_-8289423378762776985](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/12/woman-child_n_7191258.html?cps=gravity_1787_-8289423378762776985).

<sup>66</sup> Duca, "The Rise Of The Woman-Child."

<sup>67</sup> Duca, "The Rise Of The Woman-Child."

who simultaneously works as a technician, stylist, and writer. The work of an auteur usually has profound meaning and a distinguishable voice.<sup>68</sup>

Dunham's auteur status causes viewers to conflate her personality with that of her fictional protagonist--although Hannah never could have landed a deal with HBO by her early twenties. Tally argues that male show creators like Matthew Weiner (*Mad Men*) did not experience any personal backlash for their protagonist's behavior.<sup>69</sup> This is worth considering with a wider scope, but there are a variety of reasons why Draper and Weiner are not compared to each other (i.e. Weiner is less of a public figure than Dunham, he does not play the role he writes, the show is a period piece).

Dunham's writing is inspired by her own life experiences. Her creative journey began in 2004 while she was a student at Oberlin college (the same university Hannah attended). She produced three short films as an undergrad, and five after graduation.<sup>70</sup> In his article, Nate Ocean states, "After watching the films, it's clear that bits and pieces of Dunham's character, Hannah Horvath, come alive in each and every one of them."<sup>71</sup> In 2010, Dunham wrote, directed, and starred in *Tiny Furniture*, an independent comedy whose protagonist, Aura, is a floundering recent graduate. In the end, neither Aura nor Hannah are rescued or redeemed. Dunham's work is less concerned with obvious character development and tidy endings; she focuses on showcasing realistic human behavior, and in doing so, willingly puts herself in unflattering light.

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<sup>68</sup> Nelson, Erika M, and Betty Kaklamanidou. "Embracing the Awkwardness of AUTEURship in Girls ." *HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*, edited by Margaret Tally, Cambridge Scholars, 2014, 98.

<sup>69</sup> Tally, *The Rise of the Anti-heroine in Tv's 'Third Golden Age'* 86.

<sup>70</sup> Ocean, Nate. "A New Breed of Auteurism in HBO's 'Girls'." *The Artifice*, 7 Feb. 2014, the-artifice.com/hbo-girls-auteurism/.

<sup>71</sup> Ocean, "A New Breed of Auteurism in HBO's 'Girls'."

Like her author, Hannah Horvath is also a writer. When the series opens, she is working on a memoir. She constantly frames the events in her life, good or bad, as a story.<sup>72</sup> At one point, her parents ask how her project is coming along, to which she replies that she has three essays left to write, “But ya know, it’s a memoir, so gonna have to live them first haha.”<sup>73</sup> This mindset proves to be toxic when it comes to relationships, because she reduces the people in her life to characters. For instance, Hannah clearly detaches from reality when Adam makes her feel uncomfortable during sex. He treats her as an object for his masochistic pleasure, but instead of opposing, Hannah retreats into her own mind so she can use the bad experience as memoir material.<sup>74</sup> The viewer is sympathetic with her situation because she is a young woman in an unhealthy relationship who does not feel she can vocalize her sexual needs without turning off her partner, or potentially even ruining the relationship. But the sympathy is ruined when it becomes clear part of her revels in the bad experience because she can use it in her writing. We see how her behavior directly complicated the viewer’s sympathy, thus further building her case as an anti-heroine. It is no wonder, though, that Hannah is an anti-heroine, as without her unrelenting bad decisions, there would be no stories for her to write.

There is an obvious cognitive dissonance between Hannah’s rich internal dialogue and the reality of her life. This gap accounts for why viewers throw around the phrases “self-involved” and “narcissistic” so often. Lena Dunham writes and plays a

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<sup>72</sup> Bianco, Marcie, and Betty Kaklamanidou. “Hannah’s Self-writing: Satirical Aesthetics, Unfashionable Ethics, and a Poetics of Cruel Optimism” *HBO’s Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*, edited by Margaret Tally, Cambridge Scholars, 2014, 73.

<sup>73</sup> Season 1, Episode 1.

<sup>74</sup> Tally, *The Rise of the Anti-heroine in Tv’s ‘Third Golden Age’* 85.

character based on herself, who also lives as if she is the narrator of her own story. Tally argues, “Dunham will always be connected with the character of Hannah, no matter how much she draws her with increasingly ‘sociopathic’ qualities.”<sup>75</sup> The meta relationship between auteur and subject obscures the truth of their identities.

To return to the postfeminist nature of Hannah’s anti-heroine behavior, I move to a discussion of two hotly contested issues in and around *Girls*; race and privilege. Race and privilege are important players in a postfeminist text. As previously discussed, women of color are frequently excluded from postfeminist narratives. The lack of racial diversity in *Girls* was met with backlash from prominent critical voices. Out of this conversation, an important question emerged: Does Lena Dunham, a white woman, have the responsibility to write a diverse television show? Or does her personal experience (and problematic politics) excuse her from doing so?

*Girls* is set in Brooklyn, the second largest borough in New York City. As of the 2010 census, 49.5% of the Brooklyn population is white, 35.8% are African American, and 19.8% are Hispanic or Latino.<sup>76</sup> Yet, Hannah and her three friends, all white, seem to have no friends who are people of color. This was a drastic oversight for a show dedicated to portraying the struggles of “real” women. In Nikita Hamilton’s, “So They Say You Have a Race Problem” she argues:

This is a realization previously put forth by Richard Dyer in *White: Essays on Race and Culture* where he notes that often times it seems as if the only way to ‘recognize white qua white, is when non-white (and above all black) people are also represented.’ Whiteness is the standard and whatever is outside of it is

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<sup>75</sup> Tally, *The Rise of the Anti-heroine in Tv's 'Third Golden Age'* 91.

<sup>76</sup> “Brooklyn Population 2018.” *World Population Review*, 2018, [worldpopulationreview.com/boroughs/brooklyn-population/](http://worldpopulationreview.com/boroughs/brooklyn-population/).



‘other.’ Since whiteness is the norm, it is easy to overlook other races and ethnicities.<sup>77</sup> Girls’ “race problem” is easily traceable to the writer’s room: the five people who write the show are all white (three women and two men). The casting call for the first season only had one-liners and nanny roles for people of color.<sup>78</sup> As Dyer argues, white characters are the default setting, and any inclusion outside “the norm” would take a conscious effort to include. Dunham clearly did not take notes from the criticism *SATC* received for featuring almost no substantive characters of color. The lack of racial diversity in both series signals the inherently exclusive terms of the postfeminist sensibility.

Critics have divergent opinions on the subject matter. Kendra James posted, “Dear Lena Dunham, I Exist” on Racialicious.com. James, a woman of color, details the similarities between her and Dunham’s upbringings. They both went to independent high schools, and were separated by two years at Oberlin College (what James calls a “fairly diverse” campus). She asks, “If Lena Dunham and I come from similar educational backgrounds, honed our writing and narrative skills at the same school and likely with some of the same professors, and grew up spending time in the same city [...] then how could we conceive such radically different images of New York City? Why would I feel so ill at ease with her critics essentially declaring her as my voice?”<sup>79</sup> While some argue that Dunham writes about what she has been exposed to, James pushes back,

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<sup>77</sup> Hamilton, Nikita T. “So They Say You Have a Race Problem.” *HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*, edited by Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally, Cambridge Scholars, 2014, 49.

<sup>78</sup> James, Kendra. “Dear Lena Dunham, I Exist. – Kendra James – Medium.” *Medium*, Medium, 26 Aug. 2016, [medium.com/@KendraJames\\_/dear-lena-dunham-i-exist-db4bf3cb7720](https://medium.com/@KendraJames_/dear-lena-dunham-i-exist-db4bf3cb7720).

<sup>79</sup> James, “Dear Lena Dunham, I Exist. – Kendra James – Medium.”

“I know her life couldn’t possibly have looked as white as the posters for *Girls*.”<sup>80</sup> As Dunham is the auteur of *Girls*, and an outspoken feminist, the responsibility of representation falls directly on her shoulders.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, an author, educator, and national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, had a slightly different opinion. He argues:

I think storytellers--first and foremost--must pledge their loyalty to the narrative as it comes to them. I don't believe in creating characters out of a desire to please your audience or even to promote an ostensible social good. I think good writing is essentially a selfish act--story-tellers are charged with crafting the narrative they want to see. I'm not very interested in Lena Dunham reflecting the aspirations of people she may or may not know. I'm interested in her specific and individual vision; in that story she is aching to tell. If that vision is all-white, then so be it. I don't think a story-teller can be guilted into making great characters.<sup>81</sup>

His piece goes on to argue that blaming Lena Dunham distracts from the real problem:

Hollywood’s powerbrokers who continue to bank roll all-white television scripts.

Alyssa Rosenberg, opinion writer for *The Washington Post*, agrees, “There’s a world in which *Girls*’ whiteness wouldn’t be so alienating: a media landscape in which we had a healthy mix of shows and movies created and run by men and women, people of color as well as white folks, and dedicated to the deep exploration of experiences that range from tight, insular groups of friends to the mechanics of bureaucracy.”<sup>82</sup> What Coates and Rosenberg identify is that *Girls* is merely a symptom of a larger problem, one that cannot be fixed by Dunham alone. However, as James argues, Dunham makes the choice to exclude a very real part of her lived experience.

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<sup>80</sup> James, “Dear Lena Dunham, I Exist. – Kendra James – Medium.”

<sup>81</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “On Being Your Authentic Self.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 14 Jan. 2013, [www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/on-being-your-authentic-self/267128/](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/on-being-your-authentic-self/267128/).

<sup>82</sup> Rosenberg, Alyssa. “The Other 'Girls' and Diversity Goals for Pop Culture.” *ThinkProgress*, 18 Apr. 2012, [thinkprogress.org/the-other-girls-and-diversity-goals-for-pop-culture-93c0805579d9/](http://thinkprogress.org/the-other-girls-and-diversity-goals-for-pop-culture-93c0805579d9/).

In an interview with NPR, Dunham responded to her critics and reiterated some of the points Coates argued. She says, “I wrote the first season primarily by myself, and I co-wrote a few episodes. But I am a half-Jew, half WASP, and I wrote two Jews and two WASPs. Something I wanted to avoid was tokenism casting [...] I really wrote the show from a gut-level place, and each character was a piece of me or based on someone close to me.”<sup>83</sup> She goes on to say that she takes criticism quite seriously.

Dunham’s attempt to solve *Girls*’ “race problem” arrives in the second season. Hannah begins to date a black republican man named Sandy, who is played by Donald Glover. In the second episode, “I Get Ideas” Adam’s leg is broken and, although they are not together, he depends on Hannah to care for him. Hannah idealizes Sandy as the perfect boyfriend, and uses him to measure Adam’s flaws. Sandy’s only apparent flaw is that he has procrastinated reading a story Hannah wrote and gave him for notes. With Jessa’s encouragement, Hannah decides to confront him about it. The dialogue that ensues reads as almost a meta conversation between Dunham and her critics. In the scene, Hannah and Sandy sit together on a couch. Sandy admits to Hannah that he actually did read her essay, he just did not like it.

S: It wasn’t... I didn’t...it wasn’t for me exactly.

H: I mean it was probably for you, it’s like for everyone.

If we read Hannah’s story as a symbol for *Girls* itself, this comment is slightly ironic. Dunham often responds to criticism by arguing that *Girls* is not meant to appeal to every audience; her voice is for young women who wish to see themselves and their

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<sup>83</sup> “Lena Dunham Addresses Criticism Aimed At ‘Girls.’” *NPR*, Fresh Air, 7 May 2012, [www.npr.org/2013/01/11/169049203/lena-dunham-addresses-criticism-aimed-at-girls](http://www.npr.org/2013/01/11/169049203/lena-dunham-addresses-criticism-aimed-at-girls).

concerns represented on screen. Hannah immediately gets defensive, and turns the conversation on Sandy.

H: I'm actually so glad you didn't like it. This opens up a dialogue about my work. The same kind of dialogue we've had about your political beliefs.

S: There's no dialogue. I know what I believe. Steadfast in it. I'm fine with it. (...)

S: Hannah this is because I didn't like your essay!

H: It's not because you didn't like my essay! It's because we're having an open conversation about things we believe in! And I'm also a little horrified by the fact you think people should just be allowed to own guns!

S: It's a little more complicated than that.

H: Is it though? I also would love to know how you feel about the fact that 2 out of 3 people on death row are black men.

S: Wow, Hannah. I didn't know that. Thank you for enlightening me about how things are tougher for minorities. Thank you.

Hannah has fully embodied the persona her critics thrust on her. She proves that she is hardly a fit mouthpiece for racialized issues. While Hannah behaves detestably in this scene, it is important to remember that Dunham stands outside the text, fully aware of how she paints her protagonist. Hannah decides to break it off with Sandy, citing their different political beliefs as the reason.

This scene parallels an earlier storyline on *SATC* when Samantha briefly dates a black man, and must break up with him because his sister was uncomfortable with her brother dating a white woman. In both cases, Samantha and Hannah are absolved from the blame of the break up. The postfeminist era promises sexual liberation for women, but clearly enforces regressive boundaries around interracial dating. Additionally, both series locate the bad politics on the shoulders of the characters of color.

When Hannah breaks up with him, Sandy responds with a monologue about his experience as a black man:

S: I knew this. This always happens. Oh I'm a white girl and I moved to New York and I'm having a great time! And Oh! I've got a fixed gear bike and I'm

gonna date a black guy! And we're gonna go to a dangerous part of town! All that bullshit. Like yeah, I know this. I've seen it happen a million times. And then they can't deal with who I am.

H: you know what? Honestly, maybe you should think about the fact that you could be fetishizing me. Because how many white women have you dated?

Sounds like a lot from you just said.

S: What really?

H: and maybe you think of us as just one big, white, blobby mass. With stupid ideas that you can't deal with. (...) The jokes you because you know what? I never thought about the fact that you were black once.

S: That's insane, okay. You should, cause that's what I am.

H: I don't live in a world where there are divisions like that.

S: You do, okay? You're the one who brought up the two out of three black inmates statistic!

(...)

H: Do you wanna have sex still?

S: No.

This strategic scene is deeply layered with meaning. Hannah simultaneously lives in a post-racial world (“I never thought about the fact you were black once!”) that is politicized only when it benefits her argument (the statistic about black men on death row). She immediately leverages her relationship with Sandy for social currency, telling Marnie, “An entire range of kinds of men like me—black men, Republicans, et. Al.”

Coates, not having seen Season Two, says, “I have never met a black Republican in all my time in New York. And I'm black. So I have trouble believing that Hannah found that one black dude in Brooklyn who is anti-marriage equality, anti-abortion, pro-guns, and anti-health care.”<sup>84</sup> Sandy is ultimately a flat character who serves as a mouthpiece for Dunham to respond to critics. At the same time, Hannah is so naïve and detestable in this scene, Dunham makes the point that she is not the person to write complex and interesting black characters. This scene illustrates a link between the exclusionary terms of the postfeminist sensibility and Hannah's anti-heroine quality.

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<sup>84</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “Girls' Through the Veil.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 20 Apr. 2012, [www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/04/girls-through-the-veil/256154/](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/04/girls-through-the-veil/256154/).

Privilege is the second markedly postfeminist facet of culture that plays out in the text. Hannah's privilege, as expressed in the opening scene with her parents, is a recurring point of discussion in the popular press. Postfeminism is a privileged sensibility because women who participate reap the benefits of past feminist movements without engaging in political activism. The postfeminist woman does not necessarily feel she experiences overt structural oppression, and therefore has the privilege to ignore the disadvantages of other people and remain passive in the face of political injustice.

Within the text, Hannah is labeled as privileged because of her sense of entitlement (for example, when she takes the twenty-dollar tip her parents left the maid). The series begins when Hannah is cut off from her parents. They funded her expensive education and two years in New York City, and Hannah still has the audacity to beg for \$1,100 a month. Outside the text, fans and critics took issue with the fact that *Girls* intended to show the "everywoman" experience, but all four actresses have famous parents.<sup>85</sup> A poster made by an anonymous artist on an internet blog went viral:

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<sup>85</sup> Zutter, Natalie. "Girls 'Nepotism' Poster Illustrates Privilege Backlash Against Stars." *Www.alloy.com*, 18 Apr. 2012, [www.alloy.com/entertainment/girls-nepotism-poster-lena-dunham-allison-williams-891/](http://www.alloy.com/entertainment/girls-nepotism-poster-lena-dunham-allison-williams-891/).



Chelsea Daggett writes, “While *Girls* seemingly reflects this bubble of privilege its characters reside in, in reality the show’s creators Lena Dunham and Judd Apatow deftly craft these characters to exhibit these kinds of attitudes.”<sup>86</sup> Daggett echoes other critics of the “she writes what she knows” mentality. Alternatively, *Girls* could be read as Dunham’s critique of her own privileged background.

Another layer of privilege present in *Girls* is that it airs on a HBO. The premium channel guarantees the viewership is privileged because of their ability to afford the channel. A cable television series would never have survived the searing critiques of *Girls*’ first season, but HBO gives Dunham the freedom to be more controversial and edgy without the fear of alienating advertisers. HBO’s primary demographic is wealthy

<sup>86</sup> Daggett, Chelsea. “‘Occupy’ *Girls*: Millennial Adulthood and the Cracks in HBO’s Brand.” *HBO’s Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*, edited by Margaret Tally and Betty Kaklamanidou, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, 199.

white men, which might seem incompatible with the audience *Girls* wishes to reach. Of this Daggett says:

HBO's limited demographic appeal and situation within the premium cable paradigm that depends on subscribers allows *Girls* to take political risks, but ignores the irony that a show about underprivileged youth can only exist in a privileged paradigm. This incongruity may explain many of the criticisms of *Girls* that call the characters 'privileged.'<sup>87</sup>

Hannah's perceived privilege might make her more unlikeable to the viewer, except that majority of those who are able to watch her are of similar, if not wealthier, status.

Race and privilege do not exist in separate spheres, there is overlap and contradiction. An analysis of the relationship between postfeminism, race, and privilege alongside the various critical responses reveals how these facets of culture build Hannah's image as an anti-heroine.

Hannah's anti-heroine status is explicitly linked to her postfeminist ethos. Her ultimate desire is to have a career, a long-term relationship, and to lose 13 pounds ("I am 13 pounds overweight and it has been awful for me my whole life!").<sup>88</sup> Katherine J. Lehman writes, "In *Girls*' world, relationships heal when women allow men to take charge. Furthermore, *Girls* suggests that single women lust for adventure but truly desire marriage and stability."<sup>89</sup> Like *SATC*, Hannah consistently reverts to the most conventional choice when faced with a decision. In the final season, she discovers she is pregnant. Every episode leading up to this moment suggests that she is not ready to be a mother, but Hannah decides to keep the baby. This conclusion seals the fate of *Girls* as a brazenly postfeminist text. Hannah was never truly autonomous in her decisions, and therefore could not reach fulfillment on her own terms.

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<sup>87</sup> Daggett, "'Occupy' Girls: Millennial Adulthood and the Cracks in HBO's Brand" 203.

<sup>88</sup> Season 1, Episode 10.

<sup>89</sup> Lehman, "All Adventurous Women Do: HBO's *Girls* and the 1960s-70s Single Woman." 22.



## Conclusion

Despite my position that postfeminism is overwhelmingly negative in practice, I believe it is an essential theoretical frame in which to examine representations of women on television. Television is an ideological force that both reflects and informs a distinct social moment. Shows like *SATC* and *Girls* deftly capture the postfeminist era, but also further disseminate neoliberal systems of thought. Almost two decades passed between the premier of *SATC* and the finale of *Girls*, which suggests the enduring relevance of the postfeminist anti-heroine figure.

However, *SATC* and *Girls* are not anti-heroine narratives by design. Unlike Tony Soprano, who was strategically conceived of as an anti-hero in the writer's room, Carrie and Hannah were pushed into anti-heroine territory in the massive amount of discourse that responded to the series. The prickly critical reception reveals a double standard around how viewers responds to complex female characters versus their male equivalents. Rather than attempt to operate within a character trope designed to reinforce masculine power, Carrie and Hannah imagine an entirely new space, and in doing so, produce a self-reflexive critique of gender performances. They are powerful protagonists because they disrupt the notion that women must be wholly likeable complements to a male lead.

For these reasons, I argue that Carrie and Hannah's anti-hero status derives from a markedly postfeminist ambivalence. The women consider themselves to be fully liberated, only to consistently reinforce boundaries around acceptable female behavior. Their agency is fixed in the terms of consumerism and subjectification, which impedes their ability to fully self-actualize. What results is an ambivalent attitude toward major

life decisions that would lead to marriage, children, and other societally-imposed constructions of success.

Scholars, critics, and fans continuously return to and reevaluate *SATC* and *Girls*. The series act as a kind of societal litmus test for feminist relations. Carrie and Hannah's legacies are constantly in flux based on ever-changing viewpoints. These protagonists do not need to be understood in absolutist terms, as good or bad, heroes or villains. Rather, the postfeminist anti-heroine brings visibility to the problematic politics of the contemporary feminist age.

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