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Popular Culture and the Feminist Ideal: A Feminist Critique of Home Box Office's *Sex and the City*

"You have no idea how many men I have had to sleep with to get this award," was the opening line to Kim Cattrall's Golden Globe Best Supporting Actress acceptance speech, for her performance in *Sex and the City* in 2003. The success of the series that led to her award is a direct correlation to the large crowds that the film attracted when it made its debut in 2008. What is astounding, is that in 2007 only five of the fifty top grossing movies in American had a woman as a lead character, so not surprisingly critics throughout the nation were stunned at the great success the film *Sex and the City* had on its opening weekend. While critics were astounded, loyal fans predicted the success. The popularity of the film may perhaps be indicative of the times. This film came three years after the season finale of the HBO series also titled, *Sex and the City*. The series began at the peak of an ambitious female generation, empowered by third wave, and post-modern feminist movements. It may be that the emergence of a series that features the lives of four New York City women whose motto is to "do it like a man," is the reason for the incredible following the series has had since its public debut. However, it also may be that at a time when TIME magazine was releasing a cover featuring the faces of Susan B. Anthony, Betty, Friedman, Gloria Steinem and then Ally McBeal, posing the question "Is Feminism Dead?" women who had embraced their beauty and that of being a working professional, were seeking assurance. The assurance they were looking for came from the series that aimed to empower women and remind them that they did not have to sacrifice the beauty of being feminine women, for that of having a career. Women sought to be reminded that a happy medium was possible. The series ran for a total of six years, a total of ninety-six episodes, was

nominated for over fifty Emmy Awards, and received twenty-four Golden Globe nominations. With such a strong following, the creation of a film was almost inevitable. This film, with leading actress Sarah Jessica Parker brought in over 56 million dollars and successfully established itself as the highest grossing R rated comedy in America of its time. With four women serving as main characters, and the storyline being based off of their triumphs and failures in interpersonal relationships, social lives, men, money, and sex, the popularity of this film can be interpreted as a reflection of the concerns of women in today's society. Within the personas of each of the characters we can find the struggle of modern women and how they are affected by the ever-changing role of the feminine ideal in a fast paced, socially dynamic world.

In order to understand the connections that audience members create with the cast of *Sex and the City*, one must first comprehend their basic roles within the film and within their group of friends. The main character, Carrie Bradshaw as played by Sarah Jessica Parker, is a self-proclaimed "sexual anthropologist." However, Carrie is a journalist, or more specifically, she is a prominent sex columnist. When it comes to describing the troubles of relationships and intimacy between a man and a woman Carrie is the expert. Carrie's three best friends are Samantha Jones, Charlotte York and Miranda Hobbes. Samantha (played by Kim Cattrall) is a powerful sexually exultant woman who runs her own public relations firm in the city of Los Angeles. She prides herself in loving sex and intimacy yet she finds even more pride in that she is self-made, independent, and powerful. Men are more of an object and tool for pleasure rather than for emotional stability for her. However, she too has chosen to live with a counterpart, who in this case is her most popular client, and lover, Smith. Charlotte York (Kristin Davis) is quite the opposite of Samantha. She is a museum curator, and believes in tradition. In the film she is happily married to a charming man, Harry Goldenblatt, who compliments her quirky traits and

sweet feminine personality. Her goal in life is to be a great mother, however she struggles to get pregnant and have a birth child. The last of the four friends is Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), she is a goal driven attorney who has both a husband (Steve) as well as a son. Despite her role as a mother and a wife she manages to remain a very prominent attorney, but not without a few struggles in her marriage. Together this foursome represents four unique interpretations of what it is to be a female in today's society. Their on-screen chemistry is undeniable, "they complement one another perfectly; they're never too competitive--it's a moving design for living: existential haute couture" (Edelstein 3). There are conventional, unconventional, traditional and outright unconformist ways in which women today find their roles, and this film highlights all their strengths and weaknesses and serves as a foundation for understanding the progress of the feminist movement.

With this film's success and the series' popularity it is important to analyze why this film is significant and what its success means for women today. Women's roles in society have slowly evolved through generations and this film is a representation of what women today value. It is important for women to feel empowered. Beginning with Betty Friedan's struggle and publication of texts that highlight the lack of fulfillment that women had in their lives in the 1950's, the film constructs an important new ideal of feminism, the feminism that today is represented in popular culture. According to Attwood (2009) "*Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones' Diary*, have been criticized and ridiculed but they have been recognized by many as important texts capturing the *zeitgeist* as stories about the lives of young single women and the modern manners of contemporary urban centres," (Attwood, 11). *Sex and the City*, and films similar to it in context have been looked at through critical lenses, however it is important to

explore what images actually portray a seemingly accurate depiction of contemporary life in urban areas.

Communication and feminist scholars alike seek to find the connections between the fictional world of the most popular television series and the trajectory which they guide the modern woman to follow. Today's popular culture begs an important question, what does it really mean to be a woman in the new millennium? By understanding the appeal of *Sex and the City*, which some say "lies in its ability to make women feel both sexually empowered and interconnected" (Southard, 150) communication researchers can examine the rhetoric that resonates with women. Further, when equipped with this information, scholars can move forward in identifying postmodern feminist rhetoric as it related to popular culture.

While series such as these have been internationally recognized for their positive portrayal of the modern fashionista professional woman, another important question needs to be examined. If these newly created images of women depicted in popular media and film display women as being financially independent, and powerful, are these same images invalidated because of the patriarchic system still present in society? Fans of the series and the film may argue that the goal of the images is to push away from this outdated patriarchic system; however, this is why it is imperative to take a closer look at the film and examine what message it is really sending about these four women, and women today. It is widely believed that the rhetoric of the film's images pushes the idea of women's independence. Therefore, it is helpful to deconstruct the roles and positions these women play in order to explore what resonates with women today, what they may aspire to be like, and what motivates them to fit a new, perhaps post feminist ideal. In doing so, we can shed light on how popular culture constructs a different ideal of feminism away from traditional first and second wave feminism, and what the modern woman's

values may reflect. Pop culture is defined as "the most immediate and contemporary element in our lives, the most visible and omnipresent level of culture in a society." (Petracca & Surapure, 9).

While the film *Sex and the City* appears to be empowering women through rhetorical images which show the female characters possessing financial independence, free thought, free speech and self made success, the film can also be seen to invalidate these images by basing them around a plot in which men are the determining factor of the happiness in these women's lives.

In the following I will use feminist criticism to analyze the rhetorical significance of this amazingly popular film. The focus will be on the film, as the series ran for 6 years and the film reflects the culmination of all of their past experiences. I will begin by analyzing the construction of gender and gender roles, predominantly the female role and its modern ideal as reflected by the four main characters. In the construction of gender I will first analyze the main character, Carrie Bradshaw, in terms of her ambitions, and what her character values as important in her life and lifestyle. I will also analyze the life paths of her three best friends and what motivates them towards higher achievement, what drives them, as well as what hinders their strengths and the obstacles they encounter. Secondly, I will critique and observe what the film *Sex and the City* suggests about how patriarchy is maintained in society today. I will also critique and deconstruct the roles of the males in the plot, which often drive the women in the film to some surprising behaviors. Furthermore, through the use of feminist criticism I will demonstrate how patriarchy is still very present in what most people assume, to be an "equal" society. I will explore the power that the males possess in the plotline, and the significant manner in which they alter the lives of the female characters.

Background

The film *Sex and the City* is a 145-minute comedy movie based off of a television series that began in 1998. HBO, which is short for Home Box Office, is an American premium cable company, which is the second largest premium subscription channel in America. Time Warner owns the HBO series, which is the world's second largest entertainment conglomerate in terms of revenue, behind Disney. HBO also broadcasts to over 151 countries worldwide. HBO also consists of original series, motion pictures, as well as made-for-cable movies, boxing matches, and standup comedy and concert series. With the international audiences that follow HBO, the *Sex and the City* series was able to make fans across many borders. Michael Patrick King directed the television series. After the HBO series finale in 2004, there was much talk about whether or not a film would come about because of the success of the television program. Finally, HBO announced that Michael Patrick King would in fact be working on a script for the movie, which he was to direct (Gorman, 1). Michael Patrick King, Sarah Jessica Parker, Darren Star and John Melfi produced the film. It was edited by Michael Berenbaum and distributed by New Line Cinema Warner Brothers Pictures. The world premiere of this film took place at Leicester Square in London on May 12, 2008. It later premiered in the United Kingdom on May 28, 2008. The film is based on he work of Candace Bushnell, who has written a series of books that reflect the stories in each of the *Sex and the City* episodes. The film finally came to the United States on May 30, 2008. Opening in 3,285 theaters, the film made $26.93 million in the U.S. and Canada on its first day. The three-day opening weekend total was $57,038,404, aggregating $17,363 per theater. As of March 2010, the film has grossed $152,647,258 at the

U.S. and Canadian box offices, and $262,605,528 in other markets, bringing the worldwide total gross revenue to $415,252,786, making it the highest-grossing romantic comedy of 2008. Later, a second film was released titled *Sex and the City 2*. These films and the series are symbols of popular culture and remain playing on cable stations such as TBS, WGN and other local cable stations throughout the world.

The Fabulous Foursome

In the film, (as in the television series) there is one narrorator, Carrie Bradshaw; she is a successful woman confident in her knowledge of sex and love. The television series ended with Carrie's character having to decide between "a globe-trotting artist (Mikhail Baryshnikov) and a tycoon (Chris Noth). The script, without being unfair to any of the lovers, persuasively demonstrated that capitalists can sometimes be more caring than artists," (Alleva, 2). The film picks up the storyline showing that Carrie seems to have accepted a different fate for herself and is now living with "Mr. Big.," her long time love with whom she has shared intimate moments of passion and vulnerability. She takes us, the audience, through the struggles of being "40 and single" in the city and the difficulty of being under the watchful eye of the media as she has her heart broken. Her troubles are in regards to "Mr. Big," the most dominant male character in the film. "Big" is an extremely wealthy man who Carrie has been dating on and off for years. As Big has been married a few times before and has not maintained a good reputation for being a loyal man, this has lead to many difficulties in the relationship between Big and Carrie. Big and Carrie are happily living together. However, she realizes that she wants more so in order to make her happy "Big" complies and says, "I wouldn't mind being married to you, would you mind being married to me?" they are then set to be married in New York City. On the day of the wedding Big leaves Carrie at the altar, because through the combination of their fame in the city, the

wedding has become too much and he cannot make himself commit to another marriage. Carrie's happiness throughout the film is centered on her relationship with this man, and after being heartbroken and alone, "Big" and Carrie find each other once again and realize that the wedding is about themselves and what marriage means to them alone. They then decide to get married once again, and they, like most fairytales, end up 'happily ever after.' Similar to a fairytale, the princess has found her prince charming and all the while after being left at the altar the princess was miserable until she returned to the altar once again. The princess is only happy whenever her prince is ready to make a complete commitment to her.

This film, however, is not only about Carrie but also about her three best friends: Samantha Jones, Charlotte York and Miranda Hobbes who were previously introduced. Carrie, while narrarating her story, also narrarates us through the struggles that the other women face. They deal with a love affair where Miranda's otherwise faithful husband sleeps with another woman because he feels Miranda's character has been too consumed in her professional career to meet his needs sexually. Miranda is crushed and angry and initially decides to leave Steve. After some soul-searching and many apologies from Steve, Miranda and Steve reunite. They decide that they are best together and Miranda learns to take less time from her life as an attorney and dedicate more time to maintaining her appearance and her role as a mother and housewife.

Next is Samantha. Samantha is caught in a power struggle between herself and the power that her lover and client Smith has over her life. Samantha's public relations firm manages the image of her model boyfriend Smith, and she finds herself confused as to whether he is her priority or if she is her own priority. Samantha comes to realize that her life has been dominated by her love for men and sex, thus she struggles to find herself behind these superficial needs. She lusts for a neighbor next door, the sexual affection of Smith, and the power that her company

gives her. Samantha has never been a woman to admit that she is ruled by anything else other than herself, however in her journey of self-discovery she comes to realize that the exact opposite is true.

Finally, there is the lovely Charlotte. Charlotte serves as the perfect example of what is traditionally expected of women. She is happy when she realizes that she pregnant, as her and her husband have struggled to become pregnant for years. She had always wanted to be a mother so she had already become a mother by adopting a Chinese baby, but she wants her own birth child as well. When she finally does become pregnant she stops her daily routines that have always given her independence, such as her daily runs. She finds herself trapped in her desire to be a mother and her desire to fulfill her individual needs. Ultimately her career is put on hold for her husband and children and that is when she finds herself the happiest. To Charlotte, being a mother and stay at home wife is where she is her happiest.

All of the hardships, which these characters undergo, are in one way or another a direct result of what a man in their lives has done or in some cases not done. These four women do not need men to make money, to buy lavish clothing and accessories, to gain prestige or social prominence, because they individually are all capable of gaining these on their own. However, these women do in fact rely on, are men as guides to finding what makes them feel the most fulfilled and valuable.

Origin

The characters all represent a unique type of woman. Each of them fits a different stereotype that has emerged since the onset of feminism. This film is set in present day New York City and is a representation of the culmination of all three waves of feminism. The first wave began in the mid 1800's until about the 1920's, and "was focused on securing the right to vote for women."

(Foss,151). Following this wave came what was logically called the second wave; this was "focused on achieving equality for women and men with the development of opportunities for women without the constraints of gender expectation,"(Foss, 152). Further, the second wave was seen as an extremely radical assertive protest away from the system of patriarchy,

> "Second wave feminism, then, is 'the second peak of a feminist movement that has existed for more than 100 years' (Dahlerup, 2) Second wave research has also fore grounded those earlier female thinkers who put forward views on women's social and political status which we might in retrospect identify as feminist," (Whelehan, 3).

Second wave feminism set the stage clearly for how radical ideas of feminism are seen today. This is important because the second wave never came to an end; instead it combined with the third wave. The third wave brings us to present day, where feminism seems to simply be a part of our society and not a radically new ideology, "feminism is out there, tucked into our daily acts of righteousness and self□respect. … For our generation feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it—it's simply in the water." (Baumgardner, 2). From this interpretation of feminism we can see that the characters in *Sex and the City* film are a direct product of all of the years of progression and hard work towards advancement in women's rights. While the right to vote and own property are now seen as customary privileges in the United States, and many other countries, and burning bras would be seen as ridiculous, it is important to remember that the feminist movement is very much still alive. Today there is feminist ideology that is most reflective of the post-modern perspective. Postmodernism and feminism have long been polar opposites yet, "both have offered deep and far-reaching criticism of the institution of philosophy held by larger culture, and have sought to develop new paradigms of social criticism that do not rely on traditional social underpinnings," (Fraser, Nicholson, 1). This new postmodern ideology,

by definition, cannot be defined into frames of ideas; it is thought of as mostly the use of language and rhetoric. It says that feminism today is not defined by rights, or privileges rather by language and the meanings we associate with it. Beyond language post modern feminism says that there is no single cause for the subordination of women. The film, lies somewhat in an in-between aiming to push for third wave feminism ideals, while using language that is definite of post-modern feminism ideology. The waves of feminism set the occasion for the rhetorical images in film and popular culture today, enabling these images to be shown to the public and popularized. Along with the waves of feminism setting the stage for characters like Carrie Bradshaw to emerge, the waves have prepared, and in many ways created, audiences for these types of rhetorical images. Without the waves and postmodern feminist thought, progression for females and popular culture, audiences would not be accepting of the strong willed and independent characters in the film. It is very apparent that the intended audience for *Sex and the City*, is females especially those who are goal driven and independent. However, it is not clear until closely analyzing the details of these characters lives and the foundation of the plot line of the film that these images of independence and achievement lose their power because males are blatantly the underlying reason for the ultimate emotional success and stability of the female characters.

It is necessary to have knowledge of the origin of feminist literature in order to be able to understand feminist criticism and its ideals. Although, it wasn't until relatively recently that feminist literature (defined as such) emerged, the idea of feminism within literature can date back thousands of years. We can see traces of it dating all the way back to the days of Aristophanes. In the story *Lysistrata* written by Aristophanes, women learn that they can manipulate men and cause social change by using their sex appeal, or in this case withholding

sexual gratification from men. They manage to make a significant difference, and end the Peloponnesian War through their collective oaths of abstinence until the men resolve the conflict (Ruthven 16). These are traces of feminism and female power, however, not until 1792 was there a real emergence of literature which outright states the significance and rights of women. This was written by Mary Wollstonecraft and it was called ***Vindication of the Rights of Woman***. This piece of literature, ‘‘marks the first modern awareness of women's struggle for equal rights, and therefore it is the first milestone for the equality of the sexes’’(Oppermann, 1). Literature that involved feminism dates back hundreds of years, however literature involving feminist criticism as a modern literary theory first emerged from Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963. Friedan attempted to denounce the feminist role created for women during this time which can be described as, “a world confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children and home" (Millard 155). Since Friedan’s time there have been numerous women’s studies, which have sparked a revolution of thinking in favor of women’s rights. Much credit can be given to Kate Millet who authored *Sexual Politics*, in 1969. “With this book Millet initiated the first modem principles of feminist criticism by embarking upon a critique of sexist assumptions in male-authored texts and introducing some of the fundamental terms, such as "patriarchal," which gained considerable significance in feminist literary studies” (Opperhammen, 2). Another significant figure in the emergence of feminist literary criticism is Mary Ellman, who authored a book called *Thinking about Women*, in 1965. Ellman used a humorous perspective to view the way in which women are portrayed as sexual objects in literature for this she can be credited as being “one of the pioneers in the development of contemporary feminist criticism’’(Opperhamem, 4). It is because of women such as these that we now have feminist criticism as a legitimate form of analysis. It was important first to recognize that there was such a thing as feminism and beyond that it is

significant to note that women could begin to be seen in that way, which deemed them capable of intellectual literary thought.

Method

This brings us to what feminist criticism really is and how it is executed. Feminist criticism takes place in four steps. The first of these steps is selecting an artifact to study, and in this case *Sex and the City* the film is the obvious artifact. It is a good contender for this because it involves "the rhetoric of a typically marginalized or subordinate group" (Foss 157). It is also a good contender because like Foss says, it presents this group, "in a way that irritates, angers, inspires, or challenges." Second, one must analyze the artifact. Within this process there are two sub processes, which we must look at it in order to give an accurate analysis. The first is questioning and looking at how the construction of gender is created throughout the film. As noted, I will analyze each woman's careers, aspirations, and what makes them happy in order to be able to create an accurate image of the construction of gender. While I do this I will at the same time discuss the male characters roles in the interpersonal relationships with each of the four lead characters. By doing this I will "discover what the artifact presents as standard, normal, desirable, and appropriate behavior for men and women." (Foss 158). Another way to do this is to also look at how the artifact *Sex and the City*, positions its audience. What this means is that in order for the audience to really enjoy the film, the viewpoint they must take, and how they understand the world, should be easy to detect in the way in which the artifact is depicted; "it is the result of structures of characters, meanings, aesthetic codes, attitudes, norms, and values the rhetor projects into the text." (Foss 158). Often times the viewpoints offered are those which align with males; however, in this instance the entire film is created in order to align with women

who can relate to the stories of these four city women. The twist in this case is how feminism is depicted beneath their stories and how their stories do the opposite of empower these characters as individuals free from men.

The second part of analyzing the artifact will be to explain the implications of the construction of gender. In the film each gender is seen in a specific light and by finding the implications of the construction of gender we will be able to see how domination is constructed and maintained through rhetoric. This text has women's experiences as the central point making it all the more interesting. Although the storyline is central to women, it is men who are still the dominant roles and determinants of what goes on within the lives of these "independent" women. Hegemony is the " imposition of the ideology of one group on other groups, it expresses the advantage position of white, heterosexual men in a dominant culture, and how the advantage position is maintained through particular rhetorical strategies"(Foss, 160). This second element of analyzing the artifact is what really fuels the passion behind feminist criticism,

> "What unites and repeatedly invigorates feminist literary criticism... is neither dogma nor method but an acute and impassioned attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance: the consequences of that encoding for women - as characters, as readers, and as writers," (Kolodny, 62).

In my analysis of this film I will combine the sub processes in the two steps which view the depictions and then the implications of rhetorical images in the film because their depictions directly conjure up implications about both the construction of gender and what it is saying about the modern city women and what she values.

The third step in this process of feminist criticism is formulating a research question relevant to the artifact. I explore how this film creates a new ideal of feminism in modern day and furthermore examines what it means to be a woman in contemporary society. Also, if these newly created images of women depicted in popular media and film display women as being financially independent, successful and powerful, are they all invalidated because of the patriarchic system still present in society and consistently still very much present in the rhetorical images of the film and plot line? Finally the fourth step is the creation of the literature examining this feminist critique. The artifact *Sex and the City* is often noted for its positive image of female empowerment. In my analysis I hope to shine a new perspective on audiences of this film, one that generally contradicts that idea.

There are two consistent depictions and thus implications that are dominant throughout the film. I will analyze how these are intertwined and the ultimate effect they have on the construction of this new modern feminine ideal. The first depiction through imagery and scenes is of women relying on men. This directly implies that women, although seemingly fully independent, rely on men and their interpersonal relationships with them to determine their overall happiness and satisfaction with life. With these images prevalent in the film it deems this behavior as normal, and appropriate. The second depiction is seen in the male role in this film. It is small, and generally silent, but the strongest in terms of significance. While these characters do not make up for even half of the dialogue in the film, Michael Patrick King creates a universe of meaning behind the existence of each of them. The relationships that every woman has with her significant other are examples of these two depictions.

Analysis

Given the literature available regarding the construction of women in prime-time television, little

doubt remains that *Sex and the City's* portrayal of young, thin, white, economically successful, and attractive women contributes to unrealistic images of women" (Southard, 150). To begin to unravel the images that make this a realty, step let us first begin with Carrie Bradshaw. The opening scene is with Mr. Big, her future fiancée. They are in their quest to find a place to live together and begin their lives together. She is asked to sell her apartment, which she pays for herself to move into the new penthouse suite shared with Mr. Big. "Welcome home, baby, he says - Can we afford this? – She says, "I got it." He replies by saying, "Okay, let's sign some contracts." "I got it." Just like that. Like he was picking up a check for coffee or something," Carrie says as she is narrarating the scene. Without Big's financial support she would not be able to afford the penthouse. Beyond simply selling what has always been her home, she is getting into a binding contract not only with the penthouse but also with Big. "Big" then promises her a walk in closet that will accommodate her belongings and make her happy. Initially Carrie comes off as admirable through her confidence and keen wit through narration, and this is what resonates with audiences, " use of the narrating voice and its emphasis on friendship as a collective force challenges the post feminist emphasis on self-importance and disconnectedness" (Southard 155). However this is negated because a certain distancing effect from the feminist movement takes place when women who have created their own monetary success fall victim to dependence on their male counterparts. Quickly one can see that her superficial happiness is a product of being gifted lavish things, which she would not be able to purchase on her own. These implications are again defining the feminine ideal. While Carrie's happiness is at it's peak, she is offered to be on the cover of Vogue magazine under the headline, "The Last Single Girl." The editor at Vogue reads to Carrie, "The ultimate single gal, Carrie Bradshaw, will be married in Manolos to New York financier John James Preston come fall." Carrie replies in shock by

saying, - Our weddings on Page Six. - Who would put that in there?" The editor replies, “Proving to single gals everywhere that there can be a happy ending over 40- Carrie - Congratulations.” The rhetoric here emphasizes the way in which women are labeled. The happy ending the editor is referring to is that there is still hope for a woman to be married even at a late age. Carrie is given esteem because of her engagement, implying again that woman’s happiness is a direct result of her male companionship. It seems women have come to really believe that, thus the reason that the editor wants to feature Carrie on the cover, “The media construct a condition of the individual woman whose private or professional gains earned by feminist strides have a distancing effect on her connectedness to women and the feminist movement as a whole,” (Southard 154). Later, Carrie’s life turns into gloom and upset when Big leaves her at the alter. After this scene, and consistently throughout the movie there is a pattern of joy and misery in her life, all as a direct result of her ties to Mr. Big. Never once in the film do we see her happy without his affection, love and financial support. Her initial depiction as independent person is over shadowed by the implication that she needs him to complete her and is proven when in the end she finds a content and happy nature when she becomes Mrs. Big.

Further support of the weakness given to Carrie’s character is her career. She is a sex columnist, which although makes for interesting narration, is a career solely based on the interaction between men and women. Carrie makes her money and personal success because of the popularity of her columns dealing with topics such as: how to get him back, can we be happy without them? And numerous topics similar to this. Her column is easily the second element in her life that makes her happy; ironically it also would not exist without this idea of pleasing men. Carrie’s character tells the contemporary woman that she can achieve relative success for herself but without the “big” man in her life, she is just a girl in the city looking for the two L’s “love

and labels."

Next, lets examine Charlotte York, "Charlotte's passive behavior is evidence of the more ''acceptable roles'' considered for women," (Southard 162). She is depicted as the traditional house maker who has what seems, like a perfect life. Charlotte's biggest foil is that she has a fertility problem, which becomes present almost half way through the film. Although one would initially think her depiction as weak and unhappy without a man it is obvious Charlotte proves to be one of the stronger characters whose weaknesses are not so evident when it comes to dependence on men. Charlotte is happily married and has an adopted Chinese daughter whom she adores. Rather than having a career created for her she has given up her life as an art museum curator and has dedicated her life to making her family happy. She is troubled when she realizes she is pregnant. As she has had previous problems with fertility, she gives up her daily exercise routine, something that is a deeper part of who she is. In multiple scenes you see her torn between being herself and sticking to her ordinary routine and being someone she is not," I have everything I ever wanted. I am so happy that I'm terrified. Nobody gets everything that they want. Look at you. Look at Miranda. You're good people and look at what happened to you. Of course something bad is gonna happen to me." In order to conform to the demands of what her ideal lifestyle is, one of maternity and marriage, Charlotte feels as if she needs to sacrifice a bit of herself. She feels as though to be happy she needs to have a family and husband and that is it. This character's role implies that women often give up qualities, which make them who they are in order to become more like a traditional housewife, the kind that is criticized and often questioned in feminist literature. Charlotte's weakness is her obsession with the traditional. The determining factor in her ultimate happiness is whether or not she can be the housewife who is fertile and at home to make her husband happy. Charlotte is the character who finds the most

happiness throughout the movie, and ironically she is also the most traditional character who does not shy away from this older feminine ideal that a wife should take care of the children and the household. This promotes the idea to modern women today that the less they deter from what their duties as women, that have been established for hundreds of years, the more attainable happiness will be, “Charlotte couldn't help but think how truly blessed she was. This week had made her feel more grateful than ever for her happy marriage.” Charlotte’s husband in this case is a very silent character who supports her the entire way; he is hard working, dedicated and very loving. She ends up handling the pregnancy very well and with the support of her husband gives birth to a healthy baby. Once again the male plays the silent but powerful role, which keeps Charlotte’s character sane and strong. Her husband’s character, Harry, easily has the least amount of lines and screen time in the movie, yet he is what constitutes Charlotte’s happiness in life.

The next character to examine is Samantha Roberts. Samantha is quite the firecracker and is a little more difficult to identify when it comes to the labeling her, as well as the implications of her character’s role. Director Michael Patrick King uses her character to shock the audience, “When we want to send up a firework or really shock someone, Samantha opens her mouth” (Gross, 1). Her entire life she has used men as sex toys and played with them like chess pieces, moving from one to another with minimal emotional attachment. However, in this film she has finally decided to settle down with her model boyfriend Smith, whom she also manages through her public relations firm. The implication of her weakness without him comes when she realizes she doesn’t need him. This idea seems contradictory at initial thought, however with a closer analysis one can see why this is so. When Carrie asks Samantha if she is happy she replies, “Not all day every day, but every day.” Carrie continues, “ When was the last

time you felt happy?" Samantha replies " Six months ago. - I think that's normal for L.A.- what am I gonna do? Carrie responds, "What's your gut tell you?" Samantha finally admits, "I know, but Smith stayed with me through chemo. And if he can stay with me through that, then I should be able to stay in this relationship for him." Smith is an example of how even the man-eater Samantha Roberts, has conformed to the feminine expectation of women, which says that you must settle down with a man in order to be happy. Samantha finds herself stuck in a rut and frustrated that her entire career has been centered on him. She is in a battle between embracing her femininity, and staying with Smith or advocating feminist values and becoming independent of him. She realizes that she has, until this point, measured her success based on that of Smith's career. Smith's role in this film is also very small in terms of lines and appearances, however is it large in the overall quest for truth and inner happiness for Samantha. When she realizes she does not need him she breaks conformity and breaks up with him to be single once again. Here she emerges as a feminist heroine, "Yes, I love you. It's just...I'm just gonna say the thing you're not supposed to say. I love you but I love me more. And I've been in a relationship with myself for 49 years and that's the one I need to work on. You're gonna find a wonderful woman who loves being in a relationship." Smith replies by asking, "What will you find?" Samantha blatantly admits, "I don't know." However, she finds her happiness in being able to seek sexual pleasures from whomever she pleases; her happiness comes from many men and not just one, "I mean, what's the point of having a hot guy next door if you can't have sex with him?" She voices this thought to the group of friends. Without men she is not happy, and with one she is miserable, she realizes conforming to that modern ideal of living with one is not for her. In a way she breaks free of traditional feminine expectations, but conforms to the need to appeal to a plethora of men in order to find self-validation. Samantha is a very unique character; she comes off as the

strongest but truly may be the weakest in that the ultimate joy in her life is the pursuit of the attention and affection from many men rather than one. Her character contributes to another view of the modern feminist ideal, a sexualized one. Men are necessary for female happiness in the sexual satisfaction they provide, which still gives them a sense of dominance and reinforces patriarchy in modern society. Samantha values her career and her sex life, two elements that very obviously revolve around men. What this is implying is that however successful a woman is with her own business and great wealth, at the end of the day a woman is just a woman and needs the masculine character(s) in her life to make her completely satisfied.

The final character to analyze is Miranda Hobbes. Miranda represents the most popular ideal of women in today's society. She is employed, has a son and a husband. Modern popular belief says that it is possible to be a woman with a career and a family; the film contradicts this when Miranda's husband is unfaithful to her. He tells her that she is never there for him physically or emotionally because her career and attention to their son rules her life. Miranda is the character who tries to have it all but because she tries this the most important relationship in her life, the one with her husband is terribly hurt and thus her happiness goes from barely existent because of her busy schedule, to none at all because of her husband's unfaithfulness. "What could you possibly have to say that could make it any better? Miranda yells at Steve, he replies by pleading "Please. It was just that one time." She screams back," You broke us! You broke us. What we had is broken. I changed who I was for you." While they engage in intense arguments throughout the film, Miranda decides to take her husband, Steve back. She arrives at the conclusion that it has been partially her fault for his unfaithful behavior. She feels it is her fault for not being more available to her husband. Their relationship is sending the message that true happiness cannot be achieved by being a radically feminist successful woman, rather more

often than not one must side with the traditional favor in order to obtain the ultimate happiness at home and in her heart. Steve's role in this film is rather small, like the other men his lines are minimal yet actions are detrimental. They add the twist to the plot and throughout the entire film cause upset grief and joy in all of these women's lives. He cheats on her, she blames herself, does soul searching and learns to reprioritize her life, putting her husband on the top of the list, proving that the feminine ideal today, although a bit different because women now have their own careers, still rings a similar bell in that husbands are the top priority to achieve happiness.

Conclusion

Through the rhetorical images in the film *Sex and the City* one can now see how this new feminist ideal has been created yet still is very similar to traditional views of what women should prioritize in their lives. Through the waves of feminism women have come a long way in terms of representation. They have gained respect and political presence. However, society still reminds us everyday in images similar to those of the women of *Sex and the City* and in the media that men will always be the ultimate determining factor. It reminds us that males are the ones with the most power. Every step we make towards progress away from this view can also be seen as a step back through contradicting ideas such as the sexualization of women in the media. As well as how much they value men in their lives as evidenced through popular culture. This analysis of *Sex and the City* contributes to feminist criticism in that it gives a fresh outlook on what might initially seem like a feminist film. The rhetoric of *Sex and the City* aims to push women to believe that they do not have to decide between the "either/or" dichotomy of embracing post feminist or independent ideology. However as evidenced above we can see that the opposite is true. The women of *Sex and the City*, are narrated by a voice that creates a parallel between the audience and each character, this connection is superficial, yet women feel

an affinity to relate. For this reason it is often forgotten that unlike Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte and Samantha, women today are generally not all thin, white, rich and beautiful. However, female audiences throughout the international community are being fed these images of male dependency in order to achieve similar happiness and superficial goods. Evidently the happiness of the characters is not from their success or careers, rather it is from their relationships with the men in their lives and their maternal instinct and ambitions. Feminist criticism gains strength in examinations such as these so that one may learn to analyze more carefully when witnessing what appears to be pro feminist images in popular culture. It enables us to use the tools of criticism to be able to distinguish fairy-tale endings, from individually determined happiness. This analysis contributes in a similar way; the analysis helps us gain deeper insight into what seems to be positive feminist images in the media but actually turn out to be the opposite. This analysis demonstrates that although we have come a long way in terms of the feminist movement, often times women in the media are still just depicted as objects of affection that are overly emotional and irrational. However, the aim is not to discredit feminist progress, but rather to bring to the attention of audiences that they should be cautionary of the witty rhetoric and lavish accessories that decorate female characters in the media. These jewels and wit are often blinding to the underlying messages that reinforce the ideas, which women have worked so hard to challenge and dispel. This critical analysis sheds a light on the progress we have made, as well as the potential that remains for popular culture's depiction of the feminine ideal.

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