Masculinities on *The O.C.*

A Critical Analysis of Representations of Gender

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In the winter of 2005, I was teaching a course on Media, Technology, and Education to a group of undergraduate teacher education candidates, and our class discussions often included references to popular TV shows and other media. It became clear early in the semester that virtually every student in the room was familiar with and had an opinion on the primetime Fox series *The O.C.* (DeLaurentis et al., 2003–present). References to this show elicited passionate discussions about the plot, characters, actors, fashion, and commentary on how they were being influenced by and interacting with the show. This is not surprising because the first season of *The O.C.* was popular from the moment it aired on August 5, 2003. After its first season, it cleaned up at the Teen Choice awards in 2004, winning in four categories: Best TV show, Drama/Action Adventure; TV Breakout Show; TV Actor: Drama/Adventure; and TV Breakout Star, Female (Haberman, 2004). The Nielsen ratings also reflected the success of this series’ impact on teen imaginations. *The O.C.* ranked in the top three for both 12 to 17-year-old girls and boys after its second season (Council, 2005).

The way my 18 to 22-year-old students talked about the show and cared about the characters compelled me to examine it further to understand its popularity. It also presented itself as an ideal text for critical analysis to make explicit what gender codes and values were...
being conveyed in popular teen culture. Because research has documented the powerful impact television has on youth identity formation (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Brown & Pardun, 2004) as well as its role in shaping gender codes and providing models for behavior (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Brown & Pardun, 2004; Good, Porter, & Dillon, 2002; Scharrer, 2001), The O.C. is an ideal cultural artifact for an investigation on how scripts about gender roles and sexuality are being communicated to the adolescent audience in North America.

Similar work has been done in this field using the popular 1990s series Beverly Hills, 90210. What McKinley found in this research with female viewers of the show was that Beverly Hills, 90210 did work to “perpetuate a dominant notion of female identity—pretty and nice, defined not on her own merits, but in relation to a male—that feminists have argued is oppressive to women” (McKinley, 1997, p. 9). Because the target audience and the settings for these prime time shows are quite similar, it is easy to draw parallels between them, although the creators of The O.C. would argue that there are significant differences. They claim to take a postmodern twist on this familiar genre. Josh Schwartz, the show’s creator and producer calls the show a “soap-edy”: half soap opera, half comedy. He explains: “That’s how you do a show like this in the 21st century. We live in a post-everything universe, and everyone's hyper self-aware.” He describes his show as a “Trojan Horse,” which means it has “beautiful surf, sun, mansions, and parties on the outside, soulful, quirky characters as the soldiers inside” (cited in Becker, 2005, p. 17). But does this “thoroughly ironic, post-everything” (Schwartz cited in Becker, 2005) show really transform or mock the time-honored tradition of valorizing wealthy, White, hyper-heterosexual men and women performing their comfortable and normalized gender roles? Alternatively, does it merely reinforce and reinscribe hegemonic values? The present chapter aims to answer this question as well as provide a model for a critical analysis of a selected media text.

Gender and Television Comedy

The O.C. is a show that has achieved popularity with both male and female viewers and offers a unique opportunity to examine what messages are being presented to its audience. The show’s creator defines it as a “soap-edy,” and it draws on conventions from the situation comedy genre for its comic relief. In order to better understand how comedy is used in television to reinforce and challenge gender roles, this section will examine various forms of humor and how norms of language and culture are used to create comic moments.

The concept of gender as a social construction is one that has been addressed in much feminist literature and is a process that is widely recognized by contemporary gender and sociological theorists. Sandra Bem, a prominent theorist in this field, uses gender schema theory to explain how masculinity and femininity are taught through social practices:

Gender schema theory contains two fundamental presuppositions about the process of individual gender formation: first, that there are gender lenses embedded in cultural discourse and social
practice that are internalized by the developing child, and second, that once these gender lenses have been internalized, they predispose the child, and later the adult, to construct an identity that is consistent with them. (1993, p. 139)

She effectively introduces a theoretical framework that makes sense of how children learn and perform appropriate gender roles. Research on the portrayal of gender roles on television has shed new light on how this medium can teach and reinforce norms of masculinity and femininity.

Neale and Krunik (1990) explain that much comedy comes from the “surprising, the improper, the unlikely, and the transgressive in order to make us laugh” (cited in Hanke, 1998, p. 74). Therefore, situation comedies use cultural norms as a common reference point from which to depart in order to entertain. The way they apply cultural stereotypes, commonsense assumptions, and theatrical conventions are what make them funny. In his article, “The ‘Mock-Macho’ Situation Comedy,” Hanke explores some of these conventions and how they are used to parody macho or hegemonic masculinity through the two shows: Home Improvement and Coach. He explains how this self-parody implies that “masculinity is a performance or act that once met a hegemonic norm, but now obviously fails to meet it. To the degree that this performance is regarded as more implausible than plausible, this discursive strategy invites cynical laughter . . . [which] works to serve male agency by delaying the truth of male power” (1998, p. 90). In The O.C., this device is used regularly. We see it in the first five minutes of the first episode when Sandy, a public defender, lightheartedly admits to Ryan, his teen client, that his wife is the real bread-winner in the family (Schwartz, 2003). This information surprises Ryan and the audience. We laugh at the irregularity of the situation: a male professional who earns less than his wife. As a result of this twist, the audience is caught making a false assumption and may begin to read the show as presenting a nontraditional, and even potentially feminist, perspective.

Irony here is a comedic device that is used quite often on The O.C. In a recent study of the use of irony in the speech of adolescent males, Korobov argues that irony allows males to retain some deniability in their assertions that allows them to say something potentially hurtful or offensive, “while at the same time partly denying or disclaiming personal ownership of it” (2005, p. 227). An example of this occurs when Luke, the captain of the water polo team, and Marisa’s boyfriend says: “I’d be pretty jealous right now if Chino (referring to Ryan) wasn’t gay. Doesn’t bother me. He was born that way” (Episode 104). His use of irony to insult Ryan is an effective way of, “avoiding the appearance of prejudice while at the same time getting some type of prejudice across” (Korobov, 2005, p. 227). This persistent use of ironic devices such as hyperbole, sarcasm, and rhetorical questions by the creators of The O.C. will be examined further in the next section due to its ability to reinforce certain gender norms while appearing to mock and critique them.

The O.C. and the Hierarchy of Masculinities

In the opening scene of the first season of The O.C., we are introduced to Ryan, the show’s central figure, who is getting into trouble with his older brother who has convinced him...
to steal a car with him by saying, “quit being a little bitch” (Episode 101). Ryan is strong, good-looking, and from the tough neighborhoods of Chino. When he needs help, his public defender, Sandy, offers to take him in. In spite of the obvious class differences, his whiteness and his intelligence enable him to access the inner circle of wealthy Newport Beach society after his new neighbor, Marisa, invites him to a party. We are then introduced to the other main adolescent male character: Sandy’s son Seth. In his first scene, he is playing videogames and making sarcastic remarks. He is portrayed as a weak and geeky social outcast who provides an ongoing critique of Newport Beach’s rich and beautiful people. These two characters and others in The O.C. offer us an example of the various forms of masculinity that are recognized and addressed in the work of gender theorists, and are a useful case study for an analysis of the representations of gender on television.

Gender theorist R. W. Connell introduced the concept of a hierarchy of masculinities where he identified four broad categories of masculinity: hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, and subordinate (Connell, 1995). These four types of masculinity describe broad categories of behaviors and provide a conceptual framework for understanding how masculinity is represented in The O.C. Each of these types of masculinities will be defined and described with examples from the show to clarify how they work in relation to each other.

The first category, hegemonic masculinity, is the most valued form of masculinity in a patriarchal culture and is “constructed in relation to and against femininity and subordinated forms of masculinity. The dominant masculine form is characterized by heterosexuality, power, authority, aggression and technical competence” (Mills, 2001, p. 12). This description presents many traits that are attributed to Ryan. In the first episode, Ryan is established as heterosexually attractive, tough, aggressive, and a rescuer of both Seth and Marisa. Other recurring story lines that demonstrate Ryan’s hegemonic masculinity include fighting (41% of episodes), rescuing others (59% of episodes), and heterosexual relationship issues (100%). Because Ryan is the show’s hero, whenever he is violent or aggressive, his behavior is justified as a defense of someone else: Seth, Marisa, Kirsten (his adopted Mom), and even Luke. The one time he brawls to defend himself, and not someone else in response to a homophobic insult from Luke: “shut up, queer” (Episode 102). At this point, it is clear that he is not physically defending himself, but rather defending his heterosexuality. To ensure that viewers continue to view Ryan as a good guy, this act of violence is portrayed as self-defense, and is balanced later by proof that Ryan is not homophobic when he is supportive of Luke when he discovers that his father, Carson, is gay.

The second form, complicit masculinity, is also well-represented on this show. Men who inhabit the space of complicit masculinity, “do little to challenge the patriarchal gender order, thereby enjoying its many rewards” (Mills, 2001, p. 72). Many boys and men experience this form of masculinity, for they do not act out the extremes of hegemonic masculinity, but they do very little to challenge the existing gender order and thereby reinforce it. Seth, the other lead adolescent male character and his father, Sandy, enact this form of masculinity.

Seth provides the comic relief and a running ironic commentary of the events and people in the show. Ryan’s arrival provides the doorway for Seth’s first entry into the Newport
Beach social scene from which he had been previously excluded. Late in the season, his girlfriend, Summer, remarks on Seth’s lack of hegemonic masculinity by stating, “You don’t like hardware stores, you cry during chick flocks, next thing you know you’re walking in on Ryan changing” (Episode 124). The audience laughs due to the improbability of his girlfriend openly questioning his heterosexuality. This moment derives its humor from the common stereotypes of marginalized masculinities: if a man is not appropriately macho (stoic and good with power tools), then he must be gay.

At various moments in the show, Seth and Sandy provide commentary on Ryan’s hegemonic traits, often expressing some desire to share those qualities. These comments are always done with irony which Korobov points out is essential in, “subverting and (indirectly) asserting different masculine subject positions” (2005, p. 228). In one conversation with his father, Seth says, “We have a real athlete in the family (referring to Ryan). Something that all your Jewishness has kept me from becoming” (Episode 109).

Late in season one, Seth talks to Ryan about their relationship with his usual sarcasm, “I’m the brains, you’re the brawn. I’m in the ivory tower, and you’re on the ground making things happen” (Episode 122). By using irony, Seth is able to point out the obvious, yet he also somehow distances himself from the truth of the situation. Seth has clearly benefited from Ryan’s arrival in Newport Beach and, although he often mocks Ryan’s lack of emotion and tendency to brawl, his affiliation with such a friend transforms his social reality for the better. Although Seth’s masculinity prior to Ryan’s arrival might have been a marginalized one (“I’m not a girl, although I did spend several summers being called one,” Episode 117), his heterosexuality, (“I’m a man now. I had sex with a girl,” Episode 119), and association with Ryan secure his position as a male accomplice in supporting the values of hegemonic masculinity.

The third category is that of marginalized masculinities, which are underrepresented in the cast and plotlines of The O.C. Men of color and men with disabilities, the most traditionally marginalized masculinities, are noticeably missing from the show. Issues of race are virtually absent from the show with only three lines of dialogue in the entire first season. The first is in Episode 103 when Sandy is justifying his decision to support Ryan when other Newport families resent his presence in their world. He says, “Maybe next time I’ll find a Black kid or an Asian kid.” The second is in Episode 108 when Seth mocks his mother’s pronunciation of the word, “Tijuana.” He corrects her and then says, “you’re so white, mom.” The final reference is in Episode 109 when Seth explains to Ryan, “the master race has been perfected, and they all go to our school.” Men of color make brief appearances as investigators, hired help, or as bad boys at parties, and rarely utter more than a few sentences in an entire episode, which shows how truly marginalized they are. Men with disabilities do not exist on The O.C.

At the bottom end of the hierarchy of masculinities are those identities deemed as subordinate. Subordinate masculinities include identities that are perceived as antithetical to masculinity: effeminate and gay men. Anti-gay and sexist language is often used to prove a man’s masculinity. Men use power over other men to enforce this system and often act with violence toward individuals who are viewed as “traitors to masculinity.” Mills explains
that, “homophobic discourses work to position them outside the norms of ‘real’ masculinities, as the most notable grouping within the category of ‘subordinate masculinities’ are gays” (2001, p. 70). This homophobic discourse is used repeatedly in the show by the captain of the water polo team, and Marisa’s long-term boyfriend, Luke. He and his friends are repeatedly making anti-gay and sexist comments such as, “Suck it, queer” or “Welcome to the O.C., bitch.” The only gay character on the show in season one ends up being Luke’s father who is portrayed as ruining Luke’s idyllic family and his role as the popular jock at school. This one brief storyline in Episode 112, “The Secret,” showed how powerfully the association with homosexuality (having a gay father) can undo every other successful embodiment of hegemonic masculinity and render one a social outcast. The outing of his father, Carson, causes Luke significant humiliation and harassment including social isolation, verbal abuse, and getting his tires slashed at school. These four forms of masculinity, hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, subordinate, and their portrayals in The O.C. provide a useful guide for understanding how hegemonic masculinity is reinforced through reiteration of this hierarchy.

_The O.C. Rewrites Patriarchy_

Although hegemonic masculinity is clearly supported by the plots and characters on this show, the creator of The O.C., Josh Schwartz, along with his colleagues attempt to rewrite the reality of the gender hierarchy in society. These writers, directors, and producers create portrayals of women as controlling, powerful, sexual aggressors who are in need of caring men to help them be “good.” Although the actors and characters on the show are fairly balanced gender-wise, the people deciding what those characters say and how they act are overwhelmingly male. In season one, 70% of the episodes were written by males, three of which were collaborations with female writers, and 96% were directed by men. Only one episode, 124, “The Proposal” was directed by a woman: Helen Shaver. The representation of female characters on the show is typically negative and leaves viewers with the heterosexist message that women are incomplete and incompetent human beings without men. This attitude is exemplified in Summer’s sincere advice to Marisa, “You have to be independent so you can find a new guy” (Episode 122).

In the characters presented on The O.C., the women are depicted as troubled and weak (Marisa and Ryan’s mother); vain, superficial, and petty (Summer, Julie, and “the Newpsies”—a generic term for the women of Newport Beach); dominating and powerful (Julie, Kirsten, Rachel); and sexually aggressive (Marisa, Summer, Julie, Anna, Gabrielle, Rachel, and Haley). Portrayed in this setting, the male protagonists are shown as intimidated and afraid of these women and easily subjected to their will and desires. This reversing of the dynamic of patriarchy by depicting men as objects of women’s wills and desires is an attempt to undermine the project of feminism. By presenting a fantasy world that is dominated and controlled by unlikable women, the audience is induced to sympathize with the plight of the kind and generous men, and is less likely accept arguments that women are still being oppressed by a patriarchal society.
This reversal of male power starts in the first episode when Sandy tries to convince his wife, Kirsten, to allow them to shelter Ryan when he has been kicked out by his abusive, alcoholic mother. Kirsten is rigid and resistant to Sandy and Seth's pleas to allow Ryan to stay, and self-admittedly plays the "bad cop" in the family. This scenario continues until Episode 103 when Ryan finally earns Kirsten's trust, and she makes the final decision for the family and announces: "Ryan's going to stay with us now." We later learn that, although Kirsten is wealthy and powerful, it is due to her position in her father's company, not through accomplishments of her own.

Marisa's mother, Julie, is an example of a woman with a different type of power. Through gossip and party-planning, she wields significant amounts of social power in Newport. She is presented as a domineering, gold-digging, social climber, who only acts in her own self-interest. After divorcing Marisa's father, Jimmy, when he went bankrupt, she pursues Kirsten's wealthy and powerful father, Caleb, and becomes "the most powerful woman in Newport." Both Julie and Kirsten are presented as strong and intimidating women, but a closer analysis of the show demonstrates that they derive their power from their affiliations with the super-hegemonic male, Caleb.

Another strong female character is Dr. Kim, the dean of the Harbor School, where Seth, Marisa, and Summer are enrolled, and Ryan applies to attend. The men all speak of being afraid of her. When Ryan expresses hesitation to meet with Dr. Kim, Sandy tells him, "You went toe-to-toe with Julie Cooper, you can take Dr. Kim" (Episode 108). Later in the season Marisa's father Jimmy states, "Dr. Kim scares me" (Episode 120). It is clear that the women are the gatekeepers of the Newport Beach community and the men are merely there to pay for things or to help the women soften their hard edges.

Conversely, when the women are troubled or in danger, they lose their strength and power, and they need a man to rescue them. Aside from the multiple times Ryan rescues Marisa (passed out in her driveway—episode 101, overdose in Mexico—episode 107, from Oliver holding a gun—episode 118, hiding her mother's affair with her ex-boyfriend Luke—episode 122), he also defends Kirsten when she is being ogled by a fellow inmate (Episode 101), rescues Haley from her job as a stripper (Episode 122), supports Theresa when she has been punched by her fiancé (Episode 125), and again when she announces her pregnancy (Episode 127).

Sandy does less dramatic rescuing, but he is often the first person to whom people go when they are in trouble (Ryan, Seth, Kirsten, Jimmy, Cal, Theresa). He is kind, loyal, and always guides people to do the right thing. When Seth finds himself torn between Summer and Anna after both young women have essentially thrown themselves at him, Sandy advises Seth, "If you are old enough to be in a real relationship, then you are old enough to be a man" (Episode 115). This presentation of Ryan and Sandy as gentle, loving, good-hearted heroes against the backdrop of the women in their world presents a view of society that could lead the audience to be more sympathetic to men and more judgmental of the women.

This skewed representation of gender roles and the power men and women have in society is reinforced by the gender of the most powerful people on the show: the executive producers. Unlike the writers and directors, they are exclusively male: Bob DeLaurentis, Dave
Barris, Doug Liman, Josh Schwartz, and McG. This dominance of the male perspective and control in writing, directing, and producing makes suspect the show's attempt to present patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity as endangered and men as powerless objects in a woman's world.

This "thoroughly ironic, post-everything" show that claims to package "quirky soulful characters" in a superficially appealing formula actually takes that Trojan horse and instead of releasing soldiers to battle some of the problematic ideologies of dominant culture, it actually sends them in as reinforcements to join the old boys club of Hollywood. A surface examination of the characters and storyline of the first season of The O.C. could lead one to erroneously conclude that it has some nontraditional, postmodern twists. Its powerful and sexually aggressive female characters, the frequent self-parody (there are repeated references to a new hit show called The Valley), and persistent use of irony to laugh at the rich, powerful, and beautiful people of southern California are a refreshing change in the genre of prime-time dramas. This soap opera that appeals to both men and women has the potential to create new gender scripts for the twenty-first century by truly challenging and questioning core values of patriarchal society. However, as this chapter demonstrates, through a critical analysis of the writing, characters, and themes of this show, The O.C. is subtly and persistently reinscribing the power of hegemonic masculinity by presenting patriarchy, or the dominance of men, as an endangered reality. Korobov explains the discursive power behind the use of irony in this show when he explains that, "Irony thus achieves a kind of hedging—a 'have your cake and eat it, too' equivocation that pivots on multiple levels of meaning, a pivoting that suggests that the very stability and adaptability of hegemonic masculinity may very well lie in its ability to be strategically ironized" (Korobov, 2005, p. 227).

This analysis of The O.C. is influenced by what Barthes refers to as the "triple context": "the location of the text, the historical moment and the cultural formation of the reader" (Storey, 1993, p. 80). It is important to acknowledge that people bring different contexts to their interpretation of media texts. Youths are becoming more technologically savvy and are active readers of the media texts in their worlds. Through interacting with these shows and their related Web sites, fan 'zines, and other opportunities offered by technology, viewers can create their own meanings and interpretations of the messages presented to them in shows such as The O.C. However, as McKinley has pointed out in her study of 90210 fans: "viewers positioned themselves as authors and sources of television-centered behaviors; in the process, cultural norms could be naturalized and uncritically perpetuated" (McKinley, 1997, p. 152). What we need to do as educators is to provide students with the tools and the knowledge to become more critically literate in reading these texts to empower youths to create their own meanings and cultural artifacts rather than being passive consumers of corporate entertainment. By initiating discussions about gender, race, ability, and sexuality, and asking students to reflect critically on the representations that they see in their favorite shows, films, and music, we will be better able to teach, learn, and interact with them about how they experience and act in the world. This analysis of The O.C. is meant to act as a point of departure for these kinds of discussions in the classroom.


