

Shana Laski  
AMST 308  
Response Paper 2  
2/21/18

### The Gendered Discrepancies with Difficult Protagonists

The shows in question this week (as well as last) all dealt with difficult protagonists, but this time the majority were difficult women. This raised questions about the kind of women we expect to find on television and onscreen in general, as opposed to those we found in *Sex and the City*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, and *Veep* as opposed to *House*, *The Sopranos*, and *Breaking Bad*. Nussbaum's article *Difficult Women* and Smith's *Just What Makes Tony Soprano Such an Appealing, Attractive Murderer?* give two perspectives on the kinds of characters we sympathize with or antagonize based on contextual morality and actions.

We see from Nussbaum's article that, despite its successes on HBO, *Sex and the City* never has received the same level of critical acclaim as its masculine counterpart of *The Sopranos*. Both shows are highly dependent on gendered perspectives, but the masculine was rewarded where the feminine was disparaged. The trials and tribulations of a mobster family man negotiating his masculinity has more critical "worth," apparently, than mid-30s women negotiating dating and professional life. As the author indicates, watchers of *Sex and the City* were much more likely to fall into the trap that HBO's brand specifically fought to avoid: equating watching the show to a guilty pleasure. I believe this is deeply tied to the gendered dichotomy between struggles faced by Tony Soprano and Carrie Bradshaw.

The word "difficult" gets qualified for men and women differently. The men of the aforementioned television shows are "difficult" because they make us question their morality: they are violent, affiliate with "bad" people, neglect their families and interpersonal relationships, and pursue career or financial security or status at any cost.

The women, on the other hand, are self-obsessed, socially bold, financially irresponsible, psychologically unpredictable, and make questionable decisions within their familial interpersonal relationships. Though similar, the minute differences play into the gender roles that sell in mass media like television—the crazy woman and the macho man.

Carrie Bradshaw, Selena Meyer, and Rebecca Bunch are all, in Murray Smith's words, "problem personalities." They are the kind of women that, upon meeting them in real life, one would not really want to associate oneself with however onscreen and in the context of a fictional world, we root for them. These women in particular represent a brand of femininity that isn't typically offered in male-centric television drama. They take up space, they are focused on careers, and most importantly, they are given complex psychologies that both align the audience with them and also make us question how much we *want* to. In particular, I am thinking of Selena Meyer in the episode of *Veep* in her struggles to remain a strong, independent thinking woman in power as opposed to a puppet of the white, male dominated party she was associated with and the situations that unfold within that context. Many, especially women, can relate to feeling like their individual opinions are getting swallowed by institutional tradition and outdated policy. Selena and her team's actions, while cringe worthy, are what many of us wish we could express if we didn't have inhibitions and follow social decorum.

All of these shows are examples of how we can relate to characters we dislike, and like characters that we share very little in common with situationally. We can sympathize with the murderous mobster, and feel for the woman essentially stalking her ex-boyfriend because of the allegiance we build through their characterizations. Their problem personalities, however, seem to be crafted along socially entrenched gender lines.