

No Limits:  
Sex, Drugs, and Motherhood in the Showtime Dramey

by

Ben Goldberg  
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Image

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## Introduction

### Difficult Mothers

“If there’s a God up there, something above, God shine your light down here. Shine down your love... Love of the loveless.”<sup>1</sup>

Television is a medium preoccupied with both its past and future. Networks and showrunners are always looking to change up their formulas, both in distribution models and narrative structures, hoping to find the next big hit. Today, in 2017, many critics and showrunners claim that we live in a moment of constant reinvention and promise; in one year, we don’t just see one big hit but fifteen. And yet, despite the industry’s massive transformations, television plays by the same rules of repetition and variation to tell new stories through familiar means. The medium’s changes are always firmly rooted in the history of televisual traditions. No matter how hard it tries, television cannot shake its past.

In 2005, Showtime Networks changed forever with the critically acclaimed premiere of the suburban drama-comedy *Weeds* (2005-2012). Suddenly, critics sat up and paid attention to Showtime, the oft dismissed premium cable network. Between 2005 and 2012, the channel followed *Weeds* with the premieres of a number of female-driven half-hours, including *Nurse Jackie* (2009-2015), *United States of Tara* (2009-2011), and *The Big C* (2010-2013). While the network had other successes during this time, most notably the serial killer police procedural *Dexter* (2006-2013), these shows, which I will call “difficult female protagonist dramedies,” helped put Showtime on the map both critically

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<sup>1</sup> “Love of the Loveless” by Eels; featured in *United States of Tara*, 1.01 “Pilot,” Showtime, January 18, 2009, directed by Craig Gillespie.

and financially.<sup>2</sup> This time period marked a moment of incredible growth for the network; its investment in series centered on powerful, complex women—most of whom were also mothers—paid off.<sup>3</sup> With strong lead performances and edgy, provocative storytelling, the female-driven dramedy production trend won the network its first string of Emmy nominations and wins.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Showtime’s viewership sky-rocketed, jumping from 13.8 million subscribers in 2005 to 21.3 million subscribers in 2012.<sup>5</sup> Showtime had popular programming before 2005, but the dramedies cemented Showtime’s place as a competitive high-quality premium network.

The goal of this thesis is to illustrate how, through generic hybridity, Showtime’s female-driven dramedies<sup>6</sup> tell celebratory stories about transgressive mothers and families who defy easy categorization. Thus, they are cultivated by Showtime to support its distinct brand identity as a network that is always “surprising the audience,” according to former Showtime President Bob Greenblatt.<sup>7</sup> While not an explicitly defined production trend, the dramedies are undeniably connected: they are all half-hours, mix drama with comedy, and feature A-list actresses, high production values, explicit content, and flawed yet relatable mothers. Additionally, they all feature protagonists and families that are antinormative, or, in other words, divergent from socially acceptable norms: a pot-dealing mother in *Weeds*, a pill-popping nurse in *Nurse Jackie*, a selfish and deceptive mother with cancer in *The Big C*. The upper middle class “bad mothers” that populate

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<sup>2</sup> George Vernadakis, “No Time Like Showtime: Putting a Premium on Originals,” *Multichannel News* 27, no. 26 (2006): 2.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor Nygaard, ““Girls Just Want to Be ‘Quality’: HBO, Lena Dunham, and Girls’ Conflicting Brand Identity,” *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 371.

<sup>4</sup> Vernadakis, “No Time Like Showtime,” 2.

<sup>5</sup> Nygaard, “Girls Just Want to Be ‘Quality,’” 371.

<sup>6</sup> Later in the introduction, I will further discuss what I mean by “dramedy” and “generic hybridity.” I do not take either term for granted and aim to unpack the assumptions behind them.

<sup>7</sup> Vernadakis, “No Time Like Showtime,” 2.

the dramedies make questionable and difficult choices at times, including adultery and criminal behavior. They are women who hit their children, threaten their rivals' lives, and disappear from their families for days on end. At the same time, the women are ultimately celebrated within their narratives for their differences and transgressions. Even though we recognize the devastating effects their actions may have on those around them, the dramedies align us with these protagonists by also highlighting the ways external social factors have placed them in impossible situations—for Nancy Botwin of *Weeds*, through suburbia's expectations of what it means to be a mother and a widow; for Tara Gregson of *United States of Tara*, through others' ignorance of mental illness and disability; and for Jackie Peyton of *Nurse Jackie*, through the incompetence of her male coworkers and the stigma of addiction. Reveling in the edgy and taboo corresponds to Showtime's identity as a network with, as their slogan once stated, "no limits."<sup>8</sup>

I group these female-driven dramedies together not because they tell indistinguishable stories. In part, I group them together due to their textual similarities, as they mix generic conventions in an effort to align us with socially aberrant mothers. Additionally, the shows are grouped industrially by Showtime's programming and scheduling; critics and scholars also reinforce this patterning in their writing.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is important for us to study the dramedies as distinct but as also a part of a larger trend. The shows each offer a unique viewing experience, but Showtime organizes them

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<sup>8</sup> Julia Himberg, "Multicasting: Lesbian Programming and the Changing Landscape of Cable TV," *Television & New Media* 15, no. 4 (2014): 293.

<sup>9</sup> Lara Bradshaw, "Showtime's 'Female Problem': Cancer, Quality, and Motherhood," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 13, no. 2 (2013): 168.

together, crafting this production trend to generate a particular identity. Showtime must be alternative, edgy, and different. It must be *premium*.

### **The Premium Cable “Revolution”**

The rise of premium cable networks like Showtime and the Home Box Office Network (HBO), sparking a growth in critically acclaimed “quality television,” is one of the most frequently discussed shifts in television history.<sup>10</sup> Through interviews with various industry executives, Ken Auletta’s *Three Blind Mice: How the TV Networks Lost Their Way* traces the history of the move from a three-network system (comprised of ABC, NBC, and CBS) to a proliferation of cable channels. *Blue Skies* by Patrick Parsons and *The Revolution Wasn’t Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* edited by Lynn Spigel & Michael Curtin also broadly outline the history of this transformation and some of the cultural assumptions that came with it.<sup>11</sup> These authors note that before premium cable networks began producing original series in the 1990s, network television was publically understood as a “reviled medium.”<sup>12</sup> In 1961, Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow called television a “vast wasteland” to the National Association of Broadcasters, citing its simplicity and indecent moral content.<sup>13</sup> Of course, this is not to say that there weren’t incredibly well-crafted and powerful shows at the

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<sup>10</sup> Brett Martin, *Difficult Men* (New York: Penguin, 2013); Ken Auletta, *Three Blind Mice: How The TV Networks Lost Their Way* (New York: Random House, 1991); Michael Curtin et al., *Distribution Revolution: Conversations About the Digital Future of Film and Television* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014); Patrick Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Curtin & Lynn Spigel, *The Revolution Wasn’t Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 17.

<sup>12</sup> Martin, *Difficult Men*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

time, such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) and *Bewitched* (1964-1972), but rather that public understanding of television was one of a low art form.

Beginning in the 1970s, premium cable offered an alternative to network television.<sup>14</sup> With their subscription model, premium networks do not have to appeal to a large audience for advertising and are instead able to target potential subscribers. Premium networks can “gear programming to the tastes of smaller groups,” a practice called narrowcasting, in order to satisfy niche audiences through uncensored sports programs and movies.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, premium channels are not monitored by the FCC and are therefore free to air uncensored content that is forbidden on network television, including profanity, nudity, and graphic violence. From their inception, premium networks were able to differentiate themselves from broadcast through sports, standup comedy, and movies, but it wasn’t until the 1990s that premium networks, HBO in particular, delved into the original programming business to tell serialized stories you couldn’t find elsewhere. With their freedom of content—unburned by the expectations of FCC or advertisers—these channels’ original programming could appear vastly different from that of ABC, NBC, or CBS.<sup>16</sup> While television has been a very prominent part of American households since the 1950s, in the 1990s, premium networks promised a potential transformation of the medium, legitimating themselves as different, new, and potentially better “quality television.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Marc Leverette et al., eds. *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 1.

<sup>15</sup> Dean DeFino, *The HBO Effect* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014): 33.

<sup>16</sup> Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, edit. *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007): 3.

<sup>17</sup> Importantly, notions of “quality television” are not static. Since the 1950s, television has gone through multiple “Golden Ages” and what has considered to be “quality” has changed over time. While I will delve into the changing definitions of “quality” later in my thesis, the “quality” I am

While many scholars and critics have written about how premium cable, specifically through its original series, has changed television, Showtime's dramedies have largely been ignored in favor of HBO's "difficult men" and their legacy, including *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Deadwood* (2004-2006), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), and *Mad Men* (2007-2015).<sup>18</sup> Of all the premium cable networks, HBO has far and away received the greatest attention. With the premiere of *Oz* (1997-2003), the gritty prison drama, and followed by the even more popular premieres of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *The Sopranos*, HBO has developed an incredible critical reputation for producing innovative, bold, and well-crafted programs. Dean DeFino's recent book, *The HBO Effect*, is the most complete and complicated portrait of the network I have come across, and it has proved to be an incredible asset. DeFino argues that HBO has had a profound effect on television, changing the landscape of television in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; both its comedies and dramas have established models of new narratively complex stories that many other shows have adopted, noting *The Larry Sanders Show's* (1992-1998) influence on *30 Rock* (2006-2013) and *The Office* (2005-2013) and *The Sopranos'* influence on *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*. At the same time, he recognizes that though these narratives may appear to be revolutionary, they are still "built upon familiar genre and character conventions" and owe their debt to older televisual traditions.<sup>19</sup>

Two of Amanda Lotz's books, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-first Century* and *Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era* discuss how cable has

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describing here is simply its most recent iteration, prompted by HBO's original programming in the late '90s.

<sup>18</sup> Martin, *Difficult Men*, 1-32. Moving forward, I will refer to these shows as "male antihero shows." I discuss them in greater depth later in my introduction.

<sup>19</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 16.

influenced the stories told about men and women on television, arguing that cable's subscription model "enable[s] narrowcasting strategies such as developing unconventional protagonists."<sup>20</sup> In Lotz's estimation, cable channels have sparked more male protagonists who depict diverging conceptions of traditional masculinity and more profitable complex female characters.<sup>21</sup> Essentially, her argument is the same in both books: premium cable fosters particular types of narratives that shifted, but did not completely revolutionize, the kinds of male and female protagonists on television. Outlining this shift illuminates the reasons both HBO and Showtime may have chosen to focus on darker and more overtly challenging protagonists in the 2000s, since those protagonists marked the networks as different from broadcast channels and thus proved to be financially lucrative. Throughout his book, DeFino also highlights how HBO's influence and success hinges on its exclusivity; HBO relies on audience fragmentation, profane and uncensored material, as well as auteurs and presumed creative control in its programming to differentiate itself as "not TV."

Where DeFino falters, however, is in his overstated claim of HBO's influence. While it is clear that HBO has had a profound impact on the television landscape, he claims it as television's greatest, and at times only, influence in recent years, casting aside networks like AMC, FX, Showtime, and Starz as simply "imitators."<sup>22</sup> Showtime, established in 1976, has rarely been studied as anything but a consequence of the "HBO effect." More recently, scholars have turned their attention to Netflix and other

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<sup>20</sup> Amanda Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2014): 6; Amanda Lotz, *Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era* (Urbana, University of Illinois, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Lotz, *Redesigning Women*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 7.

streaming platforms' shows like *House of Cards* (2013- ), *Orange is the New Black* (2013- ), and *Transparent* (2014- ) as a new wave of the televisual revolution.<sup>23</sup> My thesis will build off of DeFino's nuanced analysis of HBO's industrial and narrative practices but extend this attention to Showtime and its dramedies not as "imitators" but as their own distinct entities, as similar yet markedly different.

Like other premium networks, Showtime uses a subscription model and uncensored content to attract fragmented niche audiences, differentiate itself from network television, and create its own distinct network identity. Former Showtime President Bob Greenblatt says that the channel's programs are "unlike the kind of things you'll see on other networks."<sup>24</sup> Showtime shows focus on taboo, controversial, or underrepresented topics in an effort to create an alternative identity, resulting in gay-oriented programming like *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) and *The L Word* (2004-2009). Similarly, the channel's difficult female protagonist dramedies are an often cited yet rarely studied pattern that deserves more scholarly attention; their success helped establish Showtime as a competitive network, at times even challenging HBO's quality status in terms of Emmy nominations and subscription base.<sup>25</sup> If television criticism popularly understands HBO as having had a massive impact on the contemporary state of television, it is imperative we look at the Showtime dramedies as part of this historical moment.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, I argue that we must think beyond the rhetoric of "HBO and its imitators" to recognize Showtime as influenced by HBO but operating with its own

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<sup>23</sup> Curtin et al., *Distribution Revolution*; Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey, *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Vernadakis, "No Time Like Showtime," 2.

<sup>25</sup> John Benutty, "Showtime at Emmy Awards," *Gold Derby*, June 23, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Alan Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised: The Cops, Crooks, Slingers, and Slayers Who Changed TV Drama Forever* (New York: Touchstone, 2013); Martin, *Difficult Men*, 11-12.

storytelling and economic logics.<sup>27</sup> In effect, the networks are doing the same thing, legitimating themselves as “quality television” worthy of a monthly subscription and viewer loyalty, through different methods.

Since Showtime’s female-centered dramedies have largely been absent in television studies, this thesis will draw on a wide range of sources, including trade articles, interviews with writers, and reviews. Existing writing on this topic mostly ignores narrative analysis or industrial contexts, often in favor of cultural and social theory. “Showtime’s ‘Female Problem’: Cancer, Quality, and Motherhood” by Lara Bradshaw is one of the few pieces of scholarly work explicitly devoted to this collection of dramedies and is therefore of utmost importance to my study. Unfortunately, Bradshaw’s analysis is primarily from a postfeminist lens that short sells the shows themselves, resulting in broad generalizations about what *The Big C* and *Weeds* tell us about society. While this lens is valuable, her social and philosophical analysis of the dramedies is ultimately incomplete and simplistic without formal analysis of them. Thus, I intend to analyze how the dramedies function *as shows* to better understand their place within Showtime and the greater television landscape. To do this, I will examine the Showtime dramedies through the lens of genre, exploring how they draw from traditions of situation comedies and melodramas in order to celebrate rebellious female protagonists and non-normative families.

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<sup>27</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 7.

## A Coin to Be Spent

What is genre? Initially, the answer to this question may seem obvious. Genre is often defined simply by, “You know it when you see it”—a comedy is a comedy and a drama is a drama. However, genre is not a static, innate characteristic of texts that we can take for granted. Rather, it is constituted in part by texts but also by audiences, networks, critics, and awards. Much has been written on genre theory, albeit not much in television, but to fully explore how Showtime and its dramedies utilize genre, we must develop our own working definition. Jeanine Basinger and Jason Mittell’s writings on genre have been invaluable in this process. In *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, Basinger studies hundreds of combat films to understand what genre is and how it can develop over time. She argues that we must study texts to locate how genre is based in audience expectations, noting that “as audience familiarity increases, the basic definition of genre grows increasingly referential and abstracted, because people know it and can fill in the blanks.”<sup>28</sup> Genre is difficult to pinpoint because it is defined by viewers’ responses to a piece of art; it is comprised of textual characteristics that we all implicitly recognize. Simultaneously, genres morph over time and utilize the same conventions to tell completely new stories. For Basinger, genre is a *way* of telling stories but not the story itself.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, Mittell stresses the industrial and historical conditions of television that shape and produce genres as cultural categories in *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*. He argues against the assertion that genre can be defined by innate textual characteristics, and instead focuses on “the industry’s productive role in constituting genres through the circulation of generic

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<sup>28</sup> Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003): 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

discourses.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, Mittell believes that genre cannot be understood simply by looking at individual texts but must be studied through the ways marketing, programming schedules, and entire network identities (such as Cartoon Network or Comedy Central) can create public conceptions of them.<sup>31</sup>

Both authors believe that genre exists in a dialogue between texts and industry, with Basinger noting that “we need to approach genre through both theory and history”<sup>32</sup> and Mittell admitting that “formal analysis of media texts can—and should—be one of the most productive tools available.”<sup>33</sup> However, in their work, they spend most of their time focusing on one or the other, textual or industrial analysis, to push back against genre theory that doesn’t consider texts or industry at all. Therefore, I will use both Basinger and Mittell’s theories as theoretical groundworks for my own study, exploring how genre operates on a textual and industrial level in the Showtime dramedies. The dramedies use textual generic conventions, like unruly and anarchic protagonists, to tell particular stories, while at the same time, the network uses these conventions, often through commonly understood cultural and generic images, to produce a brand identity that is financially beneficial to it.<sup>34</sup> The marketing for *Weeds* and *The Big C*, for example, promotes the shows through an invocation of 1950s suburban sitcoms while also disrupting that genre by having the mothers in promos mock and

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<sup>30</sup> Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 56.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, xi-xii.

<sup>32</sup> Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 122.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

ultimately escape the suburban setting.<sup>35</sup> Thus, genre is an important way of marketing the shows as distinctly part of Showtime.

We must also sketch out definitions of the sitcom and melodrama in order to understand how the Showtime dramedies draw from both. For our purposes, I define the sitcom as a half hour series that primarily aims to make viewers laugh. The sitcom generally “utilize[s] a few permanent sets, uniform lighting, [and] moving multiple cameras rather than many single-camera setups.”<sup>36</sup> While the sitcom is often thought of as depicting an idealized suburban household, like all genres, sitcoms can take a variety of forms, from *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966) to *Community* (2009-2015). In their analyses of *I Love Lucy*, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (1950-1958), *The Jetsons* (1962-1963), and *Roseanne* (1988-1997), Patricia Mellencamp, Lynn Spigel, Kathleen Rose, and Lori Landay lay out central elements of the sitcom including performativity, anarchic comedy, and narrative stasis.<sup>37</sup> Specifically, they highlight how sitcom narratives are often organized around an escalation of chaos; a problem arises and then spirals out of control comedically. Often times, the sitcom characters who disrupt the narrative are “unruly women.” Lucy Ricardo in *I Love Lucy*, for example, creates absurd situations that get more absurd and messy as each episode progresses, prompting laughter from the audience. Sitcoms’ unruly characters ignore “authority figures...unmake decorum, and

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<sup>35</sup> Bradshaw, “Showtime’s ‘Female Problem,’” 166.

<sup>36</sup> Lori Landay, *I Love Lucy (Television Milestone Series)* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010): 29.

<sup>37</sup> Patricia Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy,” in *Critiquing the Sitcom*, ed. Joanne Morreale (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 2003); Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001); Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992); Kathleen Rowe, “Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess,” in *Critiquing the Sitcom*, ed. Joanne Morreale (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 2003).

unravel patriarchal laws.”<sup>38</sup> Their comedy comes from their ability to defy expectations. The characters are larger-than-life and always seemingly out of place.

Despite the escalation of chaos in sitcoms, episodes often end where they began. The genre follows a repetitive pattern: “Situation, disruption, and resolution/reinstatement of the status quo.”<sup>39</sup> Unruly protagonists are disruptive, yet their worlds always remain constant. Mellencamp describes this structure eloquently, explaining that Lucy Ricardo is “rebelliously incarcerated within situation comedy’s domestic regime and mise-en-scene, acutely frustrated, trying to escape via the ‘comic of movement,’ while cheerfully cracking jokes along the way to her own unmasking or capture.”<sup>40</sup> This conventional sitcom structure highlights containment and domesticity as key themes of the genre. Since sitcoms were initially designed as family viewing in the 1950s, they often reflected frustrations and tensions within the private sphere of the home, questioning ideals of post-war suburban families. Female domesticity specifically was often critiqued in this narrative structure, for “by replaying Lucy’s desire to escape domesticity over and over again, the desire gets the emphasis.”<sup>41</sup> Even fantasy and science fiction sitcoms, such as *Bewitched* and *The Jetsons*, make “the norms of domesticity...unfamiliar” and unappealing.<sup>42</sup> Through the sitcom’s repeated structure of disruption and reinstatement of the norm, it is able to make viewers laugh while also commenting on societal tensions. As Joanne Morreale explains, sitcoms “smuggle in challenging ideas and images under the guise of humor.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy,” 63.

<sup>39</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy,” 72.

<sup>41</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, 122.

<sup>43</sup> Joanne Morreale, edit. *Critiquing the Sitcom* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 2003): xii.

The melodrama, on the other hand, is far more amorphous. Colloquially, calling something a melodrama is often thought of as an insult, highlighting an unwanted excess of emotion, plot, or performance. Many also commonly associate melodramas with the woman's pictures of the 1930s to 1950s and television soap operas. However, the melodrama cannot be so narrowly defined. Historically, as Steve Neale outlines, the generic category "run[s] the gamut from horror films to thrillers to westerns, from woman's films to war films to action-adventure in general."<sup>44</sup> Melodramatic conventions, which have their roots in theater, can be found in a range of films and shows, and according to Linda Williams, categorize much of popular cinema and television.<sup>45</sup> Even prestigious shows like *The Wire*, which are often compared to Greek tragedies, are "not exempt from the structure of serial television melodrama manifest in the rest of popular television since the eighties, no matter how hard HBO might have tried to convince us that 'it's not TV.'"<sup>46</sup> Thus, melodrama constitutes a vital but unrecognized part of many television narratives. In order to study how the genre of melodrama has infected Showtime's dramedies and so many other contemporary stories, I will define melodrama using Ben Singer's "cluster concept," which suggests we "view melodrama as a term whose meaning varies from case to case in relation to different configurations of a range of basic features or constitutive factors."<sup>47</sup> With this concept, "rather than looking for a single essence or foundation," we can see how melodramatic conventions are applied in different ways.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000): 202.

<sup>45</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 10-44.

<sup>46</sup> Linda Williams, *On the Wire* (Durham: Durham University Press, 2014): 45.

<sup>47</sup> Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001): 44.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

Melodramatic conventions include spectacle, heightened emotions, nonclassical narrative structures, pathos, and moral polarity. Spectacle in the form of action or emotion has historically been an essential characteristic of the genre. At the end of the classic D.W. Griffith melodrama *Way Down East* (1920), for example, the main character runs on floating ice, attempting to escape a large waterfall. Spectacle involves action set-pieces and a climactic confrontation, but it can also simply be found in characters dancing or playing sports. Similarly, melodramas include heightened emotions and performances, focusing on “personal life” as “the core problematic of the narrative.”<sup>49</sup> Private emotional conflicts are key to many melodramas. The genre’s narratives are also not causally motivated, regularly lacking traditional goal-oriented plots. Rather than character actions driving the plot, melodramas are “marked by chance happenings, coincidences, missed meetings, and sudden conversions, last-minute rescues and revelations, deus ex machina endings.”<sup>50</sup> These narrative coincidences move characters from one impossible situation to the next, creating “striking impasses or confrontations” that characters cannot escape from on their own.<sup>51</sup> In Douglas Sirk’s melodrama *Written on the Wind* (1956), the main character is in love with his best friend’s wife, and therefore can never be with her; as in the Showtime dramedies, such unsolvable situations result in an avoidance of narrative closure. With every suggestion of progress in melodrama, new “barriers and bars to the fulfillment of desire are...introduced,” making melodramatic protagonists’ goals always just slightly out of reach.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World* (London: Routledge, 1996): 88.

<sup>50</sup> Steve Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” *Screens* 27, no. 6 (1986): 6.

<sup>51</sup> Lea Jacobs, “The Woman’s Picture and the Poetics of Melodrama,” *Camera Obscura* 31 (1993): 129.

<sup>52</sup> Ang, *Living Room Wars*, 12.

Another convention of the melodrama is pathos for powerless protagonists. Narrative coincidences, reversals, and returns “mark a power over the lives of the protagonists” that encourage us to feel sympathy for them and subsequently cry for them.<sup>53</sup> Finally, melodramas rely on a sense of moral polarity, demarcating innocent and blameless victims from evil villains. In generic narratives, “melodramatic heroes suffer injustice,” urging us to rail against the person, groups, or social forces that cause those injustices.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, melodramas can establish pathos and tell stories of social inequality by constructing strict moral divisions. These five conventions provide a solid framework for studying how melodrama is at play in Showtime’s dramedies. I’d like to emphasize, however, that a show or film need not have all five conventions or use them in any particular way in order to be considered a melodrama; they can vary across stories, time periods, and mediums.

The Showtime dramedies purposefully don’t fit neatly into one genre. Therefore, I will refer to the shows’ formal strategies as one of generic hybridity. Even generic hybridity, however, is not clear-cut. It does not mean that the dramedies have certain set traits that resemble sitcoms and other set traits that resemble melodramas. Generic conventions are not simply used in one way at all times; melodramatic emotional excess, for instance, might be used to suggest that a character is ineffectual in one instance and powerful and autonomous in another. Additionally, narrative “situations” can be used to highlight a melodramatic opposition between good and evil, but they can also create absurd moments that invite laughter and joy. To hammer this point home, Nina Leibman argues that 1950s and ‘60s family sitcoms “bear the unmistakable generic

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<sup>53</sup> Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” 7.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, *On the Wire*, 4.

markers of domestic family melodrama” if “shorn of their laugh tracks,” illustrating that the two genres are not as different as we may think.<sup>55</sup> We cannot draw a solid line between the genres because their conventions can manifest remarkably similarly.

For these reasons, I am apprehensive about the term “dramedy.” The term implies that it is one static genre and that every show labeled a dramedy is in some way similar to any other dramedy, which is not the case. By functioning as a catch-all for every show that merges drama and comedy, the term can suggest that generic hybridity is always done in a clear, formulaic way. In reality, genre mixing is a process of using the same conventions in different and even contradictory ways. If, as Basinger explains, genre is a coin to be spent, then generic hybridity is the process of repeatedly flipping the coin between heads and tails. Therefore, while I will use the term dramedy to describe Showtime’s female-driven half-hours for clarity and to reflect the way critics and trade articles refer to them, I will continue to be attentive to the complexities of generic hybridity. In my analysis, I aim to not reduce genre to its moving parts, instead recognizing the various ways its conventions are pulled, deployed, and blurred in the dramedies in different moments.

### **“Walking the Line between Saint and Sinner”<sup>56</sup>**

A large part of HBO’s brand identity has revolved around a tradition of morally ambiguous, serious, and often male-centered shows which I refer to as “male antihero

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<sup>55</sup> Nina Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995): 5.

<sup>56</sup> Kristyn Gorton, “‘Walking the Line between Saint and Sinner’: Care and Nurse Jackie,” *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 11, no. 2 (2016).

shows.”<sup>57</sup> I hope to briefly sketch out the definition of the male antihero show, which includes *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *The Shield* (2002-2008), and *True Detective* (2014- ), as a useful counterpoint to Showtime’s dramedies and their generic hybridity. In this definition, I want to stress that each show is very different in the stories they tell and the strategies they employ. It is an imperfect but helpful categorization.

According to Brett Martin, the male antihero shows feature men, often middle-aged, battling their inner demons, and we as viewers are forced to grapple with their moral code. We are not cued to love or hate them or even fully understand their inner psyche, but are instead asked to engage with their ambiguity. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White watches his partner’s innocent girlfriend die in front of him. Walt is not remorseful, and this secret sticks in viewers’ minds, waiting for it to be revealed to his partner for three more seasons.<sup>58</sup> Walt remains our main character, though, and “we like [him], but are never allowed to get past [his] failing, and just as we begin to connect with [him, his] behavior turns monstrous or inscrutable.”<sup>59</sup> The male antihero shows don’t explicitly ask us to root for or against the men they center and instead compel us to feel their internal conflict without much direct access to the characters’ subjectivity. The shows also largely depict a fatalist world where everything points toward death; these characters’ lives are doomed to begin with, and death waits around every corner.<sup>60</sup> Even in *The Sopranos*’ final scene, Tony surveys a diner for a possible hitman, highlighting his anxiety and paranoia. Death is simply “the natural outcome in the world [the] characters

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<sup>57</sup> Martin, *Difficult Men*, 87-107. As the title suggests, Martin refers to the characters in these shows as “difficult men.”

<sup>58</sup> *Breaking Bad*, 2.12 “Phoenix,” AMC, May 24, 2009, directed by Colin Bucksey.

<sup>59</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 215.

<sup>60</sup> Martin, *Difficult Men*, 92.

live in.”<sup>61</sup> In short, the shows feature “dark themes, a dearth of sympathetic characters, and stories that replaced resolution with doubt and despair.”<sup>62</sup> Again, this grouping of male antihero shows can be overstated, for not every HBO series works within the same storytelling structures or uses its “difficult men” in the same way. However, when looking at HBO’s programming and the many shows that followed, as well as a host of scholarly and critical attention, a clear pattern emerges which encompasses a prominent part of the network’s brand identity and cultural status.

While HBO’s male protagonists are fatalistic, living within a “bleak worldview,” Showtime’s female protagonists are unabashed and triumphant.<sup>63</sup> Moving between comedy and melodrama in the blink of an eye, the dramedies depict resilient characters living in an oppressive social world; they are functionally different from the male antihero shows, just as Showtime’s identity is distinct from HBO’s. Due to this distinction, I will not call the female protagonists “antiheroines” for it falsely constructs a one-to-one connection. As *Weeds*’ star Mary-Louise Parker notes, “It’s one thing to create a character that is complex, it’s another thing to have an antiheroine.”<sup>64</sup> Showtime’s difficult mothers are not antiheroines, for we are cued to align with them and celebrate their transgressive actions as opposed to morally grapple with them. While the “difficult men” resist change within and battle their inner demons, Showtime’s difficult women struggle with the external world, creating an opposition between oppressive social forces and the antinormative characters that are affected by them.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Martin, *Difficult Men*, 92.

<sup>62</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 128.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

<sup>64</sup> Lisa Carroll, “Leading Ladies’ Star Turn Propels Showtime,” *Daily Variety*, November 18, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Martin, *Difficult Men*, 84.

The dramedies don't ignore Nancy or Tara's faults, and in this thesis, I do not suggest "that [their] flaws" aren't "there on purpose," as Emily Nussbaum argues some fans of female-driven shows like *The Mindy Project* (2012-) do.<sup>66</sup> They are not portrayed as perfect role models by any means. However, while we recognize the consequences of the protagonists' actions on their families, those consequences are a product of the impossible situations they are forced into. *The Big C*, *Weeds*, *Nurse Jackie*, and *United States of Tara* do not punish their protagonists for "being 'bad' mother[s]" but rather allow them to narratively succeed.<sup>67</sup> In depicting individual choice and external social forces through the merging of sitcom and melodrama conventions, the dramedy mothers' lives are recognized as valid and important rather than simply destructive; we generate pathos for the Showtime women while the "normal" world surrounding them is mocked and devalued.

The dramedies' roots in sitcoms and melodramas contribute to these themes. For starters, the shows are all half-hours, a common marker of the sitcom. Additionally, the Showtime protagonists fit into the sitcom character construction of the "unruly mother," often historically defined by Lucy Ricardo or Gracie Allen from *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. The mothers are played by A-list actresses, including Edie Falco and Laura Linney, making them instantly recognizable in the same way that Lucille Ball and Gracie Allen are. But, more importantly, they are agents of chaos and function as sources of anarchic comedy. They fight back against their worlds in disruptive ways. For example, in *Nurse Jackie*, Jackie is outspoken and refuses to follow hospital rules, often yelling at doctors and superiors. Like sitcom history's unruly women, the Showtime

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<sup>66</sup> Emily Nussbaum, "The Female Bad Fan," *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Bradshaw, "Showtime's 'Female Problem,'" 175.

protagonists “seem to be out of (or beyond) men’s control” and much of each shows’ comedy subsequently “depend[s] on the other characters’ astonishment.”<sup>68</sup> The comedy within *United States of Tara*, too, is often centered on Tara’s Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) and strangers’ inability to understand how to approach and interact with her various personalities, which are called alters. We laugh at both the chaos the alters create and the way that other characters are left dumb-founded and speechless by them.

The dramedies also play with long-term consequence as the anarchic comedy of the shows escalate, touching on themes of domesticity and containment. The mothers are, in many ways, stuck: Nancy Botwin moves in and out of a shallow suburban neighborhood, Jackie Peyton juggles her married life at home with a job where she steals prescription medicine and has a long-term affair with a coworker, and Tara Gregson grapples with alters who complicate and could potentially destroy her family life. However, unlike many sitcoms where the rising episodic chaos is resolved before the start of the next episode, leaving the characters stuck within the single-camera studio setting, the dramedies do not reset.<sup>69</sup> Rather, they embrace melodramatic serialization, constantly creating new conflict through coincidences, returns, and reversals. When drugs dealers close in on Nancy at the end of *Weeds*’ sixth season, for instance, the situation does not magically resolve itself; instead, the plot turns with a reversal as DEA agents show up at the last minute, arresting both Nancy and the other dealers.<sup>70</sup>

Reflecting the melodramatic tradition, the dramedies lack narrative closure, featuring episodes where “nothing concludes and nothing...comes to fruition,” to continue their

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<sup>68</sup> Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy,” 63.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>70</sup> *Weeds*, 6.12 “Theoretical Love is Not Dead,” Showtime, November 15, 2010, directed by Scott Ellis.

on-going stories forever from episode to episode and season to season.<sup>71</sup> Our unruly women's stories are allowed to narratively continue, for their anarchic comedy is unable to be contained.

If the shows' sitcom conventions often emphasize the chaotic and shocking actions of their protagonists, the narratives' coincidences and near-misses often accentuate how fate and social inequity can control their lives and guide them in unpredictable ways. In other words, the female protagonists react to and remain unpunished in a world beyond their control that constantly tries to restrict or complicate their lives. While their worlds "revolve around an unsolvable contradiction," these women are not merely ineffectual, as many melodramatic protagonists are, or contained, like many sitcom protagonists.<sup>72</sup> The dramedies use generic hybridity to stress the notion of a socially oppressive world while also focusing on the power of individual characters and families to take action within that world and *disrupt* it.

### **Methodology & Chapter Outline**

In this thesis, I will draw on a number of literary sources, including narrative theory, genre theory, sitcom and melodrama history, HBO history, quality television theory, and trade articles, reviews, and interviews related to Showtime and the particular shows of interest to my study. However, my primary texts will be the Showtime dramedies. With that said, it is important to note the distinction between the network and the shows themselves. Showtime's dramedies have clear similarities and fit into patterns of transgressive protagonists as well as sitcom and melodramatic hybridity, but

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<sup>71</sup> Williams, *On the Wire*, 64.

<sup>72</sup> Leibman, *Living Room Lectures*, 20.

they all face their own storytelling challenges. The network is ultimately not the one creating and guiding them from episode to episode—that is the job of the showrunner, the writers, the directors, the editors. The network, on the other hand, cultivates particular shows due to their commonalities in an effort to create a particular network identity. Therefore, I believe it necessary to turn to the shows as texts demanding formal analysis in order to understand how they are constructed and fit into an overall network brand. In *Storytelling in Film and Television*, Kristin Thompson argues for this very approach to narrative analysis. She argues that we must look at film and television at an aesthetic level in addition to on an industrial, historical, or social level. Of course, industrial, historical, and social questions are of utmost importance, and I will address those aspects of television studies as well, but such questions can only be properly engaged after or through a formal analysis of the shows' constructions.<sup>73</sup>

Following this logic, I will analyze the Showtime dramedy through three case studies: *Weeds*, *United States of Tara*, and *Shameless* (2011- ) as a variation on the format. I hope to use case studies to recognize each dramedy as its own distinct text as opposed to reductively analyzing them as only part of a broader pattern. Additionally, the case studies allow for analysis not only on an episode-level but also on a series-level to examine how shows repeat and vary their structures, addressing questions of narrative scale, restriction and progress, motifs, causality, and structuring of breaks. Throughout the chapters, my argument is organized primarily around the shows' narrative constructions with an eye towards how the shows' generic hybridity is utilized to tell vastly different stories with similarly chaotic protagonists. With that said, I am very

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<sup>73</sup> Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

invested in how the series use particular televisual styles to tell their stories. Style is used to support the shows' narratives and messages and thus should not be examined separately. Therefore, rather than separate narrative and style into two sections, I will analyze the dramedies' stylistic tendencies through discussions of their narrative constructions to illuminate how these elements are co-dependent.

My first chapter examines Showtime's history and branding strategies by tracking its programming and promotional materials. I explain why branding has become such an important strategy for not only Showtime but for all television networks, illuminating how and why Showtime distinguishes its programming from HBO. Additionally, I illustrate how the dramedies contribute to the network's personality, specifically focusing on the marketing strategies of *Weeds* and *The Big C*. To fit into Showtime's distinct brand identity, the dramedy protagonists are promoted as edgy, alternative, and intoxicatingly bad.

Following this industrial and historical analysis, I turn to *Weeds* as the first of my three case studies, exploring how the show merges anarchic comedy and serial melodrama in its construction of narrative consequence. While Nancy Botwin faces consequences for her actions as a suburban drug dealer, the narrative is based on the presumption that she will always find a way out of her situation, no matter how inconceivable it may be. Despite the heavily serialized narrative and changing setting and cast, Nancy resists punishment, never fundamentally changing as a character. By looking at the shows' fast-paced narrative, secondary characters, Nancy's mothering and romantic relationships, and the construction of space, I demonstrate how the series allows Nancy to refuse change and repentance.

My third chapter focuses on *United States of Tara*, demonstrating how it follows in *Weeds*' footsteps but uses its generic hybridity to tell a very different story about mental illness. Rather than depicting an expansive and violent world of drug dealing, *Tara* looks inwards as a meditation on the Gregson family, where external social pressures and traumas are manifested internally, within Tara herself. Through a study of the use of interior and exterior conflicts, the mystery of Tara's trauma, the function of her alters, and the ways both her family and the outside world understand her DID, I illustrate how the series uses strategies of generic hybridity to align us with Tara's unruliness, as she battles her varying personalities to win control of her body and mind.

In my final case study, I examine the U.S. *Shameless* as a marked variation of the dramedy. While the other dramedies are half-hours, focused on upper middle class mothers, *Shameless* is an hour-long ensemble series centered on a poor family, the Gallaghers, from the Southside of Chicago. I first explain how a variation on the dramedy format was a necessary programming change for the network as more cable channels and streaming platforms began to develop their own series. Then, I argue that, despite its differences from other dramedies, *Shameless* also urges us to root for characters on the outskirts of normative society while denouncing external forces that place them in a cycle of poverty. I explore the Gallaghers' absent parents, and how the eldest daughter Fiona Gallagher acts as a surrogate mother, as well as the series' reliance on crime, coincidences, repeated storylines, and a heightened style, complete with slow-motion and canted angles, to emphasize the impossible situations the Gallagher family is caught in. *Shameless*' characters are stuck in a system they cannot escape but they are also not *beaten* by that system.

Lastly, I conclude by situating the dramedies within the broader television canon, arguing that notions of quality can function as generic classifications, changing over time to reflect particular aesthetics. The dramedies fit into a premium “quality” aesthetic and yet are still largely left out of conversations about “Peak TV” and the current “Golden Age of Television.” Genre and quality markers are deeply connected, affecting the stories told in the Showtime dramedies and how we remember them. In many ways, quality is also a branding strategy itself. Therefore, in the following chapter, I will begin by examining how Showtime develops its quality image through programming, promotional materials, and industry discourse. By looking at the dramedies’ marketing, we can recognize how they are not outliers in the network’s history but rather draw from and expand on its preexisting identity. Both the shows and the network claim to be daring, gutsy, and fearless. Before watching its programming, Showtime’s current slogan warns us: “Brace Yourself.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Karen Backstein, “Soft Love: The Romantic Vision of Sex on the Showtime Networks,” *Television & New Media* 2, no. 4 (November 2001): 309.

## Chapter One

### **Branding Showtime**

“I’d rather have the audience define the brand for me than have me define the brand for them.”<sup>1</sup>

Television is no stranger to branding. Just as companies write narratives and use images and advertisements to convince people to invest in their products, networks and shows craft distinct personalities to draw viewers, as well as advertisers, in. Showtime operates in a similar manner, using branding strategies, including slogans and trailers, to differentiate itself from both broadcast networks and other premium channels, notably HBO. The female-led dramedies play a vital role in defining this network identity, and by analyzing how they are promoted together through generic hybridity, I hope to demonstrate why these particular shows ended up on Showtime at roughly the same time. It is not a coincidence, but rather part of a deliberate marketing plan. However, before we examine Showtime’s marketing in-depth, it is important for us to examine branding more broadly and how it affects the way we see and understand products. Branding is not a new phenomenon, either in television or in capitalism at large.

What is branding? The term has many definitions, but for our purposes, branding involves making a product or company attractive for consumers. It is a method of selling a product, in part through logos, slogans, and advertisements. One of the primary ways branding accomplishes this is through “product differentiation,” which demonstrates to consumers why a product is worth buying over a different one.<sup>2</sup> When television was a three-network system—comprised only of ABC, CBS, and NBC—

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<sup>1</sup> Former Showtime President Bob Greenblatt in Himberg, “Multicasting: Lesbian Programming,” 295.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television* (New York: Routledge, 2012): 2.

viewers had little choice in what they watched and there was therefore little need for elaborate marketing strategies. However, in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan “aimed to deregulate the telecommunications industry” and more and more channels started popping up.<sup>3</sup> This deregulation, and subsequently the rise of cable networks and satellite television, produced noticeable competition in the television industry, and the concept of product differentiation became important for networks to distinguish their offerings and attract advertisers. Why would someone watch FOX over CBS, or vice versa? Through the creation of a distinct personality, networks tried to make it clear to viewers and advertisers what made their channel worthwhile. For premium channels, where viewers pay a subscription fee, finely crafted network identities have become even more crucial for convincing viewers not only to watch a channel but also to pay extra for it. This economic problem indicates that “the characteristics of cable television as an industry made it particularly suited to the use of branding as a strategy.”<sup>4</sup> As this brief history illustrates, branding is often used in “times of crisis”—in this case the diversification of options for viewers—as a profit-driving strategy.<sup>5</sup> Television’s deregulation changed the industry landscape and increased competition, so networks adapted.<sup>6</sup> Brands are not static; they change over time due to the industrial “crises” they are responding to.

It is also important to note that branding is more than just a logo; it is also the way consumers relate to and understand products, providing “a frame through which industry discourse about its own working practices and values [is] articulated.”<sup>7</sup> In other

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *Branding Television*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 139.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

words, it is a marketing strategy that does not just sell a product but also conditions people how to read it. Apple products, for example, are often marketed as easy-to-use, practical, and the technology of the future. Obviously, this image sells MacBooks and iPhones, but it also shapes the way people think about them. MacBooks are recognized by consumers as a quality, high-end laptop, as a tool that evokes professional status and wealth. The marketing affects the company's profit *and* the way the company, their products, and the customers of those products are understood. Showtime's branding also shapes how we think of the dramedies in relation to one another, as fitting into a pattern of shows despite their textual differences, and impacts the way we understand genre. As I've explained, genre is in part defined by storytelling conventions, but it is also dependent on industrial conditions that cue us to read certain shows or films as being a part of a cultural category. Through branding, the dramedies' mix of sitcom and melodramatic conventions must be recognized as both a part of Showtime's marketing plan to articulate a clear identity and a way to tell stories.

### **Hailin' from the Edge**

To understand Showtime's overall network identity, we must look back at its history to see how it has differentiated itself from both broadcast networks and HBO since its inception. Showtime premiered on July 1st, 1976, with the concert film *Celebration* featuring Rod Stewart, Pink Floyd, and ABBA.<sup>8</sup> For the following two decades, its programming consisted primarily of music, sports, and movies, resembling HBO's beginnings, but Showtime worked to develop a separate identity. Showtime in

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<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Littleton, "Man with a Plan," *Variety* 325, no. 11 (October 2014).

part set itself apart from broadcast networks through its ability to air explicit material, outside of FCC government censors. The network embraced this freedom as part of its branding strategy, promoting itself as edgy and provocative through sex, blood, and profanity. In 2007, one of Showtime's slogans was even "The Best Shit on TV"—a slogan too explicit to be uttered on other networks.<sup>9</sup> Showtime, though, is not the only premium network to do this; HBO, Starz, Cinemax, and others also air explicit content. Therefore, Showtime also needed to differentiate itself from *other* premium networks—particularly HBO, following the critical successes of *The Larry Sanders Show*, *Oz*, and *The Sopranos* in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup>

Following this logic of differentiation, Showtime brands itself as shocking and taboo, all while retaining the prestige associated with premium content. While HBO paints itself as high-art, tying it to histories of art cinema and auteur storytelling with difficult and serious characters, Showtime embraces its televisual status by claiming that it is "TV. At Its Best," rather than "Not TV," as HBO does.<sup>11</sup> Showtime is playful, splashy, and unapologetically televisual. In 1980, one of Showtime's first slogans was, "You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet," immediately establishing the idea that the channel is designed to astonish viewers.<sup>12</sup> Through its ability to air sexual and profane content, Showtime "humorously" depicts "'shocking' personal developments, particularly sexual

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Newman, "Showtime's New Slogan Speaks the Way It Could Only on Cable," *New York Times*, September 3, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> In one interview, former Showtime President Bob Greenblatt explicitly said Showtime's programming was a response to HBO's *Oz* and *The Sopranos*: "[We said] let's be premium, let's be quality, and let's try to figure out our own little niche, which we ultimately did" (Himberg, "Multicasting: Lesbian Programming," 295).

<sup>11</sup> Himberg, "Multicasting: Lesbian Programming," 293.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

transgressions among ‘normal,’ white, middle-class people.”<sup>13</sup> It challenges viewers by subverting the status quo with a sense of joy and humor. In 1997, Showtime adopted the slogan, “No Limits,” suggesting that the topics of its programs will push you out of your comfort zone. No subject is off limits.<sup>14</sup> In 2011, the slogans “Brace Yourself” and “Hold On Tight” expressed similar sentiments. The slogans claim Showtime will open up viewers’ minds by “pushing the boundaries of everyday television” and presenting viewers with new types of people, stories, and lifestyles they wouldn’t see elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

While this may seem similar to HBO’s branding, its subtle differences are important: HBO markets itself as high-quality art on television, but Showtime claims it will take your breath away. You will not just be riveted or impressed, Showtime claims; you will also be knocked off your feet, so you better “hold on tight.” There is a sense of spectacle to Showtime’s image. Scholar Mike D’Angelo comments on this difference, arguing Showtime provides “a fun-house-mirror reflection of HBO’s programming, transforming penetrating drama into absurdist satire.”<sup>16</sup> HBO lives in the nuances, asking us to sit with its shows, contemplate their artistry, and often morally grapple with its protagonists; Showtime is flashy and in your face. It retains quality status through its complex narratives, high production values, and A-list stars, but it airs contentious subjects with a wink, bordering on ironic and tongue-in-cheek at times.<sup>17</sup>

I do not want to suggest that HBO and Showtime have a one-to-one competition by any means. Showtime and HBO are often bundled together in cable

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<sup>13</sup> Wendy Peters, “Pink Dollars, White Collars: Queer as Folk, Valuable Viewers, and the Price of Gay TV,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 3 (2011): 198-199.

<sup>14</sup> Himberg, “Multicasting: Lesbian Programming,” 291-294.

<sup>15</sup> Backstein, “Soft Love: The Romantic Vision of Sex on the Showtime Networks,” 309.

<sup>16</sup> Mike D’Angelo, “It’s Not TV. It’s Not HBO,” *Esquire*, August 24, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Himberg, “Multicasting: Lesbian Programming,” 293.

packages, so they utilize similar storytelling and branding strategies. The channels both claim “programming that is original, groundbreaking, and compelling, with high production values and superb writing and acting.”<sup>18</sup> In many ways, they are in the same boat, profiting off the recent cultural esteem attributed to premium cable series.

Showtime is not necessarily trying to take viewers *away* from HBO, and a new subscriber for Showtime does not equal a subscriber lost for HBO. What I am arguing here is not for a reductive binary between the two but rather a recognition of how, despite their similarities, Showtime *must* differentiate itself from HBO in the marketplace to thrive. Showtime does not achieve financial success by displacing HBO but instead by figuring out how to exist alongside it.

Showtime’s brand and slogans also materialize themselves in promotional materials, including posters and advertisements. For premium networks, one of the most important forms of advertising is the “channel trailer.”<sup>19</sup> It is, as it sounds, a trailer for the entire network, displaying its various shows, actors, and themes in a two minute video. In 1998, one of the network promos was designed around its “No Limits” slogan. Unlike most channel trailers, this promo does not feature clips or actors from any of its series, instead relying on abstract images and stock footage to relay its persona. In the promo, we see fast cuts of extraordinary, at times unbelievable, sights, such as a person flying over a bridge and ballerinas materializing out of water. We do not linger on any one image for too long, giving viewers only a taste of the extraordinary, and over these images we hear a voice singing ephemerally, “Take me there, take me there.”<sup>20</sup> With

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<sup>18</sup> Himberg, “Multicasting: Lesbian Programming,” 292.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Branding Television*, 130.

<sup>20</sup> “1998 – Commercial – Showtime – No Limits...,” YouTube video (1:07), posted on August 10, 2010, posted by “Video Archaeology.”

these astonishing and impossible images, Showtime urges us to think that we can do and see anything on the network, as its programming opens up completely new worlds that will shift our perspective. It's a lofty goal, for sure, but Showtime creates this spectacle to attract viewers. A similar promo released in 1998 uses the same stock footage with a narrator proclaiming, "A place where anything is possible." These promos suggest that Showtime is not just any other network, or even any other premium network.

Other network trailers develop this cumulative image by using footage from Showtime's original series. One promo from 2008 cuts between many star actors individually posing in front of a beautifully lit white background. By quickly editing from Mary-Louise Parker of *Weeds* to Michael C. Hall of *Dexter* as they pose in the same location, the promo cues us to think of the shows and characters as all being part of the same televisual universe. This universe is reinforced as we see the words, "The network of the year," followed by various series titles, flash across the screen. The promo continues by showing what this universe consists of: unapologetic, provocative characters. A song also plays behind the footage, singing, "Hailin' from the edge." The song suggests that Showtime's characters and stories come "from the edge" of society; Showtime claims to center the people on the fringes, the forgotten and misunderstood. The actors all smile directly into the camera, as if they are challenging the audience to listen to them. Additionally, all of the actors are dressed in suits and dresses, furthering the network's status as not only edgy but also chic and stylish.<sup>21</sup> Its characters may be bad, but they are not "trashy." Many other network promos function similarly, including

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<sup>21</sup> "SHOWTIME: Series Ad Promo (New version, Hi-ris," YouTube video (1:06), posted on September 13, 2008, posted by "echoplex."

one in 2011 that uses the tagline “Brace Yourself” as Showtime actors stare directly into the screen and fall over in slow-motion.<sup>22</sup>

The network’s brand identity is not only articulated in advertisements and promotional materials, but also in its programming. Beginning in the 1990s, Showtime began to air shows focused on minority and underrepresented groups in order to attract niche audiences. For example, the channel expanded its programming to include shows centered on gay and lesbian characters like *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*.<sup>23</sup> It also aired *Resurrection Boulevard* (2000-2002), focused on a Latino community, and *Soul Food* (2000-2004), featuring a predominantly black cast. Notably, Showtime did not cater to one particular imagined audience—rather, the network utilized a variety of topics and protagonists to establish itself more generally as a network with the guts to challenge assumptions about underrepresented subjects on television.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Showtime defined itself as a place for audiences that are not satisfied by or depicted on other broadcast or cable networks.<sup>25</sup> It is not that broadcast networks are unable to air these shows but rather that shows about minorities are assumed to not appeal to a wide enough audience. Showtime, though, due to its subscription model, can take the “risk.”

While this is not the focus of my thesis, it is important to recognize that the diversity of Showtime’s programming is inseparable from commodification. On the one hand, diverse series can be seen as progressive, representing and reflecting minority narratives. However, through this programming, marginalized groups’ experiences are

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<sup>22</sup> “2011 New Brace Yourself campaign for Showtime Networks,” YouTube video (1:29), posted on January 17, 2011, posted by “TVBoi69.”

<sup>23</sup> Himberg, “Multicasting: Lesbian Programming,” 261.

<sup>24</sup> Backstein, “Soft Love,” 305.

<sup>25</sup> Scott Wible, “Media Advocates, Latino Citizens, and Niche Cable: The Limits of No Limits TV,” *Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2004): 18.

also turned into commodities for a large corporation's profits. Marketing to a particular audience is not inherently problematic, but the co-opting of minority experiences and narratives to increase the profits of largely white executives and CEOs has often been described as exploitative. For this reason, it is important that we recognize how Showtime's diversified programming is not altruistic; it, like all other marketing and branding decisions, is profit-driven, and its targeted niche audiences are assumed to be "quality" subscribers with extra cash flow to spend on subscriptions and transmedia.<sup>26</sup> With *The L Word*, for example, Showtime targeted an imagined lesbian audience because "like gays in the early-1990s, lesbians in 2008 were hailed as untapped wealth."<sup>27</sup> In this thesis, I do not attempt to cast judgment on Showtime's marketing strategy, to celebrate it for its diverse representations or condone it for its potential exploitation of minority groups.<sup>28</sup> The commodification of social difference on Showtime warrants an entirely separate project.<sup>29</sup> Rather, I aim to examine how and why the network utilizes this branding strategy and what the tangible effects on programming, conceptions of genre and quality, and individual storytelling decisions are in the Showtime dramedies.

### **Dueling Banjos**

The accumulation of *Weeds*, *The Big C*, *Nurse Jackie*, and other dramedies between 2005 and 2012 was a deliberate programming tactic by Showtime to solidify its image

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<sup>26</sup> Wible, "Media Advocates, Latino Citizens, and Niche Audiences," 49.

<sup>27</sup> Himberg, "Multicasting: Lesbian Programming," 290.

<sup>28</sup> It is impossible to escape this conflict in the television industry, for it exists within a capitalist framework. When mulling over this issue, I find myself returning to the sentiments of *The L Word* creator Ilene Chaiken: "She considers the business needs of television inevitable; at the same time, she feels that meeting those needs does not necessarily hinder the authenticity of *The L Word's* lesbian representation" (Himberg, "Multicasting: Lesbian Programming," 296).

<sup>29</sup> See Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) and Simone Browne, *Dark Matters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

and compete as a top premium channel. However, Showtime's brand identity was not created with these dramedies; rather, they varied and added to it, particularly through the use of generic hybridity. The dramedies were admittedly somewhat of a departure for the network, for unlike many of Showtime's earlier original programming, they did not focus on racial, sexual, or economic minorities, instead featuring upper middle-class white women. Despite this change, they were still promoted and packaged by Showtime as socially transgressive and challenging. The promotion of *Weeds* and *The Big C*, in particular, invoked images of sitcoms and melodramas to complicate cultural assumptions of both genres. Between 2010 and 2012, when the shows' runs overlapped, they were often promoted together in trailers and scheduling decisions. The shows' advertisements emphasized the image of a suburban, unruly mother from traditional sitcoms while also suggesting that Nancy Botwin and Cathy Jamison could not be contained by the narratives *or* the audience. In promoting the shows by drawing on and mixing recognizable generic conventions, both individually and as a pair, the network implied that we must "brace ourselves" when we watch Showtime, prepared to watch protagonists and stories that don't fit into any boxes.

*Weeds*' promos, which were released before the start of each new season, highlight the show's genre mixing as part of the network's image. Many of the season promos, like the general network promos, do not include clips from the show but rather footage shot exclusively for the promo; by disassociating Nancy Botwin from the world of the series, the promos urge us to understand *Weeds* as also existing outside of the show's narrative world and within the larger Showtime universe. The show's seventh season promo is an excellent example of this, as Nancy sits against a green backdrop while she is questioned by a narrator for her various crimes. The centrality of Nancy is

emphasized, as the camera stays on her the entire time and the narrator says, “Mary-Louise Parker is back,” stressing the name of the actress over the name of the show. By focusing on Nancy and her transgressions, Showtime manipulates the generic image of the sitcom housewife.<sup>30</sup> Nancy drinks an iced tea while the narrator continues, saying, “Soccer mom, widow turned federal agent’s wife,” and then proceeding to list Nancy’s crimes. Nancy’s only response: “When you put it that way, I sound just awful,” with a smile and sarcastic inflection.<sup>31</sup> She is painted as a mischievous sitcom suburban mom, living a scandalous double life as a drug dealer. However, at the same time, the narrator’s long list of Nancy’s misdeeds, and the fact that she no longer resembles the “soccer mom” she used to, urges us to recognize the melodramatic twists and turns that have pulled *Weeds* in countless unforeseen directions. The promo’s playful and ironic tone cues us to be enticed by Nancy’s actions. The season six trailer works the same, as we watch Nancy on the lam while a song plays, “All of the things that you’ve done, terrible things you would never believe.”<sup>32</sup> *Weeds*’ marketing suggests that we should be astonished by Nancy, just as we should be astonished by Showtime for its bold programming. Even the narrator voices his disbelief, saying, “Geez, woman.”<sup>33</sup>

*The Big C* is presented in a similar manner. The show’s 2010 “Hourglass” promo, for example, also uses footage shot exclusively for the ad, with Cathy lying on a beach. The camera eventually pulls out and shows that Cathy is inside an hourglass and her time is running out, referencing her terminal illness. Again, by using new footage rather than clips from the show, Showtime detaches us from the story world and suggests that *The*

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<sup>30</sup> Bradshaw, “Showtime’s ‘Female Problem,’” 166.

<sup>31</sup> “Weeds season 7 promo,” YouTube video (0:40), posted on May 9, 2011, posted by “40yannis.”

<sup>32</sup> “Weeds Season 6 Promo,” YouTube video (0:55), posted on June 2, 2010, posted by “Ozer Ozcelik.”

<sup>33</sup> “Weeds Season 7 promo,” YouTube video.

*Big C* exists within a larger network context. Additionally, it also highlights the star, Laura Linney, to conjure up images of the rebellious sitcom mother. Initially, her moment on the beach seems to be a normal portrait of suburban life, until, as we pull out and see the hourglass, we recognize that she is stuck in a stifling lifestyle, a common trope within both sitcoms and melodramas. However, she then shoves a beach ball in the hourglass hole and the narrator says, “Sometimes, you’ve got to take life by the balls.”<sup>34</sup> In this moment, Showtime suggests that the show will flip our conceptions of this character, sitcoms, and melodramas on their heads. Cathy is promoted as a rebellious mother within the sitcom tradition, but also as varying those generic conventions by being even *more* rebellious, more unstoppable, and more unpredictable. She won’t be contained by anyone in her life or even the threat of death. Tellingly, as in the *Weeds* promo, Cathy smiles devilishly at the camera. Through this generic hybridity, *The Big C* is sold as dangerously enticing, helping Showtime concoct its identity as a risk-taking network.<sup>35</sup>

The most illuminating trailers, though, are those that advertise *Weeds* and *The Big C* together. In one, entitled “Dueling Banjos,”<sup>36</sup> Nancy and Cathy stare each other down, separated by a white picket fence; on the left, Cathy is in a green suburban backyard, and on the right, Nancy is in a desert, on the run. As with the individual promos, this joint advertisement “visually references the 1950s American sitcom’s prefeminist housewife figure, who is represented by the divided white picket fence.”<sup>37</sup> Cathy, in particular, exists in a beautiful suburban oasis. However, the characters begin to verbally spar, listing the

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<sup>34</sup> “Hourglass: The Big C Promo,” YouTube video (0:30), posted on August 25, 2010, posted by “FreshPaintStudios.”

<sup>35</sup> Bradshaw, “Showtime’s ‘Female Problem,’” 161.

<sup>36</sup> A purposefully ridiculous and over-the-top name, connecting Nancy and Cathy to the Western—a genre comprised of films that often function as melodramas, albeit not recognized as them.

<sup>37</sup> Bradshaw, “Showtime’s ‘Female Problem,’” 167.

awful or difficult things they've done and experienced in order to one-up the other. They are not merely comedic, as we see when Nancy explains, "Now I'm married to a drug lord, I've had his baby, and my son committed murder." Their rebelliousness is far less contained than that of traditional sitcom protagonists. Additionally, Nancy exists in a less pristine world than Cathy, with a dirt path behind her, suggesting that she has escaped suburbia and has changed the course of her life. Through the split-screen, Showtime stresses both shows' histories in suburban sitcoms and melodramatic serialization, urging us to recognize the characters as ones who don't quite live up to the expectations placed on them. Thus, despite their differences in setting, the promo draws similarities between Nancy and Cathy, and subsequently between *Weeds* and *The Big C*—the women argue about who is the most dangerous, and in the end, they both concede, saying, "I get you."<sup>38</sup> Through this "marketing bond," Showtime creates a connection between the two shows, using and reproducing generic conventions to celebrate the network for telling stories that can't be found elsewhere on television.<sup>39</sup> The branding strategy invokes, and in part produces, genre as a cultural and industrial category for Showtime's economic purposes.

Additionally, Showtime marketed *The Big C* and *Weeds* outside of trailers to fit them into a pattern of dramedy programming. Perhaps most obviously, the shows aired back-to-back on Monday nights, encouraging people to not just watch one particular show but rather a collection of Showtime programs. This branding strategy is known as "theming," which means creating a block of programming with similar themes, tones, or

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<sup>38</sup> "Dueling Banjos: The Big C & Weeds Promo," YouTube video (1:05), posted on August 25, 2010, posted by "FreshPaintStudios."

<sup>39</sup> Bradshaw, "Showtime's 'Female Problem,'" 167.

characters to entice viewers to keep watching for a longer period of time.<sup>40</sup> In this way, the network stressed *Weeds* and *The Big C*'s thematic and generic similarities in its lineup, encouraging us to recognize them both as “moms dealing with difficult personal issues.”<sup>41</sup> Promotional interviews also served a similar function. In one interview for *Adweek*, *The Big C*'s creators Darlene Hunt and Jenny Bicks explicitly cite generic hybridity to promote the show. Hunt suggests that the show is neither a sitcom nor a tragedy, and Bicks agrees, arguing, “I think there is humor in any type of tragedy there is.”<sup>42</sup> They draw on *The Big C*'s genre mixing in order to market the show as something different, surprising, and more realistic. Importantly, this generic promotion is also reliant on the network, with Bicks saying, “I think the subject matter is tough and Showtime had the balls to say this is the kind of stuff we want to put on there.”<sup>43</sup> Bicks uses the same language from *The Big C*'s promo, arguing that not only does Cathy “grab life by the balls” but so does Showtime—it is a “ballsy” network, willing to take risks with its storytelling. Through this examination of *The Big C*'s and *Weeds*' marketing, we must recognize that “television programs are not experienced in a vacuum, but are ‘packaged’ in various ways.”<sup>44</sup> The collection of dramedies on Showtime is not an accident or a coincidence. Showtime “packages” them together, using generic hybridity to make claims about the network’s willingness to step outside of the box and startle its audience.

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<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *Branding Television*, 125.

<sup>41</sup> Bradshaw, “Showtime’s ‘Female Problem,’” 168.

<sup>42</sup> Alan Frutkin, “Mediaweek TV: Presenting Showtime’s *The Big C*,” *Adweek*, August 12, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, *Branding Television*, 115.

## Categorizing the Dramedy

What, then, is a dramedy? Is it a “real” genre? Like all genres, the dramedy is in part created and manipulated by networks—and in this case, it is a vital part of Showtime’s branding strategy, as we have seen in the promotional materials for *The Big C* and *Weeds*. However, brands do not begin and end in advertisements. They condition viewers and critics to engage with shows. Therefore, while brands are created by marketing departments, they also “significantly [depend] upon critical acclaim within the media more broadly.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, to conclude, I want to highlight the role of trade and critical discourse in managing brands and grouping shows through genre, particularly the dramedy. Emily Nussbaum, the television critic for *The New Yorker*, reviewed *United States of Tara* and *The Secret Diary of a Call Girl* (2007-2011) in an essay entitled “Women on the Verge,” also defining a larger group of “women with problems” programs on Showtime in the process. Nussbaum wrote, “With *United States of Tara*, Showtime has cornered the market on the outsider heroine.”<sup>46</sup> By stressing the dramedies’ similarities in theme and tone, she asks us to understand them as a sort of generic collective. Stuart Levine reinforced this categorization, as well, saying, “The Mary-Louise Parker starrer was the first of the net’s dramedies to examine moms dealing with difficult personal issues.”<sup>47</sup> He then went on to mention *Nurse Jackie*, *The Big C*, and others, urging us to link them together under the genre of “the dramedy.” The list of articles that categorize the dramedy like this goes on and on, including “Mother Courage and Her Soaps” by

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<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *Branding Television*, 32.

<sup>46</sup> Emily Nussbaum, “Women on the Verge,” *The New Yorker*, February 1, 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Stuart Levine, “Showtime for Pickups: Pay Cabler Extends ‘The Big C,’ ‘Weeds’ to 2011,” *Variety*, September 21, 2010.

Bernard Beck and “Showtime’s Female Problem” by Lara Bradshaw.<sup>48</sup> By recognizing that critics and executives often called these programs “dramedies,” we can see that dramedy is an industrial, not merely textual, term.<sup>49</sup> Showtime, followed by critics and trade articles, categorized its female-led half hour shows as dramedies as part of a money-making strategy.

Now that I have outlined Showtime’s history and the relationship between its dramedies and marketing strategies, we can look at how the individual shows employ generic conventions. Showtime’s dramedies use melodrama and sitcom conventions towards similar branding and thematic ends but also for unique storytelling goals. Therefore, in the next chapter, I will look at the role of genre and narrative consequence in the network’s first dramedy success, *Weeds*, to align us with Nancy as an unconventional and chaotic protagonist. In the following close analyses of Showtime’s dramedies, we must always be attuned to how they fit within Showtime’s personality and how “brand is not a static, singular object.”<sup>50</sup> Brands morph over time depending on changing markets and critical reception. Thus, the network’s female-driven dramedies did not arise from a complete reinvention of Showtime’s brand but rather from a shift in its emphasis, contending with and differentiating itself from HBO’s string of male antihero successes.

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<sup>48</sup> Bernard Beck, “Mother Courage and Her Soaps: *Incendies*, *Weeds*, *Nurse Jackie*, and Daytime Drama,” *Multicultural Perspectives* 14, no. 1 (2012); Bradshaw, “Showtime’s ‘Female Problem.’”

<sup>49</sup> Amanda Keeler, “Branding the Family Drama: Genre Formations and Critical Perspectives on *Gilmore Girls*,” in *Screwball Television: Critical Perspectives on Gilmore Girls*, eds. David Scott Diffrient & David Lavery (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010): 30.

<sup>50</sup> Johnson, *Branding Television*, 157.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Godmother: Crafting a Suburban Outlaw in *Weeds***

“I wanted to deal with the people in between. I wanted to deal with deeply flawed people who you don’t necessarily know whether or not they are the hero or the villain, as most people are...I wanted to do my own outlaw show.”<sup>1</sup>

In the first season finale of Jenji Kohan’s *Weeds*, which premiered in 2005 to critical and commercial success, Nancy Botwin puts her pot-selling team together in her house with all the vital members: dealer, grower, distributor, legal, muscle.<sup>2</sup> While she establishes her drug empire, her youngest son, Shane, looks on. He asks his mother if everything is okay as she comes to pour herself a glass of wine. She attempts to quell his fears, telling him that she loves him. She then leaves to rejoin her crew, closing the door on him as they all rise to greet her in a moment evocative of *The Godfather*, as the title of the episode, “The Godmother,” suggests. Nancy is both a weed kingpin and a suburban mother, something that both she and the show constantly hold in tension. They cannot be separated, as we realize while Shane watches her solidify her hold in the business through his patio’s glass doors.

*Weeds* tells the story of Nancy Botwin, a suburban widow who turns to selling marijuana after her husband dies. Through this work, Nancy becomes tied up with the drug world, involving her two children and brother-in-law Andy in the process. Her story is one of continuous chaos; she evades law enforcement, drug dealers, and suburban narcs as she moves from Agrestic, her suburban neighborhood, to Mexico, New York City, and all across the United States. Nancy Botwin is an outlaw. Like her

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<sup>1</sup> “10 Things I Learned from OINTB and Weeds Showrunner Jenji Kohan,” *Mentorless*, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> *Weeds*, 1.10 “The Godmother,” Showtime, October 10, 2005, directed by Lev Spiro.

male counterparts that preceded her, such as Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* and Vic Mackey of *The Shield*, as well as her countless male successors, she is rebellious, dangerous, and operates with little regard for the law. In many ways, she suggests the law is obsolete altogether. However, while many male antiheroes are punished for their sins, Nancy moves through all eight seasons without consequence. She is not forced to change, and Kohan instead asks us to embrace her character with all her flaws and rough edges—fitting into Showtime’s brand as a network with bold and relatable characters that we can revel in rather than denounce. It is telling that Vince Gilligan, creator of *Breaking Bad*, describes his show as the story of “turning Mr. Chips into Scarface,” suggesting that it is a story of change, transformation, and tragedy, while from the very first season of *Weeds*, Nancy is already “the Godmother.”<sup>3</sup> Unlike *Breaking Bad*, the central conflict of *Weeds* is not about Nancy hiding her work from her family or entering a downward spiral.

Rather, the central conflict of the show resides in the question of whether or not Nancy can be both a good mother and drug dealer. In “The Godmother,” Nancy pleads, “I don’t want to choose between my business and my family.”<sup>4</sup> Focusing on this contradiction and its narrative consequences, I argue that *Weeds* merges various sitcom and melodramatic conventions to depict Nancy as an defiant mother who resists change and narratively succeeds in a world that is often outside her control—and, in the process, she reveals the dangers of normative suburbia and the limiting expectations it imposes on its residents. She follows the tradition of many anarchic sitcoms, such as *I Love Lucy*

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Gross, “‘Breaking Bad’: Vince Gilligan on Meth and Bad Morals,” *Fresh Air*, NPR, podcast audio, September 19, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> *Weeds*, 1.10 “The Godmother.”

and *Benitched*, as a disruptive mother who creates narrative chaos and conflict in the domestic sphere. Additionally, the show adopts characteristics of serial melodrama, relying on coincidences, cliffhangers, and constant narrative change, which cues us to recognize the way Nancy's life is dictated by others. She is constantly placed in impossible situations, like trying to be both a great drug dealer and mother. Every time she tries to focus on one, though, she ends up neglecting the other, suggesting that they cannot be balanced and that she cannot "have it all." As Nina Leibman explains, "The structure of modern melodrama revolves around an unsolvable contradiction."<sup>5</sup> Through this recognition of external forces and social pressures, the show cues us to root for Nancy as she rebels against the image of the ideal middle class suburban mother that is not only impossible to attain but also severely limiting.

Therefore, in this chapter, I will focus specifically on how *Weeds* utilizes its generic hybridity to distinguish between narrative and character consequence: Nancy is able to escape her constraining domestic life through melodramatic serialization, yet she herself does not change as a character. First, I will look at Nancy's place in sitcom's history of unruly women due to her inattentive parenting style, profanity, and sexuality. Then, I will discuss how the show highlights Nancy's rebellion against suburban domesticity through several strategies: its construction of space, narrative structure, and character relationships. *Weeds* juxtaposes spaces in order to depict Agrestic as unsafe and stifling, aligning us with Nancy as she breaks out of it and repeatedly changes locales. Additionally, through the use of cliffhangers and coincidences, the narrative structure and ensemble varies wildly while Nancy and the Botwin family remain. The family's

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<sup>5</sup> Leibman *Living Room Lectures*, 20.

constancy encourages us to root for her as she challenges social norms and expectations associated with motherhood. She is an outlaw indefinitely, urging us to embrace her deviance as a type of fun, and necessary, rebellion against an oppressive society. Finally, while I conclude my other two case studies—*United States of Tara* and *Shameless*—with a closer look at one particular episode or season, I end this chapter by briefly examining the season six finale and the show’s plummeting critical reception as a functional equivalent. We must look broadly at how *Weeds*<sup>6</sup> develops from season to season due to its rapidly changing story. Nancy’s path evolves, yet she remains unpunished. She is a new “type of mother...that seems strikingly innovative,” for she is neither a saint nor a sinner but rather somewhere in between.<sup>6</sup> She exists in a liminal space that we are allowed to inhabit and enjoy, even if only for the span of a thirty minute episode.

### **“You’ve Made Your Bed, Now Fuck in It:” Nancy as an Unruly Mother<sup>7</sup>**

“She’s a character. She’s a person. She’s flawed. Antihero? I don’t even know what that means.”<sup>8</sup>

Nancy is undoubtedly the lead of *Weeds*. The series opens and closes on her, and the series’ marketing materials always place her front and center. She is a transgressive protagonist, consistently challenging social norms of suburban motherhood and revealing its impossibilities. By constructing an unsolvable situation but allowing Nancy to continue obliterating others’ assumptions, the series cues us to understand and root for Nancy as she fights against the social forces that define her situation. However, we must note that she is not an outlier in televisual comedic history. To frame my discussion

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<sup>6</sup> Suzanna Danuta Walters & Laura Harrison, “Not Ready to Make Nice: Aberrant Mothers in Contemporary Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 1 (2014): 40.

<sup>7</sup> *Weeds*, 1.07 “Higher Education,” Showtime, September 19, 2005, directed by Tucker Gates.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Halterman, “Interview: ‘Weeds’ Creator Jenji Kohan,” *The Futon Critic*, June 15, 2009.

of *Weeds*, I must establish how Nancy fits into, and differs from, a long history of uncontrollable female protagonists in sitcoms, including Lucy Ricardo, Roseanne Conners of *Roseanne* and, in more contemporary contexts, Liz Lemon of *30 Rock* and Mindy Lahiri of *The Mindy Project*. As I highlighted in my introduction, much of the unruly mother's humor comes from how she disrupts and questions gendered social norms that others expect her to follow. In one episode of *I Love Lucy*, for example, Lucy attempts to sing along with a male barbershop quartet despite their attempts to shut her up<sup>9</sup>; she refuses to be silent, creating comedy that "depend[s] on other characters' astonishment."<sup>10</sup> Nancy also astonishes other characters and operates as an active agent of disruption. Even her job as a marijuana dealer creates conflict within the supposed safe space of suburbia, as evident in the first episode when we see her selling weed on the soccer field while she watches her son play. She chops down her older son's door with an axe in one episode and puts a hit out on a Mexican politician in another. The list of these transgressions is exhausting, as critic Margaret Lyons discovered when attempting to detail all of them.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, a major component of female sitcom protagonists is that they are contained within a repressive, formulaic sitcom world. By this, I mean that they are curbed by their domestic situations, the men that surround them and whom they rely on, and even the multi-camera setup of the shows themselves. Nancy both fulfills and shatters this generic convention to reveal the contradictions of suburban motherhood. Like the sitcom women before her, Nancy is defined by others' expectations of her as

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<sup>9</sup> *I Love Lucy*, 1.19 "Lucy's Barbershop Quarter," CBS, February 4, 1963, directed by Jack Donohue.

<sup>10</sup> Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy," 63.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Lyons, "A List of Everything Nancy Has Done on *Weeds*," *Vulture*, September 17, 2012.

both a mother and widow. In the very first scene of the show, two women in the Agrestic PTA gossip about her, asking, “I wonder how she’s getting by.”<sup>12</sup> Other drug dealers also take her less seriously, with one dealer named Alejandro saying, “Hello, little housewife,” upon their first meeting.<sup>13</sup> She becomes defined as a mother by others in her judgmental suburb. However, while it draws from this notion of containment, *Weeds* also deviates in its presentation of Nancy. Unlike the sitcoms previously mentioned, Nancy’s norm violations cause narrative change and transformation. When she calls the cops on Esteban, the Mexican cartel leader, she creates a chain reaction that drives the plot for the next few episodes. She breaks from sitcom traditions in that her deviance is not restricted or narratively derailed by the men in her life. Her actions are not narratively inconsequential.

In this same vein, many of her choices are understood as abnormal precisely because they are unmotherly and betray her children. When Silas comes to her about romantic troubles with one of her employees, Nancy chastises him for being unprofessional, saying, “This is not your mommy talking. This is your boss, so I suggest you listen to me now.”<sup>14</sup> In this moment, she acts against her son’s interest, refusing to fire Silas’s ex-girlfriend for making him upset or uncomfortable. She is too invested in her business, in her employee, to let it fail because of her child’s feelings. Similarly, she trips a young boy at Shane’s soccer game with no remorse.<sup>15</sup> This tripping is funny because, as with Lucy and Gracie, it surprises the viewer, challenging our expectations of a mother not hurting children, even if they are not her own. Nancy’s behavior is

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<sup>12</sup> *Weeds*, 1.01 “You Can’t Miss the Bear,” Showtime, August 8, 2005, directed by Brian Dannelly.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 1.08 “The Punishment Light,” Showtime, September 26, 2005, directed by Robert Berlinger.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 3.11 “Cankles,” Showtime, October 22, 2007, directed by Julie Anne Robinson.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 1.01 “You Can’t Miss the Bear.”

distinctly nonmaternal. A useful counterpoint to consider here is *Veep* (2012- ), the HBO show about a female vice president. Selina Meyers, *Veep*'s main character, is also an awful mother, always prioritizing herself over her daughter's feelings and safety. In one episode, both she and her daughter wear the same outfit, but instead of seeing this as a moment of mother-daughter bonding, Selina is horrified and makes her daughter change immediately. She is afraid her daughter will tarnish her public image.<sup>16</sup> Selina doesn't seem to know her daughter much at all and often forgets she exists—even I, as a regular viewer, sometimes forget this fact. However, while Selina is a neglectful mother, she is not defined by it in the same way that Nancy is, as both she and viewers think of her mothering as a tangential aspect of her personhood. It is just one of her many transgressions.

Nancy's wrongdoings, on the other hand, are almost entirely based on her status as a mother. Nancy's mothering is not seen as a joke but rather as the central tension and source of her deviance. Therefore, she transgresses as a mother in caring for her children in questionable, potentially harmful, ways. In the fourth season, for example, Nancy uses her unborn child to protect herself against its father Esteban; we learn about the child not because Nancy loves it but rather because she wants to use it for her own selfish ends, drawing attention to how Nancy complicates our expectations of maternal love and responsibility. Additionally, she is overtly profane and sexual. We see her call small children "fuckwads,"<sup>17</sup> and we watch her have sex with strangers—like Alejandro when he threatens her business and family—to assert her authority.<sup>18</sup> We are cued to enjoy

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<sup>16</sup> *Veep*, 3.03 "Alicia," HBO, April 20, 2014, directed by Christopher Morris.

<sup>17</sup> *Weeds*, 1.01 "You Can't Miss the Bear."

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 1.08 "The Punishment Light."

how Nancy uses her sexuality as a tool for control and power, defying dominant norms of motherhood that require love be a central part of the equation in sex and that suggest a mother must be a “good influence” on her children. By breaking out of these expectations and playing with traditions of comedic containment, *Weeds* reveals the impossibility of being both a successful mother and drug dealer. Nancy is forced to choose one over the other. Surprisingly, though, she regularly chooses her business over her children, putting them in harm’s way<sup>19</sup> and being emotionally unavailable. In this way, Nancy’s choices shatter the domestic expectations of her and “upend or at the very least mock” the “balancing [of] work and family framework.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, where *Weeds* differs from sitcom’s long tradition of unruly women is in its incorporation of the melodramatic “unsolvable contradiction” in her status as a mother who refuses to be domesticated. As someone who values illegal work and crime, Nancy cannot also be an exceptional, or even adequate, caretaker. The show mixes these genre conventions to simultaneously celebrate her defiance while also recognize those social pressures and expectations outside her control that she is unable to live up to, no matter how hard she may (or may choose to not) try.

### **Drug Free Zone: Manipulating Setting & Space**

“Come on, this is one tiny valley. Over the hill, there’s another one just like it. And another hill and another valley...”<sup>21</sup>

Nancy moves between several worlds throughout the series, from predominantly white suburbs to predominantly black suburbs, from a beach town near Mexico to New

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<sup>19</sup> *Weeds*, 5.09 “Suck ‘n’ Spit,” Showtime, August 3, 2009, directed by Michael Trimm.

<sup>20</sup> Walters & Harrison, “Not Ready to Make Nice,” 50.

<sup>21</sup> *Weeds*, 3.15 “Go,” Showtime, November 19, 2007, directed by Craig Zisk.

York City. Using and inverting melodramatic and sitcom conventions, *Weeds* juxtaposes spaces within Agrestic and outside of it in order to reveal the dangers of idyllic white suburbia and its social expectations. As Nancy repeatedly transgresses the boundaries of these spaces and their norms, the show focuses emotional attention within the family, urging us to align with Nancy in opposition to the ridiculous, often comedic and absurd, external worlds that attempt to define her. We first see this juxtaposition in Agrestic between Nancy's home and locations related to drug dealing, allowing us to compare and contrast the spaces to understand the dangerous secrets that are a consequence of "normalcy." Initially, Agrestic appears to be a picture perfect suburb: white picket fences, smiling families, and modest homes. In the opening credits, we hear Malvina Reynolds sing, "Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky-tacky," as the same cars drive through Agrestic and the same white man in tennis shorts runs in the park. Characters and actions are repeated in the credits, immediately establishing Agrestic as a place of stasis, as a place of conformity.

However, by cutting between this suburban "ideal," with good schools and good white neighbors, and other areas, with Nancy's mostly black drug dealing friends, *Weeds* reveals that Nancy does not fit into a hermetically sealed world. In contrast to many family sitcoms, as I laid out in the introduction,<sup>22</sup> the series expands its narrative scope, refusing to simply be contained within one suburban setting. In the pilot, for example, we cut from Nancy's PTA meeting to her buying weed at Heylia, her supplier's, house. This cut is especially harsh, with the soundtrack changing dramatically and the static camera shifting to a more handheld one. With these shifts, Nancy's entire demeanor

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<sup>22</sup> For more on how sitcoms rely on stasis and a reestablishment of the status quo, see page 13-14.

changes. She stops trying to be polite with the other PTA mothers and instead trash-talks them at Heylia's house. Through the setting change, we recognize that Nancy deviates from the conformity of the PTA mothers. This juxtaposition is highlighted again and again throughout the first three seasons; in "MILF Money," for example, we cut from Conrad and Nancy's growhouse to Celia putting up a new drug watch security camera, again shot with heavily contrasting music and camera angles to draw attention to the change in settings.<sup>23</sup> The stylistic and narrative juxtaposition between Nancy's home life and work life almost makes us feel as if these moments do not take place in the same town despite their physical closeness. In doing so, the show cues us to recognize the rigid boundaries between the spaces and ultimately the artificiality of and repression in Agrestic. As an unconventional mother, Nancy does not fit into the expectations of her town. The setting *requires* Nancy to suppress her job, as it is not only illegal but also heavily stigmatized. She is expected to be like everyone else but, due to her career, she cannot conform, suggesting that the ideal of suburban motherhood is an unrealistic contradiction. In this way, *Weeds* functions as a satire, challenging the notion that suburbs "are the site of promises, dreams, and fantasies."<sup>24</sup> Rather, the show reveals that it is a form of domestic containment for Nancy—one that she constantly rebels against.

The juxtaposition between different parts of Agrestic is also a source of comedy and expansion, as Nancy is always a clear fish out of water. In season one, for example, she borrows her grower Conrad's car, which is loud and broken. The beat up car is

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<sup>23</sup> *Weeds*, 2.08 "MILF Money," October 2, 2006, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>24</sup> Douglas Forster, "Drugs, Racial Stereotypes, and Suburban Dystopia in Showtime's *Weeds*," *The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies, The International Academic Forum*, 2013.

noticeably out of place in Nancy's immaculate neighborhood, and she hides it from her nosey neighbor named Celia.<sup>25</sup> By mixing these spaces, we see how Nancy and other characters don't fit into either world, cuing us to laugh at Agrestic and its exclusions and shallowness. We laugh at Conrad's loud car, but unlike Celia, we don't judge Nancy; rather, we laugh at the situation that makes others think she is out of place, and we are therefore allowed to take pleasure in how she rebels against others' expectations. This use of space also functions to expand the scope of the suburban sitcom through melodramatic complications and coincidences in the narrative. The show introduces groups of characters—people of color, poor folks, and criminals—who are generally absent from the myth of a picture perfect neighborhood. Notably, almost everyone in Agrestic is white, including Nancy, while most of the people in the drug dealing world are people of color. This juxtaposition asks us to compare and contrast the spaces Nancy is put in and recognize how stifling, oppressive, and *dangerous* Agrestic and its so-called normalcy are. We are cued to recognize that the concern about Nancy driving Conrad's car is rooted in its associations that anything that is coded poor or black is unwanted in her neighborhood. We see the things and people that Agrestic, and normative society at large, attempts to hide, disassociate itself from, and violently suppress.

Along these lines, the movement between spaces relocates violence, emotional stakes, and consequence within the domestic sphere, revealing the perils of the suburban world that Nancy rebels against. In an early episode, someone shoots bullets into Heylia's house while Nancy is there, leaving her shaken up. Later, when Nancy is back at her house, we hear similar sounds and remember the gunshots from earlier, but we

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<sup>25</sup> *Weeds*, 1.02 "Free Goat," Showtime, August 15, 2005, directed by Brian Dannelly.

discover it is just a car.<sup>26</sup> We may first think of Nancy's home and work as separate, but by cutting between them, we start to recognize the violence and secrets within suburbia as well. The violence of Nancy's business enters the domestic sphere. In a later episode, Celia brings a gun into Nancy's house, a jarring moment despite the proliferation of guns and violence in the show; it is surprising, though, because the gun and threat of violence enter the white suburban home, which is initially constructed as separate from the violent drug dealing world.<sup>27</sup> The same is true for when Nancy discovers heroin in her garage, which is presented as a twist ending with a dramatic music cue and quick zoom out, because hard drugs literally enter her "safe" home.<sup>28</sup> This incorporation of violence cues us to recognize that "the suburban home no longer offers nurture or safety."<sup>29</sup> In other words, the collapsing of Nancy's home and work spaces bring conflicts from a seemingly outside world back to Nancy's personal life, cuing us to align with her as she grapples with the hypocrisy and harshness of her town and its demands of its inhabitants.

Agrestic is full of secrets. Therefore, the series suggests that the idealized image of suburbia—and the notions of traditional postwar motherhood wrapped up in it—is a suffocating lie. In the pilot, Nancy looks into her neighbor's house as he has sex with an underage boy we met a few scenes earlier. She is appalled, saying, "I know nothing," but her son's girlfriend is not surprised.<sup>30</sup> With Nancy, we learn shocking information about characters we previously thought we knew: Celia's husband's affair is exposed, the

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<sup>26</sup> *Weeds*, 1.05 "Lude Awakening," Showtime, September 5, 2005, directed by Lee Rose.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 2.12 "Pittsburgh," Showtime, October 30, 2006, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 3.05 "Bill Sussman," Showtime, September 10, 2007, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>29</sup> Forster, "Drugs, Racial Stereotypes, and Suburban Dystopia in Showtime's *Weeds*," 61.

<sup>30</sup> *Weeds*, 1.01 "You Can't Miss the Bear."

accountant Doug is revealed to be crooked, and the entire city becomes implicated in an oil cover-up. The use of contrasting spaces urges us to notice that Agrestic is not an idyllic neighborhood, for “marijuana is just a metaphor for the dirty little secrets underneath this American way of life.”<sup>31</sup> By mixing a sense of sitcom containment with a melodramatic expansion of space, Kohan asks us to compare worlds and recognize the violence within the “normal” suburban ideal. We celebrate Nancy’s attempts to fight back against this setup and ultimately root for her, rather than judge her, as she continuously transgresses in the narrative. As Shane comedically but astutely screams at his elementary school graduation, “We are not safe! You moved here because you think you’re safe but you are *not* safe!”<sup>32</sup> In *Weeds*, suburbia is a glass house of secrets that could break at any moment.

The glass house eventually shatters, as the show leaves Agrestic and burns it to the ground. As Nancy puts it, she has to “go.”<sup>33</sup> Many sitcoms remain in one location, which functions as a source of stasis for their female protagonists. Lucy, for instance, is rebellious but her “abrasive edges” are “smoothed...by embedding [her] wild physical humor in domestic scenarios.”<sup>34</sup> The setting in *Weeds*, however, is unstable. Nancy has a beautiful home with a housekeeper in Agrestic, but at the end of the third season, she deliberately sets fire to it, allowing her to be a protagonist whose unruliness cannot be contained by her setting. The same is true in season six, when she decides to hit the road with her family, and in season seven, when she moves to New York City. Shifting settings raise the narrative stakes and upset the show’s status quo, reflecting Nancy’s

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<sup>31</sup> Forster, “Drugs, Racial Stereotypes, and Suburban Dystopia in Showtime’s *Weeds*,” 65-66.

<sup>32</sup> *Weeds*, 2.12 “Pittsburgh.”

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 3.15 “Go.”

<sup>34</sup> Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 153.

refusal to be complacent with where she is or with how she is understood as a mother and widow. Kohan's decision to make these jumps was based on asking her writers, "What's it going to take to reinvigorate everyone and make you excited about writing the show again?" And the answer was change. So we went out and changed everything."<sup>35</sup> While the transformation in setting depicts an outside world that shapes Nancy's life, it also suggests that she is not "rebelliously incarcerated within situation comedy's domestic regime and mise-en-scene."<sup>36</sup> Rather, she breaks out of those spaces to create new ones for herself. Even the theme song reflects this change: in the first season, we hear the "Little Boxes" song I previously described, but, in the second season, new musicians cover the song every episode to add variation. Starting in season four, the show drops the theme altogether and adds a new title card each week corresponding to the Botwins' location. The credits change with the variation in environments, demonstrating how neither Nancy nor the show are restricted to one. Nancy is not defined by her setting; rather, she continuously redefines it.

However, despite the way *Weeds* varies its setting, there is always a place for people to converge. At the start of the series, for example, Nancy's house functions as a common meeting ground. In one scene, Nancy forces the whole family, despite their differences, to have dinner together in the house, screaming, "We're going to be a family if I have to kill all of you!"<sup>37</sup> Through this shared space, we are cued to recognize their interconnected stories and lives and therefore understand the family as a collective transgressive unit. When we move away from Agrestic, Kohan creates other communal

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<sup>35</sup> Mike McLeod, "VIFF 2008 Interview," *Showbiz Monkeys*, September 30, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy," 72.

<sup>37</sup> *Weeds*, 2.01 "Corn Snake," Showtime, August 14, 2006, directed by Craig Zisk.

areas to signal the family as a constant unit in a chaotic narrative. While they live next to the Mexican border, Nancy again insists on having a family dinner, and we return to a family dinner table yet again at the end of season seven even though the family has moved to Connecticut. The family always has a place to be together, be it their house, Esteban's mansion, a New York City loft, or a minivan. In doing so, Kohan urges us align with the family as they refuse to fit into any one particular setting and the expectations associated with each. In effect, as an antinormative unit, they are allowed to break the norms of each space they enter. *Weeds* repeats these shared spaces to remind us of the constancy of Nancy and her family as we vary settings, suggesting that the Botwins remain unchanged despite the chaotic, often times overpowering, world around them.

### **“The Earth Keeps Turning On:” Narrative Repetition & Variation<sup>38</sup>**

Guillermo: “Nancy, what are you gonna do? If it all burns down—your house, your suburb?”  
Nancy: “Well, I guess I’d have to go.”<sup>39</sup>

*Weeds* is not a patient show. Its plot moves rapidly from one beat, one character, and one setting to the next. If you skip two or three episodes, the show will have progressed into drastically new spaces and conflicts, often switching its entire narrative setup in the course of half an episode. If Nancy is a truly reckless protagonist who creates unresolved chaos in the show's narrative, it is imperative that we look at its complex narrative structure. How is she situated within her story world? *Weeds* adopts melodramatic traditions of serialization and consistently unresolved plots with

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<sup>38</sup> “The Earth Keeps Turning On” by Mr. Smolin; featured in *Weeds*, 3.07 “He Taught Me How to Drive-By,” Showtime, September 24, 2007, directed by Paul Feig.

<sup>39</sup> *Weeds*, 3.15 “Go.”

tremendous narrative consequence while Nancy stays constant. This “excessive plot” is “a major melodramatic feature,” creating convoluted storylines that allow the show to continue running forever.<sup>40</sup> *Weeds* follows a pattern where, as television critic Dan Fienberg said, “Every blunder has a consequence and if you really thought that the story of a suburban mom getting deeper and deeper into the drug trade...was just going to be endlessly repeatable...you must have socked away a supply of MILF weed.”<sup>41</sup> In this way, the show’s narrative is founded on a sense of repetition and variation. Through its use of coincidences and cliffhangers, *Weeds*’ melodramatic narrative changes beyond Nancy’s control while she remains constant, cuing us to recognize the contradictions in her life: outside forces, be it fate or social expectations, try to control her, yet they also create new opportunities for Nancy when she manipulates coincidences and situations to her own advantage. By repeatedly creating new coincidental conflicts and fluctuating between Nancy’s successes and failures, we are encouraged to root for her while she challenges preconceived notions of motherhood and idyllic suburbia. She continues her story forever unchanged, encouraging her deviance rather than undercutting it.

“Judah, If You’re Still Here...I Tried”<sup>42</sup>

Coincidences play a central role in *Weeds*’ narrative, and one even creates the overall melodramatic situation of the show: the death of Nancy’s first husband Judah. This coincidence functions as both a source of containment and change, revealing the forces outside of Nancy’s control that shape her life, and leave her without a source of

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<sup>40</sup> Ang, *Living Room Wars*, 89.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Fienberg, “Weeds Season 6 Review,” *HitFix*, August 16, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> *Weeds*, 3.15 “Go.”

income, while also allowing Nancy the opportunity to change her life and embrace drug dealing and a nonnormative family structure. The coincidence is central to the show, perfectly reflecting the tension between motherhood and drug dealing. Expectations of motherhood and widowhood surround her, but due to her career, she cannot abide by them. By emphasizing how Nancy is both trapped by her husband's memory and liberated by his death, Judah's passing highlights the ways Nancy continues to succeed and transgress *in spite* of the external forces, including social stigma and assumptions, that attempt to define her. In many ways, this is reminiscent of comedic woman's pictures of the 1930s, like *Red Headed Woman* (1932), where the central protagonists are both regularly controlled by others and decidedly unstoppable in the narrative. Nancy manipulates external coincidences for her own purposes, so even when she is torn down by Judah's ghostly presence, we are cued to align with her as she reshapes and reframes her life.

First, it is important to explore how Judah's death functions as a form of containment, coming out of the blue to emphasize Nancy's difficult situation. Characters even comment on how surprising it is that Judah died from a sudden heart attack while on a run with his son Shane. It is beyond Nancy's control yet defines so much of her life, which cues us to feel pathos for Nancy through the recognition of "powerlessness," a central feature of melodramas.<sup>43</sup> Her financial situation is completely upended, prompting her to start selling weed, and her kids are so profoundly affected by this death that we see their trauma manifested in later seasons when Shane imagines his dead father talking to him.<sup>44</sup> By using this uncontrollable moment as the narrative impetus for the

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<sup>43</sup> Ang, *Living Room Wars*, 95.

<sup>44</sup> *Weeds*, 3.14 "Protection," Showtime, November 12, 2007, directed by Randy Zisk.

show, Kohan foregrounds how Nancy's life is shaped by other people and situations. Her identity even becomes partially defined by the death; other mothers gossip about her financial struggles and trauma, reinforcing her identity as a widow in her social world.<sup>45</sup> Many early episodes are also centered on the expectation for her to be sad and act as a widow *should* act, such as attending Judah's tombstone unveiling.<sup>46</sup> His ghost looms over her: we see home videos of him in season one, return to his childhood home in season four, and finally go to the spot where he died in season eight.<sup>47</sup> This melodramatic incident shapes Nancy and her family's lives, both emotionally and financially. We therefore recognize how external forces define much of her life and attempt to keep her stuck in place, in suburbia, and in her designated social roles.

However, while Nancy is in some ways contained by Judah's death, it also functions as an expansion of the narrative that allows Nancy to restructure her life, prompting us to recognize Nancy's authority in an uncontrollable world. Without Judah, she can forge a new path as a drug dealer. At one point, Nancy reflects on Judah's death as a source of freedom, saying, "Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if they [her kids Shane and Silas] died when Judah died. And be only responsible for me. How terrible is that?"<sup>48</sup> His death is *freeing* for Nancy, even though she simultaneously feels terrible for thinking it. The coincidence breaks her out of the stasis of being a suburban mother and housewife, and perhaps, she suggests, her children are also limiting her ability to do whatever she wants, whenever she wants. While Judah's death was sudden,

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<sup>45</sup> *Weeds*, 1.01 "You Can't Miss the Bear."

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 1.08 "The Punishment Light."

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 8.11 "God Willing and the Creek Don't Rise," Showtime, September 9, 2012, directed by Uta Briesewitz.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 2.07 "Must Find Toes," Showtime, September 25, 2006, directed by Chris Long.

she uses this moment for her own ends to develop a new life as a dealer in new places. Importantly, too, the series begins after Judah's death and we therefore never see him alive, deviating from previous forms of sitcom domesticity. We start in the middle of this story, once Nancy has already started to deal drugs. Therefore, Judah exists only as a memory, cuing us to focus specifically on Nancy's struggles and freedom. At one point, for example, she tells Shane, "I'll always love the *memory* of him."<sup>49</sup> Since we never see Judah or the lost traditional family in the present, we understand the Botwin clan as we see it: an untraditional family without much parental guidance. Unlike Lucy with Ricky in *I Love Lucy*, Nancy has no one to report to at the end of each episode who puts her back in the household. This narrative decision to start after Judah has died both helps to tell Kohan's story and to fit into Showtime's brand as a network with groundbreaking, premium storytelling. We don't receive a template of what every episode will look like, infusing a sitcom setup with melodramatic serialization to differentiate Showtime from non-pay networks and stories.<sup>50</sup> Neither Showtime nor Nancy's stories are predictable or restrained.

Additionally, Nancy co-opts the stifling associations that come with being a widow for her own selfish narrative gains. The coincidence drives her story forward beyond those assumptions, functioning simultaneously as a type of stasis and variation. When Nancy decides she no longer wants to date a man named Peter because he is a DEA agent, for example, she uses her widow status as an excuse, saying, "I'm a widow and I'm just trying to get back on my feet and I can't get involved with someone who

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<sup>49</sup> *Weeds*, 3.14 "Protection" (emphasis added).

<sup>50</sup> "10 Things I Learned from *Weeds* and *OITNB* Showrunner Jenji Kohan."

does what you do.”<sup>51</sup> While her primary reason for not getting involved with him is because she does not want to jeopardize her drug operation, she uses Judah’s death as a way to get what she wants and protect her business. She does the same in the third season finale, where she lies about retrieving Judah’s ashes from a wildfire in order to get into her house. In reality, though, Nancy doesn’t grab Judah’s ashes but rather burns her house to the ground. This moment, where she completely rejects her present and past Agrestic life, is a perfect depiction of Judah’s narrative function as both a source of restraint and change. As she lights the match, she whispers, “Judah, if you’re still here, I tried.”<sup>52</sup> On the one hand, Judah’s death traps Nancy in suburbia as a widow that must try to maintain her lifestyle and stay financially afloat. On the other hand, though, his death opens up an entirely new world of possibilities for her: new professions, new relationships, new places, and new directions. By burning her house down, she fails Judah; instead of continuing to mourn him and maintain her children’s lifestyles, she pushes forward past that suburban ideal. She fully embraces what she couldn’t have had when he was alive. His coincidental death initially defines her life and her circumstances, but she actively uses this coincidence to reroute her life, cuing us to recognize how Nancy can thrive despite the social expectations that attempt to control her.

“God Said Here’s Your Future: It’s Gonna Rain”<sup>53</sup>

Another central source of repetition and variation in *Weeds*’ narrative is its cliffhangers, which end nearly every episode. The cliffhangers draw from melodramatic

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<sup>51</sup> *Weeds*, 2.02 “Cooking with Jesus,” Showtime, August 21, 2006, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 3.15 “Go.”

<sup>53</sup> “Here’s Your Future” by The Thermals; featured in *Weeds* 3.02 “A Pool and His Money,” Showtime, August 20, 2007, directed by Craig Zisk.

traditions, as they are often prompted by other coincidences that drive the plot into new territory and ensure that the show and Nancy's stories continue. The repetition of absurd cliffhangers deny narrative closure. We return for the next episode to see how Nancy will continue to defy external forces in her life. They allow Nancy to survive against all odds, punctuating how Nancy remains an unchanged, unpunished transgressive mother in an ever-changing world that tries to halt her at every turn. I will use one particularly effective cliffhanger as a point of reference for this discussion: the second season finale, "Pittsburgh." The second season ends with two groups of opposing drug dealers pointing guns at Nancy after Silas replaces all of the weed she owes them with a "drug free zone" sign—and, at the same time, Celia is about to have Silas arrested for vandalism, threatening the large sum of pot that is hidden in his car.<sup>54</sup>

This may sound like an absolutely insane and ludicrous moment—which it is—but one of the joys of these cliffhangers is witnessing seemingly disconnected plots intersect, highlighting how the resulting situations are outside of Nancy's control. Silas's vandalism, Nancy's marriage with Peter, and Heylia's collusion with the Armenian drug dealers all come together in one moment not only to push the story in new directions but also to elicit an intense emotional reaction of disbelief. Therefore, the cliffhangers function as melodramatic situations, as I touched upon in the introduction. Nancy is put in impossible positions by coincidences, which emphasizes the external forces in her life—like other drug dealers, the police, and suburban watchdogs—and thus encourage us to feel pathos for her. In situations like the one at the end of "Pittsburgh," there is no "neat resolution of an impasse," instead moving the plot "from bad to worse."<sup>55</sup> The

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<sup>54</sup> *Weeds*, 2.12 "Pittsburgh."

<sup>55</sup> Jacobs, "The Woman's Picture and the Poetics of Melodrama," 140.

plot does not move linearly or logically, but the plot is not the point. Instead, the show focuses our emotional investment in how Nancy and the rest of the Botwins are affected by and continue to violate expectations of motherhood and traditional suburban families.

In this way, the cliffhangers follow “the parameters of melodrama” in that they are not to “be regarded and assessed...for their literal, referential value—i.e. their realism—but as meaningful in so far as they solicit a highly charged, emotional impact.”<sup>56</sup> Of course it is unrealistic that Silas just so happens to get arrested right as he gets on the phone with Nancy, but such clichés are excused because of the scene’s emotional exhilaration. The ending of “Pittsburgh” utilizes quick cutting—shifting between shots of the Armenians holding guns, the black men holding guns, Nancy’s reactions, and Silas getting arrested—to remind us of all the scene’s moving pieces and visually punctuate it as one of huge narrative importance. Similarly, the cliffhanger uses extreme camera angles to create melodramatic situations, “serving to sum up a specific narrative point in pictorial form.”<sup>57</sup> The final shot of season two is at a ninety degree angle, looking down at each group of people involved and the drug free zone sign left in Nancy’s safe. Stylistically distinct from the rest of the show, which is characterized by shot/reverse shots, the high-angle shot urges us to note the difference and importance of the situation. The shot creates a pictorial tableaux—an almost still image that emphasizes a moment by freezing it in time. By “arresting the flow of the narrative” through tableaux that have historically punctuated melodramatic situations, *Weeds* encourages us to recognize the external forces that place Nancy into impossible situations and

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<sup>56</sup> Ang, *Living Room Wars*, 89.

<sup>57</sup> Lea Jacobs & Ben Brewster, *Theatre to Cinema: Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 41.

subsequently to both feel pathos for her and take pleasure in witnessing how things will unfold.<sup>58</sup>

Beyond the individual moments, another joy of the show's cliffhangers draws from serial melodramas: we want to see how the writers can write themselves out of them. Cliffhangers, therefore, function as a form of variation, changing the plot dramatically. Jenji Kohan has revealed that she did not know exactly where the show was heading at the end of each season, or even the end of each episode, so new seasons required the writers to dig themselves out of the holes they dug themselves into. How could Nancy ever possibly escape two groups of drug dealers while her son is getting arrested? Kohan explains, "We're really flying by the seat of our pants."<sup>59</sup> She has no grand plan, allowing the cliffhangers to repeatedly redirect the plot. They are melodramatic situations, "giving rise to actions and are thus altered by them."<sup>60</sup> In other words, they create endlessly changing situations; Nancy is not simply stuck in her existing position, for her situations are "altered by" new ones. Additionally, each season finale ending tries to one-up the last. "Pittsburgh" creates an entirely new storyline with another drug dealer, U-Turn, in the third season that restructures Nancy's life and business. The endings are not easily resolved problems that allow the show to return to the status quo, because, after a certain point, the cliffhangers are so consistent that there is no status quo for the show to return to. In the season four episode "No Man is Pudding," for example, after all existing plotlines are resolved, the last few minutes introduce a drug-trafficking tunnel to Mexico in the store where Nancy is working,

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<sup>58</sup> Jacobs & Brewster, *Theatre to Cinema*, 41.

<sup>59</sup> McLeod, "VIFF 2008 Interview."

<sup>60</sup> Jacobs, "The Woman's Picture and the Poetics of Melodrama," 130.

another coincidence that moves the story independently of Nancy's decisions.<sup>61</sup> Her life is depicted as somewhat out of her control, making her a product of her social situations and roles, but the cliffhangers also ensure that *Weeds* and her situations are never stable or successfully confining. Instead, we always move forward and shift the world our characters inhabit, even as Nancy herself does not have to narratively change to fit into particular expectations of motherhood. She is given the freedom to move through this freewheeling narrative.

However, despite the importance of variation and melodramatic serialization, the cliffhangers also function as a form of repetition. We know that each episode will always end in one, and therefore the surprising emotional moments become routine. We come to *expect* this variation. They consistently end existing stories to create new ones, especially from season to season, again resembling melodramas where "coincidences...set up situations as well as resolve them."<sup>62</sup> The end of the fifth season, for example, closes out Pilar's storyline with Shane killing her, only to open up a new on-the-road story for season six. Thus, *Weeds*' cliffhangers function on both a season- and series-level, ensuring that new situations and stories will always resurface and thus allowing Nancy's story to continue forever in new iterations and forms. The surprise endings may significantly shape the plot, but their reinvention of the show ultimately becomes routinized, with Kohan even noting, "We always say that the finale is the pilot of the new season."<sup>63</sup> The repetition of this reinvention gives no possibility for narrative closure. Due to this repetition, we are never *truly* concerned for Nancy's mortality,

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<sup>61</sup> *Weeds*, 4.05 "No Man is Pudding," Showtime, July 14, 2008, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>62</sup> Jacobs, "The Woman's Picture and the Poetics of Melodrama," 134.

<sup>63</sup> "10 Things I Learned From *Weeds* and *OITNB* Showrunner Jenji Kohan."

instead just curious to see how she will get out of her tough situation and how the story will shift to accommodate her survival. At the end of season four, when she believes she will be killed by Esteban, we know that she must have something up her sleeve to prevent her death; as Silas notes in this same episode, she always finds a way out. Despite her transgressions, she “retains her charm and—unlike the bad mothers of years past—remains fundamentally unpunished.”<sup>64</sup> In contrast to many of the male antihero shows, whose narratives have a rise and fall that point to a particular end goal, the cliffhangers don’t lead us anywhere final. Rather, they ensure an ongoing plot. This unresolved plot structure embraces Nancy’s comedic unruliness with traditions of melodramatic serialization “that many think speak to female concerns and pleasures in ways classical novels and films do not.”<sup>65</sup> As a mother, Nancy is forced into an irresolvable situation—balancing her family and her career—that tries to tear her down. The fact that her story remains unresolved, then, is indicative of the success of Nancy’s transgressions, as her dangerous adventures and defiance of social norms are never squashed by external forces. She is never forced towards an ending, no matter how inconceivable her survival may appear to be, cuing us to align with or at the very least recognize her autonomy.

Even as these cliffhangers drive the plot forward with significant narrative consequence, Nancy’s repeated behaviors and gestures within the changing narrative suggest that she herself does not change. Like Lucy and rebellious sitcom women, Nancy, and how she relates to her situations, remains constant. No matter the reinstatement of the status quo at the end of each episode, in *I Love Lucy*, Lucy always returns to create the same narrative disorder. Nancy, too, is never beat down by her fast-

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<sup>64</sup> Walters & Harrison, “Not Ready to Make Nice,” 41.

<sup>65</sup> Brunsdon, et al., *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, 6.

paced narrative. Mary-Louise Parker's performance at the center of the show goes a long way in depicting Nancy as a fundamentally unchanged and disruptive character. She has similar gestures and reactions to changing events. For example, the show often cuts to Nancy's looks of shock, concern, or fear and lingers on her performance: her face when she discovers heroin in her garage<sup>66</sup> is eerily similar to her reaction at the end of season two, as well as to when Shane kills Pilar or when she discovers that Shane joined the police force.<sup>67</sup> This look of shock and awe in Nancy's close-ups cues us to see her as the same character from season one to season eight who hasn't faced consequences for her decisions. The same is true of Nancy's repeated actions: we always see her drinking iced coffee, to the point where Andy even jokes about her obsession after hitting her drink out of her hands in season six<sup>68</sup>; we witness repeated montages of Nancy selling weed in her changing locales; and we see her protecting her sons, verbally or physically assaulting anyone who threatens them. The list goes on. While there are slight differences in each situation, Nancy's feelings and reactions generally remain constant. She continues to violate norms and astonish those around her; Nancy is not forced to change or repent despite the unwieldy melodramatic narrative. Rather, she is allowed to stay the same unruly mother, cuing us to celebrate Nancy for her transgressions against her oppressive situations rather than admonish her for them.

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<sup>66</sup> *Weeds*, 3.05 "Bill Sussman."

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 8.07 "Unfreeze," Showtime, August 12, 2012, directed by Perry Lang.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 6.05 "Boomerang," Showtime, September 20, 2010, directed by Scott Ellis.

### Colorful Characters: The Botwins & the Rotating Ensemble

“I’m being tested for something I did to you in a previous life. Because in this life, where I have repeatedly allowed you to fuck me over a fence, whatever I do, you keep coming back.”<sup>69</sup>

The cast repeats and varies over *Weeds*’ eight seasons, as well. As the series moves through settings and stories, its supporting cast changes significantly while its core cast, the Botwin family, remains constant. The show uses its ensemble, including Nancy’s fleeting husbands, as sources of comedy, plot development, and thematic resonance in order to center emotional consequences within the drama of the family. The ensemble often tries to control or define Nancy based on their gendered assumptions of her, but she regularly defies and abandons them. Supporting characters are disposable, punctuating how Nancy cannot be permanently controlled by anyone else in the narrative. In contrast, the family members, including Andy as a romantic interest, are present throughout the entire show and are all unruly in their own rights, cuing us to align with them and root for their successes despite the terrible treatment they receive from Nancy. Rather than try to change Nancy or mold her into what they think she should be—as a mother and partner—they accept and love her *for* her transgressions against suburban domesticity.

“I Have to Warn You...My Last Two Relationships, the Guys Ended Up Dead”<sup>70</sup>

Many peripheral characters, particularly Nancy’s rotating husbands, attempt to confine Nancy and challenge her autonomy. However, their stories are short-lived and they come and go from the narrative. Nancy rejects their control. She is not defined by

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<sup>69</sup> *Weeds*, 4.05 “No Man is Pudding.”

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 3.07 “He Taught Me How to Drive-By.”

them or their expectations of her. Rather, the show constructs the peripheral characters as comedic and temporary to assert Nancy's dominance within the narrative as she resists gendered norms of domesticity and motherhood. First, many of the guest characters are often comedic, heightened, and larger-than-life villains; they are simply sources of conflict, like Guillermo, Sucio, or Pilar. The same holds true for bit characters in *Agrestic*, such as PTA members. We are never aligned with these characters because of their lack of dialogue, screen time, and backstories. We only learn about them when our main characters, like Andy, interact with them. They are more nuisances in Nancy's story than anything else, creating narrative conflict that she must overcome. Therefore, we don't take their attempts to limit Nancy and her actions very seriously—we laugh at them, knowing they will lose and eventually leave the show. Other peripheral characters, additionally, are used for thematic or paralleling effects, asking us to compare them to our central characters. Tim, for example, in season eight is established as a direct comparison to Shane: they have both lost their father and have homicidal tendencies. However, in part due to Tim's limited screen time, we do not care as much for him as we understand him in *relation* to Shane. Again, Tim is not a serious threat to Nancy's autonomy even though he shoots her in the head; we know she will live and Tim will disappear, cuing us to emotionally align with the family and their successes rather than the external forces that try to contain them.

More prominent supporting characters also come and go from the narrative, for the show's changing settings cannot stabilize the cast. By shedding major characters, we focus on Nancy and her family as they meet new people and enter new situations. Heylia and Conrad, for example, are main characters in the first three seasons, but as soon as Nancy leaves *Agrestic*, they drop from the show without a second thought. Celia, too, is

a prominent character for the first five seasons, but once the family decides to hit the road, Celia disappears without as much as a passing mention. These characters, while important, are not static; they are not *the* story but rather part of Nancy and her family's story and how we understand it. Celia's attempt to make Agrestic a drug free zone may seem like a strange detour into small town politics, but it is used for thematic purposes, urging us to recognize the oppressiveness of Agrestic. Additionally, it eventually ties back into Nancy's plotline in season three, when Celia discovers Nancy's weed and throws it in her pool, subsequently propelling the plot forward by putting Nancy in U-Turn's financial control.<sup>71</sup> These characters provide obstacles for Nancy, but she is always the last one standing. Her static suburban life and those associated with it cannot be maintained. Additionally, these characters also return melodramatically, often in cliffhangers: Heylia returns with a shotgun pointed at Nancy in season seven, four years after we have last seen her.<sup>72</sup> Heylia returns simply because Nancy needs weed from her and it propels the plot forward. While we do get momentary pleasure simply from seeing an old favorite return, Heylia only comes back to serve a purpose for Nancy's character and business. Anyone on the show is expendable and anyone can return at a moment's notice. Through these returns, we recognize the shifting world outside of Nancy's control but also focus on how she and her family remain unchanged and constant. The rotating cast provides problems for Nancy, trying to limit her deviance, but she always survives and comes out on top.

Similarly, Nancy has many romantic and sexual partners throughout the series, but they are always brief, demonstrating how *Weeds* uses melodramatic and comedic

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<sup>71</sup> *Weeds*, 3.01 "Doing the Backstroke," Showtime, August 13, 2007, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 7.05 "Fingers Only Meat Banquet," Showtime, July 25, 2011, directed by Scott Ellis.

conventions to center Nancy as an unpunished and independent woman. Kohan urges us to side with Nancy as she struggles with men who try to control her. She refuses to be defined by them. After Judah dies, Nancy remarries three times, but I will focus on her first two, most narratively significant, marriages: Peter, the DEA agent, in season two, and Esteban, the drug cartel leader, in the second half of season five. The marriages are fleeting, functioning similarly to Judah's absence, to encourage us to think of Nancy as her own person outside of the man she is with. Since Nancy has multiple husbands, characters and viewers can't view any one of them as constitutive of her identity. Importantly, Nancy marries both Peter and Esteban for survival and control, to ensure that Peter can't testify against her and that Esteban won't kill her. Her marriages are more business arrangements than romantic unions. While at the altar with Peter, Nancy even says, "Strictly business."<sup>73</sup> And, when her life is threatened, she immediately runs away from Esteban without remorse.<sup>74</sup> This is not to say that she doesn't love her husbands, particularly Esteban, but rather that love or character development is not the primary function of these relationships. Instead, it is to move the narrative forward in different, exciting ways. Just as she uses her pregnancy and status as a widow as methods of survival, she functions as a disorderly wife through these repeated business arrangement marriages, cuing us to understand her as a woman beyond men's control or definitions.

Her marriages unsurprisingly go sour when Peter and Esteban attempt to assert authority over her. When Nancy returns to traditional domestic scenarios, she cannot fit in or be satisfied by them. For example, in season two, Peter tries to convince Nancy to

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<sup>73</sup> *Weeds*, 2.03 "Last Tango in Agrestic."

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 6.01 "Thwack," Showtime, August 16, 2010, directed by Scott Ellis.

stop being a drug dealer, suggesting that he can provide her a stable income so she can retire. “Go be a mom,” he tells her.<sup>75</sup> Peter also tries to be a father-figure to Shane and Silas, slamming Silas’s elbow on the table when he doesn’t listen to his mom. While Peter here functions like Ricky Ricardo in *I Love Lucy*, trying to contain Nancy’s rebelliousness, she chooses not to be tied down by his desires and promptly disposes of him. She questions his disciplining of Silas, asking angrily, “Why did you do that thing with his elbow?” Later in the same episode, she kicks him out of her house, telling Conrad, “Agent Wonderbread [Peter] is not my husband, not in this lifetime. I don’t love him.”<sup>76</sup> When Peter tries to assert his control and dominance over Nancy, she rejects him and moves onto the next man. Peter cannot change her. She refuses to fit into a harmful myth of suburban domesticity. The same is true for Esteban, who also tries to parent Shane and Silas and tell Nancy how she should act. At one point, he tells her to stop wearing a certain perfume because, “It smells like a man.”<sup>77</sup> The situation is eerily reminiscent of her conflict with Peter; her husband tries make her more “feminine” and limit her aberrant behavior. Just as with Peter, though, she leaves Esteban shortly after. The variation of the men in her life contributes to the fast-paced, constantly changing narrative, but the repetition of similarly expendable marriages also cues us to recognize that Nancy is allowed to both enact change within the narrative and remain unchanged by it. In fact, both men end up dying due to their involvement with her: Peter is killed by an Armenian gang and Esteban is killed in jail. We know that each new marriage will only be temporary because she is, as Andy calls her, a “penis fly trap.”<sup>78</sup> *Weeds* primes us

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<sup>75</sup> *Weeds*, 2.05 “Mrs. Botwin’s Neighborhood,” Showtime, September 11, 2006, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 2.10 “Mile Deep and a Foot Wide,” Showtime, October 16, 2006, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 5.13 “All About My Mom,” Showtime, August 31, 2009, directed by Scott Ellis.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 6.05 “Boomerang.”

to understand that Nancy's marriages are temporary, bound to collapse. We wait to see how they will fall apart, taking pleasure in Nancy's reclamation of authority against these men.

“That’s the Beauty of a Tribe. We Can Kvetch”<sup>79</sup>

In contrast to this changing ensemble, Kohan focuses our attention on those characters who don't leave: the family. The Botwins are at the center of *Weeds*. While other characters come and go from Nancy's life, it is imperative that we understand how and why her family—Shane, Silas, and Andy—remains constant. Emotional consequence lies in these four major characters, as Nancy's actions *do* have significant impacts on their lives. She treats them terribly at times, but they stay with her and continue to love her. I argue that this narrative contradiction cues us to align with Nancy, as we recognize the consequence of her actions while also understand how her family is all working together in opposition to external social forces. We root for them while their stories continue indefinitely. No matter how many crazy melodramatic plot twists and turns occur, even after Shane kills Pilar or Silas tries to leave for college, the family remains intact.

Andy stays with Nancy and the kids even though he isn't part of their nuclear family, functioning as a constant romantic interest in direct contrast to Esteban and Peter. He enters in the series' fourth episode and doesn't leave Nancy's side until the very last frame of the series. As with her children, Nancy repeatedly mistreats Andy, but

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<sup>79</sup> *Weeds*, 6.11 “Viking Pride,” Showtime, November 1, 2010, directed by Michael Trimm.

he always stays. By contrasting Andy's dependency with Nancy's other partners and the changing plot, the viewer is prompted to hope for their eventual romantic union and also take pleasure in Nancy's independence and indefinite narrative disruption. Their story denies us narrative closure by functioning within the sitcom "will-they-won't-they" trope.<sup>80</sup> This trope, where two characters have unresolved sexual tension, operates as a type of narrative stasis. It stalls the inevitable, making viewers wait seasons, or even entire series like in the case of *Friends*, for a particular coupling. Andy's relationship with Nancy is similarly stalled, and—as in many "will-they-won't-they" couples, including Jim and Pam in *The Office*—they don't realize that they have feelings for one another even while they act flirtatiously with each other, urging the audience to root for them as a couple even when they themselves don't. Even though Andy doesn't discover he loves Nancy until the end of season four, we see Nancy and Andy kiss each other passionately to evade border patrol officers earlier in the season, signaling to the audience that they have tremendous chemistry. The show offers us a vision of what they could look like together.<sup>81</sup> Once Andy discovers his feelings, we hope Nancy will have a similar revelation, with Andy telling her, "You like me, Nancy, and that's why you don't want to."<sup>82</sup> There are simply narrative obstacles in the way, such as her pregnancy with Esteban's baby, cuing us to wait for narrative conditions to change, for Esteban to die as we know he must, until Andy is the last man standing.

However, their relationship diverges from most "will-they-won't-they" narratives because Nancy does not reciprocate Andy's feelings. Rather than be contained by the

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<sup>80</sup> Lesley Goldberg, "'Weeds' Series Finale: Did Nancy Pay for Her Sins?" *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 16, 2012.

<sup>81</sup> *Weeds*, 4.04 "The Three Coolers," Showtime, July 7, 2008, directed by Paris Barclay.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 5.04 "Super Happy Lucky," Showtime, June 29, 2009, directed by Scott Ellis.

stasis of their romance, Nancy uses the stasis to control Andy, manipulating his emotions so that he stays with her. At the beginning of season six, for example, Nancy flees the Mexican border with her boys and convinces Andy to come along with her, even though he must leave behind his new fiancé.<sup>83</sup> He abandons the hope for a promising new life so he can be with Nancy, even though he knows she doesn't love him back. Seasons later, he rants, "And why doesn't she love me back? And why can't I move on with my life? My own life, not the one where I'm this satellite orbiting her sun and I'm raising her sons."<sup>84</sup> Additionally, as her brother-in-law, Andy is a very nontraditional romantic interest. Their relationship challenges norms of widowhood and suburban domesticity, as we watch Nancy flirt with her dead husband's brother. As a pair, they create a nontraditional family structure, cuing us to root for their union and continued violations of social norms. In this way, their relationship mixes the more heavily comedic "will-they-won't-they" trope with Andy's unrequited love, a central characteristic of many melodramas, urging us to both recognize Nancy's power and our own desire for this antinormative, bizarre family to stay together. Nancy may not want to be with him, but she also refuses to let him go, saying, "I'm afraid....that you'll leave me! Us."<sup>85</sup>

In the series' penultimate episode, they finally have sex, but it is not exciting or pleasurable for the viewer; it is instead presented as painful. In an attempt to make Andy stay her, Nancy has sex with him on the sidewalk where Judah died years ago. Nancy's attempt to make him stay, though, does not work, and Andy runs away from her, into the night. This sex scene upsets our expectations of a resolution of their plot, suggesting

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<sup>83</sup> *Weeds*, 6.01 "Thwack."

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 8.01 "Messy," Showtime, July 1, 2012, directed by Michael Trimm.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 6.05 "Boomerang."

that their story has no ending even when they come together. In this sequence, “tears come...from the destruction of the union [and] the failure of the fantasy and its wish.”<sup>86</sup> Their sex yields no fantasy of resolution, only more misery and conflict. However, their story does not end here, and Andy returns in the following episode, although it is set ten years later. He is seen first in the kitchen, cooking Nancy breakfast, a clear parallel to his introduction in the first season.<sup>87</sup> His paralleled introductions cue us to compare the two moments and understand that, no matter all that has changed, Andy will always be there. Even though he tells Nancy in a heartfelt exchange, “I’ll always be grateful for you, and I’ll always love you, Pants, but I can’t be near you,” we see them together in the series’ last scene, smoking a joint with the rest of the family.<sup>88</sup> Despite his assertion that he can’t be near her, Andy’s constant presence suggests that he will return. By mixing generic conventions, the show cues us to understand that Nancy is in control of their relationship and to sympathize with her because, while Nancy may treat Andy horribly, we *want* them to be together. We, like Nancy, don’t want Andy to leave. In that way, as with the show’s narrative, there is no clear end in sight: no satisfying consummation but also no clean break. Their complicated relationship creates an unresolvable narrative that allows Nancy to keep thriving and surviving as an unruly protagonist, mother, wife, partner, and friend. She cannot be changed or easily defined in the narrative. When Andy tries to box them in as an O. Henry story, she disagrees, saying, “No, we’re our own fucked up little story.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” 19.

<sup>87</sup> *Weeds*, 1.04 “Fashion of the Christ,” Showtime, August 29, 2005, directed by Burr Steers.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 8.12 “It’s Time,” Showtime, September 16, 2012, directed by Michael Trimm.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 5.13 “All About My Mom.”

Similarly, Nancy's children continue to love her despite her neglect. As with Andy, we don't entirely blame her for her parental carelessness because the kids are able to enact change within the plot as well. We are therefore cued to see all the Botwins as antinormative in their own right and therefore encouraged to continue sympathizing with Nancy's transgressions as a mother. In other words, she is an "aberrant mom" who has "aberrant kids."<sup>90</sup> They are not simply victims of their mother's neglect—and yes, she *does* truly neglect them—but they are also disruptive, reminiscent of sitcom protagonists, fighting against others' restrictive expectations and their constantly changing world. Shane, for example, becomes a murderer, killing Pilar at the end of the fifth season. While Nancy is not an attentive mother, the show does not blame her for Shane's actions. When pressed about whether or not things could have been different for Shane had Nancy taken a different path, she says:

Nancy: "We would have had to sell the house. Moved to a very different zip code. You [Silas] and Shane would have gone to even lousier public schools....You probably still would have knocked up a girl. Maybe this one would have been blind instead of deaf or missing a limb. You would have struggled with your grades, smoked weed, dropped out, gotten your GED. Your brother still would have had rage issues. He would have lost his virginity to a skanky girl or a skanky girl-duo. He would have grown increasingly alienated, ended up stabbing the mailman or my manager at the Gap. We would have been in the same exact spot we are in now."<sup>91</sup>

Shane agrees with Nancy's sentiments, saying he would have probably still killed someone, validating Nancy's claims and parenting. Additionally, in earlier seasons, Shane acts in ways that are not considered normal or acceptable by his peers, paralleling Nancy's actions. His nickname is even "Strange Botwin." Throughout the first season, he shoots a mountain lion, reenacts terrorist hostage videos, and draws bloody and disturbing pictures. Like his mother, he uses profanity and crime as a way of creating

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<sup>90</sup> Walters & Harrison, "Not Ready to Make Nice," 42.

<sup>91</sup> *Weeds*, 6.03 "A Yippity Sippity," Showtime, August 30, 2010, directed by Tate Donovan.

chaos in a world that attempts to control him, his actions, and his language. All of his actions, though, are more humorous than concerning. By constructing these moments as comedic, the show foreshadows his later, more serious, crimes and cues us to recognize his actions as, like Nancy's, something to be celebrated and encouraged instead of feared. We don't blame Nancy for ruining her children because the show paints Shane as an already rebellious character, questioning what is considered acceptable by his schools, peers, and eventually the law. In fact, Nancy is even shown to be a beneficial presence in Shane's life, offering to help him get back on his feet and leave a gang in the series finale. By suggesting she could help him, Kohan makes it clear it is not Nancy's fault that Shane is in this situation, allowing us to recognize both "Nancy's disregard for the safety of her children" and her "powerful love at work."<sup>92</sup>

Silas might be an even clearer "victim" of Nancy's neglect, yet he also does not blame Nancy. Many melodramatic coincidences and forces outside of his control negatively affect him: he learns that a man named Lars, not Judah, is his biological father; all of the weed he grew is stolen; and his girlfriend is shipped off to boarding school in the second episode. He is dragged along by the serialized plot with no way of affecting it, emphasizing his lack of control in unfair environments. However, even while he actively hunts for a "normal" life, tempted to leave the Botwins and earn a college degree, he actively chooses to be a drug dealer in season three and begins running his own operation in season seven. In a sense, he and Nancy become business partners. While the incidents that harm him cue us to recognize how difficult and oppressive the world can be, he always returns to his family and drug dealing, urging us to recognize how he

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<sup>92</sup> Walters & Harrison, "Not Ready to Make Nice," 49-50.

also rejects a “normal” life on his own terms. At the end of season six, he leaves a note that suggests he has left his family for good, but he comes back at the last moment to meet his mother at the airport. As Andy tells him in the epigraph to this section, being a Botwin is difficult, but it is something Silas ultimately chooses. His decision to accept that he is a Botwin rather than attempt to be “normal” urges us to align with the family and Nancy as they challenge normative expectations.

Additionally, Silas admits that he doesn’t resent Nancy for the damage she has caused him. The show recognizes the consequences of Nancy’s actions on Silas and Shane, but it also suggests that much of the kids’ struggles and pain come from external forces, and therefore, Nancy and the rest of her family are on the same side. They stay together. In season seven, Silas yells at Nancy for being a horrible mother, but he still helps her get custody of her new baby Stevie, testifying to a judge: “She loves us....Look, she’s not mom of the year, but whatever you want to do, just give her a fair fight.”<sup>93</sup> He supports his mother in this situation despite her disinterest in his own childhood. Also, at the end of the series, Silas muses on his life and tells Nancy that he feels no ill will towards her. While one reviewer argues, “None of them [Shane and Silas] want to be with [Nancy] considering she never really achieves redemption in the end,” I argue that this lack of redemption is entirely the point of their relationship.<sup>94</sup> Silas may not want to live with Nancy, but he respects her and forgives her for everything, saying, “Did you hurt me? Yes. Do I carry around resentment and spend my days railing against what could have been if only I’d had a normal childhood? I don’t. I really don’t.”<sup>95</sup> In this

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<sup>93</sup> *Weeds*, 7.05 “Fingers Only Meat Banquet.”

<sup>94</sup> Goldberg, “‘Weeds’ Series Finale: Did Nancy Pay For Her Sins?”

<sup>95</sup> *Weeds*, 8.12 “It’s Time.”

sense, Silas embraces his abnormal childhood and legitimizes Nancy's, and all of the Botwins', actions. Through this construction of Silas as himself aberrant and choosing of this antinormative lifestyle, *Weeds* suggests that Nancy does not need to redeem herself. Rather, we see that her shattering of the norms associated with motherhood and domesticity are entirely justified.

Nancy is, simply put, a bad mother. This point is difficult to dispute. However, despite her harmful parenting, she loves and protects her children, solidifying their status as a single family unit in the narrative. When Shane gets kidnapped in season six, she fights desperately to save him, shooting an arrow into one of his kidnapper's legs; when Silas gets beat up by one of his girlfriend's fathers, she tells the dad, "You a lay a hand on my kid again, I will kill you."<sup>96</sup> Even if she is an often neglectful mother, she is also "explicitly vengeful when [she] perceives a threat or even a minor slight to [her] children."<sup>97</sup> Through the consistency of and emotional focus on Nancy's family, we recognize how the show isn't "about selling or doing weed at all. It's an outlaw show."<sup>98</sup> All of the Botwins are outlaws. They all fight against their oppressive world together in their own way, which allows us to sympathize with and root for Nancy and her transgressions rather than blame her for her children's faults. Shane asks Nancy once, "Do you ever think about going back to right after dad died and doing things differently?" Nancy rejects this hypothetical, though, saying, "I try not to think about it."<sup>99</sup> She is not necessarily sad about the life she has created, and instead of thinking about what she could have done differently with her children or Andy, we are cued to

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<sup>96</sup> *Weeds*, 2.05 "Mrs. Botwin's Neighborhood."

<sup>97</sup> Walters & Harrison, "Not Ready to Make Nice," 41.

<sup>98</sup> McLeod, "VIFF 2008 Interview."

<sup>99</sup> *Weeds*, 5.12 "Glue," Showtime, August 24, 2009, directed by Michael Pressman.

embrace the life that she and her family have chosen. She has carved out her own path, and we follow it with the rest of the Botwins till the very end—an end that is nowhere in sight.

### **Conclusion: “A Meandering Path to the Finale”<sup>100</sup>**

“Don’t sit here and tell me you want to be someone else when you do fuck all the change that’s going on.”<sup>101</sup>

Can people ever change? This is one of the central questions that Jenji Kohan’s *Weeds* proposes. Nancy moves through the narrative frequently harming the people she cares most about, yet she never repents. She is not changed or redeemed. At the end of season six, though, it appears as if Nancy is different, ready to sacrifice herself for her family. Esteban has caught up to her, out to kill her for stealing his baby, so she lets Shane, Silas, and Andy escape on a plane to Copenhagen and hands herself over to Esteban at the airport. Initially, it seems as if she has *finally* put her family above herself, sacrificing her life for their well-being. In doing so, she fits into a long line of melodramatic mothers, as in *Stella Dallas* (1937), who are “saintly sacrificers...giving all for their progeny’s upward mobility and emotional sustenance.”<sup>102</sup> However, unlike the prototypical sacrificial mother, Nancy does not selflessly make this decision. She also does it to stay alive. She calls the cops on Esteban and herself, taking the fall for Shane’s murder of Pilar, not only to help Shane but also to ensure that Esteban cannot kill her. In that sense, Nancy is not selfless or even partially redeemed, for “the ‘needs’ of the mother and child coalesce.”<sup>103</sup> Nancy does not sacrifice herself or her business for her

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<sup>100</sup> Lyons, “A List of Everything Nancy Has Done on *Weeds*.”

<sup>101</sup> *Weeds*, 5.12 “Glue.”

<sup>102</sup> Walters & Harrison, “Not Ready to Make Nice,” 39.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

children but rather manipulates her situation to stay alive; in the following season, she leaves prison and continues to deal weed. She is not stopped and she does not “learn her lesson.” Bringing back the comparison to *Breaking Bad* is particularly poignant here, as Walter ends that series owning his sins and dying for them. In *Weeds*, though, Nancy does not pay for her crimes. As Andy tells her, rather than sacrificing for her family, “what [she] sacrificed was [her] family.”<sup>104</sup> And, despite her misdeeds, in the show’s final moments, her family still surrounds and supports her as they pass a joint around. Thus, *Weeds* is not about retribution or redemption, for Nancy is an uncontrollable force.

Perhaps this lack of closure or punishment for Nancy in part contributed to the show’s plummeting critical reception. Interestingly, as the show aged and moved past its Agrestic roots, many viewers lost interest in the Botwins. I will conclude by looking at this phenomenon: why are so many people against the direction that the show took? Understanding how *Weeds* mixes generic conventions to repeat and vary its structure is necessary for examining this shift in audience judgment. While many say the show completely lost or reinvented itself, I argue that it has always functioned to celebrate Nancy as she manipulates, and at times obliterates, notions of narrative progress. One critic argues, “*Weeds* isn’t remembered as a Great Show because it took countless weird—though bold—turns in the middle and later seasons.”<sup>105</sup> Another critic had similar concerns: “*Weeds* took what can generously be called a meandering path to that finale—a path that had more detours and dead ends than any reasonable show should be able to pull off.”<sup>106</sup> These criticisms suggest the show lived past its prime, continuing to

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<sup>104</sup> *Weeds*, 5.12 “Glue.”

<sup>105</sup> Cory Barker, “Who is Ruining ‘Orange is the New Black’ —Jenji Kohan or Netflix?” *Complex*, June 16, 2016.

<sup>106</sup> Lyons, “A List of Everything Nancy Has Done on *Weeds*.”

tell a story that should have ended. Many critics question if *Weeds* ended as the same show we started with due to its shifting plots, settings, and characters. At the same time, though, *nothing* changes: Nancy remains the same, and the stories don't lead anywhere conclusive. Critics feel a tension between reinvention and stabilization. In other words, they are concerned that things are simultaneously changing too much and not changing enough.

This tension, however, has been part of the show's formula since its very first episode. *Weeds* constructs a rebellious protagonist, inspired by a long tradition of sitcom characters, who resists closure and resolution. Through its juxtaposing spaces, melodramatic coincidences and situations, and rotating characters, the series cues us to understand Nancy as someone who remains the same despite the external forces that try to change and define her. Like all the best serials, her story does not end; as soon as one conflict concludes, such as Nancy's establishment of her drug empire in season one, another conflict emerges, like Peter being a DEA agent. One critic argues that Showtime milked *Weeds* "for all [it was] worth, way past [its] expiration date."<sup>107</sup> On the contrary, I suggest that *Weeds* is constructed specifically to *not have* an expiration date. While many of the male antihero shows have a concrete ending, moving towards their main character's deaths or redemptions, *Weeds* tells Nancy's story as one that can go on forever. She remains constant as she reacts to and affects her social world. I do not mean to invalidate the opinions of those who stopped enjoying the show after the Botwins left Agrestic—television shows can have a multiplicity of readings and viewers and critics are

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<sup>107</sup> Joel Keller, "Why Does Showtime Run Shows Like 'Nurse Jackie' Into the Ground?" *IndieWire*, June 22, 2014.

obviously free to understand stories on their own terms. Things change so much over the course of the series that “it becomes easy [to dislike it].”<sup>108</sup>

Rather, I argue that critics’ hesitation to embrace the show’s later seasons might be due to the very nature of how the show is constructed, as one that straddles the line between narrative change and character stability. These transgressive characters’ narratives are built to continue indefinitely, fitting into Showtime’s branding as supporting taboo or suggestive stories that are bold and beautiful. The generic hybridity of *Weeds* celebrates the downtrodden and socially ostracized while also contributing to Showtime’s image as a network that challenges social norms, as well as our expectations of genre and television at large. Showtime continued to cultivate female-led dramedies to contribute to its brand, but subsequent shows moved on to tell drastically different stories with similar tools. After focusing on a series’ large-scale consequence in *Weeds*, in the following chapter, I will look at *United States of Tara* as a case study of how this generic hybridity is deployed in a different way, zeroing in on its internal versus external conflict to explore mental illness and trauma within one family. *Weeds*’ narrative conflicts, though, cannot be isolated to a single family or setting, and they can never be fully resolved, allowing Nancy to continue living “on the run” without “much of a destination or plan.”<sup>109</sup> By exploring comedic and melodramatic conventions, we can recognize *Weeds* as not about breaking out of suburbia or reaching a particular goal, but rather about resisting consequence and shattering our expectations of what Nancy and the show itself should be. The show, like the Botwins, asks us to accept and celebrate it for its eccentricity.

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<sup>108</sup> Fienberg, “Weeds Season 6 Review.”

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Fractured Selves: Expanding the Brand in *United States of Tara***

“I know we’ll be just fine when we learn to love the ride.”<sup>1</sup>

“I just want to explain where I’m at right now while I’m still lucid,” Tara Gregson explains in the opening minutes of Diablo Cody’s *United States of Tara*.<sup>2</sup> She continues, “I’m under a lot of pressure recently.” *United States of Tara* tells the story of Tara Gregson and her family—her husband Max and two kids Marshall and Kate—as she grapples with Dissociative Identity Disorder (referred to as DID moving forward), which causes her to transition between multiple personalities called “alters.” She struggles to stay in control of her body, and later in the pilot, one of Tara’s alters, Buck, emerges and beats up her daughter’s ex-boyfriend as everyone from her school looks on. Due to her DID, Tara fits into a pattern of strong female leads in Showtime half hour dramedies, which began with *Weeds*; like Nancy, Tara is a white, upper middle class suburban mother who transgresses social norms. Many people patronize her, fear her, and don’t know how to interact with her alters. In the pilot, Kate’s ex-boyfriend does not know what to do when Buck beats him up, exasperatedly saying, “Come on, Mrs. Gregson, I can’t even hit you back!” Buck, though, has no sympathy, spiting back, “What is this ‘Mrs. Gregson’ bullshit? I am Buck and I will fuck you sideways,” before clocking him in the face.

Tara and her alters are unabashedly disruptive, upsetting assumptions of what it means to be a good and responsible mother. In her confrontation with Kate’s ex, Tara is

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<sup>1</sup> *United States of Tara*, Opening Credits, Showtime, 2009-2011.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 1.01 “Pilot.” I will also refer to the series as *Tara* throughout the chapter.

not a quiet, peaceful caretaker but rather a violent and reckless biker. Following in *Weeds*' footsteps, by merging melodramatic and sitcom conventions, Cody urges us to align with Tara as she violates social norms and reveals the impossible situation of suburban motherhood. However, despite their similarities, *Weeds*' and *Tara*'s stories differ greatly. *Weeds*' conflict looks outward to the drug dealers, politicians, and police officers Nancy encounters, but *Tara* looks inward, internalizing external trauma in Tara's DID. Through its narrative, *Tara* tackles similar questions as *Weeds* by "taking the notion of forgiveness and acceptance to such an extreme with Tara's unsolvable condition."<sup>3</sup> From the first scene, the scope of the conflict is immediately smaller: Tara is not selling drugs or coming face to face with guns, but rather she is struggling to stay lucid after she learns of her daughter's recent sexual activity. Family secrets, the pressures of trying to be a perfect mother, and external judgments force Tara to transition, highlighting that her DID is in its own right a rebellion against an external world. Her multiple personalities suggest that she cannot fit into one set narrative and identity that others impose on her; she is a housewife, biker, party girl, terrified child, and therapist all at once. The show recognizes the consequences of her alters on the family, but they continue to love her regardless, urging us to sympathize with the Gregsons as a collective antinormative family. They accept Tara's and their own abnormalities as part of who they are, good parts and bad, and love her not in spite of them but rather because of them. Thus, ultimately, *Tara* is one family's love story, celebrating the Gregsons' transgressions against the dangerously oppressive expectation to "be normal."

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Sepinwall, "Stream This in the Summer: United States of Tara," *HitFix*, July 21, 2016.

In this chapter, I will examine how *United States of Tara* utilizes generic hybridity to zero in on Tara's internal conflict, which emanates from the traumas and expectations of her seemingly perfect and pristine suburban life and childhood. To trace how *Tara* and its protagonists' unruliness are constructed and validated by the narrative, I will first briefly situate the series in Showtime's history and brand identity. I will then analyze Tara's alters as both sources of comedic unruliness and melodramatic pathos, cuing us to align with them despite the chaos they create. Her unruliness is further defined by the series' unresolvable mystery of Tara's condition and unrestricted narration, which again ask us to embrace Tara and the rest of her family as they are unable to fit into their designated social roles. Finally, I will conclude by exploring how all of these elements work together in a single episode from *Tara*'s second season, "Torando!"<sup>4</sup> Through its internal conflict, the show recognizes that Tara cannot be cured and argues that we shouldn't expect or demand her to. Tara is not entirely a victim to her mental illness nor unscathed by it—it is a part of what makes her and her family who they are, unable to fit into coherent or "integrated" narratives. As Shoshana, one of Tara's alters, explains, "All people have ways of being not integrated."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Tara's inability to find a cure is not a tragedy. Rather, we are cued to find joy and happiness in Tara's alters, as the family continues to love one another for their aberrancy; *Tara* finds comedy in the trauma. As its theme song repeats every episode, we and the Gregsons "learn to love the ride."

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<sup>4</sup> *United States of Tara*, 2.06 "Torando!" Showtime, April 26, 2010, directed by Craig Gillespie.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 2.04 "You Becoming You," Showtime, April 12, 2010, directed by Adam Davidson.

## The Original Programming Boom

2005 was a remarkable moment in Showtime's history. After the successful premiere of *Weeds*, followed by *Dexter* in 2006, Showtime had firmly cemented itself as a household name in the premium cable conversation. The network cultivated its brand by focusing on original programming with edgy, taboo protagonists and premises that also retained characteristics of "quality television," such as high-profile actors, serialized storytelling, and writer/director auteurs. Where Showtime once aired mostly sports, music, and movies, it now experienced great success by reorienting its focus. As Matt Blank, CEO of Showtime from 1995 to 2015, said, "What's now driving the Showtime brand...are scripted original series."<sup>6</sup> Mary-Louise Parker's performance in *Weeds* earned Showtime a Golden Globe for Best Lead Actress in a Comedy in 2006,<sup>7</sup> and from 2007 to 2008, Showtime gained 1.5 million new subscribers while HBO only grew by 200,000.<sup>8</sup> HBO still greatly outnumbered Showtime's subscribers, but while Showtime had consistently been viewed as "a perennial runner-up to HBO,"<sup>9</sup> lacking the same type of high-quality programming that made HBO popular in the late 1990s, they were now growing at an incredible rate: the 1.5 million new subscribers in 2007 was a 10% increase in their viewership at the time, making it their best year yet financially.<sup>10</sup>

In 2009, Showtime expanded its lineup with the premieres of *United States of Tara* in January and *Nurse Jackie* in June. These shows, in conjunction with *Weeds*, created a roster of Showtime dramedies centered on difficult and socially transgressive

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<sup>6</sup> John Dempsey, "Showtime Series Touts Mojo," *Variety*, February 14, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Littelton, "The Man with the Plan."

<sup>8</sup> Janet Stilson, "On With the Show," *Mediaweek*, September 22, 2008, 16.

<sup>9</sup> R. Thomas Umstead, "Shameless: Behind Showtime's Strategy to Stay Edgy," *Multichannel News*, January 17, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Dempsey, "Showtime Touts Series Mojo."

protagonists. It is no coincidence that *Tara* and *Nurse Jackie* aired in the same year, too, as Showtime marketed them together to strengthen their brand. During the late 2000s, more dramedies aired on the network, including *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* and *The Big C*, mixing comedy and melodrama to depict controversial topics and characters. As previously described, Showtime amassed and marketed the dramedies together at this period of significant growth for the network in order to expand its existing identity, using the dramedies' playfulness to distinguish the network from HBO's line of morally ambiguous leads. This genre-mixing directly supported Showtime's brand as one of unique, challenging, and fun stories. Alexa Junge, the first season showrunner of *United States of Tara*, even said, "I think part of why it [the show] worked out so well is because we're at Showtime, and they're not afraid to go anywhere. It can be funny, it can be dark."<sup>11</sup> Showtime dramedies can make you laugh and cry, often in the same moment. By utilizing generic hybridity, Showtime encourages audiences to embrace and care for its audacious, antinormative characters, but also to ultimately *enjoy* their deviance.

In addition to celebrating an antinormative protagonist, *United States of Tara* also furthered Showtime's brand by mixing an off-color premise with established actors, writers, and directors to signal to audiences that it is still "quality" programming, just like HBO. Toni Collette led the cast of *Tara*, receiving universal acclaim for her performance. The show was noted for being "unabashedly a vehicle for a star who brings meaning to the notion of having personality aplenty—and then some."<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Collette won an Emmy for the show's first season in 2009.<sup>13</sup> Showtime used Collette's star power to

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<sup>11</sup> Korbi Ghosh, "'United States of Tara' Alexa Junge Talks First Season," *Screener*, April 6, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Bryan Lowry, "'Tara' Has Personality to Spare," *Variety*, January 10, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Ulmstead, "Shameless: Behind Showtime's Strategy to Stay Edgy."

establish itself as a network that makes edgy programming *quality* through exceptional acting. Many of the others dramedies functioned similarly, with Edie Falco, for example, following her acclaimed role as Carmela Soprano on *The Sopranos* with Jackie Peyton. Showtime adopted the prestige of HBO's actors but used them to tell divergent stories.

The show's creative team had a similar cachet, led by creator Diablo Cody and producer Steven Spielberg. Spielberg was a major producer on the project with a lot of hands-on creative influence, adding more prestige to the show.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, like Jenji Kohan of *Weeds*, Diablo Cody has a distinct writing style. She had just come off the success of *Juno*, the 2007 film about a pregnant teenager, and received wide acclaim for her quirky dialogue and eccentric, indie voice. Showtime capitalized on Cody as a young auteur to further its image, personifying Showtime and its dramedies as clever and, at times, dark but also profoundly funny and likable. Even Cody's history as a stripper was integrated into Showtime's marketing campaign, with Cody referencing it in several interviews, saying, "It's always been a freak flag that I've flown, and I don't have a problem with it."<sup>15</sup> Like the protagonists of Showtime's dramedies, Cody herself was paraded as a writer who lets her "freak flag" fly. Showtime used known creative talents to posit both *Tara* and the network as "quality television" that tackles fresh topics in surprising and fun ways. Now, after establishing *United States of Tara's* place in Showtime history, I will look at how its generic hybridity functions within the show itself to challenge the stigmas behind mental illness.

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<sup>14</sup> Stuart Levine, "Femme Flair at Showtime," *Variety*, July 21, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Sepinwall, "United States of Tara: Diablo Cody Q&A," *NJ.com*, January 16, 2009.

### From Homemaker to Homewrecker: Tara's Unruly Alters

"I'm not sure if mom's here."<sup>16</sup>

Tara is a peculiar unruly protagonist. Like Nancy Botwin, Tara follows in the sitcom tradition of Lucy Ricardo and Gracie Allen by shocking audiences and characters for comedic effect. However, it isn't just *her* that is unruly but also her various alters. These alters, which include a partying teenager named T, a motorcycle-driving man named Buck, and a 1950s housewife named Alice, create countless narrative problems. For example, Gimme, a monster-like alter, destroys the house just as Child Protective Services are about to come, leaving other characters to pick up the mess.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, T tries to have sex with Max<sup>18</sup> and steals Tara's car to play in an arcade in "Revolution," both of which are funny because they challenge how people expect a normative suburban mother to act.<sup>19</sup> Tara's unruliness stems from how her alters make her unable to be a socially acceptable, polite, and responsible mother. She is instead allowed to be a woman, man, teenager, and child all at once, transgressing both gender norms that require Tara dress and act in particular ways and family norms that dictate Tara be the caretaker rather than the one taken care of by her children. Thus, by fluctuating between melodrama and sitcom conventions, the show cues us to feel pathos for Tara's alters and recognize how they are defined in opposition to external social norms. At the same time, Cody encourages us to take pleasure in the alters' unruliness, laughing at how she recklessly creates chaos in her supposedly normal world. Because we know the difficulties and heartbreak the alters create for the family are in part produced by external

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<sup>16</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.01 "Pilot."

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 2.07 "Dept. of F'ed Up Family Services," Showtime, May 3, 2010, directed by Tricia Brock.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 1.01 "Pilot."

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 1.05 "Revolution," Showtime, February 15, 2009, directed by Mark Mylod.

forces and traumas from a suburban environment, we, like the Gregson family, are cued to love Tara and her alters for their transgressions.

Before I turn to the alters' comedic and melodramatic consequences and own independent storylines, I will first discuss how their existence is in itself an internal conflict for Tara. Nancy's unruliness in *Weeds* is external, sparking an unresolvable narrative; Tara's, on the other hand, is not placed onto an exterior social world but rather reflected back onto her. Her refusal to abide by social expectations manifests itself in her alters, bringing a broader social critique into the private domestic sphere—and ultimately within Tara's mind. We even receive subjective access of Tara's head as she negotiates and argues with her alters, like at the end of "Wheels" when she declares herself king of her personalities.<sup>20</sup> The final season also centers on her fight with a homicidal alter, Bryce, who tries to kill Tara and every other alter; again, this conflict emanates from within Tara's mind. Through that storyline, we see "the self turning against itself."<sup>21</sup> These conflicts do not change the plot in the same way that Nancy does because the alters eventually go away and Tara returns, but even though their chaos "narratively [fails]...performatively they [succeed]."<sup>22</sup> Despite the fact that T is eventually found and brought back to the house in "Revolution," she still creates havoc on a small-scale. Tara always returns but so do the alters, repeatedly disrupting the narrative. Just one episode after T steals Tara's car, another alter comes back to pee on her parents' bed. Therefore, we understand Tara is *always* unruly due to her DID and are cued to not expect her to change, knowing that the alters will continue to reemerge and create conflict. It is not

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<sup>20</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.04 "Wheels," Showtime, April 18, 2011, directed by Penny Marshall.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 3.09 "Bryce Will Play," Showtime, May 23, 2011, directed by Adam Bernstein.

<sup>22</sup> Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy," 68.

something she can control, creating pathos for her internal conflict and punctuating the social forces that traumatize her and prompt her to transition.

In addition to positioning the alters as fundamental and uncontrollable parts of Tara's life, the series presents them as highly comedic at times, encouraging us to take pleasure in their violations of unspoken moral codes. T, Buck, and Alice are all caricatures, and much of their comedy derives from their differences from Tara. In "Revolution," T's dance at the arcade urges us to laugh due to the absurdity of seeing a middle-aged woman dancing and talking like a fifteen-year old. We would never see Tara acting or dressing like this, prompting both Max and the audience to laugh at the sight. Many of the situations that the alters cause seem ludicrous, such as Buck helping Charmaine, Tara's sister, while she has a breast augmentation<sup>23</sup> or Chicken, a baby alter in season two, wearing a crown while she eats at a restaurant.<sup>24</sup> These images are humorous in their oddity, in that they subvert what we would expect from normal social situations. Tara's alters allow her to not be a responsible mother of two but rather a fun-loving and reckless partier; they create situations where we can watch Tara challenge our and other characters' assumptions of her, and we recognize how she manipulates and picks apart norms that try to dictate her life. Similarly, the FX show *Starved* (2005) also utilizes comedy in its depiction of four friends' eating disorders, and, like *Tara*, it challenges viewers "to consider whether eating disorders can *ever* be considered funny."<sup>25</sup> The use of comedy in depicting illnesses in both *Tara* and *Starved* urges

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<sup>23</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.07 "Alterations," Showtime, March 1, 2009, directed by Tricia Brock.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 2.11 "To Have and to Hold," Showtime, May 31, 2010, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>25</sup> Emily Newman, "'It's Not Okay': FX's *Starved* and Eating Disorders as Entertainment," *The Communication Review* 17, no. 3 (2014), 234. Unsurprisingly considering *Starved's* taboo subject matter, its creator Eric Schaeffer later had a show, *I Can't Believe I'm Still Single* (2008) on Showtime, furthering the network's brand of edgy programming.

audiences to think of these conditions not as purely dark, tragic, or threatening, but also as something to celebrate and enjoy, as a deliberate rebellion against rigid social rules. The comedy behind the alters' antics smooths their dangerous edges, allowing us to reflect on DID from a different perspective.

*Starved*, however, was canceled after only 8 episodes. Where *Starved* failed and *Tara* succeeded was in its ability to consider the seriousness of the protagonists' conditions by mixing comedy with melodrama. While Tara's deviance is often hilarious in one moment, it is incredibly melodramatic in another, highlighting the impossible situation Tara and her family find themselves in. For example, while Max laughs off T's arcade adventure in "Revolution," in the following episode when Tara's parents visit, Max begs her, "You are not going to transition and leave me alone with these people!"<sup>26</sup> Tara's alters come out at the worst possible moment, but neither Max nor Tara have any control over their situation. The return of the alters functions as a melodramatic "abrupt reversal"<sup>27</sup> that punctuates the powerlessness of our protagonists, thus inviting "us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims."<sup>28</sup> We feel pathos for Tara and Max, as they are in some ways victims to fate and outside judgments, such as Tara's controlling parents who believe that Tara's DID makes her unfit to be a mother.<sup>29</sup> By shifting between melodrama and comedy as Tara transitions, we are encouraged to simultaneously enjoy Tara's alters' shenanigans and recognize their consequences.

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<sup>26</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.06 "Transition," Showtime, February 22, 2009, directed by Brian Dannelly.

<sup>27</sup> Jacobs, "The Woman's Picture and the Poetics of Melodrama," 127.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

A helpful example to illustrate this point is the ending of “Crackerjack,” the second episode in *Tara’s* third season.<sup>30</sup> In this episode, T tries to steal Tara’s car, just as she did in “Revolution”; while the situation was played for laughs in season one, it is now deadly serious. We are cued to read this moment dramatically in part because of Kate’s reaction, who, unlike Max, does not laugh at T and instead fights her for the keys, screaming, “Don’t fuck this up for my mother! She’s put up with too much and she’s worked too hard!”<sup>31</sup> T punches Kate, and at the end of the episode, we are left with a shot of Kate’s blood dripping onto Tara’s face, cuing us to recognize the pain and literal blood the alters cause. T’s actions have not changed, but the way we relate to them has because we understand their consequences: Tara dropping out of school and Kate being stuck at home, taking care of her mother, forever. Fitting into the melodramatic tradition, both Tara and Kate are powerless, stuck “in traps that are not of their own making.”<sup>32</sup> Neither is fully to blame for their situation. Tara cannot be an adequate caretaker for Kate, and even forces Kate to assume that position for her mother, but Kate cannot comply and becomes violent. In this sequence, we recognize the impossibility of being a perfect caring suburban mother and a successful grateful daughter, creating pathos for both Tara and Kate as they fail to live up to what is expected from them. Kate and Marshall’s series-long stories continue to parallel Tara’s internal conflict, as Marshall discovers he is queer and Kate tries to find a career path and future that will make her happy. Like Tara, the kids do not fit into one identity and grapple with social norms surrounding sexuality, gender, and adulthood; and, by refusing to fit into set labels, the show encourages us to understand that they too are

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<sup>30</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.02 “Crackerjack,” Showtime, April 4, 2011, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Jacobs, “The Woman’s Picture and the Poetics of Melodrama,” 135.

antinormative. Therefore, through this mirroring, the series further cues us to feel pathos for Tara and her entire family, as they are all victims to the same social structures.

In addition to their narrative impact, the alters' own stories shift between comedy and melodrama. As I've explained, most of the alters are initially caricatures that only exist for a particular narrative function: to create chaos. Often, we are not concerned about them but rather about Tara's family. When T steals a car, we are not worried for T's safety, instead focused, like Max and Marshall are, on making sure she doesn't hurt Tara. And later, in "Crackerjack," Kate is more concerned that T will "fuck this up for [her] mother" than that T is putting herself in danger.<sup>33</sup> However, at other moments in the show, the alters are depicted not simply as narrative devices but also as independent and fully-realized characters. By understanding them as distinct, Cody encourages us to care about their emotions and struggles. We are cued to understand Tara's DID and her alters not as something to be cured but rather as a vital part of who she is, creating a narrative that makes room for "those who'd fluctuate identity depending on context...in a positive, transgressive, and entirely healthy, if socially unacceptable, sense."<sup>34</sup> Even though the alters are not socially acceptable—as they make Tara beat up Kate's boyfriend and act similarly nonmaternal—the series urges us to recognize that they are not disposable, encouraging us to feel pathos for characters whose very existences are a form of rebellion.

One of the most effective ways *Tara* paints the alters as distinct characters is through Toni Collette's stunning performance. Each alter has its own mannerisms and

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<sup>33</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.02 "Crackerjack."

<sup>34</sup> Molloy, "'I Just Really Love My Spirit:' A Rhetorical Inquiry into Dissociative Identity Disorder," *Rhetoric Review* 34, no. 4 (2015): 467.

holds themselves differently, allowing the viewer to know which one Collette is at any moment. Collette's nuanced performance is most explicit in the scenes where she performs with herself, such as in the negotiation sequence from "Wheels," where Collette's performance differentiates each alter from the other while they all share the same visual space. Similarly, in the first season finale, Collette transitions between T, Buck, and Alice in one scene, but we are able to distinguish each personality from the others due to the slight turn of her head as she transitions.<sup>35</sup> Buck speaks differently than Alice, and so on. While Collette's performance has a clear narrative function, giving each alter added depth, it also adds a certain level of prestige to the show, promoting Showtime's brand as a channel with edgy yet quality programming. Critical acclaim for the show waxed and waned, but Collette was consistently lauded, with one reviewer writing, "By turns oozing sexuality, vulnerability, and confusion, Toni Collette gives Showtime's latest half-hour its buoyant pulse."<sup>36</sup> Her performance as she jumps from alter to alter or acts alongside herself is flashy and impressive, prompting us to recognize the particularities of each alter, feel greater pathos for them, and appreciate Collette's craft all at once.

In addition to Collette's clear and nuanced performance, the use of costuming differentiates each alter, as T, Buck, and Alice all have recognizable clothing. When we see Alice wear her apron, put up her hair, and apply her red lipstick in "Aftermath," we know that Tara is no longer Tara.<sup>37</sup> We know that we are watching Alice. The show never plays games with its audience, using deliberate costuming to ensure that the viewer

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<sup>35</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.12 "Miracle," Showtime, April 5, 2009, directed by Craig Gillespie.

<sup>36</sup> Lowry, "Tara' Has Personality to Spare."

<sup>37</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.02 "Aftermath," Showtime, January 25, 2009, directed by Craig Gillespie.

is never confused about which alter is on screen, even if other characters may be. In an interview, Cody tackled this subject, saying, “Obviously, a show like this has the potential to confuse people. So in the beginning we wanted to make it really explicit: ‘She has transitioned.’”<sup>38</sup> Collette’s performance and Tara’s costuming clearly establishes who each alter is, cuing us to see them all as their own persons and understand them as not evil or parasitic; instead, we are encouraged to support Tara and her alters despite the chaos they cause. We recognize the validity of Tara’s condition which “serve[s] to invert the gender relations of suburban domesticity,” just as many older sitcoms, such as *Bewitched*, do.<sup>39</sup>

Tara’s alters also extend beyond their unruly narrative function by having their own stories, hopes, and dreams. In “Abundance,” for instance, Alice claims she is pregnant, and her unborn child is played for laughs most of the episode, as both we and the Gregsons know that she is mistaken. Alice misreads her pregnancy test, which presents her baby as another one of the alters’ humorous antics. However, in the episode’s last scene, Alice’s pregnancy takes a turn, as Alice lies on the floor of the bathroom crying after having her period, believing it to be a miscarriage. By involving “the production of discrepancies between the knowledge and point of view of the spectator and the knowledge and points of view of the characters,” this heavily melodramatic moment shifts our relationship with Alice and her baby because we know that she has not had a miscarriage.<sup>40</sup> In this situation, we have more knowledge than Alice, emphasizing her powerlessness but also her *innocence*, urging us to no longer laugh

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<sup>38</sup> Sepinwall, “Diablo Cody Q&A.”

<sup>39</sup> Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, 132.

<sup>40</sup> Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” 7.

at her but rather feel sympathy for her. Alice's miscarriage is depicted in one long take, as Max hugs her in the bathroom, forcing us to stay in the moment and see Alice's devastating reaction to her loss. In doing so, we are cued to care about Alice as her own person with her own struggles. Max's reaction to Alice also changes, as he previously dismissed and laughed her off but now consoles her, saying, "I love you, Alice."<sup>41</sup> Through this establishment of pathos, the show reveals that Alice and the other alters are not the villains of this story but rather are subsumed by the same social conditions that Tara and her family are affected by. We are encouraged to sympathize with Alice's pain, just as Max does, grieving for a child that we know was never real. In a way, that is precisely how we relate to the alters: we know that they are not "real" by normative society's standards, but we still sympathize with them as if they were. Tara's DID is not simply scary or inconvenient but also a distinctive part of Tara's personhood despite what doctors, therapists, or Tara's parents suggest.

Buck's affair with a bartender named Pammy in season two is another clear example of this. Initially, in "Trouble Junction," the affair is presented as a problem for Tara: her body is cheating on Max, and Tara hides it from him.<sup>42</sup> Buck's relationship with Pammy forces Tara to violate gender and family norms, as she appears masculine and queer; additionally, her infidelity creates a temporary rift in her marriage. However, as the story progresses, we see Buck and Pammy interact together more, letting us see that they truly care about each other without any regard for Tara or her family. For the first time, we see how Tara's existence makes life difficult for her alters. Tara ends Buck's affair to preserve her marriage with Max, prompting Pammy to tell Tara, "You're the fake

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<sup>41</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.08 "Abundance," Showtime, March 8, 2009, directed by Brian Dannelly.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 2.02 "Trouble Junction," Showtime, March 29, 2010, directed by Craig Zisk.

personality!”<sup>43</sup> By focusing on Buck and Pammy’s relationship as its own separate story, Buck’s personality is validated. His personality is not fake but rather just as real as Tara’s. Similarly, at the end of the season’s third episode, mirroring Alice’s miscarriage, the show uses a long shot of Buck crying in the bathroom to cue us to recognize Buck’s heartache and emotions rather than just the problems that he causes.<sup>44</sup> In focusing on these alters as independent characters who make Tara unruly, the show reveals the impossibility of Tara being a picture-perfect wife or mother and urges us to feel pathos for Tara, Buck, Alice, and the other alters as they struggle with their archetypal identities. Tara deliberately does not fit into simple narratives, as she has multiple conflicting ones in her mind. As Cody suggests, “Her multiple personalities symbolize the varied roles that modern mothers are expected to assume, from fierce protector to domestic goddess,” but which they are always doomed to fail.<sup>45</sup> In the depiction of conflicting personalities as both comedic and melodramatic, though, we can care for Tara’s disorder and story without viewing them as tragic. Unlike many male antihero shows, like *Breaking Bad* or *Mad Men*, these characters and shows are not “appealing” for “the tension the viewer feels...between wanting the character to get [their] life together while also hoping that [they] get caught for [their] terrible behavior.”<sup>46</sup> The show does not demand that Tara or her alters be punished or fixed “for [their] terrible behavior,” and instead urges us to align with their inability to be neatly placed into a linear narrative of “fierce protector” or “domestic goddess.” *United States of Tara* fits into a pattern of Showtime dramedies that

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<sup>43</sup> *United States of Tara*, 2.03 “The Truth Hurts,” Showtime, April 5, 2010, directed by Adam Davidson.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Katherine Lehman, “Woman, Divided: Gender, Family, and Multiple Personalities in the Media,” *Journal of American Culture* 37, no. 1 (2014): 65.

<sup>46</sup> Newman, “It’s Not Okay,” 241.

encourage us to root for their transgressive female protagonists despite, and ultimately because of, their misdeeds.

### **Secrets, Lies, & Trauma: Uncovering Tara's Past**

“Oh, I understand. Manners. Things better left behind closed doors.”<sup>47</sup>

“Can a person be fixed? Like a car or something?” Kate asks in the season two premiere, after her mother’s alters have disappeared for three months.<sup>48</sup> Kate is skeptical that Tara’s alters are gone for good, and we also know they are bound to return—otherwise, there would be no show. While Tara’s alters spark episodic conflict, the question of a cure, of Tara changing and being permanently “fixed,” provides the narrative backbone of the series. The focus on a cure mirrors *Weeds*’ exploration of Nancy’s inability to change or be punished for her actions in the face of narrative transformation. However, while *Weeds*’ narrative is one of constant reinvention, of external melodramatic change in its setting and cast, *Tara*’s series-level structure looks inward. *Tara* does not burn down its suburban setting, drop its ensemble, or introduce new cartoonish villains as *Weeds* does. Instead, it is a mystery, focused on Tara trying to uncover hidden trauma, caused by the secrets and dangers of normative middle class suburbia, as an attempt to cure her disorder. This narrative thrust, like Tara’s unruliness, is largely internal, focused on familial secrets and a buried past that must be brought to light. However, this mystery, much like *Weeds*’ fast-paced plot, never brings substantive change for Tara, for no matter how much she discovers, her alters always return. Thus, the structure of *Tara*’s serialized and melodramatic mystery suggests that, like Nancy,

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<sup>47</sup> *United States of Tara*, 2.10 “Open House,” Showtime, May 24, 2010, directed by Jamie Babbit.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 2.01 “Yes,” Showtime, March 22, 2010, directed by Craig Zisk.

Tara cannot be conditioned by others. Rather than be disheartened by the mystery's irresolution, the merging of melodrama and sitcom conventions throughout the series-long narrative urges us to celebrate Tara's inability to be integrated in a normative world that labels her as damaged. Regarding Kate's initial question, a person is not reducible to a defective object. Perhaps, the show's mystery suggests, Tara doesn't need fixing because her DID doesn't make her broken to begin with.

Tara's past is not a complicated one. Unlike *Weeds*, the narrative does not take any shocking turns or follow a convoluted path, yet it takes two full seasons to get to the bottom of Tara's trauma. Cody elongates this mystery by slowly dispersing clues, many of which end up being false leads or dead ends. At the end of season one, which primarily tells self-contained episodic stories, Tara goes to a facility with top specialists to figure out what caused her disorder. She confronts a man named Trip, whom she believes sexually assaulted her in boarding school and sparked her dissociation. Tara and Trip's meeting seems productive at first, with Tara, and us, receiving long-awaited answers; at the very end of their conversation, though, Trip says, "See you later, T," revealing that Tara's alters existed prior to this incident.<sup>49</sup> The entire episode, and season, leads the viewer to believe Trip was the linchpin of Tara's past, but the last minute twist urges viewers to keep looking. All of the clues uncovered in the season ultimately lead nowhere, melodramatically continuing this mystery and preventing change for Tara and her condition. Rather than answering questions, the clues in the latter half of season one follow melodramatic conventions and function as "blockages, barriers, and bars to the fulfillment of desire."<sup>50</sup> After the meeting, Tara is back at square one, telling Max, "I just

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<sup>49</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.12 "Miracle."

<sup>50</sup> Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," 12.

want to go home.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in season two, Tara meets her foster mother’s husband and immediately transitions, suggesting that he is related to her past; after she transitions, though, we discover that he never actually met Tara when she was a child.<sup>52</sup> The husband is another false lead, another narrative digression, revealing that the show “could not satisfy viewers’ expectations that Tara would discover the details of her traumatic past, come to terms with abuse, and gain wellness.”<sup>53</sup> The overarching narrative and mystery behind *Tara* cannot change because, if it were to, Tara’s character would also be forced to change. Rather, the narrative dead ends depict Tara as an unfixable protagonist, actively revealing the contradictions of normative “coherent” identities and subsequently supporting Showtime’s host of transgressive and unstoppable female dramedy leads.

In season two, despite receiving more unhelpful clues, Tara starts to piece together the truth of her past. We get small bits of information each episode as she slowly starts to remember moments from her childhood, including a parade, getting stuck in the rain,<sup>54</sup> and a babysitter named Mimi.<sup>55</sup> Alone, these clues mean nothing, but they pique the viewer’s interest and lazily push the mystery forward, teasing answers without providing them. In doing so, the show urges us to be hopeful that we will discover Tara’s past and cure her; however, the clues do not stop Tara’s DID and instead even exacerbate it. When we meet Mimi, Tara’s foster mother, Tara transitions to a new alter from stress.<sup>56</sup> And, in the season finale, when Tara’s mom reveals the truth, that Tara was abused by her step-brother and was subsequently sent to live in a foster

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<sup>51</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.12 “Miracle.”

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 2.11 “To Have and to Hold.”

<sup>53</sup> Molloy, “‘I Just Really Love My Spirit,’” 467.

<sup>54</sup> *United States of Tara*, 2.04 “You Becoming You.”

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 2.10 “Open House.”

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 2.11 “To Have and to Hold.”

home, Tara is not cured. In fact, she even transitions from the stress of this revelation, suggesting that our hope for finding a lasting fix by uncovering the past is misguided.<sup>57</sup> Even after it has been solved, *Tara's* mystery refuses closure, following melodrama's tendency of irresolution, where "nothing concludes and nothing...comes to fruition."<sup>58</sup> In other words, the narrative delay and lack of a satisfying resolution encourage us to see how Tara is unable to change, and therefore that the search is fruitless. Tara expresses this very sentiment in one episode, saying, "I just wish I could stay the same for a whole week but then ironically I'd be a whole different person."<sup>59</sup> Through the slow reveal of clues, we too hope for Tara to "stay the same for a whole week," but eventually recognize that we should accept Tara's disorder rather than erase it. Tara's personalities shape her life and function as a constant rebellion against conventional notions of white motherhood and womanhood.

Tara's rotating therapists also attempt to cure her DID. In each season, Tara has a new therapist, and each season, they fail to "fix" her, prompting her to find a new one. In the first season, her therapist Dr. Ocean terminates their relationship so that Tara can find someone "who has more experience with DID patients."<sup>60</sup> Tara's case is beyond the scope of Dr. Ocean's expertise, and Ocean is unable to help her. Due to this, Tara goes to a facility in the following episode, but, as I've described, her meeting with Trip there does not provide any answers and she simply goes home; those with "more experience with DID patients" are also unable to help her, cuing us to understand that perhaps

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<sup>57</sup> *United States of Tara*, 2.12 "From This Day Forward," Showtime, June 7, 2010, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>58</sup> Williams, *On the Wire*, 64.

<sup>59</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.07 "Alterations."

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 1.10 "Betrayal," Showtime, March 22, 2009, directed by John Dahl.

Tara's disorder can never be "solved" by these "experts." In the third season, Dr. Hatteras, her new therapist, also tries to study and manipulate her, but Tara's alters end up being too much for him too. Bryce almost kills Hatteras by feeding him shellfish, which he is allergic to, prompting him to quit seeing Tara and suggest she go to Boston with the "leading expert in the nation."<sup>61</sup> Tara is repeatedly shuttled off to the next greatest doctor, who then shuffles her off to the next greatest doctor. In mental illness narratives, "treatment is life-saving, the result of a doctor's willingness to truly listen to her patient."<sup>62</sup> *Tara*, though, rejects this narrative, for Tara's therapists are depicted as inept and ill-equipped to help her, suggesting that the doctors' attempts to find a cure, like Tara's attempts to uncover the secrets of her past, are deluded.

Importantly, the only helpful therapist that Tara has is one of her alters named Shoshana. In contrast to her other doctors, Shoshana is not interested in getting rid of Tara's alters, for that would mean her own death, and instead focuses on helping Max and Tara deal with how the disorder affects their marriage and family. She even has sessions with Max about Buck's affair with Pammy, saying, "Tara may have her problems, but it takes two to tango."<sup>63</sup> By constructing most of Tara's therapists as ineffectual and Shoshana as truly helpful for Max and Tara, the show denounces all attempts to destroy Tara's alters and instead cultivates a life with her DID. We are encouraged to feel pathos for Tara as she is unable to control her alters while simultaneously celebrating her inability to be cut down, narrowed, or forced to fit into a singular constricting identity that her doctors impose on her. We must believe in and

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<sup>61</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.09 "Bryce Will Play."

<sup>62</sup> Lehman, "Woman, Divided," 70.

<sup>63</sup> *United States of Tara*, 2.05 "Doin' Time," Showtime, April 19, 2010, directed by Craig Gillespie.

embrace her particularity because, as Dr. Hatteras explains, “The truth is it’s never going to get any better.”<sup>64</sup>

When discussing the central mystery of *Tara*, it is also imperative that we talk about trauma. Trauma is at the center of the show, as Tara searches for memories under the assumption that her past trauma makes her transition. And, as I’ve established, Tara *does* turn to her alters in moments of stress related to her past, such as when she meets Trip or Mimi. However, the past is not the only thing that causes her to transition. Daily mundane incidents trigger her, as well, suggesting that the key to fixing Tara’s disorder is not uncovering clues of one traumatic incident because she deals with small traumas every day. In the series’ second episode, for example, Tara transitions to Alice because other mothers patronize her for her disorder, saying, “Get some rest, Tara.”<sup>65</sup> In “Transition,” too, Tara turns to her alters because her mother tries to take her children from her, believing Tara to be an unfit parent.<sup>66</sup> Tara transitions all the time because of common stresses and family drama, cuing the audience to recognize that Tara’s disorder is not isolated to one moment despite the narrative push to uncover one. Like the dead end clues, the use of smaller catalysts for transitioning cue us to reflect on how Tara suffers “from the much more difficult-to-chart, but no less nefarious, social [traumas].”<sup>67</sup> Additionally, by approaching trauma from a more mundane and often comedic angle, *Tara* fits within Showtime’s branding strategy, ensuring that trauma does not become tragedy. David Nevins, Showtime’s current President & CEO, said, “None of our

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<sup>64</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.07 “The Electrifying & Magnanimous Return of Beaverlamp,” Showtime, May 9, 2011, directed by Jamie Babbit.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 1.02 “Aftermath.”

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 1.06 “Transition.”

<sup>67</sup> Molloy, “I Just Really Love My Spirit,” 468.

shows...take themselves too seriously,” even approaching mental illness with levity.<sup>68</sup> We are therefore cued to sympathize with Tara and her alters, but not pity them, as she struggles with the larger social pressures that force her to dissociate.

As the series progresses, we learn that Tara’s trauma originates in her family, not some outside force. Another popular Showtime show *Dexter* also focuses on its protagonist’s childhood trauma: Dexter’s mother was murdered violently in front of him. But, while this trauma is external, with a stranger murdering his mother, Tara’s is rooted in family secrets, revealing the danger lurking beneath suburbia and its supposed normalcy to align us with Tara’s dysfunctional nuclear family. In season one, we believe that Trip harmed Tara, functioning as an external figure that vanished from her life as quickly as he entered it. However, in season two, we discover Tara was actually abused by her step-brother Bryce inside her home. Thus, the mystery exists only because the people around Tara lie and keep things from her. The show continuously surprises the viewer with melodramatic reversals that expose that characters who we think have nothing to hide, like Charmaine or Alice, are concealing information. We also discover that Tara’s parents knew about her abuse all along. The progression of the mystery functions to bring these wrongdoings out in the open, with Alice saying to Tara’s mom, “People *need* to know.”<sup>69</sup>

By moving inwards, Cody stresses that the show is primarily a family drama, urging us to compare Tara’s seemingly normal and traditional, yet abusive, parents with Tara and Max’s more off-kilter home life. In many sitcoms, the outside world is portrayed as “a threatening space of sin” while “the home is a sentimental haven that

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<sup>68</sup> Carroll, “Leading Ladies’ Star Turn Propels Showtime Forward.”

<sup>69</sup> *United States of Tara*, 2.10 “Open House.”

needs to be protected.”<sup>70</sup> On the contrary, *Tara’s* series-long mystery reveals that Tara’s childhood home was just as dangerous as the outside world. Just as *Weeds* exposed the dangers hidden underneath picture-perfect Agrestic, *Tara* also reveals the harmful secrets behind her suburban past, cuing us to understand her present abnormality. While Tara’s mom criticizes Tara for being a terrible mother, Max rejects her judgments of his antinormative family, saying, “My kids are safe. Maybe you should’ve spent more time looking after yours.”<sup>71</sup> In contrast to Tara’s more traditional parents, the secrets at the heart of Tara’s condition urge us to take joy in Tara’s authenticity, in her irregularity and inability to cover up her trauma and unruliness. Tara’s aberration is anything but secret.

In fact, in addition to not being secrets, Tara’s uncontrollable alters are clues and representations of the mystery that also do not lead anywhere final. They merely provide hints at what could be in Tara’s past. Alice, for instance, is revealed to be based off Mimi, Tara’s foster mother; when Mimi is introduced, her bright costume and sing-song speech patterns mirror Alice’s, and Tara and Charmaine are shocked by the resemblance.<sup>72</sup> Alice’s existence is explained by Mimi. Similarly, new alters appear in Tara’s search as clues. Bryce, the alter resembling Tara’s abusive step-brother, is presented initially as a mystery, as we see Tara taken over by some demonic force writing “...youwillnotwin...” on her computer over and over again.<sup>73</sup> We do not understand what the words mean at the time and only discover that Bryce wrote them eight episodes later. Bryce, and the other alters introduced through the mystery, produces both answers and new questions. However, despite the alters’ inclusion in the overarching narrative,

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<sup>70</sup> Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, 4.

<sup>71</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.06 “Transition.”

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 2.11 “To Have and to Hold.”

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 3.01 “...youwillnotwin...,” Showtime, March 28, 2011, directed by Craig Zisk.

we are cued to care about them as more than extensions of it; just as they are more than sources of narrative chaos, the alters are also more than the clues they provide. Alice's goodbye to Marshall in the penultimate episode of the series, for example, is highly emotional but has nothing to do with Mimi. She gives Marshall advice and tells him she's proud of him.<sup>74</sup> While Alice parallels Mimi for the purpose of the narrative, her emotional significance for the Gregsons is separate from that connection. Alice's death has significant weight because the showrunners encourage us to "feel as strongly about the alters as [we] would any actual other character."<sup>75</sup> By using the alters as both narrative clues and emotional anchors, the show urges us to focus not solely on curing Tara, suggesting that we should care about the alters in the present as reflective of Tara's inability to fit into a neat box. Uncovering Tara's past will not "render [her trauma] definitively knowable, and thus conquerable."<sup>76</sup> As with many of the mystery's other clues, the alters are almost a decoy—they may have a function within the series-long narrative, but they do not become "knowable" or "conquerable" as a result of it.

Since the alters remain, the search for a cure does not end with the revelation of Tara's past in season two. Instead, the show concludes by constructing a new goal: for Tara to confront Bryce, her abuser alter. The final season is structured around this fight, as Bryce repeatedly tells Tara, "You will not win," and tries to kill her and her other alters off. The family goes to Bryce's grave to extinguish the memory of him in order to free Tara, but this attempt, unsurprisingly, is not successful; Bryce just laughs at his headstone. In the series finale, the conflict reaches its tipping point. Tara tries to commit

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<sup>74</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.11 "Crunchy Ice," Showtime, June 13, 2011, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>75</sup> Ghosh, "Alexa Junge Talks First Season."

<sup>76</sup> Molloy, "'I Just Really Love My Spirit,'" 463-464.

suicide and then kills Bryce inside her head, drowning him in a bucket of water and shouting, “This ends today!”<sup>77</sup> However, in contrast to Tara’s assertion, Tara’s alters again do not disappear. She confronts Bryce, looking down “the worst parts” of herself and killing them, yet at the end of the episode, we see T, Alice, and Buck sitting in the car with Tara. Bryce’s death does not solve her problems, and it is telling that killing him is relatively easy and occurs in the first three minutes of the finale, leaving the rest of the episode to address the conflict between Tara and her family. By structuring the final episode in this way, Cody focuses on the Gregsons as an antinormative family. Despite the flurry of melodramatic clues, therapists, and secrets that constitute much of the narrative, after the dust settles, the unruly family is what remains, transgressions and all. Therefore, the hunt for a cure is futile and does not “follow the narrative arc with which viewers have been accustomed especially where female characters with psychoses are concerned.”<sup>78</sup> It is irresolvable, highlighting that the Gregsons have no end in sight. While this may initially seem pessimistic, as Tara has no chance at becoming “integrated,” it also pulls from the joys of melodrama, where “an ‘unhappy’ ending may function as a means of satisfying a wish to have the wish unfulfilled.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, the failure to “fix” Tara is also cause for celebration, as it undercuts the assumption that she is broken and must change. Instead, the show asks us to take pleasure from this subversion and the family’s unity, urging us to align with them as they challenge the notion that DID is a cancer to be removed. No matter the doctors and foster parents

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<sup>77</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.12 “The Good Parts,” Showtime, June 20, 2011, directed by Craig Zisk.

<sup>78</sup> Molloy, “I Just Really Love My Spirit,” 466.

<sup>79</sup> Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” 21.

that try to shape her, the family continues to love 'Tara *and* her alters' as they disrupt social norms and middle class suburban ideals.

### **A Shift in Perspective: Internal & External Understandings of DID**

"Everyone's always staring at me."<sup>80</sup>

Even though she is our protagonist, we see Tara Gregson from a multitude of perspectives. In many cases, she is a classic fish out of water, like Nancy. When Max and Charmaine eat at a restaurant with Chicken, the waitress comes over and talks to her like a baby, mistakenly thinking that Tara has autism. She tells Max, "My aunt has a special needs child. When they removed gluten from his diet, they found that people stopped gawking so much."<sup>81</sup> Throughout the show, many people don't understand Tara's condition, make snap judgments, and patronize her. In the restaurant, for example, we are encouraged to laugh at the waitress, as she does not understand anything about Tara's life or illness like we do. She believes she is helping by offering her input, but, based on our knowledge of Tara in contrast to what the waitress assumes about her, we recognize the waitress as the same type of gawker that she warns of. Much of *Tara's* generic hybridity, mixing comedy and Tara's fish out of water situations with melodrama, functions to distinguish between the internal and external perceptions of Tara and the entire Gregson clan. This distinction, developed through the show's peripheral characters, unrestricted narration, and video camera motif, encourages us to recognize the difference between how people understand Tara's DID and how she and her entire antinormative family experience it. Even as Tara hurts her family, the show creates

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<sup>80</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.01 "Pilot."

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 2.11 "To Have and to Hold."

pathos for both parties, aligning the audience with every Gregson's deviance and experiences that contradict external perceptions of them. Like in *Weeds*, the series' generic hybridity always brings us back to the family. Thus, by emphasizing the Gregsons' antinormative perspectives in contrast to other characters', Diablo Cody encourages us to not only understand but also root for their continued aberrant lifestyle. *Tara* rewrites mental illness narratives, avoiding clichés of tragedy and superfluous comic relief. Instead, we recognize both the joyful particularity and social oppression that comes with her DID.

Including the waitress who served Chicken, *Tara* uses a host of characters outside the family to illustrate the differences between outsider and insider perspectives, cuing us to align with Tara and her family's worldview as we laugh at or are appalled by others' assumptions. Tiffany, Charmaine's friend who commissions Tara to paint her a mural, is a prime example of this character type. She does not outwardly shame Tara, but she does fetishize and trivialize her alters, suggesting that her transitions are akin to role-playing. She even pushes Tara at a public restaurant, saying, "I want to meet one."<sup>82</sup> Tiffany is at first respectful of Tara's differences but, over time, we realize that she thinks of the alters as a fun freak sideshow for her entertainment. By juxtaposing external characters' understanding of Tara with our understanding of her internal conflict, we are cued to acknowledge the inaccurate and harmful notions of DID that people place onto Tara, producing even more stress and trauma. While the FX show *Starved* I mentioned earlier "does not attempt to address the complicated misconceptions about eating disorders," instead relying "on slapstick elements and vicious, derisive remarks by the

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<sup>82</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.04 "Inspiration," Showtime, February 8, 2009, directed by Mark Mylod.

lead character,” *Tara* uses its comedic guest characters and uncomfortable situations to address common misconceptions of DID head-on. It props up Tara’s worldview in contrast to ridiculous, presumptive, and often comedic outside perspectives.<sup>83</sup>

Some people even think that Tara is faking her disorder, which we know is not true based on our access to her direct subjectivity. Dr. Hatteras, for example, is a skeptic, referring to Tara’s alters as her “convenient other parts.”<sup>84</sup> Charmaine, despite being Tara’s sister, also thinks Tara is stretching the truth to get attention. However, as Charmaine starts to spend more time with the alters, with Buck taking care of her after a surgery, she begins to believe Tara and think of the alters as not merely spectacles. Later, Charmaine tells Tara, “[Buck] was a pretty good booby buddy.”<sup>85</sup> By including skeptics, especially in the core ensemble, Cody urges us to compare how they view Tara in contrast to how she experiences her alters; and, in the case of Charmaine, we see how her understanding of the alters change as she spends time with them one-on-one, moving from an external perspective to more of an internal familial one. When Charmaine recognizes the alters as more than a cry for attention, the show reinforces how wrong her assumptions about Tara’s DID were. *Tara* and Showtime’s other dramedies urge us to root for protagonists “who *insist* that others recognize their singular worldviews and *refuse* to be defined or confined by men” and the people around them, furthering Showtime’s brand as one of provocative, fun storytelling that supports the underrepresented and misunderstood.<sup>86</sup> Tara’s worldview is validated against those outside characters who try to place false narratives onto her.

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<sup>83</sup> Newman, “It’s Not Okay,” 241.

<sup>84</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.04 “Wheels.”

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 1.07 “Alterations.”

<sup>86</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 166.

This worldview, though, is riddled with holes in times and actions. Tara's memory is fallible, making her often forget what she does when she transitions. Through unrestricted narration, the show emphasizes the conflicting ways people perceive Tara as we move in and out of her consciousness. At times, we experience her transitions through her eyes, but we also sometimes know more than Tara does and see her as others do. The unrestricted narration, while a central feature of many melodramas, is used for both comedic and melodramatic purposes. It allows us to laugh at and take pleasure in Tara's transgressions while also highlighting both Tara and her family's respective powerlessness to it; it urges us to feel pathos for them as a collective family unit struggling with normative suburban expectations and mental health stigmas.

At the end of "Wheels," for example, we are given access to Tara's direct subjectivity. After an argument with Max, the camera stays on Tara's face and flashes to white, where we find Tara in a new nondescript location with her alters. The cut from a close-up of Tara to a white backdrop suggests that we are not in a real location but rather an ethereal part of her brain. We have entered her mind. Tara tells her alters, "All of this stops right now," and they write a pact decreeing Tara is the king of her alters.<sup>87</sup> By placing us within Tara's subjectivity, we think she is in control of this situation; we only see her assert her dominance over her alters, forcing them to sign a contract. Additionally, this scene is very funny, using all the quirks of her various alters for comedic dialogue and visual gags, such as Gimme and Chicken hiding under the table and Buck writing furiously and throwing out potential drafts. The comedy within Tara's

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<sup>87</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.04 "Wheels."

direct subjectivity encourages us to find Tara's alters winsome, as integral and endearing parts of her personality.

However, the exaggeratedly loud sound effect as Tara bangs on the table and the abrupt, jarring cut from the conference table to a classroom signals to us that we have entered the real world again, and we are shocked to discover that she has been taking Dr. Hatteras's exam and writing the contract on herself this whole time. Cody makes us experience this moment from Tara's subjectivity, cuing us to feel the sharp turn from comedy to melodrama, shock, and horror that Tara faces when she finds writing all over her arms. When she tells Dr. Hatteras, "I'm crazy. I'm fucking crazy," we understand the hopelessness and confusion she feels, as we also cannot fill in the gap between her argument with Max and the exam in Dr. Hatteras' classroom.<sup>88</sup> We feel Tara's sudden jump from power to desperation, discovering the difference between what happens inside her mind and what happens externally. In highlighting this gap, we are encouraged to feel pathos for her antinormativity as her alters shift from sweet to horrifying. Additionally, while not a moment of direct subjectivity, another instance of this disparity in knowledge is when one of Tara's alters writes, "Die Yuppie Cunt" on Tiffany's mural in the middle of the night. Similarly to the end of "Wheels," we don't follow Tara's alters during the night and instead discover the mural with Tara when she goes to visit Tiffany the following morning; we don't even know which alter was responsible for it.<sup>89</sup> As we experience these moments of dissociation with Tara, we are shocked by the alters' actions and have to piece together the lost moments of Tara's life as she does, emphasizing her innocence and cuing us to see the world from her perspective.

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<sup>88</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.04 "Wheels."

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 1.04 "Inspiration."

At other times, though, we are removed from Tara's subjectivity and knowledge, seeing her transitions and alters from an outside perspective. We follow her alters even when Tara is nowhere to be found, with many episodes from the first season structured around their stories, including T going on a trip with Kate and Buck bonding with Charmaine. The episodes that barely feature Tara urge us to pay attention to how the rest of the Gregsons, rather than just Tara, react to their situation and frame their lives around Tara's unruliness. This move from inside to outside Tara's head emphasizes the differences in how people perceive Tara and aligns us with not only Tara but also her entire antinormative family, who love and accept her despite the consequences of her DID. For example, when Tara's parents visit, Tara thinks she doesn't transition the entire time; we, however, know more than her, as we see Max watch Gimme pee on her parents' bed. The image of Gimme, in a red poncho, peeing on her parents is farcical, cuing us to laugh and be baffled by the shocking sight even as we are scared by this new alter at the same time. The camera lingers on Max rather than following Gimme as she runs away, so we feel the shock that Max feels from the outside as he tries to rationalize Gimme's actions.<sup>90</sup> In the melodramatic tradition, the unrestricted narration punctuates that Max has no way of controlling or stopping the alters' continued antics. Cody uses both comedy and melodrama in this one moment to ask us to understand the effects that Tara's alters have on others while also allowing us to take pleasure in their violations of public decency and manners. Tara's parents, after all, have been awful to her throughout the entire episode, so we don't feel bad for them as the recipients of Gimme's crude prank—we know they deserve it.

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<sup>90</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.06 "Transition."

Of course, moments of dissociation from Tara's subjectivity are sometimes not humorous in the slightest, instead played entirely for horror or melodrama. Near the end of the series, Bryce takes over Tara's mind, wreaking havoc on the family for two episodes. At one point, Bryce beats up Marshall, and Tara wakes up, disgusted by what she has done. However, in direct contrast to "Wheels," we are not in Tara's mind when she comes to, and we instead see Tara wake up from Marshall and Max's perspectives.<sup>91</sup> By staying entirely with Max and Marshall, we recognize the consequences of Tara's DID on her family. Their "suffering" functions melodramatically, acting as another "form of powerlessness" that urges us to understand how both Tara *and* her family are victims of social traumas.<sup>92</sup> Specifically, through the unrestricted narration, Cody highlights the impact the alters have on Tara's children, suggesting that, like Nancy, Tara cannot be a good mother. For example, when Marshall's boyfriend dies, Tara is nowhere to be found and we follow Marshall in his grief to highlight the consequences of Tara's alters.<sup>93</sup> Through this unrestricted narrative, Cody punctuates both Tara and her family's powerlessness, for Tara cannot take care of her children like she is expected to. Rather, they must take care of her, cleaning up her messes and covering for her when Child Protective Services comes. She cannot be a perfect, or even socially adequate, mother.

Even though Tara's alters create much of this familial drama, Tara herself is not given a free pass in the narrative. By the end of the series, Kate and Marshall are crushed under the weight of their mother's disorder: they both decide they need to leave the house, with Marshall telling Max, "My bucket's almost full," after he asks him to help

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<sup>91</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.11 "Crunchy Ice."

<sup>92</sup> Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 29.

<sup>93</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.10 "Train Wreck," Showtime, June 6, 2011, directed by Bille Eltringham.

clean up yet another one of the alters' messes.<sup>94</sup> Tara's disorder is emotionally damaging and also physically deadly: T almost hits a pregnant Charmaine with a car, and five episodes later, Bryce steals Charmaine's baby. These actions are not forgotten or shrugged aside, but rather have long-term ramifications such as Charmaine no longer trusting Tara with her baby: "No, I'm done laughing this off. I'm going to have my baby in a normal fucking way with normal fucking people."<sup>95</sup> While Marshall accepts and loves his mother for her refusal to conform to others' narratives and expectations of her, he also notes that "there's a cost" to her aberration.<sup>96</sup> The unrestricted narration ensures that *Tara* does not romanticize its lead or let her shirk responsibility, instead urging us to recognize the joys of her social transgressions but also feel pathos for her and the family due to the costs associated with their deviance. We root for the "fantasy" of the family's union, a central component of melodrama, but recognize the obstacles to this union that are out of their control and lie in social stigmas, norms, and expectations.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, the show is not a celebration of Tara but also not a crusade against her. Instead, it is a family drama, and we continue rooting for the entire antinormative family as they complicate and blur mental health narratives that would posit Tara as simply sinner or saint.

*Tara* furthers this theme, highlighting the different ways that people view Tara and her family, through its video camera motif. The motif begins in the first episode of the series, as we see Tara recording a video diary to fill in the blanks when she transitions. The show opens with footage from this video diary, and almost every

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<sup>94</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.10 "Train Wreck."

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 3.04 "Wheels."

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 3.09 "Bryce Will Play."

<sup>97</sup> Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," 13.

episode from the first season follows suit. The diaries are filmed in a much different style from the rest of the series, with a static angle that suggests an objective viewpoint. They are designed for an outsider to watch and learn about the alters, even if that outsider is sometimes Tara herself. The contrast between these objective recordings and the rest of the show—which utilizes a moving, single-camera set-up—signals us to contrast “objective” and subjective understandings of Tara’s life. In the series’ first scene, Tara begins to cry on camera but then says, “I just can’t deal with this right now. I’m sorry,” and turns it off, choosing not to record or display that part of her life for others’ consumption.<sup>98</sup> However, after she turns off the camera, we still follow Tara, moving from the video diary to the show’s single-cam set-up; we gain access to her private life that reveals her daily traumas and struggles with gender and family norms. This contrast urges us to recognize the limited knowledge one can have of Tara and DID in general from an external vantage point, which thus encourages us to sympathize with Tara’s distinct experiences in contrast to the way others make cursory judgments.

Additionally, the recordings are somewhat voyeuristic and comedic, as we see different alters play up their caricatured qualities, with T saying, “I’m telling you, man, Tupac is alive” into the camera.<sup>99</sup> Later, other people even watch them to look for clues about Tara’s DID, including Marshall trying to figure out who ruined Tiffany’s murals and Hatteras studying Tara for a paper. Importantly, though, we never come to understand Tara’s DID through these videos; we do not study Tara in this way. Rather, it is the contrast between these voyeuristic videos and Tara’s daily routine that emphasize how limited a removed study of Tara’s alters truly is. In using this motif to stress the

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<sup>98</sup> *United States of Tara*, 1.01 “Pilot.”

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.05 “Revolution.”

varying ways people view Tara, the show urges us to accept and respect Tara's life rather than think of it "as frightening and isolating, as a medical conundrum, or as the shortest route to laughs."<sup>100</sup> As with Tara's subjectivity, the video diaries move us from an outside to inside perspective, prompting us to discredit the observers and gawkers.

As the series progresses, the video diaries dissipate since we become entrenched in Tara's family life. However, the motif returns significantly in *Tara's* third and final season when Marshall chooses to make a documentary about his mother. As with the diaries, this documentary revolves around how others understand Tara's unruliness—Marshall is desperate to depict his family life in a way that challenges preconceived notions of mental illness and social difference. Marshall tells his mother's story using dolls that resemble the show's opening credits, giving her tale an almost storybook quality. While people may think that Tara's disorder is tragic, scary, or upsetting, as many DID narratives have portrayed it, Marshall's use of these whimsical dolls instead presents his family's story as fantastical and charming. Marshall insists, "This isn't a '70s mental illness docudrama."<sup>101</sup> Instead, it is *his* story. The documentary also highlights *Tara's* investment in genre and generic hybridity, as Marshall's short film specifically references how genre relates to viewer perception when he comes to a revelation about the story, saying, "I know what it is. It's not a horror movie. It's not a dysfunctional family. It's a love story."<sup>102</sup> Rather than presenting Tara as a monster or bad mother, he stresses the love between Tara and Max. Importantly, as he says this, Marshall pushes the different faces of the alters' dolls together to kiss the Max doll, suggesting that Max does not love

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<sup>100</sup> Nancy Franklin, "On Television: Altered States," *The New Yorker*, January 19, 2009.

<sup>101</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.07 "The Electrifying & Magnanimous Return of Beaverlamp."

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 3.06 "The Road to Hell is Paved with Breast Intentions," Showtime, May 2, 2011, directed by Jamie Babbit.

Tara despite her illness but also in part because of it and how it shapes her aberrant personality.

Through the repetition of the video camera motif, Cody cues us to recognize the harmful and false ways that Tara and her family are depicted in contrast to the way they actually live and view their daily lives, allowing us to align with the Gregsons' transgressions against the normative and repressive society surrounding them. While the show regularly shifts perspectives and subjectivities, it is always in order to point us back to the family. And, like in *Weeds*, the Gregsons are not expected to change because, as the show's mystery suggests, "the process of becoming whole is long, painful, and never quite complete."<sup>103</sup> *Tara* embraces the "freaks," the dis-integrated, and the socially ostracized. While HBO "certainly cast[s] a tragic pall over contemporary American television," Showtime uses its unruly dramedy protagonists to differentiate its programming as jubilant and fun while retaining the quality status of HBO's tragic, cynical critical hits.<sup>104</sup>

As Marshall urges us to rethink outside judgments and assumptions, I keep coming back to the notion that *Tara* is ultimately a love story. The Gregsons are comedically unruly, but, in the melodramatic tradition, *Tara* is also "full of characters who wish to be loved, who are worthy of love, and whom the spectator therefore wishes to be loved."<sup>105</sup> By switching between multiple characters and perspectives, and urging us to feel pathos with almost all of them, this love story, I argue, is not only between Tara and Max but also between the entire family who stick together in the face of both

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<sup>103</sup> Lehman, "Woman, Divided," 73.

<sup>104</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 130.

<sup>105</sup> Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," 17.

physical and social trauma. Even when Marshall moves out in “Train Wreck,” he returns in the following episode to help his mother. He is hurt by her, but he and rest of the family remain intact. Additionally, in the last scene of the series, Marshall tells Tara, who is going to a new treatment program, “Don’t let them pull out all your good parts.” Despite the pain they cause, Marshall implies that Tara’s alters are also her “good parts.”<sup>106</sup> Tara’s children still love her even if they decide they can’t be with her, urging her to not fundamentally change herself with pills or medical treatment. There are costs to the family’s transgressions but they are costs that the family chooses. Marshall’s documentary, and *Tara* as a whole, is a love letter to these misunderstood, incomparable figures.

### **Dancing in the Storm: A Case Study of “Torando!”**

“It’s laugh or cry here at the musée d’arts. I choose laugh.”<sup>107</sup>

*United States of Tara* tells stories over multiple episodes and seasons, employing serialization—as most premium cable shows do—as a quality marker. However, the show also functions on an episodic level, making full use of the televisual medium. Therefore, I will conclude with a discussion of “Torando!” an episode from *Tara*’s second season, as a case study of how the series mixes comedy and melodrama in a single half hour block.<sup>108</sup> It is helpful to look at this episode not because it’s an especially strong episode or representative of the series as a whole but rather because it is an important entry in the series-long mystery while still functioning as a self-contained

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<sup>106</sup> *United States of Tara*, 3.12 “The Good Parts.”

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 3.11 “Crunchy Ice.”

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 2.06 “Torando!”

story. By moving from a broad to close reading, we can better understand the show's storytelling strategies and how *Tara* expands Showtime's dramedy programming, using generic hybridity to highlight deviant protagonists in very different stories and situations.

First, "Torando!" utilizes both comedic and melodramatic conventions to center audience attention on familial drama, using an external natural disaster to punctuate internal conflict and cue us to align with our primary antinormative family. Unlike most *Tara* episodes, "Torando!" brings all our characters together in a basement, seeking refuge from the tornado outside. It functions almost as a bottle episode, forcing characters into a confined space where they reveal secrets and fight with one another. The tornado that brings them together, though, is an unexplained external force; it is a melodramatic device, a plot machination beyond our characters' control. Therefore, this narrative coincidence focuses our attention not on the tornado or the threat it poses but rather on the conditions it creates, with Tara's various alters coming out and interrogating the rest of the Gregson family. The natural disaster is merely the backdrop to the central conflict of the episode. Importantly, the family also does not discuss the tornado or its consequences much while in the basement; their time is taken up by Tara's alters and the disturbance they cause. While the episode uses this melodramatic coincidence to incite personal drama and conflict, it also utilizes sitcom conventions to zero in on character interactions. For example, the tornado is presented as humorous and we are therefore never concerned about the destruction it may have on the neighborhood. Even the title of the episode trivializes the disaster, taken from the misspelling "torando" that Marshall sees on the news and is infuriated by. By presenting the tornado in this comedic and eccentric way, we are cued to not take the disaster too

seriously, instead urging us to focus on the melodramatic encounters within the basement.

These melodramatic encounters focus mostly on uncovering secrets from Tara's past and revealing clues about the root of her trauma, but the clues lead nowhere and are promptly dropped, suggesting there is no cure for Tara's disorder. "Torando!" is an important installment in the mystery of Tara's alters' origin. In the basement, through Shoshana's interrogation, we begin to unravel lies that the family has been telling for decades. Shoshana specifically targets Charmaine, who is terrified of basements for an unknown reason, about her and Tara's past. Knowing that she has something to hide, Shoshana lectures Charmaine, saying, "[People] lie because it's a habit, and it's a habit because it started somewhere." Finally, Charmaine reveals that she and Tara made a secret pact when they were younger, cuing us to understand that Tara's history is tangled up in the family's lies and artifice. The structure of the episode—culminating with Shoshana's interrogation of Charmaine—encourages us to figure out where Tara's trauma all started and find satisfaction in this knowledge. However, as with many of the show's other clues, the reveal that Charmaine and Tara had a childhood pact does not reveal much or change anything; in the following episode, Tara's alters come back and Tara continues trying to remember her past. And yet, despite the lack of narrative resolution, the ending of the episode feels conclusive when Tara returns and "gets out of the basement," as Shoshana tells her to. We forget all about Charmaine's secret pact in the last minutes of the episode. The irresolution of the mystery cues us to recognize that Tara will not change, and that her satisfaction and acceptance is not contingent on uncovering some cure or forgotten moment. Rather, through these dead end clues, we understand that "the series is a journey of self-discovery rather than a simple search for a

cure,” allowing us to find joy in Tara’s life *with* her alters.<sup>109</sup> We celebrate her transgressions rather than “fix” them.

Additionally, the Gregsons have secrets of their own in this episode, revealing that the whole family is antinormative. They all struggle with and hide their identities, cuing us to understand how their lives are shaped by others’ perceptions of them. In doing so, Cody aligns us with the Gregsons as a transgressive family unit who don’t fit into socially acceptable or easily understood narratives. In some ways, the episode is an extended therapy session prompted by Shoshana, who makes people talk about the identities and feelings they keep hidden. She analyzes the neighbors’ relationship, Tara and Max’s marriage, and Kate’s outfit. Kate wears her Princess Valhalla costume and constantly attempts to leave the basement, trying not to be analyzed and picked apart by Shoshana. Finally, though, Shoshana targets her, saying, “Your anger is a very pretty costume, just like your costume is a costume.” By stressing both the internal and external costumes that Kate wears, the show reveals that not only does Tara struggle with a disjointed identity but so does the entire family. In other words, Tara is not the only Gregson who transgresses social norms and is misunderstood because of it.

Kate’s costuming is also both heavily comedic and melodramatic. On the one hand, it is pink and large, decked out with a wig and Viking hat; it makes her stand out, encouraging us to laugh at the ridiculousness of the image. Most characters mock it, making it hard to take seriously. Shoshana, though, flips our understanding of the costume as a reflection of Kate’s turmoil by asking, “Where are you, Kate? Under all those costumes?” encouraging us to also understand it melodramatically as an emotional

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<sup>109</sup> Lehman, “Woman, Divided,” 70.

mask and barrier to Kate's desire. By fluctuating between comedic and melodramatic moments, the show cues us to find joy in the family's eccentricities while also sympathizing with their struggles. Through this focus on unaddressed secrets and familial drama, Cody reveals that "even Tara's family members...explore 'their inner alters.'"<sup>110</sup> As Tara rapidly changes alters, we understand that the whole family also struggles to discover and accept themselves against others' expectations and assumptions.

One sequence from "Torando" perfectly encapsulates all these themes of antinormativity and demonstrates how Cody expertly moves between comedy and melodrama: the dance in the basement. When everyone is bored, Max turns on the radio and begins a dance party, with each character slowly joining in. From the very start, this scene uses sitcom tropes by emphasizing every character's amateur dancing style. Their uncoordinated dances are highlighted through long shots that place everyone in the frame, all dancing out of time with each other, but we also understand how offbeat the dancing is through Kate's reaction to it. First, she is confused, urging us to recognize the absurdity of the moment, but she promptly joins in, dancing unashamedly herself. Everyone's dancing is enthusiastic and silly, and we are thus encouraged to laugh at and enjoy the Gregson's irregularity. Even if Kate initially judges the dancing, she joins in, cuing us to think about the dance in the same way. They are happy as they dance despite their obvious imperfections.

However, the moment also plays melodramatically, constantly reminding us of their uncontrollable circumstances, with the storm raging just outside the window.

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<sup>110</sup> Maureen Ryan, "Tara's Diablo Cody and Jill Soloway Talk About What's Next for the Showtime Comedy," *Chicago Tribune*, September 2, 2009.

Importantly, unlike the rest of the show, this sequence is shot handheld with a shaking camera. This deviation cues us to contrast the shaky camera from the series' usual steady-cam and recognize the heightened drama of the Gregsons' situation. Additionally, Charmaine does not dance with the rest of the family, instead sitting on the steps of the basement with her head in her hands. By cutting between the humorous dancing and Charmaine's panic, and in some cases even placing these two contrasting images in the same frame, we are cued to understand both the humor *and* the horror of this moment. The sound functions similarly, reminding us that they are hiding from a tornado. The song they dance to does not take over the soundtrack, and instead we hear it playing diegetically from an old radio. Due to this, the music is relatively quiet, and we can hear the sounds of the raging storm in the background. By allowing us to hear both the music and the storm, Cody cues us to not only enjoy their dancing but also to recognize the drama they are tangled up in. The sequence's generic hybridity encourages us to sympathize with and root for this abnormal family as they are stuck in the basement, but, as with Tara's disorder, not to pity them. They are not simply trapped but also actively rebelling against and defying social norms as a unified family. The Gregsons dance through their turmoil.

The episode ends with this same unbridled optimism. During Shoshana's final confrontation with Charmaine, the basement window shatters and the sound of the storm gets louder, accentuating the drama of their conflict. Once the confrontation ends and Tara returns, though, the sound subsides and the storm ends. *United States of Tara* is decidedly not subtle, using the tornado to punctuate its characters' internal states; and ultimately, the resolution of the storm illuminates the optimism at the root of *Tara* and all of Showtime's dramedies. Once Tara regains consciousness, she exits the basements,

saying, “It’s over. Can’t you guys feel it? The pressure’s changed.” She walks out of the dimly-lit and dreary basement, entering a bright sunny day, cuing us to recognize the hope in Tara’s life despite her struggles. The episode leaves us with a gorgeous image of Tara walking through rubble, over trees and broken telephone wires, and into the sunlight after telling Max, “There is a light at the end of the tunnel.” This light has nothing to do with the tornado, for the disaster has no significant consequence during or after the episode—the rubble disappears within two episodes, never to be mentioned again. Instead, the light Tara refers to suggests there is hope for the family to find happiness. Her comment links directly to her relationship with Max, as well, suggesting that despite their marital strife, they will continue to love one another. Max reiterates this sentiment, saying that Tara will always come back to the family because she loves them too much. The Gregsons’ story cannot end, both because there is no cure for Tara’s DID and because the family will never leave each other, sticking together as unruly characters through heartbreak and traumas. In this moment, by highlighting the family’s love, Cody validates the Gregsons’ transgressions against restrictive social norms and expectations. No matter the rubble or stormy weather, the final shot encourages us to continue rooting for Tara and her antinormative family because there is always a “light at the end of the tunnel” for them.

### **Conclusion: Learning to Adapt**

Showtime cannot afford to be complacent. It, like all networks, must be in a state of constant evolution. In the late 2000s, the network used its female-led dramedies for this purpose, to expand its branding strategy and personality. *United States of Tara* and the

other dramedies embrace alternative lifestyles, depicting families that resist normalcy and the labels others place onto them. Their protagonists, like the network itself, are not complacent or satisfied with their situations. However, despite their dissatisfaction, we recognize both the Gregsons' anguish and charm; they dance while a storm tears through their town, and we continue to root for Tara and even come to enjoy and care for her alters despite the chaos they cause.

*United States of Tara* and the other dramedies premiering at the time, such as *Nurse Jackie* and *The Big C*, renegotiated the stories told on Showtime. The network continued to highlight transgressive protagonists and taboo topics, but it cultivated generic hybridity as a way to look specifically at white upper middle class mothers struggling with the ideals of suburban America from a variety of angles—moving from a series about a soccer mom drug dealer to ones about mental illness, drug addiction, and fatal diseases. Rather than presenting common narratives about these characters, and in the process pathologizing, dismissing, or patronizing them, the Showtime dramedies use both sitcom and melodrama conventions to solve their unique storytelling challenges and push the boundaries of how we understand our protagonists. Even though *Weeds* and *Tara* tell very different stories, shifting from a rapidly changing external narrative to a more intimate family drama, Showtime uses the generic hybridity in both to promote itself as a premium channel that tells stories no one else would in a way no one else does. Unlike many HBO shows, Showtime's dramedies are imbued with hope, love, and promise for their challenging protagonists, in spite of their wrongdoings.

*United States of Tara* fulfilled this role in Showtime's programming and branding strategy, and Bob Greenblatt renewed the show after its first season saying, "This is a

perfect fit for our premium brand and we're thrilled that audiences and critics have responded to this groundbreaking show so well."<sup>111</sup> However, after three seasons, *Tara* was canceled due to low ratings. Many of Showtime's other dramedies also began to receive critical backlash, as I described with *Weeds*, for being unable to develop over multiple seasons. Due to this, Showtime was forced to swerve, deviating from the dramedy formula they perfected while still trying to retain claims to "provocative brilliance" through generic hybridity.<sup>112</sup> In the following chapter, I will turn to this change, looking at how the U.S. *Shameless* uses generic hybridity towards similar thematic and branding ends but deviates from Showtime's earlier fare. Most of the network's classic dramedies, like *Weeds* and *United States of Tara*, are no longer on the air, but they laid the groundwork for much of Showtime's original programming that followed. Networks, just like series, repeat and vary components of their brand. They learn to adapt.

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<sup>111</sup> "Showtime Renews 'United States of Tara,'" *Entertainment Close-Up*, February 11, 2009.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Chapter Four**

### **No One Fucks with the Gallaghers: Varying the Dramedy in *Shameless***

“People like you are too used to getting what you want.”<sup>1</sup>

A couple starts a brawl in a fancy nightclub. A closeted teenager has sex with his married boss. A father uses his baby to generate sympathy and then abandons him the following day. Showtime’s *Shameless*,<sup>2</sup> which focuses on an impoverished white family in the Southside of Chicago and was developed from Paul Abbott’s U.K. series for U.S. television by John Wells, is a dramedy full of these transgressive and, as the title suggests, shameless characters. However, it is also a marked variation on the Showtime dramedies previously discussed. Set to the song “Luck You Got” by The High Strung, the show’s opening credits clearly illustrate many of the ways the show departs from its predecessors. The sequence is filmed from one static angle of the family’s bathroom, with various characters coming and going; the characters pass out, have sex, play with toilet paper, and masturbate in the bathroom. We know we have immediately entered a new space, for *Shameless* is not the story of upper middle class suburbia and the transgressive women who inhabit it. The Gallaghers are not living comfortably in affluence like Nancy Botwin and Tara Gregson. Rather, they live in abject poverty, struggle to get by, and therefore operate within an entirely different social code. The characters’ actions in the credits are designed to shock viewers, but they are also an indicator of the family’s cramped quarters and necessity to improvise. While Nancy chooses to be an outlaw, burning down Agrestic and rejecting her status as a widower,

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<sup>1</sup> *Shameless*, 1.01 “Pilot,” Showtime, January 9, 2011, directed by Mark Mylod.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this chapter, I refer to the U.S. *Shameless* unless otherwise noted.

the Gallaghers are immediately assumed to be outlaws. The theme song alludes to this, saying, “You were beaming once before / But it’s not like that anymore.”<sup>3</sup> The Gallaghers are not beaming, patient, or willing, the song continues, due to the class they were born into; the law is designed to work against them, so breaking it is the only way they can survive.

While the disadvantaged socioeconomic status of the protagonists is the bedrock of the show and “separates *Shameless* from Showtime’s other fare, which typically displays families with transparently bourgeois (or at the very least comfortable) roots,”<sup>4</sup> *Shameless* differs from the dramedies in other significant ways.<sup>5</sup> For starters, the series is set in Chicago, an urban environment that allows stories to dip into various pockets of the metropolis. It is an hour long, rather than a half-hour. It is not developed by a female auteur, but rather adapted from a U.K. series with a male creator. It is heavily stylized, embracing slow-motion, split-screens, and point of view shots in ways the other dramedies don’t. Perhaps most significantly, *Shameless* is not focused on an A-list actress, like Edie Falco or Toni Collette, playing a “mother with problems.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, it is an ensemble show, as the countless characters in the credits suggest, and its biggest star is William H. Macy as the patriarch. All of these differences highlight how the show expands its world, looking not at one transgressive mother or family but rather at larger social structures, such as economic inequality, that keep them in place. Despite its divergence, however, the show is not a complete departure from Showtime’s dramedies.

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<sup>3</sup> *Shameless*, Opening Credits, Showtime, 2011-.

<sup>4</sup> John Hendel, “Showtime’s ‘Shameless’ New Show About Poverty,” *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> It is also important to note that despite the move away from “transparently bourgeois” characters, all of the show’s central characters are white, and it does incorporate or adequately consider race in collaboration with its examination of class. For more on the relationship between racial narratives and melodrama, see Linda Williams’ *Playing the Race Card*.

<sup>6</sup> Bradshaw, “Showtime’s ‘Female Problem,’” 161.

Like *Weeds* and *United States of Tara*, *Shameless* celebrates antinormative characters in an oppressive social world by fluctuating between comedy and melodrama.

Therefore, in this chapter I will argue that *Shameless* is a variation on the dramedies based on the shift in its characters' economic status. Through generic hybridity, the series moves outwards from one character or family to a more explicit critique of structural inequalities that control the Gallaghers' lives and expose them to death and suffering. Even some critics and reporters continue to call the show a "tragicomedy or dramedy," directly connecting it with Showtime's earlier fare.<sup>7</sup> First, I will examine why the show's change in the dramedy format was in part necessitated by developments in Showtime's branding strategy and the television industry at large. Then, turning my attention to the show's formal construction, I will look at how the series' unruly parents differ from *Weeds* and *Tara's*; they are used towards comedic ends without being the focus of the show, instead producing the difficult melodramatic situation for the rest of the family. I will also illuminate how all the Gallaghers, as well as the show's secondary characters, are transgressive, creating both anarchic comedy and emotional consequence and pathos. After, I will examine how the show's overall narrative structure—which utilizes external forces like coincidences and setting, as well as repetition and parallels between stories—drives the story forward. Lastly, I will conclude with a close case study of season seven, exploring the ways the show cues us to anticipate change. We celebrate how the Gallaghers maneuver and thrive in a system designed against them, but we also lament their inability to escape it. The theme song even jokingly tells us, "Think of all the luck you got," precisely because they have none.

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<sup>7</sup> Pamela Fox, "Who is *Shameless* This Election Season? One TV Show's Challenging Depiction of the Working Poor," *LAWCHA*, September 29, 2016; Hendel, "Showtime's 'Shameless' New Show."

The Gallaghers are not simply unlucky and they cannot break out of their poverty through hard work and perseverance, as the myth of the American Dream might suggest. Instead of finding joy in this false dream, the show urges us to take joy in the simple fact of their survival. At the end of the pilot, they all eat breakfast together at the kitchen table, with a song behind it chanting, “That’s the way we get by, the way we get by,” before we cut to black.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Changing Industry, a Changing Network**

“As these conversations unfold, it has become apparent that the seismic changes taking place today are among the most momentous in the history of modern media.”<sup>9</sup>

*Shameless* premiered on January 9, 2011, six years after *Weeds* and two after *United States of Tara*. While many of the original dramedies were still airing,<sup>10</sup> Showtime began to change up its programming around this time. Instead of female-led dramedies focused on aberrant mothers, the channel began to move towards period-pieces (such as *The Borgias* and *Masters of Sex*), thrillers (such as *Homeland*), and fantasy series (such as *Penny Dreadful*). To understand how *Shameless* functions as a variation on the network’s earlier dramedies, it is imperative that we consider why Showtime altered its programming. I do not suggest that there is one definitive cause for this shift, and instead I aim to highlight a constellation of factors, both within the network itself and within the industry at large, that contributed to its changing brand.

First, the dramedies were initially massive critical successes for Showtime, earning the network Emmys and glowing reviews, but over time, their appeal faded. As I

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<sup>8</sup> “The Way We Get By” by Spoon; featured in *Shameless*, 1.01 “Pilot.”

<sup>9</sup> Curtin, et al., *Distribution Revolution*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Nurse Jackie* was the last of the original Showtime dramedies to end, concluding in 2015.

noted with *Weeds*, the shows were often called kitschy and repetitive, milking similar premises well past their prime. Emily Nussbaum articulates this criticism of *United States of Tara* and *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, saying, “For all the good writing and fabulous actresses, at their worst, Showtime can make you feel like a sucker or a cynic, someone who longed for the girlfriend experience and found instead a bag of practiced tricks.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, as the series continued, they began losing the highly sought-after awards they once brought Showtime; *Weeds* received acting Emmy and Golden Globe nominations for its first four seasons but was completely shut out for its last four, and *United States of Tara* received four Emmy nominations for its first season—and a win for Toni Collette—but no nominations for its third and final season. Therefore, Showtime needed to revitalize its brand in some way, to keep itself at the forefront of quality television. It needed new shows and new hits, which it got with *Homeland* (2011-), winning the network its first Best Drama Series Emmy in 2012.<sup>12</sup>

The landscape of television was also changing dramatically in the early 2010s with the rise of digital distribution and cable networks. The increased import of cable networks was one of the largest shifts in the industry at the time, as demonstrated by AMC’s successes with *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Walking Dead* (2010-) and FX’s successes with *The Shield*, *Damages* (2007-2012), *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014), and *Justified* (2010-2015). Now, Showtime was no longer competing just with HBO and broadcast networks but also with an endless number of basic cable channels. Of course, this change did not happen overnight; we can find its antecedents in the deregulation of the

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<sup>11</sup> Nussbaum, “Women on the Verge.”

<sup>12</sup> Aaron Dobbs, “Why Showtime Wants Series That Are ‘A Little More Dangerous,’” *IndieWire*, September 19, 2013.

1970s and in the rise of premium network original programming of the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> If broadcast networks “retained an effective bottleneck at the point of distribution” in the 1980s, and premium networks did the same in the 1990s and early aughts, then the shift in the 2010s signaled an opening of the floodgates.<sup>14</sup> The increased competition created a crisis that Showtime was forced to respond to with new programming, for, as I’ve noted, branding is used most explicitly in these times of crisis. In response to the sheer amount of new critically acclaimed shows—a period referred to as “Peak TV,” coined by the FX President John Landgraf and then adopted by television critics—Showtime President David Nevins said, “I want Showtime to be the place for the most progressive and innovative television out there. There are other people making premium television that is closer to what Showtime has always done, so that forces us to be more original. AMC and FX are doing it really well, and I think you’re starting to see even more mainstream basic cable networks trying to edge up.”<sup>15</sup> Nevins explicitly addresses the new competition and suggests that Showtime’s brand needs to keep reevaluating itself to be “progressive and innovative.”

On top of this, new digital distribution services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon gained popularity in the early teens, increasing competition for Showtime even further. Netflix, for example, was not only “recycling content from other media,” but “also [was] becoming [an] original creative force in the entertainment industry.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, these services began producing original content and becoming a new type of online television network. Digital platforms adopted the “network as a brand that could be

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<sup>13</sup> Curtin et al., *Distribution Revolution*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, *Branding Television*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Dobbs, “Why Showtime Wants Series That Are ‘A Little More Dangerous.’”

<sup>16</sup> Curtin et al., *Distribution Revolution*, 1.

extended onto the digital landscape to help viewers find the content they want to watch.”<sup>17</sup> The “digital distribution as brand” idea created a new brand for Showtime to compete with and differentiate itself from. As with HBO, it is important to note once more that Showtime is not in a one-to-one competition with any of these other distributors and networks. Still, it is necessary for Showtime to differentiate itself to justify the subscription fee. Why subscribe to Showtime when you could just have Netflix? This was a new question Showtime had never faced before, forcing the network to “realign [its] business models around fresh modes of delivery or risk losing [its] audiences to a host of new rivals in the digital space.”<sup>18</sup>

All of these factors converged in this historical moment to necessitate a slight shift in the network’s image, explaining the move from its original female-led dramedies to a variation like *Shameless*. In 2011, David Nevins also replaced Bob Greenblatt as President of Showtime, bringing with him a new vision for the network while still retaining its core personality. When asked how Showtime might look different under his watch, Nevins explained, “I think there is a slightly different sensibility. I’m looking for things that have scope and intensity; that, more often than not, have multiple points of view and layers.”<sup>19</sup> In another interview, he expressed similar sentiments, saying, “I think we can broaden the range [of our shows] a little bit and be slightly more expansive. I think we can do shows with more than one lead; I think we can do slightly different genres.”<sup>20</sup> Nevins’ programming follows this logic: the first show he picked up was *Homeland*, a spy-thriller spanning multiple continents with two leads. It was a clear

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<sup>17</sup> Johnson, *Branding Television*, 46.

<sup>18</sup> Curtin et al., *Distribution Revolution*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Dobbs, “Why Showtime Wants Series That Are ‘A Little More Dangerous.’”

<sup>20</sup> Umstead, “Shameless: Behind Showtime’s Strategy to Stay Edgy.”

departure from previous Showtime series while still retaining the basic tenants of the channel's quality television aesthetic, such as exceptional performances, high production values, and challenging protagonists.<sup>21</sup> *Homeland* is essentially *24* (2001-201) with a premium aesthetic. *Shameless* fits within this framework perfectly, as well, using an ensemble cast and a more expansive setting in Chicago to move past the suburban settings and narrow focus of most of the other dramedies. Showtime's new expansive image, including period pieces and fantasy programming, resembles that of the digital distributors they now compete with. Hulu, for example, "chooses to emphasize the *range* of programming available."<sup>22</sup> Instead of just offering one type of show, Hulu, Netflix, and Amazon stress their variety. There is something for everyone, be it a crime show like *Narcos* (2015-) or an animated adult comedy like *Bojack Horseman* (2014-). Viewers don't need to like everything on their network, as long as they find a few notable programs to warrant the service's cost. Showtime's changing slate under Nevins seems to adopt a similar strategy, varying its shows' topics, genres, and scope to appeal to a wider range of audiences.

However, even as the Showtime brand changes, I want to stress that its sensibilities remain the same. The network does not dismiss its old brand; just as *Shameless* is a variation of earlier female-led dramedies, Showtime's new image is simply a variation on its preexisting one. In short, the network continues to make claims towards quality television while centering taboo or controversial topics. As Nevins says, they aim for their shows to be "provocative" and "in keeping with the tone of quality and adult

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<sup>21</sup> Greg Braxton & Yvonne Villarreal, "TCA Press Tour; Showtime is Entering a Season of Transition," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, *Branding Television*, 55.

sophistication.”<sup>23</sup> One critic even claims that Showtime makes “provocativeness almost a genre unto itself.”<sup>24</sup> And this provocativeness refers not only to the topics of the shows, but also the sex, nudity, and profanity in them, literally showing viewers things they can’t see on broadcast networks, just as they always have. In many ways, a mix of provocativeness and sophistication is the perfect recipe for Showtime and an apt description of *Weeds*, *United States of Tara*, and *Shameless*. In the promotional poster for *Shameless*’ seventh season, one character points directly at the camera, another holds up her beer, and a third lights his cigarette with a torch lighter. Even as Showtime’s image morphs, it still aims to shock us with things that “feel a little bit dangerous, a little bit forbidden.”<sup>25</sup> All the factors I’ve highlighted, including critical reception, the increase of digital distributors, and turnover of Showtime personnel, created the conditions for the network’s changing image, in part helping to explain *Shameless*’ deviation from earlier dramedies. Again, I do not mean to suggest that there was any one thing that caused this change or to imply causation where there may only be correlation. Rather, I hope to have illuminated the numerous elements that made such a shift both possible and necessary, for, as Nevins puts it, “A successful network is in a constant state of reinvention.”<sup>26</sup> Having established the industrial context behind *Shameless*’ differences, I will now turn to how the show is constructed using generic hybridity to tell a story about poverty, first in its use of unruly characters and then its larger narrative construction.

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<sup>23</sup> Umstead, “Shameless: Behind Showtime’s Strategy to Stay Edgy.”

<sup>24</sup> Lauren Sarner & Winston Cook-Wilson, “Why is ‘Shameless’ On Season 7?,” *Inverse*, July 20, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> David Nevins in Dobbs, “Why Showtime Wants Series That Are ‘A Little More Dangerous.’”

<sup>26</sup> Umstead, “Shameless: Behind Showtime’s Strategy to Stay Edgy.”

### “Neglect Fosters Self-Reliance:” Unruly, Absent Parents<sup>27</sup>

Steve: “You’re going to be disappointed.”

Fiona: “Wouldn’t be the first time somebody’s disappointed me.”<sup>28</sup>

Showtime’s female-led dramedies feature unconventional mothers, ranging from disinterested to downright neglectful, that draw from traditions of sitcom protagonists. How does *Shameless* follow, or diverge, from its presentation of motherhood and antinormative parents? Unlike Nancy and Tara, Monica Gallagher, the matriarch in *Shameless*, is not the program’s star—in fact, she is not even a regular character, only briefly appearing in three of the show’s seven seasons. The father, Frank Gallagher, is also not the narrative center of the show like the parents of *Weeds* and *Tara* are, and he is the furthest thing from the series’ emotional foundation. They are not simply neglectful; they are entirely absent. Yet, despite this change, *Shameless* still functionally relies on its unruly parents to both create comedic antics and establish the melodramatic situation that prompts the rest of the series, allowing us to focus on the consequences of parental neglect on the Gallagher children.

First, I hope to illuminate how the show’s entire premise is founded on the parents’ absence and the tension between Frank and Fiona, his eldest daughter, as co-leads—both in advertisements and the show itself. As I’ve noted, *Shameless* doesn’t feature a star actress playing an antinormative mother. We don’t have an Edie Falco or Laura Linney to identify with, no immediately recognizable female star to promote. Instead, we have William H. Macy as Frank. He does not raise his children, leaving that responsibility to Fiona Gallagher, played by Emmy Rossum. In many ways, she takes on

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<sup>27</sup> *Shameless*, 2.05 “Father’s Day,” Showtime, February 5, 2012, directed by Anthony Hemingway.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 2.12 “Fiona Interrupted,” Showtime, April 1, 2012, directed by John Wells.

the “deviant mother” status of Nancy Botwin or Tara Gregson. She becomes an unwitting mother, often operating as the emotional core of the ensemble in a way that neither Frank nor Monica could. With all that said, though, Macy was initially promoted as the star of the series. He was moving from high profile roles in film to television and was therefore the project’s most recognizable name. In the first season promo, for example, the first thing we hear is Frank’s voice, saying, “Nobody’s saying our neighborhood is the Garden of Eden, but it’s been a good home to me and my kids,” suggesting that Frank and his children form a solid familial unit, like in *Tara*. Additionally, the trailer later reads, “Frank Gallagher: father, teacher, mentor, captain of our little ship,” and the first name that appears afterwards is, “Emmy Award Winner, William H. Macy.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, he is often nominated in the Best Actor category for the Emmys, and many critics reviewed the show listing him as the first and primary acting credit.<sup>30</sup> This was especially true in the show’s first season, but even now, Macy is the most prominent character in the latest “Best of Showtime” trailer, despite his character not dominating the series’ narrative or screen-time.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, I argue that Frank Gallagher, in part through Macy’s star power, functions as a sort of Trojan horse. This concept is drawn from Jenji Kohan’s description of the main character Piper in *Orange is the New Black*;<sup>32</sup> Kohan called Piper, a privileged cis white woman, the show’s Trojan horse, as she is the viewer’s entry-point, only for the series to then expand its focus to black, Hispanic, transgender, and

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<sup>29</sup> “Shameless TV Series Season 1 Promo Trailer,” YouTube video (1:41), posted on November 14, 2012, posted by “Ege MyLive.”

<sup>30</sup> Margy Rochlin, “‘Shameless’ Brings Home America’s Poor Next Door,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> “Best of Showtime,” *Showtime Networks Website*, no postdate available.

<sup>32</sup> Kohan, creator of Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black*, also created and executive produced *Weeds*.

socioeconomically disadvantaged characters over the course of its first season.<sup>33</sup> While it is not a perfect comparison, I think this concept is useful for articulating Frank's function in *Shameless*, as he is promoted as the show's comedic lead, but within the first episode, we come to recognize that Frank is not a part of his children's lives and that his actions are not simply humorous but also have serious emotional repercussions.

This turn is demonstrated perfectly in the pilot's first half hour. In the first scene, we hear a voiceover of Frank describing each member of the family; he says great things about everyone, claiming that he is the "captain of their ship," while they all laugh and enjoy themselves at a large bonfire together.<sup>34</sup> The camera highlights his face, prioritizing him over his children. They appear to be a loving family, with Frank at its helm. In the following scene, though, Frank is nowhere to be found. Fiona wakes up and looks at herself in the mirror, going from sibling to sibling's room to wake them up. The camera follows Fiona in a single take, and, in contrast to the first scene, there is no music, voiceover, jump cuts, or intense stylization. Due to this shift, we are cued to immediately draw a contrast between Frank and Fiona and recognize that he is not the patriarch he claims to be. At breakfast, Debbie tells her brother earnestly, "You're almost nine, you have to start pulling your weight around here," suggesting that the children can't rely on Frank and have to take care of themselves.<sup>35</sup> We don't even see Frank again for another twenty minutes, when he is found passed out on the street by a cop. Frank talks the talk, but we then see Fiona doing the daily and mundane work of taking care of the family. While he is promoted as the show's star, or at the very least its co-lead, Fiona is the

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<sup>33</sup> "'Orange' Creator Jenji Kohan: 'Piper Was My Trojan Horse,'" *NPR Fresh Air*, podcast audio, August 13, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> *Shameless*, 1.01 "Pilot."

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 1.01 "Pilot."

Gallaghers' primary caretaker. Additionally, the network recently solidified Fiona, and Emmy Rossum's, importance to the show. Rossum negotiated to receive a higher salary than Macy for the show's eighth season in order to compensate her for the past seven seasons where she was not at parity with him. In doing so, the network finally recognized that Rossum is as much of, if not more of, a lead than Macy.<sup>36</sup> Within the first episode, we begin to understand that the show is not centered on a sitcom-inspired parental figure, as the other dramedies are, but rather based on its lack.

Before we look closer at Fiona as a modified unruly mother, I will examine how Frank functions as an overtly comic figure, creating anarchic and ridiculous situations, even as his actions have tremendous melodramatic resonance. At the end of the show's first scene, Frank shouts, "We know how to party."<sup>37</sup> Knowing how to have fun and shock audiences, he repeatedly finds himself in sticky, larger-than-life situations, like trying to manipulate a dying doctor into giving him all of her money and building a concrete wall in his house to keep his children away. Frank is a con man. Many of his antics and cons are presented with little narrative consequence through high stylization, cuing us to enjoy these moments of hilarity without concern for their repercussions. He is a harbinger of chaos, he has fun doing it, and we have fun watching him. In this way, he fits into a tradition of sitcom protagonists as the trickster, who "is shifty and clever, and gets what he or she wants through deception, tricks, and rule-breaking. The trickster dons disguises, plays roles, crosses gender and class, causes trouble, and stirs up the status quo."<sup>38</sup> Almost all of his stories rely on deception and trickery in some way.

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<sup>36</sup> Derek Lawrence, "Emmy Rossum Signs New *Shameless* Contract After Equal Pay Dispute," *Entertainment Weekly*, December 14, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> *Shameless*, 1.01 "Pilot."

<sup>38</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 54.

For example, for the first two seasons, Frank pretends to love an agoraphobic woman named Sheila only so that he can live in her house, and he later does the same to his long-lost daughter Sammi. At the end of season two, he also tries to take advantage of his mother's death to make money.<sup>39</sup> He “dons disguises” and will manipulate or have sex—which functions as a type of graphic comic deviance—with anyone in order to get what he needs. As with his mother's death, Frank often twists topics of great significance, such as a gay rights movement, for his own selfish ends. In season seven, he tries to create a homeless shelter, but its entire purpose is for him to turn a profit—when others figure this out, they throw him out a window and the storyline ends. Frank just moves onto his next scheme. He alludes to larger social issues, but his actual story trivializes them. Notably, these stories are almost always independent from his children's and do not have a lasting impact, cuing us to take joy in Frank's moments of misbehavior. In many ways, Frank is the show's greatest source of comedy; we do not need to take him seriously because “the joke's usually on him.”<sup>40</sup>

Much of Frank's comedy comes not only from its narrative construction but also the way it is stylistically presented. Frank's antics are often depicted through slow-motion, upbeat music cues, and fast camera movement to distance us from his actions, cuing us to laugh at how unbelievable they are. When Frank becomes the face of the gay rights movement and delivers a speech, for instance, we watch him from untraditional camera angles, including below and through a glass podium, as well as with quick camera movements that spiral around him. Additionally, as he starts to say increasingly

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<sup>39</sup> *Shameless*, 2.11 “Just Like the Pilgrims Intended,” Showtime, March 25, 2012, directed by Mark Mylod.

<sup>40</sup> Fox, “Who is Shameless This Election Season?”

contentious statements—like calling heterosexuals “breeders”—playful music picks up and we cut between shots of him and the audience much faster, giving the illusion of speeding up the speech itself and cuing us to think of Frank’s actions as hilarious rather than as anything of consequence.<sup>41</sup> Macy’s performance is also incredibly heightened, again distancing us from his actions and allowing us to laugh at him. In this scene, his performance utilizes his whole body, as he paces and gestures wildly. Just as we are impressed by Mary-Louise Parker’s breathless delivery in *Weeds*, Macy amazes both viewers and characters through his impassioned and verbose acting style. As one reviewer notes, the “slur, rant, or general profanity curling around the edge of his lips” makes for “great comedy.”<sup>42</sup> The heightened style and performance ensure that many of Frank’s antics are not grounded, cuing us to take pleasure from them.

However, at other moments, his actions do have profound emotional effects on his family, which is often illustrated through shifts in style and other Gallaghers’ reactions. For example, in the first episode, Frank is passed out on the living room floor, and Fiona tries to wake him. The camera focuses on Fiona’s face, as she cries, saying, “Hey, dad, get up. Get up. Get up!” She kicks him and screams before composing herself, with no music underneath the scene to distance us.<sup>43</sup> Instead, in this moment, we are not cued to view Frank as funny or harmless, for the harsh shift in style and character focus urges us to recognize the emotional impact his drunken shenanigans have on Fiona. We also see the effects of his actions on Debbie, his youngest daughter, later in the season when Frank gets sober for one day. After giving up alcohol, Frank is

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<sup>41</sup> *Shameless*, 3.10 “Civil Wrongs,” Showtime, March 24, 2013, directed by Gary Goldman.

<sup>42</sup> David Crow, “Why *Shameless*’ Frank Gallagher is the Nastiest Protagonist on TV,” *Den of Geek*, July 10, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> *Shameless*, 1.01 “Pilot.”

suddenly a very attentive and loving father. The eldest son Lip warns Debbie to not get too attached, but Debbie also knows better, saying, “Daddy’s going to forget all about us when he starts drinking again. I know, I don’t mind. I’m just going to enjoy this for a while if that’s okay.”<sup>44</sup> In this episode, Frank’s transformation functions not to give us insight into his psyche or make us miss his schemes—or even spark a long-term plot—but rather to emphasize the abandonment that his children feel when he drinks. In that way, Frank is “not complex, even if” his narrative function “is nuanced and complicated.”<sup>45</sup> As Debbie guessed, Frank starts drinking again in the following episode and moves onto new adventures, promptly forgetting his children. Through this contrast, the show cues us to both enjoy his rowdiness and also recognize the melodramatic consequences of it. Similarly, in season seven, after Frank builds a concrete wall in the house stairwell to keep the children from going upstairs, Fiona and Lip take a sledgehammer to it, releasing all of their aggression with Frank against that wall.<sup>46</sup> Here, the show utilizes slow-motion not to emphasize the frivolity of Frank’s actions but rather to elongate and therefore draw attention to Fiona’s anger against her father. While Frank’s construction initially seems silly and outlandish, the show employs melodramatic techniques so we can see the effect it has on Fiona. We see that his actions are not devoid of context and that they have consequences.

Even though she is not a regular character, Monica functions similarly, arresting characters’ independent stories when she returns. In all three seasons where she appears,<sup>47</sup> she comes back at their ends in order to shake up every existing plotline.

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<sup>44</sup> *Shameless*, 1.08 “It’s Time to Kill the Turtle,” Showtime, February 27, 2011, directed by Scott Frank.

<sup>45</sup> Crow, “Why *Shameless*’ Frank Gallagher is the Nastiest Protagonist on TV.”

<sup>46</sup> *Shameless*, 7.02 “Swipe, Fuck, Leave,” Showtime, October 9, 2016, directed by Rob Hardy.

<sup>47</sup> Monica has appeared in seasons one, two, and seven.

Tellingly, the episode where she returns in season two is entitled “Hurricane Monica”—she brings a hurricane with her, both of hilarity and trauma.<sup>48</sup> In season two, she and Frank sneak into Sheila’s house, scaring Sheila and making her run around the house screaming, while the Gallagher parents laugh and escape.<sup>49</sup> In this moment, the chaos that Monica’s antics cause—with Sheila using her vacuum cleaner for protection as she scans her house for intruders—is primarily funny. This is also another moment of high stylization, as we see the scene play out in a split-screen with Sheila on the left and Frank and Monica on the right, distancing us from the action. Chloe Webb, who plays Monica, also employs a similarly heightened performance style as Macy so that we can read many of her actions as larger-than-life and enjoy them. At the end of “Hurricane Monica,” we even see all of the Gallaghers, Monica and Frank included, dancing in the living room and drinking together; the edits in this scene are fast, cutting from one family member dancing to another. The camera moves quickly between the family, and a loud upbeat song plays over the party, cuing us to relish this moment of bliss because everyone in the family is, as well.

However, as with Frank, Monica’s aberrance is not entirely comedic—even the fact that she is a recurring character automatically implies her abandonment. In season two, for example, Fiona and the other siblings start to warm up to Monica, finding her sympathetic rather than destructive. The ending of “A Great Cause” changes this, though, when Fiona returns to find her house in shambles, one of her brothers in the hospital and the other signing up for the army, and all of their emergency money gone; suddenly, it isn’t all fun and games anymore. Fiona tells Lip that she hoped it would be

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<sup>48</sup> *Shameless*, 2.09 “Hurricane Monica,” Showtime, March 11, 2012, directed by Alex Graves.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 2.10 “A Great Cause,” Showtime, March 18, 2012, directed by Mimi Leder.

better this time, to which he simply responds, “How’d that kool-aid taste going down?” By melodramatically shifting to Fiona’s perspective, we recognize the dramatic impacts of Monica’s unruliness that are outside of Fiona’s control: Fiona is left without parents, so she needs to carry the weight. Fiona then goes to find Monica lying in her bed crying in a moment reminiscent of Fiona’s interaction with a passed out Frank in the pilot. She begs for an explanation from Monica, but Monica doesn’t respond or move, leading Fiona to scream, “Get up. Get out of bed, mom!” The repetition of this moment, of Fiona’s frustration, cues us to recognize the pain that her parents cause and how the Gallagher children cannot escape it. Importantly, though, Monica is not presented as a villain but as also a victim of her circumstances and bipolar disorder. We see Monica crying in bed, suggesting that she loves her children and tries to care for them even when she fails. Afterwards, Fiona goes to the kitchen to clean up the mess, and the show uses slow-motion and a melancholy song to highlight Fiona’s despair as she takes off her blazer, which once suggested a hope for a professional career and future that now appears to be lost.<sup>50</sup> Rather than speed through narrative moments or distance us from character action, here, the show’s heightened style draws out the time we spend with Fiona and accentuates her powerlessness. By presenting Monica and Frank as both comedic and melodramatic, the show encourages us not to simply hate them but also to feel pathos for them—for Frank’s alcoholism and Monica’s bipolar disorder—as we recognize how their lives have been influenced by social factors outside of their control.

In *Shameless*, in contrast to other Showtime dramedies, the parents’ recklessness is fundamentally unsustainable for the family and ultimately unforgivable—for this reason,

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<sup>50</sup> *Shameless*, 2.10 “A Great Cause.”

as I've noted, neither Frank nor Monica provide the affective backbone of the series. Instead, this honor belongs to Fiona Gallagher. Unlike Nancy or Tara, Fiona never asked to be a mother and is instead saddled with her siblings; the fact that she is forced to be a mother becomes the central tension for her character and the source of her transgressions. Fiona is unabashedly sexual, profane, and neglectful, deviating from socially acceptable images of motherhood. In the first episode, one of the first things we see her do, after waking her siblings up, is go out to a party, bring a stranger home, and have sex with him on the kitchen floor.<sup>51</sup> This story is presented as glamorous, utilizing upbeat music at the club and fast editing during the sex scene to cue us to enjoy the adrenaline rush and excitement of the situation rather than judge it. Additionally, Fiona's sex with Steve, the stranger who later becomes her boyfriend, is especially graphic, establishing her as brazenly sexual despite her maternal status and as reflective of Showtime's identity of a premium network with shocking and explicit material, including nudity. Her sexuality is repeatedly emphasized as the series progresses, too, as we continue to see her having graphic sex with many men and disposing of them when she pleases, like her boyfriend Gus in season five. She also swears regularly and loses her cool; when she is cut off by a car, she flips off the driver, yelling, "Fuck you, you fucking asshole! At least I don't have a tiny penis!"<sup>52</sup> She is not polite, reserved, or composed, instead embracing her own set of social transgressions that we can revel in. Importantly, she is also not fully attentive to her siblings, even forcing them to pay rent and telling Debbie that if she doesn't get an abortion, she will not let her live in the house.<sup>53</sup> At

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<sup>51</sup> *Shameless*, 1.01 "Pilot."

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 4.02 "My Oldest Daughter," Showtime, January 19, 2014, directed by Mimi Leder.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 6.03 "The F Word," Showtime, January 14, 2016, directed by Nisha Ganatra.

times, she is an absent caretaker herself, due to being in prison<sup>54</sup> or simply refusing to answer her siblings' emergency calls.<sup>55</sup> She is a loving sister and maternal figure, but due to her violations of those identities, we recognize that she is not saintly nor sacrificial and therefore the Gallagher children cannot always rely on her.

At the same time, she is *forced* to be a mother based on her parents' actions; her reluctant motherhood forms the melodramatic situation of the show, urging us to root for her untraditional family structure. In that way, Fiona embodies both the sitcom convention of the unruly mother *and* the melodramatic convention of the innocent, suffering protagonist, "who for all of her foibles has never really shed her identity as a teenager forced to grow up too fast and raise her siblings like her children."<sup>56</sup> The show uses this generic hybridity in Fiona's characterization, collapsing comedy and melodrama into one element, so that we can understand all of her riotous actions as stemming from her inescapable situation: someone needs to raise the siblings, and if it's not her, then who will it be? A look at the courtroom sequence in "A Long Way from Home," where Fiona assumes legal custody of her siblings, is helpful for uncovering her character's function.<sup>57</sup> On the surface, it seems as if Fiona must choose between herself and her siblings, but during her testimony, it becomes clear that this has never been a choice for her:

Fiona: "We were living out of a car once. Uncle Nick had kicked us out. We couldn't find anyone else who would take us in. Lip and Ian and me were sleeping in the backseat when Frank pulled over, middle of the night. Think it was Holstead. Told me to take the boys and sit on the curb and he'd be right back. I was six. Few hours later, we're still sitting on the sidewalk and Ian's head is burning up and he's hysterical. I didn't know what to do, so I ran down the street, Lip under one arm, Ian under the other, trying to flag down help. Would've been easier scoring crack than a

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<sup>54</sup> *Shameless*, 4.06 "Iron City," Showtime, February 16, 2014, directed by James Ponsoldt.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 7.03 "Home Sweet Homeless Shelter," Showtime, October 16, 2016, directed by Iain MacDonald.

<sup>56</sup> Myles McNutt, "Refugees Review," *The AV Club*, February 7, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> *Shameless*, 3.07 "A Long Way from Home," Showtime, March 3, 2013, directed by Mimi Leder.

ride to the clinic. I finally made it on foot. They said Ian had a fever of one-hundred-and-four. Another couple hours, who knows. I didn't find Frank until a couple days later. First thing he asked me was how much money I had on me. I wish I could say that was the only time, but it was just the first. My mother's bipolar and my father's an alcoholic and an addict. He takes what he pleases and he offers nothing. No money, no support. I've done what I could to help raise my siblings. I wish I could've done more. I'm not asking for your pity or your admiration. I just want to give these kids everything they deserve because they're great kids and they deserve better."<sup>58</sup>

As her testimony illustrates, Fiona has been her siblings' de facto caretaker since she was six. By calling upon this story, Fiona and the show draw a clear parallel between that situation and her decision to assume guardianship. The judge tells her it is her choice, but if she doesn't become a legal guardian, Child Protective Services will take her siblings away from her and put them into the foster system. Similarly, in the story she retells, she had no choice but to take care of her younger brothers, for if she didn't, they would have died. This moment therefore is as much about her siblings deserving better as it is about how *she* deserves and deserved better. We see the direct melodramatic consequences of Frank and Monica's actions through Fiona's status as a disruptive mother, for her "opportunities for action" are constrained "in ways that go beyond simply posing obstacles."<sup>59</sup> However, it is just as important that Fiona is not asking for "pity" or "admiration," either from the judge or the audience. Despite her impossible circumstances, she remains an active agent of disorder. Even though the judge tells her that this means she must now always put her siblings first, Fiona continuously refuses to do so, going so far to explicitly tell them that they are on their own in season seven. Her legal status does not suddenly make her an attentive parent, for she is not law-abiding and, like the other Showtime dramedy mothers, has little regard for social norms and expectations. We are urged to feel pathos for her based on her situation, but the show

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<sup>58</sup> *Shameless*, 3.07 "A Long Way from Home."

<sup>59</sup> Jacobs, "The Woman's Picture and the Poetics of Melodrama," 141.

also utilizes comedic rebelliousness to ensure that she is not simply a victim. She, like all of the Gallagher children, navigates and manipulates the life she is given rather than becomes subsumed or defined by it.

### **A Family of Outlaws**

“The only way to make money if you’re poor is to steal it or scam it.”<sup>60</sup>

The Gallaghers know how to have fun, and they know how to party. Before moving onto a discussion of the show’s larger narrative constructive, it is necessary to illustrate how *Shameless* depicts the entire family, not just Fiona and Frank, as outlaws, and to explain how the show presents their social deviance by fluctuating between the convention’s comedic roots and its melodramatic fallout. As previously explained, the Gallagher children—Fiona, eldest brother Lip, Ian, Debbie, Carl, and baby Liam—exist within a melodramatic situation, in part due to their socioeconomic status and in part due to their parents’ abandonment. However, despite this situation, all of the Gallagher children continue to survive through improvisation and by infusing chaos into the narrative, turning to crime, schemes, and other morally objectionable behavior. Due to their limited options, we can find “a kind of charm in the way in which the family doesn’t bother to differentiate between moral and immoral means to get by.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, the Gallaghers are unapologetic. While these characters are placed within a situation that prompts our sympathy, they exhibit comic and socially deviant behavior to

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<sup>60</sup> *Shameless*, 3.02 “The American Dream,” Showtime, January 20, 2013, directed by Anthony Hemingway.

<sup>61</sup> Joe Reid, “Why Isn’t *Shameless*’ Fiona Treated Like the ‘Difficult Men’ of TV?,” *The Atlantic*, February 2, 2015.

cue us to not only take pleasure and laugh with them but also to recognize the joy and power in their unlikely survival.

The repeated motifs of parties, crimes, and schemes help construct the Gallaghers as uncontrollable. Many early episodes of the series are structured around the Gallaghers' capers, where the family is faced with a problem, often related to their class, and they must resort to extreme measures to feed themselves or keep their house. As in sitcoms, the Gallaghers are often presented as "childish schemer[s] whose comic exploits stem from getting [their] way from an initial position of inequality....It is the root of their trickery."<sup>62</sup> In other words, the comedic trickster uses deception to get their way because they are already at a disadvantage—the Gallaghers' economic position puts them in a similar boat. For example, in the third episode, the family kidnaps an old woman with dementia to pose as their Aunt Ginger, who is listed as the owner of their house, or else they will be evicted. The necessity of the plot justifies their questionable actions, so the story is presented humorously, using cheery music as they steal the elderly woman from a nursing home where Vee, their next-door neighbor, works. Additionally, Debbie takes photos with the woman to artificially produce memories, and this moment is depicted in an upbeat montage, quickly cutting between snapshots that Debbie is taking, to distance us from the extremity of their kidnapping. And, notably at the end of the episode, the Gallaghers get to keep their house with little narrative consequence: the elderly woman is returned to her nursing home unharmed and Vee doesn't lose her job, telling Fiona, "Girl, please. This place is just like they say on the news."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 38.

<sup>63</sup> *Shameless*, 1.03 "Aunt Ginger," Showtime, January 16, 2011, directed by Stephen Hopkins.

We see similar episodic structuring in other episodes, including when Debbie steals a toddler<sup>64</sup> and when the family fakes Frank's death.<sup>65</sup> By utilizing a heightened style and a lack of narrative consequence, the show encourages us to enjoy the Gallaghers' schemes as successful romps. Their antics therefore follow a similar pattern as a traditional sitcom structure, through the establishment of a problem, escalation of chaos, and finally a resolution.<sup>66</sup> As with *I Love Lucy*, the reestablishment of the status quo is both a success and failure, for the Gallaghers continue to survive while also remain trapped in their same oppressive conditions. The fun antics also call attention to the family's melodramatic situation at times. When the family brings the old woman back to her nursing home, the camera lingers on Debbie crying as she loses her new friend, cuing us to recognize the lack of strong parental figures in her life after a full hour of the Gallaghers' escapades. The same structure happens in the following episode, when Debbie steals a young boy because she wants a new friend; it is a highly dramatic incident with a similar emotional resonance, calling to mind her innocence and difficult position. At the same time, though, it is also played for comedy as the family tries to hide the boy and skirt around the cops through montages, fast-editing, and split-screens that destabilize the drama.<sup>67</sup>

While many episodes are based around these patterned crimes, the rest of the series is also filled with moments of the Gallaghers breaking various social norms and expectations, which contributes to Showtime's image of having shocking, rule-breaking

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<sup>64</sup> *Shameless*, 1.04 "Casey Casden," Showtime, January 30, 2011, directed by Todd Holland.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 1.07 "Frank Gallagher: Loving Husband, Devoted Father," Showtime, February 20, 2011, directed by David Nutter.

<sup>66</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*.

<sup>67</sup> *Shameless*, 1.04 "Casey Casden."

characters that we must “brace ourselves” for. We see these transgressions in every episode. In the first episode, Lip gets a blowjob from a girl while both of her parents are in the room, and he must then run away, chased by her father.<sup>68</sup> Steve steals cars and tempts Fiona to join in on the fun, bringing us along for the ride. Carl begins smuggling drugs in season five, using a younger boy as his mule. Debbie creates a daycare in season three, but then is incredibly negligent and even uses the children to do work around the house. As with Fiona, we also repeatedly see almost every member of the Gallagher family having graphic sex; these scenes function as “spectacles” that highlight how the family challenges cultural and viewer expectations.<sup>69</sup> I could go on. The important takeaway, though, is that the repetition of these shocking moments, often depicted through a heightened style and wide shots that provide “the emotional distance we need to perceive comedy,” encourage us to recognize how the Gallaghers’ disregard for the law is necessary and required for their daily survival.<sup>70</sup> As Emmy Rossum explains, “[The characters’ situations] aren’t funny things, but there are a lot of funny things that come out of them.”<sup>71</sup>

Due to this comedy, one of the chief criticisms of *Shameless* is that it doesn’t take its characters’ situations or behaviors seriously, “making kitsch of the artifacts of destitution.”<sup>72</sup> I argue, however, that the show does not make light of the Gallaghers’ poverty. The family’s mischief is not only played for comedy, but also for its lasting melodramatic impact. The series flips on a dime. Fiona’s neglect stops being funny and

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<sup>68</sup> *Shameless*, 1.01 “Pilot.”

<sup>69</sup> Fox, “Who is Shameless This Election Season?”

<sup>70</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 30.

<sup>71</sup> Danielle Turchiano, “‘Shameless’ Star Emmy Rossum Says Fiona is Stumbling towards Maturity in Season 5,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 9, 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Hendel, “Showtime’s ‘Shameless’ New Show About Poverty.”

becomes almost lethal in season four, for instance, when she throws a party and Liam, the youngest sibling, gets into her cocaine. This incident leads to Liam's hospitalization and Fiona's arrest. The party is initially presented with the same flippancy as the family's other high jinks, using upbeat music, fast camera movement, and quick editing to distance us and urge us to not take their partying too seriously—we, like Fiona, are meant to have fun. Once we discover that Liam has gotten into the cocaine, though, the tone shifts. The music cuts away, forcing us to sit in silence, and the camera lingers on reaction shots of family members as they process the news.<sup>73</sup> Unlike other instances of social deviance in the show, Fiona's partying sparks a story that does not get resolved at the end of the episode, but rather continues for the rest of the season. The Gallaghers' "schemes often backfire and the trickster is duped, because society is not so elastic as to allow for the trickster's remaking of social roles, metaphors, practices, and spaces."<sup>74</sup> Her social deviance is first comedic but also becomes painful, reminding us to always acknowledge the difficult positions and decisions that are forced unto the family. They fight back against societal norms but they are constantly put back into that original position of inequality and suffering.

The movement between comedy and melodrama in these moments urges us to not think of the Gallaghers as blameless, though, even as we understand how they are forced into particular situations. The show recognizes that Fiona *is* at fault for her brother's hospitalization, as Lip later screams, "Liam almost died, and that was you! All you. Your coke, your boyfriend, your fucked up life."<sup>75</sup> Similarly, in season three, Fiona

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<sup>73</sup> *Shameless*, 4.05 "There's the Rub," Showtime, February 9, 2014, directed by David Nutter.

<sup>74</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 55.

<sup>75</sup> *Shameless*, 4.07 "A Jailbird, Invalid, Martyr, Cutter, Retard, and Parasitic Twin," Showtime, February 23, 2014, directed by Gary Goldman.

takes money from the family's savings in order to pay for a club promotion. The club is presented as an exciting and fun job prospect for Fiona, and the monetary risk she takes ends up paying off. She turns a profit, but Lip confronts her for putting the entire family at risk in the process. Their confrontation urges us to both recognize the limits of the Gallaghers' class position, just as many sitcoms demonstrate the limits of femininity, and the dangers of their individual actions on the rest of the family.<sup>76</sup> The show again uses style here to focus on these repercussions, using longer reaction shots and a silent soundtrack to emphasize and elongate the siblings' conflict. Our protagonists' antinormative behaviors can thus be seen as pleasurable, dangerous, and a result of their socioeconomic position; we are encouraged to root for them and their small victories despite the harm their actions may cause. Therefore, the comedy and melodrama behind the Gallaghers' unruliness are two sides of the same coin.

“Not Everyone's a Thug”<sup>77</sup>

*Shameless* features a slew of over-the-top, humorous characters outside of the family. For instance, the regulars at the Alibi, Vee and her husband Kevin's bar, are largely caricatures, getting into drunken brawls and making crude comments. The show has been criticized for its portrayal of these peripheral characters in the Southside, with one critic stating, “The show plays on so many stereotypes as to be white-trash porn.”<sup>78</sup> However, as with the Gallaghers themselves, I argue that the show plays off these stereotypes of poor characters to later upend them, to enjoy the humor within them

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<sup>76</sup> *Shameless*, 3.02 “The American Dream.”

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 4.07 “A Jailbird, Invalid, Martyr, Cutter, Retard, and Parasitic Twin.”

<sup>78</sup> Hendel, “Showtime's ‘Shameless’ New Show About Poverty.”

while not forgetting the pain of their circumstances. Much like with the alters in *United States of Tara*, generic hybridity in *Shameless* complicates initially stereotyped figures.

*Shameless* encourages us to think broadly about the social structuring of the Southside by mixing genres in its representation of secondary guest characters, exploring both their comedic value and emotional resonance. Many secondary characters are often used as props in the family's schemes without much narrative consequence, such as the old woman who the family pretends is their Aunt Ginger. Additionally, in another episode, Vee and Kevin's neighbor accidentally sets himself on fire, but due to the scene's upbeat grunge music, fast editing, and emphasis on Kevin's close-up reaction in contrast to long shots of the neighbor on fire, we are distanced from the supporting character. This distancing thus cues us to laugh and gasp at the ridiculousness of the situation rather than feel pathos for the neighbor.<sup>79</sup> The neighbor may be caught in our protagonists' crossfires, but we understand him as primarily a narrative tool. However, at other points, we are encouraged to care for the characters who the Gallaghers have wronged, such as Gus, Fiona's boyfriend whom she cheats on, and Sierra, Lip's girlfriend whose ex-husband he publically beats up. We see Sierra, who Lip repeatedly falls back on and manipulates for emotional support, refuse to put up with him, saying, "What am I, support staff? This is about you growing up and owning your shit."<sup>80</sup> The show moves between treating the secondary characters that the Gallaghers affect with flippancy and care, urging us to continue rooting for our primary family and their antics while also expanding our sympathies and the scope of the show's melodramatic situation. Nancy

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<sup>79</sup> *Shameless*, 6.04 "Going Once, Going Twice," Showtime, January 31, 2016, directed by Christopher Chulack.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 7.09 "Ouroboros," Showtime, November 27, 2016, directed by Christopher Chulack.

Pimental, the show's executive producer, elaborates on this concept by explaining the show's goal, "To have each person take on a different point of view, especially points of view that haven't been explored, is what's important."<sup>81</sup> With the guest characters, we move beyond the scope of our primary family to see a variety of perspectives, suggesting that the conditions of economic inequality in the Southside do not just impact the Gallaghers but also everyone in their community.

The series' more prominent supporting cast is also presented as simultaneously comedic and melodramatic, exemplifying the age-old adage, "Don't judge a book by its cover." I will briefly discuss this treatment of *Shameless'* ensemble through the example of Mickey Milkovich, a gruff teenage boy who lives down the street from the Gallaghers and later becomes Ian's long-term boyfriend. He is first introduced in the third episode as an appendage to Lip and Ian's stories, as the angry brother of the girl Ian had sex with. His introduction is filmed in slow-motion, tire iron in hand, with the show's typical upbeat grunge music to stress the excitement of Mickey as a comedic obstacle. We don't recognize him as his own character because all we know about him is that he loves to beat people up. When he bursts into the convenience store where Ian works, he shouts, "Ian Gallagher!" elongating the syllables in his name with a devilish smile; the heightened performance style in his introduction immediately cues us to think of him as a humorous villain, as part of the absurd texture of the series' world.<sup>82</sup> We can laugh at him since he is simply a problem for Ian to overcome. Similarly, when Ian and Mickey first have sex, it is presented as a spectacle. It begins as a physical fight but develops into them kissing

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<sup>81</sup> Whitney Friedlander, "'Shameless' EP Nancy Pimental on Showing Another Side of Teenage Pregnancy," *Variety*, January 9, 2016.

<sup>82</sup> *Shameless*, 1.03 "Aunt Ginger."

each other through jump cuts that distance us from the emotional intensity of the moment. Both the spectacle of the fight and the fast editing in this scene cue us to think of it as nothing more than a fun romp with little consequence. The series does not punctuate their kiss as especially romantic, as we never linger on Mickey and instead simply follow Ian's reaction.<sup>83</sup> In the start, Mickey is more of a bit character, used as a comedic tool for Ian's character arc.

However, over time, we start to care for Mickey separately from Ian—by season four, Mickey has arguably become one of show's leads. His family is very abusive, which is again initially presented as a humorous caricature, but when his homophobic father, Terry, walks in on Mickey and Ian, he beats them up and forces Mickey to have sex with a woman while Ian watches. This sequence is not lighthearted or exciting like their first encounter was, and instead the camera lingers on both Ian *and* Mickey's devastated faces while somber piano music plays underneath it, cuing us to recognize Mickey's pain and own powerlessness.<sup>84</sup> Later in the season, Ian tells Mickey he is leaving for the army, but all Mickey can say is, "Don't," and the camera stays on his heartbroken face in silence long after Ian has left, cuing us to align with his devastation in addition to Ian's.<sup>85</sup> Mickey cannot tell Ian how he feels about him because of his own melodramatic situation: his homophobic family and the expectation for him to be a tough, "real" man as opposed to a "faggot." The show explicitly calls attention to Mickey's difficult position, with him telling Ian in the prior episode, "Grow the fuck up. Not everyone gets to blurt out how they're fucking feeling all of the time."<sup>86</sup> While Mickey is initially presented as a

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<sup>83</sup> *Shameless*, 1.07 "Frank Gallagher: Loving Husband, Devoted Father."

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 3.06 "Cascading Failures," Showtime, February 24, 2013, directed by Anthony Hemingway.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 3.12 "Survival of the Fittest," Showtime, April 7, 2013, directed by Mark Mylod.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 3.11 "Order Room Service," Showtime, March 31, 2013, directed by Sanaa Hamri.

humorous tool for Ian's story, we start to feel pathos for him as a powerless character trapped by social norms and his abusive home life.

By slowly revealing Mickey's melodramatic struggle—along with a host of other secondary characters, most notably Sheila and her daughter Karen—*Shameless* cues us to recognize the larger social structure of poverty and broken families that controls and torments characters across the Southside, not just the Gallaghers. We may laugh with and at secondary characters' transgressions, but we also are encouraged to look beneath their surfaces; the show uses generic hybridity in order to “run with the most outrageous class stereotypes only to turn them inside out.”<sup>87</sup> Over the course of the series, we learn there is much more to Mickey than comedic and narrative spectacle. In this way, *Shameless* turns its attention to broader structural inequalities and societal critiques of class, while still largely ignoring questions of race in its prioritization of white secondary characters. We come to see that narrative problems and melodramatic situations are not isolated to our one main transgressive family. Rather, in *Shameless*, poverty and class oppression have far-reaching effects.

### **The Vicious Cycle: A Narrative of Survival**

“What type of choices do I have?”<sup>88</sup>

After analyzing the role of genre in the show's depiction of both primary and secondary characters, we must look towards its large-scale structuring. How does the series construct its melodramatic situation? If *Weeds*' narrative is focused on shattering

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<sup>87</sup> Fox, “Who is Shameless This Election Season?”

<sup>88</sup> *Shameless*, 7.06 “The Defenestration of Frank,” Showtime, November 6, 2016, directed by David Nutter.

expectations of suburban motherhood and *Tara's* is about trying and failing to find a cure to DID, I suggest that *Shameless's* story is much simpler: it's about surviving. The Gallaghers have limited options, as this section's epigraph suggests, and we know they have little hope for ever truly escaping their poverty. The Gallaghers are constantly beaten down by their social position, but at the same time, they also defy all odds by staying alive as a unified nontraditional family. Despite the characters' awareness that the myth of American meritocracy is a lie, that they are forced to play a game with all of the rules rigged against them, they continue to persevere and refuse to be killed, contained, or separated from one another. Even though they are always knocked down by forces outside their control, they also always bounce back. Therefore, I will examine how the series' overall narrative structure—through its use of external forces, stable settings, and repetition and variation—cues us to align with the Gallaghers as they fluctuate between success and failure, between comedy and melodrama, between elation and sorrow.

“The World is Gonna Fuck You”<sup>89</sup>

*Shameless* has a scattered narrative. We follow characters doing completely unrelated things; while Ian strips at a night club, Lip might be helping kids cheat on the SATs, and Fiona might be paying the heating bill. We do not follow one single narrative path because the series is structured around external forces that shape the Gallaghers' lives, forcing them to react to surprising developments related to their position of poverty and parental abandonment. These external forces can completely swerve the story, resulting in family members running from the police or evading tax collectors. Like

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<sup>89</sup> *Shameless*, 7.01 “Hiraeth,” Showtime, October 2, 2016, directed by Christopher Chulack.

*Weeds*, the narrative moves swiftly, dropping characters, bringing existing ones to shocking conclusions, and introducing returns and reversals—all vital components of melodrama. The show's plotlines are never stable, always in flux. Therefore, in season seven, when Fiona asks Ian if his relationship with his boyfriend Trevor is “fixable,” critic Myles McNutt accurately points out that the show is also asking, “Will he be baked into the fabric of the show or no?”<sup>90</sup> The series uses conventional melodramatic strategies, such as coincidences, surprise character returns, and government institutions, for both comedic and melodramatic ends, constantly spinning the plot in new directions while also emphasizing how social structures dictate the Gallaghers' lives.

Various coincidences impact the show's narrative from its start. Steve, a complete stranger at the time, happens to run into Fiona at a night club in the pilot, leading to their relationship and story for the following three seasons. Ian decides to become an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) because he happens to find the firefighter who saves him attractive.<sup>91</sup> Child Protective Services (CPS) just happens to check in on the Gallagher household at the worst possible moment: when Fiona is digging up bones in the backyard, Ian is patching up a bleeding Mickey, and Debbie is running an illegitimate daycare.<sup>92</sup> As in many melodramas, the show may “appear deficient or risible due to an overabundance of ‘action,’ that is, an overly complex plot in which an accumulation of reversals and recognitions strains the limits of credibility, even comprehension.”<sup>93</sup> Coincidences spark stories, moving us forward in absurd and unpredictable ways, and conclude them. For example, Frank almost dies from alcohol

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<sup>90</sup> Myles McNutt, “Requiem for a Slut Review,” *The AV Club*, December 18, 2016.

<sup>91</sup> *Shameless*, 6.03 “The F Word.”

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 3.05 “The Sins of My Caretaker,” Showtime, February 17, 2013, directed by J. Michael Muro.

<sup>93</sup> Jacobs, “The Woman's Picture and the Poetics of Melodrama,” 126.

poisoning, but he survives due a last-minute liver transplant.<sup>94</sup> This turn of events has no underlying logic, but these repeated coincidences come to structure the ever-changing plot.<sup>95</sup> While they can be highly comedic, allowing characters to continue living past the past they reasonably should and urging us to laugh in disbelief, they also have a melodramatic undercurrent. When CPS walks into their home at the worst possible moment, the CPS agent takes action and puts all of the children into the foster care system. We can see the harmful ways their lives are constructed against them, for their narratives may be changed or transformed in an instant.

Similarly, reversals and surprise character returns are two other melodramatic conventions that comprise much of the show's large-scale structure. As I've examined in detail, Monica's returns create new season-long conflicts, such as her trying to take Liam away from the rest of the family. Similarly, Steve leaves at the end of the first season, but his reappearances in season two and five are unprompted and generate problems for Fiona—long after she has gotten over him, too. Sammi, Frank's long-lost daughter, is inexplicably introduced in season five, as well, again driving a whole host of ridiculous stories. On the one hand, the coincidences and reversals invent exciting and unpredictable stories. As Pimental explains, "Each year, our aspiration is to take on something in a way that's different from what we've seen on television before or that's in the zeitgeist or in the culture."<sup>96</sup> The unpredictable movement of the narrative does just that, taking us to startling places, like Nazi gangs and green card marriages.

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<sup>94</sup> *Shameless*, 3.12 "Survival of the Fittest."

<sup>95</sup> Crow, "Why *Shameless*' Frank Gallagher is the Nastiest Protagonist on TV."

<sup>96</sup> Friedlander, "'*Shameless*' EP Nancy Pimental on Showing Another Side of Teenage Pregnancy."

At the same time, though, the returns/reversals have serious repercussions for the Gallaghers. For instance, Lip's college girlfriend, Amanda, comes back in season six to spread a sex video of Lip and his professor Helene, sabotaging their relationship and Helene's career. One critic refers to this development as "Chekhov's nude photo," for the conclusion is not causally motivated or arising from our protagonists' decisions and choices; rather, the show uses this device to highlight how the Gallaghers' decisions are superseded by and undercut due to their socioeconomic position.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, earlier in the series, Lip's other girlfriend Karen is pregnant, but upon the child's birth, we discover that it is not Lip's baby. Again, this reversal emphasizes Lip's lack of knowledge and power in his situation, cuing us to feel pathos for him in his despair. Coincidences and reversals can occasionally change our family's situations for the better, but they rarely seem to. We wait for the twist that will improve their lives forever—such as winning the lottery or meeting a wealthy philanthropist on the train—but it never comes. And, if it does, another coincidence comes to sabotage it. A professor at the University of Chicago, for example, recruits Lip and gives him a full scholarship, but his college career is hampered again and again: Fiona gets arrested, leaving Lip to take care of the family, and Amanda leaks his sex tape, driving him to alcoholism. Our pathos and care for the Gallaghers is developed through melodramatic conventions that ensure the family's happiness is delayed, even as it is suggested. As Steve Neale puts it, in melodrama, "Tears can come whether the coincidence comes too late or just in time, provided there is a delay, and the possibility, therefore, that it *may* come too late."<sup>98</sup> At

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<sup>97</sup> McNutt, "Refugees Review."

<sup>98</sup> Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," 11.

even the slightest hint of positive growth or change, the coincidences driving *Shameless*' narrative take it away. It feels as if there is some cosmic force working against them.

And, in fact, there are forces working against the Gallaghers, although they are not necessarily cosmic. Rather, they are governmental and social: eviction officers, real estate companies, and the police. The narrative is framed around these agencies' actions and their impact on the family. Humor does arise from the situations, as I've described through the Gallaghers' antics, but here I aim to illuminate the melodramatic function of this plot structure. It places them in an impossible bind, constantly fighting to simply stay alive. In season six, Fiona receives an eviction notice because her poor neighborhood is being quickly gentrified. The swift gentrification of the neighborhood looms over the series, as wealthy new neighbors begin to take issue with original Southside residents (most outrageously complaining about their unpresentable yards) and Fiona fights to save the diner she manages from closing and turning into an expensive apartment complex. Child Protective Services functions similarly in season three, as do the social security collectors in season one, and the police who place Fiona under house arrest in season four. Importantly, the government agencies are faceless, constructed as villains without a single corporeal form. The police often cause trouble for the Gallaghers—with Lip arrested in seasons one, two, and six; Ian arrested in season one; and Fiona arrested in season four—but there is not one bad man in charge of the police force that we can see. We cannot point to one single person or group of people to blame. Rather, the police system is presented as a structural problem completely outside of the family's power. In other words, it is presumably unchangeable. By using agencies and social forces as foundational sources of narrative conflict, as overwhelmingly impossible roadblocks, the series melodramatically delays the family's happiness,

allowing “outside events [to] simply and unexpectedly intervene.”<sup>99</sup> Pimental tells an interviewer that one of the central questions for the writers is, “How big or small is their [the Gallaghers’] world?”<sup>100</sup> While *Shameless* explicitly chooses to center on one family, the use of external forces as a narrative motor urges us to look also towards larger systems of inequality that dictate their story, playing into Showtime’s new branding strategy of having expansive series.

Based on the show’s ensemble, there is not one central storyline. While *Tara* is focused primarily on one character’s mental illness and *Weeds* follows Nancy’s story as she builds her drug empire, *Shameless* moves between many interconnected threads. The characters are splintered. The plot is not neat. Our primary characters are therefore not connected by their stories but rather by their overarching situation of poverty. The show often uses montages to this end, cutting between characters performing different actions in order to connect them thematically and stress their shared social status. Their economic class defines their disparate narrative conditions, positioning them as innocent victims to an unfair distribution of life chances. The story is never substantively changed because there is no single goal that the show moves towards. When Lip is dumped by Helene, a new story emerges; when Fiona gets out of jail, Steve returns to create new problems. Pimental states that this ebb and flow of the narrative is deliberate: “I think putting new stories in a more familiar setting is probably how we do it [changing the show].”<sup>101</sup> In other words, *Shameless* does not follow a linear plot because outside forces, rather than the central characters, dictate narrative change, resembling melodrama in that

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<sup>99</sup> Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” 12.

<sup>100</sup> Myles McNutt, “Cultural Interview: Shameless Executive Producer Nancy M. Pimental,” *Cultural Learnings*, October 9, 2016.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

“the melodramatic plot is vitally concerned with the creation of impasses, with the protagonist’s inability to act...[It] does not advance in a straightforward linear fashion but rather through substitute acts and symbolic parallels.”<sup>102</sup> *Tara* builds to and hints at lasting change only to later undercut it, but *Shameless*’ plots never even offer a potentially workable solution, instead piling on more and more “impasses.”

We see this lack of movement towards one goal clearly in episode endings. While cliffhangers are still used in *Shameless*, they do not have the same narrative import as they do in *Weeds* and *United States of Tara*. We follow so many characters and plots, so one moment at the end of an episode cannot always properly sum up or address every story. Tellingly, most episodes feature an ending cut-scene—even after cliffhangers—that are never vital for understanding the plot. One could watch the entire series without ever knowing they exist. The undercutting of the cliffhanger structure of *Weeds* and *United States of Tara* cues us to focus less on the long-term narrative change the cliffhangers create and instead turn to the various ways our characters respond to them and attempt to survive in the short-term. We still receive pleasure from the drama of cliffhangers and the continued disruptive nature of our characters, as we do in the other dramedies, but they do not hint at transformation because, for the Gallaghers, such transformation is already a known impossibility. In fact, they often fight change because change can result in their deaths. In many ways, narrative stasis is as much a recognition of survival as it is a sign of restricted social mobility.

The fast-paced plot and multiple independent stories also create an *illusion* of progress despite a lack of a unified narrative goal. Stylistic excess plays a large role in this

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<sup>102</sup> Jacobs, “The Woman’s Picture and the Poetics of Melodrama,” 124.

feeling of movement by constructing exciting images. As with the Gallaghers' crimes, the use of split-screens, fights, montages, and physical action urge us to enjoy the overall series' outlandish plots. The heightened style is a "technique of comedy," operating as a functional equivalence for the sitcoms' use of "dialogue, props, slapstick, pantomime, costume and makeup, and physical comedy."<sup>103</sup> In direct contrast to the pain caused by the stasis of the characters' social conditions, we are amused by mundane moments of excess in the Gallaghers' lives. Additionally, the show often uses style self-reflexively, distancing us from the drama of the narrative in order to find it comedic. For example, each episode's recap begins with a different character directly addressing the audience; in one, Mickey walks towards the camera, saying, "Hey, people around here get their ass beat for missing *Shameless*, so sit down, shut the fuck up, and catch up."<sup>104</sup> After this, we see the recap cover previous episodes with exciting, fast-paced music, which lightens even the most dramatic moments. The recaps call attention to how many different threads the show weaves together and therefore the overall melodramatic situation of poverty, but through the recaps' direct address, we are encouraged to recognize ourselves as distanced viewers. In other words, we are prompted to recognize the artificiality of the plot in order to laugh with it rather than simply wallow in the endless suffering of the family. Like sitcoms that regularly use comedy to "expose the portrayal of home life on television as staged and inauthentic," *Shameless* too utilizes comedic conventions in order to celebrate the Gallaghers and their wild stories.<sup>105</sup> We recognize

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<sup>103</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 50.

<sup>104</sup> *Shameless*, 5.02 "I'm the Liver," Showtime, January 18, 2015, directed by Sanaa Hamri.

<sup>105</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 15.

the narrative's artifice—its constant changes and constant stability—so we can take pleasure in it.

With its large ensemble, the show also utilizes an unrestricted narration to move between character perspectives for comedic and dramatic effect, both shocking us and producing hierarchies of knowledge. As with *Tara*, the unrestricted narration in *Shameless* emphasizes the division between internal and external characters and forces so that we feel the characters' powerlessness. This hierarchy of knowledge is a common feature of melodrama, allowing us to know more than the characters we watch.<sup>106</sup> At the end of season two, we know that Monica stole money from the family's emergency fund, but Fiona does not. When she returns to the house to find the mess we've seen Monica create, we are cued to understand how these moments of chaos happen outside of Fiona's control. We watch her climb up the professional ladder as a club promoter, but all the while we know that she will return home to ruin.<sup>107</sup> The same is true when we discover the Steve has been lying about his identity to Fiona half a season before she does, again making us wait for the moment she discovers that she has been duped by someone she believed she could trust yet again.<sup>108</sup>

However, this discrepancy of knowledge is also played for comedy. In the previous example when Child Protective Services comes to the Gallagher house, we move between different vantage points—Fiona digging, Debbie babysitting, Mickey bleeding, and the CPS agents out in the car—giving us far more information than any one character. By cutting between characters, the show cues us to expect their collision,

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<sup>106</sup> See previous discussion of hierarchies of knowledge in *United States of Tara* on page 100-101.

<sup>107</sup> *Shameless*, 2.10 "A Great Cause."

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 1.09 "But At Last Came a Knock," Showtime, March 6, 2011, directed by Mark Mylod.

creating pathos because we know what is coming and are unable to stop it. However, as I've outlined, this moment is also highly comic in its absurdity and recognition of the Gallaghers' social transgressions.<sup>109</sup> Thus, unrestricted narration, much like the entire narrative structure, creates both pathos and comedy. It urges us to recognize the external forces that shape the characters' lives for the worse while also embracing the humor of their situations and the joy of their unlikely survival.

“Homeless Free Zone”<sup>110</sup>

While *Shameless* jumps between characters and stories, one element always remains constant: place. Setting, both in terms of the Gallagher household and the larger Southside neighborhood, is at the core of the series, functioning as both a source of external conflict and stability. Like *Weeds*, the show's opening credits immediately call attention to its setting, as we watch various characters come and go through one space. However, while *Weeds*' credits shift and change over seasons, as does its setting, *Shameless*' credits remain the same. The characters cannot leave, always pulled back to the Southside, no matter how hard they may try to escape it. Therefore, instead of transforming the setting, Pimental says they envision the show's future by “having new stories in an old environment.”<sup>111</sup> I hope to illuminate how generic hybridity is related to setting, producing both places for comedic unruliness and melodramatic conflict. The setting contains the family, as they are unable to escape poverty, but it also is indicative of their survival; they are never successfully evicted or pushed out of their

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<sup>109</sup> *Shameless*, 3.05, “The Sins of My Caretaker.”

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 7.04 “I Am A Storm,” Showtime, October 23, 2016, directed by Emmy Rossum.

<sup>111</sup> McNutt, “Cultural Interviews.”

neighborhood. They still have their house, they still have their family, and they still have a place where all their over-the-top, farcical stories can converge.

Just as Monica and Frank's absence frames the show's melodramatic situation, so too does the Southside. It is a poor, primarily black<sup>112</sup> community in Chicago, and constantly under the threat of gentrification. The Gallaghers' setting is comparable to the external forces previously discussed, forcing the family to constantly fight to keep their home. In season five, young "hipsters" begin frequenting the Alibi, the Southside's local bar, because they find the "poor aesthetic" ironic and trendy. In response, Kevin repeatedly scams them, cuing us to laugh at the "hipsters" and feel sympathy for the Southsiders whom the wealthy manipulate and systematically extort. Similarly, the show cultivates a sense of unity and pride in the Southside, particularly during season seven when affluent real estate agents aim to redevelop all the neighborhood, displacing many of its residents. Etta, the owner of the local laundromat, is almost forced to sell her business and lose her apartment, so Fiona opts to buy it in order to keep the business "in the family," so to speak. The threat of gentrification permeates throughout the series, cuing us to recognize harmful social disparities that frame the narrative. However, at the same time as the show urges us to feel solidarity with the residents of the Southside, we also recognize the social limits of being born there. Family members try to leave the area, such as Lip pursuing a college education, but they are either pulled back in or viewed with contempt by the community. For example, Fiona later sells the laundromat she bought from Etta in the hopes of climbing the social ladder, but her family does not support the decision, viewing her as a sellout. The Southside is constructed as a space

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<sup>112</sup> As previously noted, the show does not consider questions of race in relation to poverty, instead focusing on a primarily white cast.

constantly in danger of external negative change, but simultaneously any attempt to leave it is constitutes a type of betrayal. In this way, the space reflects the family's impossible melodramatic situation: they try to survive and create a better life for themselves, but they are also unable to effectively and morally abandon their home. By constructing space in this contradictory way, we are cued to develop pathos for the Gallaghers' economic plight.

The physical house operates similarly—as something that is constantly threatened and therefore must be protected but that is also limiting and constricting for the Gallaghers. While Nancy Botwin finds liberation in burning her home to the ground, the Gallaghers do not have that class privilege. Nancy can improvise and adapt in *Weeds*, doing anything she wants without consequence, because she knows her family will be financially safe. In *Shameless*, though, the family does not have the same luxury. The family's only hope, rather, is in *keeping* their house; it is their one source of stability. In season six, we see this conflict unfold when the city, again operating as an external narrative force, evicts the family.<sup>113</sup> Unlike Nancy, who chooses to set her house on fire, the Gallaghers have no power in this situation and are ultimately victims to the city. The sheriff comes in and moves all their belongings out of the house, making it look like a shell of its former self. Its emptiness is jarring and upsetting. Therefore, while *Weeds*' goodbye scene to the house signals a fresh start, Fiona walking through her empty house feels as if it is the end of the world. She looks at her siblings' height markings on the wall, cuing us to recognize that the death of the house also signifies a death of the stable family unit. Fiona even explicitly tells her siblings that they need to fight for the house to

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<sup>113</sup> *Shameless*, 6.04 "Going Once, Going Twice."

stay together: “How do you think we made it by all these years? By staying a family.”<sup>114</sup>

The loss of the Gallagher house does not indicate a blossoming of a new life, but rather an unwitting destruction of their existing one.

Importantly, though, their eviction is not permanent—Carl collects enough money from his drug dealing to buy back the house in the following episode. As with domestic sitcoms, the series “often [begins] and [ends] in the home,” even if there is a threat to the home-life in the middle.<sup>115</sup> We always return to the home because, as Pimental says, it is “too substantial” to lose.<sup>116</sup> However, while this does signal a success for the family, it also functions as a form of sitcom containment and a prolongation of the show’s melodramatic situation. They fight to stay alive and keep their home, but the flipside of this fact is that they are also never able to leave to find anything better, to climb up the economic ladder. The house is a place of financial and emotional stability but also containment. The consistency of the home is a perfect representation of the family’s melodramatic situation, for they cannot win by keeping or losing it. Pimental expands on this thought, saying, “We did not think [losing the house] was final—what we wanted to show was just the kind of reality of living where they live, and how everything is a juggling act.”<sup>117</sup> *Shameless* juggles comedy and melodrama in its use of the home, moving between a celebration of its retention and a mourning of our inability to escape it.

Stressing the importance of place to the family’s survival, the house is also where diverging narrative threads come together—it is a place of connection. Not only do the

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<sup>114</sup> *Shameless*, 6.05 “Refugees,” Showtime, February 7, 2016, directed by Wendy Stanzler.

<sup>115</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 42.

<sup>116</sup> McNutt, “Cultural Interviews.”

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

Gallagher children stay there, but, throughout the series, so do Frank, Monica, Sammi, and Sammi's son. Additionally, family meetings are often held in the kitchen, bringing every sibling into the same room together despite their disparate storylines.<sup>118</sup> In one episode, Debbie makes lunch for herself, but she intercepts Lip and his girlfriend Mandy simply because they inhabit the same space.<sup>119</sup> Characters run into one another in the kitchen and on the stairs, punctuating the necessity of the house to connect them as one familial unit. In this way, the house allows the Gallaghers to be with one another for parties, holidays, deaths, and weddings. The family reunions are also often highly comedic, represented through stylistic excess to cue us to celebrate the Gallaghers' social transgressions and unity. Yet, still, family reunions in the home do not always have happy endings: when they celebrate Thanksgiving, Monica tries to commit suicide;<sup>120</sup> when Lip is thrown a going away party, we celebrate with the family but also pray that he doesn't return to the Southside.<sup>121</sup> Again, the house, and the Southside in general, is a melodramatic device trapping the family in poverty. As we fluctuate between humor and melodrama, *Shameless'* setting reveals the impossible contradictions the family navigates. Returning to the house is happy, sad, uplifting, and restricting all at the same time.

“Just Because We Were Born Here, Doesn't Mean We End Up Here.”<sup>122</sup>

Repetition and variation is baked into *Shameless*. After addressing external forces and setting, we must look at the ways individual Gallagher storylines repeat themselves,

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<sup>118</sup> *Shameless*, 7.03 “Home Sweet Homeless Shelter.”

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 3.10 “Civil Wrongs.”

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 2.11 “Just Like the Pilgrims Intended.”

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 3.12 “Survival of the Fittest.”

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 6.09 “A Yurt of One's Own,” Showtime, March 13, 2016, directed by Ruben Garcia.

and parallel one another, to reveal the characters' stagnancy. Contrasting the U.S. and U.K. versions—and how they deviate as they progress—is particularly telling. The American adaptation is very similar to the original U.K. at its start, with many first season episodes mirroring the original. However, the series eventually diverge. In the U.K. version, Fiona leaves after the second season to run away with Steve, but when she is given the same choice at the end of the American first season, Fiona chooses to stay with her siblings. She is constantly tempted to start anew, season after season, but she repeatedly refuses to leave. The U.K. series slowly lost the Gallagher characters, and it even continued for two seasons after they had all left, because “it’s not really a story of one specific family behaving badly” but rather “it is the story of an entire culture with which...Frank passes through.”<sup>123</sup> In the U.S. series, however, none of the Gallaghers have permanently left the cast as of its seventh season. This distinction illuminates that Showtime’s *Shameless* focuses on the family and the large-scale repetition of their storylines. On the one hand, the repeated storylines and parallels stress the characters’ powerlessness, but on the other hand, they also suggest that the family continues trying to overcome their conditions, just as Lucy in *I Love Lucy* does: “We want Lucy to fail because that is what’s funny, although there is also great humor in her moments of triumph.”<sup>124</sup> Success and failure are fundamental components of both sitcoms and melodramas, and the show utilizes both genres, through the comedy of the family’s repeated unruliness and the melodrama of their victimization, in order to highlight these contradictions. There is no escape for the Gallaghers, but we are urged to recognize and

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<sup>123</sup> Crow, “Why Shameless’ Frank Gallagher is the Nastiest Protagonist on TV.”

<sup>124</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 44-45.

align with the family's constant struggle as they oscillate between victory and defeat, between momentary celebration and devastation.

While distinct, all of the Gallaghers' stories repeat over the course of the series. Fiona, for instance, repeatedly dates men that lie to her or try to take her away from her family—men that try to “save” her—but despite their temptations, she always returns to the family. Similarly, she repeatedly grapples with her job as her siblings' legal guardian and her own desire to lead an independent life, allowing us to see how her life is dictated by others while still giving us hope for the possibility of something better. Ian's story also repeats and parallels Monica's, as his bipolar disorder suggests that he may never be able to escape the consequences of his upbringing. His social position becomes fate. And, yet, like Fiona, Ian is able to live a happy, prosperous life as an EMT. The repetition and parallels encourage us to feel pathos for Ian and enjoy his happiness, knowing that we will constantly move between both states.

This oscillation between success and failure is never more evident than in Lip's storyline. From the start of the series, he is hailed as the family's greatest (and only) hope; he is a science wiz, naturally bright without trying. Fiona and the rest of the siblings invest in him so that he can go to college, get a good job, and save the family. He, moreso than any other Gallagher, is shown as someone who potentially could get out of the Southside. His upward mobility, though, becomes halted—a process which repeats again and again, encouraging us to understand that, despite his genius, he is still confined by his larger social conditions. In season one, we see Lip earn perfect scores on the SAT exam and get recruited to the University of Chicago with a full scholarship, teasing the possibility of change. However, he constantly has to fight to stay in school;

he is arrested in season two, must take care of his siblings in season four, and is part of a professor-student sex scandal in season six. He even gets kicked out of school in season six, but the professor who first recruited him sticks by him and finds him an internship. Through his professor's gesture, Lip's story of upward mobility, of being the "exceptional poor kid," continues, only to later have the company he is interning with get busted by the DEA. He tries to make it in a professional, upper-class world but that world is designed to exclude him, revealing the myth of American meritocracy. At his breaking point, Lip screams at his professor, "You don't give a shit about me because you don't fucking have to! You're just sitting pretty in your ivory tower and I'm a fucking insect crawling on the walls that you squash. Does that make you feel fucking powerful?"<sup>125</sup> His constant inability to reach this "ivory tower" accentuates how the education system is stacked against him; it makes him powerless. We continue to root for his graduation and professional career even as he fails, though, because in melodrama, "pleasure will come from the pleasure of fantasy itself, a pleasure which resides in the process of articulation of a wish rather than in any representation of the attainment of its object."<sup>126</sup> In other words, the show repeatedly depicts the potential of Lip's "exceptionalism" in order to emphasize the hope of his—and our—"fantasy." We can enjoy Lip's momentary successes and defiance of social expectations that arise from his attempts to fulfill this "fantasy," as well as cry for the melodramatic situation that keeps its attainment always just slightly out of reach.

The show also highlights the parallels between Lip and his alcoholic father, further contributing to the idea that Lip cannot escape what he was born into. Lip drinks

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<sup>125</sup> *Shameless*, 6.11 "Sleep No More," Showtime, March 27, 2015, directed by Anthony Hemingway.

<sup>126</sup> Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," 20.

often at the beginning of the series; he is a regular at the Alibi, often shirking off work to go drink and cool down, but it is not depicted as a problem. However, in season six, the show draws a direct parallel between Lip and Frank's alcoholism when Lip turns to booze to cope with his recent breakup. He joins Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) but is inattentive and bored in the meetings, mirroring Frank's reactions when people tell him to stop drinking. Similarly, in an episode from the sixth season, Lip is hospitalized and doesn't remember how he got there or what happened the evening before,<sup>127</sup> echoing many of Frank's plots: Frank ends up in the hospital for drinking in the third season, and in season five, an entire episode is constructed around him trying to remember his drunken escapades the prior evening.<sup>128</sup> More explicitly, in the opening to the seventh season, the show parallels the two of them when Frank hallucinates Lip sinking underwater with him in the Chicago River. They are both wearing the same suit and drinking the same bottle of liquor, visually mirroring one another.<sup>129</sup> These narrative and visual parallels connect Lip and Frank together despite Lip's attempts to disassociate himself from his father and earn a college degree. Through these connections, the show cues us to realize how Lip can never truly escape his poverty, as his family and past bring him down and keep him in the Southside. It is Lip's drinking, after all, that ultimately gets him expelled from college, halting his rise in class.

Through the use of repetitive and paralleled storylines, the show ultimately exposes the façade of the American Dream, for even the prodigy, the shining example of meritocracy, cannot truly succeed. Perhaps, then, contrary to the quote that opens this

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<sup>127</sup> *Shameless*, 6.09 "A Yurt of One's Own."

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 5.04 "A Night to Remem...Wait, What?" February 1, 2015, directed by Richie Keen.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 7.01 "Hiraeth."

subsection, the Gallaghers are doomed. But, still, even as we see them fail to leave their situation and end the cycle of poverty, the characters have momentary, comedic successes and joys. Lip and the rest of the Gallaghers still fight because there's always "a glimmer of hope" within their repetition.<sup>130</sup> Their failures repeat, but so do their rebellions. They do not succumb to the forces that trap them, nor do they become apathetic. Therefore, we feel pathos for their melodramatic circumstance, but we also celebrate their daily and repetitive attempts to escape it.

### **"So Now I'm Leaving You All Behind Me:" A Case Study of Season 7<sup>131</sup>**

"When the world comes crashing and crumbling on me / When the world comes knocking and knocking on me / I say, I ain't the one."<sup>132</sup>

*Shameless* varies from the other Showtime dramedies in a number of ways—its setting, topic, length, and country of origin—but still merges melodramatic and sitcom forms to align us with socially transgressive characters, fighting against forces beyond their control. However, unlike *Weeds* and *United States of Tara*, *Shameless* is not over; it ended its seventh season in the winter of 2016 and is returning for an eighth.<sup>133</sup> How can one study an ongoing show? I cannot make any definitive statements about how it ends, about what it will or will not do, because anything could still happen. Therefore, I will conclude this chapter by looking more closely at season seven, particularly its final episode, and how all of the elements we've looked at work together in this season to stress both the Gallaghers' hope and their impossible situation—as well as how it cues us

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<sup>130</sup> Patti Greco, "Shameless Star Emma Greenwell on Her Surprise Return," *Cosmopolitan*, March 14, 2016.

<sup>131</sup> "I Ain't the One" by Spoon; featured in *Shameless*, 7.11 "Happily Ever After."

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> And the eighth season has not been announced as the show's final season.

to anticipate what will happen next. As with *Tara*, I look towards this season for close analysis not because of its notable strengths or weaknesses but rather in order to highlight how the show's generic hybridity and series-long strategies work on a localized level, especially later in the show's run when its formula could be accused of going stale.

Season seven is particularly striking in part because of how it changes its emphasis: for much of the season, the Gallaghers are on an upward trajectory. Rather than continuing to emphasize the ways the show's world "fucks its characters over," the latest season explores "the act of 'soldiering on.'" <sup>134</sup> Surprisingly, things appear to get better more often than they get worse for the Gallaghers. Fiona swears off men, calling out the repeated romantic partners that have brought her down, and instead turns to her professional career. She negotiates raises as manager of a diner, and she buys and later sells the local laundromat, giving her more money than she has ever known. She admits, "I didn't think I'd make this much money in my life." <sup>135</sup> The season shows her quickly learning how to be a business woman as she negotiates with Margot, who owns the diner; and, Fiona almost always comes out on top. Suddenly, we recognize that Fiona has a clear shot at changing her economic position. She tells Lip he is not the only one who has potential: "Just so we're clear, I'm just as likely as anyone else in this family to make a life for myself. And it's about time you got that, you arrogant shit." <sup>136</sup> The other Gallaghers also have their fair share of progress, with Lip committing to a rehab program, Ian entering a stable relationship with man named Trevor and becoming a respected and high earning EMT, and Carl entering the military academy to channel his

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<sup>134</sup> Myles McNutt, "Hiraeth Review," *The AV Club*, October 2, 2016.

<sup>135</sup> *Shameless*, 7.11 "Happily Ever After."

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 7.03 "Home Sweet Homeless Shelter."

love of violence and crime into a legal profession. Debbie's story, while the most unconventional, still has a tinge of hope; after giving birth, she marries a handicapped man for emotional and financial stability. It appears as if the Gallaghers could finally get out of poverty.

However, surprise character returns threaten to derail this progress. Most notably, Monica returns at the end of the season, introducing new comedic and disruptive plots. Monica and Frank are up to their same schemes, and they decide to get married to each other again. They also attempt to rob a bank, wearing masks and toting guns, but the serious crime is presented as a humorous antic without any negative consequences. The sequence uses quick editing and fast music, but then undercuts the excitement with the revelation that the bank has bulletproof glass, causing Frank and Monica to run out of the bank. Nothing comes from this plot, encouraging us to simply laugh at their ineptness; they are truly awful bank robbers.<sup>137</sup> Monica's return functions in part as a comic spectacle. At the same time, though, her return has highly melodramatic consequences. From her first episode back, we feel the threat of the Gallagher children sliding into the same cycle of suffering they are close to escaping. When Monica visits Fiona at the laundromat, for instance, she tries to get Fiona's attention, asking her to come to her wedding and to return to the family. Fiona completely ignores her, cuing us to recognize the contrast between Fiona's new life of professional success and the life of pain and destitution that Monica inflicted upon her.

Even as Fiona tries to ignore her family, though, she is always pulled back in. She ends up going to Monica's wedding. Pimental explains the writers' tricky position

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<sup>137</sup> *Shameless*, 7.10 "Ride or Die," Showtime, December 4, 2016, directed by Zetna Fuentes.

regarding social mobility, saying, “It is a balancing act between bougie writers who want to infuse their own personal stories on this character and get them out [of the Southside], and the feeling that ‘No, we ‘ve got to be true to these characters.’”<sup>138</sup> The season provides a chance for breaking out but also reintroduces the impossibilities of it. Mickey, who escapes from prison at the end of the season, serves a similar narrative function for Ian. Mickey’s return, like Monica’s, brings comedic antics. Ian and Mickey even end up inadvertently robbing a gas station, mirroring Frank and Monica’s attempted bank robbery. But, his return also stresses the family’s melodramatic situation. Ian’s bipolar disorder has not resurfaced recently, and he is enjoying a new relationship and career, but Mickey threatens to undo all of this progress. As Fiona notes, “You turned your life around. Mickey would set a match to it.”<sup>139</sup> Ian is eventually pulled back into the past that he has tried to leave behind, telling Mickey, “Let’s ride,” as they leave for Mexico.<sup>140</sup> At the Mexican border, even though Ian makes a last-minute decision to not join Mickey, he still gives Mickey all of his savings, leaving him back at square one nonetheless. *Shameless* constantly holds its characters’ pasts and futures in tension.

In the penultimate episode of the season, Monica dies due to her declining health conditions. I want to now look more closely at Monica’s death sequence, which ends the episode, and its fallout in the season finale as a prime example of how melodrama and comedy are deployed in *Shameless*. The death montage cuts between Frank, Fiona, and Ian as we discover that Monica has died. This cutting beautifully demonstrates how family history and trauma continue to trap the Gallaghers, even though they may be

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<sup>138</sup> McNutt, “Cultural Interviews.”

<sup>139</sup> *Shameless*, 7.10 “Ride or Die.”

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

unaware of it. After an evening of partying, we first see Frank wake up in silence and find Monica lifeless on the floor. The camera cuts between close-ups of Frank's and Monica's faces, stressing his emotions of despair before a melancholy song takes over the soundtrack. Additionally, the show utilizes a heightened flashy style, incorporating slow-motion and intercutting, in this moment to accentuate the gravity of this death and its impact on the family. Rather than speed through his emotions, we watch Frank cry over Monica's body in slow-motion to elongate his grief. Similarly, the episode's ending cuts between Monica's death, Fiona putting Etta in a nursing home, and Ian watching Mickey go across the Mexican border; this intercutting further elongates the moment of Monica's death to emphasize the melodramatic moment. Through all of these strategies, the show telegraphs that her death will have lasting ramifications for the Gallaghers. Even in death, Monica disrupts and stalls the narrative.

It is also crucial to note that while we are aware of Monica's death, neither Fiona nor Ian are. They are not home with Frank as he discovers her body. Instead, Fiona is begrudgingly relocating Etta, moving her out of her apartment and into a nursing home so that Fiona can sell the laundromat. It is a difficult moment for Fiona, but it also suggests hope for the future, teasing at upward mobility and a swift professional climb. By intercutting between this beat and Monica's death, though, we understand that Fiona's professional dreams will be halted. She will be pulled back into her family, needing to attend to and deal with the fallout of the tragedy. She tries to leave behind Etta and the Southside for a new life of prosperity, but through Monica's death, we recognize that a clean break is impossible for her. Similarly, as Ian parts ways with Mickey, there is a suggestion that Ian can return to Chicago and forge a new path for himself. However, by cutting directly from Ian's smile to Monica's lifeless face, the show

urges us to recognize how Ian also cannot escape his family or the bipolar disorder that he received from his mother. Their plots and lives are all connected thematically through this montage, encouraging us to align with Fiona's and Ian's hopes and dreams while also acknowledging the complications that make this change improbable.<sup>141</sup>

The seventh season finale, "Requiem for a Slut," is structured around Monica's death. Even moreso than her return earlier in the season, Monica's death completely suspends every season-long storyline: Fiona and Lip must arrange the funeral, Ian comes back from the Mexico border, and Carl returns from military academy. In the opening scenes of the episode, the family waits together in the hospital and at the kitchen table. The family is brought back together in the stable setting of the home, suggesting that even when they try to move away and transform their lives, they always find their way back to Southside. However, while this family reunion is prompted by melodramatic events and situations, the show also finds comedy in it. At the kitchen table, the characters crack jokes to lighten their sad circumstances, with Lip holding up a spoon saying, "Anyone got a rock and a lighter?"<sup>142</sup> Later, too, the whole family is overjoyed that Carl is home, with Kevin saying, "Carl, look at you. The ghetto ninja warrior!"<sup>143</sup> Monica's death also leads to fun antics when Frank reveals that Monica has a secret storage unit with the kids' inheritance. He convinces Carl, Debbie, and Liam to help him break into it. This heist sequence is filmed with the show's signature stylization, using upbeat music and a handheld camera to distance us from the gravity of their crime. As they search for the correct storage container, we also cut between inserts of different

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<sup>141</sup> *Shameless*, 7.11 "Happily Ever After."

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 7.12 "Requiem for a Slut," Showtime, December 18, 2016, directed by John Wells.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*.

locker numbers as the upbeat music completely takes over the soundscape and replaces all diegetic sound, even further distancing us in order to think of the heist as frivolous and exciting. Similarly, Frank repeatedly talks about the threat of booby traps and DEA agents that might be onto them, but the heist has no significant repercussions. It is ultimately a narrative digression, allowing us to enjoy the excitement of the moment without worrying about the characters being arrested or shot. Through the utilization of generic hybridity, of finding anarchic comedy within melodramatic situations, we are cued to recognize how the Gallaghers soldier on. They are not torn down by their situation, but rather learn to work around and manipulate it.

“Requiem for a Slut” goes back to the conflict that sparked the series’ original situation: Monica and Frank’s parenting. How can a family grieve for a woman who has caused them so much pain? During the finale, Monica and Frank are presented with both their good and bad qualities, allowing us to sympathize with them as well as acknowledge how dangerous they have been and can be for their children. For all her faults, Monica left the family \$70,000 worth of crystal meth in an attempt to provide for her children. Fiona tells her father, “She didn’t love any of us....I’m glad she’s dead,” but immediately afterwards, Fiona finds all of the greeting cards Monica bought for their birthdays and forgot to send. These posthumous discoveries complicate our—and Fiona’s— understanding of Monica.<sup>144</sup> The series emphasizes that Monica did love and care for her children, but she was unable to be an attentive mother because of her bipolar disorder and impoverishment. For Fiona, this does not excuse Monica’s actions; when Fiona sees her mom in a casket, she simply says, “Fuck you, mom.”<sup>145</sup> We feel

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<sup>144</sup> *Shameless*, 7.12 “Requiem for a Slut.”

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

pathos for both Monica and Fiona, urging us to understand both of them as victims of larger social structures that create their harmful conditions.

In the finale, Frank is also painted as far more sympathetic than usual. Halfway through the episode, he drunkenly passes out on the floor, mirroring his actions in the pilot. But, rather than screaming at him, Fiona places a blanket over him, encouraging us to sympathize with his grief. However, later, Frank fights his children for the crystal meth and grabs Debbie, his youngest daughter, by the neck—his once comedic unruliness becomes frightening. Through the fluctuation between comedy and melodrama, Frank is presented as dangerous but also as “a victim of his own vices and addictions,” and I would argue a victim of the cycle of poverty that leads to his “vices and addictions” as well.<sup>146</sup> This complicated representation of the parents highlights the central contradiction of the series, as we hope that the Gallaghers can get away from their terrible situations but also take pleasure in and root for the retention of the family. As Frank says in his eulogy, “Hate her [Monica] if you want, but she’s in you and that’s a good thing.”<sup>147</sup> And, in the end, Fiona recognizes this fact and chooses to dance with Frank during the post-funeral party. The show makes no attempts at trying to redeem either parent, in claiming them as saints, but it also has no interest in portraying them as monsters. We take joy in their unity, in Frank and Fiona dancing together, despite the horrible things Frank has done to his children—in the same way that we mourn for Monica without rewriting her past misdeeds. We are encouraged to root for the family and their survival even as we recognize the pain that comes with it. The Gallagher children cannot ever truly leave their family, their roots, and their traumas behind.

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<sup>146</sup> Crow, “Why *Shameless*’ Frank Gallagher is the Nastiest Protagonist on TV.”

<sup>147</sup> *Shameless*, 7.12 “Requiem for a Slut.”

### Conclusion: Resisting Closure

*Shameless* is both a product of its own storytelling structures and reflective of Showtime's developing identity. Through its large ensemble and shift in setting, *Shameless* broadened its scope in order to focus on larger social critiques of poverty and socioeconomic inequality. While it deviated from earlier "ladies with problems" dramedies, the show did not transform the format but rather used similar strategies for new stories and purposes.<sup>148</sup> Like *Weeds* and *United States of Tara*, *Shameless* is ultimately optimistic. It does not present the Gallaghers as hopeless or naïve even when the cards seem stacked against them, instead pulling from melodrama and sitcom conventions to align us with transgressive characters as they refuse to be complacent in their irresolvable positions—in *Shameless*' case, of poverty.

How, then, can this show end? I argue that, like the dramedies that preceded it, *Shameless* actively resists a happy or sad ending. Rather, it is designed to perpetually move between both. For instance, despite the complications and suffering that Monica introduces, the seventh season finale ends with a montage suggesting that the children's paths have not been permanently derailed. Their futures are still looking up: Fiona buys an apartment building to start her career in real estate development, Debbie goes to welding school,<sup>149</sup> Lip rejoins rehab, Ian returns to work as an EMT, and Frank commemorates Monica's death. They are able to move forward after Monica's death rather than become subsumed by it. Despite their hardships, they keep trying, dancing,

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<sup>148</sup> Richard Lawson, "Showtime Cornering the Market on 'Ladies with Problems' Shows," *Gawker*, March 24, 2010.

<sup>149</sup> A bit out of the blue, but uplifting nonetheless.

and partying. In some ways, the episode feels as if it could be the series finale.<sup>150</sup> If the series ended here, we would feel a sense of “fulfillment [of the Gallaghers’ dreams]—at last it has come, at the very end of the story—and its loss—the story and the fulfillment are soon both over.”<sup>151</sup> However, this isn’t the series finale. In the credit’s cut-scene, Lip explicitly tells the audience that the story isn’t over, as he yells, “Come back next year, Jesus.” Then, we abruptly cut to the credits with more upbeat music to contrast the highly emotional montage that ended the episode. The emotional finality of the episode is replaced by the excitement of what will come next.<sup>152</sup>

Even though it appears as if everything is changing for the better, we know that the Gallaghers’ stories are bound to fall apart next season. The series continues because we know that the family’s hopes for social mobility can never be attained. The narrative changes constantly, almost always out of our characters’ control, so we simply wait for a new coincidence or surprising twist to propel our characters to new, unexpected places. This refusal for closure prolongs the series’ melodramatic situation through “an unstable constellation of forces precariously held in check but nonetheless liable to break out into action.”<sup>153</sup> We wait for outside forces to create action and bring our characters back to where we started. The lack of material change is also a classic sitcom convention in an attempt to stretch out characters’ comedic antics. Similarly to the irresolution of melodrama, at the end of a sitcom episode, “nothing has *really* changed, the inside is back on the inside and the outside is outside again, the women and men will go back to where

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<sup>150</sup> At the time, too, Emmy Rossum’s contract had not been renegotiated, so there was a real possibility this could have been the series finale.

<sup>151</sup> Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” 21.

<sup>152</sup> *Shameless*, 7.12 “Requiem for a Slut.”

<sup>153</sup> Jacobs, “The Woman’s Picture and the Poetics of Melodrama,” 131.

they ‘belong,’ but with some new kind of understanding...that will be gone by next week’s episode.”<sup>154</sup> Therefore, even when it appears as if the show is changing, that characters have gained new understandings or are envisioning alternate lives, the show’s generic hybridity and overall structure cues us to anticipate that the show will revert to the status quo. The characters will continue to be stuck in their melodramatic situation, but they will also continue creating comedy and actively fighting against forces that try to kill, imprison, and evict them. They refuse to be tragic figures. They are survivors.

This brings us back to the question I posed earlier: how can one write about an ongoing show, especially one that hints at change that has not yet been realized? I argue that we must understand how the show utilizes generic hybridity in its small- and large-scale structure in order to cue us to *anticipate* the rest of the story. We can look towards the series’ internal repetition and variation to see what must repeat next, to recognize the waves and phases of the show. We know the Gallaghers will continue to be pushed down and then be brought back up again. It is telling that, when asked about the show’s end-goals, Nancy Pimental shrugs the question aside, saying, “Who knows? I’ll let you know when we do season fifteen and we’re wrapping things up.”<sup>155</sup> She suggests that the series could go on forever, never allowing its characters to ultimately win or lose. As with Nancy Botwin and Tara Gregson, we can root for, and laugh with, the Gallagher family as we recognize the forces that construct their lives in harmful ways. Perhaps, then, this is precisely what constitutes the Showtime dramedy: it moves between the successes and failures of its protagonists, between comedy and melodrama, never truly allowing them to overcome their situations but urging audiences to find pleasure in their fight against it,

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<sup>154</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 52.

<sup>155</sup> McNutt, “Cultural Interviews.”

in the hope that one day they might. As Pimental notes, the shows are “making comedy out of tragedy.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Friedlander, “Shameless’ EP Nancy Pimental on Showing Another Side of Teenage Pregnancy.”

## Conclusion

### Blurring the Quality Boundary

“High quality and high profits not only can co-exist but—in the realm of television at least—they must co-exist. For what is ‘quality’ but another form of currency?”<sup>1</sup>

In the past four chapters, I have outlined how melodrama and sitcom conventions are deployed in Showtime’s female-led dramedies and help create the network’s broader identity. The channel’s production trend—ranging roughly from 2005 to 2011 with the premiere of *Homeland*—features women who challenge countless social norms, particularly surrounding motherhood and romantic relationships, with glee. The shows ask us to root for Jackie as she commits malpractice and adultery in *Nurse Jackie*; for Cathy as she neglects her son and husband’s emotional needs when she is diagnosed with cancer in *The Big C*; and for Nancy as she puts her children in the crossfires of Mexican cartels and law enforcement in *Weeds*. Showtime’s dramedy formula put the network on the map, competing with HBO’s recent successes by differentiating its programming, and variations of the formula continue to populate the channel in shows like *Shameless* and *Happyish* (2015).

As we’ve seen, melodrama is at the heart of the Showtime dramedy, prompting us to feel pathos for its central characters as they struggle with outside forces that control and shape their lives. In most cases, these outside forces are directly connected to the characters’ social status. Nancy is a widow, struggling to both financially support her children and retain the image of a perfect suburban mother; throughout the show, we recognize that she cannot do both. Due to social norms, she is placed in an

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<sup>1</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 17.

impossible situation. The same is true of Tara, whose DID reflects expectations for her to fit into one ideal narrative of, again, a suburban white mother. She is also unable to live up to this ideal as she transitions between alters at the most inconvenient moments for her children and husband. Of all the Showtime dramedies, the melodramatic situation is most pronounced in *Shameless*, where the Gallagher children are stuck in poverty. The move away from upper middle class suburbia to a low-income neighborhood in Chicago makes the show's social critique and its characters' situation much more explicit. The Gallaghers' lives in the Southside are dictated by external forces and agencies that keep them in place, like the police, Child Protective Services, and gentrification. Despite their attempts for social mobility, they always come back to where they started, suggesting that hard work and perseverance in America mean little when faced with systematic inequality. The dramedies' narratives change constantly and without warning, creating an endless series of unmovable obstacles for their protagonists. In doing so, they cue us to recognize how the dramedy characters are victims to their social worlds.

At the same time, the dramedy protagonists are not passive agents. Rather, they fit into a tradition of sitcom characters who violate social norms and astonish other characters in their televisual worlds. They actively disrupt their narratives. Nancy sells weed on the soccer field, challenging preconceived notions of white suburban motherhood. Tara's alters start parties, have affairs, and talk back to parents and judgmental mothers—all things Tara would never dream of doing because it would be impolite. But, Tara's alters have no interest in being polite or unobtrusive. The Gallaghers are also all unruly, stealing from the rich and crafting schemes to ensure their continued survival. The infusion of comedy in the Showtime dramedies ensures that

their characters are not only victims but also rebellious mothers and families who refuse to fit into the set narratives others write for them. The dramedy protagonists constantly redefine social expectations—of motherhood, poverty, and mental illness. They are not complacent in their melodramatic situations but rather constantly fight against them.

Ultimately, due to this generic hybridity, the Showtime dramedies are distinctly optimistic. While the characters' lives are constructed in harmful ways by external forces, their stories never end; they continue to disrupt the narrative over and over. Nancy is never punished for her crimes and her family sticks by her side, despite the pain she causes them. Tara never finds a cure to her DID, and we are encouraged to never expect or even *want* her to. Her alters make her and her entire family who they are. And, in *Shameless*, the Gallagher siblings can never escape the Southside but they are also never split up. They continually evade the police, keep their house, and continue to support one another. Unlike the male antihero shows outlined earlier, the dramedies refuse a finite or fatalistic ending. Nancy does not look around her son's Bar Mitzvah party for someone who's out to kill her like Tony Soprano does in the finale of *The Sopranos*. The threat of death does not loom over the dramedies. Rather, we know that our protagonists will never die. They will continue to find new, inventive ways out of their situations, never fully escaping them but never becoming defeated or defined by them. By endlessly rotating between the protagonists' successes and failures, the Showtime dramedies are imbued with an unending sense of hope. Thus, like HBO, Showtime makes claims towards quality television to justify its subscription fee, but it does so through different methods with its dramedies—by reveling in the fun and possible liberation of social deviance rather than grappling with troubled men and their existential crises.

If the shows I've discussed contribute to Showtime's quality image, I want to conclude by looking at how these shows are remembered within the canon of Great Television (if there is such a thing). How are they thought of in relation to HBO's landmark shows and other Showtime hits like *Dexter* and *Homeland*? How are the notions of genre and brand identity intertwined with assumptions of quality? To unpack these connections and examine how Showtime's dramedies fit or don't fit within their boundaries, we must first briefly trace some of the history and characteristics of "quality television"<sup>2</sup> as a scholarly, industrial, and critical concept.

First, quality television is not simply an aesthetic judgment or personal evaluation—in many ways, it is perhaps better understood as a generic category in itself. There have been many definitions of quality television over time, through various Golden Ages of the 1950s, 1970s, and 2000s/2010s, suggesting that the term does not simply equate shows with greatness but also categorizes series and produces particular viewer expectations. Evoking Basinger's earlier definition of genre, Robert Thompson argues in *Television's Second Golden Age* that you "know [quality TV] when [you see] it."<sup>3</sup> This explanation rings true, especially when we are told to recognize certain programming as artistic and others as guilty pleasures through advertisements, reviews, and word of mouth. I knew *The Wire* was a quality show years before I saw it, not because I thought I would necessarily enjoy it, but rather because it fit into a canon of shows with similar characteristics and was repeatedly cited as a show of high artistic merit by critics and scholars. In this way, "quality TV has become a genre in itself,

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<sup>2</sup> From this point forwards, quotation marks around the phrase "quality television" can be assumed unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (New York: Continuum, 1996): 12.

complete with its own set of formulaic characteristics” and subsequently reinforced by critics, scholars, and network executives.<sup>4</sup> According to Sarah Cardwell, contemporary markers of quality television include “high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognized and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative, camerawork and editing” in addition to narrative complexity.<sup>5</sup> Not all of these conventions of quality are found in every quality show, but their presence cues viewers and critics to recognize the artistic merits of a program. These conventions, though, change over time. While serialization may be a common denominator of most contemporary critically acclaimed programming, in the 1950s, anthology series such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) were recognized as the best television had to offer. The term and its associations are not static but, like most generic classifications, change with industrial and cultural shifts. Due to this, we must not think of quality as a neutral classification based only on the merits of certain texts because “there are always issues of power at stake in notions of quality and judgment—Quality for whom? Judgment by whom? On whose behalf?”<sup>6</sup> There are significant repercussions to a show being described as quality: cultural cache (for both viewers and creative teams) and ultimately profit for networks. By recognizing how these definitions can develop and exist outside of the shows themselves, I hope to demonstrate how claims of quality are part of a “process of social alchemy.”<sup>7</sup> Conceiving of quality TV as its own generic category

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<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Cardwell, “Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations, and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgment,” in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, eds. Kim Akass & Janet McCabe (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007): 26.

<sup>6</sup> Akass & McCabe, *Quality TV*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Anderson, “Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television,” in *The Essential HBO Reader*, eds. Gary Edgerton & Jeffrey Jones (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2008): 38.

illuminates the ways the term and its conventions are used by critics and industry professionals to influence how we understand and anticipate stories.

Second, quality television is an exclusive category, defined in opposition to what it is not. The phrase cues us to respect certain things as higher art by denigrating others, telling us what stories to care about by telling us what stories we shouldn't care for. As Christopher Anderson puts it, "The ability to think of one television series as a work of art exists alongside a belief that others are nothing more than noisy diversions clattering along the conveyor belt of consumer culture."<sup>8</sup> Even describing certain television shows as quality implies that most television is not quality—that certain programs are exceptional and transcend the confines of the televisual medium. This exclusivity is especially pertinent in our current moment of "Peak TV," indicating both the sheer amount of television being produced as well as its critical acclaim and quality. In other words, "Peak TV" means that viewers "may not be finding new shows they would love, but only because they were busy watching shows they already love."<sup>9</sup> The artistic boom of "Peak TV," however, is conceptualized as an anomaly, as a massive change in television's history, suggesting that television used to not be worthy of study or appreciation. For example, in his book *The Revolution Was Televised*, TV critic Alan Sepinwall equates post-1997 television to a "revolution,"<sup>10</sup> and he and fellow critic Matt Zoller Seitz later write that the premiere of *The Sopranos* "was the start of a creative explosion in television—one we had a front seat to watch and write about—that ended

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<sup>8</sup> Anderson, "Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television," 29.

<sup>9</sup> Willa Paskin, "What Does 'Peak TV' Really Mean?" *Slate*, December 23, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised*, 1-15.

the medium's second-class citizenship."<sup>11</sup> Sepinwall and other critics' conception of a televisual revolution centers on shows, such as *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) and *The Shield*, that are thought to be different, more artistic, and better than what preceded them, in effect denouncing much of the medium's history.

Thinking of television as mindless entertainment is nothing new. Famously, in 1961, FCC Chairman Neil Minow referred to TV as a "vast wasteland," citing its simplicity and indecent moral content.<sup>12</sup> This cultural association still exists today, with psychological studies claiming that television will rot your brain and body.<sup>13</sup> To many, television is a succubus. Thus, many current shows are compared to other more culturally respected art forms to add legitimacy. In her book *On the Wire*, for example, Linda Williams notes how *The Wire* is often referred to as a Greek tragedy despite its roots in television melodramas in order to elevate it above TV.<sup>14</sup> Other critics, too, compare shows to novels and plays because these "literary associations lent television legitimacy."<sup>15</sup> However, this "vast wasteland logic" has been refuted by many scholars, notably Robert Thompson, who argues that "the TV of the 1950s continues to bask in the glow of selective recall."<sup>16</sup> Ideas of what is and is not quality changes over time, and shows from the 1980s like *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) are now being replaced in the minds of critics and viewers with contemporary programming like *Breaking Bad* and *Mad*

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<sup>11</sup> Alan Sepinwall and Matt Zoller Seitz, *TV (The Book): Two Experts Pick the Greatest American Shows of All Time* (New York: Grand Publishing Center, 2016): x.

<sup>12</sup> Martin, *Difficult Men*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Brittany Nicole Mellon, "The Potential of Televisions in the Bedroom Increasing a Child's Risk of Obesity," Master of Public Health Dissertation, San Diego State University (2014); Frank Hu & co., "Television Watching and Other Sedentary Behaviors," *Journal of American Medical Association* 289, no. 14 (2003); Jan Van den Bulck, "Is Television Bad for Your Health?" *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 29, no. 3 (2000).

<sup>14</sup> Williams, *On the Wire*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 116.

<sup>16</sup> Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*, 12.

*Men*. The concept of a revolution, with its “selective recall,” is significant because it creates an exclusionary canon of Great TV, as we can see Sepinwall and Seitz’s *TV: The Book*, which heavily slants towards post-1995 shows in its ranking of the top one hundred shows ever made. The category of quality is oppositional and “infuriatingly narrow” in order to raise the artistic status of certain programs and networks; and, in the process, the reality of older television is often replaced by imaginary cultural conceptions of it.<sup>17</sup> New quality television should not be understood as a revolution but rather as a variation from previous television eras.

Third, but perhaps most importantly, quality TV is also utilized as a branding strategy. All of the quality markers I have laid out—serialization, high profile actors, authorship, high production values—are also characteristics of premium cable networks. Premium cable, especially HBO, “has helped to give shape to that otherwise ill-defined term ‘quality TV.’”<sup>18</sup> Our current definition of quality TV comes from the way premium cable networks differentiate themselves from broadcast networks in order to attract subscribers. Therefore, HBO’s slogan is both a branding strategy *and* an indicator of quality because “HBO must continuously promote discourses of ‘quality’ and ‘exclusivity’ as central to the subscription service.”<sup>19</sup> Premium networks claim to be better than normal television—with HBO trying to divorce itself from the low-brow associations of the medium in its slogan, “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO”—to draw in subscribers. Recognizing quality as a branding strategy also reveals its economic

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<sup>17</sup> Mary McNamara, “Can Women Break the Antihero’s Hold on TV?” *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Avi Santo, “Para-Television and Discourses of Distinction: The Culture of Production at HBO,” in *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, eds. Marc Leverette et. al. (New York: Routledge, 2008): 20.

implications: it is not just about creating art but is also about attracting a viewership with spending power, notably the coveted 18-49 year old demographic. Premium cable's subscribers enter a privileged club for those who can afford to pay the subscription fee, granting those viewers a certain level of cultural cache and adding to network profits.<sup>20</sup> Based on this history, it is unsurprising that "over the past decade and a half, HBO has been identified as the wellspring of a new 'Golden Age' in American television."<sup>21</sup> Many HBO programs, like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Six Feet Under*, are often cited as the cream of the crop, as shows that set the bar for everything that follows. They, and the shows that continue their legacy like *Breaking Bad* and *The Shield*, dominate scholars' attention and sweep the Emmys year after year. In order to increase premium cables' profits, they have shaped what critics and viewers contemporarily understand to be quality: cable, male-centered or male-authored, and serialized.

Showtime's female-led dramedies occupy a fascinating space in the world of quality television. By embodying Showtime's branding strategy as a premium cable network, these shows have many of the characteristics of quality television that Thompson, Cardwell, and other scholars have established. They feature high-profile actors, often hailing from film or other acclaimed series, like Edie Falco, Laura Linney, and William H. Macy; they tell highly serialized stories that carry across multiple episodes and seasons; and they include profanity and nudity that differentiate the shows from broadcast offerings. In all of these ways, they tout themselves as part of an exclusive cool-kids club, as being "not TV." It is also therefore not shocking that the dramedies limit their protagonists to white women, largely casting aside questions of race, because

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<sup>20</sup> Santo, "Para-Television and Discourses of Distinction," 33.

<sup>21</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 2.

they play into the same exclusionary discourse of quality. As with HBO, the way the dramedies support Showtime's exclusive brand are the same ways that they can be recognized as quality television.

However, the dramedies are not remembered in the same way as HBO's "revolutionary" shows and the male antiheroes that followed. There are numerous books written about HBO, yet not a single one on Showtime; there are many college courses and essays about *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, yet Showtime's dramedy production trend has largely been forgotten or reduced to a passing mention. *Weeds* and *Nurse Jackie* were enormous critical successes and won Showtime multiple prestigious awards, and are regarded by critics as "good shows, some even great shows," but they are "not granted the same social respect as their dramatic peers."<sup>22</sup> I am not suggesting that they should instead be thought of as revolutionary, but rather I am asking why they check all the appropriate boxes and yet still fall outside the recently defined canon of Great TV? It is precisely this contradiction that prompted my inquiry into the dramedies to begin with. Why are certain shows remembered as part of the immortalized "pantheon," as being Great, while others are simply thought of as great and enjoyable at the time? What distinguishes these programs besides aesthetic preference? How are popular conceptions of melodrama implicated in or brushed aside in quality television? Does quality TV discriminate between comedy and drama? Does it discriminate based on gender or race?

Perhaps the generic hybridity of the dramedies is a problem for critics or viewers, as the genre mixing confuses and upsets expectations of what these shows and their protagonists should be. In shows like *United States of Tara*, you can't draw a clear line

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<sup>22</sup> McNamara, "Can Women Break the Antihero's Hold on TV?"

between melodrama and comedy because they move between the two in the same moment. We may be unsure if we should be laughing or crying with Tara's disorder and the Gallaghers' poverty. Similarly, many writers have criticized *Weeds* for no longer being funny after season four without considering that maybe the show had lost all interest in making its viewers laugh. Emily Nussbaum references *United States of Tara* and *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* and writes that "Showtime's series have borderline personalities," bouncing "inconsistently" between wackiness and "real and painful feelings."<sup>23</sup> The dramedies do not fit into either generic category neatly, inviting critical apprehension. Critic Matt Zoller Seitz explains how shows like *Weeds* and *Nurse Jackie*, and other half-hours like *Transparent*, can be more accurately referred to as "comedies in theories," meaning they are more heavily dramatic or thematically serious than other comedies.<sup>24</sup> They challenge established generic markers between comedy and drama, so that "distinctions that once delineated the...divide—hero versus anti-hero; classical structure versus experimental or improvised storytelling; 60 versus 30 minute—mean little."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps these shows' generic hybridity also upset assumptions and expectations about what can be quality television, for we do not know how we are meant to engage with their contradictory tones. Do we laugh, cry, or both?

Additionally, generic hybridity is difficult for award shows like the Emmys, which are industrial markers of artistic merit. If Showtime's dramedies cannot be classified as a drama or a comedy, it becomes hard to place them in either dramatic or comedic award categories. *Shameless*, for example, switched from the drama to comedy

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<sup>23</sup> Nussbaum, "Women on the Verge."

<sup>24</sup> Matt Zoller Seitz, "How Comedy Usurped Drama as the TV Genre of Our Time," *Vulture*, June 13, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Emmy category in its fourth season, and it now sits as an outlier in the comedy category as a sixty minute show. By defying “many boundaries in terms of what can be done in either genre,” *Shameless* “continually confuses award committees.”<sup>26</sup> The same holds true for *Weeds*, *Nurse Jackie*, and *United States of Tara*; while they are all considered comedies in the Emmys and have received numerous nominations and wins, critics have complained that the shows and performances should not win as comedies since they could be considered primarily dramatic. The question then becomes: can the Emmys award Edie Falco in the comedy category for giving a complicated and dark performance about addiction over Tina Fey’s overtly comic performance in *30 Rock*? Even more extreme, how can Emmy Rossum’s performance as a sister going to jail for endangering her baby brother’s life be compared to Amy Schumer? The dramedies are in a lose-lose situation, for if they are submitted to the Emmys as comedies, they are considered too dramatic, but if they are submitted as dramas, they are considered too comedic.<sup>27</sup> How can one judge and compare performances that cross so many generic boundaries?

While these may initially appear to be logistical questions, questions of classification “prove to be problematic insofar as these classically defined categories can mean the difference between winning and losing highly coveted television industry awards.”<sup>28</sup> The Emmys are significant in that they function “as a cultural marker of high status, ‘quality series,’” creating positive press about shows and networks and subsequently attracting more viewers.<sup>29</sup> The generic hybridity of Showtime’s dramedies

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<sup>26</sup> Turchiano, “Fiona is ‘Stumbling towards Maturity’ in Season Five.”

<sup>27</sup> Keeler, “Branding the Family Drama,” 31.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Jordie Lagerwey & Taylor Nygaard, “Broadcasting Quality: Re-centering Feminist Discourse with ‘The Good Wife,’” *Television & New Media* Special Issue: The Good Wife (2016): 2.

did not stop them from receiving Emmys, but it did complicate their chances of receiving top accolades as they switched categories or received criticism for their categorical placement. Notably, *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) was the last show that could be considered a dramedy to win for Best Comedy in 1999 and *Northern Exposure* (1990-1995) the last dramedy to win Best Drama in 1992. Many fantastic shows that have followed Showtime's dramedies—including *UnREAL* (2015- ), *Transparent*, and *Jane the Virgin* (2014- )—are similarly uncategorizable. Prestigious awards try to impose strict boundaries of drama and comedy on shows that cannot cleanly fit either category.

Perhaps another reason why Showtime's dramedies are not remembered as part of the television canon is because they aren't thought to be significant enough. Quality television, Sarah Cardwell argues, moves beyond superfluous entertainment to be meaningful and "realistic." Quality TV, she says, "is regarded with a certain 'seriousness.'"<sup>30</sup> The dramedies, in contrast, have their dramatic sides, but they also heavily lean on anarchic comedy in order to urge us to *have fun*. None of the series take themselves too seriously all of the time, and *Shameless* in particular embraces graphic sex, crime, and parties that make no attempt to be high-class, artistic, or realistic. The shows' women are not as dark and tortured as the "cable guys" and "difficult men" that surround them, whose moral quandaries Amanda Lotz and Brett Martin explore. Rather, through comedy, the dramedies embrace their status as entertainment and can potentially be regarded as frivolous. They may be fun, they may be entertaining, but perhaps they aren't considered art. It is also interesting that many of the most challenging female protagonists on television can be found in comedy or more overtly melodramatic series,

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<sup>30</sup> Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good?"

such as Rachel Goldberg of *UnREAL*, Rachel Bloom of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015- ), and Olivia Pope of *Scandal* (2012- ). The dramedy protagonists' transgressions are slightly muted and easier to swallow because of the series' exaggeration. Due to their comedic and flippant treatment of social transgressions, it is possible that the Showtime dramedies are not considered "authentic" enough to be the Best of the Best.<sup>31</sup>

Relatedly, maybe Showtime's female-led dramedies are not remembered in the same way as male antihero shows due to the gendered aspects of quality television. In her brilliant essay on *Sex and the City* and "Difficult Women," Emily Nussbaum questions how critics and scholars discuss *Sex and the City* and *The Sopranos* as the two shows that put HBO on the map. She argues that *Sex and the City* has had a lasting impact on television, but "even as *The Sopranos* has ascended to TV's Mt. Olympus, the reputation of *Sex and the City* has shrunk and faded, like some tragic dry-clean-only dress tossed into a decade-long hot cycle."<sup>32</sup> Like the Showtime dramedies, the show is respected and successful—but only to a certain point, due to "the assumption that anything stylized (or formulaic, or pleasurable, or funny, or *feminine*...) must be inferior."<sup>33</sup> Quality is often associated with male auteurs such as David Chase, David Simon, Alan Ball, Joss Whedon, and Louis C.K. Even female auteurs are industrially and culturally legitimized by male auteurs, like Judd Apatow executive producing Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012-2017).<sup>34</sup> Quality is coded as masculine by devaluing that which is feminized as trivial and

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<sup>31</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 114.

<sup>32</sup> Emily Nussbaum, "Difficult Women," *The New Yorker*, July 29, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid* (emphasis added).

<sup>34</sup> Nygaard, "Girls Just Want to Be 'Quality'"; Todd VanDerWerff, "How *Girls* Challenges the Masculine Expectations of 'Good TV,'" *The AV Club*, June 14, 2012.

mindless entertainment: comedy, broadcast networks, female stories, and television's own past.

Tellingly, dramatic female antiheroes are difficult to find on television outside of Patty Hewes on *Damages*. Most “shows labeled ‘dramedies’ by critics,” Amanda Keeler even notes, “are programs that center on female characters.”<sup>35</sup> It is hard to deny that many of the shows in television's pantheon are dramas centered on men and their problems, while we primarily see women transgress social boundaries in comedies. Shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) and *Maude* (1972-1978), and more recently *United States of Tara* and *The Big C*, can be brushed aside as light, repetitive, and formulaic. It may be impossible to point to one clear reason for the gendered division between genres; however, we can recognize that by elevating “serious” male dramas over their comedic equals, the quality television aesthetic suggests that the Showtime dramedies' legacies are influenced by the fact that women's stories and genres are not valued in the same way that men's are. Popular television has a long history of representing women's lives and struggles, yet the canon defined by the quality aesthetic separates itself from this televisual past and, in the process, “tends to reflect the values of a man's world.”<sup>36</sup>

Showtime's dramedies and the characters they feature do not easily fit into any categories. Nancy Botwin, Tara Gregson, and the Gallaghers' lives are neither entirely funny nor serious. They are neither victors nor victims. Just as they move between genres, not clearly belonging in one over another, the dramedies do not entirely fit within or outside of scholars' and critics' conceptions of quality television. They reveal the

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<sup>35</sup> Keeler, “Branding the Family Drama,” 33.

<sup>36</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 165.

contradictory nature of quality TV and generic distinctions. Therefore, I suggest the dramedies' hybridity and tonal inconsistencies be thought of as not a deficit but rather as "the power of a program...[that] moves the line between these disparate typologies [and] prevent it from adopted by any one audience."<sup>37</sup> I am not arguing that we should bring these dramedies into the discourse of quality or that we should consider them either melodramatic or comedic, for they actively reveal the inconsistencies of such categorizations. As I hope has become clear, quality television is not a particularly useful concept for evaluating series. Instead, analyses of the shows can potentially work to undo rigid and exclusionary boundaries between genres and reveal how generic conventions can be fluid and used in different, often conflicting, ways. As Matt Zoller Seitz notes in his exploration of the "comedic revolution" of the 2010s, we are reaching a moment where "the labels 'comedy' and 'drama' and 'hour' and 'half-hour' no longer tell us anything useful about a show," and we must instead look towards the ways genre expectations can be broken and manipulated to tell different and more diverse stories.<sup>38</sup>

While this thesis has aimed to explore three of Showtime's fascinating dramedies and the connections between genre, brand identity, and quality television that can be found within them, I don't have concrete answers for any of the questions I posed at the start of this chapter. Instead, it is my hope that more scholars will take up and study these topics and that my hypotheses can better equip this research. Specifically, I believe there is more work to be done with genre on television—work that has been expertly started by Jason Mittell and Amanda Keeler but demands further investigation. I hope that more writers will study the assumptions we bring to genre and how those

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<sup>37</sup> Keeler, "Branding the Family Drama," 35.

<sup>38</sup> Seitz, "How Comedy Has Usurped Drama as the TV Genre of Our Time."

assumptions can be shattered to not only create “better TV,” as Wesley Morris and James Poniewozik suggest, but to also tell more expansive and representative stories.<sup>39</sup> There are countless “comedies in theory” that have been left unturned. I believe it would be beneficial to study shows such as *You’re the Worst* (2014- ), *Jane the Virgin*, and *UnREAL* to uncover how they play with generic conventions and portrayals of femininity, race, and sexuality on their respective networks, particularly on less prestigious channels like Lifetime. Additionally, the dramedy production trend only lasted a few years on Showtime. It would be fascinating to further explore how Showtime has renegotiated its programming in recent years, and if it has been successful with the uptick of digital distribution. And, now that male antihero shows are going out of fashion, what will take their place as the face of quality television? In this age of “Peak TV,” we must be attentive to how notions of quality and a televisual canon will adapt to an abundance of critically acclaimed programming. What will be remembered as the new *The Sopranos* from the 2010s, if anything?

Most importantly, though, I hope that television scholars will continue to look outside of the canon for their subjects. I began this thesis suggesting that we must study the Showtime dramedies because they and other basic cable dramas have been dismissed as HBO’s “imitators.”<sup>40</sup> *Weeds*, *United States of Tara*, and *Shameless* are not merely following HBO’s lead from the late ‘90s but are also mixing and merging generic conventions to upset narrative expectations and diverge from HBO. The contradictions within the series’ tones and narratives are indicative of the irresolvable situations—suburban

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<sup>39</sup> James Poniewozik and Wesley Morris, “Why Diverse TV Matters. It’s Better TV. Discuss,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, 7.

motherhood, mental illness, and poverty—in which the characters are placed. Nancy Botwin, Tara Gregson, and Fiona Gallagher are not the female equivalents of Tony Sopranos or Nate Fisher, nor can they be thought of in simple binaries. They are both in control of and victims of their series' story worlds. Therefore, I believe we must continue to study the “imitators” and the shows and networks that are assumed to not have any impact on television's history. We must look towards those shows that are denigrated as *not* worthy of study. To do otherwise, as scholars Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey argue, “assumes that TV scholars have accomplished the work” of legitimizing the medium and therefore “suggests that only certain TV (white, male, serial, and narrowcast or streaming)” can be quality.<sup>41</sup> I hope more scholars will follow Nygaard & Lagerwey's lead and analyze broadcast series, genre shows, web series, and other critically maligned programs as their own distinct and unique stories. Because, as we have seen in Showtime's dramedies, perhaps the “imitators” that Dean DeFino and other scholars dismiss are not merely copying quality television but are doing something else entirely.

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<sup>41</sup> Lagerwey & Nygaard, “Broadcasting Quality,” 6.

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