

“WITH PAIN THERE IS HOPE”: REPRESENTATIONS OF WORKING MOTHERS ON ABC’S

*BROTHERS & SISTERS*

by

MEGAN VOGEL

(Under the Direction of Peggy J. Kreshel)

ABSTRACT

The national conversation about working mothers and their place in society has been long, intense, and fraught with contradiction. These women are caught between the cultural ideal of nurturing domesticity on one hand, and economic reality and personal ambition on the other. Grounded in British cultural studies and feminist theory, this thesis explores this tension by examining the representations of working mothers on ABC’s *Brothers & Sisters*, a popular television drama. The findings suggest that these representations are messy and at times, contradictory, and that they both challenge and uphold traditional gender roles. The study’s findings are placed within contemporary social and cultural discourses to suggest the ways that the fictional characters are used to humanize the confusing position many women find themselves in today. Limitations and opportunities for future research are also discussed.

INDEX WORDS: *Brothers & Sisters*, Cultural Studies, Feminist Theory, Patriarchy, Popular Culture, Representation, Television, Textual Analysis

“WITH PAIN THERE IS HOPE”: REPRESENTATIONS OF WORKING MOTHERS ON ABC’S

*BROTHERS & SISTERS*

by

MEGAN VOGEL

B.A., University of Virginia, 2007

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2009

© 2009

Megan Vogel

All Rights Reserved

“WITH PAIN THERE IS HOPE”: REPRESENTATIONS OF WORKING MOTHERS ON ABC’S

*BROTHERS & SISTERS*

by

MEGAN VOGEL

Major Professor:	Peggy J. Kreshel
Committee:	Janice Hume Carolina Acosta-Alzuru

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
May 2009

## DEDICATION

For all the women who walk the cultural tightrope between personal and professional success.

With deepest gratitude to my own working mother, Linda Vogel, who taught me it *is* possible to be a confident woman with a firm understanding of self while balancing a successful career and a large family in which the mother is the heart.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Kreshel, you have been a fantastic mentor and have become a wonderful friend throughout this project (and my journey towards 13.1 miles!). I am incredibly thankful for all of the late night meetings, “jam sessions,” gab fests, and snacks. Your enthusiasm is contagious and your unwavering support and confidence in me and in this study means more than you will ever know. Did women work in World War I?

Dr. Acosta-Alzuru and Dr. Hume, I want to thank you for your support and guidance. You have always had your door open for me, and have been extremely helpful whenever I have had questions. You have helped me become a more critical thinker, researcher, and writer.

Mom and Dad, what can I say? Thank you for helping me become the person I am today. Your encouragement throughout this project and my whole educational career has been invaluable. I aim to make you proud every day and love you both very much.

Bobby, thank you for your friendship and love these past seven years. Your passion for knowledge and zest for life continue to inspire me and I am so much better for knowing you.

Last but not least, I want to thank all of the faculty members, staff, and students I have had the privilege of knowing during my time at Grady and the Cox Center. I have learned a lot from all of you about media, the world, and myself, and you helped me find my place in these crazy worlds we call Athens and academia!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
PROLOGUE.....	1
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	4
Research Objective & Questions.....	7
Historical Context: Women, Employment, & Motherhood.....	7
2 THEORY.....	16
Cultural Studies.....	16
Feminist Theory.....	21
Cultural Studies & Feminist Theory: A Shared Space.....	23
3 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	25
Feminist Media Studies.....	25
Feminist Television Studies.....	27
Representations of Women in Media: Career Woman & Mother.....	30
4 METHOD.....	37
Creating the Text.....	40
The Text: <i>Brothers &amp; Sisters</i> .....	41
The Process of Analysis.....	42
The World of <i>Brothers &amp; Sisters</i> .....	43
5 WOMEN AND WORK: AWAKENINGS & DISAPPOINTMENTS.....	46
Work=An Identity of Her Own?.....	48
An Iconic Romance: Emulation & Expectation.....	54

6	ILLUSIONS SHATTERED: DISSOLUTION OF THE NUCLEAR FAMILY.....	58
	A Patchwork of Gender Roles .....	58
	A “terrible, bruised silence” & the Failure to Understand.....	60
	Emotional Distance Created & Revealed Through Space .....	63
	“Honestly, am I enough?” Dissatisfaction, Guilt, & the Search for More .....	65
7	MATERNAL FEROCITY IN THE WORKPLACE & HOME.....	72
	“She knows her stuff”: Sarah the Businesswoman.....	73
	“You are not responsible for everyone, Sarah”: Protecting the Ojai Foods Family .....	73
	“Stay the hell away from my family”: Sarah versus Holly .....	76
	“Supermom” or Just Doing the Best She Can?: Sarah as Mother .....	80
8	CONCLUSION .....	87
	Contributions, Limitations, & Opportunities for Future Research .....	87
	Conclusions .....	88
	Sarah: An Embodiment of Our Cultural Confusion .....	92
	REFERENCES .....	94

## PROLOGUE

### HOW I CAME TO THIS STUDY

This project began when I needed a paper topic for a class project. The class was an introduction to mass communication theory and the project was designed to teach us how to write a literature review to make a case for the importance of a topic and why a study should be carried out. As an undergraduate, I had studied mass media as cultural forces to understand how they interpreted and represented American womanhood and how they could influence the way women thought about their roles in society. Almost all of this undergraduate work had focused on media texts produced between 1930 and 1960. Drawing upon my interest and with past work in mind, I decided to continue studying representations of womanhood; this time, however, I chose to study contemporary, rather than historical, representations. To narrow this broad interest further, I turned to the literature.

Two texts I stumbled upon in my research—Diane Meehan’s *Ladies of the Evening: Women Characters of Prime-Time Television* and Bonnie Dow’s *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970*—helped spark a personal epiphany: media and cultural scholars have studied representations of mothers and working women, but few have examined representations where the two roles come together in one woman—the working mother. A look into sociological and mainstream publications revealed a long and often-heated discussion about motherhood and work, with phrases like “mommy wars,” “maternal wall,” and “opting out” recurring again and again. From there, my research quickly snowballed and my interest grew the more I learned. “Why hadn’t I thought of this before?” I asked myself. “I’ve always been surrounded by working mothers.”

Then, I realized it was likely this closeness that had blinded me to the topic for so long. Growing up in a busy suburb of Washington, D.C., I didn’t think anything of my mom trying to balance her career and her familial responsibilities. The vast majority of my friends’ moms worked, so to me, it was the norm. The thing I couldn’t understand growing up, was why my mom needed “30 minutes...just 30

minutes” to herself when she came home from work before I could ask her about dinner, sleepovers, or bedtime. This project has helped me realize that during these brief moments to herself, Mom was switching gears, so to speak, from powerful corporate executive to mother and wife.

Even with the frustration and stress that often result from balancing career and family, I believe that my mother—and later, my sister and two sister-in-laws—can, in fact, “do it all” successfully. With so many millions of women performing this juggling act everyday, I began to wonder: why do media focus on women who can’t seem to achieve this balance more often than they focus on those who are simultaneously wonderful workers, parents, and spouses? It is, in part, this question and my own background that helped transform my interest in working mothers from a topic for a class project to this thesis.

Current events also conspired to fuel my interest in the topic, particularly when Alaska governor Sarah Palin and Michelle Obama captured the nation’s attention during the 2008 presidential campaign. Constant conversations and sometimes-frenzied controversy in media over Palin’s decision to accept the Republican Vice Presidential nomination despite being the mother of five young children, in my mind amplified the importance of researching media constructions of the working mother. It seemed everyone from journalists to actors, scholars to talk show hosts, corporate executives to stay-at-home parents voiced their opinion. Some applauded her as a “super [hockey] mom” doing it all; just as many, if not more, derided her as a neglectful mother, arguing she was putting her personal ambitions before the welfare of her family (Cheplic, 2008; Marsh, 2008).

Michelle Obama’s arrival on the national stage added another level of complexity to the work-motherhood debate. The public and media judged Obama’s status as a working mother far less harshly than they did Palin’s, perhaps because unlike Palin, Obama emphasized motherhood before work. Many, it seemed, could not relate to Palin because she seemed to have no trouble balancing work and family obligations and needed little, if any, help to do it. Obama, on the other hand, was candid about her struggles to balance career and family, a strategy that made her approachable to many working mothers. “[I’m] always living with the guilt that if I’m spending too much time at work, then I’m not giving enough

time to my girls," Obama said on the campaign trail (Corley, 2008, para. 4). "And then if I'm with my girls, then I'm not doing enough for work — or you name it. It's a guilt that we all live with...Can I hear an amen?"

When Barack Obama was elected President, commentators noted that it was the first time they felt as though there was a *unified* "First Family" entering the White House (SkyNews, 2008). Earlier presidential families seemed to be a composite of separate individuals: President, First Lady, and child(ren). The emergence of a family-first mentality, largely attributed to Michelle Obama, was solidified when she was dubbed "Mom-In-Chief" by reporters and when she described herself as "First Mom" in *U.S. News & World Report*.

[As First Lady] I will work daily on the issues closest to my heart: helping working women and families, particularly military families. But, as my girls reminded me...even as First Lady, my No. 1 job is still to be Mom. At 7 and 10, our daughters are young. My first priority will be to ensure they stay grounded and healthy, with normal childhoods—including homework, chores, dance, and soccer. (Obama, 2008, para. 4).

Although "normal childhood" remains a contentious term, Obama seems to have become a media darling and a role model for young women and mothers, perhaps because she emphasizes family over career. The differences in media scrutiny of Palin and Obama made me wonder: what does a working mother look like when the media create a fictional representation from the ground up? Do the resulting representations challenge or uphold patriarchal ideologies of motherhood? What can they tell us about what it means to be a mother, a woman, and a working professional in America?

As a kid you never think about the parts of your parents' lives that are separate from you—the parts you don't see, and only hear them talk about with other adults. During the course of this project, as well as the formal and informal research that brought me to it, I've come to reflect on my experiences growing up, and what I will likely experience as a working mother myself. I've come to understand my mom and her experiences in new ways. Now, her analogy about working mothers being like ducks—"cutting across the water in smooth, fluid, and effortless motions but paddling like mad beneath the surface"—seems all too appropriate.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Mommy Wars.” “Mommy-Track.” “Mommy-Track 2.0.” “Sequencing.” “Opting-Out.” “Opting Back In.” “Having It All.” “On Ramps.” “Off Ramps.” “Glass Ceiling.” “Maternal Wall” (Belkin, 2003; Tanneeru, 2006; Selvin, 2006; Tucker, 2007; Belkin, 2007; Graff, 2007). These phrases about women’s (particularly mothers’) roles in society, specifically their participation in the paid labor force, have littered media discourse since the mid-1980s. The so-called “mommy wars” set working mothers against stay-at-home mothers, constraining both to overly simplistic, mutually exclusive categories, disregarding that most women move between the two extremes. Media often characterize working mothers as selfish women trying to do it all at work and have it all at home. Stay-at-home mothers are portrayed as overly present, single-minded females with few interests outside their children and home.

In a 2003 *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* article, “The Opt-Out Revolution,” contributing writer Lisa Belkin did not set working and non-working mothers at odds, but she intimated that happy women were closer to the mommy wars’ stay-at-home mothers than to its working mothers. She asserted that although women were entering the workforce with more impressive credentials than at any other time in history, they weren’t ruling the (business) world because they simply didn’t want to. In short, Belkin argued, women around the country were beginning to redefine work and success. They were choosing—in great numbers—to “opt-out” of their careers because they were unsatisfied with playing by an antiquated and male-dominated rulebook, and were tired of fighting against the subtle discrimination they faced in the workplace.

Since then, scholars, media, and government have widely discredited the revolutionary aspect of Belkin’s claims, arguing instead that working mothers will remain the norm in American society (Goldin, 2006; Joint Economic Committee, 2008). Indeed, Belkin may have been too quick with her assertions; 60% of married mothers with preschool-aged children were active in the American labor force in 2005, a

drop of just four percent since a zenith in 1997 and 1998 (Cohany & Sok, 2007, p. 23). What's more, nearly 75% of all married women with children between the ages of 6 and 17 were part of the American labor force in 2003, just two percent less than in 1997 (p. 23). The significance of these differences seems to be a matter of perspective and it may be too soon to evaluate the validity of Belkin's claims. Still, revolutionary or not, the sheer amount of attention paid to the "mommy wars," the "mommy track," and a potential "opt-out revolution" reveals the cultural discomfort that continues to surround issues of maternal employment in the United States.

This discomfort manifested itself recently when Alaska Governor Sarah Palin publicly accepted the Republican Vice Presidential nomination on September 3, 2008. Her candidacy sparked a renewed upsurge in media attention to maternal employment patterns, as members of the media and public began to question whether as a mother of five, Palin could or should tackle such a serious undertaking. In an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal*, Kay and Shipman (2008)—both reporters and authors of an upcoming book on female employment—argued that Palin sparked controversy because she was challenging the supposedly national trend toward a redefinition of success that Belkin had noted some five years earlier:

It's important to understand why, then, Mrs. Palin has hit a nerve. It's not because she's a woman with children trying to do a man's job. It's because she's actually pushing the combination of professional and personal ambitions beyond the sensibilities of this generation of working moms. As women, we may be awed by her, but she's not necessarily a role model for so many professional women who now say they want to do it differently, that they don't want to do 150% of everything all of the time. So what you are hearing is less condemnation than a collective gasp of amazement -- and exhaustion -- at the thought of juggling five children, one of them an infant, and the most extreme example of a job with little or no flexibility. It would make supermom feel feeble. (p. A11)

Palin's presence on the national stage upped-the-ante for working mothers. She reified a "supermom" seemingly doing it all—and doing it successfully—in a man's world. Palin is an example of "a distinctly Republican vision of feminism," Marsh (2008) writes, that teaches women that "if [they] can't do it all, [they're] just not working hard enough" (para. 3). Regardless of whether women are working hard enough, opting-in or opting-out, or celebrating or denigrating other women's choices, activist Judith Tucker (2007) argues that "mothers and their work preferences are not the problem. It's what the rest of

the country is thinking that is holding women back” and maintaining the divide between those who hold up working mothers, and those that would tear them down (para. 10).

The national conversation about working mothers and their place in society has been long, intense, and fraught with contradiction. It is equally likely to take place in boardrooms and living rooms, nightclubs and book clubs, on the factory floor and the floor of Congress. But it is perhaps most visible in the media in nightly newscasts, magazine features, films, online content, and of course, television programs. Since the 1950s, television programming has provided some of the most enduring icons of idealized womanhood. June Cleaver, Donna Reed, and Harriet Nelson are a powerful triumvirate representing the seemingly perfect American mother that, despite being fictional, continues to inform cultural attitudes about women’s ‘proper’ roles (Douglas, 1994).

In the widely read and influential book *Television: The Critical View*, Newcomb and Hirsch (2000) assert that television is a “central cultural medium” through which cultures examine themselves, their values and concerns, and shifts in those attitudes over time (p. 564). As ideological tools, television texts not only transmit, interpret, and reinforce a culture’s prevailing norms and controversies but also influence the way Americans think about certain issues (Kellner, 1995; Dow, 1996). Susan Douglas (1994) raises this point when she discusses the way mediated representations help us make sense of our world.

Little kids have all these cracks and crevices in their puttylike psychological edifices, and one relentless dispenser of psychic Spackle is the mass media. They help fill in holes marked “What does it mean to be a girl?” or “What is an American?” or “What is happiness?” (p. 13)

However, media are far from coherent in their messages, and are not all-powerful apparatuses through which consumers are inculcated or dominated (Newcomb & Hirsch, 2000). Media texts, like popular culture at large Hall (1993/1998) argues, are sites of struggle where meanings are contested and negotiated by producers and consumers. The confusion and contradictions in these texts become fruitful entrées for study because it is in these moments that the complexities of a culture become visible. The text used here, a television drama called *Brothers & Sisters*, is an important research site not simply for how it

portrays working motherhood, but for what its representations tell us about the assumptions and values regarding female employment and motherhood that inform American culture today.

In the section that follows, I introduce the research objective that has guided this study, as well as the particular research questions that informed my analysis.

### Research Objective & Questions

As the literature review in chapter three will suggest, past scholarship examining media representations of women is abundant and varied, both in focus and approach. And, while researchers have looked at representations of mothers, and of working women, there is little research on representations of women who occupy both roles, that is, working mothers. The objective of this research was to begin to fill that void through the analysis of representations of working mothers in prime-time network television programming. The text I chose was the first season of ABC's family drama *Brothers & Sisters* (2006-present); the following questions guided my analysis of the program (see chapter four for a discussion of text selection and analysis):

1. How are traditional gender roles upheld, challenged, or overturned in this series?
2. What complex of relationships are portrayed? What do these portrayals say about power and the tensions that arise in a situation in which a mother occupies both professional and domestic spaces?
3. When viewed in its entirety, what do the representations in this text say about working mothers' success and happiness?

The remainder of this chapter outlines, in the broadest of strokes, the historical tensions that continue to inform our nation's cultural struggle over work and motherhood.

### Historical Context: Women, Employment, & Motherhood

All women were regarded in the first half of the nineteenth century solely as potential mothers. The worker with her own earnings was, accordingly, an affront against nature and the protective instincts of man. (Neff, 1929, p. 36-37)

Although poor, black, and immigrant women had long labored in the marketplace for subsistence wages, they had excited little public controversy...The controversy caused by the movement of [white, middle-class] women into the labor force led to cycles of reaction and reform based on the

desire to reestablish women within the framework of middle-class domestic values. (Weiner, 1985, p. 4)

Until the early nineteenth century, there was virtually no separation between work and family life. “Man’s work was chiefly the production of raw material, while woman’s work was chiefly the transforming of [this] raw material into commodities” for the family (Lilienthal, 1916, p. 6). Individual family members worked together to create or obtain the necessities of life; each contributed to the health and welfare of the family unit. These early working women were part of what amounted to small economic engines, moving from field, spinning wheel, or family business, to kitchen or baby’s crib and back again.

An informed analysis of the mediated images of the working mother necessarily begins with an examination of the two concepts that underlie the conversation: (1) the supposed split between a ‘public’ world and a ‘private’ world and (2) the cultural cement that has fused specific gender roles to these arenas despite economic reality.

The cultural discomfort surrounding working mothers did not begin in earnest until America moved from the market-based economy described above, to a highly mechanized and technologically driven economy during the Industrial Revolution (1760-1850) (Keller, 1994). As products once produced within the home became manufactured in local factories, and men became increasingly defined by their ability to financially support their family by working outside the home, what has come to be identified as the “separate spheres” of “public” and “private” gained ground. Men and women’s roles were transformed: once co-producers and co-nurturers, these roles became breadwinner and homemaker, public wage-earner and consumer. Although thousands of women put their skill sets to work in industrial “sewing trades,” many remained within the home, and were valued primarily as nurturing consumers within this domestic sphere (Keller, 1994; Lilienthal, 1916). The work of the middle-class wives who managed their homes was devalued economically, but held in high esteem culturally—a model that would persist well into the twentieth century.

Women became the center of the home and were expected to (1) secure a child's emotional, physical, and spiritual health with the help of experts, rather than from an engaged father figure, and (2) to create a comfortable space that could provide refuge from the larger social and economic changes. Proper Victorian motherhood was viewed as a learned skill, rather than a biological one, and 'good' mothers were expected to be with their children constantly (Gorham, 1982). This exaltation of the role of mother reflected the shift in cultural values and left little, if any, room for mothers to work outside the home, making the decision to be a stay-at-home mother a seemingly easy one for many. Additionally, popular opinion suggested that women were most fulfilled in the role of mother; work could only diminish a woman's personal wellbeing. These opinions helped bolster the perceived opposition between motherhood and work (Abrams, 2006; Nye & Hoffman, 1963; Weiner, 1985).

In the early twentieth century, approximately half of the women in the paid labor force were single and it was assumed that they would work only until they were married (Nye & Hoffman, 1963, p. 7). These single workers were white, native-born women who moved away from home to support themselves or their families, and poor black and immigrant workers. Although the ideal of women in a domestic space that was calm and protected dominated American culture, many women continued to work long after marriage, particularly when their husband's earnings were insufficient or their children could not work.<sup>1</sup> A large number of married women who worked, many of whom were minorities, were what Braybon (1989) calls "hidden workers;" they earned money doing tasks that could be completed within their home (washing, mending, taking in boarders, etc.), allowing them to uphold the Victorian ideal of the ever-present mother even while earning an income (p. 20). Because this "hidden" work was undercounted by the Census, the percentage of working mothers was likely higher than the 15% reported in 1910 (Weiner, 1985, p. 6). When married women ventured outside the home for work, they most

---

<sup>1</sup> In the early industrial age, healthy children were often recruited to work in the new factories because they provided a cheap form of labor. Child labor laws were passed, invalidated, and otherwise contested until 1938, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Act which placed limits on the amount of time and types of conditions within which children could work.

commonly did so to assume jobs in domestic service and in textile and other mechanized factories (Braybon, 1989).

### *The World Wars*

When America entered the ‘Great War’ in 1917, the “seasoned, well-trained army of women workers in manufacturing industries” transferred to munitions factories and other sectors of industry to produce wartime necessities (Foner, 1982, p. 223). It is estimated that almost 10 million, primarily single women either joined the labor force or shifted within it during World War I. Widespread mobilization efforts were not aimed at married women and mothers until cease-fire orders were signed (p. 222; Brown, 2002). Many upper and middle-class women (especially if they were single), chose to go abroad to assist and support the soldiers or, if they chose to stay in America, mobilized movements to encourage other homemakers to create Victory Gardens, buy war bonds, and organize supply drives. Thus, paid employment of women remained a class issue even in the face of a wartime industry boom. Upper and middle-class wives of leisure could participate in the public sphere while upholding the domestic ideal, relying on the products and services produced by women of the lower working classes.

After World War I, an increasing number of consumer durables were produced for mass consumption. “For the growing middle-class population,” Murphy contends (1995), “the twentieth century American dream had become based on the acquisition and consumption of this rising tide of commodities” (para. 1). Advertising campaigns encouraged consumers to purchase goods on installment plans, removing the stigma that had long surrounded debt. As the 1920s progressed, women were increasingly defined through their consumption and many sought the materialistic and glamorous lifestyles shown in popular magazines (Kitch, 2001).

The stock market crash in 1929 threw many Americans into severe economic distress, ending dreams of glamour, luxury, and ease. Male production workers were laid off in mass and women were often called upon to keep their families solvent by working in clerical and service occupations maintained during layoff periods (Margolis, 1984). In 1930, only 11.7% of married women were in the paid workforce, but the number steadily rose throughout the decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 1933, p. 274;

Helmbold, 1987, p. 642). Many men resented the influx of women workers, although their disgust was primarily targeted toward the married women who competed for open jobs.

In 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Men were called to be soldiers in the battle abroad, and at home, men and women once again entered munitions factories and other parts of the war machine. In addition, peacetime industries needed to be staffed to keep the country going, and America's labor surplus rapidly depleted. World War II marked the first time the American government actively collaborated with the media to recruit not just working class and single women, but middle-class wives and mothers, into the paid labor force (Brown, 2002). The recruitment efforts paid off; the number of women in the American labor force climbed from 10.8 million in 1941 to more than 18 million in 1944 (Yesil, 2004, p. 105). Still, the government's message through all media content was far from coherent.

[Propaganda and advertising] urged women to demonstrate their physical strength and mechanical competence while they told them to be feminine, attractive and dependent on men, and idealized the notions of domesticity, home and family. As a result, during the war, a complex image of a woman...emerged: she was not primarily a worker but just a woman who happened to work; her participation in the labour force was not motivated by self-actualization or self-reliance, but by patriotism and the desire to win the approval of men; and she had to make sure that despite the arduous war work she was attractive and feminine. (p. 108)

Although some, like Susan B. Anthony II (1943), argued that “the key to Victory in this war is the extraction of women—all women—from the relative unproductivity of the kitchen, and the enrolling of them in the high productivity of factory, office, and field,” (p. 5) most agreed with the War Manpower Commission's contention that “the first responsibility of women with young children in war as in peace is to give suitable care in their own homes to their children” (Weiner, 1985, p. 111). The war complicated the discussion of work and motherhood. The government needed American wives and mothers to join the workforce, but continued to value a woman's role as mother more highly than her role as economic producer/ provider. Government campaigns, speeches, and public releases furtively made the case that women could not span both roles successfully for any extended period of time. Illustrative of the confusion of practical reality and cultural ideals, the Manpower Commission, while seemingly valuing motherhood over work, simultaneously ran a campaign to ease the cultural anxiety about mothers working, producing

posters with slogans like “Women in the War: We Can’t Win Without Them,” and “The More Women at Work, The Sooner We Win!” (Wartime Manpower Commission, 1942/1943). Popular approval of working mothers increased from 12% to 40% during the war, but was contingent on mothers retreating from the workforce when the war was over (Weiner, 1985, p. 111).

### ***Postwar Boom***

Although many women left the workforce to make a space for themselves and their families in the newly built suburbs at the end of the war, the female labor force did not evaporate when the Allies declared victory in 1945. In fact, the number of women in the paid workforce increased “four times faster than [it did] for men [in the 1950s],” and equaled the high levels set during World War II (Chafe, 1977, p. 941; Hartmann, 1994). It is noteworthy that the employment rate increased the fastest for middle-class women; over 39% of mothers with school-aged children worked outside the home (Hartmann, 1994, p. 86). This increase was the result of several social, economic and cultural changes (Oppenheimer, 1973; Nye & Hoffman, 1974). Fewer single women were available for work in these decades than there had been previously (due to lower birth rates from 1910-1930 and more women marrying at younger ages) and women were planning smaller families and concentrating their pregnancies into shorter time frames. Additionally, the postwar economy increased the demand for female labor, the mechanization of homes and move to suburbs put a strain on many one-income families, and women were earning higher educational degrees, which opened jobs in white-collar industries.

Despite women’s ever-increasing presence in the workplace, Freidan (1963) would later argue that American culture continued to tie and reduce women to their domestic role. The ‘happy housewife’ figure and the ‘man in the gray flannel suit,’ icons of traditional gender roles, helped to solidify a separation between the sexes—and sex roles—during the Cold War era. The ideology these icons represented was supported by many women’s magazines and was echoed through advertisers and by politicians. In 1959, during what has since come to be identified as the ‘Kitchen Debate,’ Vice President Richard Nixon disclosed his belief that “American superiority rested on the ideal of the suburban home, complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles for family members” (May, 1988, p. 17).

May (1988) argues that Nixon's comments during this impromptu debate speak to the fact that he "measured U.S. superiority over the Soviet Union in terms of its ability to keep women in the home" where their job was to buy products and take care of the family and domestic space (p. 91). While Nixon was not alone in his belief, Meyerowitz (1994) contends that the influx of middle-class mothers into public life (including the paid labor force) was celebrated in the era's nonfiction literature. The split between the 'happy housewife' in mass-circulating works of fiction and the happy and independent female public figure in nonfiction in some sense mirrored the tension between the era's cultural ideals and the social reality.

By 1960, 19% of women in the workforce were married with at least one child under six years old—a number that grew to 36.7% by 1975, 53.4% by 1985, and to 61.8% by 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a, p. 409). The rumbling of the oncoming women's movement began in 1963 when Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, swept the nation and ignited a new debate about women's 'proper' roles. Women began to ground their desire to work outside the home on the need for self-fulfillment, rather than on economic necessity (although the consumerism of the time often made the latter scenario true). The desire to work outside the home for self-fulfillment was recast, "justified in its relation to the good of other family members." This rhetorical strategy effectively connected it "with the more traditional value of mother's self-sacrifice" (Keller, 1994, p. 37). Popular magazines like *Parents* told women that working outside the home would improve their relationships with their spouses and children by making them appreciate the time the family spent together. "In fact," a 1968 article in *Parents* asserted, "a woman with many interests can be a better companion to her husband and set a better example for her kids" than a woman whose sole interest [is] her home" (p. 37). In the 1960s then, the question 'should upper and middle-class women work?' was replaced by 'how much and how often should these women work?' Although there were women who continued to defend their traditional role as housewife, millions began (or continued) to balance paid employment and traditional domestic responsibilities.

Many, in fact, had little choice in the matter. Nye and Hoffman (1974) have asserted that an increasing divorce/separation rate in the early 1970s had a disproportionate effect on young mothers

(because divorce usually occurs within the first seven years) who needed to supplement their income by taking paid jobs. Women's entry into the workforce was aided by the fact that day care facilities became subsidized by the government, making it easier for women to work even if they had small children. By 1972, approximately two out of every five employed women were mothers with children under 18 years old (p. 14). As these working women found increasing acceptance in society, "there was a decline in both the social respect for and the self-esteem of the housewife/mother" (Keller, 1994, p. 58). Women's employment continued to be rationalized as being for the good of the family; thus, while "the working woman and the housewife started at different ends of the ideology," they "wound up being justified by the same characteristic—their relationship to their children" (p. 99-100). During this era working mothers were urged to "have it all," essentially, to be superwomen. Still, in order to "have it all" while effectively balancing their work and domestic responsibilities, popular media encouraged women to reduce their hours, take flex time, work part-time, or lower their career expectations to make time for everything—a call remarkably similar to those being made today.

### ***"New Momism" to Today***

By the 1980s, "new momism" took hold of the political and social arenas in the insistence that women had choices and autonomy. Still, Douglas and Michaels (2004) argue, the "enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first, that you are a "real" woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, [was] to become a mom and bring to child rearing a combination of selflessness and professionalism" (p. 5). This "new momism" was complemented by the "mommy track," which celebrated a (supposed) renewed interest in domesticity and sought to tell women that "career success [and] working outside the home...was not all it was cracked up to be" (p. 204). The "mommy wars" that emerged in the late 1980s/early 1990s reflected and reinforced the continued tension surrounding women's roles, as the media divided women into "two mutually exclusive and combative camps"—working mothers and stay-at-home mothers (p. 204). The press coverage during these decades made the argument that women were flocking out of the labor force, but while there were slight dips in the proportion of women working between 1989 and 1991, Douglas and Michaels argue this decrease was

due to a lack of available jobs in a depressed economy, rather than a desire to return to traditional domesticity.

Women continue to join the workforce in significant numbers and contribute economic and emotional support for their families and themselves. “Whether hailed or decried,” Keller (1994) writes, “the increase of mothers in the labor force... [remains] significant because it has created a discrepancy between traditional middle-class familial values and the conduct of its members” (p. 5).

This historical background, while brief, illuminates major social trends concerning the employment of mothers. Chapter two will describe the cultural studies perspective and feminist theory that provide the theoretical framework for this thesis. Chapter three will discuss the contributions of feminist media studies and provide a brief overview of how women and their roles—particularly the roles of mother and career women—have been constructed in media. Chapter four will then explain the method, textual analysis, and will describe the process of text selection and analysis. I will present my analysis in chapters five through seven, discussing the multi-generational story created in *Brothers & Sisters*. It is a story of women, work, and the consequences and outcomes of mothers’ decisions to stay at home, or to work. The final chapter will summarize the contributions of this study to the communication literature generally, and more particularly to feminist television studies, and will suggest areas for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORY

This study of the representation of working mothers is grounded in British cultural studies and feminist theory. This chapter outlines the basic tenets, assumptions, and concerns of these areas of scholarship to construct the conceptual framework for this study.

#### Cultural Studies

Cultural studies emerged in Britain in the early 1960s in the work of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and Stuart Hall and the founding of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in 1964 (Sardar & Van Loon, 2005). In a discussion of the “theoretical legacies” of cultural studies, Hall (1996) notes that while cultural studies’ theoretical break with the past was profound, cultural studies did not simply “emerge full grown from the head”, but instead developed as a response to and critique of what had come before—most notably Marxism (p. 262). He reminds us, however, that “there never was a prior moment when cultural studies and marxism represented a perfect theoretical fit” (p. 265).

Still, in establishing the project of cultural studies, the Marxist influence is apparent. Like Marxists, cultural studies scholars contend that cultural meanings must be analyzed in relation to the social structures and historical circumstances that have helped to create the present culture; the study of culture cannot be isolated from politics, economics, or history. While cultural studies scholars agree with Marxists that capitalist societies are characterized by gender, race, and class inequities, the nature of the struggles that arise are viewed quite differently (Storey, 1996).

Believing that the ideas of society were determined by its economic base, Marx and Engels (2006) argued that the class who controlled the means of economic production also controlled the production of ideas, and that those ideas that gained prevalence were in the best interests of the ruling class. Members of other classes, then, were subject to and accepted these (false) ideas. It is precisely the

economic reductionism intrinsic to Marxism, the resultant base/superstructure fissure, and the conceptualization of ideology as false consciousness that render Marxism inadequate to the development of a culture studies project. Hall (1996) notes in this regard:

From the beginning...there was always-already the question of the great inadequacies, theoretically and politically, the resounding silences, the great evasions of marxism—*the things that Marx did not talk about or seem to understand which were our privileged object of study: culture, ideology, language, the symbolic.* (emphasis added) (p. 265)

Thus, unsatisfied with the economic reductionism inherent in traditional Marxist thought, cultural studies scholars view culture as an “all-inclusive entity, a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual” (Williams, quoted by Sardar & Van Loon, 2005, p. 29). Indeed, it is culture, dismissed by Marxism as “the superstructure” that is viewed by cultural studies as “one of the principle sites where [these] division[s] [are] established and contested; culture is a terrain on which takes place a continual struggle over meaning, in which subordinate groups attempt to resist the imposition of meanings which bear the interests of dominant groups” (Storey, 1996, p. 3). This struggle for power over meaning is an ideological one. The examination of meaning making is a key aim of cultural studies work.

The conceptualization of ideology is one that remains central to cultural studies scholarship. The Marxist version of ideology was too simple, cultural studies scholars argued; it overlooked the complicated nature of culture. Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony to displace the Marxist idea of false consciousness and to explain the complexities of culture. In Gramsci’s view, upper classes establish ideologies that are in their best interest as the “intellectual and moral leadership” of a society (Gramsci, 2006, p. 210). These ideologies, however, are not forced upon people but suffuse through a society’s “organs of public opinion” such as newspapers, associations, and Hall (1998) would later argue, popular culture (p. 210). In contrast to the Marxist view, Gramsci noted that lower classes do not passively accept these messages—they actively negotiate and challenge them. Ideologies are provisional then, and are only dominant as long as there is a seeming consensus about them in society (Sardar & Van Loon, 2005, p. 49). When such consensus is achieved, coercion is unnecessary and the upper classes dominate by consent (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, & Wise, 2006). These ideological stances mystify

their connection to the desires of particular social groups by appearing natural and commonsensical and are thus far more powerful and secure than stances made by brute force. Hegemony then, explains why people become complicit in maintaining ideologies and social structures that oppress them—the ideologies seem an ordinary part of life, and so, remain largely unquestioned. This conceptual insight gave Hall and other cultural studies scholars access to answers to questions that Marxism could not provide.

In opposition to scholars who limited culture to canonical artifacts of “high” culture and ignored what came to be called the “popular culture” enjoyed, lived, and produced by the average person, cultural studies scholars, believed that “culture [was] ordinary” (Williams, 2001, p. 10). They adopted a definition of culture that included not only the products and artifacts of culture, but the lived experiences and practices of everyday life as well. This definition “legitimi[z]ed popular culture as a valid area of scholarly research” (Acosta-Alzuru, 1999, p. 34). No longer considered to be vapid, “bad,” or irrelevant, popular culture became a key site where the intricacies of culture could be examined

As a theoretical perspective, cultural studies acknowledges the ideological nature of cultural texts and asserts that meaning is socially constructed and fluid. Hall (1998) argues that to study ‘the popular,’ one must understand that it is “the arena of consent and resistance” within which the struggle for the power to transform pre-existing meanings, values, and understanding is fought (p. 453). Cultural studies scholars embrace their subjectivities, recognize the importance of context, and view culture simultaneously as an “object of study and the location of political criticism and action” (Sardar & Van Loon, 2005, p. 9).

Another foundation of cultural studies adapted from Gramsci is the concept of the organic intellectual. According to Gramsci, this intellectual not only must know “deeply and profoundly (more than other intellectuals), but

cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class. (Hall, 1996, p. 268)

The cultural studies project is concerned with the study of meaning making not for the sake of academic inquiry, but to uncover how cultural practices “reproduce, struggle against, and perhaps transform the existing structures of power” in a society (Grossberg, 1996, p.180). Only through this type of examination can social, cultural, and political structures be understood and the knowledge of those structures be dispersed beyond the walls of the academy. Cultural studies research, then, is at its very core a political project; “there is something *at stake* in cultural studies” (Hall, 1996, p. 263)

Cultural studies scholarship defies disciplinary boundaries, indeed, almost demands an interdisciplinary approach.

It is extremely difficult to define ‘Cultural Studies’ with any degree of precision. It is not possible to draw a sharp line and say that on one side of it we can find the proper province of cultural studies. Neither is it possible to point to a unified theory or methodology which are characteristic to it or of it. A veritable rag-bag of ideas, methods and concerns from literary criticism, sociology, history, media studies, etc., are lumped together under the convenient label of cultural studies. (Sparks, 1996, p. 14)

Noting the confusion that could result from such a “rag-bag” of methods and ideas, Johnson (1996) posed what he framed to be a “kind of realist hypothesis:”

What if existing theories—and the modes of research associated with them—actually express different sides of the same complex process? What if they are all true, but only as far as they go, true for those parts of the process which they have most clearly in view? What if they are all false or incomplete, liable to mislead, in that they are only partial and therefore cannot grasp the process as a whole? (pp. 45-46)

He (and later du Gay et. al, 1997) argued that cultural texts and practices should be studied at various ‘moments’ including representation, production, identity, consumption, and regulation to understand how meaning is created, remade, and circulated through culture. These five ‘moments’ are distinct, but the meaning transacted at each moment influences every other, and the knowledge that is gained at each point is fluid, making it difficult to strictly delineate the boundaries of each moment. This particular study examines only the ‘moment’ of representation, but constantly recognizes the importance of the other ‘moments’ in the meaning making process.

### *American Cultural Studies and the “Dominant Paradigm”*

When cultural studies emerged in American universities, it stood in stark contrast to what Gitlin (1978) has called “the dominant paradigm” of American communication studies (p. 205), which had dominated and perhaps even defined communication research. The paradigm was characterized primarily as “the search for specific measurable, short-term, individual, attitudinal and behavioral ‘effects’ of media content” (p. 207). In their attempts to record and quantify these ‘effects,’ researchers working within this paradigm conducted most of their work in laboratories or using survey methods. In these analyses, the “objective” researcher stood apart from the research subject/object. Complex structures/process were parsed into variables so that they might be isolated from their historical, cultural, and/or political context, as well as “confounding variables” that might inhibit the generalizability of findings. Thus, researchers within this paradigm sought to simplify precisely that which cultural studies made complex.

In “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” Carey (2002) attempts to recast the manner in which we think of communication, suggesting that “our models of communication ...create what we disingenuously pretend they merely describe” (p. 42). He described the “transmission view” underlying the dominant paradigm, defining it as “a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people” (p. 39). Carey also described the “ritual view” in which communication creates and maintains a community’s set of shared beliefs and collective memories—that is, communication is the shared construction of meaning. Adopting this model, American cultural studies developed as a critique of the dominant paradigm and enabled scholars to ask different set of questions (p. 40).

Although they have much in common, a canyon of disagreement lies between British and American cultural studies. That disagreement arises in regard to the relative importance of power and political economy and the structure of meaning. Acosta-Alzuru (1999) notes that “the notion...that there is no real...distinction between political economy and culture is the greatest single insight of British cultural studies” which has subsequently been lost, disregarded, or de-emphasized in the work of American cultural studies scholars (p. 36). Referring, in part, to this divide, Hall (1996) wrote, “I don’t

know what to say about American cultural studies. I am completely dumbfounded by it” (p. 273). Based on my belief in the centrality of power relations and the fluidity of meaning in cultural texts, this study is guided by the assumptions of British cultural studies.

Cultural studies largely neglected gender as a critical issue until British feminists challenged the CCCS’s white, male “boyzone” with the simple question, “what about women?” (Brunsdon, 1996, p. 277; Long, 1996, p. 196). Stuart Hall would later describe the interruption of feminism at the CCCS as “a thief in the night,” writing, “it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, [and] crapped on the table of cultural studies” (Hall, 1996, p. 269). He locates this “interruption” in the publication of the CCCS’ report *Women Take Issue*. These studies tried to make the invisible—women—visible by focusing on women’s experiences, presence, and perceptions in the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres (McRobbie, 1978; Brunsdon, 1981; Hobson, 1982). They sought to challenge the notion that social class was the single axis upon which domination operated and attempted to integrate ideas of how race and gender worked with, against, and within social class to dominate (Long, 1996).

The next section will outline the basic tenets and concerns of feminist theory and will point to the assumptions it shares with cultural studies to solidify the conceptual framework for this study.

### Feminist Theory

What is distinctive about feminist research is its commitment to improving the lives of women. (Golombisky, in press)

Feminist theory is not a single, cohesive body of theory but is a consistently evolving composite of many. The umbrella label “feminist theory” encompasses many approaches including liberal, radical (libertarian and cultural), Marxist, psychoanalytic, multicultural, global, postfeminist, and ecofeminisms (Tong, 1998). Although each of these approaches takes a dramatically different starting point, feminist theories are united in four key ways: (1) a belief in female oppression, (2) a need to understand that oppression and its cause(s), (3) an explicit assumption that research is a political act, and (4) a desire to achieve “gender justice” by offering avenues of resistance to structures of oppression (Tong, 1998).

Feminist theory is grounded in what Kolmar and Bartkowski (2005) call “gender asymmetry”—the “designation of women and things associated with women as different from, inferior to, or of lesser value than men and things associated with men”(p. 2). Inherent in many feminist studies is the assumption that there are “clear distinctions in women’s lives between public and private meanings” and that women are forced to “depreciate their own experiences in favor of the dominant—male—culture or paradigm” (Acosta-Alzuru, 1999, p. 61). Feminist theorists attempt to curb this pattern by centering their studies on exactly what other disciplines have cast aside or degraded: women’s lives, experiences, and perspectives on the world.

Feminist theorists believe that women’s subordination is a centrally important issue for scholarly study and in an attempt to understand the causes of this continued oppression, work to expose the underlying, seemingly natural, structures that support social and gender hierarchies (Walters, 1995). Many scholars, feminists included, have examined cultural representations of women as symbols of larger social discourse and ideological systems. Feminist media scholars attempt to illuminate the ideological underpinnings of many cultural texts and try to explain them in order to expose and potentially discredit their supposed naturalness in society. In his essay, “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture,” Kellner (1995) speaks to this need for media literacy, arguing:

The media are a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy: They contribute to educating us about how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear and desire—and what not to. The media are forms of pedagogy that teach us how to be men and women; how to dress, look and consume; how to react to members of different social groups; how to be popular and successful and avoid failure; and how to conform to the dominant system of norms, values, practices and institutions. (p. 5)

Feminist scholars view the examination of cultural artifacts as both interesting and necessary and have called for the redefinition of “what constitutes a ‘legitimate’ text, ‘significant’ events, and ‘important’ ideas” (Cirksena & Cuklanz 1992, p. 19). These artifacts can reveal the values of a society and, through telling silences and subtexts, can relate the ideological tensions surrounding those values.

All feminist theories also share the explicit belief that research is a political act and a commitment to making women's lives better. Dow and Condit (2005) speak to this political stance in their article, "The State of the Art in Feminist Scholarship in Communication," when they write:

The moniker of "feminist" is reserved for research that studies communication theories and practices from a perspective that ultimately is oriented toward the achievement of "gender justice," a goal that takes into account the ways that gender always already intersects with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Gender justice may include but can also go beyond the seeking of equality between men and women, to include understanding of the concept of gender itself as politically constructed. Feminist research has demonstrated that all scholarship ultimately proceeds from evaluative, political assumptions, but feminist research does so explicitly. (p. 449)

Feminist scholars seek to achieve "gender justice," whether it is through literal equality of the sexes or understanding how gender is politically constructed. Feminists want their work to move beyond the academy to help women understand how they are being oppressed, both implicitly and explicitly, and to find ways to resist and transform existing power structures.

#### Cultural Studies & Feminist Theory: A Shared Space

Although this chapter is not meant to be an exhaustive survey of cultural studies or feminist theory, it has highlighted the assumptions and objectives these two areas of scholarship share. First, both cultural studies and feminist scholars believe that research and "scholarly writing can and does do meaningful cultural work," and thus has a political aspect (Nelson, 1996, p. 280). Second, both emphasize the importance of power and recognize the ideological nature of cultural practices and artifacts, and more specifically for this research, media texts. Both 'disciplines' seek to expose underlying structures of this power, whether they are political, social, cultural, economic, historical, etc. In fact, feminists have injected the concept of power into American cultural studies by introducing gender as an axis of power to both British and American cultural studies. Third, cultural studies and feminist scholars have consistently challenged traditional academic protocol by using research to understand their own experiences and by embracing their subjectivities in their studies. Finally, both believe that in the study of culture, context is all important and both employ a wide range of theoretical starting points and methodologies to answer the

questions they pose. Each field has a rich and complicated background and provides strong theoretical starting points, but both are enriched by their intersection.

The next chapter will outline the literature relevant to the study at hand: namely, feminist media studies and feminist television studies, and will present a brief overview of how women have been typecast and represented in media.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

By the end of 1949, only one out of three heroines in the women's magazines was a career woman—and she was shown in the act of renouncing her career and discovering that what she really wanted was to be a housewife. (Friedan, 1963, p. 44)

Early feminist media studies scholars, like mass communication scholars at large, adopted the effects tradition, using quantitative content analyses to explore how media represented women and to what effect. Through this image-based research, they argued that media were denigrating and pigeonholing women into patriarchal roles. Slowly, scholars have moved away from this type of study to examine how meaning is constructed and negotiated through texts. This chapter will outline the details of this shift, and will outline the contributions feminist scholars have made to television research.

#### Feminist Media Studies

Feminist media studies emerged in the 1960s as an outgrowth of what is now called the second wave feminist movement and flourished after Betty Friedan's scathing critique of the media in *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan (1963) argued that the media, particularly women's magazines, were accomplices in maintaining society's patriarchal ideals, portraying women in stereotypical ways that socialized them into traditional and constricted roles, strapping them to their homes, families, and domestic chores.

Friedan has since been widely critiqued for her adoption of what one feminist scholar has called a "conspiratorial version of mass culture theory" (Hollows, 2000, p. 13). Friedan and early feminist media studies scholars largely adopted the dominant model of communication research at the time, which focused almost exclusively on the mediated images of women and assumed those images prevented women from realizing their full potential. This model is illustrated perhaps most clearly in Tuchman's (1978) introduction to the seminal work, *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Media*. Taking the starting point that media treatment of women is a "national social problem," (p. 5) Tuchman argued that

women were being “symbolic[ally] annihilat[ed]” in media content, either not shown or denigrated through content that portrayed “them as incompetent, inferior, and always subservient to men” (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 16). These portrayals, she noted, jeopardized the social development of women and girls. Two primary assumptions underlying this research model were reflected in Tuchman’s contentions that media provided (or should provide) a “window on the world,” as a reflection of “reality,” and that audiences passively absorbed or modeled media images. “Suppose for a moment that children’s television primarily presents adult women as housewives, nonparticipants in the labour force,” she wrote (p. 6). “Also, suppose that girls in the television audience ‘model’ their behaviour and expectations on that of television women” (p. 6). Identifying a “cultural lag” between societal progress and media portrayals, Tuchman posed the question: “How can we free women from the tyranny of media messages limiting their lives to hearth and home?” (p. 38). The answer, to many image scholars, was to replace the problematic images with some that were ‘good’ and current with the times. Over time however, study after study found that women continued to be stereotyped, objectified (particularly in pornography), and underrepresented.

Despite its longevity, “image research” has been widely critiqued. Walters (1995) notes that the approach is based on the assumption “that there exists, somewhere in the world, a ‘real’ woman who can be revealed to us through imagery, if only the false, negative, inaccurate, untrue imagery is stripped away” (p. 40). It also presumes, Hollows (2000) argues, that there is a ‘reality’ that can be truly reflected and that being a man or woman is straightforward and uncomplicated by other constructs of identity like race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or class. Additionally, as noted in chapter two, the approach is grounded in mass culture theory, assuming a direct link between messages and a viewer’s behavior—a claim not easily proven.

Acknowledging these shortcomings, feminist media studies scholars began to adopt new assumptions and research interests. Inspired by the work of British scholars, they asserted that media were not simply reflecting society, but instead, actively defining and constructing a very particular ‘reality’

(Grossberg et. al, 2006). Feminist scholar Suzanna Walters (1995) describes the shift in feminist research as:

...an invigorated concern with the productiveness of images. If images of women were no longer to be seen as simply reflections or (misreflections) of “real” women, then feminists had to develop an analysis that stressed how representations construct sexual difference, rather than simply reflect it, arguing that ‘representation is not reflection but rather an active process of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping of making things *mean*’ [Byars, 1991]. ...One can broadly characterize this development as a shift from an “images of women” approach to a critical practice that stresses the constructedness of woman as image or woman as sign. (p. 47-48)

Adopting this theoretical approach, feminist media studies scholars moved beyond the examination of “surface ‘message’ of media content to the ideological role of media texts in reproducing male dominance. ...[and] hierarchical gender relations” (Carter & Steiner, 2004, p. 37). Content analyses which simply identified images depicted in the media and counted how often they appeared provided valuable information, but were unable to examine how meaning was created or the intricacies and power struggles that surrounded and influenced the meaning making process (MacDonald, 1995). Texts came to be recognized as polysemic, that is, able to generate multiple meanings. While texts may have a preferred reading, texts are ultimately open to varied interpretations. The audience may decode a text contrary to the author’s intentions (Hall, 1993).

### Feminist Television Studies

Feminist television criticism [is] a dynamic and independent area of study that can be traced to the incorporation of multiple intellectual influences including feminist film criticism, British cultural studies, and feminist-inflected mass communication research. (Lotz & Ross, 2004, p. 185)

The feminist contribution to television research in the last fifteen years, in its most widely accepted form, [is] the gendering of two key concepts, that of genre and that of audience. (Brunsdon, 1997, p. 115)

Feminist perspectives have been a crucial part of television studies from the field’s beginning, yet it took until the 1980s for feminist television studies to flourish (Brunsdon, d’Acci, Spigel, 1997). Kaplan (1987) posits two potential reasons feminist scholars did not immediately study television: (1) most studies throughout the 1960s and 1970s examined production aspects of television using an “objective,” social scientific stance that stood in opposition to feminist work, and (2) because television was often

marginalized as a topic of serious, academic inquiry and women were still finding their way in the academy, they may have been “reluctant to engage with the form” (p. 249). Instead, feminists focused on film, considering it an art form. In this early period of second wave feminism, “feminists dealings with television were often calls to action growing out of a conviction that women’s oppression was very much related to mass media representations and that change was not only urgent, but possible” (Brunsdon et. al, 1997, p. 5).

The “image research,” that dominated feminist media studies more generally also dominated early feminist television studies. Heavily reliant on quantitative content analysis, this approach bore vestiges of mass culture theory, positing that television reflected reality and had negative effects on passive consumers. Meehan’s (1983) *Ladies of the Evening: Women Characters of Prime-Time Television* is a classic illustration of this approach. Arguing that television’s presentations of women were “reflections of women’s lives, [and] implicit endorsements of beliefs and values about women in a very popular form,” Meehan used a mixture of quantitative, interpretive, and comparative approaches to study how women had been represented from 1950 to 1980 (p. vii). She classified the portrayals she studied into 10 distinct images: the imp, the goodwife, the harpy, the bitch, the victim, the decoy, the siren, the courtesan, the witch, and the matriarch. In her conclusion, she asserted that television had reduced women’s complex experiences into simplistic and inaccurate images and called for “stories of female heroes—heading families, heading corporations, conquering fears, and coping with change” (p. 131). Around the time that Meehan’s work was produced, however, feminist media scholars began to move away from these assumptions, as did feminist scholars exploring television. By the 1980s, many feminist scholars had shifted their attention from film to television, bringing many of their methodological and theoretical approaches to the ‘small screen.’

Feminist television scholars began producing sophisticated analyses that not only deconstructed texts, but situated them within larger political, social, and cultural contexts (for examples, see Rabinovitz (1989) and Rowe (1997)). In her influential book, *Make Room for TV*, Spigel (1992) even used the physical placement of the television within the home as a text for examination, arguing that it

“transform[ed] the home into an exhibition space,” essentially “merging the public sphere with the public domain of spectator amusements” (p. 100). Studies of television texts, rather than studies of production, political economy, or audiences were the starting point for many early feminist television studies and they remain a cornerstone of the field.

Brunsdon (1997) argues that feminist scholars have made their most distinctive marks in their examinations of the (female) audience and studies of “women’s genres,” particularly soap operas (p. 115). These arenas are closely linked, as many studies examine or speculate about the audiences of “women’s genres” and the existence of a gendered audience (Brunsdon, 1981; Ang, 1985; Modleski, 1996). Such research has illustrated the range of meanings created within these texts and has explored how these meanings work within or against dominant ideologies. It has also provided evidence that televised messages are not simply absorbed, but are thoughtfully (even if unconsciously) constructed and negotiated by consumers. Although soap operas and telenovelas continue to be rich and popular arenas of investigation, feminist television scholars have extended their work to sitcoms and detective series/crime dramas (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003b/2003c; Brunsdon et. al, 1997, p. 2).

In her oft-quoted book *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970*, Dow (1996) uses five television texts—*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *One Day At A Time*, *Designing Women*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*—to examine how feminism and the feminist movement have been “absorbed, structured, and represented in media discourse for public consumption” since the 1970s (p. xvi). A rhetorical critic, Dow emphasizes “television’s role in mediating social change,” but stresses that it is just one piece of our media discourse (p. xix). Thus, she contextualizes each series within its media climate, looking not only at other television series, but examining newspapers, books, film, and magazines. This work is particularly relevant to this study because it has provided an example of the fluidity between television texts and the discourse that surrounds and influences them. Looking, in part, at the televised *representations* of feminism, Dow’s work provides a foundation for this study of yet another complex social issue—the discourse surrounding the working mother.

Reflecting technological developments, television “as an institution, industry, and everyday practice” has undergone major transformations in the last 30 years (Brunsdon & Spigel, 2008, p. 2). These transformations include, among others, developments in digital platforms, convergence between the Internet and television, globalization, the emergence of time-shifting capabilities, the rapid proliferation of cable and satellite channels, and the increasing importance of the niche audience. These changes offer feminist researchers new points of entrée into television studies, and invite an ever-increasing number of conceptual, theoretical, and methodological approaches. Textual, ideological, narrative, and ethnographic audience analyses remain the most prominent methodological approaches in feminist television studies, but contemporary feminist scholars have begun to use them in new ways to examine new arenas. For example, Amanda Lotz (2006/2007) has used a combination of interviews, surveys, textual analysis, and industry analysis to study the television industry in what she calls the “post-network era” (Lotz, 2007, p.28).

The expansive variety and availability of television programming has also changed our everyday interactions with television. Brunsdon and Spigel (2008) note that “women’s ‘rhythms of receptions’ are no longer necessarily bound to the temporal flows of TV schedules” (p. 2). Nor are we bound by television texts produced in our time or in our nation. A viewer may begin her evening watching *The “L” Word*, flip the channel to catch a re-run of *Sex and the City*, then tune into an episode of *Leave it to Beaver*, breezing by an international documentary or cooking program, and ending the night watching *The Bachelor* or *What Not to Wear*. It is possible, if not probable, that we have never before had such a variety of images or opportunity for research in the television field.

This summary, while necessarily abbreviated, has illustrated the diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches feminist television scholars use, as well as the range of topics they study.

#### Representations of Women in Media: Career Woman & Mother

Douglas (1994) has argued that one of the most important legacies the media have created for women is “a pastiche of all the good women and bad women that [come] to us through the printing presses, projectors, and airwaves of America” (p. 13). These mythical, limiting and, at times, ridiculous

portrayals of women, Douglas notes, have eroded the possibility of having an understanding of a unified self because women come to identify with “one type [of woman], then another” and thus, have “grown accustomed to compartmentalizing [themselves] into a whole host of personas” (p. 13). This section will provide a brief overview of how women and women’s roles have been constructed in popular culture.

Although this study concerns television, I have included magazines and film because they too are part of what Clarke et. al (1976) have called a “historical reservoir,” a shared portfolio of cultural symbols that are continually remade as they circulate through culture (p. 11).

Studies of women’s magazines, Hollywood films, and prime-time television have shown women typecast into several distinct roles. Kitch (2001) notes that these female archetypes have generally divided women into two groups: ‘good’ women and ‘bad’ women.’ Good women are women who “made men stronger,” while bad women are the ones who “destroyed them” (p. 56). As is evident, these archetypes are usually characterized by their association with others, particularly with the male sex—a pattern that remains today.

Kitch (2001) suggests that the Gibson Girl, drawn for magazines by Charles Gibson in the early 1900s, “looked quite similar from one drawing to the next, and this consistency made her the first visual stereotype of women in American mass media” (p. 37). The idealized, aristocratic Gibson Girl was reproduced on consumer goods such as china, wallpaper, and sheets of music; her hairstyle became popular with young women who wanted to look like this fictional icon of ‘proper’ womanhood. Around 1910, urban nightlife (in the form of dance halls and nightclubs) and overt sexuality found their way into media through depictions of the dangerous “vamp,” a woman who “defined play as sin” and who, while irresistibly seductive, could not be trusted (p. 58). The archetype slowly shifted; by the 1920s, she had become the flapper, a “fearless, dancing, sex-crazed [girl next door]” who “simply wanted to raise a little hell before she settled down to married life” (p. 121).

In her influential book *Popcorn Venus*, Rosen (1973) argues that these early female archetypes appeared and reappeared in Hollywood films produced in the first half of the twentieth century, complemented by spinsters, pin-ups and virtuous mothers. In her study of television, Meehan (1983) later

added an archetype particularly germane to this study—“the goodwife” (p. v, 5). Each of these archetypes is worthy of book-length discussion, but given the focus of this study, the following discussion examines representations of (1) the working woman who became the career woman and (2) the mother.

### *The Working Woman to Career Woman*

The working woman, whether single or married, has appeared in various incarnations across many media. In her study of popular American magazines, Marcellus (2006) found that women in clerical work were portrayed as submissive, dominated by the men around them; they had transgressed into the male ‘public’ sphere with which they were unfamiliar and in which they were sometimes unwanted. The traditional stereotypes that women—even those who worked—should be passive, beautiful, selfless, and subservient dominated magazines and early film. It was not World War II, when single women and married mothers entered the workforce in mass, that a new chapter in the representation of working women began to emerge (Carter & Steiner, 2004, p. 12). In films, working women were portrayed as competent, assertive, and strong (Rosen, 1973). Hollywood could afford such indulgences “because at the beginning [of the war] nobody, not even the women themselves, thought they might want to make [female independence] permanent” (p. 190). The film industry seriously examined women’s lives, emotions, and troubles in these films because during the war, film audiences were primarily female. The “independents” that starred in 1940s films were largely lower-class working girls or women whose work was justified through patriotism, rather than the self-fulfillment of an occupation.

While many of the women portrayed in these 1940s films worked as nurses, secretaries, domestic servants, and in wartime factories, some were engaged in careers that required training or specialized knowledge—psychoanalysts (Ingrid Bergman in *Spellbound*), congresswomen (Loretta Young in *The Farmer’s Daughter* and Jean Arthur in *A Foreign Affair*) and journalists (Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*) (Galerstein, 1989; Rosen, 1973; Sochen, 1978). Although Rosen suggests that these films provided strong, independent role models for women, Galerstein (1989) has noted that with few exceptions, their “professional accomplishments are viewed only as stepping stones to romantic success as sweetheart and personal fulfillment as wife and mother” (p. xvi-xvii). This “stepping stone” metaphor

reinforced the cultural “norm” of the time: sustained professional success and domestic happiness could never go hand in hand. The strong female figures of the wartime films rapidly faded into the background at the end of the war, when sex goddesses and bobbysoxers came to the fore in films such as *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) and *The Bachelor and the Bobbysoxer* (1947).

The “independent” woman resurfaced on the small screen with increasing frequency beginning in the 1950s. Taylor (1989) argues that throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the “independent” women on television largely fell into three categories: widows (e.g. Lucille Ball’s character on *The Lucy Show*), “husband-hungry spinsters” (p. 86) (e.g. Eve Arden on *Our Miss Brooks*), or engaged women (e.g. Marlo Thomas on *That Girl*). Taylor further argues that these women, like their film counterparts, “were either idiosyncratic exceptions to, or strays soon to be integrated into, a benign inviolate nuclear family” (p. 86). They too viewed employment as a stepping stone toward an eventual marriage and domestic life.

By contrast, Taylor (1989) notes that the single women shown on 1970s television were “divorced or separated, single parents, or single but decidedly unspinsters” (p. 86). Perhaps the most recognizable working woman series of the decade, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), was “the first [sitcom] to assert that work was not just a prelude to marriage, or a substitution for it, but could form the center of a satisfying life for a woman” (Dow, 1996, p.24; Klein, 2006). Still, Dow (1990, 1996) remarks that while these early working women were progressive, they were still “domesticated” in the sense that their co-workers became a surrogate family in the absence of real family. Thus, in workplace comedies like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, working women could simultaneously be professionals and stand-in wives, mothers, sisters and daughters to those around them.

Workplace comedies with large ensemble casts were popular throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and often kept to the formulas that had been established in the 1970s. Co-workers became a surrogate family and women were often “domesticated” in professional relationships. Series such as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *Designing Women* (1986-1993), *L.A. Law* (1986-1994), and *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) emphasized the conflict between having a successful career on one hand, and enjoying a successful and fulfilling private life on the other (Dow, 1996). Dow (1996) notes that the character of Murphy

Brown personified the stereotype “of a driven career woman with no time or talent for relationships” (p. 144). Implicit in the series was the recurring notion that “the qualities [that] the public [read: male] world require[d] are radically different from those necessary for success in the private world of relationships” (p. 145). Murphy Brown and other characters of the 1980s and 1990s were a few in a long line of women portrayed in popular media who seemingly could not “have it all.” They were either successful at work, or happy at home, but could not maintain the balance for any sustained period of time.

### ***The Mother***

In her study of motherhood as portrayed on *Sex and the City*, Tropp (2006) argues that although the contemporary idea of “having it all” refers to balancing career and family, the meaning of the phrase has changed through the decades (as was discussed in the introduction). In the early part of the twentieth century, “having it all” had no relation to a career: it meant having a “wholehearted commitment to family and...happy submersion into domestic life” (p. 861-862). In popular media, this commitment was personified in Meehan’s (1983) “goodwife” archetype. While not directly called “mother,” the goodwife was identified solely by her selflessness and her relationship with her husband, children, and home (Kaplan, 1992). Despite being smart, competent and capable, the goodwife rarely, if ever, ventured outside the domestic sphere, choosing instead to remain the moral guardian of her home. Although Meehan coined the term in 1983, goodwife characters could be found throughout 1930s and 1940s films, providing a center for their family and quietly organizing and encouraging those around them. These characters can be seen in the popular *Andy Hardy* (1938-1946) film series and in films such as *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944).

Even though “goodwife” characters made inroads on the big screen, Coontz (1992) notes that “our most powerful visions of traditional families [and by extension, the ‘traditional’ mother] derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sit-coms” like *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963) and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966) (p. 23). Each of these series had a strong goodwife character at the heart of the family unit. Harriet Nelson, June Cleaver, Donna Reed, and Laura Petrie were represented as “the embodiment of all that [was] socially and ethically

correct and [were] the endorsement of homemaking as the one true path for women” (Meehan, 1985, p. 45).

In addition to the domestic goodwife, a professional goodwife often appeared in dramatic television series (and to some extent, in film) beginning in the 1950s. This woman acted as wife and mother to the series’ male protagonist, listening “to the hero’s ideas and ideals, applaud[ing] his exploits, and consol[ing] him in his moments of self doubt and defeat” (Meehan, 1983, p. 40). The most memorable of these professional goodwives were often secretaries for a male protagonist, as exemplified by Charmaine ‘Schultzzy’ Schultz in the *The Bob Cummings Show* (1955-1959), Della Street in *Perry Mason* (1957-1966) and Suzanne Fabray in *77 Sunset Strip* (1958-1964). Although she worked outside the home, the professional goodwife did not threaten cultural ideals because she portrayed the characteristics of the domestic goodwife: a maternal instinct, selflessness, and secondary-status. Both the domestic and professional goodwife exerted influence over their “children” but remained subservient to the dominant males in their lives (husbands, bosses, etc.).

Representations of women have centered on the dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad;’ the mother archetype is similarly split. While the ‘good’ mother gained predominance in magazines and on television, Hollywood film has provided a stage on which the ‘bad’ mother could be represented (Kaplan, 1992). Characterized by her lack of maternal nurturing, over-possessiveness, or negligence, the ‘bad’ mother has appeared in films such as *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Mommy Dearest* (1981), *Casino* (1995), and *Gone Baby Gone* (2007). This character is also gaining ground on contemporary television in some of the medium’s most popular series—*The Sopranos*, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* and *Sex and the City* (Kaplan, 1992). The ambivalence these ‘bad’ mothers feel toward their children Tropp (2006) argues, may be a manifestation of their desire to maintain the social and professional life they are forced to change because of motherhood.

Given the controversy that has constantly surrounded working mothers throughout American history, it is somewhat surprising that feminist and cultural studies scholars have addressed representations of women as mothers and as workers as separate areas of study; research on

representations of the woman who is a mother and who works outside the home is so limited as to be almost non-existent. This study will help to fill this gap in existing media scholarship by examining depictions in which the two roles come together in one character—the working mother—so that we may understand not only how she is represented, but also what it can tell us about our culture today.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHOD

The products of media culture require multidimensional close textual readings to analyze their various forms of discourses, ideological positions, narrative strategies, image construction, and effects. (Kellner, 1995, p. 14)

To understand the popularity of television with its diverse audiences, the critic must look for contradictions and openness in the television text, not unity and closure. (Fiske, 1986, p. 391)

When I designed this study, I began with the following theoretically based assumptions: (a) meaning is socially constructed through the interaction of written, auditory and visual language systems;<sup>2</sup> (b) cultural texts are sites of struggle over meaning, and the examination of power relations—which are influential and pervasive—is crucial; (c) evidence of these power structures may not be manifest, instantly accessible, or quantifiable; (d) culture is best understood if we embrace its complexity and tease out the intricate details and factors that contribute to this complexity; (e) texts and representations are polysemic, that is, a text can be read many ways but the number of readings is not infinite because the process of “encoding will construct limitations, constraints, and parameters within which” the text will be decoded and understood by viewers (Acosta-Alzuru, 1999, p. 41; Hall, 1993); and (f) while all research is political, feminist research openly announces its politics and its intention to attain “gender justice” (Dow & Condit, 2005, p. 449).

---

<sup>2</sup> Hall (1997) identified three approaches scholars can use to explain how meaning is created in cultural texts: the reflective approach, the intentional approach, and the constructionist approach. The reflective approach argues that meaning is fixed, it already exists in the world and that it is simply reflected in the texts. The intentional approach argues that the text expresses only what the producer or author intends. These two approaches were linked in early image research, as scholars argued that the images they studied were reflections of reality and were intended to oppress women. The constructionist approach diverges from these assumptions, arguing that meaning is constructed “through cultural practices; it is not simply ‘found’ in things” (du Gay et. al, 1997, p.14). Representation is an ideological process because it is actively selecting and presenting elements of an original to make a claim about a chosen or desired reality. Due to its recognition that meaning is negotiated, variable, and ideological, the constructionist approach offers a more useful perspective to explain how meaning is created in *Brothers & Sisters*.

With these assumptions as my grounding, I chose qualitative textual analysis as the appropriate method with which to answer my research questions. Assuming meaning is a social production, textual analysis moves beyond examining images to discover the latent meanings in a text and how those meanings are constructed through language systems. Simply, it moves beyond the “*what* is represented?” question foundational to content analysis, to consider *how* something is represented and made to mean. The goal of textual analysis is to examine and illuminate the logic and power structures that underlie the text and help to organize and frame potential readings. Unlike deductive and quantitative methods, textual analysis can “preserve something of the complexity of language and connotation which has to be sacrificed in content analysis” because it is not bound by pre-determined categories (Hall, 1975, p. 1).

Texts are complicated, multi-faceted and messy. Because textual analysis is deep and intricate, it is possible to parse out not only the manifest readings in a text, but also the latent, potentially subversive readings that complicate the “common sense” logic of dominant ideological standpoints. During these analyses, then, the researcher is not searching for one absolute truth or one “right” reading, but is instead seeking to “note the possibility of meaning” in the text, fully realizing the polysemic nature of cultural artifacts (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003a, p. 146; Acosta-Alzuru & Roushanzimir, 2000).

Although it does not rely on numerical data, textual analysis is not without evidence. In the introduction to *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change, 1935-1965*, Stuart Hall (1975) argues that,

the analyst learns to ‘hear’ the same underlying appeals, the same ‘notes’, being sounded again and again in different passages and contexts. These recurring patterns are taken as pointers to latent meanings from which inferences as to the source can be drawn. But the...analyst has another string to his bow: namely, strategies for noting and taking account of emphasis. Position, placing, treatment, tone, stylistic intensification, striking imagery, etc., are all registering emphasis. (p. 1)

The analysis of television texts poses additional complexities. In television series, relationships are constantly evolving, and character styling, inflection, and non-verbal behavior work in tandem with visual, verbal and musical cues to create meaning.

Adopting a feminist perspective, I believe that the discovery and analysis of meanings in a text is a necessary step toward awareness of the power structures that underlie our everyday lives, and how ideologies frame the media texts we consume. “To the extent that criticism teaches us something about television and how it works,” Dow (1996) writes, “it [should] tell us about the world and how it works” (p. 5). This type of research, and this study in particular, contributes to our understanding of television as one component of a larger cultural discourse about working mothers.

In addition to its political standpoint, feminist scholarship is self-reflexive; feminist television scholars recognize the tension inherent in their dual roles as scholar and viewer. Some take a view reminiscent of the 1960s women’s movement—because all women live under patriarchal structures, they share gendered experiences and thus, have “a shared sisterhood” between them (Brunsdon, 1997, p. 116). Women are women, and in studies adopting this perspective, there is no difference between the feminist scholars and others.

Others suggest a feminist scholar may differ from the “other, ordinary woman,” but this work is premised on the contradictory position of the scholar who, at times tries to differentiate themselves from “other women,” but who also find themselves identifying with them (Brunsdon, 1997, p. 120). Brunsdon (1997) argues that most scholars fall into this category; there is a tension between being a feminist and enjoying television texts, because as scholars, feminists are trained to recognize the problematic natures of those texts. In *Prime-Time Feminism*, Dow (1996) comments on this tension when she writes,

I believe in critics’ ability, by virtue of training and expertise, to analyze and explain the strategies and implications of television that are often invisible to the ordinary viewer, but I also believe it is a mistake to act as though we are immune to television’s influences ourselves. I study television because I think it is important, because I think it could be better, and because I want people to take it seriously. I also study it because I like it. (p. xiii)

In fact, Dow asserts that “the confluence and contradictions of these three subjectivities—fan, critic, and feminist—motivate and inform” her examination of televised representations of feminism (p. xii). Like Dow, I approach my analysis as a fan, a feminist, and a critic.

### Creating the Text

I chose to analyze prime-time, broadcast network television programming because I wanted to look at series that attract a large and diverse audience. Unlike cable series that serve much smaller, niche audiences, prime-time broadcast audiences number in the millions from week to week and include men, women, and children with varied racial, cultural, and/or ethnic backgrounds. As such, prime-time series can serve as key texts through which we can examine and analyze the national cultural conversations incorporated into their plots. I assembled the text for this study using a rigorous four-stage process: definition, collection, narrowing, and selection.

I began looking for recently produced broadcast television series in which a working mother character had a prominent role, utilizing the following operational definitions as a guide. I defined a “working mother” as a mother who works outside of the home, in the paid labor force, full or part-time. I defined “recent” as any series produced and aired after 2003. I chose that year because it was a significant milestone in the media’s construction of the “mommy wars,” this time as a response to Lisa Belkin’s article, “The Opt-Out Revolution,” which argued that working mothers were leaving the workplace to be stay-at-home mothers. I defined a “prominent role” as a main character or a supporting character that plays an integral role in a majority of the series’ episodes. A final pragmatic criterion that entered into the process was the availability of the series on DVD. Textual analysis is a time-consuming process that requires repeated viewing, so I had to be sure I would have extended access to the program selected.

In the second stage, identification, I identified approximately 15 to 20 television series that met the criteria I had chosen. I found these series by searching network websites and other television-centric sites, parenting websites, and sites found through Google searches using search terms such as “working mother,” “television,” and “mother,” as well as combinations of these terms. I also brainstormed with others for series that I may have missed. I checked the availability of the series I found on DVD and read reviews, general plotlines, and character biographies.

After creating a list of series, I informally “screened” at least four episodes of each of those available on DVD to further narrow my list. During this stage, I determined plot lines, the prominence of

a working mother character, and the existence of a work-life balance or dilemma. The series screened included *Medium* (2005-present), *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-present), *Brothers & Sisters* (2006-present), *The New Adventures of Old Christine* (2006-present), *What About Brian?* (2006-2007), and *Lipstick Jungle* (2007-present). As a result of these screenings, I selected ABC's *Brothers & Sisters* as my text, for reasons discussed in the following section.

### The Text: *Brothers & Sisters*

Currently in its third season, *Brothers & Sisters* debuted on September 24, 2006 after ABC's already-popular *Desperate Housewives*. The series attracted and kept approximately 12 million viewers<sup>3</sup> throughout its first season and has maintained its popularity in subsequent seasons ("2006-2007 Primetime Wrap," 2007). In addition to being popular among viewers, *Brothers & Sisters* has been nominated for a number of awards. Sally Field and Rachel Griffiths have been nominated for two Emmy Awards (Field won in 2007) and two Golden Globes for Outstanding Actress and Supporting Actress in a Drama Series. Overall, the series has been nominated for one People's Choice Award, six Emmys, four Golden Globes, four Satellite Awards, and two Screen Actors Guild Awards in the casting, leading and supporting actresses, and outstanding drama categories (Internet Movie Database, 2008). It is, then, somewhat surprising that the series has garnered no serious, in-depth scholarly attention.

In addition to being a critically-acclaimed and highly popular series that remains on the air, I chose *Brothers & Sisters* because it portrays a working mother—Sarah—character in both her professional and domestic environments and vividly explores her relationships, rather than leaving them to imagination or dialogue alone.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Sarah's children Paige (age 8) and Cooper (age 6) and

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a very respectable audience size, particularly for a new program. For comparison, the top 10 shows on broadcast television during the 2006-2007 season each garnered audiences of about 24 million. But, this number includes cultural phenomena such as *American Idol*, *Dancing With The Stars*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Grey's Anatomy* (Give Me My Remote, 2007). *Brothers & Sisters*' lead-in program, *Desperate Housewives*, brought in approximately 17 million viewers during the 2006-2007 season.

<sup>4</sup> There is another working mother on *Brothers & Sisters*—Holly Harper (William Walker's mistress). I chose not to discuss her in this role for several reasons: (1) she worked as an actress before she became a mother, but was supported by William Walker for 20 years and didn't work while her daughter, Rebecca, was growing up, (2) Rebecca is almost out of college, doesn't live at home, and is largely self-sufficient in season one, and (3) the series doesn't explore Holly and Rebecca's relationship and its intersection with work as vividly as it does for Sarah.

her stepson Gabe (age 15) don't simply disappear whenever it is convenient for the character or plotline, as often happens in television series. Although some television series (e.g. *All in the Family* (1971-1979); *Maude* (1972-1978)) have been produced to explicitly discuss or examine social issues, *Brothers & Sisters* did not set out to be the story of a working mother. Instead, the series focuses on the “everyday” occurrences of an American family and in doing so, touches on issues surrounding family and employment. As scholar Meredith O'Brien writes, the series “intensely examine[s] the fall-out from the world-life choices mothers like Sarah and [her mother] Nora make, and reveals the private struggles of trying to make those choices work” (O'Brien, 2009, para. 3).

After I selected *Brothers & Sisters* as the text, I set about determining which season(s) I would include in this analysis. I defined the ‘text’ at the level of the season, rather than the episode, because I wanted to explore the development of character portrayals over time, rather than being constrained to their behavior in a given hour. Ultimately, I chose season one (2006-2007) for a number of reasons. It provides solid character development and an introduction to the series’ main plotlines. It is also the season in which Sarah takes over the family business—an event that alters her relationships with her husband, children, siblings, and co-workers, and thus made it ideal for my study.

The text, then, consisted of 23 hour-long (42 minutes without commercials) episodes. It is reasonable to assume that the system of selection resulted in a relatively representative sample of the series’ themes and characterizations; in television dramas, the characters and context remain relatively consistent over time.

### The Process of Analysis

According to Hall (1975), textual analysis has three phases: (1) a “long preliminary soak,” (p. 15) during which the researcher immerses him/herself in the material and focuses on issues in the texts while still considering the text in its entirety; (2) a close reading of representative examples to determine themes and strategies present in the text; and (3) a detailed interpretation of the text through the chosen theoretical framework—in this case, feminist media theory.

During the “long preliminary soak,” I watched the entire season once without taking any notes in an attempt to “take it all in” and begin to develop an understanding of the characters, relationships, conflicts, and the series’ narrative structure (Hall, 1975, p. 15). I then watched each episode again, focusing primarily on scenes that concerned maternal employment or Sarah’s domestic relationships, in many cases, watching those scenes over and over again. I sought to uncover common themes and take note of telling silences. I looked at Sarah in her multiple roles as mother, wife, daughter, sibling, and co-worker. I also examined the characters that surround her in their roles as fathers, husbands, mothers, siblings, employees, co-workers, and children; the interactions between “external” characters and roles are essential to constructing representations of working motherhood.

In subsequent phases, I realized that the story of maternal employment was a generational story, told not only through Sarah, but also through her mother, Nora. I focused on the way relationships create meaning in the series and how power structures frame those relationships. The relationship between power, value, and work was of utmost importance. To gather evidence from the text, I recorded verbal and visual cues that resonated again and again; then, I looked at each word in the dialogue, and in many cases, every camera angle, movement, character inflection and non-verbal behavior in a scene to construct a preliminary analysis. As my analysis continued, I uncovered additional struggles, inconsistencies, and latent connections between characters and themes.

The results of my analysis will be presented in the chapters that follow. The next section serves as an introduction to the series’ setting and characters.

### The World of *Brothers & Sisters*

*Brothers & Sisters* follows the five Walker siblings and their significant others through triumphs, challenges, grief, deception, and attempts to understand their parents’ actions. The series has a sizable ensemble cast. The primary characters at the core of this analysis are:

**William Walker**—patriarch of Walker family; owner of Ojai Foods; dies in first episode

**Nora Walker**—matriarch of Walker family; full-time stay-at-home mother; constantly involves herself in her children’s affairs

**Saul Holden**—Nora’s older brother; Chief Financial Officer at Ojai Foods

**Sarah Walker Whedon**—eldest Walker child; Vice President at Ojai Foods; married to Joe; mother to **Gabe** (stepson; 15 years old), Paige and Cooper

**Joe Whedon**—Sarah’s husband; stay-at-home dad; father of Gabe, Paige and Cooper

**Paige and Cooper Whedon**—age 8 and 6 respectively; Sarah and Joe’s children

**Kitty Walker McAllister**—second eldest Walker child; political pundit on television, then communications director for Senator; lives with Nora in first season

**Tommy Walker**—middle Walker child; Vice President of Operations at Ojai Foods; married to Julia; father to infants Elizabeth and William

**Kevin Walker**—second youngest Walker child; corporate attorney; reoccurring plotline is struggle as openly gay man

**Justin Walker**—youngest Walker child; U.S. veteran who fought in Afghanistan; recovering drug addict; lives with Nora in first season

**Holly Harper**—William Walker’s mistress of 20 years; stockholder in Ojai Foods

**Rebecca Harper**—Holly’s daughter; assumed to be William’s illegitimate daughter

**Noah Guare**—Sarah’s former colleague and potential romantic interest

The daily lives of the Walker siblings are dominated by the family’s organic food business, Ojai Foods, or their newly-widowed mother, Nora. Members of the Walker family are in constant contact with one another and, more often than not, are deeply involved in each other’s affairs. When the season opens Sarah, a graduate of the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, has recently left a high-powered corporate job at Northlight Coffee to join Ojai Foods in hopes of spending more time with her family. Her father dies unexpectedly at the end of the first episode. In his will, William appoints Sarah president of Ojai Foods, much to the chagrin of her younger brother Tommy, who has worked at the company for 12 years.

As president, Sarah is immediately forced to confront the fact that her father had embezzled \$15 million from the company and had used the employee’s pension funds to cover the shortfall. In addition

to being president of the company, Sarah is married and a mother of three (two biological young children and an older stepson). Her plotline revolves around her efforts to successfully run the corporation, be a loving partner to her husband, and be an active and involved parent to her children. The creator of the series, Jon Robin Baitz, has said that Sarah has “become the quietly brilliant representative of women who work and have families,” intimating that she is meant to be the ‘everywoman’ with whom American women can identify (Abele, 2007, p. A2).

The series is set in Pasadena, California, a hub of culture and sports located just 10 miles from downtown Los Angeles. According to the U.S. Census (2000b), 53% of the city’s population is classified as white and the average household and family income is higher than the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The world the series creates each week is in some sense reflective of these statistics, yet because meaning and ‘reality’ are constructed, the setting is not meant to be a mirror of the actual city of Pasadena. As Fiske and Hartley (2003) argue, television “uses codes which are closely related to those by which we perceive reality itself. It appears to be the natural way of seeing the world,” but we must never forget that it “is a human construct” (p. 4-5). As such, the writers and creators of the series made the entire Walker family (including in-laws, stepchildren, etc.) white. With the exception of a few African American and Latino workers at Ojai Foods, in fact, the entire *Brothers & Sisters* world is white. The Walkers are an influential family in the area, both economically and culturally, and socialize with other powerful, wealthy families.

## CHAPTER 5

### WOMEN AND WORK: AWAKENINGS & DISAPPOINTMENTS

Before exploring the recurring themes uncovered during analysis, I will discuss an inextricably linked pair of concepts: patriarchy and matriarchy/matrifocality. The world constructed in *Brothers & Sisters* is linked to the viewers' 'reality' through remarks about contemporary events. In the first season, we learn how the Walkers have been affected by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the soaring prices of gas, hear Justin talk about his time as a soldier in Afghanistan, watch Kevin confront a legislator who signed a bill to prevent him—a gay man—from marrying, and listen to the family discuss other happenings of the day (e.g. Barack Obama's early presidential campaign and a televised special about Betty Friedan). Given this sense of realism, we also assume the characters inhabit a culture deeply embedded in, and largely organized by, heteronormative and patriarchal structures. Indeed, this notion is blatantly referenced in the pilot episode, "Patriarchy."

Broadly speaking, patriarchy refers to a gender hierarchy in which males dominate and control. Dow (1996) asserts that this hierarchy is "modeled on the family [and is] replicated through society on a number of levels" (p.39). Although early definitions of patriarchy focused primarily upon the domination of younger males by male heads of households (see Weber, 1947), through the years, feminist scholars have shifted the spotlight to male domination over women. In her book *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Walby (1990) defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (p. 20). This definition rejects biological determinism as the basis of women's subordination, instead emphasizing patriarchy as a social structure. Patriarchy operates in both the public and private spheres through structures of the state and employment, and through cultural roles and expectations. Although American women have more economic, intellectual, and cultural power than ever before, American culture ultimately remains true to its patriarchal foundations.

Scholars have argued that the opposite of patriarchy—matriarchy—has never existed in a pure form and have used the term ‘matrifocality’ to describe societies where women are thought to dominate (Bamberger, 1974; Eller, 2000). Smith (2001) defines matrifocality as “a property of kinship systems where the complex of affective ties among mother and children assumes a structural prominence because of the diminution (but not disappearance) of male authority in domestic relations” (p. 9416). The term has also been used in a broader sense to describe female-headed or female-dominated households within patriarchal societies.

For Sarah, the eldest daughter and most prominent working mother in the series, three families dominate: the Walker family she was born into, the ‘family’ of workers at the family business, and the family she has created with her husband, Joe Whedon. Matrifocal systems are at work in all of these families because women are at the head of each. In the first season, Nora, Sarah’s mother, becomes the sole parental head of the Walker family after her husband dies in the first episode. Sarah is appointed president of her father’s company and thus becomes the leader and ‘mother’ to the family of employees. As the breadwinner, Sarah is also the head of her family with Joe. Focusing on Sarah’s perspective, the series gives prominence to the affective ties between Sarah and her children, consistently diminishing Joe’s role in relation to hers. Although matrifocality characterizes these three families, they remain part of a larger patriarchal society; the two women who dominate them remain bound within patriarchal structures.

Relationships constructed on *Brothers & Sisters* rely heavily, if subtly, on foils—characters who contrast, yet complement, each other and who help add meaning to the other. Throughout the first season, Nora and Sarah often serve as foils for one another. Nora is a strong and opinionated stay-at-home mother who has raised five children (including Sarah) to adulthood, while Sarah is a powerful corporate executive trying to be actively involved in her young children’s lives. Nora’s development throughout the series helps to establish Sarah’s background, and it is through Nora that we come to understand many of Sarah’s expectations about marriage, parenting, and domestic life in general. Through the lives of these two women, two stories of women’s choices about work and about family emerge. Though the stories are

distinct, it becomes apparent that both women see participation in the paid labor force as a desirable avenue toward self-identity, confidence, and sufficiency.

As noted at the outset, the ‘reality’ in which the characters live is one familiar to viewers: political, geographical, and cultural markers create a contemporary setting. Still, the series is fiction. The characters are fictional. Although they were created in 2006, there is an assumption that they have a past and the following timeline uses events from the series (i.e. birthdays, anniversaries, etc.) to locate the characters in that past. Nora and Sarah are 60 years old and 40 years old respectively. This suggests that Nora was born around 1946, a time of traditional gender roles and the blossoming of suburban life in America. Sarah was born around 1966, a formative year in the early women’s right’s movement. Sarah graduated from college around 1989, the time when the media’s “mommy wars” began to gain ground and female enrollment for undergraduate and graduate degrees outpaced the enrollment rate for males (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Additionally, based on information given in the context of the series, Sarah married Joe in 1996 and had her first child, Paige, in 1998, a time when, many argue, groups of mothers began “opting out” of the workplace. This timeline is important because these periods in the national work-family debate necessarily inform the way Sarah and Nora’s stories are constructed.

#### Work=An Identity of Her Own?

In the first episode, “Patriarchy,” Nora immediately emerges as an older version of the goodwife archetype. Once an amateur artist and writer seeking self-expression, Nora is articulate, well-informed and intelligent, but seemingly has no real interests outside her family and home. Despite being wealthy enough to employ domestic servants, she is consistently shown in the kitchen preparing drinks and dinner or at the family dinner table, passing food and laughing with her loved ones. Nora is identified relative to others; she seldom ventures outside her home, and when she does, her outings are typically premised around one of her children. We know almost nothing about her life before she met her husband. Instead, our attention is focused on Nora having married William Walker at age 20 and subsequently dedicating her life to her family.

Nora's intense love for her family and the life she had with her husband is immediately apparent; it is only after her husband dies that she begins to question that life. In an exchange with Kitty, her single, career-driven daughter, it becomes apparent that Nora's so-called 'choices' were not necessarily her own, but were in fact, influenced by patriarchal structures.

**NORA:** (*meager and sad*) Kitty, I'm so confused. I went from my father's house to my husband's house with nothing in between. (*hopeful*) Not like you. Your life was yours, the choices you made, the life you created belonged to you.

**KITTY:** (*concerned*) I thought that you always loved being home?

**NORA:** (*whispers*) I did, I did. I would not trade a single moment of it. But, now that your father's gone and you kids are grown, I don't know what to do with the rest of my life...I have to give myself some time to figure out who I am without having anyone else to account to. (*Sexual Politics*)

The gender hierarchies evident in the phrases "my *father's* house" and "my *husband's* house" clearly suggest that Nora has always inhabited spaces that she believed belonged to men. But, the comment moves beyond the physical spaces to equate the houses with life: Nora mentions moving from one house to another just before she says, "not like you. Your life was yours, the choices you made, the life you created belonged to you." The juxtaposition of houses and life in this remark make them almost interchangeable, so although she is referring to her male-dominated surroundings, Nora is also talking about a male-dominated life that has been created *for* her. It is a life that has been shaped by the approval of others: she always has had someone to account to, and has been identified and has identified herself in relation to others. She is William Walker's wife, Kitty's mother, Saul's sister, etc.

That Nora chooses to reveal these feelings of dissatisfaction, discouragement and envy repeatedly and always to her children is significant. Each child has a career that frames his or her identity. Nora's longing for a life like those she perceives her children to have, rich with choices and sufficiency, signals that Nora views a career as a way to gain power over her life. Nora has ambitions and interests of her own, but has had little choice or opportunity to be more than a familial caretaker. This role is visually reinforced throughout the scene as Nora wakes Kitty and they share the coffee that Nora has brought to Kitty's bedroom. Even while confessing her disappointment about being little more than a goodwife, Nora is portrayed as a mother doting on her child.

While Nora was a stay-at-home mom for the vast majority of her life, at one point after her husband's death she tells Sarah that for a short time, she too was a working mother.

**NORA:** Despite what you [Sarah] might think, in between changing your diapers and reading *The Velveteen Rabbit* thirteen thousand times, I actually helped your father build this company from a two hundred acre farm to what it is today. I worked in budgeting (*hesitating*)...hiring (*stammering*)...and a lot of other things. (*Family Day*)

In response to this revelation, Sarah looks at her mother with skepticism and disbelief. Sarah was too young to remember this part of her mother's life and she and her siblings never mention Nora balancing work and family. Given this silence, viewers can deduce that Nora worked when Sarah was an infant, but became a full-time stay-at-home mother after Kitty was born and never discussed her employment again. After her husband's death though, Nora decides to "step up to the plate" and work at Ojai Foods, the family business. Exhibiting an air of authority, she demands an office from Sarah and her brother, Saul.

Nora is characteristically strong and direct, but her somewhat stilted, stammer-filled attempt to articulate her experience at Ojai, and her efforts to avoid eye contact with Sarah or Saul, cast doubt on the truthfulness of her claims. The camera reverses to visually capture Sarah's skepticism. This skepticism works to minimize Nora's assertions, intimating that they have been enhanced and romanticized in Nora's memory. Instead of assuming her mother's work was constructive and important to the success of the company, Sarah's behavior implies what Sarah has always believed: that her father started the company largely without help, and that it wasn't a joint venture with Nora. Sarah's assumption is reinforced through flashbacks during the season, where William is shown talking about what *he* has created at Ojai Foods for *his* family and how proud *he* is that *his* children can carry on what *he* has built. The only time Nora is mentioned in relation to the business in these flashbacks is when William says:

**WILLIAM:** I can't tell you how much this warms my heart, to see the two of you [Sarah and Tommy] working together. And how proud I am to have two members of my family who want to be a part of what I built here... You two get back to work. I'm going to go home, hug your mother, and tell her what a great job she did with you two. (*Love is Difficult*)

Nora is cast among the assets of the business not for her management skills but because she did a "great job" raising two strong, intelligent children who are now executives leading the company. Sarah—skeptical though she may be—doesn't fight Nora's demands and gives her an office. In this work

environment, we get glimpses into Nora's abbreviated experiences in the paid labor force and more evidence of her (perhaps unconscious) belief that a career could have provided the freedom and identity she so desperately craves.

On her first day at Ojai Foods, Nora arrives wearing an uncharacteristic power suit that looks similar to the suits Sarah wears. Tommy shares his sister Sarah's skepticism about their mother working; neither knows what to have her do. They know her only as their father's wife and their mother. Sarah asks Tommy to help Nora find her niche and when Nora comments that the office looks drab and needs curtains, Tommy tries to put her in charge of decorating. Recognizing his attempt to keep her in the domestic box that has held her for 40 years, Nora refuses his offer saying, "nice try" (*Family Day*). When Tommy offers to teach her how to create shipping invoices, she seems satisfied. An unruly employee, Nora sends a company-wide e-mail allowing employees to bring their dogs to work and steps in for a receptionist so she can see her son play basketball. These actions wreak havoc on the office, disrupting the normal course of business. Nora falls behind on the shipping invoices; others then have to straighten out the office environment and complete the tasks that had been delegated to her.

Throughout the time she is at Ojai Foods, Nora tries to mother Tommy—the company's Vice President of Operations—the way she must have when he was a child. He specifically asks her not to speak at an Executive Board meeting, but she again defies him, embarrassing herself and indirectly, her children who are, in this setting, first and foremost corporate executives. Later, when Tommy tries to quiet her again, Nora, completely exasperated, says, "Tommy...if you had your way I would never speak at all!" (*Family Day*). Tommy is in many ways the stereotypical white American businessman and is consistently compared to his father, a well-loved yet dominant patriarch. Nora's experience in the office then, parallels her marriage: it is patriarchal and hierarchical. Nora is now unwilling to be silenced, having gained more power and autonomy as the sole parental head of the family. Realizing she is in the way, Nora quickly decides to return to her sphere of expertise, her home. Before she leaves Ojai Foods, however, she attempts to prove herself to Tommy by telling him about her experience as an executive secretary and the life she could have had.

**NORA:** (*assertively*) You can't boss me around anymore. I'm totally useless here [at work], I know that. But you know what? It wasn't always that way. I was once an executive secretary.

**TOMMY:** (*surprised*) You were?

**NORA:** Yes, I was. To a wonderful man, Mr. Stanley Elliot. He was the president of a big manufacturing company. He used to say to me everyday, 'Nora, one day you're going to run this place,' and he meant it.

**TOMMY:** Well, what happened?

**NORA:** (*resigned*) Sarah was born. Then Kitty, and you and Kevin. And last but not least, Justin.

**TOMMY:** You don't have any regrets, do you?

**NORA:** (*loudly*) I *should* have the way you guys treat me!

**TOMMY:** Mom...

**NORA:** (*resigned*) No, no, no. Tommy. You know, I read Mr. Elliot's obituary in the *Times* not too long ago and I felt so sad because I realized there wasn't anyone left who knew me the way I was then, the way he knew me. Whatever else I could have been in this life was buried with old Stanley. I made my choices, I just forgot for a minute they were the right choices.

(*Family Day*)

Throughout the season Nora is shown to be highly adept in domestic surroundings and it may be that her domestic skills are a result of the professional skills she acquired as a secretary. It is also possible that her blunders during her time at Ojai Foods were the result of being unpracticed, rather than her being inept. Her confidence in her ex-boss' claim that she would have his job suggests that Nora's skills were valuable to his company and that she too believed she could have had a successful career. In this view, her poignant account of having children implies that, in some sense, she views her children as roadblocks to this success. Her sadness and longing work against her contention that she does not regret having children, especially with the phrase "whatever else I could have been in this life was buried with old Stanley." Mr. Elliot knew her before she had children (quite possibly before she was married) and seemed, at least in Nora's view, to believe she was on the company's fast-track. Her decision to leave after Sarah was born however, suggests that motherhood and this fast-track were incompatible.

Nora's assertion that the possibilities open to her early in life were buried with Mr. Elliot implies that she feels she cannot regain the identity she once had (an identity outside of mother and wife), due to her age, relative inexperience, or because her life revolves around and is consumed by her children. Her last remark, "I made my choices. I just forgot for a minute that they were the right choices," suggests that Nora is trying to convince herself that her decision to leave the paid workforce was a choice and was the

right choice (*Family Day*). It begs the question, however, “right” for whom? Her children? Herself? Her husband?

Suggesting work and motherhood are incompatible helps to explain why Nora often focuses on her identity as mother, the role at which she excels. At an extravagant charity banquet, Nora confronts Sarah about recent financial trouble at Ojai Foods. She tells Sarah that she has a right to know about it because it was her ability to raise five children “all by [herself] which afforded [her husband] the luxury of building the company in the first place” (*For the Children*). In this conversation, Nora, like her husband before her, defines her ‘job’ and contribution to the company as her labor in the domestic sphere, rather than her work in the public sphere, as she had when she discussed previous work experiences.

Her use of the phrase “afforded him the luxury” speaks volumes about how Nora is remembering the power dynamics of her marriage (*For the Children*). While it is clear throughout the season that Nora was a goodwife who put herself second to her husband and children, here she gives herself some power. She tells her children that it was her work that allowed her husband to have a family and start a business—a “luxury” that would have been impossible without her. Nora’s comment implies that her (perhaps reluctant) willingness to divide work along traditional gender lines (woman in the ‘private’ sphere, man in the ‘public’ sphere) contributed to her husband’s success—an assertion that is complicated by the ‘lack of choice’ narrative that underlies the rest of the episodes.

Overall, it seems that in spite of the sometimes contradictory ways Nora reconstructs her past, two sentiments seem to consistently ring true: first, that “being good for [her] family has been [her] sole purpose in life,” and second, that Nora longs for an identity outside of motherhood and marriage and views a career as one way she could have attained it (*Valentine’s Day Massacre*). Nora perceives Sarah as a realization of her desires; she spans the roles of mother, wife, daughter, and powerful, confident career woman. During an intimate conversation, Sarah describes how hard she is working to save Ojai Foods from financial ruin and how much she misses her children, being away from home so often. She asks Nora what she thinks of her, to which Nora responds:

**NORA:** I am in awe of you, Sarah. You became the woman I always wanted to be, and you did it all without losing your softness and your goodness. I love all my children, but I have so much respect for you, Sarah. All that and you gave me two of the most perfect grandchildren on Earth! You're not a daughter Sarah, you're the damn trifecta! (*For the Children*)

Tearful and emotional, Sarah can only reply, "You rock, mom. You just do," confirming the power and emotion of Nora's maternal guidance and, for Sarah, gratitude that someone acknowledges her attempts to balance work, marriage, and motherhood simultaneously. In this one exchange the Nora-Sarah foil is most explicit and perhaps, most powerful.

#### An Iconic Romance: Emulation & Expectation

If Sarah embodies the life Nora believes she wants, Nora's marriage to William is the embodiment of the domestic life Sarah desires. Much like Sarah and Nora act as foils for each other, Nora and William's marriage acts as a foil for Sarah and Joe's marriage. In the first episode, in fact, Sarah verbally compares her relationship with Joe to her parents' "absurd iconic romance" (*Patriarchy*). As we learn later in the season, Nora's marriage was anything but iconic (her husband had a 20-year affair, is suspected of having an illegitimate child, and embezzled from his company without telling her). Nonetheless, Sarah's perception of her parents' romance up until her father's death may have influenced her own decisions and expectations of marriage.

When the season opens we are told that Joe and Sarah are going to marriage counseling. When Kitty asks Sarah why, Sarah identifies four contributing factors: 1) the fact that they have three children (including Joe's son Gabe), 2) her career, 3) little to no physical connection, and 4) unrealistic expectations through a comparison with her parents' relationship. All four factors are important to this analysis, but here, I will consider only the fourth factor. From what can be gathered throughout the season, Sarah spent most of her childhood in the large home her mother still inhabits, situated in a wealthy yet family-friendly neighborhood. From Sarah's perspective, her parents represented traditional gender roles while she was growing up: her father worked outside the home, her mother was a homemaker, and the family was happy. A fight with Joe (a stay-at-home dad) much later in the season

suggests that Sarah consciously set up their married life to emulate her parents' relationship and the nostalgic 1950s suburban family life they enjoyed:

**JOE:** *(to Sarah; frustrated)*...I'm stuck in this life that you wanted. This suburban little world, complete with two little kids and a picket fence...Every decision—to have this home, to have the kids, to go to work—they were choices that you made. And I went along with them because I want to make you happy. *(Bad News)*

It is important to note that Joe positions Sarah as having made the decisions that shaped their domestic life. The role reversal—Sarah as breadwinner and Joe as stay-at-home-dad—is exceptional but beyond that, the world Joe describes parallels Sarah's childhood. She and Joe live in a very family-friendly neighborhood in a large and lovely home made possible by Sarah's salary. The phrase “suburban little world, complete with two kids and a picket fence” is an especially telling insight into Sarah's desire for an iconic life; it is laced with connotations of the much-romanticized and nostalgic visions of 1950s suburban America that remain prevalent in American consciousness.

As important as dialogue is to television, sometimes pure visual emotion conveys more than the spoken word. Sarah's longing for an iconic romance of her own is evident when she witnesses a private, romantic moment between her parents before a family dinner one evening. The visual and audio cues outlined below are constructed in a way that visually key us into Sarah's desires, yet keep Sarah at a distance from her parents (or more symbolically, the romance they represent).

#### **VISUAL**

Long shot of Sarah walking into dining room; Kevin pours wine; Paige sets table, then leaves.

Medium shot of Sarah stopping, smiling and staring toward camera; Kevin looks at Sarah and then glances quickly toward parents and back at Sarah

#### **Dialogue/MUSICAL LYRICS<sup>5</sup>**

AND ITS SIMPLY IRRATIONAL WEATHER,  
I CAN'T EVEN HEAR MYSELF THINK

Sarah: *(to Paige)* Thanks, sweetie [for setting table].  
Paige: You're welcome.

CONSTANTLY BAILING OUT WATER

---

<sup>5</sup> Note: Musical cue/lyrics begin before this scene and continue through the next scene, which shows the family eating dinner.

Reverse long shot of William and Nora quietly talking; Nora has her hands lovingly on William's chest

Medium shot of Sarah and Kevin; Sarah still looking towards parents; Kevin looks back at parents quickly, then Leaves

Medium shot of Sarah looking longingly toward parents. Then she looks down sadly, sighs, half smiles and looks back up at them

Reverse medium shot to William and Nora kissing

Long shot of Sarah, alone in dining room, hands in pockets. Takes one more wistful look and walks out of dining room (*Patriarchy*)

STILL FEEL LIKE I'M GOIN' TO SINK  
Kevin: So did Kitty and Mom have a...  
Sarah: Fight. Yes, drop it.

COZ I'M UNDER THE WEATHER  
JUST LIKE THE WORLD

SO SORRY FOR BEING SO BOLD

WHEN I TURN OUT THE LIGHTS  
(Tunstall, 2006, track 3)

Sarah's unwavering gaze throughout this short scene creates a connection between her and her parents, but the use of a shot-reverse shot set-up<sup>6</sup> in which she is never in the same camera frame as her parents creates and maintains a distance between them. The use of long shots also keeps us at a distance from the characters, but we are allowed some access through the use of medium shots, which bring us physically closer to them. The medium shot of Sarah focuses our attention on her face—a face that relays happiness and desire, then resignation and despondency. This scene tells us everything we need to know without a word being spoken. Sarah is happy for her parents and envies their relationship, but for whatever reason, despite her best attempts, she has not been able to replicate that relationship with Joe.

The song that plays throughout this short scene is not a sad song, but the lyrics and the artist's tone, in combination with the sense of sadness that surrounds Sarah, becomes a melancholy undertone that help create meaning in almost pure visual content. Because Sarah is the main focus of the camera's attention (and subsequently the viewers' eyes), the "I" in the song's lyrics become identified with her; she is the one feeling "under the weather" like she is "goin' to sink" despite "bailing out water." This

---

<sup>6</sup> Shot-reverse shot refers to the film sequence when the camera focuses on a character's face, and then reverses to show us the other person in the frame. For example, it would show us Sarah, then Joe when they are talking.

identification is strengthened by the fact that at this point we are aware that Sarah and Joe's marriage is in serious trouble, if not sinking altogether.

Later in the season, when her marriage is truly in shambles, Sarah shares an emotional scene with her mother, during which both women compare themselves and their relationships to the other's.

**SARAH:** (*upset*) I know your marriage wasn't perfect, but I am very glad that you guys stayed together. I had a good childhood. I grew up feeling like I was part of something whole. (*crying*) And that's all I've wanted to give my kids.

**NORA:** (*compassionately*) Sarah, you're such a good mom. I know you're not a quitter, sweetheart. I wasn't either and maybe that's why I never let myself see what was really happening. I stood by your father blindly, no matter what. I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did. I don't want you to. (*Grapes of Wrath*)

Sarah compares her memories of childhood to the life she has built for her family. Sarah and her siblings found out about their parents' marital issues only after their father's death, so up until that point, we are led to believe that she supposed they had an ideal romance. Her intense, emotional concern for her children's future implies that she connects her childhood happiness with her parents being together. Sarah, then, is afraid that she will fail Paige and Cooper if she cannot provide the same idyllic childhood for them.

In her response, Nora compares herself to Sarah noting that they are not quitters and intimates that Sarah is in the same situation Nora was, just many years later, and that she, like Nora, would be willing to make the same "mistakes" for the sake of her children (*Grapes of Wrath*). Essentially, Nora says that her marriage worked because she was willing to stand "blindly" by her husband, no matter what, never questioning or closely examining the relationship. As I will argue in the next chapter, a contributing factor to the crumbling of Sarah and Joe's marriage is their unwillingness to stand blindly by one another and their increasing inability to understand each other and maintain the roles they have assumed the way Nora and William seemingly did.

## CHAPTER 6

### ILLUSIONS SHATTERED: THE DISSOLUTION OF THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

“Love is difficult,” R.M. Ralke wrote in 1934, “For one human being to love another human being: that is the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us” (*Love is Difficult*). Ralke’s quote is used as the title for an episode late in the first season of *Brothers & Sisters*—the episode, in fact, when we see the therapy sessions Sarah mentions in the first episode. Love is a task made more difficult when traditional gender roles are partially reversed, the individuals occupy different worlds and only occasionally cross emotional paths, and when the individuals are lonely and looking for more despite being in a relationship. This chapter will explore how the factors listed above ultimately contribute to the dissolution of the nuclear family Sarah and Joe have created.

#### A Patchwork of Gender Roles

The link between work and value is fundamental in American culture. Whether the value is a sense of self-worth/identity, economic and/or intellectual power, sufficiency, or the building and maintenance of a strong moral fiber, work helps to define Americans. Sarah explicitly articulates this link when she says, “I thought when I quit my old job I would gain in time what I lost in salary, but being a working mom is like being a currency that never has enough value” (*Patriarchy*). Sarah connects two of her primary roles—employee and mother—through this exchange of value. In leaving her old job, Sarah thought she was trading greater economic value to gain the irreplaceable and fleeting time to be a good mother for her children (and thereby add value to their lives through her ‘maternal work’). Her follow-up, “but being a working mom is like being a currency that never has enough value,” suggests that because she has a career and is a mother, she is spread so thin that she can’t realize her full value in either role. Like currencies that are continually compared against one another to determine value, Sarah’s professional and domestic work is continually, if subtly, evaluated in relation to Joe’s, a stay-at-home father and the primary caretaker for their children.

In many ways, traditional gender roles are reversed in Sarah and Joe's relationship. She manages their finances and is the primary breadwinner for the family, although Joe makes extra money by teaching guitar lessons out of their home. Joe is the primary caretaker for their children and is, for all purposes, the male equivalent of a housewife. We often see him cleaning and/or decorating the house, preparing meals, hosting "play dates" for the children and their friends, taking them to and from school, and occupying them while Sarah is at work. When Joe jokingly asks Sarah if she is jealous of the time he is spending with the mother of one of Paige's friends, Sarah replies, "Don't be ridiculous. She's just another [stay-at-home] mom" (*Sexual Politics*). 'Another' implies that Sarah perhaps unconsciously perceives Joe to be a stay-at-home mother. That Sarah thinks it is 'ridiculous' for Joe to suggest she could be jealous of a stay-at-home mom implies that Sarah considers herself superior to those mothers who don't work. From afar then, it seems Sarah and Joe have reversed gender roles.

The division of labor, particularly within the home however, is not so clear-cut. Joe never attempts to take over Sarah's role as the breadwinner, but Sarah often shares the weight of domestic chores, particularly those associated with the children. We see Sarah cook dinner almost as often as Joe, and she seems to be the parent who most frequently prepares the children's lunches and snacks. She often has grocery bags in her hands when she comes home from work, and on several occasions, talks about driving the children to and from school. Although Joe serves many functions associated with mothers, when Sarah is home she is undoubtedly the mother figure—protective, strict, loving and tender. Her consistently watchful eye enables Joe to play the more laidback, fun father figure when she is present. This overlapping of domestic roles is complicated, but it seems to work in favor of the children—Joe and Sarah are almost always a positive and unified front when caring for Paige and Cooper.

Sarah and Joe are consistently shown in the kitchen, which visually underscores their partial reversal of roles. It is a space traditionally associated with women, but in Sarah and Joe's case, is a space where gender roles are contested; no gender dominates and both individuals are confident and productive. Many of Sarah's scenes outside of the office take place in a kitchen to show that she can be domestic, like

traditional women, and that regardless of her career, she is able to care for her family and provide her children with the love and attention they desire.

As is evident, Sarah and Joe's marriage is a fragile and complex patchwork of gender role reversal and stasis. This intricate patchwork is further complicated by the comparison to a nostalgic and idealized view of 1950s suburban life discussed in the previous chapter. In this ideal 1950s nuclear family, patriarchy was firmly in place: father was the breadwinner, mother happily stayed home, and the family unit was harmoniously blissful. The underlying logic of this type of familial system, the reason it seemed to work, is because every member of the family accepted their role and place in a traditional gender hierarchy, submitting to it as long as it was needed. In the Whedon household, however, a matrifocal system dominates; Sarah has taken the public, leading role as well as much of the domestic role, and Joe has grudgingly accepted to fill the private, domestic role when she is absent. This system has worked for ten years, but it begins to disintegrate as Sarah and Joe become increasingly unable to understand each other and maintain their relationship.

#### The "terrible, bruised silence" & the Failure to Understand

Joe hardly talks to anyone in Sarah's family unless Sarah is present, but on these rare occasions, the conversation almost always revolves around his relationship with Sarah. Very early in the season, Joe bumps into Kitty in a hallway at Nora's house and through this conversation, we become aware that in many ways, Sarah and Joe reside in two different worlds.

**KITTY:** (*overwhelmed/awe struck*) I don't know how you guys do it. Two kids all day, every day. Gabe on the weekends.

**JOE:** Eh, most of the time I'm grateful for it, you know? I do better when I'm busy, but uh, Sarah...

**KITTY:** Oh please, she's my sister.

**JOE:** She's busy with work, we don't see each other much, and I just get the feeling...

**KITTY:** What?

**JOE:** That there's something that she's not telling me.

**KITTY:** (*nonchalant*) Oh well, you know. Sarah's like that. She always retreats into her work. She's just like our Dad that way...I'm sure it's just a busy time, it'll get better.

**JOE:** (*lackluster*) Yeah, I'm sure. (*Family Portrait*)

Joe immediately connects himself to the children, saying, "I'm grateful for it...I do better when I'm busy," not mentioning Sarah or including her with a personal pronoun like "we" or "us" (*Family*

*Portrait*). In Joe's mind, he is the one handling the overwhelming nature of having children, as opposed to being in a partnership with Sarah. The separation between Sarah and the rest of the family is further established when Joe says that she's "busy with work" and that they "don't see each other much," suggesting she is usually away from home. In this situation, neither spouse really knows what is happening in the other's life. They know the highlights, of course, but cannot fully understand the minute details that make up each day. In a therapy session, Sarah confesses that besides their children, she and Joe have nothing to talk about because they have so little common ground. She says she "can't imagine spending the rest of [her] life like [that]," implying that the lives she and Joe are leading are slowly diverging and the situation is becoming increasingly unbearable (*Love is Difficult*).

Joe identifies Sarah's career as the primary reason they don't see each other. He is not involved with her career and has no connection with that part of her life. Sarah's knowledge of her father's embezzlement sets her apart from Joe because she cannot tell him about it, the solutions she is considering, and what it ultimately means to Ojai Foods. Sensing distance, Joe tells Kitty he believes there is something Sarah is not telling him. Despite his suspicions though, Joe never asks Sarah. When he finally tells her he is upset that she doesn't talk to him, she tells him she can't. "What's happening at the company—the mess that my dear departed father left me to clean up—is so filthy, so rotten, that if I tell you you could go to jail" (*Family Portrait*). In this instance, Sarah deliberately creates distance between her work and her family to protect the family from external forces that could cause them harm.

That Sarah "retreats" into her work just as her father did, not only reinforces a role reversal, it also creates the image of Sarah, perhaps unconsciously, distancing herself from Joe and her family in favor of her work—a choice Joe does not seem to have (*Family Portrait*). "You have no idea what is like. Being at home all the time. Being around kids all day," Joe tells Sarah "You have your job. Being at home day after day...gets lonely" (*Sexual Politics*). Joe believes Sarah's job provides her with an outlet and access to the outside, adult world. Joe is a citizen of a kid nation and, having no one to talk to, no one to lean on, and no one who understands his life, Joe is—as he says—lonely.

In a therapy session, an emotional Sarah notes that in addition to having nothing to talk about, she and Joe don't have passionate sex and are "freezing each other out" (*Love is Difficult*). She says they "used to be something" and that she "doesn't know what's happened" to change their relationship. A once a happy couple has disintegrated, leaving two lonely individuals who occasionally rekindle the spark, but more often live disconnected lives. Their children seem unaware of their parents' marital problems until Sarah and Joe officially separate at the end of the season, but behind the masks they wear for the children's sakes, Sarah and Joe are a shell of their once vibrant selves.

As the instability of their marriage becomes more and more evident to Sarah and Joe, they employ what I will call a "rhetoric of choice." We often see Sarah and Joe trying to convince themselves that they chose the life they lead and the roles they play. This sense of choice, however, is complicated by a cycle of blame, envy, and resentment. When Sarah confronts Joe about the time he is spending with the mother of one of Paige's friends, Joe evenly states:

**JOE:** I don't blame you [Sarah] for working. I choose to be a stay-at-home dad. You have no idea how small the day can be. Peanut butter sandwiches and scrapes and picking them up and that's fine. But don't begrudge me being hungry for a little bit of adult company in the midst of all that. (*Love is Difficult*)

Joe says that he chose the role he plays, perhaps to give himself power in a situation where he seems to have little. Sarah holds the economic power in the family and since she also assumes many of the domestic roles, she minimizes his ability to claim absolute power over any part of their life. Joe complicates his claim that he doesn't blame Sarah for working by making his life at home sound more like solitary confinement than a fulfilling and satisfactory existence. He seems to envy the companionship Sarah has with her siblings and at her job, and may resent her ability to break out of the domestic sphere.

Joe's feelings of confinement are reiterated several episodes later when, in the midst of a screaming match with Sarah, he yells:

**JOE:** (*to Sarah; frustrated*)...I'm stuck in this life that you wanted. This suburban little world, complete with two little kids and a picket fence...Every decision—to have this home, to have the kids, to go to work—they were choices that you made. And I went along with them because I want to make you happy. (*Bad News*)

Joe suggests the choice to be a stay-at-home dad was not his choice; he became the stay-at-home parent by default. He relinquished any direct input into shaping their life and instead, became the passive, reactionary partner who helped make Sarah's decisions work. Joe seems to be stifled in the life that has resulted. Indeed, the word 'stuck' suggests Joe is trapped. He perceives Sarah to be free because she is able to transition from home to work and back again everyday.

Sarah, on the other hand, seems to feel constrained by the very choices that Joe believes give her freedom. "I won't pay for the fact that I am trying to have a career and be a wife and mother. God, I dream of being at home to watch those kids grow up!" she shouts at Joe (*Love is Difficult*). Sarah accepts that she made the decision to go to work, but envy, blame, and resentment boil just below the surface. *He* is the one watching the kids grow up, witnessing their daily challenges and triumphs, things she misses because of her career and the time it demands. The undertone of blame is palpable in this scene. If Joe had a job, Sarah would be relieved of some of the pressure she feels to provide for the family and it might be possible for her to spend more time with the children.

Both for Sarah and for Joe, the grass appears to be greener in the other person's pasture. They each want at least part of what the other has, and both feel constrained by their roles. They have little common ground, and as the season progresses—despite attempts to reconcile their diverging lives—the "terrible, bruised silence" between them continues to grow (*An Act of Will*).

#### Emotional Distance Created & Revealed Through Space

The emotional distance between Sarah and Joe is created and revealed not only by what they say and how they act, but also through the construction of their scenes. The distance is created through three film techniques: a shot-reverse shot set-up where the characters are framed by themselves, a play on focus, and careful character staging in relation to the set. This section will examine two examples from the series to show how these techniques are used simultaneously to create additional meaning in Sarah and Joe's often-tumultuous relationship.

The emotional distance between Sarah and Joe is evident the very first time we see them; both focus and staging are used to create the void (*Patriarchy*). Sarah is in her kitchen—the "heart of the

home” where many of the important decisions and revelations in the series occur. While on the phone with her sister, Sarah is busy preparing snacks for Cooper and Paige, who are in the kitchen coloring. Joe is sitting in the dining room, playing his guitar. The dark wood doorframe between the kitchen and dining room acts as a frame that visually contains Joe and separates him from the rest of the family. The wallpaper in the dining room is much darker than the paint in the kitchen and it acts as a mat for the doorframe, emphasizing Joe’s physical separation through color, framing, and depth. The reverse shot (from Joe’s perspective) also uses the doorframe to accentuate the physical distance between Joe and the family, and he only crosses this visual threshold when Sarah asks him to watch the children.

When Joe enters the kitchen, Sarah retreats to the dining room, maintaining a physical space between them. This disconnect is highlighted by the fact that Joe is noticeably out of focus, making him seem smaller and farther away. Kitty asks Sarah if her marriage is getting any better and Sarah tells her about couples therapy, providing insight into the distance: she and Joe have been having marital problems and, we can assume, are experiencing the emotional turmoil that normally accompanies such problems.

As I established earlier, a shot-reverse shot set-up helps to establish distance between two characters by juxtaposing them and framing them by themselves. This set-up is employed in many episodes throughout the season, particularly when Sarah and Joe are arguing (*Sexual Politics, Love is Difficult, Bad News, Grapes of Wrath, Favorite Son*). They are framed much tighter—and together—only when they share intimate, loving moments (*An Act of Will, Affairs of State, Northern Exposure, Bad News*), but the extreme closeness in these shots tends to further accentuate the distance that exists between them in the other, more frequent shot-reverse shot set-ups.

In some cases, distance and closeness are implied in the same scene as Sarah and Joe transition from anger to weary affection. In these scenes, the disconnect and emotional distance between Sarah and Joe is temporarily bridged, and an emotional connection is partially regained. A perfect illustration of this point occurs late in the season, when Sarah and Joe are in the midst of yet another rocky patch. Sarah has admitted to Joe that she almost had an affair with a former colleague from her job at Northlight Coffee and has found out that Joe kissed Rebecca, her newly discovered alleged half-sister (*Grapes of Wrath*).

The scene begins with a medium shot of Sarah, packing Paige and Cooper’s backpacks. Joe enters the frame behind her, but is kept distinctly out of focus as he asks her if she wants coffee. As she ignores his question, the camera reverses to show us her back. He begins to walk closer to her, but the camera immediately cuts to a medium-close shot of Joe—a technique that keeps them at a distance despite his attempt to physically fill the void between them. He asks her if she is going to the opening of her brother’s new winery, and she says she doesn’t want to go (*Grapes of Wrath*). As the conversation progresses, the camera returns to a medium-close shot of Sarah, with Joe still out of focus. Similar to the example discussed above, this lack of focus gives the illusion that he is farther away than he actually is and creates the sense that they are on two different planes of vision—a metaphor, one could argue, for their entire relationship.

A series of shot-reverse shot medium-close ups (from the chest and up) of each of them follow as Joe persists in trying to persuade her that she should go to the winery. Then, when Joe says “I’ll go with you,” he is framed in tighter proximity to Sarah (from the shoulder and up). This closeness is maintained as he reestablishes their bond, saying, “Yeah, I’ll take the heat. I want them [her family] to know...I want you to know that I’m still in this [marriage]” (*Grapes of Wrath*). Sarah looks down sullenly, seemingly unsure of Joe’s commitment and their chance of success as a couple. In this look, we realize that while Joe can fill the physical space between them, Sarah does not share his optimism about their future—a revelation that maintains the emotional disconnect between them.

As these examples have illustrated, the emotional distance that grows between Sarah and Joe is visually embedded in their scenes. These patterns are maintained throughout their therapy sessions, a trip to Tommy’s vineyard, and their many vicious fights. In these fights, Sarah and Joe often allude to their dissatisfaction with one another and intimate that they need more than their marriage can provide.

#### “Honestly, am I enough?”: Dissatisfaction, Guilt, & the Search for More

There are three external characters involved in Sarah and Joe’s search for something more: Noah Guare, Vanessa, and Rebecca Harper. Noah is the object of Sarah’s lust throughout the season. He is a former colleague from Northlight Coffee, with whom Sarah almost had an affair. Although Sarah wants

her marriage to work, her heart and affections remain linked to Noah. Joe, on the other hand, becomes involved with Vanessa and Rebecca in his search for more. Vanessa is the mother of one of Paige's friends who often comes over for coffee when their daughters have play dates. Rebecca is a 21 year old woman the Walkers assume is William's illegitimate daughter. She shares Joe's love of music and the guitar.

Before I explore Sarah's relationship with Noah and Joe's associations with Vanessa and Rebecca, I will establish how Sarah and Joe view each other. As with any tumultuous relationship, their views seem to change with the wind. They are sickeningly sweet to each other when times are good, but more often, they resort to degrading one another in bouts of anger and frustration. In a particularly telling argument, Sarah tells Joe exactly what she thinks of him, contending that Joe cannot see the "truth" about himself: that he is "a failed musician with two failed marriages under his belt and three kids he can't support" (*Bad News*). Sarah suggests Joe is a professional, personal, and economic failure and blames him for the breakdown of their marriage. In response, Joe shouts, "There's the typical Sarah. Belittling everything I say, telling me I am less than...As far as you're concerned, I don't do anything right" (*Bad News*). Apparently Sarah has a history of dismissing Joe and minimizing his opinions, his contributions to her life, and seemingly, his very existence in relation to hers. "So it's all my fault? I drove you to seek out other women?" Sarah asks (*Bad News*). Trying to restore his ego, Joe assertively responds, "at least other women, they don't look at me like I am some insignificant burden, like I'm not worthy of being with you" (*Bad News*).

Noah, on the other hand, appreciates Sarah's professional abilities and knowledge in a way that Joe, who has never been in a professional setting with her, cannot. Sarah and Noah's mutual attraction is introduced in the series' first episode, after the unstable nature of Sarah and Joe's marriage is established. Noah calls Sarah to get her opinion about a new advertising campaign Northlight Coffee plans to run. During this meeting we find out that Sarah designed the primary marketing plan the company has been using. Noah says that he asked her in because he wanted to make "sure [he] wasn't crazy" about the logic behind the new campaign, suggesting Sarah is the expert (*Patriarchy*). Sarah, then, is positioned as the

talented, intelligent and rational businesswoman she perceives herself to be. To her delight, Noah seems to share her perception.

Their conversation quickly turns from the campaign to personal matters. Sarah lies to Noah when he asks if her job at Ojai Foods has allowed her to spend more time at home and if her relationship with Joe has improved. His questions alert us to the fact that Sarah's fast-track job at Northlight was a cause of her domestic turmoil, and that her move to Ojai Foods was to be the solution to the problem. When he asks her if their attraction to each other caused her to leave Northlight, Sarah again skirts the truth, explaining, "No, not at all. We have lives, families. We knew where the line was" (*Patriarchy*). Sarah and Noah could not consummate their lust without risking irreparable damage to their personal lives—a risk Sarah was unwilling to take. Wanting her kids to be "part of something whole," Sarah made her family a priority over the potential for romantic happiness (*Grapes of Wrath*). Sarah exits Noah's office, walks to her car and, once inside, breaks into tears. While she sobs, the lyrics of a song tell the story of Sarah's heartache:

'Cause everybody's got the way I should feel  
Everybody's talking how I can't can't be in love  
But I want want wanna be your love for real (Yamagata, 2004, track 1).

Sarah is the "I" in these lyrics because she is the only one in the camera's sight and "your" refers to Noah because the scene explores her longing for him. The lyrics are particularly poignant because, as a married woman, society dictates that Sarah should not love a man who is not her husband. Yet, as we find out later, being with Noah "is like vertigo" for Sarah—a whirlwind sensation unlike anything she seems to experience with Joe (*Love is Difficult*). Sarah tells Nora that although "nothing happened [between her and Noah], it could have. There was a connection. [Noah] had passions and made himself in the world" (*Love is Difficult*). For Sarah then, the attraction to Noah stems in part, from the common ground they share: they went to business school together, worked as a team for Northlight Coffee, had similar passion and drive, and were self-made successes. Noah has seen Sarah in all her professional glory and realizes she is a sensitive and caring partner—two aspects of the person Sarah wants to be (in addition to being a good mother).

The self-worth Sarah gets from Noah is accompanied by guilt and emotional pain. She reveals these feelings to Noah, saying, “being in sync with a man who is not your husband [the way she is with Noah] is almost as painful as not being in sync with your husband” (*An Act of Will*). In his scenes with Sarah, Noah is a subconscious replacement for Joe, so the fact that Sarah is in sync with Noah because he has passions and has “made himself in the world” implies that she is not in sync with Joe because he has not (*Love is Difficult*). This suggestion minimizes Joe’s work within the home and with the children, making it seem less important than her career. In Sarah’s mind, Noah is an equal where Joe is not; Noah can challenge her, appreciate her, and seems to see only the qualities that comprise her ideal self.

Joe has conflated his ideal self with his past. In a therapy session, he says Sarah is always angry at him, “at who [he] is” as a man (*Love is Difficult*). He says that when he met Sarah he was young and “in a band...living that [rock and roll] life,” but that he settled down to make a home with her (*Love is Difficult*). The juxtaposition of the past—“I *was* in a band, I *was* young...”—and the present—“I don’t know why she is so angry at me. At who I *am*”—suggests that Joe likes to think of himself as a young musician rather than as a ‘housewife’ whose spouse harbors disdain towards almost everything he values (*Love is Difficult*). Sarah doesn’t share Joe’s love of music. She can’t understand why he is so lonely within his domestic role and accuses him of looking for something outside of the marriage. For a time, she believes he has found it in Vanessa, the mother of one of Paige’s friends.

After work one day, Sarah returns home to find Vanessa and Joe laughing while he teaches her how to play the guitar. Although we hardly ever see Vanessa again, this brief encounter provides Sarah with enough evidence to convince her that Joe is losing interest in their marriage. At the time Sarah says she not jealous of Vanessa, but later, confesses that she “felt like the other woman when [she] walked in[to the house]” (*Sexual Politics*). Joe asserts that he does not care for Vanessa like that, but Sarah becomes obsessed with the idea, contending that they were “connecting” on a more intimate level than friendship (*Sexual Politics*). Many episodes later, Sarah tells Joe that “when [she] saw [him] with Vanessa, [she] thought [he] must have been feeling what [she] had been feeling with Noah,” suggesting that she believes Joe’s relationship with Vanessa rests on the same building blocks as her relationship

with Noah: the common ground they share and the feelings of self-worth and confirmation Vanessa can provide (*Love is Difficult*).

Still, Joe's associations with Vanessa and later, Rebecca, are different than Sarah's relationship with Noah. While Sarah seeks a professional and personal equal, Joe seems to want a relationship in which he can have the upper hand—a luxury he does not have with Sarah. Vanessa and Rebecca, on the other hand, each want to learn from Joe and establish their connections to him literally over his expertise: his guitar. During these encounters, Joe boasts of his musical abilities, claiming that he is one of “six people on the planet who can make [a certain guitar] chord” and that they are “lucky” to be learning from him (*Game Night*). This initial bond is strengthened through other avenues: with Vanessa, it is the fact that she understands the minutiae of his daily life because she too is a parent who works out of the home. Given the 20 year age gap between Joe and Rebecca, their bond is strengthened not through a comparison of responsibilities, but through their outsider status in relation to the Walkers. “It's like they have this whole rhythm thing going on and you're the extra beat” her tells her (*Game Night*).

Throughout the season, Joe maintains that despite what Sarah thinks, Vanessa is only a friend, and that this friendship has nothing to do with their marital troubles. When he is suddenly unable to “finish” while he and Sarah are making love, though, Sarah is quick to blame his supposed feelings for Vanessa. In a therapy session she asks:

**SARAH:** Do you think maybe you're thinking about someone else, like, you don't really want to be there with me?

**JOE:** That's not true. I get tired taking care of the kids, and teaching...

**SARAH:** Oh come on, Joe. I don't think when we're making love you're thinking about teaching.

**JOE:** Just say it then.

**SARAH:** It's Jessica's mom, Vanessa. You can't let go with me because you're thinking about her and you feel guilty.

**DOCTOR:** Vanessa?

**JOE:** The mother of one of Paige's friends that Sarah is convinced I have a thing for. Which is not true.

**SARAH:** I just think this whole withholding thing began when you became friends with her. You know, teaching her how to play 'Proud Mary' or whatever it was. (*Love is Difficult*)

Sarah is actually projecting her behavior and feelings of guilt onto Joe. She admits that she used to fantasize about Noah when she was in bed with Joe, no longer satisfied with him. Here, she asserts that

the reason Joe is not sexually satisfied with her is not because she is unable to please him, but because she is not Vanessa. Sarah postulates that Joe's desire for a woman who is not his wife causes guilt that ultimately blocks his pleasure. It is interesting that Sarah believes guilt is enough to hinder Joe's pleasure, but that it was not enough to stop her from achieving pleasure from her own fantasies.

The guilt Joe supposedly feels over Vanessa is brought to full fruition during an encounter with Rebecca. Sarah makes a deal with Rebecca that Joe will teach her how to play the guitar in exchange for babysitting. While Sarah is at work and the children are at school, Rebecca comes over for her first lesson. Joe brags about his musical knowledge and after much flirtation, kisses her. He is so overcome with guilt that he takes Sarah on a romantic weekend get-away to make up for the indiscretion. When Sarah confronts Joe about the kiss, he has very little to say for himself. "I feel awful that it happened...[and] the second it happened, I stopped" he claims (*Bad News*).

The revelations surrounding Sarah and Joe's search for more ultimately leave them in what Sarah calls "relationship purgatory, which feels more like relationship hell" (*Grapes of Wrath, Favorite Son*). "It's not even about the kiss [with Rebecca] anymore," she tells Kitty. "Things have been said. I don't know how to go back, [but] I'm too scared to move forward" (*Grapes of Wrath*). Sarah and Joe both feel guilty because they are more "in sync" with other people than they are with each other.

Try as they might, Sarah and Joe cannot maintain the life they have created because they are too lonely, bitter, and 'out of sync' with each other to stay together. When the season ends, Sarah and Joe formally separate in an attempt to work through their issues and hopefully, reconcile happier and healthier. Realizing that her marriage is potentially irreversibly damaged, Sarah, sobbing, asks her therapist: "Why can't you say anything? One thing to make this feel better?" (*Love is Difficult*). The doctor replies:

**DOCTOR:** There are no shortcuts, Sarah. In life or in love. This pain must be felt. The alternative is much worse. It's what makes us special, what makes us beautiful, what makes us worthy. The pain of how we love. But that pain is accompanied by something else, isn't it? Hope? With your pain there is hope. And that is where you are. Somewhere between agony and optimism and prayer. So you're human. You're alive. And that's what we have. (*Love is Difficult*)

This monologue summarizes much of Sarah's life and her relationship with Joe as it is shown in the series' first season. She experiences a great deal of pain—the death of her father, revelations of his betrayals, a massive reorganization at Ojai Foods, her daughter's diabetic diagnosis, and the crumbling of her marriage. But with her pain, there is hope. Hope that she will one day come to terms with her father and his actions. Hope that Ojai Foods will survive and prosper. Hope that her daughter will live a full life in spite of her illness, and hope that she and Joe can overcome the obstacles to their happiness and recapture the fun-loving, happy couple they used to be.

## CHAPTER 7

## MATERNAL FEROCITY IN THE WORKPLACE &amp; HOME

Throughout the first season, we come to know Sarah through other character's perceptions of her and through glimpses into her relationships. Her husband Joe typically emphasizes her domineering and dismissive tendencies, while Noah, her former business partner, sees her kindness, sensitivity, and business acumen. Tommy, her jealous brother and second-in-command at Ojai Foods argues she "thrives on control" and isn't trusting or objective in many of her business dealings (*The Other Walker*). Her father, on the other hand, describes her as a "wonderful, beautiful, [and] brilliant woman" with a keen business sense and a wealth of knowledge (*Love is Difficult*). Sarah's maternal status is rarely highlighted by the men who surround her, but is a defining aspect of her personality to the women in her life (*Family Portrait*). Her mother calls her "supermom," a successful working professional and devoted mother; her sister, Kitty, views Sarah as a "natural" in both business and domestic environments (*Family Day*).

Sarah has a powerful, maternal instinct<sup>7</sup> that manifests itself in both the professional and domestic spheres. She often becomes "a lioness protecting her cubs" from threats of corporate bankruptcy, personal intimidation or, in her children's cases, disease and teenage angst (*Family Day*). This protective instinct is a common thread weaving together her professional life and her personal life, yet it is manifested in different ways. In this chapter, I explore Sarah's interactions with Ojai employees (an extended family, of sorts), Holly Harper, and her children to illustrate her maternal instinct and the ferocity with which she protects the people she loves.

---

<sup>7</sup> I recognize the essentialism inherent in the term "maternal instinct." Here, I view it not as something "hard wired" into the female brain, but rather as a commonly used, socially constructed understanding of a mother's bond with her child(ren).

“She knows her stuff”: Sarah the Businesswoman

Sarah is a businesswoman. After graduating with an MBA, she worked for Northlight Coffee, a corporation portrayed as having a Starbucks-like popularity. On the “fast-track” in the marketing/public relations department, she took a leave of absence to work for her father’s organic food company, Ojai Foods. She welcomed the opportunity because, she tells Noah, Northlight’s “fast-track” was “eating up [her] life,” leaving her with almost no time to spend with Joe and their children (*An Act of Will*). This narrative is reminiscent of the choice her mother, Nora, made as a young secretary “on the fast-track.” Again, success at work and a happy home life are set up as mutually exclusive. Rather than abandon her career, choosing the route her mother had decades before, Sarah chose to work for her father, believing he understood her need to spend more time at home and could make it possible. To Sarah, the job at Ojai Foods represented the possibility of balance without sacrifice of career or family.

Sarah’s father’s death and the company’s financial troubles, however, demand that Sarah spend long hours at work and leaves little time for her family. Sarah is appointed president of the company in her father’s will (*An Act of Will*). Her younger brother Tommy, the oldest son and the Walker child most involved with Ojai Foods, believed he would succeed his father as president and is disheartened and angry by his father’s trust in Sarah’s skills over his own. This anger fuels a persistent power struggle with Sarah.

“You are not responsible for everyone, Sarah”: Protecting the Ojai Foods Family

When Sarah becomes president of Ojai Foods, the company is near bankruptcy. Sarah, Saul (Sarah’s uncle), and Tommy discover that William had embezzled \$15 million from the company and had used his employees’ pension funds to cover his tracks. As president, Sarah is “the only one with the authority to fix [the shortfall]” and protect the business; she can be held legally responsible for her father’s actions (*Date Night*). She initially refuses not to report the shortfall to the government and seeks legal advice. According to the lawyer, Sarah has three options: sell company assets to replenish the funds, declare bankruptcy, or falsify the company’s financial statement and go to prison if discovered (*An Act of Will*).

Sarah's protective instinct emerges; one of her chief concerns as she deals with the crisis is the company's employees. The government will close Ojai Foods if the shortfall is reported and the employees will lose their jobs, benefits, and retirement funds without hope of reimbursement. A terrible situation for any business, this is particularly upsetting to Sarah. Ojai Foods is after all a family business; employees are regarded as members of the family. Thus, Sarah is in essence the "family" matriarch. Many of the employees have been with the company since Sarah's youth and she feels a particular closeness to them that most executives do not. This affection stands counter to her business school training. The employees are no longer hypothetical figures on a business exam—they are real human beings who have helped build the company from the ground up. They share much of her family's past and while most classic, textbook-oriented, executives would view them as liabilities to be downsized, Sarah views it as her responsibility to protect their interests.

In a conversation with Noah—a classic, by-the-book executive—Sarah reveals her feelings of responsibility and the complicated decisions she must make.

**SARAH:** Dad left some serious problems at the company. Beyond serious.

**NOAH:** You think you might have to shut it down?

**SARAH:** Maybe. Probably. I can't go into details. I can't even tell Joe.

**NOAH:** You know what they said at business school—almost all family businesses fail in successive generations. I mean, if Ojai is already having problems...

**SARAH:** We should kick it to the curb, according to our M.B.A.

**NOAH:** That's the smart plan.

**SARAH:** It's not that easy. Losing Ojai, it'd devastate my family.

**NOAH:** Come on You have no idea what families can survive. Besides, you are not responsible for everyone, Sarah. You always took on everyone else's problems. (*An Act of Will*)

To Noah, adhering to business theory and voluntarily closing Ojai Foods is the "smart" thing, the rational thing, to do. His comment to Sarah implies that her refusal to do so is somehow illogical or unwise. Her efforts to make Noah understand the situation is neither as black and white nor the decision as obvious as an MBA case study introduces the complexity interjected by her personal involvement with the company and its employees. According to the textbooks, emotion has no place in the boardroom or in the business formula. Sarah realizes this, but cannot escape her emotions, her attachment to her employee "family," or her family. Losing Ojai Foods would "devastate" them and Sarah feels it is her duty to protect them from

that devastation. Characteristically, Sarah assumes everyone else's stress to keep them from having to live through the discomfort themselves.

Tommy and Saul have no formal business education, but like Noah, they seem to adhere to a 'by-the-book' rationality. They remain relatively unconcerned about the employees' welfare and focus instead on evaluating divisions and selling small assets. They try to get Sarah to act quickly and decisively, but despite their efforts, Sarah stalls. Realizing her MBA can't provide an answer she can live with, Sarah asks Tommy for advice, conceding, "right now I trust your gut more than my MBA." (*Affairs of State*). She follows Tommy's advice, agreeing to wait six months before calling the U.S. Attorney, hoping they can find a way to replenish the funds themselves. "I love what our family has built here [Saul], and I want to keep it alive" she says. "Not just for us, but for all the people who work here. People who trusted this family, who trusted this company" (*Affairs of State*).

Saul begins selling properties and other small assets immediately. Sarah's concern remains centered on protecting the employees. She doesn't tell them about the shortfall because she doesn't want to diminish their trust in the management, start a panic, or ruin her father's legacy with the revelation that he stole "millions of dollars from [the people] who worked tirelessly to make him rich in the first place" (*For the Children*). Her persistent worry, her secrecy, her delay in making a decision, and her sense of responsibility are manifestations of a powerful maternal instinct. She tries to keep the employees at arms length from the problem, and by extension, from the panic, anxiety, and anger that accompany it.

After extensive deliberation, council, and discussion, Sarah decides to build Ojai Foods into a major distributor, selling major company assets—the orchards, refining plants, and canneries—to replace the employees' retirement funds and rectify her father's crime. This decision is 'good business.' The reorganization will protect the employees, whose jobs will be saved through contractual agreements with buyers. It will also protect the Walker family's lifestyle, saving the company that makes that lifestyle possible. After making the decision, Sarah shares a moment with Tommy, admitting to him:

**SARAH:** (*to Tommy*) You were right, I was afraid to make a decision. This is going to cause a lot of pain. I just wasn't up for it. Seems to be a reoccurring issue with me at the moment. (*Date Night*)

Sarah's fear of causing pain is arguably magnified by the fact that she has historical, personal, and economic ties to the company.<sup>8</sup> Management decisions are often complex and seldom occur without serious consideration and reflection. Sarah considers both fact and feeling, but ultimately, is not naïve. She recognizes the harsh realities of business. She knows a massive reorganization will illuminate inefficiencies, which will lead to job losses. The reorganization she helps devise might be viewed as an achievement of a kind of work-life balance. She does what is best for the company, but is able to balance those 'work' interests with the interests of her 'families,' safeguarding both the employees' futures and the economic foundation of the Walker family.

"Stay the hell away from my family": Sarah versus Holly

Sarah is a slow, methodical decision maker, cautiously exploring options before committing to a course of action. However, when she is forced to interact with Holly Harper—her father's life-long mistress—Sarah is decisive, cunning, and calculating. Her behavior stands in sharp opposition to the softer, nurturing persona we so often see. Again, Sarah's protective instinct emerges; she characterizes Holly as a villain threatening Ojai Foods and the Walker family and justifies her questionable behavior by saying that she has the company's best interests in mind.

Before his death, Sarah's father used \$15 million he embezzled from Ojai Foods to buy land in Nevada valued at \$1.2 million. Sarah, Tommy, and their younger brother Kevin discover that in the complex land deal their father created, the Army will buy the land for \$30 million. The joy Sarah feels as she realizes Ojai Foods' survival is assured is short-lived. Holly Harper owns a third of the land and the Walker family can't liquidate it unless she sells her share. Feeling betrayed, righteous, and spiteful, Sarah immediately asserts:

**SARAH:** (*sternly*) I'm not giving that woman \$10 million. Let's buy out her third before we sell to the Army.

**TOMMY:** Yeah, but if we had that kind of cash, this wouldn't be a problem.

---

<sup>8</sup> We come to understand fear as part of her maternal instinct through the context of the series. At the time the decision to reorganize is made, Sarah is also struggling with her daughter's recent diabetes diagnosis and her unwillingness to give her daughter insulin shots for fear of inflicting pain.

**SARAH:** No, they valued the land at \$1.2 million, we can afford a third of that.

**TOMMY:** You mean screw Holly.

**SARAH:** (*shrugging*) It worked for Dad. (*Light the Lights*)

The swiftness with which Sarah formulates and authoritatively articulates a plan that is ethically questionable stands in stark contrast to angst that dominated her earlier business decisions. Sarah wants to curtail Holly's involvement with the Walker family; she wants to withhold the monetary trust she feels her father took from the family to give to his mistress. Sarah's maternal, protective instinct—now focused on the threat rather than the group she is protecting—is vicious, ferocious and, in many ways, stereotypically masculine. Adopting aggressive, seemingly violent language, Sarah likens herself and her actions to those of her father.

Sarah is complex; her behavior nuanced. Seemingly motivated by personal revenge rather than the best interests of the company, Sarah is neither objective nor fair in her treatment of Holly. Tommy and Saul do not share Sarah's intense hatred of Holly, but they willingly comply with the deception she proposes. When they meet with Holly and offer to buy her share of the land for \$400,000, Tommy and Saul are visibly uneasy. They fidget, look to each other for support, and avoid extended eye contact with Holly. Sarah, on the other hand, stares directly at Holly throughout the meeting, sits completely still, and calmly lies to Holly. Tommy, Saul, and Sarah have switched perspectives: the men are as nervous and unsure as Sarah was before, and Sarah is ready to act.

Growing increasingly uncomfortable with the situation and with Sarah's cavalier attitude, Saul confronts Sarah.

**SAUL:** I'm stunned, Sarah. You can live comfortably with this deception?

**SARAH:** Weighing Holly Harper's well-being against the future of this company? Yeah, I am. I'm pretty comfortable, Saul. I think you would be too if you weren't thinking with your...

**SAUL:** I may be weakened by my personal [romantic] feelings, but you're blinded by yours. You tell me this isn't more about screwing over your father's mistress than saving his company.

**SARAH:** It's about building a future for the company, Saul. Screwing Holly is merely a perk. (*Light the Lights*)

Saul's shock at Sarah's behavior emphasizes its deviance from the normally compassionate, friendly, and rational Sarah to which he has become accustomed. Though she continues to rationalize her decisions on the basis that they are best for the company, Sarah is clearly pleased to be deceiving Holly. Ultimately,

Saul appeals to Sarah's sense of familial responsibility to get her to tell Holly the true value of the land: "your father wanted her to have this. You might even say it was his final wish. Are you prepared to deny him that?" (*Light the Lights*). Sarah is torn between protecting her family from the woman who helped her father betray them, and carrying out her father's wish despite her personal feelings.

As Holly explains her terms of sale, Sarah views her with condescension. Arrogantly leaning back in her chair, she smirks as she tells Holly, "I presume you know absolutely nothing about business," as if her experience and formal training places her above Holly (*Light the Lights*). When Holly asks for an office at Ojai Foods, claiming that she has several projects she wants to develop for the company, Sarah's condescension reemerges.

**SARAH:** (*mockingly*) 'Projects.' That's so cute, it's adorable. (*sternly*) It's not how business is done. There is a process. Everything is vetted.

**HOLLY:** (*angry*) Do you think it is possible for you to listen to anything I say objectively?

**SARAH:** (*pause*) We'll find you an office. Just try to stay out of the way. (*Light the Lights*)

Sarah realizes she must consent to Holly's request, because Holly is now one of the company's largest single shareholders. But, she continually minimizes Holly's credibility as a businesswoman, mockingly calling her potential business ventures "cute" and "adorable."

Holly convinces Tommy and Saul that one of her projects, a winery, is a good investment for Ojai Foods. Sarah refuses to consider it seriously because it was Holly's suggestion and uses her power as president to block the winery's approval.

**SARAH:** (*authoritatively*) If Holly wants to overturn my decision as president, she's welcome to go to the Board and get 75% of the vote to overrule me. Then again (*with smile*), probably not.

**SAUL:** She still has a considerable amount of Ojai stock, Sarah.

**SARAH:** (*haughtily*) Saul, if any major stockholder came in here with the same ridiculous proposal, they would get the same result (*Saul shakes head 'no'*). And as for Holly, as long as we don't have a gold-digging mistress division, she's of absolutely no use to Ojai Foods or to me. (*Valentine's Day Massacre*)

Again, Sarah's lack of objectivity is apparent. Though Saul and Tommy believe it to be an interesting option, in Sarah's estimation the winery is "ridiculous." Sarah's haughty smile as she suggests that Holly would be unable to overrule her reveals that Sarah is cunning and high-handed. She won't allow her decisions to be overturned, particularly by a person she deems to be less important, less informed, and

less deserving than herself. Sarah works to undermine Holly at every opportunity, believing that the affection her father apparently had for Holly gives her power. Verbally reducing Holly to a “gold-digging mistress” of “no use” to anyone, Sarah simultaneously expresses her disdain, minimizes Holly’s importance to Sarah’s father, and diminishes her stature as a threat (*Valentine’s Day Massacre*).

Finally, Sarah persists in creating distance between herself and Holly through name-calling and characterizing Holly as a classic villain. As her opposite, Sarah becomes the heroine in her own mind, trying to rescue her family and business from Holly’s evil clutches. Sarah’s interactions with Holly become an all-out war that places Sarah and the Walker family on one side and Holly on another. Sarah tries to convince Saul and Tommy that Holly’s is a threat, calling her “evil,” “a nut job,” “a gold-digger,” a “piece of work,” and a “lying bitch” (*Valentine’s Day Massacre; Mistakes Were Made Part I*). This name-calling reinforces the division between the two sides and emphasizes the ferocity of Sarah’s protective instinct. She boldly accuses Holly of manipulating everyone around her and flies into a rage when she finds Saul at Holly’s house, evidently having spent the night. Saul stands between the two women during Sarah’s tirade, a visual metaphor for his position in this war. Sarah concludes, telling Holly, “I don’t care what you do, just stay the hell away from my family.” Turning to leave, she looks at Saul and says, “You’ve got a decision to make old man” (*Mistakes Were Made Part I*). Saul’s relationship with Holly has made him a potential threat, and Sarah is willing to cut him off from the Walker family without question or consideration.

Holly refuses to be cast aside and convinces Tommy to buy the winery Sarah blocked. Sarah is shocked and dismayed at Tommy’s decision to leave Ojai Foods, but says that after all the months of haggling with Holly, she “can’t fight anymore. Not with anyone” (*Love is Difficult*). Tearing and visibly worn down, Sarah doesn’t argue his decision. Tommy bridges the division Sarah has created between the Walkers and Holly, but unlike Saul, is in no risk of being cast out of the Walker family. Sarah is his oldest sibling, and although their relationship is competitive and adversarial at times, their familial bond is stronger than their pride. Characteristically wanting to have the last word, Sarah assures Tommy she will “have his back” in his new venture (*Love is Difficult*). “If [Holly] screws with you, I will kill her. I

swear to God I will,” she says. (*Love is Difficult*). Smiling, Tommy replies, “That’s what I’m counting on.”

### “Supermom” or Just Doing the Best She Can?: Sarah as Mother

Sarah is a daughter, a wife, a sibling, a working professional, and a mother. These roles intersect to construct her identity. Sarah is established as a caring parent at the moment she is introduced; she is preparing nutritional snacks for her children (*Patriarchy*). We often see Sarah doing typical parental tasks: packing Paige and Cooper’s backpacks, making their lunches, bringing them home from school, and supervising them as they color, play video games, hang out with friends, and do their homework. Many perceive her to be a “supermom,” seemingly successful in balancing career and family (*Family Day*). As we get to know her, however, we come to realize that all is not as it seems. Sarah’s conversations about her career preventing her from spending time with her children are tinged with an undertone of guilt, and even defeat. These feelings overpower Sarah when she promises to buy Paige a grass skirt for a school recital but forgets to go to the party store until the day before the performance.

When she leaves work that day, she joins Noah for coffee and by the time she reaches the store, all of the grass skirts have been sold. Sarah’s panic erupts into raw hysteria as she shouts at the stunned clerk:

**SARAH:** (*emotional*) Children have recitals and their parents, their mothers, can’t do it all and we rely on our local party store to keep up their end of the bargain so that our husbands and our children don’t despise us when we come home empty handed! (*An Act of Will*)

Here is intense sadness, frustration, and guilt. This emotional explosion is *not* about a grass skirt. Sarah’s failure to get the skirt symbolizes all the things made more difficult because Sarah works full-time. She doesn’t have time to make a skirt for Paige, and can’t even keep her promise of buying one. In this outburst, she acknowledges that as a mother, society expects her to be the primary caretaker for not only her children, but for her husband as well. She must ensure their needs and wants are met, regardless of other commitments. The price of failure? Being despised. At this moment, Sarah is a sympathetic character because she articulates the challenges of motherhood and reveals her own vulnerability. Rather

than a “bad mother” who is selfishly trying to have it all and sometimes coming up short, Sarah is a woman desperately seeking ways to make her decisions work.

There are only a handful of scenes that focus exclusively on Sarah’s relationships with her children, Paige, Cooper, and her stepson, Gabe. Sarah’s protective instinct is the foundation of these relationships, but she protects them in different ways. Gabe is present throughout the beginning of the season, but disappears halfway through, never to be seen again. That the writers include intense, emotional scenes between Gabe and Sarah suggests they must tell us something about Sarah. I believe these encounters are included not only to illustrate Sarah’s protective instinct, but also to remind us of the fragility of the bond between mother and child.

Gabe is a 15 year old boy forced to split his time between divorced parents. He usually suppresses his emotions and is secretive about his affairs, but we come to understand that he feels like an outsider who doesn’t belong. Sarah suspects something is wrong, but Gabe characteristically refuses to talk. He puts up a wall between himself and the rest of the family by reiterating that he is only Paige and Cooper’s half-brother. After being ostracized by his classmates during gym one day, Gabe engages in a fight and is sent to the principal’s office. Sarah leaves work to pick him up and, on the way home, tries to find out what “set him off.”

**GABE:** (*upset*) Why do you even want to know?

**SARAH:** (*assertively, like she assumes he knows*) Because you’re part of this family, Gabe.

**GABE:** (*stoic*) I’m not part of anyone’s family. (*Mistakes Were Made Part I*)

Now, acutely aware of what is wrong, Sarah blames herself. She realizes that as a parent, she can’t protect Gabe from everything, but the fact that she hasn’t protected his self-esteem by making him feel included is too much for her. Her guilt triggers her instinct to consciously convince him that he is loved.

She assumed that after being in a family unit for so long, Gabe would know how she feels about him. Realizing this not to be the case, she shares her feelings with him:

**SARAH:** We haven't done a very good job lately of including you in stuff. For that, I am really sorry.

**GABE:** It's alright.

**SARAH:** No, it's not. But, the point is—and I mean this with all my heart—I may not be your mom, but you are my son. When I look back at the end of my life, at all the things I've done, all the good and all the bad, I know I will be able to say, 'At least I had three great kids.'

**GABE:** Yeah?

**SARAH:** Yeah. (*Mistakes Were Made Part I*)

Sarah admits she has made mistakes; she should have been more aware of Gabe's feelings. But most notably, she shares her emotions. Her comment, "I may not be your mom, but you are my son" not only highlights the intense maternal bond she feels, but implies genuine interest in his life and her personal stake in his emotional well-being. These maternal qualities shape Sarah and Gabe's relationship (*Mistakes Were Made Part I*).

It is only after Sarah asserts the strength her maternal bond that Gabe confesses what happened at school, that he punched the other student because he called Gabe a "fag" (*Mistakes Were Made Part I*). It is significant that he confesses what happened after, rather than before, Sarah's speech because it seems the feelings of security and love Sarah expresses give him the confidence to admit he was made to feel like an outsider at school. Now feeling that he is part of the family and can count on their support, Gabe has the courage to solve his issues at school peacefully.

The strength of their bond is tested when Sarah catches Gabe trying to sneak vodka out of the house (*Family Day*). She is forceful in confronting him, but when Gabe appeals to the relationship they have recently forged and asks her not to tell Joe, she concedes. But, after her brother Justin goes to rehab, Sarah becomes concerned that Gabe might be headed down the same path. Joe agrees Gabe's actions were stupid, but thinks Sarah is overreacting and he says he'll deal with Gabe later. Sarah persistently talks over Joe and cuts him off, saying, "Gabe needs to realize there are lines he can't cross without facing the consequences [and] you're not helping him by ignoring this" (*Family Day*). With this criticism of his parenting skills, Joe shifts his anger from Gabe to Sarah and he orders Gabe to go upstairs. Sarah indicates that she is "trying to be a good mother to [Gabe]" because "that's what he wants when he's

here” (*Family Day*). Sarah’s use of “good” sets up a dichotomy, intimating that Gabe’s biological mother and Joe are bad parents, or at least, parents who don’t have Gabe’s best interests in mind.

Later, Joe finally agrees that Gabe should have consequences for his actions and disciplines him.

**GABE:** (*angry*) It’s not fair, she’s not my mother!

**JOE:** She is. In this house, she’s your mother. And I’ve seen for myself how fiercely she loves you. So trust me pal, she’s a lioness protecting her cub.

**GABE:** By what, grounding me?

**JOE:** Yeah, that is what we decided...(*looks at Sarah*)...together.

**SARAH:** Okay Gabe, for the next month on the nights that you’re here, no Internet, no iPod, no television.

**GABE:** (*angry*) What the hell do you want me to do then?

**JOE:** You could try hanging out with us and your brother and your sister.

**GABE:** (*resigned*) Fine. Can I go now?

**SARAH:** Sure. (*Gabe leaves*) I think I succeeded in making him hate me.

**JOE:** Hey, he hates us both now. Happy? (*Family Day*)

Gabe’s first comment shatters the bond Sarah has worked to create, claiming that because Sarah is not his biological mother, she cannot discipline him. Joe tries to reestablish the bond, reaffirming Sarah’s love and recasting her discipline as a product of that love and her protective instincts, calling Sarah a “lioness protecting her cub” (*Family Day*). That Joe likens Sarah to a lioness, again, tells us something about her. Lions are ferocious, territorial, and protective animals, particularly when their cubs are concerned; typically, the male lion is the protector. In this sense, the metaphor tells us about Joe as well. He does not lead the family. Sarah rules the pack and although her protective instinct is motivated by love, it is fierce. Joe’s assertion that he and Sarah decided upon Gabe’s punishment may be an effort to regain his paternal authority or an effort to “spread the blame.” In any case, Sarah’s proactive and consistent concern was the impetus for the disciplining process.

That Sarah explains the punishment reinforces her role as the disciplinarian and active protector. Joe just sits to the side, passive and complicit. After she hands down the punishment, Gabe’s eye contact—looking at her when she is talking, asking her, rather than Joe, if he can leave—suggests that he recognizes her authority. When Sarah says that she thinks Gabe “hates her,” she suggests that by disciplining him, she has truly stepped into a parental role for him. Now, he is a regular teenager,

emotionally and physically rebelling against his parents, rather than a seemingly outcast stepchild merely occupying a room in Sarah's house.

Sarah's biological children, Paige (age 8) and Cooper (age 6), are present in almost every episode. We come to understand Sarah's relationship with them through visual, non-verbal behaviors, rather than lengthy dialogue. Sarah is physically affectionate with them, regularly doling out hugs and kisses. She often spends time listening to their stories and jokes, playing games with them, and watching them perform skits before and after work. Although Paige and Cooper are rarely the center of our attention, Sarah is constantly attentive and aware, trying to keep them happy and content while providing structure and boundaries.

Sarah and Joe face their greatest parenting challenge early in the season when Paige is hospitalized and diagnosed with diabetes. Kitty notices her symptoms when she babysits one evening, but it isn't until Paige slips into a diabetic coma that Sarah and Joe finally notice and take her to the hospital. "I just feel so dumb that I didn't see it" Sarah tells the nurse, "She was right in front of me" (*Family Portrait*). Sarah and Joe, bogged down in the minutiae of daily suburban life and the turmoil of their marriage, failed to see what was happening and protect Paige's health before her physical condition became dire (a similar point is made by O'Brien in a posting on mommytrackd.com, 2009).

One day before Christmas while Sarah is giving Paige an insulin shot, Paige asks Sarah why she got diabetes, believing it is a punishment.

**PAIGE:** Mom? Why did I get diabetes? Was I bad?

**SARAH:** No, baby. It doesn't work like that. Bad things happen, but we have each other and we always will. You have to have faith.

**PAIGE:** I have faith that I'll get better.

**SARAH:** Babe, it'll get easier but you're always going to have diabetes. But I promise you, you will fight through it and you'll get stronger, and you'll see the magic you have that your daddy and I have seen in you your whole life. I love you more than anything else in the world.

**PAIGE:** (*giggling*) Even more than Cooper?

**SARAH:** (*smiling*) Oh, I have more love than both of you will ever need. (*hugs Paige*) (*Light the Lights*)

In assuring Paige that life will get easier, Sarah articulates her own experience, and convinces herself that things will get better. "Bad things" have happened to both of them, but Sarah employs family and love as

a shield to protect Paige from that unpleasantness. She says that they “have each other and [they] always will.” This sentiment suggests that there is an eternal home (whether literal or figural) to which Paige can return and find a safe haven from the troubles of the world, much the way Sarah continually returns to her mother Nora, and her childhood home. Pairing this sentiment with faith, Sarah’s comment becomes reminiscent of the speech her therapist gave her, when he told her that with pain there is hope (*Love is Difficult*). Sarah, knowing that, like her, Paige is confused and overwhelmed, attempts to give Paige a sense of hope. It will get easier, she says, suggesting they will both rise above the pain they feel. They *will* have wonderful lives.

Sarah’s realist perspective, however, ensures that while her children grow up with hope, dreams, and faith (in everything from Santa Claus to love), they are also protected from disappointment by the truth. In the exchange above, she doesn’t sugarcoat the fact that Paige will always have diabetes, but argues that love, family, and faith will help her persevere. Sarah makes a similar argument when she and Joe tell Paige and Cooper that Joe is moving out.

**SARAH:** It’s really important that you understand that this is not because of you or anything that you did, okay? Mommy and Daddy love you both more than anything else in the world.

**PAIGE:** But you don’t love each other anymore?

**SARAH:** Oh, honey. Of course we do.

**JOE:** Paige, how could I not love your mommy? She made you and Cooper and because of that, I will always love her. And we will always be a family, no matter where I live.

**PAIGE:** But how come we can’t live together? I don’t understand.

**SARAH:** Look, Paige. We’ve been having some grown up problems and its best if we have just a little time apart so that we can figure out how to fix them.

**JOE:** Yeah, it’s kind of like a time-out.

**COOPER:** Like when you do something bad? Did Daddy do something bad?

**SARAH:** No, Cooper. Daddy didn’t do anything bad.

**PAIGE:** Are you getting a divorce?

**SARAH:** No honey. We, um, we need just to take some time. Nothing’s been decided.

**PAIGE:** I don’t believe you. It’s just how Gabe said. He said that first Daddy moved away and then he got a divorce.

**SARAH:** Paige, I know this is hard and I am so sorry, but nothing’s going to change. We’re still going to be a family, okay? That’s not going to change. And you’re going to have the same room and you’re going to go to the same school and keep all your old friends, okay? (*Favorite Son*)

Asserting their split will not destroy the family, Joe and Sarah emphasize that they will always be a family and will always love each other. This, in conjunction with their insistence that the children’s lives will be the same, is intended to make the children feel better about the situation by preserving as many

aspects of their lives as possible. Sarah doesn't lie to Paige when she explains her marital trouble with Joe as "grown up problems," but she protects Paige and Cooper from the extent of the trouble. Saying that "nothing's been decided" about the couple's future, Sarah leaves the children with some hope that she and Joe will reconcile and the family will be together again. Sarah and Joe share this hope, but realize that reconciliation will be neither easy nor quick.

Although overwhelmed by emotion throughout the season, coping with revelations that shake the foundations of the Walker family, her family with Joe, and her work situation, Sarah never allows her children to see her upset—even in this scene where the family is literally torn apart. Gabe, Paige, and Cooper never hear their parents fight, and even though Sarah is often in tears or frustrated with Joe, she always presents a strong and rational front to the children. She is not unfeeling, of course, but she never breaks down when they are present. This control acts as a protective device because the children have no inkling of trouble; they believe everything is the way it's always been.

Sarah, while perhaps not a "supermom" (if any mother can be called that), is doing the best she can for her children. With the help of Joe and the Walkers, she is able to work and her children have most of their needs met. Sarah's maternal instinct is always apparent in her scenes with Gabe, Paige, and Cooper, and she uses love, family, discipline, honesty, and emotional control to protect them from life's unpleasantness. Although she is not always successful at protecting them, her caring nature and consistent efforts establish her as an involved parent trying hard to make her decisions work and be everything for everyone.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

#### Contributions, Limitations, & Opportunities for Future Research

This study provides evidence of Hall's (1993/1998) assertion that popular culture texts are sites of struggle. It also problematizes our basic understanding of television programming. Dow (1996) argues that television's "individualistic view of the world implies that most problems can be solved by hard work, good will, and a supportive family" and that "television programming does not deal well with complex social issues" (p. xxi). This analysis partly contrasts Dow's claim, arguing that while the representations are difficult to untangle and deconstruct, *Brothers & Sisters* is a television series trying to deal with a complex social issue. The series humanizes the abstract concepts surrounding maternal employment and makes them "real," but it relies on familiar stereotypes to tackle the issue. That it can't neatly package the issues speaks to their complexity, and that it devotes at least two major plotlines to them every week reveals their significance in our larger society. The series reveals the continued strength of patriarchy despite the popular, yet inaccurate, belief that we have moved past it.

Feminist and cultural studies scholars argue that "scholarly writing can and does do meaningful cultural work" (Nelson, 1996, p. 280). It is my hope that this analysis can help us begin to sort out the cultural discourse that surrounds us and can serve as a heuristic for future feminist television scholars.

This study was not without limitations, but these limitations provide opportunities for future research. First, based on the size of this project and the time required to do in-depth textual analysis, I was limited to the examination of one television genre—drama—and one series within that genre. Thus, I was unable to draw comparisons across several series. Future studies could extend this work into television news, sitcoms, made-for-TV movies, reality television, and other dramatic forms, such as process-oriented series (i.e. *Law & Order*), or workplace dramas (i.e. *Grey's Anatomy*) to explore how themes of

maternal employment and the meanings that are created differ according to context and generic constraints.

Second, this study was limited to the text itself, and cannot speak to issues of reception. Future studies could move beyond the text to study the audiences for these television texts to explore how they are being consumed and negotiated by actual viewers. These studies would benefit from using in-depth interviews, ethnographies, and participant observations with a sample of participants from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic classes, political affiliations, etc.

Third, I focused exclusively on the moment of representation, and cannot make claims about intent. Future studies could extend the study of working mothers in media to the moments of identity, production, regulation, and consumption to gain a fuller understanding of how meanings are not only created in the text, but how they circulate and are remade through culture.

Finally, *Brothers & Sisters* portrayed only the lives of an upper class white family, limiting my analysis of how race and class intersect with gender to create representations of working mothers. Future studies should extend this topic to series that have racial, economic, and gender preference diversity. Such work is desperately needed in feminist television criticism.

### Conclusions

Throughout our lives we have been getting profoundly contradictory messages about what it means to be an American woman. Our national mythology teaches us that Americans are supposed to be independent, rugged individuals who are achievement-oriented, competitive, active, shrewd, and assertive go-getters... Women, however, are supposed to be dependent, passive, nurturing types, uninterested in competition, achievement, or success, who should conform to the wishes of the men in their lives. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that these two lists of behavioral traits are mutually exclusive, and that women are stuck right in the middle. (Douglas, 1994, p. 17)

Media play an ideological and pedagogical role in our culture. They help us interpret and understand our world, and inform our values, attitudes, and perspectives. Media texts, then, are part of our cultural discourse. Debate about maternal employment has been steadily escalating in the media throughout the twentieth century, and has become particularly feverish since the 1990s. As a media scholar, feminist, and future working mother surrounded by this discourse, I wanted to see not only how

working mothers are represented in media, but what these representations say about working mothers' success and happiness. What I found, however, is that there are no easy answers, no definitive conclusions. This study has shown that television is a rich and complex battlefield on which the ideological struggles surrounding working mothers continue to be fought.

Although scholars have noted that the seemingly perfect and one-dimensional mothers of 1950s television were more complex than we may think, our cultural nostalgia for the decade camouflages that complexity. We may recognize the strict patriarchal division of labor in those homes, but we continue to view that version of motherhood as an easy, satisfying, and female role. For many, June Cleaver remains the epitome of televised motherhood. Some 60 years later, after many cultural changes, *Brothers & Sisters* is challenging even our understanding of motherhood as gendered. We see the mother role effectively filled by a man, but the anomaly serves as a constant reminder that we usually take the role for granted. The series questions the satisfaction motherhood is *supposed* to provide, often echoing the claims Betty Friedan made in 1963. Both Nora and Joe are experiencing “the problem that has no name,” finally beginning to ask, “is this all?” (Friedan, 1963, p. 15). It's as if they've both had the feminist movement's “click,” suddenly awakening to find themselves constrained in their own lives.

On the surface, *Brothers & Sisters*' story is contemporary. But, on closer examination, it's *The Feminine Mystique* revisited. Changing the faces of the characters involved, the series both complicates and reinforces our understanding of traditional gender roles. Nora, Joe, and Sarah consistently evaluate themselves and their roles in relation to each other, and when the text is considered in its entirety, it is clear that the rhetoric of ‘choice’ they employ masks the *should* that limits their options. These ‘shoulds’ are often the patriarchal expectations that are persistently tied to a specific sex or a specific role. Even though Sarah works, she believes that, like her mother, she *should* be married. She *should* have children. She *should* be devoted to her family. She *should* have a beautiful home. She *should* have a romantic relationship with her husband. Nora and Joe *should* be happy as homemakers. Everyone *should* be satisfied. But in fact, no one is.

*Brothers & Sisters*' story of motherhood and work is both generational and historical, particularly in its references to a nostalgic version of the 1950s. Although Sarah knows that her vision of the 1950s and of the supposedly iconic life her parents lived is fiction, she refuses to let go of those images. She carries them with her as both a reference point and a benchmark, against which she measures herself and her life. She is constantly struggling to reconcile the traditional 1950s understanding of womanhood and motherhood with her status as a modern mother in an infinitely more complicated and trying time. Sarah is the woman described by Douglas (quote above), stuck between the traditional domestic life she thinks she wants, "complete with two little kids and a picket fence," and the ambitions and passions that drive her and pull her from that life (*Bad News*).

At first glance, Nora and Joe's experiences seem to be very different. Nora is a version of traditional motherhood. She assumed the role of housewife and mother in the early 1960s and continues to play that role. As a man in a traditionally female role, Joe seems to be a representation of "progressive" motherhood, reifying the evolving face of American motherhood. Upon deeper examination, Nora and Joe's stories are in fact the same story. Both are the 'unhappy housewife' that fascinated Friedan (1963) decades ago.

To Sarah, Nora is the embodiment of an iconic life and a source from which Sarah draws her expectations of marriage and motherhood. Because Nora is immediately established as a "goodwife," we—like Sarah—assume that she has been happy, or at least comfortable, in her domestic role (Meehan, 1983). This understanding is complicated when she experiences the feminist movement's "click" after her husband's death. The discovery of his embezzlement, his 20-year affair with Holly Harper, and the existence of a potential daughter from that union, literally rips away Nora's life and the roles she has assumed in that life. It is only then that she begins to question her past happiness and to reflect on the patriarchal structures that have stifled her options. Her seemingly sudden, desperate search for an identity outside of motherhood and her home suggests that after having her consciousness raised, motherhood is no longer enough. It is important and rewarding, yes, but it alone can't provide the sense of self-worth or identity Nora seeks. And yet, it is difficult to move beyond the confines of that role. She tries to prove to

herself and to her children that she can indeed be more than a housewife and mother by re-entering the workforce after 40 years. But her office blunders only serve to magnify how isolated Nora has become in the domestic role. Her children know her only as their father's wife and their mother. It never occurred to them to see her any other way and now it appears they can't. They dismiss her attempts to re-create herself as a career woman, their own skepticism contributing to her failure to do so.

Ultimately, then, Nora remains constrained in what patriarchal society has deemed a woman's 'proper' place. She returns home not as a "goodwife," but as a matriarch. The only parental head of the family, Nora assumes more power than she had in her marriage, but she continues to be defined by her maternal role. She is a woman and matriarch fundamentally trapped in a patriarchal world. Nora isn't particularly happy, but she is resigned. "I made my choices, I just forgot for a minute they were the right choices," she tells her son (*Family Day*). She spends the remainder of the season convincing herself that her choices *were*, in fact, the "right choices."

On the surface, Joe's presence in the domestic role makes familiar representations—housewife and mother—unfamiliar. It is through Joe, however, that all of the subtle, nagging things that underlie Nora's story are explicitly articulated. He boldly declares he's lonely and that his loneliness is because he's deprived of adult interaction (*Sexual Politics*). He relinquished his power and allowed Sarah to make all the decisions about their life and is now "stuck" in a life he agreed to because he wanted Sarah to be happy (*Bad News*). His explicit critiques, however, are not grounded in his sex. He is not miserable because he is a man in a traditionally feminine role. It is the *role* that makes him miserable. Thus, Joe is the voice of the "problem with no name" (Friedan, 1963, p. 15). Nora becomes unhappy only after her children are grown, her husband is dead, and she reflects on choices she has made. Joe is unhappy while he is in the midst of it—his children are young and continue to need him. He's constrained in his role, yet he never tries to move outside it. In some ways, like Nora, he can't leave because even in divorce, Sarah would count on him as the children's caretaker.

The commonalities between Nora and Joe are striking. Both illustrate that although times have changed, we have progressed in many ways, and motherhood is no longer a simple, gendered term, our conception of the “good” mother has changed very little.

Sarah: An Embodiment of Our Cultural Confusion

[Sarah] has become the quietly brilliant representative of women who work and have families. (John Robin Baitz, creator of *Brothers & Sisters*, quoted by Abele 2007, p. A2)

We are used to having some sort of closure on a subject or story when we reach the end of a media text. The first season of *Brothers & Sisters*, however, ends with many issues unresolved and many questions left to ask. I recognize this open-endedness is due, in part, to the constraints of the medium—television producers have to leave viewers wanting more. But, I think it is more than that. It also speaks to the “no man’s land” in which many of the series’ characters, particularly Nora, Joe, and Sarah find themselves. Having moved between and beyond the socially constructed roles of housewife, mother, business executive, man, and woman, the representations that result are messy, complex, and fraught with contradiction. Each character questions the choices they’ve made, but are ultimately constrained by them.

The complexity of the representations enables viewers to interpret them differently. Some may walk away believing—as Nora does—that Sarah is the trifecta, the “supermom” balancing work and family. Others may see her as a woman focused too much on her career and neglecting her family. Still others could read her as someone in between those extremes, as I do, as a woman trying to be everything for everyone because she believes she should. I see Sarah as a more honest appraisal of modern American womanhood, trying to navigate a world full of contradictory messages, relationships, obligations, and expectations. The range of potential readings and definitions of “success” and “happiness” make a summative, consensual statement about working mothers’ success and happiness impossible. But, we know that Sarah has a personal idea of what these concepts mean and we know that every small, episodic success or failure is either a stepping stone or a roadblock to her efforts to achieve the goals she has set. Saving Ojai Foods from bankruptcy and protecting the employees are mini-victories towards success in business. Failing to protect her family from Holly Harper and failing to achieve an iconic romance are

setbacks towards personal happiness. Establishing a maternal bond with Gabe is a step towards success and happiness at home.

We know that as a character on a television drama, something has to be left unresolved. Sarah can't successfully save the business, have a strong maternal bond with her employees and children, and have a successful marital relationship. If she did, there would be no drama. "Working mother" implies drama, not only in the struggles that surround it in culture, but in the very term itself. It implies that there are only two roles—employee and mother—when in fact there are often three—employee, mother, and spouse. It is perhaps this emphasis on work and children, and not the fact that Sarah works, that creates dysfunction in her relationship with Joe. Indeed, the only time Sarah focuses on being a spouse is when she and Joe literally vacate their lives, leaving the children, home, and work behind. Judging their marriage against an iconic vision that is inherently flawed and unrealistic immediately sets Sarah and Joe up for disappointment and unhappiness. Although there is hope that her marriage can be salvaged if she and Joe work hard enough, Sarah is dogged by pain. She illustrates the painful struggle to balance traditional gender roles and the desire to move beyond them, but with that pain, *Brothers & Sisters* tells us, there is some hope that balance can one day be achieved. For now, however, Sarah's struggle continues.

## REFERENCES

- (2007, May 27). 2006-2007 Primetime wrap. *Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved November 1, 2009, from <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/>
- Abele, R. (2007, June 14). Brothers & Sisters: Special report. *Daily Variety*, p. A2.
- Abrams, L. (2006). Ideals of womanhood in Victorian Britain. BBC Online. Retrieved November 2, 2008, from [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian\\_britain/women\\_home/ideals\\_womanhood\\_06.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_06.shtml)
- Acosta-Alzuru, C. (1999). The American Girl dolls: Constructing American girlhood through representation, identity, and consumption. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Georgia. Athens, Georgia.
- Acosta-Alzuru, C. & Roushazimir, E.L. (2000). All you will see is the one you once knew: Portrayals from the Falklands/Malvinas War in U.S. and Latin American magazines. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 1(4), 301-345.
- Acosta-Alzuru, C. (2003a). Change your life!: Confession and conversation in Telemundo's 'Cambia Tu Vida.' *Mass Communication & Society*, 6(2), 137-159.
- Acosta-Alzuru, C. (2003b). "I'm not a feminist...I only defend women as human beings:" The production, representation and consumption of feminism in a telenovela. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 20(3), 269-294.
- Acosta-Alzuru, C. (2003c). Tackling the issues: Meaning making in a telenovela. *Popular Communication*, 1(4), 193-215.
- Ang, I. (1985). *Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*. London: Methuen.
- Anthony II, S.B. (1943). *Out of the kitchen, into the war*. New York: S. Daye, Inc.
- Baitz, J.R. (Creator). (2006). *Brothers & Sisters* [Television series]. Burbank: ABC.
- Bamberger, J. (1974). The myth of matriarchy: Why men rule in primitive society. In M.Z. Rosaldo &

- L. Lamphere (Eds.), *Woman, Culture, and Society* (pp. 263-280). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Belkin, L. (2003, October 26). The opt-out revolution. *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved September 25, 2008, from <http://www.nytimes.com/>
- Belkin, L. (2007, May 17). After baby, boss comes calling. *New York Times*. Retrieved September 25, 2008, from <http://www.nytimes.com/>
- Braybon, G. (1989). *Women workers in the First World War*. London: Routledge.
- Brown, C. (2002). *Rosie's mom: Forgotten women workers of the First World War*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Brunsdon, C. (1981). Crossroads: notes on soap opera. *Screen*, 22(4), 32-37.
- Brunsdon, C. (1996). A thief in the night: Stories of feminism in the 1970s at CCCS. In D. Morley & K. Chen (Eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (pp.276-286). London: Routledge.
- Brunsdon, C. (1997). Identity in feminist television criticism. In C. Brunsdon, J. d'Acci, & L. Spigel (Eds.), *Feminist television criticism: A reader* (pp. 114-125). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Brunsdon, C., d'Acci, J. & Spigel, L. (1997). Introduction. In C. Brunsdon, J. d'Acci & L. Spigel (Eds.), *Feminist television criticism: A reader* (pp.1-16). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Brunsdon, C. & Spigel, L. (2008). Introduction. In C. Brunsdon, J. d'Acci & L. Spigel (Eds.), *Feminist television criticism: A reader* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (pp.1-19). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Carey, J. (2002). A cultural approach to communication. In D. McQuail (Ed.), *McQuail's reader in mass communication theory* (pp.36-45). London: Sage Publications.
- Carter, C. & Steiner, L. (2004). *Critical readings: Media and gender*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Chafe, W. (1977). *Women and equality: Changing patterns in American culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cheplic, M. (2008). Sarah Palin: Supermom or in way over her head? Message posted to

<http://www.Families.com>

- Cirksena, K. & Cuklanz, L. (1992). Male is to female as \_\_\_\_ is to \_\_\_\_: A guided tour of five feminist frameworks for communication studies. In L. Rakow (Ed.), *Women making meaning* (pp. 18-44). New York: Routledge.
- Clarke, J., Hall, S., Jefferson, T. & Roberts, B. (1976). Subculture, cultures and classes. In S. Hall & T. Jefferson (Eds.), *Resistance through rituals* (pp.9-74). London: Hutchinson.
- Cohany, S.K. & Sok, E. (2007). Trends in labor force participation of married mothers of infants. *Monthly Labor Review*, 130(2), 9-16.
- Coontz, S. (1992). *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgic trap*. New York: Basic Books.
- Corley, C. (2008). Michelle Obama: The exec, mom and campaigner. National Public Radio. Retrieved March 2, 2009, from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93535521>
- Douglas, S.J. (1994). *Where the girls are: Growing up female with the mass media*. New York: Random House.
- Douglas, S.J. & Michaels, M.W. (2004). *The mommy myth: The idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined women*. New York: Free Press.
- Dow, B. (1990). Hegemony, feminist criticism and The Mary Tyler Moore Show. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 7, 261-274.
- Dow, B. (1996). *Prime-time feminism: Television, media culture, and the women's movement since 1970*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Dow, B. & Condit, C. (2005). The state of the art in feminist scholarship in communication. *Journal of Communication*, 55(3), 448-478.
- Du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L., Mackay, H. & Negus, K. (1997). *Doing cultural studies: The story of the Sony Walkman*. London: Sage Publications.
- Eller, C. (2000). *The myth of matriarchal prehistory: Why an invented past won't give women a future*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- Fiske, J. (1986). Television: Polysemy and popularity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 3, 391-408.
- Fiske, J. & Hartley, J. (2003). *Reading television*. New York: Routledge.
- Foner, P.S. (1982). *Women and the American labor movement: From the first trade unions to the present*. New York: The Free Press.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique*. New York: Dell.
- Galerstein, C. (1989). *Working women on the Hollywood screen: A filmography*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- Gitlin, T. (1978). Media sociology: The dominant paradigm. *Theory and Society*, 6, 205-253.
- Give Me My Remote. (2007, May 29). 2006-2007 Primetime Ratings. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from <http://www.givememyremote.com/remote/2006-07-primetime-ratings/>
- Goldin, C. (2006). The quiet revolution that transformed women's employment, education, and family. *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series*, w11953. Retrieved October 1, 2008, from [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=877458](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=877458)
- Golombisky, K. (in press). Feminist methodology. In L.Z. Leslie (Ed.), *Communication research methods in postmodern culture*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Gorham, D. (1982). *The Victorian girl and the feminine ideal*. London: Croom Helm.
- Graff, E.J. (2007, April 24). The mommy wars machine. *The Washington Post*, p. B1.
- Gramsci, A. (2006). Hegemony, intellectuals and the state. In J. Storey (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture* (pp. 210-216). London: Pearson.
- Grossberg, L. (1996). The circulation of cultural studies. In J. Storey (Ed.), *What is cultural studies?: A reader* (pp. 178-187). New York: Arnold.
- Grossberg, L., Wartella, E., Whitney, C. & Wise, J.M. (2006). *Media making: Mass media in popular culture*. California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Hall, S. (1975). Introduction. In A.C.H. Smith (Ed.), *Paper voices: The popular press and social change*,

- 1935-1965 (pp.11-24). New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hall, S. (1993). Encoding, decoding. In S. During (Ed.), *The cultural studies reader* (pp. 90-103). New York: Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1996). Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies. In D. Morley & K. Chen (Eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (pp.262-275). London: Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage Productions.
- Hall, S. (1998). Notes on deconstructing 'the popular.' In J. Storey (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture* (pp.448-453). London: Pearson.
- Hartmann, S.M. (1994). Women's employment and the domestic ideal in the early cold war years. In J. Meyerowitz (Ed.), *Not June Cleaver: Women and gender in postwar America, 1945-1960* (pp.84-100). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Helmbold, L.R. (1987). Beyond the family economy: Black and white working-class women during the Great Depression. *Feminist Studies*, 13(3), 629-655.
- Hobson, D. (1982). *Crossroads: The drama of a soap opera*. London: Methuen.
- Hollows, J. (2000). *Feminism, femininity and popular culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Internet Movie Database. (2008). Awards for *Brothers & Sisters*. Retrieved November 1, 2008, from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0758737/awards>
- Johnson, R. (1996). What is cultural studies anyway? In J. Storey (Ed.), *What is cultural studies?: A reader* (pp. 75-114). New York: Arnold.
- Joint Economic Committee. (2008, July 22). *Equality in job loss: Women are increasingly vulnerable to layoffs during recessions*. Retrieved October 15, 2008, from <http://www.jec.senate.gov>
- Kaplan, E.A. (1987). Feminist criticism and television. In R.C. Allen (Ed.), *Channels of discourse, reassembled*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Kaplan, E.A. (1992). *Motherhood and representation: The mother in popular culture and*

- melodrama*. New York: Routledge.
- Kay, K. & Shipman, C. (2008, September 6). Let's talk about Palin's family challenges. *Wall Street Journal*, p. A11.
- Keller, K. (1994). *Mothers and work in popular American magazines*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Kellner, D. (1995). Cultural studies, multiculturalism and media culture. In G. Dines & J.M. Humez (Eds.), *Gender, race and class in media: A text-reader* (pp.5-17). London: Sage Publications.
- Kitch, C. (2001). *The girl on the magazine cover: The origins of visual stereotypes in American mass media*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Klein, A. (2006). *What would Murphy Brown do?: How the women of prime time changed our lives*. California: Seal Press.
- Kolmar, W.K. & Bartkowski, F. (2005). Introduction. In W.K. Kolmar & F. Bartkowski (Eds.), *Feminist theory: A reader* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) (pp.2-6) Boston: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.
- Lilienthal, M.S. (1916). *From fireside to factory*. New York: Rand School of Social Science.
- Long, E. (1996). Feminism and cultural studies. In J. Storey (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture* (pp. 197-207). London: Pearson.
- Lotz, A.D. (2006). *Redesigning women: Television after the network era*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Lotz, A.D. (2007). *The television will be revolutionized*. New York: New York University Press.
- Lotz, A.D. & Ross, S.M. (2004). Bridging media-specific approaches: The value of feminist television criticism's synthetic approach. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(2), 185-202.
- MacDonald, M. (1995). *Representing women: Myths of femininity in the popular media*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Marcellus, J. (2006). Women as machine: Representations of secretaries in interwar magazines. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 83(1), 101-115.
- Margolis, M.L. (1984). *Mothers and such: Views of American women and why they changed*.

- Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Marsh, K. (2008). Working moms against 'supermom' Palin. CBSNews.com. Retrieved January 12, 2008, from <http://www.cbsnews.com/>
- Marx, K. & Engels, F. (2006). The ruling class and the ruling ideas. In M.G. Durham & D.M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: KeyWorks* (pp. 9-12). Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.
- May, E.T. (1988). *Homeward bound: American families in the cold war era*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- McRobbie, A. (1978). *Jackie: An ideology of adolescent femininity*. Birmingham: The Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies.
- Meehan, D.M. (1983). *Ladies of the evening: Women characters of prime-time television*. New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press.
- Meyerowitz, J. (1994). Beyond the feminine mystique: A reassessment of postwar mass culture, 1946-1958. In J. Meyerowitz (Ed.), *Not June Cleaver: Women and gender in postwar America, 1945-1960* (pp. 229-262). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Modleski, T. (1996). The search for tomorrow in today's soap operas. In P. Marris & S. Thornham (Eds.), *Media Studies: A Reader* (pp.371-380). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Murphy, S. (1995). The advertising of installment plans in the 1920s. *Essays in History*, 37. Retrieved November 10, 2008, from <http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/EH/EH37/Murphy.html>
- Neff, W. (1929). *Victorian working women*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Nelson, C. (1996). Always already cultural studies: Academic conferences and a manifesto. In J. Storey (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture* (pp. 273-286). London: Pearson.
- Newcomb, H. & Hirsch, P. (2000). Television as cultural forum. In H. Newcomb (Ed.), *Television: The critical view* (p.561-573). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nye, I.F. & Hoffman, L.W. (1963). *The employed mother in America*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company.
- Nye, I.F. & Hoffman L.W. (1974). *Working mother: An evaluative review of the consequences*

- for wife, husband, and child*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.
- Obama, M. (2008, November 7). My no. 1 job as first lady is to be first mom. *U.S. News & World Report*. Retrieved January 10, 2008, from <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/>
- O'Brien, M. (2009). Brothers & Sisters: Moms & daughters juggling work and family. Message posted to <http://www.mommytrackd.com/>
- Oppenheimer, V.K. (1973). Demographic influence on female employment and the status of women. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(January), 946-961.
- Rabinovitz, L. (1989). Sitcoms and single moms: Representations of feminism on American TV. *Cinema Journal*, 29(1), 3-19.
- Rosen, M. (1973). *Popcorn Venus: Women, movies & the American dream*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan.
- Rowe, K.K. (1997). Roseanne: Unruly woman as domestic goddess. In C. Brunson, J. d'Acci & L. Spigel (Eds.), *Feminist television criticism: A reader* (pp.74-83). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Sardar, Z. & Van Loon, B. (2005). *Introducing cultural studies*. U.K.: Totem Books.
- Selvin, M. (2006, September 5). This mommy track may go somewhere. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved November 1, 2008, from <http://articles.latimes.com/>
- Skynews. (2008, November 7). Obama honours wife Michelle [Video File]. Video posted to <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/>
- Smith, R.T. (2001). Matrifocality. In N.J. Smelser, N.J. and P.B. Baltes (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences*. (pp. 9416-9418). Oxford: Elsevier Science Ltd.
- Sochen, J. (1978). Mildred Pierce and women in film. *American Quarterly*, 30(1), 3-20.
- Sparks, C. (1996). The evolution of cultural studies. In J. Storey (Ed.), *What is cultural studies?: A reader* (pp. 14-30). New York: Arnold.
- Spigel, L. (1992). *Make room for TV: Television and the family ideal in postwar America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Storey, J. (1996). Introduction. In J. Storey (Ed.), *What is cultural studies?: A reader* (pp. 1-

- 13). New York: Arnold.
- Tanneeru, M. (2006, April 24). Deciphering the 'mommy wars.' *CNN.com*. Retrieved November 1, 2008, from <http://www.cnn.com/>
- Taylor, E. (1989). *Prime-time families: Television culture in postwar America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tong, R.P. (1998). *Feminist thought: A more comprehensive introduction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boulder: Westview Press.
- Tropp, L. (2006). 'Faking a sonogram': Representations of motherhood on Sex and the City. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 39(5), 861-877.
- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Hearth and home: Images of women in the mass media*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tucker, J.S. (2007, July 20). What's a working mother worth? *The American Prospect*. Retrieved November 1, 2008, from <http://www.prospect.org/>
- Tunstall, K. (2006). Under the weather. On *Eye to the telescope* [CD]. London: Virgin Records.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (1933). *General report on the population: Number and proportion of women 15 years old and over gainfully occupied, by color, nativity, age, and marital condition, for the United States: 1930*. Washington: Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2000a). No. 654: Labor force participation rates for wives, husband present by age of own youngest child: 1975-1999. In *Statistical abstract of the United States: The national data book* (pp.409). Washington: Government Press.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2000b). *American FactFinder fact sheet: Pasadena city, California*. Retrieved January 15, 2009, from <http://factfinder.census.gov>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2008). *Fast facts: College enrollment*. Retrieved February 15, 2009, from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastFacts/>
- Van Zoonen, L. (1994). *Feminist media studies*. London: Sage.
- Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing patriarchy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

- Walters, S. D. (1995). *Material girls: Making sense of feminist cultural theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wartime Manpower Commission. (1942/1943). World War II Poster Collection. Held at the Northwestern University Library. Evanston, Illinois.
- Weber, M. (1947). *The theory of social and economic organization*. New York: The Free Press.
- Weiner, L. (1985). *From working girl to working mother: The female labor force in the United States, 1820-1980*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.
- Williams, R. (2001). Culture is ordinary. In J. Higgins (Ed.), *The Raymond Williams reader* (pp.10-24). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Yamagata, R. (2004). Be be your love. On *Happenstance* [CD]. New York: RCA Victor.
- Yesil, B. (2004). 'Who said this was a man's war?': Propaganda, advertising discourse and the representation of war worker women during the Second World War. *Media History*, 10(2), 103-117.