All Good Women Are Mothers: Exploring Gender Binaries in *How I Met Your Mother*

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ALL GOOD WOMEN ARE MOTHERS: EXPLORING GENDER BINARIES IN HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER

by

Jessica Marinho

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF SCIENCE in Communication Studies

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT

All Good Women are Mothers: Exploring Gender Binaries in How I Met Your Mother

by

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Utah State University, 2023

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This thesis examined the ways in which gender binaries are reinforced through the acceptance or rejection of motherhood ideology by the two main female characters in the television series How I Met Your Mother (2005-2009). Motherhood ideology argues that real women who engage in motherhood find fulfillment by engaging in traditional heteronormative behaviors, whereas women who remain childless are perceived to be the antithesis of motherhood by rejecting the traditional belief that all women should engage in motherhood. I argued that this ideology surrounding motherhood has influenced how mothers and their counterparts, childless women, are depicted in modern-day media; which seemingly embraces modern views on working mothers or working childless women, but still depicts them as violating their traditional gender role.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

All Good Women are Mothers: Exploring Gender Binaries in *How I Met Your Mother*

Jessica Marinho

Television is thought to be a form of entertainment through its many genres from comedy to drama, however, it is more than a relaxing pastime. Television series construct messages that influence audiences to accept specific behaviors. In this thesis, I analyzed the portrayal of the two main female characters in the popular television series *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2009) and I argued how their depiction served to represent childless women as unwomanly and mothers as the ideal woman.
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Jessica Marinho
CONTENTS

Page

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... iii

Public Abstract ............................................................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgments ....................................................................................................................... v

Chapter I: Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter II: Historical Constructions of Motherhood in the U.S., Motherhood in Television …... 5
  Historical Constructions of Motherhood in the U.S. ................................................................. 6
  Motherhood in Television ........................................................................................................... 7

Chapter III: Methodology ............................................................................................................. 11

Chapter IV: Gender Binaries in How I Met Your Mother, Robin: An Unfulfilled, Masculine
  “Whore,” Lily: An (Un)stable, Feminine “Madonna” ................................................................. 13
  Robin as “Whore” ....................................................................................................................... 16
  Robin as Traditionally Masculine ............................................................................................. 20
  Robin as the Unfulfilled Woman ............................................................................................... 23
  Lily as “Madonna” .................................................................................................................... 26
  Lily as the Good, Feminine Mother .......................................................................................... 29
  Lily as the (Un)stable Woman ................................................................................................. 32

Chapter V: Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 35
Chapter One

Introduction

The portrayal of mothers and women in television and movies has typically favored the more traditional, white heteronormative family values and roles (Press, 2009); the typical nuclear family portrayed throughout history included a working father, a homemaker mother, and children (Valiquette-Tessier et al. 2019). Television series such as Leave It To Beaver, Father Knows Best, and The Andy Griffith Show portray the culturally held belief that mothers are meant to be in the house taking care of their husbands and children. Media and culture have been tools in shaping the image of a good mother/woman who is selfless, and sacrifices for her family by giving up her time and potential career, as well as her individuality (Heffernan & Wilgus, 2018). The media portrayal of motherhood and womanhood constructs a “moral landscape where certain choices and practices are deemed more appropriate than others” (Heffernan & Wilgus, 2018, p.2); through this moral landscape, any woman who participates in motherhood is considered womanly while those who do not (regardless of the reason they would be childless) are inferior, unfulfilled, selfish, and/or sexually deviant (Buchannan, 2013). These cultural discourses and media glamorization of motherhood enforce the narrative that women can only find fulfillment in life if they have a husband and children (Kinnick, 2009), thus supporting the cultural ideology that motherhood is the ideal life for women.

Traditionally, motherhood has been considered a determining factor for a woman’s gender identity (Letherby, 1999; Meyers, 2001). Cultural discourses describe motherhood as the utmost fulfillment of femininity, hence being a mother is what and who women are (Gillespie, 2003). Therefore, women who do not wish to become mothers or cannot become mothers are subject to having their womanhood and feminine identity called into question (Peterson &
Engwall, 2013) leaving little room for women to develop a positive feminine identity separate from motherhood. Buchanan (2013) conceptualizes a rhetorical framing of motherhood and womanhood. Revolving around two poles, this framing makes sense of the public discourse about mothers and women, comparing motherhood to good and womanhood to evil. This framing of motherhood versus womanhood as good and evil creates an ideology that characterizes childless women as the antithesis of mothers, and mothers as the ultimate feminine identity.

This thesis will focus on the cultural ideologies of motherhood and womanhood depicted in the popular television show *How I Met Your Mother* (HIMYM). HIMYM first aired in 2005 and tells the story of five friends living in New York City. The main character, Ted Mosby, narrates each episode as his older self telling his children the story of how he met their mother during his late 20s. Before he meets the children’s mother, Ted lives with his best friend from college, Marshall Erikson, and Marshall’s college sweetheart, Lily Aldrin; the three of them have been friends since their freshman year. Years after college, Ted meets Barney Stinson, who befriends Ted in a bar and tells him that he will help him live an awesome life of parties and one-night stands. A few years after this encounter, Marshall and Lily become engaged, which leads Ted to want to finally find his wife and start a family of his own. Ted then meets Robin Scherbatsky, a Canadian news anchor who he becomes infatuated with; he believes her to be “the one” moments after he meets her. Robin, however, wants to travel the world and not be tied down to a husband and children. This backstory is established within the first episode and marks the start of Ted’s journey to find “the one.”

The show ran for nine seasons and was nominated for 91 awards (including two Golden Globe Award nominations) and won 21 including four People’s Choice Awards and two
Primetime Emmy Awards. Despite its multiple awards, the show has received criticism for its blatant racism, homophobia, misogyny, and sexual assault/rape jokes (Alberty, 2014; Puente, 2014). The public both praised and critiqued the show and viewers have since expressed their thoughts and feelings online about the controversies. Through online platforms such as Buzzfeed and Twitter, viewers wrote their opinions on aspects of the show that they found to be problematic. Viewers expressed disapproval of the toxic masculinity the male characters would embody as they belittled one another for doing things they deemed were “girly” or made them look “gay” (Woodward, 2018). A different theme for viewers that caused disapproval was the inequality of the main characters’ careers. The three males were an architect, a lawyer, and a successful businessman whereas the two women were a struggling journalist and a kindergarten teacher (Woodward, 2018). Viewers also considered the double standard of sexuality in the show to be problematic. Ted and Barney would have sex with dozens of women and be praised as heroes, like when Barney achieves a perfect month by having sex with 31 different women, yet Robin was slut-shamed for having a one-night stand on a first date (Woodward, 2018). *HIMYM* has had many controversial themes, yet the most consistent issues throughout the nine seasons are gender inequalities and misogyny. Viewers tweeted in reference to Barney’s hot/crazy scale that states that the hotter a woman is the crazier she is “It's sexist, gross and compounds the notion of women as hysterical or mentally unstable as a means of keeping them subordinated” (Woodward, 2018). Another viewer tweeted “One of the many things that always kinda bugged me was … the two women were a somewhat struggling journalist and a kindergarten teacher.” (Woodward, 2018). Viewers were displeased with the writing of the show which allowed these kinds of jokes and stereotypes to be depicted throughout the series.
While the show has been the subject of much public attention, it lacks scholarly attention. Given the popularity of *HIMYM* and the ways in which it grapples with issues including homophobia, misogyny, and sexual assault, the show is a rich site for rhetorical analysis. Utilizing ideological criticism as well as extant literature at the intersections of rhetoric, gender, and media studies, this thesis examines gender binaries pertaining to motherhood and womanhood in *How I Met Your Mother’s* portrayals of Lily and Robin. Although *HIMYM* seemingly embraces the nuances of gender and challenges the ideologies of gender norms as Lily and Robin are both modern-day women who work, I argue that it ultimately reinforces gender binaries and stereotypes. These stereotypes are represented as Lily depicts the female stereotype of a woman who desires motherhood, is physically petite and delicate, and has a nurturing/motherly personality (Heilman, 2001; Wartel, 2021). In contrast, Robin embraces male stereotypes through her bachelor lifestyle, her aggressive qualities as she favors activities that are violent, like hunting, shooting guns when she is angry, and playing hockey, and her prioritization of working up the corporate ladder rather than having a family (Bates et al., 2019; Ladge et al., 2015). Therefore, the depiction of gender binaries and stereotypes contradict the superficial presentation of female empowerment through Lily and Robin as they ultimately represent the male and female dichotomy through their careers and personal lives.

In what follows, I first detail the precedent of the modern-day ideology of motherhood and womanhood as well as the commentary on motherhood and womanhood presented in the media. The literature review serves to illustrate how motherhood and womanhood have been determined by cultural ideologies as to what constitutes a good mother and a good woman versus a bad mother and a bad woman. Using examples from rhetorical studies of television shows and movies, I also include examples of how working mothers and women have been portrayed in the
media in the past and present. I then offer my analysis which explains how gender binaries are reinforced in *HIMYM* by introducing the two female characters from the series and providing an analysis of their background, personality, and profession and how each character fits into the cultural binaries of gender as they embrace or reject motherhood. To conclude I explain how the representation and depiction of mothers and childless women in *HIMYM* add to the academic conversation of motherhood, gender, and media studies.

**Chapter Two**

**Historical Constructions of Motherhood in the U.S.**

During the Victorian era, the dominant cultural construction of the ideal mother or “good” mother was a woman who dedicated her life to her family. The traditional and cultural description of a family would be a nuclear family, with heterosexual parents, a father who worked to provide, a stay-at-home mother, and their biological children (Valiquette-Tessier et al. 2019). This traditional mother would be selfless, domestic, and naturally attuned to her children’s wants and needs. Women who did not hold those characteristics were “bad” mothers who had failed their children (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky, 1998). These women who were unwilling to put their families ahead of their own wants and needs were deemed undeserving of being mothers (Cott, 1997). Whereas a “good” mother did not feel the need to work outside of the home and would feel fulfilled by raising her children (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). This ideal
contrasted with reality, as most working-class families were not one-parent income families. Working-class families needed the mothers to work outside of the home to ensure the family’s survival (Gonzalez, 2015). Therefore, women were often employed outside of the home in jobs such as shop assistants or domestic servants or would work in the home by renting rooms in their homes to boarders or creating products to sell (DeVault, 2013; Neale, 1967). Working women’s time was spent earning money for their families, making it impossible for most mothers to meet the cultural prescriptions of the ideal mother.

During World War II, men were enlisted to fight and women were encouraged to enter the labor force to support the war effort (Yesil, 2004). For many women, going to work was also a financial necessity due to decreased income in the absence of a working husband (Goldin, 1991). Women were considered to be temporary workers and, more specifically, helpers, which was considered a feminine role (Honey, 1981) thus making it more acceptable for them to leave their homes and enter workforce. However, because the feminine identity had been constructed around motherhood (Choi et al., 2005), motherhood and womanhood were both considered to be under attack during and after World War II as women fulfilled the male roles in their families and society (Goldin, 1991).

The change of gender roles during the war was criticized as one of the main causes of a motherhood crisis (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky, 1998). The “motherhood crisis” was seen as a result of women fulfilling multiple social roles during the war because their sole purpose was no longer to nurture their families but to also provide economically. Women were no longer mandated to solely nurture their children but were also allowed to work outside the home, and because of this society believed that women would consider and prefer life outside of motherhood (Kaplan, 1987). Women who challenged the traditional ideology of motherhood and
worked outside of the home were (and continue to be) seen as abnormal and selfish for not fulfilling their feminine role to become stay-at-home mothers (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). This cultural ideology and social construction of motherhood and womanhood constitute a rigid definition of what is a “good” mother and a “good” woman as well as what is a “bad” mother and a “bad” woman (Choi et al., 2005).

**Motherhood in Television**

The heteronormative and hegemonic standard of the male breadwinner and female caretaker continues to clash with reality, yet narrow stereotypes of women and mothers continue to be portrayed in mainstream media, including television. American television's “golden age” from the 1950s to the 1970s complies with the dominant ideology of strict gender norms mainly within white nuclear families with women being depicted as stay-at-home mothers who spend most of their time in the kitchen (Oren, 2003). Television series in the sitcom genre such as *Leave It to Beaver* cement a hegemonic social construction surrounding motherhood in which the mother contently stays home and cares for her family (Dillaway & Pare, 2008). These 1950s sitcoms focus on the domestication of women and mothers as they were placed in the home while the father/husband works outside of the home. In contrast to sitcoms, the soap opera genre portrays women challenging the dominant constructions by depicting them as childless women or emotionally distant mothers, and in doing so upholding the strong ideology of the “bad” mother (Feasey, 2013). The teen soap opera *Popular* (1999-2001) depicts two of the main character’s mothers as abusive, emotionally unavailable alcoholics (Feasey, 2013). Similarly, in the well-known television series *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000), a mother abuses her daughters and is addicted to drugs (Feasey, 2013). Just as the sitcom genre constructs the ideology of a “good” mother, the soap opera genre cements the social construction surrounding
the ideology of “bad” motherhood (Feasey, 2013). Therefore, television series possess a strong presence in constructing or deconstructing the meanings around motherhood and gender.

In later decades (the 1980s-1990s) the depiction of female characters shifted in television from being the full-time, stay-at-home mother to a woman having to choose between their family or their job (Press, 2009). Lotz (2006) states that this “choice,” however, was in reality only available to women who had the opportunity to make such a choice (typically white, upper-middle-class, educated women who, due to their social status, could make a choice between work and their family). The television series murphy brown (1988-1998) portrays a woman who becomes pregnant and decides to become a single mother. Davies and Smith’s (1998) essay on racial and gender influences on portrayals of the American mother in television explains how murphy brown sparked a controversial debate in 1992 on motherhood and womanhood. Enraged by the portrayal of the nuclear heterosexual family in the series, former Vice President of the United States, Dan Quayle, criticized the show because the main character, a woman named Murphy Brown, decides to become a single working mother (Davies & Smith, 1998). Quayle claimed the show mocked traditional family values and called Murphy’s decision to have a child without a husband/father “another lifestyle choice.” His rhetoric was embedded with the belief that if someone lived a life that challenged the heterosexual nuclear family then they were abnormal. He believed that Murphy Brown mocked “the importance of fathers” (Sanders, 2019, p. 72) and that she strayed from the cultural norms of womanhood by choosing to live an alternative lifestyle. However, many female viewers felt they could relate to Murphy Brown, as they themselves were working mothers from different backgrounds and circumstances. Murphy Brown offers a role model for “working mothers, young girls, and women, who viewed themselves as independent and strong, and viewers felt that Murphy gave them a voice” (Davies
& Smith, 1998, p. 120). Although Murphy Brown contradicts the cultural ideology of a good mother and a good woman, she represents the cultural reality of many women by being a working mother.

Another popular series, *Nurse Jackie* which ran from 2009-2015, demonstrates how women must choose to prioritize either their family or their career, while also demonstrating the privilege that is available to few women to be able to choose between a family and a career. In their analysis of mediated motherhood in *Nurse Jackie*, Lehman (2016) explains how the character Jackie, a working mom who has a drug dependency, upholds the cultural disdain for working mothers. In the series, Jackie creates a double life because she believes that she cannot obtain a successful career while also having a family, thus to her coworkers she presents herself as a single, childless woman. She lives this secret life because she fears that if her colleagues discover that she is a mother then she would lose opportunities for promotions at work or any possible extra shifts; she wants to use any extra shift she can attain to enable herself to spend more time at work rather than spend time with her family (D’Amore, 2011). Choosing work over her family, Jackie disregards her identity as a mother and violates cultural expectations by not sacrificing her wants and needs for her family. Hence, women who work, childless or not, violate the same cultural expectations because they seemingly do not place their family above their own wants and career.

Even though *Nurse Jackie* and *Murphy Brown* are television series with different storylines and characters, each challenges the cultural and traditional ideology of a good mother/woman. Nurse Jackie works in a high-stress field and neglects her family due to work (Lehman, 2016). She challenges the cultural/traditional ideology of motherhood as she does not prioritize her family over her career (Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Ladd-Taylor & Umansky,
1998). Murphy Brown challenges the cultural/traditional belief of motherhood as she was not only a working mother but a single *working* mother. She challenges the traditional roles of fathers and mothers by being both the financial provider (a traditional father role) and emotional provider (a traditional mother role) for her child (Haller & Hoellinger, 1994). While portrayed in different ways, these two characters violate the cultural expectations of what constitutes a good mother/woman.

While portrayals of working mothers and women in the media sometimes challenge dominant cultural narratives, television and movies also reinforce the belief that women can only find fulfillment or stability in their lives by becoming stay-at-home mothers. When mothers or childless women in television challenge the cultural narrative of motherhood and womanhood, they are often depicted as selfish, unfulfilled, career driven, and as bothered by their failure to live up to cultural expectations (Dever & Saugeres, 2004; Lehman, 2016). Examples of women like this are shown in television and movies such as *Friends*, wherein Monica Gellar loves her career as a chef but was desperate to be married and have a family; and *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, a movie on the singleton of women in which Bridget Jones is inept in her life and obsesses over superficial ambitions such as marriage and diet culture and who critics have pointed out as the negative stereotype of middle-aged single women (Engler, 2017). In the movie *Stella Dallas*, a single mom desires a life of fun, and in the film, *Mildred Pierce* a working mom must face scrutiny when her child dies while she is on a business trip (Abbey, 2003). Monica Geller and Bridget Jones depict the working woman who seems to be filling a hole in her life by working until she can find a husband and have children. Although they were independent, they were unfulfilled and neurotically obsessed over finding the right man to feel complete, loved, and happy. As I explain next, these same rhetorics manifest in *HIMYM*’s portrayal of Robin and Lily
as women who, in distinct ways, uphold the dominant discourse that motherhood is the primary way women can obtain fulfillment in their lives.

Chapter Three

Method: Ideological Criticism

Described as patterns of beliefs and values, ideologies are used to create meaning that guides our interpretations of reality (Freeden, 2003; Kornfield, 2021). Ideology is defined as “the characteristic world-view or general perspective of a class, or another social group, which will include formulated conscious beliefs but also less conscious, less formulated attitudes, habits and feelings or even unconscious assumptions, bearings and commitments” (Williams, 1985, p. 26, as cited in Dow, 2016). Johnston and Swanson (2006) note that people produce ideologies to make sense of the random beliefs, values, and behaviors individuals and groups claim and perform. Ideologies reflect a specific construction of reality; thus, ideologies do not represent an objective reality (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). Ideologies influence people and societies and can sanction and weaken certain social and political behaviors and values (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). Ideologies work to reward and punish certain roles and behaviors, thus preserving hegemony and actions by a dominant cultural group (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). Described as the “various means through which those who support the dominant ideology in a culture are… able to reproduce that ideology in cultural institutions” (Dow, 1990, p. 262), dominant ideologies are preserved through hegemonic practices by those who benefit from enforcing said ideologies. Although ideologies may create inaccurate representations of the social, political, and cultural realities of people and groups, the dominant social, political, or cultural group benefits from ideologies that maintain their dominant beliefs and values (Lee & Blood, 2021).
Ideological criticism is grounded in the notion that people generate concepts, images, and stories “about the nature of our world, and these ideas are used to interpret social reality” (Lee & Blood, 2021, p. 208; see also Colley & White, 2019). The goal of ideological criticism is to “expose the role of communication in creating and sustaining an ideology” (Chen, 2007, p. 55). Ideological critique can help identify systems of belief and the ways in which they invite audiences to understand reality and to act within the audiences’ understanding of the world and the reality it perceives (Kornfield, 2021). Furthermore, ideological criticism is used to make sense of public discourse and reveals the interpretations of reality that are guided by systems of thoughts, beliefs, and values (Kornfield, 2021).

In the U.S., dominant ideologies of motherhood assert that a mother is responsible for the well-being of her children and husband and this dynamic must occur within the heteronormative nuclear family (Dow, 2016). This belief emerged during the Industrial Revolution, predominantly among White middle-class families, and dominated American society (Dow, 2016). In *The Rhetoric of Television, Criticism, and Theory*, Dow (1996) describes criticism as a social activity because it is written with the intent to persuade a specific audience. From a poststructuralist view that argues everything can be seen as a discourse that cannot be separated from “real life,” Dow (1996) argues that television functions as a discourse that cannot be separated from “real life.” Television holds a strong position in constructing and reinforcing the hegemonic cultural discourses of its audiences. Television holds many functions such as having a continual presence in people’s lives and its power serves to “inform, entertain, socialize and educate, and create community and consensus” (Vande Berg et al., 2004, p. 221). Television’s strong presence and power aid in creating and communicating messages that audiences
incorporate into their lives, allowing the discourses of a movie or a television show to shape how
the viewer perceives and engages with reality.

Dow’s (1996) arguments regarding the influence of television provide support to my argument that *HIMYM* reinforces dominant ideologies of gender and motherhood. This thesis extends Dow’s research by explaining how media has constructed and reinforced dominant ideologies of motherhood and womanhood. It is partially through television discourse such as that in *HIMYM* that audiences learn gender expectations for women.

**Chapter Four**

**Gender Binaries in How I Met Your Mother**

Although a multitude of contemporary television series have challenged narrow conceptions of motherhood and womanhood (e.g., *Murphy Brown, Nurse Jackie*), *HIMYM* mirrors many of the troubling patterns illustrated above. In this analysis, I focus on the show’s portrayal of Lily and Robin, the two female characters who together reify notions of good women as mothers. To conduct this research, I focused mainly on the first four seasons and the last two episodes of the final season and would refer back to other seasons if needed. I focused on those seasons specifically because they are the ones that provide a layout for the characters stories and personalities throughout the series. It is within the first two seasons that the audience witnesses Robin’s aversion to marriage and the beginning stages of seeing Lily’s desire for more than a family and the repercussions of those desires. The last two episodes of the final season provided storylines for Robin and Lily that pertained to the overall argument of this thesis. The audience gets to see what happens to Robin for rejecting motherhood and what happens to Lily for embracing it and having a family.
Each episode of the series begins with an older version of Ted telling his two children stories that were part of his journey to finding their mother. Although the audience does not meet the mother until the last season, she has a continual omnipresent role throughout the series. According to Ted, she embodies how the perfect woman and mother should and she serves as the blueprint for the ideal woman because she represents everything Ted wants for a wife. While she is an important character who arguably further reinforces rigid understandings of womanhood and motherhood, this thesis focuses on Lily and Robin because they most forcefully portray womanhood and motherhood throughout the series.

Robin in many ways portrays the stereotypical “bad” woman. She is a career woman working full-time as a news anchor. She is taller than Lily and acts more traditionally masculine. For example, she has multiple sex partners (Lily only has two and both were long-term relationships), smokes cigars at a men’s club, and played hockey as a teenager. Her father, Robin Scherbatsky Sr. wanted a son so when Robin was born he was disappointed that his first child was a girl. Therefore, he raises Robin much as he would have raised a son. She was named Robin Charles Scherbatsky Jr. after her father, always wore very short hair to make her look like a boy, and played on an all-boy hockey team. Robin does not want a family and does not want to sacrifice her career for a family. She breaks up with Ted in season two after they discuss her desire to not settle down at that time and possibly never, thus “ruining” Ted’s dreams of starting a family in the very near future. She hopes that her job would allow her to travel around the world and states that kids would get in the way of that dream. As Peterson and Engwall (2013) state, a woman’s identity as a woman is called into question when she does not desire children, and this is something we see throughout the show’s portrayal of Robin.
Lily is the opposite of Robin, and is presented as the maternal figure of the friend group. She is a petite and conventionally feminine woman (standing at 5ft 5’). She earns a college degree in Art History, which she does not use for its intended purpose. She dreams of becoming a painter but instead teaches kindergarten, a female-dominated profession. Lily’s character portrays a stereotypical “good” mother as she fits the feminine mold and desires to have a family with Marshall. She also was a mother figure to her friends and sometimes strangers as she would reprimand her friends in a motherly way. If she does not approve of their behavior she will confiscate a prized possession of theirs and only return it if they apologize. In one instance she takes a prized possession from Ted’s boss because he was condescending and mean to Ted and the other employees. She confiscates a baseball autographed by former major league player Pete Rose. This act intends to “punish” him for his bad behavior and she tells Ted she will only return it once his boss apologizes and changes his behavior. Her actions to take it upon herself to punish adults as if they were children shows how Lily fits the maternal figure without explicitly labeling her in that role.

While there has been public coverage of the many problematic themes in HIMYM, the theme of the depiction of motherhood and womanhood has yet to be discussed. This theme is worthy of attention as motherhood studies, according to Kawash (2011), have been neglected by mainstream academic feminism and “fragmented and discontinuous in the academic margins” (p. 996). In their essay, Feasey (2013) states that while motherhood has indeed been a central topic in feminist scholarship, there is little existing text on motherhood in television. The public audience's reactions and reviews of HIMYM have also neglected the theme of motherhood in the show. As I explain next, Robin and Lily together reinforce the cultural expectations of a “good” and “bad” mother as well as a “good” and “bad” woman. Drawing on examples from the show
and past examples of motherhood and womanhood in contemporary television, this research offers a case study examination of motherhood and womanhood as they are depicted in contemporary television.

Robin: An Unfulfilled, Masculine “Whore”

Robin as “Whore”

The Madonna-Whore dichotomy establishes a stereotype in which women are categorized into one of two categories in society: the Madonna or the Whore. The Madonna is a nurturing woman, one that is deemed as the “good” and ideal woman who is chaste and has limited sexual experiences (Cooper, 2019). In contrast, the Whore lacks the same traits as the “good” woman as she is promiscuous and seductive (Cooper, 2019). Women are treated differently based on where society puts them in this dichotomy; those who represent the Madonna are viewed through benevolent sexism as warm and supportive, thus they deserve and need men to protect them (Bareket et al., 2018). Those who are seen as the Whore are subject to hostile sexism as they are punished by men; women are exposed to rewards and punishment depending on which part of the dichotomy they are placed in (Bareket et al., 2018).

The Madonna-Whore dichotomy is presented through Lily and Robin via their monogamy and multiple partners, respectively. Lily lives a monogamous lifestyle with Marsall being her second sex partner which she in actuality considers her first and only, whereas Robin throughout the series has multiple sex partners. Lily is represented as the chaste Madonna while Robin is represented as the seductive Whore.

Robin depicts the Whore as she upholds stereotypes that construct childless women as selfish, sexually deviant, and therefore, unwomanly as they engage in sexual pleasure for themselves. Her over-sexualization and active sex life sever her connection to the ideology of
Buchannan’s (2013) description of the pure and selfless woman, contrasting Robin’s Whore to Lily’s Madonna, and steers her toward the ideology of the “bad” woman who resists the hegemonic discourse of passive female sexuality and purity (Tolman, 2012).

Robin’s sexualization is not an unusual depiction since sexualizing women in television and movies is commonplace (Ward, 2016). This portrayal of the sexualization and objectification of womanhood represents the culturally held belief that childless women, as the “antithesis of motherhood,” are sensual and enjoy engaging in sexual relationships for their own pleasure and not for procreation (Buchannan, 2013). Robin expresses her sexual agency or her role as the Whore by having multiple sex partners throughout the series. In one example, she has sex with a man (nicknamed “the naked man”) not because she was attracted to him, nor was she in a committed relationship with him, but because he removed his clothes in her apartment while she left him alone to answer a phone call; she returns to find him naked on her couch and tells her friends “it just happened.” The audience witnesses how easily Robin will engage in sex for pleasure whenever it is presented to her; her active sex life and disposition to engage in sex for fun challenge the hegemonic discourse of female purity and worth derived from abstaining from sex until marriage.

As a running gag throughout the series, Robin is sexualized and objectified. For example, Robin and Barney have sex and agree to keep it a secret due to Robin and Ted’s past relationship. Shortly after Robin and Barney have sex, the group hangs out at their favorite bar, and Ted asks Barney “How did it feel to hit it?” Barney spits his drink in shock thinking that Ted is referring to Robin. Marshall then says “Oh, I cannot wait to hit it!” and Lily joins in by saying “When I hit it, I’m going to hit it hard” as Robin replies “Yeah, you are.” Barney misunderstands them as they mean turning thirty. In this instance, Robin is reduced to a sexual object. She is
referred to as “it,” a pronoun used when referring to an object. Objectifying her and limiting her to her sexuality dehumanizes Robin and depicts her as a sexual commodity to be used by others as they please, similar to how society deems a Whore should be treated.

Depicting Robin in such a sexual manner occurs early in the series when the group discovers that Robin has a secret past; she evades questions from Ted about her past and it is later discovered that she was a Canadian teen pop star. Prior to learning the truth, Barney believes her secret to be that she filmed pornography and he finds a copy of one of her music videos. In this video, a 16-year-old Robin in a schoolgirl’s uniform (portrayed by an adult Robin as a teen) approaches her teacher in a classroom and seductively asks “Is there anything I can do to get an A?” A 16-year-old Robin is fetishized as a young schoolgirl who implies she will use sex as a commodity to gain something in return. This example shows Robin as sexual from an early age. During her teen idol years, she was part of a children’s learning television show with another teen idol named Jessica Glitter (another adult dressed to look like a teen) both in schoolgirl uniforms. In the show, they would both have a beaver puppet on their hand and would ask each other questions such as “Hey Jessica! How’s your beaver?” To which Jessica would reply “Great, how’s your beaver?” Robin would reply “Busy as ever!” This innuendo uses “beaver” to reference a woman’s vagina. In one episode of the show, an older man joins them and holds two phallic-shaped pieces of wood (an innuendo to a penis) and exclaims that the beaver’s favorite food is wood. He then turns this into a math activity by saying “If Robin’s beaver devours six inches of wood every half hour, and Jessica’s beaver devours eight inches of wood every 45 minutes, how much wood would I need to keep both of these beavers well fed all weekend long?” Robin fulfills the role of the Whore from a young age which continues into her
adulthood, this implies that the Whore will always have that role in her life and will never change.

Robin’s active sex life presents a contradiction of culturally perceived female sexuality and sexual agency. In Western culture, it is believed that men are inherently sexual beings with high sex drives, whereas women are sexually passive and instead desire love and to be cherished with the implication that if they do want sex it is driven by the natural “need” to conceive a child (Hayfield & Clarke, 2012). However, if a woman illustrates sexual agency, she is subject to hostile punishment through “slut shaming,” the act of slandering women for sexual behavior (Almazan & Bain, 2015). Marshall calls Robin a “slut” for having sex with the “naked man.” Marshall states that Robin sleeping with a man just because he took his clothes off made him think that she was promiscuous because the only thing in the way between her and sex was clothing. Using hostile sexism to punish Robin by calling her a slut and judging her actions to engage in sex so easily, Marshall displays disapproval and disgust at Robin’s sexual leniency.

Yet, there exists a double standard in the series. Ted is praised by Marshall and Barney when he wins the “threeway belt,” a wrestling belt designed by Barney that only those who have had a threesome (in this case, one man and two women) can then earn. Ted’s threesome is seen as a conquest by Barney, and Marshall allows Ted to use his and Lily’s bedroom to have the threesome. This reaction greatly differs from the one Robin faces after having sex with the “naked man.” She is further slut shamed by Ted when, in a flashback memory, she finishes naming how many men she has had sex with, and before she says the total Ted—who appears visibly upset—says “Oh, I’ve been counting.” Once again, the double standard for the characters' sex lives is shown as Ted is upset about the number of men Robin has slept with. However, Ted’s storylines are a retelling of the number of women he had sex with until he met his wife,
demonstrating the double standard that exists between male and female sexuality in *HIMYM*. This displays the cultural beliefs and expectations surrounding sexuality, as male sexuality is natural and must be expressed, whereas female sexuality is dangerous and must be controlled (Averett et al., 2008). Ted is free to express his sexuality and is praised for acting on it and Barney is deemed comedic for the sexual conquests he attains through sexual harassment and manipulation. However, Robin’s sexual agency is inappropriate and her expression of it leads to her being slut shamed by the male characters. She violates the cultural norms of female sexuality by having an active sex life. Her sexualized depiction demonstrates how women who engage in sex for their own pleasure and not for procreation are deemed sexually deviant. Such women are marked as seductive and promiscuous making them “whores.”

**Robin as Traditionally Masculine**

In addition to the sexualization she encounters, Robin displays masculine behaviors by rejecting typical feminine stereotypes and favoring traditionally masculine activities and behaviors. Robin’s masculine behaviors reflect hegemonic masculinity which refers to the preferred and idealized form of masculinity within a culture and is defined as patriarchal displays of power and force (Hardin et al., 2009). The culturally preferred form of masculinity visualizes the ultimate man to be a tough guy, one who has a hard exterior shell, is competitive and dominates others (Rivera & Scholar, 2020). Robin depicts the idealized form of masculinity through her behaviors, interests, and her voice (she has a deeper voice compared to Lily). She is a tough woman with aggression issues who loves guns and violence and ridicules overly feminine women.

Robin’s upbringing and her dislike of girly things separate her from being seen as the ideal woman. Her full name is Robin Charles Scherbatsky Jr. Traditionally, the naming of a child
after their father is reserved for the firstborn son as a patriarchal ritual. Since Robin is the firstborn in her family and her father wanted a son, she was named after him. From a young age, Robin had to enact a masculine identity to be the son her father wanted; she was raised to play hockey and hunt. Throughout the series, she partakes in behaviors such as smoking cigars, drinking scotch, playing hockey, and shooting guns. Her masculinity demonstrates how detached she is from womanly behaviors. In one instance she acts as Barney’s “wingman” for a night and after he invites her to fill the role as his bro. They begin their evening in a men’s cigar lounge where Robin smokes a cigar and orders a scotch, a drink typically ordered by the men in the show. These behaviors hold up the idea that Robin prefers to do more masculine activities over activities that would attribute her to femininity.

Robin’s participation in traditional masculinity demonstrates the dominance of her masculine traits over her feminine traits, fulfilling the cultural belief and preference for male dominance over femininity. She purposefully separates herself from gendered stereotypes about women or from a female identity by avoiding female friendships and preferring to be friends with men. Robin rejects gendered stereotypes such as the cultural belief that women need men to provide for them, and takes on the role of provider for herself by working full-time and seeking out sex partners, fulfilling her own financial and sexual needs (Seibert, 2018). Her friends also separate her from femininity as they point out behaviors or characteristics that they attribute to masculinity. For example, Barney calls her the least needy woman he has ever met and states that she is her own daddy, mommy, and a weird survivalist uncle (Seibert, 2018). In this example, Barney removes her from the stereotype that women need men to provide for them, while also stereotyping her as a daddy (usually a male-presenting person who is sexually attractive and dominates a relationship sexually and financially). Then he calls her a weird survivalist uncle,
implying that men are better at providing for themselves but also referring to her violent behaviors and knowledge of how to take care of herself. Although Robin challenges some stereotypes of women, the ways in which she does so reinforce a masculine/feminine or male/female hierarchy.

Robin's pursuit of a career over a family masculinizes her because her identity as a woman is challenged by the cultural stigma that women who pursue a career over a family are masculine (Park, 2005). As she prioritizes her career over a husband and a family she fights against the idea of being married. Ted tries to convince her they should get married and have kids, only for Robin to respond “You know kids are not part of my plan.” While celebrating their anniversary in season two, Robin is mistakenly given a glass of champagne with an engagement ring in it. She panics and then desperately says, “No, no, no, Ted you cannot do this to me, no, no, no, no!” After her outburst, they discuss their views on marriage. Ted desires to be married within five years with kids and Robin wants to travel claiming that “I’m a journalist and my career can take me anywhere and I kinda hope it does.” Traditionally, in white, upper-middle class, heterosexual couples the husband/father is the one who prioritizes their career and is the main economic provider with the wife/mother being the socio-emotional provider of the family. However, this traditional notion does not accurately reflect reality as is evident since women have had to work to help support their families or they simply desire to work. Robin wants her career to take her anywhere in the world and having kids was not part of her life goals, which villainizes her for preventing Ted from fulfilling his wants to have a family in the near future with Robin. She upholds the masculine side of the gender binary between masculine and feminine through enacting traditionally masculine behaviors such as being a wingman for her male friends, attending men’s clubs, and prioritizing a career over having a family. Her depiction
serves as a way for audiences to not see her as an ideal woman but rather as one who violates
gender norms as she embraces the male bachelor identity of self-indulgence, prioritizes her own
wants and needs above her partner’s, and, overall, violates the cultural expectations of how
women should behave.

Robin as the Unfulfilled Woman

Robin’s unhappiness and lack of fulfillment in her work allude to the cultural idea that
women cannot find happiness or fulfillment outside of the expectations for their gender to have
children. She is confronted with this issue in the series, such as when she attends a career day for
Lily’s kindergarten class. Instead of being asked about her career, the children ask her if she has
a fiancé, another asks who she lived with, and another asks if she is a lesbian. She replies that she
has five dogs in hope of receiving a positive reaction of awe from the children. Instead, one of
the children asks if she ever gets lonely living alone. Later that same evening, she is shown to be
upset about her romantic life and pours herself an entire bottle of wine into a big glass. This
example shows how childless and single women can be disapproved of, facing stigma and
negative responses from society; Robin is perceived to be less happy and to have a less
rewarding life because she is not married with children, a stereotype commonly cited in
academic literature (Kelly, 2009; Mueller & Yoder, 1997). This exemplifies the belief that
women can best find true happiness if they embody their femininity and engage in traditional
motherhood.

Robin continually works hard to obtain a successful career as a news reporter and dreams
of traveling the world and reporting on impactful world events. She works for the fictional news
channel “Come On, Get Up New York!” She would report her segments at 4 a.m. with low
ratings due to the time slot. She mocks her career as she does not consider the local news she
covers to be real news because the stories are uneventful and include embarrassing puns to introduce the story, such as “Is your toothpaste killing you? Stay tuned for the shocking tooth.” She constantly mocks her position and expresses her hatred for her it claiming “I am not a reporter, I’m just someone who shows up at night and scares people. I’m the boogie man with a teleprompter.” Beyond her own dislike for the news she covers, her friends also point out how they do not consider her to be a real journalist. Barney dares her to say something stupid on television but she rejects the bet stating she is a journalist to which Barney replies “You’re not a real journalist, you do the little fluff at the end of the news.” Her friends perceive her career to be not real or unimportant as opposed to Ted’s designing a skyscraper for New York City or Marshall for being a lawyer.

Robin feels unfulfilled in her career and love life and joins a group of single women for solidarity. They drink and party; HIMYM conveys single women as often pretending to have fun while hiding their insecurities and lack of fulfillment. The group she joins is called “wooo girls,” this group yells “woooo” to communicate they are having a good time, but actually act this way to hide their insecurities and their sad lives. This idea of a woman’s worth stemming from her success and fulfillment in her romantic life is shown again when Robin attends a birthday party with Lily at a bar. When they arrive, one of the women in the small group yells at them from across the bar “Get over here you sexy bitch!” then her group proceeds to yell “wooo!” At first, it seems that they are a group of young adult women who like to have fun by letting loose at bars as they drink and dance. However, as Lily observes the group of five women dancing, each “woo” is translated into captions on the screen such as “I cry in the shower,” or “I have never been on a second date,” and “What if I never get to be a mom?” Robin eventually joins the group of woo girls without Lily. When Lily confronts her about the wooing Robin tells her that she did
it because her life is sad and she needs to woo to release her issues. She states she is “like them, I’m unemployed, I’m single, and a little lost. Sometimes I just gotta woo.” She connects her worth to her failed career and failed romantic life persuading audiences to see that childless, single women live sad, unfulfilled, and insecure lives.

Robin’s career creates complications in her relationships. She breaks up with Ted because she wants to travel for work instead of getting married or having children, but she eventually marries Barney in the last season. Their marriage only lasts for three years due to stress caused by the constant traveling her job requires. In the second to last episode, she and Barney travel to Argentina because she is on an assignment for work; they argue over her having to work so much and the conditions of their hotel which prevent Barney from building his blog business. Robin yells that she is sorry she has to work and says that that is part of being on assignment. Barney replies, also yelling, “Well, what about me? There’s no Wi-Fi in this hotel. How am I supposed to run a business, Robin with no Wi-Fi?” Robin states that they are in a lose-lose situation as they both hate when she travels alone or when she drags Barney with her. Robin initiates the conversation about ending the relationship to which Barney agrees and they end their marriage. Robin again prioritizes her career over a relationship instead of fixing the relationship or quitting her job to save the marriage.

As time passes by, Robin’s work demands deteriorate her friendships and romantic relationships. The last episode of the series occurs over a span of multiple years, while Ted lives with the mother of his children, Lily and Marshall continue to grow their family, and Barney becomes a father after a one-night-stand, and they all continue to be involved in each other’s lives. Robin, however, is absent and only sees her friends by chance in meetings on the streets. Lily calls these encounters with Robin as rare as a sasquatch sighting, to which Marshall replies
that Robin is not like sasquatch because sasquatch is a warm and gentle creature and Robin is more like a yeti because she is “cold and aloof.” Robin is perceived as being distant and cold because her career becomes her main priority in life over any relationship, and although she finally obtains a career she loves, she is single and lonely, coming full circle to her younger self in season one as a single woman with five dogs instead of a family.

Despite all of her hard work to become a successful journalist, Robin continuously struggles to reach her career goals throughout the series. While she eventually achieves a successful career, it is only depicted in the episodes of the series. What the audience primarily witnesses is a woman who lost the two men she loves due to her work and insecurities in relationships, and eventually her close friendships because she dives into her work as a way to replace her unsuccessful relationships and role as a woman.

Lily: An (Un)stable, Feminine “Madonna”

Lily as “Madonna”

The Madonna ideology states that a woman who is nurturing and chaste is a “good” woman who fits the ideal of femininity by remaining sexually pure until marriage or has had limited sexual encounters (Cooper, 2016). Women who are categorized as the Madonna are perceived to be better suited to becoming wives/mothers who should remain sexually available to their husbands at all times as opposed to the Whore who serves to fulfill her own sexual gratification (Bareket et al., 2019; Natarajan et al., 2022). Unlike Robin, Lily has limited sexual experiences. She has been in a long-term committed relationship with Marshall since they were both eighteen, and she had only one prior relationship with a high school boyfriend with who she briefly had sex one time yet he did not penetrate deep enough for her to feel anything. Her intimate relationship with Marshall is seen as a pure and wholesome relationship as they are
proud that they have only had sex with each other (Lily does not count her experience with her high school boyfriend because it did not last very long and as Lily described it, he only stayed in the “lobby”). Lily’s limited sexual experiences with multiple partners place her in the category of a good woman who is suited to be a wife and a mother.

Lily’s name symbolizes cultural expectations of female purity, fertility, and the Madonna. In their work on floral femininity in art, Stott (1992) notes that nineteenth-century artists used flowers to draw a parallel between femininity and nature, specifically painting lilies to symbolize sexual purity and fertility. Because flowers are seen as delicate, beautiful, and decorative they represent the expectations set upon women to be passive, dependent, feminine, and decorative (Stott, 1992). In addition, flowers are a symbol of female fertility, drawing a parallel of femininity to motherhood. Stott (1992) wrote “The blossom, which proceeds the fruit…was a natural symbol of the potential of a woman to be fruitful and bear children” (p.66). After they have been married for a few years, Lily and Marshall desire a family but encounter complications for the first few months as they try to conceive but to no avail. After they decide to consult doctors fearing that they are both infertile, the doctors tell Lily that she is actually extremely fertile and, therefore, could easily become pregnant. Her ability to become pregnant so easily ties her identity to her ability to conceive a child, reiterating how being a mother is what and who women are (Gillespie, 2003). They later discover that Marshall was the one having fertility issues, but are able to have three children. Lily’s purity and fertility depict the expectations set upon women traditionally and culturally that they must only engage in sexual intimacy with their husbands for two reasons: to procreate and to fulfill the man’s sexual needs (Durán et al, 2011; Hayfield & Clarke, 2012).
It is shown in a flashback memory in college that Lily wants to wait to have sex and wants to make her and Marshall’s first time together special. Marshall seems to be disappointed to have to wait but he agrees. They do have sex that same night after they initially decided to wait; even though Lily contradicts the idea of the Madonna figure in this example, she is still a “good woman” for showing purity by desiring to wait, but also because when she does have sex it is with a long-term partner. She fulfills Marshall’s sexual needs which makes her a good woman for completing her role in fulfilling his sexual desires. This reiterates that a good woman is either a virgin or someone who has had very limited sexual experiences and only engages in sex with her husband for his pleasure or to procreate (Cooper, 2016). In another flashback to college Lily and Marshall discuss how Lily will be painting a nude piece for art class, Marshall is extremely upset and tells her he does not want some random guy being naked in front of Lily. Even though Lily tells him that it is just for an art class Marshall still protests against it and he tells her that he thinks the only naked man she should ever see is him. Although Marshall expresses this thought and does not want Lily to see another man naked, Marshall contradicts himself later in the series as he attends strip clubs with Barney and Ted on a few occasions. This shows a double standard of behaviors that are permissible for men but ultimately forbid women from doing the same. Marshall’s belief reiterates the idea of purity that women must uphold for their husbands throughout their lives.

Portraying Lily as the Madonna who is delicate and feminine persuades exemplifies her as a good woman and a good mother. She is deemed to be sexually pure because her sexual experiences have only been with one man whom she is in a committed relationship with. She is also a good woman/mother because of her extreme fertility which allows her to easily conceive a
child. Because she holds these attributes she is the subject of benevolent sexism. Therefore, Lily is deemed to be good enough to marry and become a mother as she fulfills her gender’s duties.

**Lily as the Good, Feminine Mother**

The cultural ideology behind motherhood is presented through Lily as she holds traditional female attributes such as being nurturing, desiring children, and having a conventionally feminine physical appearance. Despite claiming “I’m not really a girly girl,” Lily is always presented as feminine in contrast to Robin’s masculine traits. Lily also works in a female-dominated profession as a kindergarten teacher; although this career was not her first choice nor was it her dream, it is clear that her job is based on taking care of small children. Lily’s professional life depicts the cultural and traditional belief that it is a woman’s biological destiny to have children and tend to them and raise them (Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979).

As noted, the “ideal” woman in U.S. culture is a full-time, stay-at-home mother who finds fulfillment by completing domestic tasks (Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Lily and Marshall are seen as the quintessential white, heteronormative couple that wants to get married and raise a family. Ted calls them “an inspiration to the rest of us” because they are “so devoted and connected.” When they visit Marshall’s family in Minnesota for Thanksgiving, Lily is subject to the family’s traditional values of motherhood and family as they push their expectations of her having a baby as soon as possible. She is gifted an apron with “Mrs. Erikson” embroidered on it (Erikson being Marshall’s surname), which serves as a symbol of patriarchal ideology that “denies women identities and selfhood outside of motherhood” (Johnston & Swanson, 2005, p.22). Lily states she might not take Marshall’s last name, committing a cultural transgression against this Western practice that is expected of women (Duggan et al., 1993). However, she does take Marshall’s last name and becomes Lily Aldrin-
Eriksen. Taking the name Eriksen sacrifices her own identity as Lily Aldrin and becomes a member of her husband’s family because she is culturally expected to make that change for him and her future family so that they are perceived as a strong unit by having the same last name. By taking Marshall’s surname she also displays devotion to Marshall and denies her own identity outside of her marriage.

Furthermore, Lily is depicted as caring and nurturing. Despite working full-time, she makes lunches for Marshall to take to work, will sometimes make him breakfast, and every Sunday will make him pancakes for breakfast calling it “pancake day.” She is supportive of his career ambitions and emotionally supports him as he finishes law school. At one point, Marshall is unemployed and she becomes the financial provider, all while maintaining the role of socio-emotional provider as she supports Marshall in his endeavor to find his dream job. Here, Lily takes on the expected role of wives to tend to their husbands as they work and sustain the family (Pavalko & Elder, 1993). Lily also acts as nurturing toward her friends in a parental sense. For example, when Ted begins a new relationship in the first season, he asks that Lily and Marshall not act like involved parents in his relationship and to “skip the traditional interrogation” of questions parents would usually ask if someone were dating their child. Although they promise to not interrogate his new girlfriend, Victoria, they find a way to ask her personal questions about her dating life through a made-up game. They conduct the game in a way that Victoria must always answer the questions which include “Have you ever cheated in a relationship?” and “How many boyfriends did you have before you started dating Ted?” These questions show how protective and caring Marshall and Lily are toward Ted, depicting them both as parental figures (this being the only time that Marshall is depicted as so) who protect their child from anyone or anything that may cause them harm.
In addition to her nurturing mannerisms, Lily acts as a chastiser towards her friends and strangers. Since mothers typically spend more time with their children and are more involved than fathers, they are more likely to supervise and monitor their children’s behavior and are held responsible for how they “turn out” (Gryczkowski et al., 2009; Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979). Lily acts as the mother figure and monitors the behaviors of her group and sometimes of others. She uses her “Aldrin justice” system to punish those who misbehave. Lily confiscates a possession of the person she believes to be misbehaving and will only return their property if they apologize. Her monitoring of others’ behaviors is first shown after she and Marshall get back together after she leaves to go to an art school in San Francisco and calls off their wedding. She returns after three months and later reconciles her relationship with Marshall. During her absence, Ted leaves a voicemail for Marshall on their answering machine calling Lily a “bitch” for leaving. She discovers the voicemail while decorating their apartment for Christmas, wanting to make it special for Marshall who had to write a paper that day. She and Ted argue about why he called her a bitch and Ted storms out of the apartment. Later, when he returns, Lily is gone and has taken all of the Christmas decorations with her. Ted then calls her and she tells him that if one of her kindergarteners had used language like that she would call their mother. Lily did indeed call Ted’s mother to tell her about his behavior because she believes he misbehaved and needs a mother figure and his actual mother to correct his behavior.

Lily takes it upon herself to educate others on how to be good people by teaching them through a mother-child relationship dynamic as she infantilizes the adult she is punishing and warns them of the consequences of their actions. Lily uses the “Aldrin Justice” system another time when she steals a crystal ashtray from a millionaire’s house after he insults her. The millionaire, “Captain,” invites Lily to evaluate a painting he purchased, hoping that she will be
amazed by the art piece. Instead Lily expresses how she prefers a different art piece and thinks that he should have purchased it instead, to which in disgust the Captain replies “You’re just a kindergarten teacher.” Upset with his behavior she takes his crystal ashtray to teach him a lesson. Although she is the same age and sometimes younger than those she reprimands, this role of monitoring others’ behaviors and educating adults to behave better depicts her as a mother held responsible for others’ behaviors.

Through her position as a kindergarten teacher, a mother figure to her friends, and eventually a biological mother, Lily fulfills the cultural expectations of her gender. As Lily takes on the role of a mother throughout the series, she is given a feminine identity that positions the audience to see her as a “good” mother and an ideal woman by possessing motherly instincts and presenting herself as feminine. Even though Lily desires more outside of motherhood, acting like a mother toward others is part of her character and personality. Her character conveys “good” women as having maternal instincts.

**Lily as the (Un)stable Woman/Mother**

Although Lily is motherly, she challenges the expectations of motherhood by having a career as a kindergarten teacher and later in the series by accepting a position as an art consultant. However, the audience does not get to see Lily fulfill her dreams outside of motherhood by becoming an art consultant until the penultimate season. Therefore, the audience sees more of Lily lamenting her failed dreams outside of motherhood while also seeing her fulfill her role as a mother and a wife who needs a husband to provide for her. She repeatedly laments not fulfilling her career goals. In one instance, she expresses to Ted that she wants to become an artist but because of work and tending to her family she has not painted in months. She evidences how her work is taking care of other’s kids, and when she comes home she must take care of her
child. She expresses exhaustion from the constant care of giving to children and abandoning her own hobbies and dreams.

Lily intends to become an artist with her degree in art history but throughout most of the series, she is a kindergarten teacher. She expresses her frustration, yelling at Marshall that “I am just a kindergarten teacher…I have a degree in art history, I was meant to do something with it!” Her need for fulfillment leads her to break up with Marshall at the end of season one to move to San Francisco for three months to attend an art institution. Before she leaves, she states that she needs to do this one thing for herself before committing a life to Marshall and needs to know if she could “become something” in the art world. After she returns to New York, she tells Robin and Ted about her summer in San Francisco, how she met people from around the world, how her teachers would express awe at her work, and how it was an incredible experience. However, these experiences were untrue. Her teachers were disgusted with her work and stated that she is so bad at art that she is “unteachable.” She thus fails to find herself and attain a sense of achievement as an artist and lies to hide her sense of failure.

Lily is dependent on Marshall to provide her with safety, stability, and financial necessities. Before leaving Marshall, Lily lives in a spacious two-bedroom apartment, and she had protection with a nice place to live; after Lily returns to New York, she looks at two different apartments. She loves the first apartment but decides to keep looking and checks out a small studio apartment in which the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen are the same room, with a fold-out bed too big for the apartment. The moment she enters the small apartment she turns around and states “Yeah, I’m going to take the first apartment.” But her offer on the first apartment is rejected and she takes the small studio apartment. In this example, Lily upholds the traditional belief that women need men to take care of their material needs and provide financial stability
(Zuo, 2004). Lily needs Marshall in order to live a stable life, and once they reconcile their relationship she moves back into his apartment. In contrast to Marshall’s career as a lawyer, Lily’s career does not provide financial stability. Lily not only struggles with providing for herself when apartment hunting but also cannot provide for herself financially or make good spending decisions. Lily has thousands of dollars of credit card debt that she keeps a secret from Marshall but after they plan to buy an apartment, her debt becomes an obstacle for them to receive a loan. Marshall is the one who takes the lead on fixing the problem and starts a website to sell Lily’s clothes, demonstrating his role as an economical provider. Once again, she is dependent on Marshall to bring stability into her life since she appears to not be able to do so on her own.

Although Lily does not feel fulfilled because she is not living her dreams, others consider her to be fulfilled due to her relationship status. As mentioned previously, Lily discovers that Robin joins the group of “woo girls,” and Lily tries to join them. However, her efforts are brushed off by the other women and she is convinced it was because she was “some kind of loser” for being “happily married” which made her no longer fun. Robin consoles her and shows her that her efforts were not being reciprocated not because she is a happily married loser, but because the woo girls were unhappy, single losers. As Robin explains, Lily represents what the other women want; therefore, they feel sad to be around her because it reminds them of their “sad lives.” The woo girls consider her to be accomplished and fulfilled as she does not need to mask her pain of being alone and single with parties, alcohol, and yelling “woo!” as a desperate cry for help.

Lily does not find a stable sense of self on her own and suffers negative repercussions for leaving her relationship with Marshall. Despite her efforts to work and to use her art degree, her
life seems to achieve stability only by having a family. By taking on her natural role as a mother, Lily was able to ultimately find stability. She had a husband who could provide stability and safety in her life by fulfilling her material and financial needs.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

As I have shown, HIMYM reinforces the gender binary surrounding motherhood and womanhood by employing the use of gendered stereotypes through the characters of Lily and Robin. HIMYM seems to challenge gendered expectations as both Lily and Robin are depicted as modern-day working women, yet they are still constrained by cultural ideologies and expectations. Their individual depictions represent the gender binary that defines women as good mothers or bad women through their physical appearance, behaviors, actions, and respective desires to become a mother or remain childless. These portrayals depict Robin as a bad woman for prioritizing her career over having a family and Lily as a good woman/mother for living a traditional gendered life. Robin is deemed as a bad woman since she does not fulfill her female identity by becoming a mother, nor does she possess any desire to become a mother or a wife; in contrast, Lily is seen to be a good woman/mother who embodies the female identity by desiring a family, being in a monogamous, committed relationship, and by becoming a mother.

Robin is presented as unfulfilled, masculine, and sexually promiscuous as she does not embrace the cultural expectation to find fulfillment through marriage and motherhood. Objectifying Robin as the Whore serves to separate her from the notions of “the good woman” and shows the traditional belief that childless women are sexually deviant (Buchannan, 2013). Furthermore, Robin privileges masculinity over femininity as she rejects typical feminine behaviors and instead displays traditionally masculine attributes. Depicting Robin through
masculine stereotypes supports the ideology that women who work and/or are childless are not real women since being a mother represents the utmost fulfillment of female identity (Gillespie, 2003). The depiction of Robin as being unfulfilled, not only by herself but by others around her rhetorically enforces the ideology that women can only find true happiness and fulfillment by becoming a mother and a wife. Through the “old maid” trope, Robin’s unfulfillment serves as a cautionary tale to women that if they disregard their “natural” role of motherhood they will end up sad and alone in life. This is harmful, as childless women face social scrutiny and are often perceived to be lonely, and/or unfulfilled (Laha & Hazan, 2014).

In contrast to Robin, Lily is depicted as a (un)stable, feminine Madonna. The Madonna is symbolized through Lily’s embodiment of cultural expectations for feminine purity and chastity. Women who hold these virtues are considered to be better suited to become mothers/wives if they maintain their purity and do not seek out sexual encounters for their own gratification like the Whore (Bareket et al., 2019; Natarajan et al., 2022). Her example functions to portray women who enact the Madonna as good women who uphold their purity before and after marriage and use sex for procreation and their husband’s pleasure (Buchannan, 2013; Cooper, 2016). Connecting Lily’s chastity to her feminine attributes to desire children, her conventional feminine physical appearance and her nurturing mannerisms display her as a good, feminine mother/woman. She acts as the socio-emotional provider in her relationships, a role that is culturally expected for women to fulfill. Lily’s maternal behavior serves to reinforce the cultural ideology that women who are mothers are more feminine because they are fulfilling their “natural” role. Unlike Robin, Lily’s desire to engage in motherhood gives her a positive feminine identity (Peterson & Engwall, 2013). However, she also serves as a cautionary tale to women who may decide to choose their wants over their families. Lily's dreams of becoming an artist are
never accomplished, at least on screen for the audience to witness. She laments many times throughout the series about how she did not attain her dreams. When Lily tries to venture out on her own, her life becomes unstable as she lacks a husband to take care of her, but when she includes Marshall in her life she finds stability and safety. This rhetorically depicts her life as safer and more stable when she is a wife and a mother. Her example functions to depict the ideology that motherhood is the primary way women can find happiness and fulfillment.

This analysis shows that media still portrays motherhood as part and parcel of “true” womanhood. It has been proven through the analysis that gendered stereotypes are still depicted in media and perpetuate unrealistic cultural ideologies surrounding motherhood and womanhood. *HIMYM* depicts its two main female characters as working women who are liberated in contrast to the stay-at-home mothers who rarely left the kitchen in sitcoms from the 1950s-1970s. The portrayal of Robin and Lily as working women demonstrates an evolution of female depiction in the sitcom genre. Yet, there still exists a problem with how *HIMYM* seemingly embraces the nuances of gender stereotypes and cultural ideologies but nonetheless uses dated, stereotypical tropes surrounding gender, motherhood, and womanhood. While some modern-day sitcoms have advanced from these tropes, they are powerfully present in the plots and characters’ storylines in *HIMYM* and likely in other series as well. The stereotypes and ideologies in *HIMYM* reflect a specific construction of reality, one in which women find stability by embracing motherhood and sacrificing their identity, and another reality in which childless women are sad, lonely, old maids. Such portrayals do not represent the objective reality of many women who must work to sustain their families or simply decide to be childless and still find stability.

Further, this thesis shows how television continues to serve as a powerful reinforcer of dominant ideologies, including those surrounding motherhood and womanhood. In their essay on
television criticism, Chapel (1975) argues against the idea from previous critics that television is purely a form of entertainment. Instead, Chapel (1975) notes that television communicates “ideas, attitudes, values, content with implications and consequences for human action” (p. 82). Television asks audiences to accept “specific attitudes” which can be identified as persuasive (Chapel, 1975, p. 82), thus functioning to influence as it creates a discourse that is connected to “real life” (Dow, 1996). Boroff (1966) describes television’s persuasion: “There is no such thing as mere entertainment. Even in the zaniest episode of a situation comedy, there are thematic implications…television is often innocent of ideas, it is never devoid of attitudes and values” (p. 97, as cited in Chapel, 1975). Boroff’s (1996) argument states that television is always functioning as a persuasive tool; regardless of the genre, television has a persuasive dimension that can hold a position of power and reinforce the hegemonic cultural ideologies of its audience. Therefore, a mere sitcom series does not solely entertain but also persuades audiences to accept the ideas and values being conveyed in the series which influences audiences to act on those messages, thus creating inaccurate realities in the world. Boroff’s (1996) and Chapel’s (1975) statements remain relevant in 21st-century television as it is not merely a form of entertainment and mindless watching, but is in fact a powerful tool for creating and depicting cultural ideologies. The messages of television “are in fact designed to persuade” (Shrum, 1999, p. 120). For that reason, an audience does not watch a sitcom series without being influenced by persuasive content to accept specific attitudes, values, and beliefs. While a sitcom series may be a tool of entertainment and comedy it is still persuasive in its messages and depictions of political, cultural, and social issues. As it has been argued in this thesis, HIMYM is not primarily a sitcom series for entertainment but is also a medium for influencing audiences to accept
specific cultural attitudes and beliefs and consequently embrace ideologies that do not represent objective realities.
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