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SEX AND THE CITY: A POSTMODERN READING

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Antoinette Christine Di Guglielmo

December 2007

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ABSTRACT

Taking a postmodern feminist perspective with regard to an example of popular television programming, this study illuminates what I perceive as a false value system imposed on modern women and propagated through popular culture. Through an analysis of the Home Box Office hit program *Sex and the City*, I have evaluated and identified core societal paradoxes that have both facilitated and encumbered the progress of women's self-reliance in contemporary America. By exploring issues of American consumption, I have discovered the historical evolution of an epidemic of materiality that is suffocating American people (especially women) today. The main character Carrie from the program *Sex and the City* exemplifies the crippling effects of uber-consumerism in the new millennium: a woman who can't afford to purchase her apartment because she owns \$40,000 worth of shoes. Marxist theory has assisted me in illuminating how the show is based on a capitalist society in which revenue is the main objective. I have considered and detailed how primarily female-based issues of body image and sexuality have evolved and challenged core value systems in modern America by carefully exploring the characters Miranda,

Carrie, Samantha and Charlotte's diverse sexual and emotional needs and the ways they express them. As a result of my research, I have concluded that today's overwhelming influence of popular culture, bombarding us from all directions, has had a profound effect on American culture, rendering us masters of wastefulness, gluttony, narcissism, materiality and emotional instability. This impact has affected women especially, considering the whirlwind of change through which the female role has evolved over the decades.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT. iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS v

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: *SEX AND THE CITY:*
THE PHENOMENON 1

CHAPTER TWO: CARRIE MEETS BARBIE. 8

CHAPTER THREE: CARRIE WEARS PRADA 27

CHAPTER FOUR: BREAKING BREAD. 42

CHAPTER FIVE: SEX AND THE MODERN GIRL 56

WORKS CITED 71

>

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: *SEX AND THE CITY*:

THE PHENOMENON

Modern subscription television programs like Home Box Office's *Sex and the City* have brought forth a new dimension in woman-centered drama. Because of being unrestricted by the narrow parameters of prime-time network television, *Sex and the City* successfully tapped into a flourishing new buyer base. Running for a modest six seasons compared to many contemporary hit programs on television, 94 total episodes for a time period beginning in 1998 and ending in 2004, *Sex and the City* as a phenomenon lives on today in reruns (in expurgated version) and is also for rent as well as sale on DVD. The show's beginning as a subscription television program freed it from being muzzled by the necessity to appeal to a broad audience base in order to receive desirable ratings. As purchasers of the premium channel Home Box Office, the audience is a consumer of the show, a scenario that marries television with glossy magazine, producing a "Cosmo T.V" outcome. Who is better-qualified than the post-feminist female consumer to subscribe (literally) and

appreciate such a visually stimulating concoction of fashion, commercial and hip romance novel rolled into one? *Sex and the City* succeeded and flourished because it had a fresh, custom-ordered audience base and its characters gratified the third-wave feminist's thirst for a modern woman's drama rich in episodes about consumption, women's sexuality, financial independence, fashion, and contemporary relationship dynamics. *Sex and the City* successfully captures and perpetuates a modern take on the ideologies that drive women's perception of personal fulfillment, including body image ideals, consumerism, social behavior and values, and romantic relationship dynamics.

I will explore one of the leading ideologies perpetuated by *Sex and the City*, sexuality and body image ideals, in my second chapter. The characters of *Sex and the City* exemplify and condone unrealistic modern body image ideals. These ideals, so successfully delivered by the cast, are a primary determiner of a program's popularity in this day of materialism and body consciousness. In this thesis, I will explore this phenomena as well as the corroboration of today's normalization of the slender female frame. Women outside

of the narrow parameters of what is acceptable to the masses, women who are overweight or lacking in other physical or social graces are not taken seriously or not viewed as successful on this show. I will apply Susan Bordo's conclusions on how mastery of the physical form has become a matter of controlling numbers on a scale versus managing impulses and excess. These body image issues also have a place in the history of women that coincides with issues of power within the household and over the body and sexuality.

In chapter three I plan to employ a Marxist critical perspective of the show which will argue that the economic means of production controls and enables these unhealthy body image and personal fulfillment ideologies. Also explored within my research are the historical beginnings of women's consumption as explained by Lizbeth Cohen. Cohen's research illuminates the World War II era as a starting point for the targeting of American women by the government, through the media to contribute to the American standard of living by purchasing fine items for their homes as an act of patriotism. This fresh attitude of women kick-started a new American image-consciousness that would later expand to *Sex and the City's* audience

base as a bizarre contortion of socially acceptable behavior and values, a condition I will examine in chapter three.

Sex and the City's audience base, the educated, middle-class white woman, now has a programming option that differs from women's programming of the past, leaving behind the stale theme of women juggling the worlds of work and their private world, as depicted in programs like *LA Law*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Cagney and Lacey*. Women have held high-profile jobs for long enough now so that they no longer need that popular-culture reassurance they once received through television programming; it's just not that interesting anymore. In the modern *Sex and the City* world, women do well and they already know it, they don't need convincing. So the women's work realm reemerges as just another sector of their private world, another form of self-expression versus a necessary plot determiner like women's drama of the past.

Self-expression is the central means by which the characters of *Sex and the City* capture their audience as well as demonstrate their values through their social behavior. In chapter four I will examine how these modern women define themselves not by their accomplishments or

domestic aptitude or ability to do it all as the more traditional female television characters of the feminist and postfeminist era have (think *Mary Tyler Moore* and the more modern *Grey's Anatomy*.) Sexuality and romance, consumption, economic independence and relationships with one another are all primary forms of self-expression for this new breed of female heroine. As Jane Arthurs argues,

There is a generic expectation that postfeminist drama will be about single women wanting to get married. Unlike other postfeminist narratives, in *Sex and the City* the responsibility for single women's unhappiness isn't laid at the door of feminist women choosing a career over a man. Of the four women only Charlotte is unequivocal in her desire to get married but is quickly disillusioned when she does. The traditional romance narrative is still there but as a residual sensibility, a slightly old-fashioned version of femininity that doesn't work in practice. (85)

The four heroines in this series are single as a precondition to their central preoccupation; finding satisfying sexual relationships while still enjoying their

lives and roles as independent, trendsetting cosmopolitan women.

As trendsetting cosmopolitan women, Carrie, Miranda, Samantha and Charlotte set the stage for a visual, pop culture consumption smorgasbord for the audience. The standard of living enjoyed by these women is nothing less than fabulous, each maintaining apartments in the hippest, trendy or upper-class neighborhoods of New York City. They dress in the hottest fashions and purchase the most expensive shoes around. The establishments they frequent, be they bars, clubs, restaurants or what have you, are top-rate and oftentimes exclusive, highlighting the generous amount of money that the ladies spend to go there and play there. They try to be seen only at such places. The show puts a large focus on lifestyles, proving how popular culture perpetuates an economically gluttonous buyer base. Brand names are marketed mercilessly on the show. The women are spending freely and with great vigor, creating an image that condones frivolity and excess, even to the point of self-destruction. I plan to explore this phenomena, including a particular episode where the main character, Carrie, finds herself in dire financial straits, realizing that she has no savings to purchase her

apartment, yet co-habitates with an overflowing closet full of several-hundred dollar shoes. Still she remains adamant that her frivolity is socially and personally acceptable, all for the worthy cause of fashion and personal fulfillment.

Today's woman has choices like never before in history. Her happiness or level of perceived success is not determined solely by the presence of a man to call her husband, as it was in the pre-feminist era, nor is it determined by her ability to have a career, as it was in the feminist era. Today's woman is burdened by the responsibility of pioneering previously uncharted oceans of possibilities and combinations of worlds in the search of a healthy balance that will allow her to find happiness and fulfillment. Today's woman has to battle strict new ideologies about body image, juggle and/or choose between motherhood and career, master the art of contemporary fashion without overdoing it on the materialism, and explore and consider the increasingly socially acceptable sexuality smorgasbord. I will explore the arrival and progression of these women's issues through American history as well as how they are represented in the popular culture arena.

CHAPTER TWO

CARRIE MEETS BARBIE

In six seasons of the series *Sex and the City*, the four main characters remain very slender in physical frame (dare I say too lean), except for a brief stint for one of the characters, Miranda, who battles weight issues because of just having had a baby (her issues however are representative of her inner struggle with who she is versus who she's become.) The women together are shown almost always eating at restaurants, and we almost never see them exercising or discussing healthy lifestyle issues. Instead, although seen eating and drinking frequently, they always magically maintain their slender figures. The series doesn't make an issue out of weight; body image is rarely discussed in the sense of weight and proportions of the characters in their everyday situations. We just expect our four heroines to look good, i.e., to stay in shape and remain thin and fashionable in order to be considered sexy and enviable, and they do not disappoint. Even in situations of extreme threat to the physical form, such as Samantha's battle with breast cancer, Samantha finds a way to make her misfortune

fashionable by picking wild and fabulous wigs of all shapes and forms to wear while in the public eye in order to preserve society's expectations of her physical image as well as to "prove" that even cancer will not win in the fight to look good.

In modern society's pop culture world, body image ideals play a leading role in determining the success or failure of the characters represented, as well as how seriously they will be taken by the American public. *Sex and the City* would probably not be such a success if the cast's physical attributes didn't meld so perfectly with their character's distinct sexual personalities, and they would not be taken seriously as strong, independent, and successful women if their physical appearance and body image did not conform with today's ideals of the perfect woman. Their body images mirror their personalities just as they provide a keen insight into their individual and diverse sexualities.

Contemporary society has normalized the slender female body. To be taken seriously in today's culture, the female body must be able to stand alone as a sort of "other," an entity that has become almost completely separated from the original "mind, body, soul" trinity,

and that separate entity must be thin to be considered beautiful and complete. An initial assessment is made of the female television character often based on primarily physical appearance, and if she passes the test, that is if she conforms successfully to the public's opinion of what is pleasant to look at, the program has a chance of success. The alternative, the occasional female character who defies the odds and becomes successful despite the fact that she does not represent the perfect-looking, slender framed American woman, is typically successful as a travesty.

As an example, we can explore the dynamics of the popular 80's sitcom heroine, Rosanne Conner from the series *Rosanne*. Rosanne was a mother, wife, and blue-collar worker who was not particularly good at anything domestic or otherwise. Moreover, she was proud of her inadequacies and lack of fervor. She was viewed as a tough woman but also as a joke. Her size was a grotesque punch-line to the idea of her being a strong woman. Her weight and appearance, combined with her toughness, was the heart of the comedic storyline. Rosanne symbolized what every middle to upper-class American woman strives not to be like; loud, trashy-mouthed, obnoxious, unsuccessful, rude,

ignorant, lacking in class and poise, and physically grotesque. She epitomized of the term "white trash" and her figure physically represented that stereotype. Although enormously successful in primetime television, middle- to upper-class women would not look at Rosanne as a person to emulate or take seriously. Few in contemporary middle or upper-class America would look at Rosanne and envy her or wish to model their life or dreams around the lifestyle her character portrays. To be enviable like the girls from *Sex and the City*, a character must represent all that today's materialistic, self-serving, egotistical, go-getter female society desires for themselves. The *Rosanne* show works because it mocks and jeers at how "funny" it is when a family is dysfunctional, distasteful, poor and obese, not an appealing objective for most upper-class American women who care about culturally-induced ideals. If the show is appreciated by a sector of the middle to upper-class community, it is partially because of the opportunity to scoff at the "unfortunates" of material circumstance and physical form.

While fashion, beauty, fancy cars and nice homes, wealth and privilege all are often high on the middle to upper-class agenda of female America, nothing tops the

list like the desire for the perfect female form. These expectations of the female form are not new. In the Middle Ages, fasting began as a sort of spiritual cleansing, a method in which to gain control over weakness of the flesh. These practices were reserved for a small proportion of society, those who held religious or prominent positions within their culture. Contemporary body image ideals however, have turned these original early conceptions inside out, and the previous spiritually-guided objectives have degenerated into a practice of body management, a method of establishing dominance over the physical human form where the mind is reduced to a slave to the secular body rather than a liberator to the divine soul. In the words of Susan Bordo, Fat, not appetite or desire, became the declared enemy, and people began to measure their dietary achievements by the numbers on the scale rather than by the level of their mastery of impulse and excess. The bourgeois "tyranny of slenderness" (as Kim Chernin has called it) had begun its ascendancy (particularly over women), and with it the development of numerous technologies – diet, exercise, and later on,

chemicals and surgery—aimed at a purely physical transformation. (185.)

Today it is considered abnormal, grotesque, or problematic to not have control over one's physique. The women of *Sex and the City* are trendsetters; they set the standards for many middle to upper-class contemporary women; they are strong, independent, and sexy, and therefore cannot afford to show the weakness of being that is associated with a heavy physical form. All too often how we appear to the outside world defines who we are, and to not be slender is to be inadequate.

Even in other American situation comedies that prospered by representing the working class American life, such as the very popular *Married With Children*, the characters have been thin and attractive. Peg Bundy was not ultra-thin but not obese either, and she was able to get away with being average-weight only because the show's central female character, her daughter, Kelly, was thin and beautiful. In this case, thin was rated so much more highly than smart that the show thrived on Kelly's stupidity and the sheer idiocy that such a beautiful girl could be so dumb. She was as dumb as a box of rocks. Kelly prided herself on her sexual promiscuity while continually

being insulted by her family because of her ignorance and stupidity. The show's astounding popularity was partly attributed to Kelly's stunning beauty, thin build, sexy dress, and outrageous stupidity. What kept the show going was that Kelly's thin appearance was sexually enticing, and her sexuality was taken seriously by the American audience. The writers' use of comic exaggeration here assists in illustrating the point that America wanted and enjoyed this kind of character; if America didn't like it, America wouldn't have been watching it. The writers continued to push the exaggeration further and further because it was working.

Sexuality in *Sex and the City* also necessitates thinness in order to be taken seriously. The highly sexual character of Samantha has taken a decidedly masculine approach to displaying her sexuality in body and in behavior. Her behavior is the one that most closely resembles the typical male approach to the art of sex and relationships. She is aggressive and animal-like in her sexual behavior, barring nothing and trying everything, including men of all shapes and sizes, not to mention a woman or two. Yet her dress is provocative and feminine, used like a lioness luring her prey. In order for her to

be perceived as the strong, independent and assertive character she represents, her figure as well as her style of dress must remain enticing to counter her aggressive, go-getter personality.

Samantha is a woman of power. She plays a Public Relations executive who has earned the respect of her colleagues by having the influence to summon the right people and the right places in order to conduct her public relations work effectively. She can get into all the hip clubs, can arrange for the best caterers, decorators, and guests at all her events, and has access to all the most coveted hot spots. Samantha plays a role more akin to the traditional traits of a male harasser or predator, even her nickname, "Sam" - from Old Testament strong man, Samson suggests her masculine prowess, prone to seeking out her prey and attacking. In such an aggressive role, her less feminine figure and her masculine personality must be married to create a character contemporary society finds convincing. Had she been a middle-aged single woman who ate donuts and battled with her 100 excess pounds and cellulite, she may have been rejected by her audience as well as her clients as a non-believable woman of strength and power. It is notable that Samantha portrays American

popular culture's version of a Public Relations Executive, stylized and so New York, with her sleek and chic look that intimates that only the fashionable, trim and aggressive woman in New York succeeds. A more realistic view into the public relations industry would reveal that this is not always the case, but for the sake of American television entertainment, these are the rules.

Samantha hunts and devours men. The "maleness" of Samantha's ways encourages the discerning audience to consider what she can get away with in the show, compared to what a male counterpart might be able to get away with. In episode 70, a Worldwide Express delivery man (a conspicuous hunk) comes to her office to deliver a package. The term "package," quite obviously placed within the scene's dialog refers to his manhood as well as to her masculinity. The context clearly makes the opening use of the term "package" a blatant reference to male genitalia power, domination and aggression. The allusion works two ways here, one in Samantha's enthusiasm to possess both the parcel and the hunky delivery man's "package," and also in the loss of his power when he is immediately depleted of any ounce of control he may have had over his own body from the second he walks in the door. A matter of

minutes and several references to his "package" later, Samantha has convinced him to drop his pants. Carrie walks in and is embarrassed by seeing Samantha performing oral sex on him. As the episode continues, Carrie and Samantha navigate around the uncomfortable situation until they finally find a way to laugh about the whole thing. The lesson learned is that Samantha has to learn to exercise a little discretion and self-control.

If this situation were reversed and the character playing Samantha was Sam, and the delivery person was a woman, the scene would have been perverse and controversial, evoking public accusations condoning an atmosphere that objectifies women. In our culture, sexual aggression is usually thought of as a male trait, and women who partake in sexual misadventures and yield to the advances of a man are traditionally thought of as weak, misguided, provocative, promiscuous, and or victimized and exposed. Samantha's character effectively takes this male-like characteristic and creates a powerful female counterpart, a woman secure in her sexuality, who knows what she wants. At this point it would seem that American television has difficulty representing a promiscuous woman unless she's seriously deranged (or impaired, like *Married*

With Children's Kelly) or a control freak like *Sex and the City's* Samantha. Another notable difference in the two scenarios is the Worldwide Express delivery person's reaction. A male would almost always appear proud and happy to accept the woman's advances, while the female would surely consider herself harassed or assaulted by the male's advances. Samantha's insistence on opening the delivery man's "package" may be viewed as rape or at least sexual harassment, while, if a man became unrelenting in his advances, he would be considered macho, powerful and virile. Generally, in real life, men don't feel threatened or victimized by women's advances as women often do of men's.

The most distinctly feminine character in *Sex and the City*, effectively the anti-Samantha, is Charlotte, who even in name implies femininity. Her physique matches her character, slender but curvy and soft, and her behavior and demeanor is quite opposite that of Samantha's. She is aloof in her sexuality and resists Samantha's sometimes shocking and aggressive sexual outspokenness. Charlotte's mannerisms are at times reserved and even prudish. She is represented as the "innocent" or naïve one of the four women, preferring conventional, compliant sexual roles and

a less contemporary female role in her world. Charlotte is passive and desires the lifestyle of a married homemaker who honors and serves her husband. Throughout the series, she is searching for the perfect man to settle down with, all the while wearing floral dresses, lots of pink, and ribbons in her hair. Charlotte is the girl who recites out loud how her first name would sound with the last name of her current boyfriend, in the hopes of someday becoming his prim and perfect "Stepford" wife to her knight in shining armor.

A contemporary cultural image of a "Stepford Wife" who molds her image to fit into a man's world, reveling in her at home everyday successes such as baking the perfect bundt cake or hosting the neighborhood bake sale, Charlotte has the build and persona of what her character is trying to exude; femininity, conformity, passivity. Her body image screams "honor and obey" and her dreams reek of fancy dinner parties laced with heirloomed formal china. At the end of season five, Charlotte begins to fall in love with a Jewish man. Not being Jewish, Charlotte discovers that it is an issue for him, since he feels he should not marry outside his faith. Charlotte abandons her own traditions in favor of becoming a Jew so that they may

marry. Charlotte believes in love and will do anything for it and marriage, even if it means challenging or even compromising her own customs. With this kind of character, Charlotte is acutely aware of her body as a temple and portrays a more demure sexuality, one that contrasts Samantha's to the extreme. Her curves, long hair, conservative ways and desire for male companionship are perfect physical manifestations of today's cultural image of the homemaker, or the little girl who wants nothing more than to grow up and become a mommy.

Portraying the anti-homemaker for a good majority of the show, Miranda differs greatly from Charlotte. She's the one who is less needy, less obsessive, less frilly than the others. Miranda doesn't need sex like the others; she's the one we see on her couch alone at night with her TiVO and a quart of ice cream. Of the four, she is the least conscious of her body image and fashion sense. Miranda is Ms. No-nonsense, no primp, no fuss, who has short jagged hair and wears drab non-revealing, male-corporate in color and cut clothing. Her career as attorney is her first priority in her life, and she works long hours, therefore not putting much energy into having any romantic relationship in her life. Sexually, Miranda

is direct in conveying her needs to her lovers and just as direct when ushering them out of the door after they deliver those needs. Miranda leads a simple, independent, no-frills, low-maintenance lifestyle and is not easily swayed from her daily routine.

Given these personality traits, the writers implemented issues into Miranda's life that only Miranda would have difficulty dealing with. Miranda sleeps with a younger man who ultimately falls in love with her, thus complicating and polluting her no-nonsense lifestyle. Steve, in fact, is a human version of nonsense; a loveable, potentially useless but at the same time quirky and huggable, indispensable kind of guy. In these episodes, Miranda's "weaknesses" are witnessed as she struggles with whether or not to keep the endearing, yet goofy guy around. In the end, to further complicate things, she finds herself pregnant by him and agonizing over whether or not she can deal with the responsibility caused by a baby and/or a man, permanently in her life. Ironically, giving into these new lifestyle changes does prompt Miranda to become more image-conscious, and in the final episodes we see her struggling with her weight and attempting to fit back into the mold of who she used to

be, a running theme for her throughout the remainder of the series. Miranda moves to the suburbs with Steve, who after years of on-and-off dating, she suddenly discovers she is in love with. This move out of the city alone prompts an intense internal struggle for Miranda, who never thought she would give up her independent, cosmopolitan lifestyle. As an attorney, she struggles with career responsibilities, insisting that she can handle as much as she took on before (only to find out she is under-equipped to handle the load.) She struggles with her weight, sure that she can get back down to the body size from before she had her baby: a physical representation of the conflict between "old" Miranda and "new" Miranda. Miranda's eternal struggle is that she is stuck between who she has always been and who she's become. In the end, Miranda becomes everything she thought she wasn't; a mom, a wife, a suburbanite, a half-time lawyer.

The character of Miranda reaches out to a select audience, the 'defectors.' The successful women who gave up everything she thought she always wanted in order to go to 'the other side.' Miranda's corporal image reflects a weakness in her own eyes to her character, the fact that she did not hold her ground and maintain her own identity

as an independent and self-sufficient, powerful woman. Miranda represents the middle ground between Samantha's masculine intensity and Charlotte's feminine passivity. Miranda's struggle is a familiar one today, as the offspring of the advocates of women's rights who are still trying to demonstrate that a woman can support herself and represent herself as well as a man, but who also has come to a place in her life where because she is a woman, she must make some concessions in order to lead a productive, healthful life as a contributor to society, as a wife and a mother. Miranda represents a larger portion of ambitious contemporary female Americana, a woman who doesn't (like Samantha) want only the high-powered career, or (like Charlotte) only the homemaker lifestyle.

Carrie is a mixed bag of fashion, body consciousness and sexuality. She is a combination of all three other women. Jumbled up in a pool of indecisiveness, Carrie is the little girl-lost compared to the others. All three of the other characters are quirky, unbalanced and strong-willed, yet they know exactly what they want from their lovers, careers and lifestyles. Carrie tries on men like she goes through shoes, talking incessantly and ever analyzing her men and relationships as enthusiastically as

she does her outfits. Carrie is a physical representation of our mixed-genred society, a crumpled mass of women's lib activists, first-wave feminists, second wave feminists, descendants of World-War One wives, 1980's female glass-ceiling breakers. Carrie wants it all, the knight in shining armor, the high powered career, the high fashion wardrobe, chivalry, equality, independence, self-sufficiency, inter-dependency.

Carrie is a reflection of a female consumer society that is suddenly full of choices. No longer restricted by their options and defined by their gender, women of the new millennium are left to forge a new path for themselves. Products of a hungry culture that values and propagates body image and materialism over individualism and self-definition, women like Carrie are caught in a cycle of self-exploration through consumerism. For women like Carrie, who do not have a hard and fast idea about exactly who they are and precisely what they want from life, consumer America is a gleaming bulb of hope, illuminating the boulevard with fantasies about who they can be today if they put on this trendy designer outfit or purchase a home in that sophisticated end of town. They

are a nation of searchers, wandering from store to store in search of who they want the world to think they are.

The irony is while it seems that slender and beautiful Carrie has a plethora of choices of outfit, the more she accumulates, the more she wastes what her real talents have earned her. Fashion and consumerism are fickle bedfellows, ever-changing and greedily enticing their lovers right into bankruptcy and loss of independence. Hypnotized by its charms, Carrie loses the independence that her generation has earned with each dollar she throws away on fashion, almost like an equality conspiracy directed toward the 20th century woman to bring her back down to a position that deems her incapable of sound financial decision-making. Armed with a brilliant mind and a promising career, Carrie still traps and compromises her financial security in search of the perfect pair of Manolo Blahnik shoes at a price tag that could feed a family in a third-world nation for a year. Boyfriends and lovers come and go from Carrie's life, leaving her emotionally depleted and mystified in a similar way that maintaining her body image ideals through materialism nearly ruins her financially. Carrie's relationships and sexuality follow suit, taking her all

over the chart as if she were shopping 5th Avenue, going from store to store in search of what baubles she can pick up to make her who she is.

The writers of *Sex and the City* are making the point that our society is comprised of many different types of women. Not every woman is a Samantha, Miranda or Charlotte, desiring mainly sex, career, or housewifery respectively. Carrie represents our generation's plethora of options and their confusion at defining their desires when so many of these options have just become available and so many of them are burdened by so much controversy. In today's America, if a woman wants to be thin, she is scrutinized and accused of being obsessive or narcissistic, but if she is overweight, she is ridiculed for being lazy and sub-par. If a woman wants to be a housewife, she is accused of having too low standards for herself, blind to a world of endless opportunities that her foremothers fought for. If a woman is highly sexual, she is branded a whore, and the woman who has her sights set on corporate America is selfish and cold. If today's woman has come so far, why is it that each prospective opportunity is held by so short a leash?

CHAPTER THREE

CARRIE WEARS PRADA

The standard of living upheld by the characters depicted in *Sex and the City* conveys how culture rewards the attention to image that the women maintain. Their world is wealthy and posh, including the people they associate with, the establishments they choose to frequent, the apartments in which they live, the clothes they wear, and even their preferred method of travel. Tremendous emphasis is placed on how well they live and how and what they consume, yet never is there any indication that they acknowledge their positions in such an exclusive society, or of what their core values are. Only two of the characters hold what could be considered as high-salary careers: Miranda is an attorney and Samantha is a Public Relations Representative for the most exclusive accounts. Carrie writes a small column for a newspaper and Charlotte becomes the most mysteriously wealthy of the bunch. Throughout different segments of her life within the show, her jobs vary anywhere from unemployed to volunteer, to art gallery manager, to millionaire wife, to millionaire divorcee. By focusing on

their lifestyles, the show reflects how our culture perpetuates an economically gluttonous buyer base and the myth of women as financially frivolous.

Middle-class women's financial frivolity is a notion that has only recently emerged after a legitimate historical and political indoctrination (through such forums as advertising and the media) to the concept of spending freely, which had a beginning point in American history. The show's characters, born to a generation of post World War II consumers, caught in a "new and exciting" era that promoted and encouraged free spending. Postwar American women were besieged with exciting new ideas about their prosperous futures and were assured that the more they buy, the greater their income potential and standard of living. These ideas were stimulated by a government fearful of a postwar depression similar to what occurred after World War I. Women were enticed through the media by ad campaigns showing the happy and glowing bride, dressed in her fashionable wedding gown and posing with a shiny new percolating coffee machine. Somewhere along the line, some sixty years later that fashionable wedding gown and shiny new percolating coffee machine turned into Carrie's Dolce & Gabana peacoat and Manolo Blahnik shoes.

The transition (and changing) of this dream in this direction reflects exactly what the ideals that the series *Sex and the City* intends to imitate about today's society, as well as the disturbing shift of focus on the part of the consumer. Today, it is considered by many in the middle to upper class to be gauche for a woman's main aspiration to be becoming a bride. Today women are encouraged to wait to become married, perhaps until their early thirties. They are encouraged to attain an education and a career, and to "get to know themselves" before entering into a lifetime union. These things are positive and show how women have advanced since the post WWII era. However, the other side of it is the disturbing shift in focus from the functional coffee pot and bridal gown to the ridiculously expensive and extravagant shoe and designer clothing. It seems that we've taken two steps forward and one step back. Carrie, while supporting herself on an upper-middle class salary, wears her designer clothing like the bride in the post World War II advertisement, with poise and pride – and no guilt, just like her mother would have probably taught her. Elizabeth Cohen argues:

Out of the wartime conflict between citizen consumers, who reoriented their personal consumption to serve the general good, and purchaser consumers, who pursued private gain regardless of it, emerged a new postwar ideal of the purchaser as citizen who simultaneously fulfilled personal desire and civic obligation by consuming. As *Bride's* magazine told the acquisitive readers of its handbook for newlyweds, when you buy 'the dozens of things you never bought or even thought of before . . . you are helping to build greater security for the industries of this country . . . [W]hat you buy and how you buy it is very vital in your new life - and to our whole American way of living.

(119)

The popular opinion then was that mass consumption would contribute to the desire to achieve a higher standard of living for an injured nation, and the bullhorn went out to the women. After all, women had begun to come into their own; they were daring and learned to express their desire to work, be educated, and contribute to society as men had been doing for years. Their husbands being off at war,

these women became self-sufficient, independent, and accepted in the workplace. This was a huge step forward for them, but also naturally made them a target market for the ad campaigns. Encouraged to get out there, make their own decisions and spend, they weren't guilty, frivolous, or materialistic; they were merely conscientious and dedicated American citizens, stocking their homes with furnishings, modern appliances and what Martha Stewart would later call "good things." A generation before Feminism and Women's Liberation, Post-World War II women were learning to assert themselves in all kinds of ways, including having a say in how they spent the family money through patriotism. After all, as a *Fortune* editor proclaimed, "thrift is now un-American." Cohen 121.

The women of *Sex and the City*, however, take this anti-thrift campaign to a new level. The "early to marry," modest post-war female consumer of yesteryear has become today's narcissistic, image-invested self-sufficient-seeking woman. In episode 64 of *Sex and the City*, Carrie finds herself in a situation where she must either purchase her apartment or leave it. Carrie quickly discovers that she is in a terrible financial bind. Closer investigation leads her to the realization that she has

spent \$40,000 on the shoes in her closet, and has nothing to speak of stashed in the bank to purchase her apartment. This episode dramatizes one of the few instances in the six-season series where a character is put into the position where she's forced to explore her core values and re-evaluate her financial priorities. In the end, Carrie continues to lead the same frivolous, care-free lifestyle. It would seem that such a predicament would evoke a response of disapproval and awe that a seemingly bright and self-sufficient independent young woman could manage to get herself into such a disgraceful dilemma. Yet, Carrie and her friends don't seem to find her situation particularly insulting to her intelligence. This fact suggests that Carrie's struggles with her finances not only fall within the boundaries of an "acceptable" modern crisis, but one possibly shared by contemporary middle-class women. Spending endlessly is marketed as a sort of sport or hobby that keeps women especially "in touch" with modern standards and trends, just like the women of post-war America. Carrie does not want to give up her trendy apartment and own a home of her own in another cheaper neighborhood. She prefers to stay where she is, stay a renter, and buy shoes. Carrie's situation is an extreme

example of what can be argued as the actions of someone who adheres to the values of a gluttonous society. Staying trendy and chic is admirable in some segments of today's society, no matter what the cost.

There are other ways of staying trendy and chic within the multiple narratives of *Sex and the City*. Charlotte, the most traditionally-dressed character, doesn't get into trendy fashion image within the show, but shows her image-consciousness through her luxurious and posh upscale apartment. She comes upon this great space by marrying a very wealthy man and redecorating his apartment. The apartment is so lavish that she is recruited for a featured article by an exclusive home magazine. At different segments of her life before and after this point, Charlotte finds herself in various financial situations, ranging from being unemployed to working a modest job at an art gallery, to volunteering. She becomes divorced, keeps the posh apartment until she later remarries and her new husband moves into it with her. Throughout all of her various living arrangements, Charlotte continues to live well. All this despite the fact that she does not ever in any episode, before or after her marriage, work a high paying job, nor does she

struggle with her finances. She lives a life of luxury and seems to enjoy all the "finer" things whenever she wants. Her character represents a modern middle class woman's interpretation of a woman with a successful foundation, regardless of her struggles with marriage and the traditional role of "wife."

Charlotte's situation is a modernized version of the postwar emphasis on a high standard of living. Another example of the influence of the postwar consumption push is an article from *Life Magazine* showing the postwar family and comparing the differences in their standard of living options. When viewing "before and after" pictures portraying the "hard" life of the family living in the old frontier-looking weed-invaded wooden paneled home vs. the "easy" life of the new suburban home, complete with lawn and driveway, appliances in the kitchen, and dad in a business suit, the "choice" for the American family is clear. Who would want to live like the "before" woman, hunched over, sweeping the dirty floor around the old wood-burning stove, when any "good" American family would take out a loan and move on up to suburban living; clean, comfortable and luxurious? The slogan for this article is "Family Status Must Improve - It Should Buy More for

Itself to Better the Lives of Others.” (Cohen 113) Mass consumption had become a civic responsibility versus a personal indulgence. Families were encouraged to buy “more comfortable” new homes and stock them with shiny and innovative new appliances; consumption in the interest of stimulating a postwar economy and utilizing the new enormous capacities of mass production as stimulated by the war.

Consumption and keeping up with fashion is not just a pastime but is something imposed on society by many influences. Women like Carrie have been targeted and seduced by the media, popular culture and a superstructure that is motivated by self-interest. Carrie and her friends have to keep up with fashion and a high living standard because they are programmed to believe that if they don't keep up, they will no longer live up to the high expectations of the class they wish to represent. This is exemplified by the aforementioned scenario of Carrie and her shoe predicament. Her need for the latest brand-name shoe on the market has taken over her good judgment.

In episode 83, season 6 of *Sex and the City* entitled “A Woman's Right to Shoes,” Carrie is invited to a baby shower for a couple who is having their third child. The

"shower" is more like a casual cocktail party for adults, and the parents request that the guests remove their shoes when they come in to prevent the family's other children from picking up "outside dirt." Carrie is confused and disappointed about removing her Manolo Blanik shoes and is immediately deflated when she takes them off and puts them in the pile with the other shoes. At the conclusion of the party, Carrie discovers that her shoes have been absconded with. The hostess, her friend Kyra, who is also the mother of the new baby, handles the situation and Carrie's devastation with marked detachment and calmness. Bewildered, Carrie accepts Kyra's offer to pay for the missing shoes but when Carrie tells her the cost, Kyra expresses her disdain. The dialogue between Carrie and Kyra goes as follows:

Kyra: "I'm sorry, I just think that's crazy to spend that much on shoes"

Carrie: "You know how much Manolos cost. You used to wear Manolos."

Kyra: "Sure, before I had a real life. But Chuck and I have responsibilities now. Kids. Houses. Four hundred and eighty-five dollars. . . like, *Wow!*"

Carrie: "I have a real life!"

Kyra: "No offense, Carrie - but I really don't think we should have to pay for your extravagant lifestyle. I mean it was your choice to buy shoes that were that expensive."

Carrie: "Yes, but it wasn't my choice to take them off."

Kyra: (snickers) "They're just shoes" (child repeats "shoes.")

Carrie goes on to analyze her feelings of anger and shame. She wonders, is it bad that her life is filled with shoes and not children? In the portion of the episode that describes Carrie's "thesis" for her weekly article, she writes:

"When we were young, Marlo Thomas sang to us about accepting each other and our differences. But then we got older and started singing a different tune. We stopped celebrating each other's life choices and started qualifying them. Is Acceptance really such a childish concept? Or did we have it right all along? When did we stop being free to be you and me?"

By the end of the episode, Carrie has realized that over the years she has attended Kyra's wedding shower, wedding, and all of her baby showers and she's spent \$2300.00 "celebrating Kyra's choices." Carrie wonders what happens for all of the single women to celebrate their life choices. She decides to call Kyra and leaves her a message stating that she's getting married to herself and that she's registered at Manolo Blahnik. Kyra goes to Manolo Blahnik, buys and has the pair of shoes sent to Carrie only after the store salesman requests that she keep her children away from the shoes. The show ends with Carrie stating "The fact is, sometimes it's really hard to walk in a single woman's shoes. That's why we need some really special ones now and then to make the walk a little more fun."

Carrie's "thesis" about "being free to be you and me" elucidates what Elizabeth Cohen argues about contemporary consumerism ideals having a tremendous impact upon modern society. Carrie equates being "free" to be herself with being able to purchase as many pairs of shoes as she desires. This episode reveals a historical dilemma of women when going through this conflicting period in their lives, when they may no longer have the resources

(emotionally or financially) nor often the will to continue the level of focus on themselves they're accustomed to. But an interesting question arises here. Does that focus change because of a newfound motherly maturity as is insinuated by Kyra, or does the focus just shift to a new source of consumption interest? In other words, is Carrie's shoe and fashion obsession destined to shift to a new obsession of "outfitting home and baby" when and if she becomes a mother? Is Carrie destined to become the woman in the aforementioned postwar advertisement in the wedding gown, holding the shiny new percolating coffee pot?

This same interpretation argues that the perpetuation of an economically gluttonous buyer base depends upon fulfilling the needs of the marketers. *Sex and the City's* characters spending habits as well as the women's fashion addiction suggest that they are victims of social and economic forces, and have been programmed as such from birth. Similar to what we've learned about the postwar push on consumption, a Marxist perspective also indicates that such social institutions as culture, art, literature, politics and economics are imposed upon us (the "base") by

a controlling "superstructure" motivated by self-interest.

Bressler writes:

Marx argues that the economic means of production within a society—what he calls the base—both engenders and controls all human institutions and ideologies—what he calls the superstructure—including all social and legal institutions, all political and educational systems, and all art. These ideologies and institutions develop as a direct result of the economic means of production, not the other way around. (163)

The characters of *Sex and the City* have represented well a culture and society, especially a white middle to upper-class one, of women who have been portrayed in popular media as consumption-aholics. Marx argues that the social elite impose their ideals on the working class. This argument applied to the series indicates that through popular culture, the superstructure is effectively "marketing" its standards and ideals to the base through Carrie and her friends. A look into American history confirms that Americans come by it honestly, having lived through the perils of a devastating World War I and

encouraged by the government to save ourselves with mass consumption after World War II. Examining the personality of the consumption, that is, how it's changed over the years, poses some interesting and perhaps frightening insights, however. Our perspective seems to be shifting from overspending on our homes in these days of "mc-mansions" and families to overspending on materiality, excess and vice. With the contemporary growing popularity of ever increasing kinds of plastic surgery and \$500 high heels, what's next? *Sex and the City*, when properly examined, brings to light some thought-provoking questions.

CHAPTER FOUR
BREAKING BREAD

The main characters of *Sex and the City*, Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte, represent four modern examples of white, single, middleclass sector of female society, or at least the direction that this sector desires to be heading. Through the plotline of the show, these women battle a steady stream of stale stereotypes of what a woman should look like, want, behave like and need in her life, all conventional social roles determined by predominantly masculine values. It is notable that while the four women are portrayed as particularly independent and self-sufficient, they still constantly must combat these ancient ideals, and they do this effectively through their bonding sessions. A large part of their bonding process occurs in upscale, presumably trendy restaurants, bars, or clubs, where the women indulge in eating and drinking as they exchange ideas and give insight to their diverse value systems and perspectives on life. In this chapter we will explore this female bonding process of breaking bread together as well as the use of food and

eating as a method of facilitating a positive new forum for self-expression and power.

The act of breaking bread together is an important element of this series and worthy of close analysis. The women meet regularly for breakfast, lunch or dinner and are seen eating, drinking and chatting together in every episode. At times of crisis, they come together to eat or drink. At times of happiness they come together to eat or drink. They have regular Saturday morning breakfast together and even have special "places" where they sometimes meet without even having to name the spot; it's simply referred to as "our place." The women frequent the poshest pubs and most exclusive clubs and restaurants as well as the corner hot dog stands, although the latter is usually seen with only one or two of the women actually eating. They also stop for ice cream or to grab a coffee. Sometimes all four of them, other times just a couple, but each meal is enjoyed out and almost never do we see the girls gathered around the table at one of their homes after one of them has carefully put together a home-made meal. In the rare instances where the women dine around an actual kitchen table, it is for a dinner party. We almost never see them actually cooking. When they do eat at each

other's homes, they almost always have ordered take-out. In episode 52, we see Miranda impressed with herself because she can follow the directions on a box of cake mix.

One of the more obvious points made by not showing the women inside their kitchens cooking is the purposeful resistance by these women to resemble conventional female stereotypes. These snappy contemporary cosmopolitan women would lose some credibility if they were perceived as domestic and traditionally feminine. Similar to the previous chapter in which we explored the women's body images and how the women must be thin to be taken seriously, in the context of this show, the women need also represent a feminist perspective on the woman's place in society. These women are futuristic and deviant from their earlier conformist counterparts. These women who can make it on their own, and are not tied down by traditional roles of women who need to be carried by a man, follow in the footsteps of male superiors, or limit their desires to the "ordinary" existence of mainstream America. These women must be more masculine, having their meals prepared for them and not being burdened with domestic obligations and chores. Eating and drinking and being served by others

successfully shows that these women are powerful, independent and revolutionary in comparison to the social roles that haunt them from their past. Women historically have been taught to control their appetites and show restraint, and eating is a powerful way to maintain control.

Women's eating behavior patterns have changed over time. Susan Bordo argues that women's eating habits have been scrutinized since the Victorian era, when wives had manuals telling them how a proper woman should behave around food. In Bordo's words:

Victorians did not have *Cosmo* and television, of course. But they did have conduct manuals, which warned elite women of the dangers of indulgent and overstimulating eating and advised how to consume in a feminine way (as little as possible and with the utmost precaution against unseemly show of desire). *Godey's Lady's Book* warned that it was vulgar for women to load their plates; young girls were admonished to "be frugal and plain in your tastes. (113-114)

Being frugal and plain in their tastes is not a forte of the girls in *Sex and the City*, although some of

these eating "rules" still exist today in some social arenas. I know few women who in a room full of other women will scarf down a plateful of potluck items simply because they are famished. Women have been encouraged to hold back, show restraint and suppress their appetites or else risk appearing unfeminine, unattractive, over-eager, weak, or out of control.

Much of the eating hype is class related. To be appropriately upper class, women strive to look thin and to view food with relative distance. It is not considered an upper-class feminine character trait for women to dive into a hearty meal of meat and potatoes and then to gorge themselves on a giant bowl of ice cream afterwards. This is most clearly obvious by taking a look at the menus at the higher end eating establishments of today where *Sex and the City* characters eat; the plates are beautifully decorated and arranged more like a dainty work of art than an appetizing and filling meal.

The overall message is that eating out a lot is a sign of affluence and prestige. The four apparently don't patronize fast food restaurants, which cater primarily to the lower to middle income families, are

the establishments that offer "super sizing" as an incentive to eat there. Lower income families are encouraged to "eat up" on fried foods and money-saving buffets, while upper-class families are taught restraint. The few incidences where the women are shown buying food from a cart is more of a testament to their devotion to the culture of New York City than the women striving to save a buck.

In episode 83, Samantha is dining by herself in an upscale restaurant. Adjacent to her in this restaurant is a woman with a child. The child is making noise and disrupting Samantha's business cellular phone call. Samantha becomes enraged and approaches the woman, telling her that her child should be left at home and not in "her" environment, disrupting her life. The discussion becomes an argument between Samantha and the child's mother. The child becomes obnoxious and throws his spaghetti on Samantha, ruining her perfectly coiffed hair and expensive ensemble. This is a scene of traditional versus contemporary, both women representing the feuding genres of femininity that are represented within the show. The upper-class, modern woman is

disgusted by the gall of the woman living the traditional lifestyle and the woman with her child is defying Samantha's conception of what is appropriate social or dining behavior. Samantha's world is Samantha-centered while the other woman's world is child-centered, and Samantha wants to know why her choice of singledom and non-motherhood is not respected or appreciated by the other woman, a theme of large consequence within the framework of the series.

So, the breaking bread scenes of *Sex and the City* represent a source of empowerment, class, and social position for these women as well as an arena to put current women's issues on the table, so to speak. In these scenes, both sides of the women's lifestyle conflict are asserting their newfound footing in the social arena via social eating. Both sides are showing that they are well-off, successful, independent, and have control over their own lives and are above the prescriptive forces that are suffocating the modern woman in relation to what they should or shouldn't behave like around the table or elsewhere in their lives. These women are sending a

message of empowerment over their own lives by not adhering to the stigma and stereotypes of women who stay at home and cook for their husbands, or who hide their children in their homes until they are old enough to behave appropriately. They are saying "we are a new breed, we are independent. We are not housewives, enslaved by the confines of our homes. We are in control of our destinies, we earn our own money, we eat freely, openly, and often." They are defying the traditional insistence that women are the providers of food, the kitchen workers, the housewives and caregivers. Bordo states:

The metaphorical dualities at work here, whatever their class meanings, presuppose an idealized (and rarely actualized) gendered division of labor in which men strive, compete, and exert themselves in the public sphere while women are cocooned in the domestic arena (which is romanticized and mystified as a place of peace and leisure, and hence connotes transcendence of the laboring, bourgeois body). In the necessity to make such a division of labor appear natural we find another powerful

ideological underpinning (perhaps the most important of industrialized society) for the cultural containment of female appetite: the notion that women are most gratified by feeding and nourishing others, not themselves. (118)

Bordo's argument is that by showing an appetite, "prominent" women in popular culture portray strength, resiliency and independence; characteristics of a contemporary woman who should be taken seriously. In this way, the women are resisting the prescriptive social forces of our culture. In some episodes, however, they comply with it.

In more than one episode, Miranda is having emotional problems and can't control herself from eating. Episode 52 involves Miranda deciding to have a "sex strike" in lieu of chancing any more bad dates. Having more than enough time to herself because of not dating, she discovers a new hobby; gorging herself on chocolate éclairs. She is ecstatic to have discovered something wonderful, eating chocolate éclairs in front of the television on a weekend night. In the next scene, Miranda is in front of the pastry counter and she is trying to avoid

getting the 7 éclairs that she really wants, and almost buys a \$74 gourmet chocolate cake instead. She thinks better of this and decides to go home and bake a cake with a store-bought cake mix. By the end of the evening, she has devoured $\frac{3}{4}$ of her "home-made" pride and joy out of the pan by herself. The next day she returns to the cake, becomes disgusted with herself, and throws it in the trash can, only to go in after it again and ultimately pour dish soap over it because she realizes she has no self-control. This episode is suggesting that it is an appropriate response to a decision of celibacy in our society for a woman to use eating chocolate to fill a void left by the lack of a male partner. It's true; many of today's women feel that without a man, their lives are somehow incomplete or unsuccessful, but more constructive ways of dealing with unhappiness are available to them, such as working out at the gym, taking a class or simply finding happiness in themselves.

Eating can also represent sexual empowerment for the characters of *Sex and the City*. There is something erotic about a woman who knows the pleasure of a brilliantly

choreographed feast, one who can truly enjoy and savor the delectable and enticing aroma and flavor of fine cuisine. A woman who is passionate about what she puts in her mouth during a meal has an intriguing sensuality about her that exudes prowess and power. "...The sexual act, when initiated and desired by a woman, is imagined as itself an act of eating, of incorporation and destruction of the object of desire. Thus, women's sexual appetites must be curtailed and controlled, because they threaten to deplete and consume the body and soul of the male." (Bordo 117)

Samantha, the most sexually uninhibited character in the show, and the character least concerned about her figure (yet she is always very thin,) is definitely a representative male devourer. She inevitably brings up some racy topic about her sex life over food. Eating is a part of expressing her sexuality and defying the opinion that a woman's appetite (sexual and otherwise) must be controlled, and Samantha's sexual appetite is insatiable. Nothing about Samantha's sexuality is controlled. She never worries about what she eats or what she does in the bedroom. It is quite common in the course of a meal for Samantha to bring up an entirely inappropriate topic for discussion that relates to her racy sex life. In fact it

is so commonplace that it would be unlikely for Samantha to not say something over one of their meals together that is so highly risqué that the other girls flinch or choke a bit over their plates. Samantha is asserting herself and her ravenous sexuality through food.

Taking a close look at contemporary advertising techniques and popular culture devices such as music and cinema can be enlightening to uncovering the way the women eating has been likened to reckless abandon and sex. Think of the movie *"When Harry Met Sally"* and the dinner scene where Meg Ryan fakes an orgasm over a meal to prove that she has no societal constraints to prohibit her from being sexually liberated. The scene is especially taboo and provocative when acted out over a dinner table in front of other customers. Not only is she devouring her food, but she is openly expressing her sexuality as well. Bordo's argument -

When women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food (almost never in commercials, and only very rarely in movies and novels), their hunger for food is employed as solely a metaphor for their sexual appetite. In the eating scenes in *Tom Jones* and *Flashdance*,

for example, the heroines' unrestrained delight in eating operates as sexual foreplay, a way of prefiguring the abandon that will shortly be expressed in bed. (110.)

Of course, all this emphasis on the eating habits of the characters in *Sex and the City* must have some common thread in relation to our societal expectations about female relationships and bonding. Traditionally in popular culture, men bond over beer or sports. A whole situation comedy was born and survived with enormous popularity strictly on this theme, *Cheers*. *Cheers* was a bar where the central (mostly male) characters came to drink, laughing and crying about their lives in the process. This is a societally acceptable forum for male bonding. A traditional television forum for female bonding might be sitting around in the home plotting and scheming (like Lucy and Ethel or Laverne and Shirley) or baking and homemaking like the Brady girls or Mrs. Cunningham. But the *Sex and the City* girls barely know how to cook or homemake. The show would have a completely different personality if they did.

Drinking and getting drunk is a manly and acceptable occupation, but what happens when women become similarly

gluttonous over food? It is interesting to compare the two rituals, one in which men become physically impaired and over a period of time, may develop a host of physical and/or mental handicaps, the other which (if performed in a similarly gluttonous fashion) can cause obesity and therefore public scrutiny above all else, a fate worse than any physical or mental ailment, a path that no self-respecting woman would ever want to take.

Why then, is it okay for the *Sex and the City* gals to bond over eating when it has never been okay before? It is okay because these women are living like men in popular culture have always lived before. They are autonomous; they run the streets like the men of *Cheers*, some of whom had wives sitting dutifully at home. They are gluttonous in their thirst for life, hunting and feasting and playing and socializing with voracity for decadence and self-amusement like we've never seen before in female Americana. The act of breaking bread together for these women is crucial to their self-discovery as well as to the revitalization of a gender in popular culture that has been ensnared in their kitchens for far too long.

CHAPTER FIVE

SEX AND THE MODERN GIRL

Sexuality in popular culture today is often used as a tool for self-definition. In the series *Sex and the City*, the four lead characters define themselves by their various styles of sexual expression, creating an atmosphere where viewers are able to fit themselves into one or more of the various "molds" depicted. Seeking to learn about one's sexuality is a process that is encouraged today and aimed at women from an early age through the various media of popular culture, whether promoting abstinence, glorifying sexual promiscuity, encouraging tolerance for or denouncing homosexuality, or educating on safe sex practices. In today's climate of expanding sexual freedoms and tolerance that defy traditional romantic roles, women are encouraged to challenge themselves and expand their repertoire of experiences through discovering and embracing new options in sexuality and partnership (or lack thereof.) Today's feminism, often designated as "third wave feminism" unlike the now almost distant first wave or second wave feminism, embraces the concepts of individual choices made for

individual lives, versus the larger political agenda asserted by feminists of the past. *Sex and the City* attempts to portray the concept that remaining single can be rewarding and fulfilling, trial and error can be a learning experience, and that through a new climate of evolved relationship roles, women can endure the triumphs and tribulations of romantic and/or sexual relationships and still remain strong and independent, putting more emphasis on their friendships with one another as an indicator of fulfillment.

Modern women's sexuality has evolved into an entirely different animal than it has ever been in our history. Roles, dreams, ambitions and sexual freedoms have taken on an entirely new personality, and the *Sex and the City* characters reflect our new liberties, roles and desires as women. Today's woman does not necessarily want to be rescued by the prince on the white horse, then settle down and raise children. A more modern fairy tale often includes women succeeding (and outnumbering men) at the top colleges and leading successful and dynamic careers. Women's goals and achievements have changed and contorted the traditional male/female relationship dynamic,

rendering gender issues and concepts of sexuality outdated.

Within *Sex and the City*, women are behaving more like men, eagerly expressing their sexuality and asserting themselves and their desires without shame or fear. They discuss issues previously considered taboo on television, especially for women, such as their experimentation with bisexuality, oral, anal, and group sex. A recurring theme in *Sex and the City* is one of acceptance of sexual adventure of the characters. The women are not punished for being sexually active. Plotlines of previous tamer and more traditional television series would have them ultimately falling victim to some horrible fate as punishment for their promiscuity; instead these women are praised for their enthusiasm in seeking sexual pleasure. As argued by Astrid Henry:

Sexuality, in all its guises, has become a kind of lightning rod for this generation's hopes and discontents (and democratic vision) in the same way that civil rights and Vietnam galvanized a precious generation in the 1960's. Third wave feminists have entered an ongoing debate within feminism about sexual freedom and sexual agency.

While many second wave feminists argued that sexual freedom and pleasure are central to women's political liberation, others insisted that sexuality is primarily a site of oppression and danger to women. Self-described third wave feminists have studied this history and have gravitated toward the former position, stressing the liberating potential of sexuality. Rejecting the so-called 'victim feminism' of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, with its focus on the danger of rape and women's lack of agency and power, third wave feminists have instead celebrated those aspects of second wave thought that focus on a woman's right to pleasure.

(Akass & McCabe 75)

The previous generation of feminism had a much different idea of women's sexuality, a concept of woman as universal sisterhood, and sexuality was seen as a means to capitalize on women's vulnerability. Today's third-wave feminist embodies an entirely different agenda, promoting sexual expression as a way of achieving individuality and finding oneself. The *Sex and the City* women are serial daters, ever exploring their myriad of sexual options.

Carrie has the most interesting relationships. Her character is complex and dynamic, and her sexuality resembles her enthusiasm and openness to finding the right man and the right life for her, whatever that life may be. Carrie is caught somewhere between celebrating her choice to remain single and searching for not "a" guy, but "the" guy, a typical dilemma for the upper thirty-something modern woman. Her tastes are diverse as her love interests. Four of her most interesting romantic relationships are with Big, Aidan, Berger, and Aleksandr Petrovsky. Their names, in the grand tradition of the show, tend to be a good character indicator.

A perfect example of today's more complex and confusing romantic relationship dynamics, *Sex and the City's* main character Carrie finds herself experiencing both the "rescue" and the "passion" relationship fantasies in her misadventures with Aidan and Big respectively. In both cases, when presented with the perfect traditional ideals of love, Carrie cannot navigate herself into a fruitful, committed relationship with either man. Carrie's conflict stems from the fact that she does not want to compromise. She wants the passion she has with Big to last forever, but Big cannot commit to her. Aidan can commit to

her, but, while she is in deeply in love with him and has his heart entirely, she remains obsessed with the thrill of the hunt she gets from Mr. Big's ultimate inaccessibility. With Mr. Big, Carrie finds herself enthralled in rapture but left empty because he consistently walks out of her life, not allowing her the fairy-tale ending. Aidan, while available for Carrie, can't hold onto her because them being together seems to go against the laws of nature. Aidan proposes to Carrie and she throws up. Carrie tries on wedding dresses and she breaks out in hives. Carrie's dilemma is that she wants to establish a future with Aidan and live the type of life which she has been programmed by the mainstream culture to desire, but does not know how to make it right for her; she wants Big. Among the four characters, Carrie is the least definable. She runs the gamut, sampling different types of men and various levels of intimacy, ever searching for that "perfect connection," that "whole package" of brawn and brains, passion and emotional connection, caught between the quest for the perfect relationship and the restrictions of that relationship when she finds it.

Aidan, the most "traditionally average" of the bunch, is a wood worker. He is a successful furniture craftsman and enjoys a middle- to almost upper-class preppy-bohemian lifestyle. He is manly yet loveable, and charmingly humble. Carrie and Aidan almost get married, but in the end, Carrie walks away from the seemingly perfect future. Strong and sensitive, earthy as the material of his trade, Aidan is a natural wonder of a man, a fantasy "Mr. Perfect." Aidan represents a figure that I believe many women have had in their lives, the one that got away. He also fits into the cliché of the man who was just too darn nice.

Berger represents the man that just didn't make the cut. As his name implies (burger), he satisfies an immediate need but not an ultimate goal. He's just not enough to make it for the long haul. Not quite a tender filet mignon, Berger lacks substance. His role in the show confirms this. He is a writer like Carrie, just not as successful, and that has a hard time dealing with it. He ends up breaking up with Carrie on a post-it note because he admits he just can't handle being less successful than her. I find it interesting that the writers chose his name as something typical of a fast-food meal, insinuating that

"Burger" is not up to snuff as a serious possibility for Carrie, and posing an interesting contrast to her main love interest and the man she ultimately ends up with, Big.

Carrie's final attempt at replacing Big is Aleksandr Petrovsky, a lavish, extravagant, extremely wealthy and over-the-top personality. His social stature, in contrast to Berger, is untouchable and Carrie finds herself lost in his big-wig world and out of place in his social circle. Mimicking the actor counterpart, the larger-than-life Mikail Baryshnikov, Petrovsky's grand social stature dwarfs Carrie, challenging her to relinquish her own ambitions and personal identity in order to go to Paris to essentially become lost in his shadow. Interestingly, somewhere in between burger and caviar, Carrie finds herself back in the arms of Big, the man she chases through all six seasons who seemed untouchable before the Petrovsky experience.

What's interesting and different about Big is that Carrie chases him from the first season to the last one, ultimately ending up with him. Big's name, like so many other character's names in the show, is creative and purposeful and he lives up to it well within the scheme of

the show. He's bigger than life. He's the "big" man in her life.

Each character has a very distinctive style and approach to romantic relationships and sexuality. Samantha is the most sexually expressive and aggressive. Miranda is the most straight-forward and pragmatic in her sexual and emotional needs. Charlotte is the most conservative, who chases after the traditional role of wife and lover. Each woman resembles a piece of the conflicting values and needs many women struggle with in an attempt to find what they are looking for in a relationship and to define their own sexuality.

In *Sex and the City*, Samantha is the sexual dynamo of the group. She constantly pushes the envelope and goes past the average woman's comfort level with her promiscuous ways and her showy sexual mannerisms. She insists that she does not want or need a man, except to please her insatiable sexual appetite. Her behavior resembles a contemporary stereotype of many twenty-first century men; she is aggressive, anti-monogamy, and commitment-phobic. She is not shy about her sexuality; she prides herself in dressing provocatively and speaks freely about her sexual needs and desires. Ever the explorer,

Samantha has many diverse sexual experiences, including a brief lesbian relationship, a trial run with a much older man, and a highly charged sexual relationship with a younger man that defies many of her own preconceptions and rules. Samantha explores various levels of intimacy with her many sexual conquests and is easily defined more through her sexuality than by any other aspect of her flamboyant character.

Samantha is the only character to seriously explore lesbianism. During her lesbian relationship with Maria, a fiery Portuguese-speaking Latina, Samantha not only crosses gender and cultural barriers but also gender roles. She begins this experience rather timidly for her usually unreserved character, unsure if she will be able to ultimately "take the plunge" into sex with another woman. She eventually does take the plunge and finds herself enamored by the marvels of the female form, astonished at all that she realizes she did not previously know about her own body, despite her own extensive sexual experience. When socializing with Carrie, Miranda, and Charlotte, Samantha holds nothing back in relaying information about her experiences in detail with the other girls. Samantha is graphic and upfront in her descriptions

and details about her sexual encounters with Maria. The relationship really crosses traditional gender roles when Maria begins to demonstrate behavior that is commonly attributed to women, including being "clingy" and "needy." At first their relationship is highly sexual and lusty, but as time progresses, Maria begins to want to spend more time "talking" with Samantha, which ultimately drives her away, releasing her back into her usual no-commitment, no strings ways. Samantha's character is defined by her traditionally masculine sexual mannerisms and this female-female relationship uses extremes to illustrate this point.

Another one of Samantha's relationships pushes her boundaries and one in which she actually falls in love. Richard is powerful, successful and very wealthy. His character, like his name, represents masculinity and virility. Richard is authoritative in business and commanding enough personally to "break down" the tough Samantha. He sees Samantha as a challenge since she is one of the few women he has met who really does not want a commitment. Richard finds himself out of character and wooing Samantha, despite his usual alleycat style of jumping from woman to woman. It appears that she has tamed

him and Samantha also begins to fall in love. After she has finally given into her heart and let herself fall for him, relinquishing her usual masculine role of the pursuer, she walks into his apartment and discovers him in bed with another woman. In retaliation, she makes hundreds of demeaning flyers and throws them all over the city. She realizes the error of her ways in letting him feminize her and is liberated from the "humbling" experience.

Charlotte is the anti-Samantha. Highly feminine in her ways, Charlotte thrives on tradition and a more classic ideal of sexuality, relationships, and love. She strives for monogamy and commitment, dresses conservatively and enjoys her men only as possible marriage prospects, often reciting their names in full and her name with their surname in place of hers to see if it fits. Her opinions about sexuality and her sexual mannerisms are conservative and restrained. When the four girls are together and talking about sex, she keeps her voice low and whispers the "dirty" words that the other three would not hesitate to say aloud. Charlotte wants marriage and housewifery, and cherishes the institution of marriage and commitment so much that she changes her faith in order to be able to marry the man that she falls in

love with. Her final "catch" in the series is a bald Jewish man named Harry. Again with the ironic names!

Miranda is the pragmatic one. She enjoys sex, but in a very rational and controlled way. Sex for her is merely a physiological need, satisfied occasionally by a willing partner, and dismissed until further need arises. This attitude toward sex mirrors her personality and works well as a roadmap to her personal outlook on life. She is very controlled and doesn't easily become distracted by relationships or emotions. Wanting only success in her work and continuity in her relationships with the other characters, Miranda doesn't entertain fantasies or romantic ideals, doesn't put much emphasis on challenging her comfort zone, and doesn't have much patience for frivolity or the excitement of a new romantic adventure.

Adventure she finds, however. Miranda is the only character to explore a serious relationship with an African-American man in six seasons of the series. In season six of the series, the writers decide to throw the audience for a loop as Miranda goes for something totally unexpected and allows herself to become both physically and emotionally involved with her African-American neighbor. She succumbs and becomes enveloped in the wonder

and excitement of her situation, finding herself enjoying his company very much. The relationship does not work out as she cannot manage to return his "I love you."

Interestingly, however, she decides to get back together with Steve (after accidentally blurting out these same words to him) - an end result that had previously seemed out of the question considering Miranda's complete inability to relate to the traditional roles of women as mothers, wives, and dwellers of suburbia. She realizes that despite the seemingly impossible bridging of their uneven social classes, this is her normality, and she frees herself to embrace it. It would seem that having a partner of like social and professional class is not necessary for Miranda after all.

The postfeminist era, defined by a plethora of options for the modern woman, brings with it a myriad of dilemmas and uncharted terrain for the new generation of women. Set out into the world where women are working side by side in comparable positions to men, they have earned their positions in a more equal corporate America. It is no longer as interesting to watch television programming based on women fighting their way to the top as did *Mary Tyler Moore*. Today's woman doesn't have to fight as hard,

it is not such a seemingly insurmountable goal as it once was, and that story has grown passé. Today's viewer wants to see women in the raw, with sex lives, careers, options, -women who faced with all the options that only men once had, can now enjoy the pursuit of many things at once, whose biggest problem is not gaining respect but exploring their world. *Sex and the City*, like other woman-centered dramas of the past, evolved as a response to cultural changes and is symptomatic of the forces shaping today's woman as depicted in popular culture through media and magazine. The format of the show, a rare and innovative combination of subscription fashion magazine, romance novel and chick flick all in one, reverses the recent popularity of masculine/feminine hybridization in modern television by catering to a streamlined social group of affluent women viewer. Its tremendous success demonstrates that today's woman has been in need of a salty, non-watered-down woman-centered drama to sink their intellect into.

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