

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved:

Trischa Goodnow

In 2004 after *Desperate Housewives* premiered, it was met with significant criticism condemning the lack of values and morals on the show, depicted through the pervasiveness of sinful and illegal behavior (Olsen & Morgan, 2010). However, Olsen and Morgan contend that sinful and illegal behavior is accompanied with attempts at redemption and honesty, making *Desperate Housewives* a redemptive drama. This study seeks to demonstrate how Kenneth Burke's dramatistic process of guilt, redemption and purification provide insight furthering Olsen and Morgan's claims that methods of guilt purification contain valuable messages. Particularly, this study compares the effectiveness of transcendence in contrast to the ineffectiveness of mortification and scapegoating through the characters' various attempts at redemption. In addition, this study also examines how the dramatistic process may sometimes entail several attempts at guilt alleviation or guilt avoidance until redemption is achieved. Finally, implications of how this study impacts the academic literature on dramatism, rhetorical criticism and fictional television are discussed.

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Guilt and Redemption on Wisteria Lane: A Burkeian Analysis of *Desperate Housewives*

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Michelle M. Huillet

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Speech Communication

Director of the Interdisciplinary Studies Program

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Michelle M. Huillet, Author

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Introduction

After the premiere of *Desperate Housewives* in 2004, the show encountered significant criticism from viewers and critics for the messages sent by the show through the characters' sinful and illegal behavior (Olsen and Morgan, 2010). As Olsen and Morgan elaborate:

The characters on *Desperate Housewives* are complicated. When the show managed to break all Ten Commandments in the first eight episodes, it drew the ire of the Christian right. The American Family Association criticized the show and lobbied sponsors to withdraw advertising. L. Brent Bozell, Parents Television Council president, has characterized the show as “skuzzy” and “sleazy,”... AFA warned its members that *Desperate Housewives* “gives the message time and again that the end justifies the means. If sexual immorality, lying, and manipulation can get you what you want, then it’s OK.” (p. 331)

Despite the sinful and illegal behavior on the show, some scholars have argued that wrongful behavior does not indicate that *Desperate Housewives* is endorsing such behavior as wrongful behavior highlights the complexities of the characters. For instance, the characters almost always face retribution for their sinful behavior (Olsen and Morgan). Furthermore, the show is complex as it “invite[s] multiple readings and interpretations” of the messages communicated by the characters' behavior (p. 332). In fact, the complexities of the show are what make it appealing to viewers. According to Amy Fallon, “People don’t watch [Desperate Housewives] because they get a black and white moral message . . . What’s good about the show is that it doesn’t suggest that the choices we make are easy”(as cited in Olsen and Morgan, p. 332).

The complexities of the show’s messages pose new challenges for rhetorical scholars to discover the underlying meanings within patterns of guilt purification on television. Since meanings reside within guilt purification methods, *Desperate Housewives* provides an opportunity to discover the rhetorical significance within such

meanings. The show challenges rhetorical scholars to analyze how meaning is created through seemingly contradictory messages, especially when messages are not what they appear to be. Furthermore, the distinctive characteristics of the show challenge rhetorical scholars to consider how messages within an artifact such as *Desperate Housewives* are communicated differently from other rhetorical artifacts. We can begin to address these challenges by examining how a rhetorical artifact such as *Desperate Housewives* exemplifies the dramatic process and challenges scholars and critics alike to critically engage with the show.

After running for eight years (2004-2012) *Desperate Housewives* proved to be popular with viewers and critics alike, as Thompson (2005) explains:

Desperate Housewives is TV's most talked-about series. And why not? This wonderfully addictive suburban soap (set on sweetly deceptive Wisteria Lane) is racy, smart, mysterious, dramatic and just flat-out fun. It's *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Twin Peaks* and, heck, *I Love Lucy* rolled up into one darkly twisted, utterly irresistible TV cocktail. (p. WP9)

According to Seidman (2011), critics appreciate the show as it is unlike any other show on television and it constantly shocks viewers with plot twists and appalling behavior.

Such characteristics of the show were effective as the show drew millions of viewers and won countless awards (Thompson). Specifically, during 2003-2004 it was the most popular show in its demographic worldwide and the most-watched international comedy series with an audience ranging from 115 to 120 million worldwide viewers (TVSA News Desk, 2007). During some years, the show was the number one comedy and the number one drama on primetime television (Seidman). It has been nominated for and won countless awards including Emmys, Golden Globes, People's Choice Awards, Screen Actors Guild Awards, Teen Choice Awards and AFI Awards, according to Finke

and Andreeva (2011). Since *Desperate Housewives* was widely popular and yielded polarized discussions concerning the morality of the show, we must ask ourselves what exactly produces such intense audience engagement and viewer response? Specifically, why are audiences obsessed with and addicted to *Desperate Housewives* as reviews and ratings suggest? If a show like *Desperate Housewives* is so popular, then what does that say about the audience that makes it so? These are questions I hope to begin to address within this study throughout my literature review, analysis and conclusion.

Whereas most of the academic literature uses feminist criticism to focus on stereotypical gender roles within the show, my research progresses in a slightly different direction by examining an area of feminist criticism not yet researched, the implications of sexual abuse on *Desperate Housewives*. Since the primary story arc I analyze revolves around sexual abuse, a discussion of this issue is central to the analysis of the show. Thus, the literature review, analysis and conclusion will address how sexual abuse on the show is framed while focusing on the link between sexual abuse and guilt purification methods.

The majority of communication research on *Desperate Housewives* examines the relationships between the characters and audience responses to the show as a way for understanding the show's popularity. As such, the field of rhetorical criticism has not begun to examine how rhetorical artifacts like *Desperate Housewives* use the dramatic process of guilt, purification and redemption to encourage critical engagement with the intricate themes on the show. Thus, shows like *Desperate Housewives* are rhetorical in that they persuade viewers to critically think about the issues on the show. Specifically, the show seeks to prove that the decisions people make as well as judgments placed on

such decisions are convoluted. This study attempts to demonstrate a new way to study *Desperate Housewives* in order to provide a foundation for studying the dramatic process within fictional television to uncover how and what such programming communicates.

Olsen and Morgan contend that *Desperate Housewives* "...wrestles with many of the nagging and significant issues central to the human condition" (p. 333) while following Kenneth Burke's theory of pollution, purification and redemption. They argue that *Desperate Housewives* perpetrates conservative values; values that are widely misunderstood because of the character complexities:

Desperate Housewives has been promoted as a show about desperate female bodies eager to drop their towels to pursue sexual ecstasy. Such promotion rarely includes complexities of the characters and plot. While hardcore critics consider it an example of "trash TV," the show is better understood as a redemptive drama that explores desperate people wishing they could drop their guard for moments of authenticity. (p. 332)

My study hopes to uncover the specific messages and values conveyed through attempts at purification and attainment of redemption on *Desperate Housewives*. The primary purpose of this study is to uncover how the characters on *Desperate Housewives* address guilt and the messages communicated through their attempts at guilt purification.

Furthermore, I am curious as to the differences and similarities between my analysis and that of Olsen and Morgan. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What messages are communicated by the characters' methods of guilt purification?
2. How does the connection between the characters' motives and their behavior provide understanding for their choice of purification?
3. What occurs when attempts at redemption are unsuccessful?

In order to accomplish these objectives I will be using a dramatistic analysis developed by Burke (1976) who contends that life *is* drama; people are merely actors on a stage with specific roles. An essential element to the drama is the concept of hierarchy and rules, as Burke (1971) contends that humans develop rules to provide order and structure within our lives. However, drama includes the breaking of such rules and doing so causes us to feel guilty. Upon feeling guilty, we will purge ourselves of guilt utilizing mortification, scapegoating or transcendence. The method of purification used communicates messages about one's worldview, personality and motives. My preliminary assertion is that conclusions regarding one's motives may provide insight into one's choice of purification. Thus, my study will seek to explore the conclusions that can be drawn from the characters' respective choices of purification.

To begin my study I will provide an overview of the academic literature concerning *Desperate Housewives* to uncover some of the gaps that exist in the literature from a communication perspective, specifically a rhetorical perspective. Next, I will discuss the dramatistic methodology of the guilt, redemption, purification theory before applying it to a particular story arc on the show. Within the beginning of my analysis, I will demonstrate how this theory is an appropriate theory to apply to the show because of the flawed characters and dark themes present throughout the series. The analysis will provide me with further insight on the themes within *Desperate Housewives* through the characters' selected methods of purification and behavioral motives. Furthermore, the implications of purification methods will be discussed and how these implications impact rhetorical criticism, dramatism, and our understanding of human behavior and motives. I

hope the conclusions drawn from this analysis will establish a foundation for studying shows similar to *Desperate Housewives*.

Literature Review

When *Desperate Housewives* first premiered, it encountered considerable criticism due to the inappropriate and outrageous behavior on the show (Olsen and Morgan, 2010). Although *Desperate Housewives* was widely critiqued for depicting inappropriate behavior, there is extensive academic literature on *Desperate Housewives* to explore the complexities and symbolism of such behavior, therefore this literature review will primarily focus on the academic literature surrounding the show. I will begin this literature review by providing a review of the literature that studies television from a rhetorical perspective. After demonstrating the rhetorical nature of fictional television, I will discuss the literature that focuses on televised female representations within fictional programs, while the bulk of this literature review will concentrate on the literature regarding *Desperate Housewives*.

The Rhetoric of Fictional Television

The literature suggests that mass media is exceptionally influential in shaping audience attitudes and behavior, thus we must study television to uncover how it impacts the audience (Bandura, 2009; Fernandez-Morals, 2009; Murphy et al., 2011; Merskin, 2007; Morgan et al., 2009; Nacos, 2000; Gerbner, 1999; De Fleur, 1966; Loeb, 2009; Hanke, 1990; Dow, 1990; Meyer, 2012; Perks, 2012). As Meyer (2012) explains (as cited in Fiske and Hartley 1978):

...It is television's familiarity, its centrality to our culture, that makes it so important, so fascinating, and so difficult to analyze. It is rather like the language we speak: taken for granted, but both complex and vital to an understanding of the way human beings have created their world. Indeed, the resemblance of television discourse to spoken language explains our interest in the communicative role played by television in society (p. 263).

A review of the academic literature also suggests that fictional television is particularly influential because fictional television presents images and messages that reflect the social values and ideas held by a particular culture (Loeb, 2009; Bandura, 2009; Fernandez-Morals, 2009; Murphy et al., 2011; Merskin, 2007; Morgan et al., 2009; Nacos, 2000; Gerbner, 1999; De Fleur, 1966; Hanke, 1990; Dow, 1990; Meyer, 2012; Perks, 2012). Thus, television is a form of rhetoric for two primary reasons; television reveals much about the political, social and cultural atmosphere it emerges from and television influences the attitudes of a particular culture (Merskin, 2007; De Fleur, 1966; Loeb, 2009; Hanke, 1990; Meyer, 2012; Perks, 2012), which Meyer elaborates:

Television is a living, breathing discourse that becomes such a central part of individual lives that it cannot be separated from the ways individuals articulate their identities, communicate interpersonally with others, and act as agents in communities, organizations, and culture. (p. 267)

Dominant Ideologies within Television

Television not only reveals, but also upholds the values and beliefs of the dominant ideology within a culture (Dow, 1990; Hanke, 1990; Loeb, 2009; Ferguson, 2009; Perks, 2012). As Loeb (2009) explains “The ability to present, shape, and support a particular view of reality, a subjective view that is both value-based and constructed, makes television inherently rhetorical” (p. 249). According to Loeb, television is rhetorical because it “...supports the values and ideas held by the dominant ideology of a particular culture while devaluing values and ideas that are perceived as oppositional or alternative to that dominant ideology” (p. 249).

The Uniformity of Television

One of the primary themes in the literature is that the consistency of messages, images and values across television programs allow television to be a dominant influence

in people's lives (Merskin, 2007; Morgan, 2010; Gerbner, 1999; Morgan & Shanahan, 2009; Nacos, 2000; Chapel, 1975; Hanke, 1990; Meyer, 2012). For instance, in a study by Hanke (1990), the show *Thirtysomething* was compared against an assortment of television programs to find that depictions of women and men were consistent across many different television genres and shows. Another similar theme in literature is that television is successful at perpetuating traditional, historical and popular values and norms (Loeb, 2009; Dow, 1990; Ferguson, 1990). For instance, Loeb (2009) studied *Thirtysomething* to demonstrate that despite the progressive aspects of the show, the program continued to uphold traditional ideas of gender, class, race, patriarchy and family values upheld by the dominant ideology. With regard to *Desperate Housewives*, although the show may appear to promote progressive ideas, it may simultaneously also promote traditional ideas, values and beliefs, which will be addressed throughout this review of the literature as well as within the analysis.

Accumulation Theory

One of the theories that explains why the repetition of images and messages is influential is accumulation theory. According to Merskin (2007):

Accumulation theory suggests the media are likely to have powerful effects if the information is presented persistently, consistently, and corroborated among forms...if the mass media...present information in ways that are consistent, persistent, and corroborated, this instruction is likely to have long-term, powerful effects. (p. 134, 135)

When messages are consistently repeated, these ideas gain credibility, which allows the audience to readily believe such information (Merskin, 2007; De Fleur & Dennis, 1981; Waller, 1988; Morgan, 2009; Meyer, 2012). Specifically, television influences audience

beliefs by portraying messages that are consistent within most media representations (Merskin, 2007; Morgan, 2009; De Fleur & Dennis, 1981; Waller, 1988).

For instance, Waller (1988) points out that different television genres such as soap operas, comedies and crime dramas each exhibit the same values and ideologies. In another study, Merskin (2007) utilized accumulation theory and found that depictions of Latinas are similar and in some cases identical across several different television shows and television genres. Furthermore, Seggar (1975) utilized elements of accumulation theory to show that depictions of criminals and law enforcement officials within crime dramas and comedies were nearly identical. Seggar's study also found that depictions of women were both consistent and stereotypical throughout popular television shows. In another study, De Fleur (1964) found that depictions of the same occupations on different television shows are portrayed with characters containing similar behavioral traits. Thus, when an audience is exposed to similar messages from several different sources these messages shape audience beliefs and values over a long period of time (Morgan et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2009; De Fleur & Dennis, 1981). Consequently, most mainstream television shows portray and uphold the same values, beliefs and ideas.

Cultivation Theory

Another theory similar to accumulation theory is cultivation theory developed by George Gerbner, who explains how television impacts audience beliefs (Morgan et al., 2009; Gerbner, 1998; Kahlor et al., 2011; Romer et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2010; Hetsroni, 2012; Hendricks, 2002). Cultivation theory differs from accumulation theory in that it suggests that audiences who watch television are likely to perceive the world in accordance with the reoccurring messages exhibited on television (Morgan et al., 2009;

Gerbner, 1980; Gerbner, 1998; Morgan et al., 2010; Nacos, 2000; De Fleur & Dennis, 1981; Romer, Jameison & Pasek, 2009; Kahlor & Eastin., 2011; Hetsroni, 2012; Hendricks, 2002). Romer, Jameison and Pasek (2009) explain that the audience perceives the world in accordance with television because individuals who are exposed to more television receive less influence from sources outside of the media. Furthermore, television impacts how the audience perceives the world as television is a form of education, as Chapel (1975) explains:

...TV and other mass media communicate a "hidden curriculum" which "is a lesson plan that no one teaches but everyone learns. It consists of the symbolic contours of the social order." Gerbner cautions that the mass media are vastly more than entertainment. (p. 84)

In addition, Morgan et al. (2010) found that audiences come to understand and view the world using what they learned from television:

Cultivation studies of gender and family roles continue to show that television contributes to traditional images and aspirations, despite the massive social changes that took place in women's roles in recent decades.... exposure to sitcoms and soaps (but not overall amount of viewing) predicted anticipating a traditional motherhood, in which they would be devoted to family and children rather than focused on the world outside the home. (p. 346)

In a study by Hetsroni (2012) that looked at the shows *Friends* and *Mad About You*, Hetsroni found that individuals who watched these shows had the same ideas about dating, love and relationships to those that were conveyed on the show. In another study by Hendricks (2002) cultivation theory was used to show that women who are exposed to more televised images of women, were less satisfied with their own bodies. Thus, the research suggests that television can change one's beliefs and values to match the beliefs and values depicted on television (Morgan et al., 2009; Gerbner, 1998; Bandura, 2009; De Fleur & Dennis, 1981; Morgan et al., 2010; Romer et al., 2009; Kahlor et al., 2011;

Hetsroni, 2012; Hendricks, 2002).

Social Learning Theory

Bandura (1977) and Ferguson (2009) explain that social learning theory provides another explanation why television is influential. Bandura (1977) and De Fleur (1966) suggest that individuals learn how to behave by observing other individuals, and then they mimic their behavior. Bandura further explains that the pervasive and dramatized nature of television allow it to be significantly more influential than interpersonal interactions.

De Fleur (1964) argues that television has a much more pervasive role in people's lives because children spend more time watching television than they do in school. Bandura (1977) explains that television is a source of social learning as television can "...transmit new behavior patterns simultaneously to vast numbers of people in widely dispersed locations....their perceptions of social reality are heavily influenced by...what they see, hear, and read in the mass media" (p. 40). He also claims that "It has been shown that both children and adults acquire attitudes, emotional responses, and new styles of conduct through filmed and televised modeling....the mass media play an influential role in shaping behavior and social attitudes" (p. 39). For instance, in a study by Ferguson (2009), the social learning theory was used to demonstrate that female audiences mimic the behavior and appearances of glamorized and idolized women on television.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory contains similar concepts to the former theories discussed. However, according to Bandura (2009) social cognitive theory suggests that "...heavy

television viewing shapes viewers' beliefs and conceptions of reality" (p. 281). Social cognitive theory contains two primary precepts, the first is that television is primarily influential when *frequently* viewed and second, television encourages audiences to think and behave in certain ways by providing *incentives* to do so (Bandura, 2009; Hendricks, 2002). As Bandura explains (2004) "Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties" (p. 144).

The behavioral outcomes of television characters influence audience beliefs by making these outcomes appear desirable (Murphy et al., 2011; De Fleur & Dennis, 1981; Hendricks, 2002; Bandura, 2009). For instance, Hendricks (2002) studied the effects that depictions of women on television had on female audiences and found that women exposed to these images were not only less satisfied with their own bodies, they worked to recreate their own image in order to look more like women on television. Thus, according to social cognitive theory, the audience will often mimic the behavior of characters that they strongly identify with (Murphy, 2011; De Fleur & Dennis, 1981). Bandura (2001) and De Fleur and Denis (1981) contend that the reason audiences imitate the behavior of television characters is because audiences desire to achieve the same *outcomes* that occur when television characters perform certain behaviors.

Two-Step Flow of Communication

De Fleur (1966) suggests that the two-step flow of communication explains television's influence as television targets specific audiences who will likely respond to a television program the way the producers intended and these audiences will ultimately influence other individuals. This 'two-step flow of communication' demonstrates how

vastly influential television can be. For instance, De Fleur explains that:

...information moved from the media to relatively well-informed individuals who attended the mass communications firsthand. Second, it moved from those persons through interpersonal channels to individuals who had less direct exposure to the media and who depended upon others for their information. (p. 131)

Therefore, it is evident that television not only influences the intended audience, it also influences those impacted by the original audience (De Fleur & Dennis, 1981).

Television as a Reflection of Society

De Fleur (1966, 1981), Chapel (1975) and Seggar (1975) argue that television is influential because it depicts contemporary cultural and social issues, then influences audience attitudes about certain issues. Chapel (1975) elaborates on this concept:

...television programs ask their audiences to accept specific attitudes, and in this sense they may be characterized as persuasive....It will be argued that many television programs... continue, extend, and legitimize our national "dialogue" on social problems. It will be argued, further, that these programs are persuasive in that they suggest attitudes to be taken toward social issues, and they imply that the audience should respond in certain ways to those issues. (p. 82, 87)

Television mirrors social, cultural and political issues according to De Fleur and Dennis (1981) and it "...keeps people doing what they are already doing" (p. 296) by reinforcing widely held attitudes and values. Seggar (1975) explains that television reflects realistic issues occurring in society, yet television simultaneously impacts a culture by further perpetrating such values and beliefs associated with such issues. For instance, Chapel (1975) explains that television "...helps legitimize a discussion of the social problems....these shows bring social problems out into the open. If actual persuasion is not immediately taking place, at least people's attitudes are being "relaxed" (p. 89).

Furthermore, De Fleur and Dennis (1981) explain that "...the media influence the public's perception of reality, of what current issues are about and what importance they

have....” (p. 315). For instance, De Fleur (1964) found that the most prevalent occupations on television were those in the fields of law, medicine and media entertainment. Thus, these occupations were overrepresented in comparison to how many individuals actually work in these fields. De Fleur’s findings suggest that although television may depict contemporary and realistic issues, television frames these issues using a particular perspective.

Humor and Irony in Television

Although television reflects social and cultural issues, according to Meyer (2012) television uses irony, humor, parody and satire surrounding contemporary issues to gain audience appeal. Perks (2012) draws on Meyer’s conclusions by suggesting that these elements exaggerate issues within a culture, which can impact how a culture frames such issues. For instance, Perks conducted a case analysis on the *Chappelle Show* to demonstrate that the use of irony, parody and satire causes intense audience engagement and identification since these elements reflect realistic issues within a culture; thus the audience finds pleasure when viewing and interpreting issues that they are familiar with. Since the literature on *Desperate Housewives* often references the use of irony, humor, parody and satire on the show, Perks and Meyer’s findings provide context for comprehending the significance of these themes on the show.

Meaning Theory of Mass Communication

De Fleur and Dennis (1981) suggest television is one of the primary factors that shape one’s construction of reality. Specifically, television can shape the meanings the audience has about things:

By establishing meanings, the media not only expand the number of people who share a meaning for a particular symbol but also expand the understandings of each person who shares the experience. People can also learn additional meanings for words or other symbols with which they are already familiar.... By repeatedly showing the accepted meanings of these symbols, the media more firmly establish the conventions regarding their interpretation. (De Fleur & Dennis, p. 363)

Therefore, television can both change and create meanings as it changes how the audience perceives reality. This section of the literature review has examined the different theories, concepts and studies that explain television's influence. Although there is extensive rhetorical television criticism within academic literature, continuing this area of research is important, as Chapel (1975) explains:

At a time when television is recognized as a pervasive force in society and the main source of news and entertainment for many Americans, there is a need for television criticism that focuses on media content...to uncover, analyze, and evaluate the attitudes being communicated by TV programs. (p. 82)

Thus, in my study of *Desperate Housewives*, I will focus on the messages communicated by the presence of guilt and guilt purification on the show.

Women on Television

By looking at television as a rhetorical artifact, we see that television is increasingly influential in impacting audience beliefs and behaviors; therefore for the purposes of this study we must also examine television's treatment of gender. The literature suggests that television is very successful at perpetrating traditional and historical gender norms by upholding these norms (Ferguson, 2009; Leob, 2009; Dow, 1990; Morgan et al., 2010; Seggar, 1975; De Fleur, 1964; Brunson, 2000; Spangler, 2003). For instance, Ferguson (2009) and Morgan et al. (2010) argue that even after the second-wave of feminism women on television are frequently portrayed as stay-at-home mothers, secretaries, assistants, teachers and nurses. Ferguson explains that "...women continue to be

outnumbered, continue to be cast in supportive roles, and continue to have family and romance as their major objectives...” (p. 218). Therefore, as De Fleur (1964) points out, women are most often depicted as supporting men, either in the domestic or professional realm. Dow (1990) expands on Ferguson and Morgan et al.’s ideas, by contending that programs that appear to be from a feminist perspective, like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Sex and the City* actually perpetrate traditional ideas of gender norms because these shows depict women in traditional and stereotypical roles. According to Vidoloff and Freitag (2010) gender portrayals on television are important to study as such gender portrayals influence how the audience thinks about gender roles:

...research concludes that repeated exposure to gender-specific tasks reinforces traditional roles for males and females, and, unfortunately, television networks continue to perpetuate the status quo....It follows that if a television show can portray the domestic female role as desirable through images of sexy middle-aged women, then women may want to imitate that behavior. (p. 105)

As a result, the more television women view, the more likely they are to have traditional values.

Consistency of Female Representations

A review of the literature demonstrates that women are consistently portrayed alike throughout different shows, as initially proposed by the accumulation, social cognitive and cultivation theories. Spangler (2003) argues that such depictions are detrimental as shows depict negative, offensive and stereotypical representations of women. When looking at depictions of women across an array of contemporary television programs, Ferguson (2009) found that women are often negatively depicted:

...the common characteristic of the women shown, in the office or the kitchen, is their ability to *manipulate*. These women will do anything to get what they want. Getting the upper hand of men (and of women who are defined as a threat) is achieved through deviousness, lying, sexual blackmail, and assuming passive ("dumb female") or aggressive ("hard bitch") persona as required. (p. 218)

In another study, Vidoloff and Freitag (2010) discovered that most contemporary televised depictions of women portray women from the male gaze and reinforce male hegemony. These oversexualized and manipulative depictions of women are reinforced in *Desperate Housewives* (McCabe, 2006) therefore we see that some aspects of the show perpetrate stereotypical depictions of women on television, which I will continue discussing in subsequent sections.

Impact of Female Representations

According to Brunson (2000) predominantly female audiences aspire to be like women on television as these depictions are constructed in a manner that makes them desirable to a female audience. This is detrimental as women are seldom realistically portrayed on television (Brunson; Vidoloff & Freitag; Ferguson; Spangler, 2003). For instance, according to Brunson, female audiences have claimed that they wish they could accomplish all that televised housewives do, while still looking put-together, maintaining a career, having a social life and finding time for themselves. These depictions of housewives are prevalent on *Desperate Housewives*, which provides a foundation for examining the show's treatment of gender as there is abundant literature concerning gender depictions on the show, which I will address in the next section.

Review of Literature on *Desperate Housewives*

The central themes discussed in the academic literature on *Desperate Housewives* include the show's popularity, history of the housewife, feminism, motherhood and

careers, the show's producer Marc Cherry, the female narrator, comparisons with *Sex and the City*, sinful behavior and deception, secrecy and guilt redemption. Most of the literature on *Desperate Housewives* analyzes the show from a critical or feminist perspective by examining depictions of gender and the role women have within gender relationships. By examining the literature concerning the show's treatment of gender we see that the research has not addressed other feminist issues on the show such as sexual assault, which I will begin to analyze. Although the literature studying the show from a rhetorical perspective is also limited, I will thoroughly discuss how *Desperate Housewives* has been studied from a rhetorical perspective using Burke's guilt redemption cycle as this study by Olsen and Morgan (2010) provides a foundation for my research. Since the literature is limited in the areas of rhetorical criticism and sexual abuse, my study will examine how sexual abuse is rhetorically constructed on the show and how sexual abuse impacts the guilt and guilt purification methods the characters use. My contention is that the plots in *Desperate Housewives* are especially effective in establishing a foundation to examine the role of guilt on the show.

The Popularity of *Desperate Housewives*

One of the most prominent topics in the literature on *Desperate Housewives* is an explanation for the show's popularity. Many authors seek to explore what makes the show vastly popular, and some of the key conclusions to this inquiry include: audience identification to characters, mystery and secrecy and the appeal to many different audiences (Hill, 2010; Kahn, 2006; Coward, 2006; Morgan, 2007; Beck, 2006; Cassuto, 2006; Di Gregorio, 2006; Sayeau, 2006; Akass, 2006; McCabe, 2006; Lancioni, 2006; Sharp, 2006; Pozner & Seigel, 2006; Singleton, 2006).

The Popularity of Female Representations

The literature suggests that a primary factor that contributes to the show's popularity is depictions of female gender roles and women's issues (Hill, 2010; Murphy, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Beck, 2006; Di Gregorio, 2006; Fernandez-Morales, 2009, Akass, 2006; McCabe, 2006; Wilson, 2006; Sharp, 2006). As Hill (2010) explains "One of the most distinguishing features of *Desperate Housewives* is its treatment of gender..." (p. 163). Depictions of women's issues are the primary component that contributes to the show's popularity, since the targeted audience (18-45 year old women) can personally relate to and identify with these portrayals (Hill, 2010; Morgan, 2007; Beck, 2006; Cassuto, 2006; Di Gregorio, 2006; McCabe, 2006; Wilson, 2006; Lancioni, 2006; Sharp, 2006; Kahn, 2006; Singleton, 2006; Vidoloff & Freitag, 2010). As Hill explains, "*Desperate Housewives*' representations of women and femininity are at the heart of the show's construction, reception, and, consequently, its success" (p. 163). Vidoloff and Freitag (2010) support these ideas by claiming "*Desperate Housewives*' popularity may be due, in part, to the program's ability to glamorize the everyday lives of women and men trapped in traditional roles that revolve around family life" (p. 105).

Reflection of Contemporary and Realistic Issues

The audience identifies with the plots on the show because *Desperate Housewives* plays on the audience's historical and cultural knowledge of issues (Hill, 2010). For example, Coward (2006) explains that:

...after all, contemporary television necessarily reflect contemporary realities....the key gender issues of the moment are given expression....The appearance of these issues in *Desperate Housewives* shows how these anxieties are filtering into the wider culture....it does so in a way that is progressive, empathetic to the dilemmas and difficulties of contemporary women. (p. 31-32, 41)

Wilson (2006), Lancioni (2006) and Akass (2006) contend that although *Desperate Housewives* exaggerates plots, these stories simultaneously contain realistic problems and situations that the audience can identify with. For instance, according to Olsen and Morgan (2010) the audience can identify with the flawed characters who often make mistakes and work to fix their mistakes. Coward (2006) explains that the audience identifies with the characters because of the realistic issues experienced by the characters:

This is almost certainly the clue to the series' popularity....Even though the series is not conventionally realistic, often engaging in humor or parody, it is touching a core of reality. This is the reality of the contemporary family, with its broken relationships, difficult teenagers, repressed desires and disappointed hopes....No one could accuse *Desperate Housewives* of hiding the emotional difficulties of so-called normal families....what it exposes is this emotional reality. (p. 40, 41)

Emotional Attachments and Influence

Fernandez-Morales (2009) explains that audiences develop emotional attachments to the characters and storylines on the show which makes them loyal viewers. According to Beck (2006), "Many women have made the impressive statement that they 'identify' with the women characters. The overwhelming stress, endless betrayals, insensitive demands, personal doubts, and missed opportunities that beset the characters surely mirror the range of challenges that real women face" (p. 30). The audience identifies with the characters because *Desperate Housewives* highlights "...the struggle between 'fantasy' (what our society expects women to be like) and 'reality' (what women are actually like)" (Morgan, 2007, p. 113).

Merskin (2007), McCabe (2006) and Wilson (2006) explain that since the audience is able to relate to women on the show, these characters actually influence how the audience thinks about women's gender roles. Sharp (2006) contends that since many

viewers' experience many of the same anxieties and frustrations with motherhood and housewifery, the audience identifies and sympathizes with the characters. For example, Fernandez-Morales (2009) studied audience responses to *Desperate Housewives* and found that one influential component of the show is that it contains characters that a female audience are emotionally attached to and closely identify with; subsequently impacting how the audience frames issues the characters encounter. The literature suggests that audience identification with the characters on *Desperate Housewives* not only contributes to the show's success; audience identification enhances the show's influence.

Secrecy and Suspense

The literature also suggests that the darkness, secrecy and suspense on *Desperate Housewives* contributes to the show's popularity as the *combination* of secrecy with comedy is unique in television (McCabe, 2006; Olsen & Morgan, 2010; Wilson, 2006; Lancioni, 2006; Sharp, 2006; Kahn, 2006; Pozner & Seigel, 2006; Jermyn, 2006; Gillis & Waters 2006; Cassuto, 2006; Hoth, 2010; Akkas, 2009). As Lancioni (2006) explains "The characters...are likeable, even though they're bad" (p. 135). The secrets on the show contribute to the show's popularity as the suspense enhances the drama and excitement (Sharp, 2006; McCabe, 2006; Hoth, 2010). Jermyn (2006) provides a different perspective by suggesting that the dark elements on the show are unique in that they are presented from a women's perspective by showing how women internalize such complex and dark issues.

Furthermore, some authors suggest that the combination of comedy with drama and mystery contribute to the show's popularity since this combination of genres is

virtually unseen in television. (Lancioni, 2006; Hill, 2010; McCabe, 2006; Sharp, 2006; Akkas, 2009). The combination of crime, suspense and humor work to provide the audience with different contexts for understanding the realistic issues depicted on the show (Wilson, 2006; McCabe, 2006). For instance, as Lancioni explains *Desperate Housewives* uses "...dramedy to construct a post-feminist critique of marriage, motherhood and friendship....[and] uses humor to crack the stereotypes, and drama to show what lies beneath (p. 141-142). The combination of darkness and mystery intertwined with comedy contributes to the show's success as these elements provide the audience with a new way for understanding some of the complex issues on the show.

Darkness Beneath the Facade

Another explanation for the show's popularity is that "...all is not what it seems on *Desperate Housewives*" (Sayeau, 2006, p. 45). As Vidoloff and Freitag (2010) explain (as cited in para. 1, "ABC's *Desperate Housewives*," n.d.) "*Desperate Housewives* is a television sitcom that takes a darkly comedic look at suburbia, where the secret lives of housewives aren't always what they seem" (p. 104). Specifically, the sharp contrast between the façade of perfection and darkness on the show contributes to the show's popularity (McCabe, 2006; Lavery, 2006; Wilson, 2006; Bautista, 2006; Lancioni, 2006; Kahn, 2006; Jermyn, 2006; Akkas, 2009; Morgan, 2007). The perfectly manicured lawns, white-picket fences and beautiful women are a sharp contrast to the outrageous plots of crime and mystery on the show (McCabe, Morgan). For instance, "...with every episode it becomes clearer that even in beautiful and seemingly perfect suburban neighborhoods lots of secrets, crimes and mysteries are buried" (Akkaas, 2009, p. 3). According to Wilson (2006) "...[*Desperate Housewives*] takes a darkly comedic look at suburbia

where the secret lives of housewives aren't always what they seem" (p.144). Thus, the audience enjoys the scandals intertwined with the darkness and secrecy (Lavery 2006; Lancioni, 2006; Jermyn, 2006; Sayeau, 2006). The literature also suggests that the contrast between perfection and secrecy appeals to the audience as this contrast is both unique and highly entertaining (McCabe, 2006; Lavery, 2006; Wilson, 2006; Bautista, 2006; Lancioni, 2006; Kahn, 2006; Jermyn, 2006).

Audience Diversity

According to Chambers (2006) *Desperate Housewives* is popular because it attracts a variety of different viewers, "...*Desperate Housewives* speaks to a very different and much larger one [audience]" (p. 73). Kahn (2006) expands on this idea by explaining how the show attracts a widely diverse audience:

...*Desperate Housewives* speaks to both liberals and conservatives alike....*Desperate Housewives'* appeal to right-wing viewers is obviously due to the show's seemingly restorative social order based on family and community; but left wing viewers also enjoy the show for its transgressive nature and the satiric subversion of sexual and social norms....the show allows for an exploration of unconventional themes only, in the end, to restore traditional values in the eventual patching up of any given transgression. (p. 96, 97)

Since the show is able to appeal to a large audience through its' depictions of polarizing issues and themes, *Desperate Housewives'* ability to attract a large and diverse audience is one of the key factors to the show's success (Sayeau, 2006; Kahn, 2006; Chamber, 2006; Hoth, 2010).

Feminist Critiques of *Desperate Housewives*

One of the most prominent themes in the literature is discussions of gender on the show from a critical feminist perspective. However, the literature deviates in this area, since some authors argue that the show is written and produced from a feminist

perspective, whereas other authors suggest the contrary. Therefore this part of the literature review will address both feminist critiques and praises about the show.

Progressive Feminist Themes

Busch (2009) contends that *Desperate Housewives* is depicted from a feminist perspective because the show creates awareness of contemporary feminist issues, such as stereotypical gender roles and the limited choices between motherhood and careers. For instance, according to Akkass (2009), *Desperate Housewives* depicts the struggle women have in domestic environments, which highlights contemporary feminist issues concerning domesticity. According to Jermyn (2006) *Desperate Housewives* is depicted from a feminist perspective because:

...dominant culture continues to endorse marriage and motherhood as worthy and desirable choice for women, the allure of this lifestyle is left somewhat tarnished by *Desperate Housewives*...contemporary TV is willing and able to make some headway towards reflecting on female identity and experience in such a fashion speaks of the impact of post-feminism on popular culture- and a moment in television that is to be embraced for the rich and intriguing material it offers feminist criticism. (p. 178-179)

On the surface, *Desperate Housewives* may appear to uphold gender stereotypes for women, yet the show's depictions of such stereotypes simultaneously includes repression, anxiety and destruction to illustrate that 'domestic bliss' is unattainable (Jermyn, 2006; Chamber, 2006; Bautista, 2006; Gillis & Waters, 2006; Cassuto, 2006). The show also challenges gender norms through satirical representations of gender that ridicule contemporary gender expectations (Jermyn, 2006; Chamber, 2006). Many authors agree that *Desperate Housewives* is written and produced from a feminist perspective as the show utilizes satire and irony when conveying feminist issues (Jermyn, 2006; Busch, 2009; Bautista, 2006; Cassuto, 2006; Gillis & Waters, 2006; Akkas, 2009).

According to Seigel (2006) the show is framed from feminist perspective since it portrays empowered women and strong female figures and leaders. Gillis and Waters (2006) explain that *Desperate Housewives* is produced from a feminist perspective because the characters often confess about the challenges of child rearing and housework and “Confession in the show functions primarily as a way in which to explore female and maternal tension” (p. 191). According to Gillis and Waters, confession between women is one of the key elements of feminism since most contemporary oppression occurs in the private, domestic sphere. Furthermore, Jermyn (2006) claims *Desperate Housewives* is a feminist text as the female narrator works to frame the show from a woman’s perspective. We see that in some cases, *Desperate Housewives* frames women’s issues from a feminist perspective, however the literature does not address the issue of sexual abuse on the show, which is a reoccurring issue during later seasons. Therefore, my study will begin to uncover how sexual abuse on the show is framed.

The Feminist Mystique and Desperate Housewives

Another prominent theme in the literature draws on concepts from Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminist Mystique*. The literature suggests that *Desperate Housewives* highlights and expands on main themes within *The Feminist Mystique*, specifically the notion of the unhappy housewife (Bautista, 2006; Wilson, 2006; McCabe, 2006; Sharp, 2006; Richardson, 2006; Lancioni, 2006; Gillis & Waters, 2006; Ferguson, 2009; Busch, 2009). Bautista (2006) argues that *Desperate Housewives* not only suggests that issues developed by Friedan still exist, the messages on the show suggest that these issues are more complex and problematic.

For instance, the literature suggests that the character of Bree Van De Kamp satirically embodies the traditional housewife, in order to illustrate the ridiculousness of this conception (Bautista, 2006; Sharp, 2006; Wilson, 2006; Ferguson, 2009; Busch, 2009). McCabe (2006) also draws on concepts from Friedan to demonstrate that *Desperate Housewives* depicts the "...discrepancy between how women's lives are perceived and how they really are" (p. 79), a prominent theme in *The Feminist Mystique*. The literature suggests that *Desperate Housewives* illustrates how the role of the housewife has not substantially changed since the publication of the book (Sharp, 2006; McCabe, 2006; Bautista, 2006; Busch, 2009).

Whereas Jermyn (2006) and Busch (2009) argue that *Desperate Housewives* is depicted from a feminist perspective, Bautista (2006) draws on concepts from Friedan to explain that "...although the show complicated the iconic image of the happy housewife, ultimately it offers no solutions to the desperation that informs current interpretation of the domestic role" (p. 165). Although the show depicts feminist problems it does not provide solutions to these problems, a fundamental deficiency of a feminist artifact (Shuler et al., 2006; Bautista).

The Lack of Feminism on Desperate Housewives

McCabe (2006) argues that the show is not from a feminist perspective since it reproduces dominant ideals of femininity, including stereotypical conceptions of the feminine body, lifestyle, aspirations and identity. For instance, "It is a media-produced deception of what feminine normalcy should look like..." (McCabe, p.78). Vidoloff and Freitag (2010) support these ideas by suggesting that although the show depicts strong

and powerful women it reinforces the belief that women must be thin, gorgeous, objects of male desire who oblige men's wishes and desires.

Although the show may occasionally portray feminist issues, it does not demonstrate the characters discussing the personal impacts of feminist issues, consequently hindering awareness of personal effects of oppression (Shuler et al., 2006). Wilson's (2006) argument corresponds to Shuler et al. since Wilson explains that although *Desperate Housewives* appears to promote a feminist agenda, the predominant anti-feminist elements of the show, such as stereotypical gender roles, overwhelm any feminist agendas. Pozner and Seigel (2006) and Sayeau (2006) concur that the show does not promote feminism, since it also reinforces race and class stereotypes in addition to gender stereotypes. As Shuler et al. explains "While true female friends can challenge gendered structures, the interaction between the *Desperate Housewives* in the first season largely perpetrates them" (p.189). Furthermore, according to Pozner and Seigel the show is anti-feminist since the show demonstrates that feminism has either failed in its efforts or feminism has died.

Interconnection of Feminism and Anti-Feminism

A lot of polarization exists in the literature as it distinguishes *Desperate Housewives* as either feminist or anti-feminist. However, Sharp (2006) and Kahn (2006) contend that the show both challenges and reinforces feminist agendas, as Sharp explains:

On the one hand, the emphasis on problems of the housewife in *Desperate Housewives*... seems to offer potential for feminist critique.... On the other hand, *Desperate Housewives* ... confirm[s] dominant cultural beliefs about traditional gender roles as they ridicule housewives for their perfectionism and ambivalence about motherhood and domesticity. (p 120-121)

According to Hoth (2010) this combination of feminism and anti-feminism make the show appealing to a broad audience with different viewpoints of feminism.

Feminism and Choice

Another prominent theme in the literature focuses on the choice women have between motherhood and careers. The literature suggests that *Desperate Housewives* emphasizes two primary concerns with this issue, first it reveals that choosing either motherhood or a career can be problematic, next, the show demonstrates the inherent conflict that occurs when women choose both (Robinson, 2011; Sharp, 2006; McCabe, 2006; Morgan, 2007). For instance, Bautista (2006) explains that *Desperate Housewives* depicts "...the dichotomy between working and stay-at-home- motherhood..." (p. 157). According to Robinson (2011) *Desperate Housewives* "... highlights the pressure that women face in making choices about work, motherhood and family..." and the show highlights that "Society sends mixed messages to women about what is appropriate behavior...because they will be viewed negatively no matter what choices they make" (p. 121). Thus, the show accurately depicts the difficulties of making choices concerning motherhood and careers, as Sharp (2006) explains:

While many post-feminist representations offer this choice as a form of empowerment as the best option, *Desperate Housewives* obsesses over the anxiety of retreatism.... *Desperate Housewives* comes close to a feminist critique of patriarchy and the unequal division of labour...[*Desperate Housewives*] demonstrates an extreme ambivalence towards the role of motherhood, and satires the ways women internalize the social pressures of choosing to be stay-at-home mothers and living up to unrealistic standards of domestic perfection...." (p. 122, p. 124)

Desperate Housewives is successful in demonstrating that the choice women have between motherhood and careers is not really a choice at all due to the ramifications that accompany either decision or the difficulty of balancing both roles. According to

McCabe (2006) *Desperate Housewives* works to highlight the myth that women may choose between motherhood and careers, as Coward (2006) describes:

...it is touching on the illusion of post-feminism, the idea that if women can choose how they live, they will be fulfilled....What is being articulated is the continuity of disappointment....what is being exposed are false promises, the hypocrisy and unhappiness that coercive ideals. (p. 40)

Akass (2006) and Lancioni (2006) explain that the choice between motherhood and a career is a myth because although it is acceptable for women to pursue careers, women are still primarily responsible for all of the domestic responsibilities associated with being a housewife. According to Richardson (2006) *Desperate Housewives* depicts:

...the difficulties which these women encounter in their roles of housewife and mother....these women are, as the series' title suggests, *desperately* unhappy with their situation....representing contemporary super-women who unite demanding professional jobs with selfless childrearing. *Desperate Housewives* demonstrates that being a superhuman 'new mom' is not quite as easy as contemporary media would suggest. (p.158)

Thus, the show is significant in demonstrating that gender roles for women have changed, whereas gender roles for men have not changed (Akass; Lancioni; Morgan). According to Gillis and Waters (2006) *Desperate Housewives* demonstrates that women will be criticized for either choice. These issues are both unique to the show and imperative to its' success as they are rarely depicted on television (Seigel, 2006).

Choice and Guilt

Desperate Housewives depicts the guilt women experience when they choose their career, motherhood, or both (Gillis & Waters). According to Fernandez-Morales (2009), the characters feel guilty when balancing motherhood and a career because balancing both roles causes them to feel that neither roll is being fulfilled well. Bautista (2006) and Sharp (2006) contend that *Desperate Housewives* dramatically explores the

complexities and contradictions within domesticity and the show accentuates the darker and sinister elements within domesticity. Despite the prevalence of guilt from motherhood Shuler et. al. (2006) found that the characters seldom confess their guilt to one another, which represents a lack of mortification on the show that I will discuss in subsequent chapters. Although my study will examine different sources of guilt on the show, the research suggests that guilt is central to the show.

Marc Cherry: Creator of *Desperate Housewives*

Another prominent topic in the literature focuses on the show's creator and executive producer, Marc Cherry, in order to gain an understanding of the show's objectives (Sharp, 2006; Lancioni, 2006; Kahn, 2006; Pozner & Seigel, 2006; Jermyn, 2006; Olsen & Morgan, 2010; Akass, 2006; Vidoloff & Freitag, 2010; Hill, 2010; McCabe & Akass, 2006). As McCabe and Akass (2006) explain:

The show was the brainchild of Marc Cherry and inspired by something his mother Martha said. Watching the news coverage of the 2002 trial of Andrea Yates, the Texan woman found guilty of drowning her five children in a bathtub, with his mom....he said: "Gosh can you image a woman so desperate that she would hurt her own children?"[his mom] said, "I've been there".... the concept was born for a series about women making the choice to live in the suburbs but finding the reality not as imagined. (p. 3)

Cherry realized that if his mother had moments of great desperation, then all mothers must have moments of great desperation so he wanted to create a television series about four housewives experiencing desperation (McCabe & Akass). These accounts from Cherry demonstrate that one of the objectives of the show is to highlight the challenges of being a housewife:

I call it a post- feminist take. The women’s movement said, ‘Let’s get the gals out working’. Next the women realized you can’t have it all. Most of the time you have to make a choice. What I’m doing is having women make the choice to live in the suburbs, but things aren’t going well at all. The show is actually a love letter to all the women out there who have issues and are trying their best to be stay at home moms. (Sharp, 2006, p. 122-123)

As Olsen and Morgan (2010) explain, Cherry created *Desperate Housewives* to demonstrate what women do when they are unhappy with their lives. In addition, Cherry’s purpose for *Desperate Housewives* was to explore issues central to the human condition and uncover some of the darker and hidden issues women experience, issues not often depicted on television (Olsen & Morgan). In order to highlight the darker issues on the show, Cherry decided to mix comedy with drama, which he believed would convey the severity of women’s issues, in a manner that was also entertaining (Hill, 2010). Interviews from Cherry provide a foundation for understanding the complexity of the messages on *Desperate Housewives*.

Mary Alice Young: The Narrator of *Desperate Housewives*

The literature also examines the unique role of Mary Alice Young, the female narrator on the show (McCabe & Akass, 2006; Lavery, 2006; Coward, 2006; Richardson, 2006). According to Akkas (2009) “Her voice leads the viewer through the happenings and through the plot of *Desperate Housewives* and structures the series with her pro- and epilogues” (p. 3). As Jermyn (2006) explains:

...Mary Alice speaks with calm authority and wisdom.... More interestingly, each week her voice also frames the story, providing the opening prologue- often a pithy tale about the misplaced values of suburbia- and the epilogue- often extracting some sage lesson based on what we've seen....she still has knowledge, awareness, insight into this time. As well as having a heightened sensitivity to her friends' emotional states...she appears to be actually present at events....She thus enjoys a superior position of knowledge in relation to the text, above that of other characters and the audience.... Mary Alice's curious and oddly empowered present-absence go further, making her a significant structuring presence in the program despite her death....*Desperate Housewives* takes time to reflect on some of the everyday negotiations and experiences lived out by these women... (p.170-177)

According to Hoth (2010) and Morgan (2007) Mary Alice has a heightened sensitivity and knowledge to the issues and emotions the characters are experiencing. As Akkas explains "She is one of the housewives who seems to have all the answers to the mysteries of Wisteria Lane. What is special about her is the fact that she has knowledge about everything and everybody..."(p. 5). Hoth explains that Mary Alice's role is unique because:

...what distinguishes *Desperate Housewives* from other voice narrated audiovisual narratives is that its speaker Mary Alice Young tells her take from the grave. In the very first episode she commits suicide, only to take on the role as an omniscient voice-over narrator commenting in dulcet tones each week on the trials and tribulations of her neighbors.... Mary Alice provides additional information the viewer cannot get. (p. 93, 95)

According to Jermyn, Mary Alice leads the audience to both trust and empathize with her, although she is guilty of various crimes, including murder. The literature suggests that the narrator works to frame the show in a manner that brings the audience to empathize with the characters (Jermyn; Hoth; Vidoloff & Freitag, 2010). The female narrator on *Desperate Housewives* works to frame the issues and themes on the show from her perspective, which impacts the likelihood that an audience will perceive the issues on the show from her perspective (Hoth). As Akkas explains, the narrator on

Desperate Housewives has the advantage of “...drawing the viewer to like the show...” (p. 5) because Mary Alice appears to be similar to an old, good friend, who invites the audience to become involved in the show, which encourages audience engagement with the show.

Comparisons with *Sex and the City*

The literature also makes comparisons between *Desperate Housewives* and *Sex and the City* often in order to provide context for understanding female-centered shows. These shows are similar in the messages and values expressed (Fernandez-Morales, 2009; Busch, 2009; Hill, 2010; Robinson, 2011; Hoth, 2010; McCabe & Akass, 2006; Lavery, 2006; Coward, 2006; Richardson, 2006; Lancioni, 2006; Wilson, 2006). For instance, Fernandez-Morales (2009) explains that each show is a feminist artifact, however, each show differs in that each show highlights different feminist issues. Whereas *Desperate Housewives* focuses on the complexities of motherhood, *Sex and the City* addresses romantic relationships (Fernandez-Morales).

According to Hoth (2010) each show upholds traditional ideas and values concerning family and marriage. Busch (2009) claims that *Desperate Housewives* expands on the themes from *Sex and the City* because whereas *Sex and the City* “...suggest that women’s nature is most readily satisfied by domesticity, *Desperate Housewives* suggests a greater complexity in women’s search for fulfillment, as children, homes, and husbands alone are insufficient sources of happiness for women” (p. 96). Thus, each show provides different suggestions for how women can achieve happiness and fulfillment (Busch; Fernandez-Morales).

Hill (2010) also contends that the shows are similar because each show embraces new, contemporary and different representations of women. Robinson (2011) expands on Hill's ideas by explaining that the two shows are similar because each is successful at highlighting the pressures and anxieties that contemporary women experience. Hoth explains that the shows are similar in that each contains a female narrator that frames the show to impart their own wisdom and perspectives.

The shows differ according to Hoth, because *Desperate Housewives* prioritizes family and marriage over friends, whereas *Sex and the City* prioritizes friends and non-traditional relationships over family. Shuler et al. (2006) presents a different perspective by arguing that although the shows may appear to be similar because of the close relationships between the four main characters, *Desperate Housewives* is different because the friendships on *Desperate Housewives* are not as genuine as those on *Sex and the City*. As Hoth explains: "Unlike the female protagonists of *Sex and the City*, the women in Wisteria Lane do not tell each other everything; instead they hide private matters from each other, conceal their ulterior motives and sometimes lie..." (p. 95).

Sin and Deception on *Desperate Housewives*

The literature discusses the sinful and deceitful behavior on the show because this is one of the most common themes on the show (Clapson, 2005; Wilson, 2006; Bautista, 2006; McCabe, 2006; Olsen & Morgan, 2010; Hoth, 2010; Akkas, 2009). As Clapson (2005) explains such behavior exists on *Desperate Housewives* in order to show that "...desperation...leads inexorably to promiscuity, or to all sorts of spiteful or vengeful behavior" (p. 37). Another example of the sinful behavior on the show includes dishonesty, as the characters frequently lie to one another (Hoth, 2010). Thus, the show

critiques domesticity and suggests that domesticity may lead to desperation, which ultimately may cause sinful and deceitful behavior (McCabe, 2006; Wilson, 2006; Bautista, 2006; McCabe & Akass, 2006; Lavery, 2006; Coward, 2006; Kahn, 2006).

Punishment of Sin on *Desperate Housewives*

Cosman (2006), Olsen and Morgan (2010), Kahn (2006) and Di Gregorio (2006) explain that although *Desperate Housewives* depicts bad behavior, the show inevitably condemns such behavior and depicts characters attempting to repair their wrongdoings. For instance, *Desperate Housewives* shows adultery, however the show also shows the severe consequences of adultery, such as divorce. According to Gillis and Waters (2006) the characters often confess their mistakes and wrongdoings. The literature suggests that on the surface *Desperate Housewives* may appear to encourage bad behavior, yet consequences almost always accompany bad behavior; conveying the message to the audience that bad behavior does not go unnoticed or without punishment (Kahn; Cosman; Olsen & Morgan, 2010; Lancioni, 2006; Di Gregorio, 2006; Olsen & Morgan, 2010). In addition, the literature also suggests that the audience is able to comprehend these complex messages that often uphold traditional and moral values (Lancioni; Olsen & Morgan).

Concealment of Sin

Di Gregorio (2006) contends that *Desperate Housewives* not only depicts the consequences of sinful behavior, it depicts how the characters conceal their behavior. As Coward (2006) explains, "...everybody has secrets from each other.... Everyone is presenting appearances and hiding things....Underneath the polished and perfect exterior, suburbia is a potentially dangerous place" (p. 37). Ding Wang and Hou Jin'an (2008)

argue that the characters conceal their behavior in order to achieve social harmony with others, “They try to avoid conflict, use indirect forms and adopt silence or nonverbal communicative methods like facial expressions.... They try to pretend to be polite, tolerant and moderate and prevent others from feeling too embarrassed.” (p. 6).

According to Di Gregorio a unique element of *Desperate Housewives* is the sharp contrast between the characters’ secrets and their façade of perfection:

This notion of appearance verses reality is reflected on a macro level, metaphorically and satirically, in the pleasant, neat façades of Wisteria Lane- depicting typically wealthy, middle class suburban setting that leave that niggling feeling that something is going on; that the pleasant exterior hides a more ominous truth. (p. 63)

Gillis and Waters (2006) elaborate on the irony of the façade on the show:

This foregrounding of the necessity of appearance strikes at the heart of *Desperate Housewives*....through the narration of the deceased Mary Alice, exposes the dichotomy between surface appearances and emotional realities that the inhabitants of this neighborhood contrive to conceal. The dissymmetry of outward appearances and concealed truths that is established in this formative sequence is crucial to the plot....secrecy, and the absence of confession, govern the dynamics of suburban relationships....female friendships in Wisteria Lane are based, is, in fact, characterized by deceptions and silences. (p. 194-195)

One of the main themes on *Desperate Housewives* is secrecy, however according to Coward (2006) the show also depicts the consequences of secrecy, addressed in the next section.

Sin and Guilt on Desperate Housewives

Olsen and Morgan (2010) are the only authors who studied *Desperate Housewives* from a rhetorical perspective using Burke’s guilt redemption cycle. In their article *Desperate For Redemption? Guilt and Redemption on Desperate Housewives*, they studied how the methods of guilt purification used by the characters often contradict the characters’ behavior. Specifically, despite all the sinful behavior on the show, the

characters work to make amends for their behavior (Olsen and Morgan). Therefore, *Desperate Housewives* is not just a show about the evil within the human heart, it is a show that demonstrates how people purify themselves of evil (Olsen and Morgan).

Olsen and Morgan found that the characters' mistakes and wrongdoings cause the characters to feel very guilty, while the secrecy of their wrongdoings causes the characters to feel immensely guiltier, which is explored in my study as well. My study builds upon theirs to determine the differences and similarities between the guilt purification methods used in their study and my own. According to Olsen and Morgan, a key component of the show is that the characters are able to recognize that their behavior is wrong. Specifically, we often see characters face punishments for their behavior and their use of guilt purification (particularly mortification) demonstrates the recognition of their wrongdoings (Olsen and Morgan). The recognition and confession of one's wrongdoings in combination with punishment for one's behavior represents what Olsen and Morgan define as conservative values, in that despite the sinful behavior on the show, it conveys conservative values concerning right and wrong through appropriate treatment of sinful behavior.

Although *Desperate Housewives* deals with the dark side of the human condition, it also exposes the redemption process characters use to rid themselves of guilt (Olsen and Morgan). Olsen and Morgan explain that "Rather, the strength of the show is that, within, despite and perhaps because of all those shortcomings, redemptive moments occur. Seeing what it takes to bring about those moments can be redemptive for the viewers as well as the characters" (p. 343). Thus, the characters often take responsibility for their wrong behavior by confessing their wrongdoings (Olsen & Morgan). Olsen and

Morgan applied Kenneth Burke's theory of guilt-purification to a random selection of scenes within the first season of *Desperate Housewives* and found that the four main characters frequently seek to redeem their guilt using mortification as the characters utilize confession, request forgiveness and are punished. This study applying guilt and redemption to *Desperate Housewives* serves as a foundation for my own study of guilt and redemption on the show as I hope to determine if Olsen and Morgan's findings are upheld in my study in addition to the similarities and differences between our studies. Whereas they only focused on a few sporadic scenes from the first season of the show, I will develop on Olsen and Morgan's application of Kenneth Burke's dramatism by studying how each individual character alleviates their guilt across an entire story arc, covering a total of 14 episodes.

Conclusion

This literature review has examined concepts and theories that explain television's influence within contemporary culture. Since the literature suggests that television is influential, we see that *Desperate Housewives* also influences how the audience thinks about certain issues such as gender, feminism, sinful behavior and secrecy. I hope to contribute to both rhetorical and feminist criticism by uncovering how the show impacts how viewers think about issues such as sexual abuse. Within this literature review I have established areas of *Desperate Housewives* that have already been studied in order to uncover the gaps within rhetorical criticism, specifically concerning how a story about sexual abuse impacts guilt and redemption. Although most of the research on *Desperate Housewives* examines the first season, my research will examine the first, seventh and eighth seasons, with references to episodes throughout the entire series in order to

provide a comprehensive analysis of the show.

Methodology

In order to analyze the process of guilt purification on *Desperate Housewives*, I am applying Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism to the show. Since the literature suggests that guilt and redemption are prominent themes on the show, I will apply dramatism to *Desperate Housewives* to uncover how the characters address their guilt as well as the implications of their methods of guilt alleviation or guilt avoidance. The methods of guilt alleviation or avoidance utilized by the characters will reveal important messages and values present on *Desperate Housewives*. Prior to a comprehensive explanation of how dramatism will be applied in my study, dramatism must be thoroughly explained. The next section of the methodology will explain the primary concepts of dramatism, focusing on the three different methods of guilt purification. In the next section I will also discuss how dramatism has been utilized within the academic literature and detail how dramatism will be used within my research.

The Dramatistic Pentad

Kenneth Burke (1976), in his theory of dramatism, contends that the language one uses to describe their behavior can be critically analyzed to uncover one's motives, which provides a comprehensive understanding of human behavior. There are five primary components that illustrate elements surrounding human behavior, which Burke defines as the dramatistic pentad: act, scene, agent, agency and purpose (Burke, 1962; Burke, 1976; Brummett, 1980; Zappen; Murray, 2002; Garlitz, 2004). The agent is the individual, the act is one's behavior, the purpose is why one behaved the way they did, the agency is what the individual used to perform their behavior and the scene is the situation the act occurs in (Burke, 1962). Specifically, agents use language to describe and construct the

pentad from their own perspective. Identifying the components of the dramatistic pentad will seek to explain motives for human behavior: "...it is our purpose to show that the explicit and systematic use of the dramatist pentad is best designed to bring out the strategic moments of motivational theory" (Burke, p. 67). Although an explanation of the dramatistic pentad is important for understanding dramatism, I will not be applying the pentad in my research since I am focusing on how the characters on *Desperate Housewives* redeem their guilt.

Order and Perfection

A significant concept within dramatism is the concept of order as humans are motivated by the need and desire to create and maintain order and harmony (Burke, 1976; Burke, 1962; Brummett, 1980; Messner & Buckrop, 2000; Hughes, 2003; Brummett, 1984; Moore, 1997; Scheibel, 1999; Schultz, 2011; Wess, 1996; Garlitz, 2004; Carter, 1996). Brummett (1980) explains that order is inherent to human nature as "People try to live together harmoniously because social order allays the terrors of social mystery" (p. 65). Garlitz (2004) contends that order, hierarchy and perfection motive humans to behave the way they do.

The concept of order directly relates to the concept of perfection because humans attempt to reach an ideal world of order by striving for perfection, eliminating evil, doing good and correcting flaws (Messner and Buckrop, 2000). As Burke (1976) explains, humans are obsessed with perfecting themselves, perfecting others and perfecting the hierarchy. Moore (1997) elaborates on Burke's notion that humans strive for perfection by explaining the connection between order and perfection:

...humans, as symbol-using animals who are moved by a sense of order or hierarchy, seek perfection in the logical extension of such principles as order and hierarchy through the symbols that they use to embody them. As humans perfect their logic of order and hierarchy through symbol use, they reveal that they are ultimately motivated, not by order or hierarchy, but by the principle of perfection itself. (p. 38)

Therefore, achieving perfection primarily motivates humans, as doing so indicates one has attained order. The dramatic pentad reveals how human actions either contribute to or disrupt order. Thus, a dramatic analysis of *Desperate Housewives* will uncover character behavior that disputes order and how the characters work to restore order.

Mystery, Hierarchy and Order

In order to achieve perfection, humans create order through a hierarchical system, which removes social mystery (Brummett, 1980; Brummett, 1981; Messner & Buckrop, 2000; Hughes, 2003; Brummett, 1984; Moore, 1997; Wess, 1996; Garlitz, 2004; Carter, 1996; Burke, 1970). Scheibel et al. (2002) explains that social mystery occurs because there are social barriers between humans and other humans, who by nature do not want to cross these barriers. Mystery is anything that is unknown or unfamiliar to humans (Brummett, 1980). Brummett (1981) draws on concepts from Burke to elaborate on the concept of mystery:

... the perception of difference, strangeness, and alienation between people. Insofar as everyone is somewhat different from everyone else, mystery is inescapable. And insofar as groups of people have values, commitments, and lifestyles that are markedly different from those of other groups, the mystery is threatening. (p. 255)

Burke (1971) makes a distinction that mystery refers to the mysteries of people (due to race or class, for instance). For instance, mysteries occur when individuals encounter unusual social situations or meet new people (Scheibel et al., 2002).

Brummett (1981) contends that hierarchies address mystery as “Hierarchies control the terrors of *mystery*.... Hierarchies do not eliminate mystery; rather, they provide an order for controlling it” (p. 255). Hierarchies provide categorization of people who would otherwise be mysteries to one another, by creating groups of people with similarities (Scheibel, 1999). Brummett further explains that hierarchies remove social mystery because:

Social mysteries are intolerable, so if people cannot avoid them by obeying laws and social norms they seek to encompass them through hierarchy.....A hierarchy overcomes the natural mystery to which people are heirs by providing grounds for union, for consubstantiality. Although apart in one sense, people may partake of the common substance offered in hierarchy. (p. 65)

A comprehensive explanation of hierarchy will create an understanding of how hierarchies control mystery.

Hierarchy

Brummett (1981) draws on concepts from Burke to define hierarchy as “...a system of social order in which participants assume roles, rights, and responsibilities towards other participants” (p. 65). Brummett further explains hierarchy as:

a social order that binds people together in a system of rights and obligations. A hierarchy is based upon a set of values, or principles, a "constitution," that defines those rights and obligations. Hierarchies may be constructed around principles as explicit as the laws and rules... (p. 254-255)

Westerfelhaus & Ciekawy (1998) claim that hierarchies can be organized using cultural, economic, political, religious or social factors. Hierarchies are necessary for the creation of order and humans will always strive to achieve order through the creation of hierarchies, “...the existence of such hierarchies is an inevitable feature of human social life because the hierarchic principle is a defining characteristic of human thinking” (Westerfelhaus & Ciekawy, p. 271). Scheibel (1999) explains that hierarchies establish

both values and rules because hierarchies “...constitute organizational meanings and organizational expectations” (p. 170). Hierarchies can be understood as moral orders that utilize rules and values to “...tell us what we should or should not do or want” (Messner and Buckrop, 2000, p. 5). Hierarchies guide humans by outlining how humans should or should not behave through the use of social norms and prohibitions (Westerfelhaus & Ciekawy). My analysis of *Desperate Housewives* will focus on actions that are prohibited within the hierarchy and the implications of such actions.

Hierarchy and Authority

A significant part of hierarchies include the “distribution of authority” (Burke, 1971, p. 152). The distribution of authority creates a sense of order through an authoritative ladder. Burke (1962) explains the authoritative ladder as “...the members of the entire group being arranged developmentally with relation to one another” (p. 711). An authoritative ladder creates an official process of rank or steps on the ladder, which establishes the hierarchy, and therefore a sense of order. Westerfelhaus & Ciekawy (1998) use Burke’s metaphor of the ladder to further explain the relationship between hierarchies and authority:

People create social order through division and, like the rungs of a ladder, these divisions are arranged vertically rather than horizontally. Separation through division, and the vertical arrangement of those who have been separated, places people on various rungs of a society's hierarchical ladder. This social arrangement fosters a desire on the part of most people to climb up the ladder (e.g., through the acquisition of wealth, power, and prestige) while at the same time instilling within them the fear of falling to a lower rung (e.g., through the loss of wealth). (p. 271)

Authority figures in each hierarchy eliminate mystery between individuals by establishing order through an authoritative ladder (Wess, 1996; Garlitz, 2004; Carter,

1996; Burke, 1970). Schultz (2011) explains that the use of authorities in hierarchies creates order because:

Power endows certain individuals and institutions with authority; authority in turn establishes the roles occupied by members of a society. As people accept these roles and work within the hierarchy, order is created. Hierarchies are maintained through the exercise of authority, fixed and modified by inclusion and exclusion. (p. 170)

The authoritative ladder both unifies and divides the hierarchy with authorities who create division through power differences (Scheibel, 1999).

For instance, in a classroom, the teacher would be the authority figure, with the students ranking lower on the hierarchy than the teacher, because the teacher has ways of identifying their rank and identifying respect for themselves, often through language. This serves to eliminate mystery since the students are aware of the rules and guidelines that must be followed, based on instruction from the teacher. Authority figures are fundamental to the hierarchy since they utilize language to enforce the norms, rules, laws and standards of the hierarchy that individuals must obey (Garlitz, 2004; Burke, 1970).

Hierarchy, Symbols and Language

Murray (2002) explains that the use of symbols by humans is necessary to the hierarchy since "...the world is encountered only in and through language" (p. 28) and language is "...how we come to know the world" (p. 31). Thus, humans interact with each other in the hierarchy by using language. Furthermore, the use of language also provides rules and guidelines for *how* humans should interact with one another (Murray; Scheibel, 1999). Burke (1976) claims that humans are symbol-using animals who utilize language which is a form of symbolic action that expresses human attitudes and beliefs.

According to Carter (1996) and Burke, language is a form of action and all human action, including language, is symbolic of human beliefs and motives.

Although language is a type of action or behavior, language also serves to explain motives for behavior. According to Burke (1976) and Garlitz (2004), the language that accompanies behavior is significant as such language explains motives for human behavior. According to Burke, language emulates human attitudes, values and motives:

...a grammatical function does figure in our thoughts about the motives and purpose, in the choice and scope of the terms that are used for characterizing a given situation dramatism would discern implicit corresponding attitudes and programs of action...one could possibly select descriptive terms in which policies of some sort are not more or less clearly inherent. In the selection of terms for describing a scene, one automatically prescribes the range of acts that will seem reasonable, implicit, or necessary in that situation. (p. 14)

Thus, applying dramatism to one's language can reveal how one expresses and justifies their motives. For instance, Burke and Murray (2002) explain that humans justify their behavior through a careful selection of language. The role language has within justifying behavior will be further explored in subsequent sections in the methodology. During my study, the dialogue from the characters will be analyzed, however sometimes the dialogue will be summarized in order to condense some of the scenes and focus on the characters' main points.

Motives of human actions are not always readily apparent through language, according to Garlitz (2004). While language can be used to explain motives for behavior, language can also be used to withhold behavioral motives (Garlitz, Burke, 1962).

According to Garlitz, humans may use language to conceal motives when they violate rules of the hierarchy. Garlitz and Burke explain that a critical dramatic analysis can uncover motives that humans conceal with language. Therefore, dramatism will be used

to examine how the characters on *Desperate Housewives* may withhold or express their motives using strategic language, which I will directly or indirectly analyze as sometimes the characters' language will not be fully transcribed in order to address their main point.

Hierarchy and Conflict

Hierarchies are complex systems because each individual belongs to several hierarchies (Brummett, 1984, Westerfelhaus & Ciekawy, 1998). While hierarchies create unity *within* a group, hierarchies simultaneously create divisions *between* separate hierarchies due to the different ideologies that exist within each hierarchy (Zappen, 2009). Westerfelhaus & Ciekawy explain that memberships to many hierarchies causes tension or guilt because:

The occupation of multiple hierarchies makes it possible for those advantageously placed within one hierarchy to lack an equally advantageous position within another. In this way, the relative position of people with respect to one another might differ from hierarchy to hierarchy; people occupying rungs below others in one hierarchy sometimes occupy rungs above them in another. By resorting to victimage within a multi-hierarchical arrangement, we contend that people can make use of resources derived from their advantageous placement in one hierarchy to better their position within another [hierarchy]. (p. 270)

Humans assume social burdens to each hierarchy to which they belong and these social burdens sometimes create conflict (Scheibel et al., 2002; Westerfelhaus & Ciekawy).

Other sources of drama and conflict within the hierarchical system will be explored in the next section of the methodology.

Hierarchy Violation: Origins of Guilt

Hierarchical disorder not only occurs from the tensions *between* hierarchies, it occurs from tension *within* the hierarchy. Recall that humans strive for perfection and the hierarchy is the result of this pursuit for order and perfection. Although humans strive for perfection, humans will inevitably and ironically create "...perfect fools, perfect villains,

and perfect enemies” during the attempt to reach perfection (Moore, 1997, p. 39).

Although, humans develop a hierarchy to understand their world and create order in their world “...inevitably some or all of its members violate its principles through hate, violence, lawlessness, rejection, alienation, or failure to meet responsibilities”

(Brummett, 1980, p. 66). Brummett further explains hierarchy violation:

Unfortunately, no one can be part of hierarchies without violating them from time to time through violence, withdrawal, or rebellion. Violation of a hierarchy may be covert....Or violation of a hierarchy may be vicarious, through the destructive, rebellious, or deviant action of another. (p. 255)

Westerfelhaus & Ciekawy (1998) explain that the structure of hierarchies causes hierarchical violation because:

The pervasiveness of the hierarchies, prohibitions, and norms of perfection create a social order in which violations against the order are not only possible, but inevitable.... the very things that make social order possible also ensure that the social order will be violated. (p. 272)

According to Messner and Buckrop (2000) violations to the hierarchy occur because “...no human is capable of meeting all of the covenant's demands. Thus, hierarchies are negated and what once was ordered falls into disorder” (p. 5). Carter (1966) explains that the hierarchy is violated because the hierarchical expectations are unreasonable, no one can follow *all* of the rules of the hierarchy, *all* of the time. Humans will violate the hierarchy because “...true perfection does not exist, so while we are moved by the drive for perfection, ultimately we cannot achieve it” (Schultz, 2011, p. 169). Scheibel (1999) provides an example of how the hierarchy is violated in a study of college students, “...two problematic aspects of student life [are]: roommates and grades. Both are sources of hierarchic imperfection, and as such, are sources of guilt” (p. 187).

Hierarchies create optimum conditions for guilt because humans are naturally disobedient (Burke, 1976). For instance, Burke explains that:

On the side of disorder there are the temptations of the senses and the imagination. The senses can function as temptations to the extent that the prescribed order does not wholly gratify our impulses (whether they are nature or a by-product of the very order that requires their control). Similarly, the imagination falls on the side of disorder insofar as it encourages interests inimical to the given order... (p. 14)

Westerfellaus and Ciekawy (1998) explain that hierarchical violations occur “...from hierarchical tensions that occur between people who occupy different rungs of the same hierarchy” (p. 269). Thus, hierarchical tensions occur between different ranks or levels of power within the hierarchy (i.e. between a teacher and a student).

Violation of the hierarchy is defined as pollution, which Schultz (2011) claims occurs “...when either intentionally or unintentionally the order is rejected” (p. 169). When humans violate the hierarchy “this offense against the social order creates in the transgressor the feeling or motive of guilt” (Brummett, 1980, p. 66). Schultz explains that “pollution inspires an urgent need for purification” (p. 176). In my analysis of *Desperate Housewives*, one of my objectives is to identify examples the characters’ guilt and their recognition of a need to purge their guilt. Prior to a discussion of how pollution is removed through purification, the concept of guilt must be discussed.

Guilt

According to Westerfellaus and Ciekawy (1998) guilt is “...the personal and social tensions that result from violations of the prohibitions, the norms of perfection, and/or the hierarchies” (p. 269). Schultz (2011) further explains that “...Guilt arises when an individual's actions transgress against moral, social or legal norms” (p. 172).

According to Burke (1962), guilt can either be individual or collective, thus one may

experience guilt from their own actions or from the actions of a group to which one belongs. The concept of collective guilt is imperative to my research since some of the characters experience guilt from their own actions as well as the actions of others. For a further understanding of guilt, the concept of original sin will be discussed in the next section.

Guilt and Original Sin

The concept of original sin is one of the foundations of Burke's methodology as Burke uses original sin to explain guilt. Guilt comes from original sin, which is defined as "...the inherited guilt that is an intrinsic part of the human experience" (Westerfelhaus & Ciekawy, 1998, p. 272). Original sin is a concept in Christian theology that represents "... a chosen people whose Covenant with God implies the possibility of a Fall from grace and entails, as a condition of redemption, some punishment or payment for wrongdoing" (Ivie, 2007, p. 225). Schultz (2011) contends that original sin has been developed from the biblical creation story in the book of Genesis, in which the original sin occurs when Eve takes fruit from the forbidden tree. This sin represents how a hierarchy established order using God's laws, yet humans created disorder by sinning (Schultz). In his explanation of the original sin, Burke (1962) claims that humans are naturally transgressors, thus humans by nature will disrupt the order within the hierarchy through violation of rules. According to Westerfelhaus and Ciekawy, "Original sin, then, can be understood as the potential within a society for guilt, while actual sin is the realization of that potential" (p. 272). Therefore, all humans have the potential to sin or violate rules of the hierarchy and create disorder, which causes humans to feel guilty; however, guilt can be redeemed through a form of purification.

Guilt in the Hierarchy

Feelings of guilt are detrimental to the hierarchy because the presence of guilt violates order and creates mystery, which threatens the harmony of the hierarchy (Messner & Buckrop, 2000; Brummett, 1981). Recall that the purpose of the hierarchy is to eliminate mystery by establishing order, yet the presence of guilt in the hierarchy creates mystery and eliminates order; jeopardizing the structure of the hierarchy. Thus, guilt is detrimental to the hierarchy because guilt causes humans to be divided and estranged from their hierarchies (Brummett, 1982). Since feelings of guilt are detrimental to the hierarchy “guilt, therefore, becomes a motive because it must be removed” (Messner & Buckrop, p. 66). The consequences that guilt has on each character will be explored within my research on *Desperate Housewives*.

Guilt As A Motive

According to the literature, the mere presence of guilt motivates one to alleviate their guilt. “This feeling of guilt is matched by a corresponding need to expunge the guilt, to purify ourselves of it in a manner that leads us back to perceived order” (Messner & Buckrop, p. 5). Guilt is a motive because feelings of guilt provoke one to remove guilt and restore harmony and order within the hierarchy (Brummett, 1980; Burke, 1962; Hughes, 2003, Brummett, 1981; Ivie, 2007). As Garlitz (2004) explains, “...the dynamic process of temptation, sin, guilt, victimage, and vicarious redemption, are the universal motives of human action” (p. 99). Therefore, guilt is a motive because guilt causes one to seek redemption. In my analysis of *Desperate Housewives*, I will examine how guilt motivates each character to alleviate their guilt.

Guilt Redemption

Burke (1971) explains that although the structure of the hierarchy creates opportunities for guilt, the hierarchy also creates opportunities for the redemption of guilt “...a principal of absolute ‘guilt’ matched by a principal that is designed for the corresponding absolute cancellation of such guilt” (p. 159). According to Schultz (2011) “Redemption is a cleansing of guilt” (p. 173), thus, when one seeks redemption, one is purged of guilt and guilt is removed from the hierarchy. Garlitz (2004) explains how guilt is inevitably connected to the hierarchy:

...guilt creates the idea of a cleansing redemption...Guilt and redemption reciprocally operate within the terms for Order as the reverse of each other...The principal of hierarchy is the principal of Order; it reaffirms guilt and victimage.... Guilt and redemption paradoxically operate reciprocally; feature one and you thereby feature the other. (p. 119, 120)

Brummett (1981) expands on the former concepts by explaining that “Guilt must be expiated, and the person or group must achieve redemption that leads back to a secure hierarchy” (p. 255). Although humans will inevitably violate the hierarchy and subsequently feel guilty, the structure of the hierarchy creates optimum conditions for the redemption of guilt. Redemption of guilt is *absolutely necessary*, as redemption allows humans to reestablish order and harmony in the hierarchy (Brummett, 1980; Scheibel et al., 1999) Furthermore, Ivie (2007) argues that guilt redemption is not only necessary to the hierarchy, but humans have an “incessant desire for redemption” (p. 228).

Schultz (2011) simplifies the redemption of guilt into a four-step process: pollution, guilt, purification, and redemption. According to Brummett (1980), this process allows one to achieve guilt redemption and reestablish order and harmony in the hierarchy. First pollution (sin) occurs against the hierarchy, which causes guilt and guilt

must be alleviated through purification, which leads to redemption, according to Schultz. Garlitz (2004) expands on these concepts to explain this process as a cycle “...start with guilt, move to punishment arrive at redemption and from there return to order, whence the cycle of the possibility of sin or fall begins once more” (p. 116).

Scheibel (1999) and Ivie (2007) explain that the use of language makes guilt redemption possible. Language is an essential component of the guilt-redemption cycle because language is “...the way in which one enacts a means of redemption or avoidance” (Brummett, 1981, p. 256). According to Brummett (1981), when addressing guilt, rhetorical messages are utilized and these messages will always fall into one of the three following categories: mortification, scapegoating or transcendence. The analysis of rhetorical messages using dramatism can demonstrate how messages communicate the avoidance or denial of one’s guilt (Brummett, 1984; Roy, 2004). In the next section the three different methods of guilt purification will be discussed in order to provide a foundation of how I will analyze *Desperate Housewives* utilizing the three different methods of purification.

Sacrifice: Mortification and Scapegoating

“...When people perceive disorder in their lives, they attempt to reestablish order via scapegoating, mortification, or transcendence” (Messner & Buckrop, 2000, p. 6). Guilt can be purged through either scapegoating or mortification as these purification methods allow one to achieve redemption and reestablish order through purification (Moore, 2006; Messner & Buckrop, 2000; Hughes, 2003, Brummett, 1981; Brummett, 1980; Scheibel, 1999; Garlitz, 2004; Wess, 1996; Carter, 1996; Burke, 1970). Mortification and scapegoating lead to redemption because an individual, group or object

is always sacrificed; thus the sacrifice allows for atonement from guilt (Ivie, 2007). According to Burke (1976) sacrifice is an essential element of the hierarchy because "...order involves sacrifices of some sort, the sacrificial principal is intrinsic to the nature of order" (p. 15). Thus, my analysis of *Desperate Housewives* will examine how the characters use sacrifice within guilt purification.

Guilt Redemption Cycle: Mortification

Mortification is an individual's attempt to rid oneself of guilt by confessing and seeking forgiveness (Moore, 2006; Hughes, 2003; Brummett, 1981; Olsen & Morgan, 2010). One utilizes mortification when one cannot find a scapegoat or if one believes the only path to redemption is through mortification (Carter, 1996). According to Brummett (1980), the process of mortification entails the following steps: confession, punishment, redemption and order. Messner and Buckrop (2000) explain confession and punishment as "...making oneself suffer for one's own sins. It involves an open confession of an individual's transgressions against the Order..." (p. 6). Furthermore, "The need for forgiveness and the restoration of order reflects an awareness of transgression or wrongdoing" (Messner & Buckrop, p. 314). Therefore, the elimination of guilt through confession demonstrates one is aware he or she has sinned (Moore, 2006).

After confession, the next step within mortification is punishment (Brummett; Moore, 2006; Messner & Buckrop, 2000; Scheibel et al., 2002). Through mortification, one is punished through external sources or through self-inflicted punishment (Messner & Buckrop). Redemption is achieved through punishment as punishment causes one to suffer (Messner & Buckrop). In a study concentrating on sorority recruitment Scheibel et al. found that mortification can often be found in the form of self-restraint or self-control,

such as refraining from making certain comments or refraining from exhibiting certain behaviors in order to adhere to social norms and burdens. Alternatively, when mortification is not used, yet one desires to purge their guilt, scapegoating may be used.

Guilt Redemption Cycle: Scapegoating

Scapegoating is utilized “If the guilt as it exists within ourselves is not punished...a representative of the guilt must be found in the external world and punished” (Brummett, 1980, p. 66). Therefore, scapegoating “...requires the guilty to find and punish some person or object which represents their own guilt” (Brummett, 1981, p. 246). Moore explains that scapegoating works as “...one relieves guilt by placing it on someone or something else” (p. 314). Through scapegoating, guilt is transferred from one individual to another individual (Messner & Buckrop, 2000; Burke, 1976).

Scapegoating occurs when a guilty individual claims that they are polluted because of the behavior of someone else and they desire to blame their behavior on someone or something else (Olsen & Morgan, 2010; Messner & Buckrop, 2000). According to Burke (1976), “...the alienation of inequities from the self to the scapegoat amounts to a *rebirth* of the self” (p. 407). Thus, through scapegoating one becomes cleansed from their guilt as another assumes the full burden of guilt. Individuals choose scapegoating because they are “...motivated by guilt that makes a people see their own evil in others and unable or unwilling to see it in themselves” (Ivie, 2007, p. 225). Furthermore, individuals use scapegoating as humans tend to act in their own interest and scapegoating removes blame for responsibility for behavior that disrupted the hierarchy (Ivie, 2007; Wess, 1996). The process of scapegoating is appealing as it not only relieves

individuals of their guilt, it strengthens their own sense of power in the hierarchy (Messner & Buckrop).

The scapegoat is used as a substitute for the guilty individual (Burke, 1976). According to Garlitz (2004) the scapegoat is the "...representative of certain burdens delegated to it" (p. 27). Another person or object is punished for the guilt, not because the other person or object is guilty, but because the person or object *represents* the actions of the guilty person (Brummett, Roy, 2004). The scapegoat represents more than the guilty individual and their sinful act, it represents all that is wicked or wrong in the world (Burke, 1962; Ivie, 2007).

When guilt is placed on someone else "...the sacrificial victim in scapegoating is a symbol of chaos and disorder. Thus, it needs to be eliminated to bring about order and harmony in the community" (Roy, 2004, p. 328). The scapegoat removes guilt from the hierarchy because the guilty "...ritualistically cleanse themselves by loading the burden of their own iniquities upon it" (Burke, 1962, p. 406). Carter (1996) explains that the scapegoat removes guilt from the hierarchy in the following process:

At one moment the chosen victim is *a part of* the clan, being one of their number; a moment later it symbolizes something *apart* from them, being the curse they wish to lift from themselves. By operation of dialectical change they first identify with their victim; then they deny the connection altogether....it represents those infectious evils from which the group wants to be released.... The group's sense of guilt is relieved. (p. 18)

Therefore, scapegoating is redemptive as redemption occurs through disassociation from the scapegoat (Roy, 2004; Schultz, 2011; Burke 1962). According to Roy (2004) scapegoating is "...primarily concerned with the purging of communal guilt to maintain order..." (p. 328). Therefore, the alienation of the scapegoat removes guilt from the hierarchy and reestablishes order. Burke (1971) contends that scapegoating restores the

hierarchical order since alliances form against the common enemy identified as the scapegoat, and such alliances remove mystery between individuals by creating commonalities between individuals (i.e. a common enemy).

Scapegoating often utilizes symbolic language to instigate group cohesion against the scapegoat using language that constructs the scapegoat as the source of fear, evil, sin and guilt (Ivie, 2007). Ivie suggests that the guilty individual constructs the scapegoat as evil and wrong by using symbolic language to paint a sinister and fearful image of the scapegoat. Therefore, the more evil the scapegoat becomes with the use of language, the more severe the punishment the scapegoat endures.

Scheibel (1999) provides an example of scapegoating on college campuses by suggesting that the death of one's roommate causes one to suffer, which in turn negatively impacts their grades; however, one can utilize the death of their roommate as the scapegoat to alleviate the guilt of earning bad grades, and achieve redemption of their grades by receiving a 4.0. Scheibel et al. (2002) demonstrates that scapegoating is also utilized in sorority recruitment on college campuses, since the source of guilt in sorority recruitment is the process of accepting and rejecting new sorority members. According to Scheibel et al. scapegoating is used by sororities to alleviate the guilt of judging potential sorority members, by deeming potential sorority members (the scapegoat) as unworthy or detrimental to the sorority, thus redeeming such judgment. In another study, Ivie (2007) used post 9-11 presidential speeches from former president George W. Bush to demonstrate how Bush used rhetoric to construct Muslims as the scapegoat, in order to absolve the U.S. government from any guilt surrounding the 9-11 attacks and demonstrate that "...any and all means were justified by holy ends in what amounted to a

redemptive war on Islamic terrorism” (p. 223). The academic literature on scapegoating suggests that scapegoating is an increasingly popular method of guilt alleviation in contemporary U.S. culture (Scheibel, Ivie), thus I will examine if *Desperate Housewives* upholds this hypothesis.

Guilt Redemption Cycle: Scapegoating with Mortification

Sometimes scapegoating can be combined with mortification when an individual accepts responsibility for their sins through confession; however the individual uses the confession to blame others for their sins (Moore, 2006; Scheibel et al., 2002). Moore explains that this type of purification is: “...a form of self-sacrifice for the sake of forgiveness and redemption for the mortified and restoration of order for society, but it is also part of a process for purging guilt that combines and interacts with that of scapegoating...” (p. 314). For example, one may admit that they are an alcoholic and accept treatment for alcoholism (mortification), however one may simultaneously blame others for causes of their alcoholism (scapegoating).

Guilt Redemption Cycle: Transcendence

Whereas mortification and scapegoating allow one to *alleviate* their guilt, transcendence avoids guilt altogether (Brummett, 1981; Messner & Buckrop, 2000; Scheibel et al., 2002; Burke, 1962; Burke, 1970). Burke (1962) explains that transcendence is a process of transformation, in which “...the position at the end transcends the position at the start...” (p. 422) by abandoning the guilt. According to Brummett (1981) “...one may avoid guilt by engaging in transcendence. This avoidance of guilt puts the sin into a perspective which redefines it as ‘not-a-sin,’ as a virtue or as

the requirement of some higher and nobler hierarchy” (p. 256). In transcendence, guilt is framed and redefined as something that is not a sin (Scheibel et al., 2002).

Transcendence is different from scapegoating and mortification as transcendence does not provide redemption for the guilty, transcendence “...denies that redemption is needed” (Messner & Buckrop, 2000, p. 6). Furthermore, transcendence differs from mortification and scapegoating because transcendence occurs when one completely avoids guilt (Brummett, 1984). Transcendence is a method of purification because “...transcendence is clearly a means of responding to an accusation of guilt because it enables one to avoid the assignment of guilt” (Messner & Buckrop, p. 6). Wess (1996) states that transcendence is best understood as a shift in perspective and a change of attitude about a particular scenario.

Burke (1962) claims that transcendence can be a symbolic action of language “...concealed by the terminology of the surface” (p. 556). Wess (1996) explains that transcendence is a rhetorical tool since one can utilize symbolic language to change their perspectives of particular behavior. Thus, transcendence occurs when one uses language to make the initial situation appear differently (Burke, 1970). One abandons language associated with guilt, and replaces this vocabulary with new language, that places one into a higher position enhancing one’s standing to be higher than guilt and closer to perfection (Burke, 1970). Brummett (1982) further explains that language is a primary component of transcendence:

An important resource of language is the strategy of transcendence.... [transcendence] takes place when one redefines some action as part of a new, higher context.... Thus people may have several ways of naming what has happened to them, with each one transcending the usage before it. The renaming of unacceptable experiences transcends contexts in which they seem undesirable and redefines them as something more acceptable.... Transcendence is a way of redefining our own 'crimes'.... (p. 549)

When transcendence is used to construct a situation as one without guilt, redemption is achieved through guilt avoidance (Burke, 1970).

Dramatism and *Desperate Housewives*

Olsen and Morgan (2010) argue that *Desperate Housewives* follows Burke's pattern of guilt- purification- redemption because one of the central themes on *Desperate Housewives* is guilt. Examples of issues causing guilt include manslaughter, adultery, sexual deviance and deception (Olsen & Morgan). "The plots of *Desperate Housewives* address pollutions central to the human condition, including loneliness, competition with others, fears of characters getting to know one another too well or not at all, and the search by some characters to be rescued" (Olsen & Morgan, p. 335). Olsen and Morgan explain that:

An intriguing characteristic of *Desperate Housewives* is that not everything turns out right, nor does everything turn out wrong. Some efforts to...become a better person do not work. Yet, as in real life, there are occasions where efforts do lead to moments of redemption and transcendence. Part of what makes *Desperate Housewives* redemptive is the actions it suggests one take in response to pollution. Not every character takes them, and no one takes them all the time....The characters are... "fallen," and this is part of their richness. (p. 336-337)

According to Olsen and Morgan, *Desperate Housewives* is a form of redemptive media as it "...consistently disapproves of manipulative strategies when addressing pollution in relationships. Beneath the character flaws and titillating plotlines is the steady promotion of honesty over manipulation as the primary strategy for exorcising relational pollution."

(p. 339). Thus, my analysis will use their study as a foundation to comprehensively evaluate how the show is a type of redemptive media through the use of purification.

Although Burke's guilt-redemption-purification cycle has been utilized to study *Desperate Housewives*, further research is needed to determine how the main characters address guilt across an entire storyline in order to understand and compare how the characters work through the process of guilt redemption. For instance, Olsen and Morgan (2010) contend that "...examples of pollution, its suggested strategies for purification, and proposed states of redemption are consistent with the mainstream and even conservative values" (p. 334). Therefore, my study will examine how methods of purification are either consistent or inconsistent with conservative values. My study will also make comparisons with Olsen and Morgan's findings and compare the characters' methods of purification.

Burke's guilt- purification- redemption cycle has been applied to an array of issues involving social, political and economic conflicts, particularly within public speeches; however, further research is needed to explore dramatism in different areas such as television to discover how guilt is addressed within a fictional context. Thus, I will apply dramatism to *Desperate Housewives* to examine the different methods of guilt purification used by the characters and the implications this has on the show's messages and values.

Applying Dramatism to *Desperate Housewives*

Using a Burkeian analysis I plan to identify and analyze the methods of guilt purification used by the four main characters on the show: Susan Delfino, Lynette Scavo, Bree Van de Kamp and Gabrielle Solis. In order to do this, I will analyze how the

characters address guilt across an entire story-arc involving all four characters. My analysis will cover the story-arc from season 7 episode 23 through season 8 episode 12. The first step of my analysis will demonstrate that *Desperate Housewives* is an appropriate artifact to use in conjunction with dramatism. In the next step of my analysis I will describe the show to establish a clear understanding of origins of guilt for each character as well as identify examples of each character's guilt. Next, each character will be categorized based on the method of guilt purification they use and the outcomes of their selected method. This evaluation will seek to explore how methods of guilt purification communicate particular messages and values.

Analysis

This analysis establishes how *Desperate Housewives* exemplifies the Burkeian process through patterns of guilt, purification and redemption. Although the literature surrounding the show demonstrated that guilt is a prominent theme on the show, I hope to uncover specifically how guilt is alleviated and the significance of guilt purification on the show. The first part of the analysis will examine the prevalence of guilt and redemption on the show to demonstrate that dramatism is an appropriate method to use when analyzing *Desperate Housewives*. In the second part of the analysis I will describe the act central to the analysis, identify examples of guilt and classify the methods of guilt redemption. Before analyzing the show, I will provide a summary of the show and the main characters.

Summary of *Desperate Housewives*

“*Desperate Housewives* is a primetime soap opera that debuted in September, 2004 to unbelievably strong ratings” (Morgan, 2007, p. 114). The show is a combination of comedy, mystery and drama that follows the day-to-day lives of a group of four women, all who live in upper-middle class suburbia on Wisteria Lane (Vidoloff & Freitag, 2010; Hill, 2010; McCabe & Akass, 2006). The four main characters become drawn together by the mysterious suicide of their best friend and neighbor, Mary Alice, who is the show’s dead narrator. Each seasons brings with it new secrets and new challenges the housewives encounter.

Summary of Main Characters

The four main characters are Susan Mayer (known as Susan Delfino in later seasons), Lynette Scavo, Bree Van de Kamp and Gabrielle Solis. Susan is a divorcee and

a single mom who works from home as a children's book writer and illustrator. She is often depicted as emotional, lonely, clumsy and desperate for love (Busch, 2009; Morgan; McCabe & Akass). Lynette is a stay-at-home mother of five disobedient children, who is constantly stressed as her husband is not home often to help with the children and housework (Vidoloff & Freitag; Morgan). She left a high-powered career in advertising to stay at home with her children; however she regrets her decision and resents her husband who pressured her to do so (Vidoloff & Freitag; Morgan; McCabe & Akass). Bree is also a housewife and is often compared to Martha Stewart for her perfectly landscaped lawn, spotless home, baked goods and gourmet dinner parties (Morgan; McCabe & Akass). She has two children and is viewed as the most traditional, conservative and old-fashioned housewife who constantly strives for perfection (Vidoloff & Freitag; Olsen & Morgan; Morgan; McCabe & Akass). Gabrielle (often called Gabby) is a former model, who is thin, gorgeous, self-centered and self-indulgent (Vidoloff & Freitag; Busch; Morgan; McCabe & Akass). She married her husband for money and they are the wealthiest couple on Wisteria Lane (Morgan; McCabe & Akass).

Desperate Housewives: An Appropriate Text for Dramatism

Before applying the guilt-redemption-cycle to the show, I am going to demonstrate that dramatism is an appropriate method for studying *Desperate Housewives* because of the prevalence of illegal and immoral behavior on the show that causes characters to feel guilty. This part of the analysis will examine the episode "Guilty" as this episode focuses on how the characters utilize guilt purification. After summarizing the episode, I will identify examples of each character's guilt then analyze how they alleviate or avoid their guilt.

Episode Summary of “Guilty” (Season 1 Episode 8)

Prior to this episode Gabrielle is having an affair with her teenage gardener, John Rowland; however her mother-in-law, Juanita “Mama” Solis, catches her. After catching Gabrielle, Juanita runs out into the street with a camera containing pictures of the affair; it is then that Bree’s son, Andrew, accidentally hits Gabrielle’s mother-in-law while he is speeding down the lane. Lynette starts taking her son’s ADD medication in order to keep up with the housework and the children. Susan begins dating her new neighbor Mike Delfino and spies on him as she finds him mysterious.

Gabrielle Solis: Guilt Alleviation

Although Gabrielle is partially responsible for Juanita’s accident, she does not feel guilty as she uses scapegoating to blame Juanita for the events leading up to the accident. She further justifies her position by pointing out that she did not drive the car that hit Juanita, blaming the driver of the car (whom she does not realize is Andrew Van de Kamp). In addition, Gabrielle blames Carlos for the affair because he drove her to have an affair by making her unhappy. However, Gabrielle is only alleviated of guilt temporarily as she begins to feel guilty towards the end of the episode. The ineffectiveness of scapegoating highlights the ramifications that occur when one does not take responsibility for their own behavior.

John Rowland: Guilt Alleviation

John feels *very* guilty as he believes Gabrielle and he caused Juanita’s accident so he uses mortification to alleviate his guilt, as he believes “...she wouldn’t have been there if we weren’t having an affair.” John confesses about the affair and the accident to his priest, Father Crowley, who recommends that John end the affair, and he does.

Ending the affair represents the authenticity of John's confession, as John genuinely believes the affair is wrong. Although John confesses to his priest, mortification tells us that one must confess to all one has wronged, which would entail confessing to Carlos. On the surface, it appears that John has done the right thing by using mortification, yet his use of mortification is incomplete. Nonetheless, John's use of mortification depicts the challenges that accompany mortification.

Gabrielle Solis and John Rowland: Comparisons in Guilt Alleviation

John and Gabrielle's guilt alleviation methods provide an interesting comparison as they use conflicting methods; whereas John takes responsibility for his behavior, Gabrielle does not. This demonstrates how the same act can be redeemed through different methods of guilt purification. Yet, John is redeemed of his guilt through mortification, whereas Gabrielle is not. This suggests that mortification is the honorable method of guilt alleviation, as scapegoating is not only wrong, but ineffective. Therefore, *Desperate Housewives* teaches a moral lesson to viewers by depicting the consequences that occur when one blames others for their own mistakes.

Bree Van de Kamp: Examples of Guilt

Andrew accidentally hit Juanita because he was driving recklessly after drinking. Yet, after he hits Juanita, he speeds away to escape the scene of the crime. When Bree learns of this, she decides their family must abandon the car in an underprivileged neighborhood, so someone will steal it because if the police find the car it will appear that the car was not in the Van de Kamp's possession at the time of the crime. Bree decides this because if Juanita dies, Andrew will be guilty of murder, along with fleeing the scene of the crime, and drinking and driving.

Covering up Andrew's crime causes Bree to feel guilty, as demonstrated in Mary Alice's narration:

There is a widely read book that tells us everyone is a sinner. Of course, not everyone who reads this book feels guilt over the bad things they do. But Bree Van de Kamp did, in fact, Bree had spent most of her life feeling guilty....she knew the transgressions of her past were nothing compared with the sin she was about to commit....Bree knew what she was about to do was wrong, but like most sinners, she would worry about her guilt, tomorrow.

Mary Alice's narration clarifies that *before* Bree conceals Andrew's crime, she knows her decision is wrong. However, Bree does not believe she has a choice, as she feels obligated to protect her son. Her conflict between right and wrong works to highlight that the choices one makes are often complicated as one may feel obligated to do something they know is wrong, in order to protect someone they love; a prominent theme throughout the show that will be further discussed in the conclusion. Bree feels very guilty for concealing her son's crime, as she constantly inquires about Juanita Solis' condition and attempts to soothe her guilty conscience with small gestures such as baking for Gabrielle and Carlos and cleaning up after the accident.

Bree: Guilt Avoidance and Redemption

Bree uses transcendence to justify her decision and avoid her guilt as she claims, "Our son could spend the rest of his life in jail. I won't allow that." She justifies hiding the accident with protecting Andrew and through this means of justification Bree fulfills a higher purpose of love and protection that further reinforces her justification. Although Bree has several options with regard to Andrew's accident, from her perspective, protecting Andrew is the only viable option. Her use of transcendence is symbolic because it suggests that it is acceptable to do *anything* for one's child, as protecting one's child is the ultimate priority for a parent. Transcendence allows Bree to frame the

situation from a new perspective that highlights the sacrifice she made for her son, instead of the crime she committed in order to avoid the guilt associated with her decision.

Andrew Van de Kamp: Guilt Alleviation

Bree is worried that Andrew does not feel remorse for his accident, as demonstrated in the following exchange:

Bree: “Honey, you put a woman into a coma, surely that arouses some kind of emotion?”

Andrew: “Yeah, well, it doesn’t. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

Bree: “No I won’t! Not until you tell me!”

Andrew: “Why do you care?”

Bree: “Because I need to know that you are not a monster.”

Andrew: “Do you want to know how I feel?”

Bree: “Yeah.”

Andrew: “Okay, here it goes. I feel bad that she got hurt. But I also feel bad that my car got dinged because somebody didn’t have enough sense to look both ways before she crossed the street. And, I also feel bad that now I’m gonna havta ride my bike to school.”

Bree: “Andrew, you almost killed another human being!”

Andrew: “She’s an old lady! Okay? She’s lived her life. I have my whole life ahead of me and now it might be screwed up. That’s what you should be worried about.”

Bree: “What I’m worried about Andrew is that you don’t seem to have a soul. Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t call the police.”

Andrew: “Because I’m your son. That would make you the monster.”

Evidently, Andrew justifies his behavior through scapegoating by explaining that the accident is Juanita’s fault. His use of scapegoating demonstrates how wrong behavior can

be justified when one utilizes suitable validation that disregards the severity of one's behavior.

Bree: The Scapegoat

Although Bree uses transcendence to avoid her guilt, she becomes Andrew's scapegoat who bears the full burden of guilt, as Mary Alice explains, "...not everyone feels guilt over the bad things they do. In contrast, there are those who assume more than their share of the blame." Bree feels guilty for raising a son who is a 'monster' and she assumes the guilt Andrew should feel, which suggests that ultimately one will be punished for their behavior, regardless if one alleviates or avoids guilt. In Bree's case, she is punished for her behavior by becoming the scapegoat, burdened with guilt. Bree's story reflects Olsen and Morgan's (2010) findings that morals reside within *Desperate Housewives* as she is unable to avoid or alleviate guilt since she does not use mortification.

Lynette Scavo: Guilt Alleviation

Lynette's *need* for her son's ADD medication causes her to feel guilty so she utilizes a combination of mortification and scapegoating. For instance, during an appointment with her acupuncturist, she confesses that she took her son's ADD medication, admits that it was wrong, yet claims she did not have a choice in the matter as the medication allowed her to fulfill her role as a mother. Although her confession represents mortification, it also represents scapegoating since she blamed motherhood that created her need for the pills. In addition, Lynette confesses that she did not feel like she had a choice (similar to Bree), as she was forced to take the pills to keep up with the kids and the house. Lynette's use of scapegoating with mortification is unique in that she

is honest while simultaneously justifying her decision. This combination of guilt alleviation elucidates that scapegoating sometimes accompanies mortification as it is challenging for one to admit that they were wrong.

She uses mortification again in the episode as outlined in the following dialogue:

Lynette: “And I started taking the pills because they gave me energy and then I couldn’t sleep at night. And I was getting so tired in the daytime. And then, it totally messed me up. I love my kids so much. I am so sorry they have me as a mother.”

Bree: “Lynette, you are a great mother.”

Lynette: “No I’m not. I can’t do it. I am so tired of feeling like a failure. It’s so humiliating.”

Susan: “No it’s not. So you got addicted to your kid’s ADD medication, it happens.”

Bree: “You have four kids. That’s a lot of stress, you just need some help.”

Lynette: “That is what is so humiliating. Other moms don’t need help. Other moms make it look so easy. All I do is complain.”

Susan: “That’s just not true. When Julie was a baby I was out of my mind almost everyday.”

Bree: “I used to get so upset when Andrew and Danielle were little. I would use their nap times to cry.”

Lynette (sobbing): “Why didn’t you ever tell me this?”

Bree: “Nobody likes to admit that they can’t handle the pressure.”

Susan: “I think it’s just that we think, you know, it’s easier to keep it all in.”

Lynette: “Oh we shouldn’t. We should tell each other this stuff.”

Susan: “It helps, huh?”

Lynette: “Yeah, it really does.” (sobbing)

Through this confession, Lynette is alleviated of guilt, which reinforces the notion that mortification is an effective method of purification. Her confession highlights one of the challenges of mortification as it was difficult for Lynette to admit that she needs help with raising her children, as she does not *want* to need help. She is rewarded for being honest as her confession allows her to discover the solution to her problem as Mary Alice explains, "...there are the ones who simply vow to do better next time and pray for forgiveness." Thus, Lynette is alleviated of guilt because of her confession; desire to seek forgiveness, decision to stop taking the medication and willingness to get help with her children. Through mortification, Lynette is able to change and become a better person.

Susan Mayer (AKA Susan Delfino): Guilt Alleviation

During a visit with Mike, Susan discovers a gun and a large stack of cash in his cupboard so she offers to let the maintenance man in the next day while he is gone, in order to snoop around his house. While Mike is gone, Susan goes through his house; however, Mike catches her, so she uses a combination of mortification and scapegoating, similar to Lynette. For instance, she apologizes to Mike, yet she explains that she was snooping through his house because he is mysterious and she was trying to protect herself in their relationship. Her confession is an example of mortification as she confesses in order to seek forgiveness; yet, it is also an example of scapegoating as she blames her behavior on Mike. Her confession parallels Lynette's in that they each utilize mortification in combination with scapegoating. Their use of mortification is accompanied with positive results, which further highlights how mortification is admirable. However, this combination also implies that although one is willing to be honest they are unwilling to accept punishment for their behavior by justifying their

actions with external factors. Thus, one is able to appear that they are utilizing mortification through honesty, which enhances the validity of their confession, yet they are simultaneously able to reap the face-saving benefits of scapegoating.

Paul Young and Martha Huber: Guilt Alleviation

Paul Young learns that his neighbor, Martha Huber, was responsible for writing a note that caused Mary Alice, his late wife, to commit suicide. Martha justifies the note by claiming that she needed the money after her husband passed away as he did not leave her any money. Therefore, she was trying to blackmail Mary Alice to pay her off for keeping Mary Alice's secret. In this example, Mary Alice is Martha's scapegoat as Martha claims her intention was not for Mary Alice to commit suicide. However, Paul strangles Martha to death as Mary Alice narrates that some people convince themselves that their sins are justified, just as Martha did. Although Martha utilized scapegoating, Paul still found her guilty, which demonstrates how one's method of guilt alleviation may be unacceptable to others.

Paul Young: Guilt Alleviation and Avoidance

Paul also uses scapegoating because he believes his decision to murder Martha is justified as he attains vengeance for Mary Alice by casting Martha as the scapegoat. However, it is possible that Paul may view his behavior as transcendence as he fulfilled a higher purpose of love for Mary Alice. In addition, Paul also did not feel that he had a choice to kill Martha, as he believed he was obligated to do so in order to get revenge. Although Paul did not perceive his decision as a choice, he is ultimately convicted for Martha's murder. Thus, *Desperate Housewives* demonstrates that one will ultimately be punished for their sins, which is consistent with Olsen and Morgan's study.

Guilt, Purification and Redemption on *Desperate Housewives*

Guilt purification is a prominent theme on *Desperate Housewives* as exhibited through the characters' use of mortification, scapegoating and transcendence. Each story of guilt redemption teaches a moral lesson through subtle reminders by the characters and the narrator about the consequences of one's actions. Although the show does not provide new insight, it uses complex examples to teach simple, moral lessons to viewers.

This preliminary analysis has revealed two important findings. First, the messages conveyed by the characters' use of guilt purification are consistent with the findings from Olsen and Morgan's study, in that the characters are ultimately punished for their behavior. Thus, the show contains conservative values by depicting behavioral consequences and highlighting the benefits of mortification. Next, this analysis demonstrated that often the characters use a combination of guilt purification methods in order to achieve redemption. These concepts will be further explored in the next section of the analysis as well as the conclusion.

Analysis: Story Arc Summaries

This part of the analysis will examine the main story arc I have selected to analyze which covers 13 episodes, beginning in season 7 episode 23 and continuing through season 8 episode 12. Within this story, the four main characters participate in the same act with one another that causes each of them to feel guilty. First I will describe the beginning of the story arc and the events that cause the characters to feel guilty that start in "Come on Over for Dinner" (season 7 episode 23) and continue through "Secrets That I Never Want to Know" (season 8 episode 1). After describing the act in these episodes the analysis will examine examples of each character's guilt and how each character

alleviates or avoids their guilt. Examples of guilt and guilt purification for each character will be discussed, however some character discussions will be more comprehensive than others as some characters exhibit more guilt than others. This story arc was selected, as it is the only story in the series in which all four main characters feel guilty for the same act. Therefore this story provides a foundation for comparing the characters address guilt for the *same* behavior, as opposed to comparing different methods of purification used for different acts, as Olsen and Morgan did in their study. Furthermore, this story arc is consistent with the predominant themes on the show such as secrecy, crime and guilt, as well as other themes such as protection that I will discuss throughout this analysis and the conclusion.

Summary of “Come on Over for Dinner” (Season 7 Episode 23)

This summary of “Come on Over for Dinner” will explain a background of events leading up to this episode as well as the main story in this episode. Bree, Lynette and Gabrielle decide to throw a dinner party for Susan and her family, who recently moved back onto Wisteria Lane, so most of the episode covers this dinner party, in which each dinner course is served at a different house. Another aspect of this episode involves Bree, Andrew, Carlos and Gabrielle. Recall that Bree’s son Andrew hit Carlos’s mother with his car, which ended up killing her. Throughout the series Bree and Andrew have continued to hide the truth behind this accident; however, Carlos recently learns that Andrew killed his mother. Gabrielle discovers that her sexually abusive stepfather, Alejandro, whom she thought was dead, has been stalking her. She takes shooting lessons and purchases a gun for protection in order to confront Alejandro. At the end of the

episode when she goes home to prepare the dessert for the dinner party, Alejandro appears as he was hiding in her home:

Alejandro: “Hola Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle: “What are you doing here?” (looking terrified and screaming)

Alejandro: “I know you told me not to come back, but I’m bettin’ you won’t be so tough without your gun” (while he pats his coat pocket, alluding that he took Gabrielle’s gun)

Gabrielle: “I told you to leave!”

Alejandro: “And I did. I drove 15 miles out of town, but I just couldn’t stop thinking about all those things you said, you made me sound like a *monster*.”

Gabrielle: “I only said what was true.”

Alejandro: “You sure? Cuz when you say that thing ‘bout being a virgin, I almost had to laugh.”

Gabrielle: “What?” (looking confused)

Alejandro: “Comon’ Gabby, those short skirts you wore, those halter tops. You were a little slut.” (approaching Gabrielle and briefly touching her chest as she backs away)

Gabrielle: “You sick bastard!”

Alejandro: “No, no, no, no, no. You did all the talkin’ before, now it’s my turn. Sit down!” (grabbing Gabrielle and throwing her on a storage chest as Gabrielle screams)

Gabrielle: “Stay away from me.”

Alejandro: “Remember those nights in your room baby.

Gabrielle: “NO! STOP!” (crying and struggling to get away from Alejandro)

Alejandro: “As for me putting my hand over your mouth, that was so your mother wouldn’t hear, how much you were *enjoying* it.”

As Carlos arrives home, he hits Alejandro over the head with a candlestick, which knocks him to the floor, killing him soon before Gabrielle’s friends arrive:

Gabrielle: “Let’s call the police before he wakes up.” (as Carlos checks for a pulse)

Carlos: “Oh God.”

Gabrielle: “What?” (crying)

Carlos: “There’s no pulse. (pause) He’s dead. I killed him.”

Gabrielle: “That was self-defense. I mean, he had my gun.”

Carlos: “Your gun? I put that in the safe.”

Gabrielle: “No! No, I mean he had it, he had it. Right here, it was, it was here.” (searching Alejandro’s coat pocket for her gun)

Carlos: “I just killed an unarmed man.” (as Bree, Susan and Lynette walk into their house unannounced)

Lynette: “What happened?” (as Bree, Susan and Lynette look at Gabrielle and Carlos in disbelief upon seeing a body on the floor)

Bree: “Who is that?” (as Bree, Susan and Lynette approach the body)

Gabrielle: “My stepfather.”

Lynette: “The one who…” (Gabrielle nods, alluding to the man who sexually abused her as a teenager)

Susan: “Is he dead?”

Carlos: “Yeah. I killed him.” (Bree, Susan and Lynette look horrified)

Gabrielle: “This is bad, this is really bad.”

Bree: “The man was in your house and you had every reason to be scared after what he did to you.”

Gabrielle: “No. I never reported him. No one knows. They’re only going to know he was here and he was unarmed and Carlos killed him. And now he’s going to go to jail because he was trying to protect me.” (crying)

Lynette: “Calm down. We just need time to think”

Susan: “We don’t have time. Everybody’s coming.” (looking outside the window to see that the guests from the dinner party are walking over for dessert)

Lynette: “Including your boyfriend, the detective.” (speaking to Bree)

Carlos: “I killed the son-of-a-bitch who hurt my wife, if I have to go to prison I will.”

Bree: “That’s not gonna happen.” (with a stern, determined look on her face)

To hide the body from the neighbors, Bree suggests the women hide the body in a storage chest in the living room.

Summary of “Secrets That I Never Want to Know” (Season 8 Episode 1)

After their guests leave, the women and Carlos drive Alejandro’s body out to the woods to bury him. After Carlos leaves to move the car, Bree begins shoveling dirt over Alejandro:

Susan: “Is this happening?” (with hesitation)

Lynette: “Are we really *doing* this??” (hysterical)

Bree: “Everyone stay focused. The hardest part is over, now all we have to do is fill this in.” (Bree initiates shoveling dirt into the grave)

As Bree shovels dirt into the grave, Alejandro’s cell phone rings.

Susan: “Oh my God.”

Gabrielle: “I thought I got everything.” (panicked)

Susan: “No! No, you missed the phone. And if you missed that, what else did you miss?”

Bree: “Susan it’s gonna be okay.”

Susan: “*How* is it going to be okay? Someone is calling the dead guy!”

Gabrielle then removes the phone from the grave and reads where the call is coming from.

Gabrielle: “Home...”

Susan: “See! He has a home! With people who care about him! People who are going to come looking for him, leading them straight to us.”

Bree: “What do you want us to do?”

Susan: “It’s not too late. We could still go to the police.”

Gabrielle: “And send my husband back to prison? This time for murder!”

Lynette: “No, not necessarily. It was self-defense, he broke into your house, he threatened you, we could explain that.”

Gabrielle: “Yeah, and we could explain how we dumped him in a trunk, ate some cheesecake and buried him in the woods!”

Susan: “We are going to get caught. People always get caught! We *can’t* do this! We’re not criminals. We drive carpool!”

Bree: “That’s enough. This is a very bad man, he attacked our friend and her husband protected her, and now we are going to protect them. That means we tell no one. Not the police. Not our families. No one. When we bury the body, we bury the secret. Forever.”

They agree to keep Alejandro’s death a secret, although Lynette and Susan are reluctant to do so.

Susan: Character Analysis

Susan is a stay-at-home mom while her eldest daughter, Julie, is off at college. By the eighth season she is married to Mike Delfino and they have a son together, M.J. who is in elementary school. Although she is a children’s book author and illustrator, she rarely works. She is often depicted as weak and vulnerable. Since Susan, Lynette, Gabrielle and Bree have been close friends for several years, she feels obligated to help Gabrielle.

Susan: Guilt in “Secrets That I Never Want To Know” (Season 8 Episode 1)

Susan exhibits significantly more guilt, guilt alleviation and guilt avoidance than the other characters so this part of the analysis that focuses on her will be more extensive

relative to the analysis of other characters. When the women are burying Alejandro, Susan immediately begins to feel guilty. As Burke (1962) explains, collective guilt results from the actions of a group to which one belongs, which Susan experiences. For instance, Susan attempts to persuade her friends to report the incident to the police, yet they convince her otherwise. When she realizes that Alejandro has a family, this augments her guilt, as she is worried about the pain his death will inflict on them. For instance, while substitute teaching the class hamster dies and Susan must bury the hamster, which to Susan represents Alejandro's burial:

Susan: "It's funny the way life works out sometimes isn't it? I wasn't even supposed to be here today. Once again in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now I have to carry this around with me for the rest of my life." (crying)

Juanita Solis Jr. (Gabrielle's daughter): "Don't be sad, Mrs. Delfino. Cupcake was kind of a bad hamster. She had three babies and ate them."

Susan: "But does that mean she *deserved* to die? We don't get to make that call, Juanita. We're not God. (pause) What have I done?" (crying)

Juanita Solis Jr. "It's not your fault."

Susan: "I know it's not my fault but try telling that to Cupcake's family when they *show up* looking for her. There we're done. Not let's all slap on a happy face and pretend like this never happened."

Susan's conversation is reflective of her opinions regarding Alejandro's death as she feels the full burden of guilt for her and each of her friends. Although Susan believes that Alejandro deserved to die, she also believes that she is not in a position to determine so. As exhibited from the former dialog, Susan is overwhelmed with guilt as she has been unable to sleep, eat or do much of anything else. In addition, keeping this secret from her husband augments her guilt. The next part of the analysis will look at Susan's attempt to alleviate her guilt.

Susan: Guilt Alleviation in “Secrets That I Never Want To Know” (Season 8 Episode 1)

Since Susan feels very guilty, she attempts to alleviate her guilt several times throughout this story. First, Susan uses scapegoating as she blames Bree for getting her involved with covering up Alejandro’s death. Despite Susan’s hesitation, Bree demanded that all the women help cover up Alejandro’s death, so Susan felt that she did not have a choice because of the pressure from Bree. Thus, Bree becomes the scapegoat as Bree compelled Susan to get involved and refused to consider that Susan was reluctant to do so. Although Susan uses scapegoating, she is unsuccessful at alleviating her guilt, which is demonstrated in the subsequent sections.

Susan: Guilt in “Making The Connection” (Season 8 Episode 2)

When Susan intentionally gets arrested for damaging a police motorcycle, she calls Carlos to pick her up from jail, as she cannot tell Mike the reason for her strange behavior. During a conversation between the two, she discusses the severity of her guilt:

Susan: “I’ve been in this weird place lately. I keep doing things, hoping to get caught.”

Carlos: “Does it help?”

Susan: “For five minutes, and then I just feel guilty again. I just don’t know how to pull myself out of this.”

Carlos: “I get it. Gabby keeps pushing me to act like everything’s normal. I guess were just supposed to stuff everything down and move on.”

Susan: “But that’s impossible. The girls are playing poker and acting like things are fine and they’re *not*.” (crying)

Regardless of what Susan does, she is unable to alleviate her guilt, which I will continue to look at in this analysis.

Susan: Guilt Alleviation in “Making The Connection” (Season 8 Episode 2)

In another attempt at guilt alleviation, Susan uses mortification to alleviate her guilt, which Burke (1962) explains can be symbolic as well as self-inflicted. For instance, when she is caught for accidentally taking soda from the grocery store without paying for it she attempts to symbolically absolve her guilt:

Store Security Guard #1: “You are a criminal.”

Store Security Guard #2: “I’ve known Mrs. Delfino for years. She pays for the grapes she eats in the produce section. She would never do anything bad.”

Susan: “Sure I would.”

Store Security Guard #2: “What?”

Susan: “You don’t know me at all. I’m a very bad person I did a horrible thing. I deserve to be punished.”

Store Security Guard #2: “Just pay for the soda next time you come in.”

Susan: “No, no, no! You need to march me inside and make me pay NOW!”

Store Security Guard #2: “Mrs. Delfino.”

Susan: “I’m serious. Make an example of me to deter other criminals.” (putting on handcuffs herself)

Store Security Guard #2: “Fine! Take her in.” (to Store Security Office #1)

Susan: “Yup, did the crime. Doin’ the time.” (smiling with delight as the officer takes her inside the store)

Later in the episode, Susan describes the incident at the grocery store to her friends:

This kind of guilt really messes with your head....The other day I accidentally took a case of soda from the supermarket and the security guard started yelling at me. At first I was like no, but then I was like yes! I deserve it, I deserve to be punished. It felt right to be publically humiliated like that.

Despite Susan’s numerous attempts towards self-inflicted, symbolic punishment, she is never actually punished until she kicks a policeman’s motorcycle over. She is delighted

to get arrested, as her time in jail is symbolic of the punishments she thinks she deserves. Her self-inflicted, symbolic punishment reflects her desire to both confess and be punished for covering up Alejandro's murder. Since she recognizes that she cannot fully achieve mortification without jeopardizing her friends, she punishes herself instead as a symbolic gesture towards redemption. Although she utilizes mortification, she is not alleviated of guilt, as she does not believe her punishment was appropriate.

Susan: Guilt Redemption in “Watch While I Revise The World” (Season 8 Episode 3)

Susan not only feels guilty about covering up Alejandro's murder, she also feels guilty about keeping his death a secret from Mike, so she confesses to him. Her confession represents mortification since confessing jeopardizes their relationship, as Mary Alice explains, “For some the art of concealment comes at too great a cost. And so they find themselves forced to reveal the truth, even at the risk of facing an uncertain future.” Yet Mike forgives Susan and admits he understands her decision. Although her guilt for hiding Alejandro's death is not alleviated, her guilt for keeping it a secret from Mike is.

Susan: Guilt in “What's To Discuss Old Friend” (Season 8 Episode 10)

When Susan is able to identify the specific source of her guilt, she is able to work towards alleviating that guilt:

Mike: “Man up! Dump the guilt! Let's get on with our lives!”

Susan: “I know you're right. It makes no sense for me to be depressed. And I know Alejandro was a bad guy.”

Mike: “And he deserved to die.”

Susan: “He did, he absolutely did.”

Susan: “I’m going to Oklahoma....You asked me why I still feel so guilty. I finally figured it out. He got a phone call.”

Mike: “Who got a phone call?”

Susan: “Alejandro. When we were putting his body into the ground his phone rang. Do you know what that means....It means he has a family and they have no idea where he is. It must be tearing them apart. He did something horrible, not them. They shouldn’t have to suffer too.

Mike: “What exactly are you gonna do about it?”

Susan: “...I havta see if they’re okay. I think it’s the only way I’m ever getting back to normal.”

She then leaves for Oklahoma City to check on Alejandro’s family, with hopes of alleviating her guilt.

Susan: Guilt Redemption “Who Can Say What’s True?” (Season 8 Episode 11)

After arriving in Oklahoma City, Susan learns that Alejandro’s family is putting their house up for sale, so she poses as a potential buyer to get inside their home. She learns that his family is struggling financially, so she pretends to be a collector of antiques after seeing Leggos sprawled around the house and offers Mrs. Sanchez (Alejandro’s wife) \$1,000 for the Leggos:

Susan: “...I want to do something to help, you know, because of your situation.”

Mrs. Sanchez: “Look whatever my realtor said you don’t gotta feel sorry for me. I know my husband will come back.”

Susan: “But, on the off chance that he doesn’t, please take my check.”

Mrs. Sanchez: “Okay. Thank you. But stop giving me the sad eyes, Ramone [Alejandro] does this sorta thing all the time. He goes on a little bender then comes home. But mostly he’s a good husband and a loving father.”

By helping Alejandro’s family with their finances, Susan believes this will make amends for his disappearance.

Although she helped them financially, Susan got the idea from Mrs. Sanchez's daughter, Marissa, that she was not anticipating Alejandro's return, so Susan visits their house again later that evening to check on Marissa:

Susan: "...I wanted to talk to you alone, if that's okay?"

Marissa: "Why?"

Susan: "I uh, I wanna ask you about your dad."

Marissa: "Step-dad!" (snapping back)

Susan: "Step-dad, right. Um, he wasn't a very good man was he? When your mom mentioned him I noticed the look on your face and I had this feeling that maybe there was a problem between you two."

Marissa: "I don't wanna talk about this."

Susan: "It's okay. I know him, a little bit, enough to know the kind of person he is, you can tell me, did he ever hurt you?"

Marissa: "Why?" (crying)

Susan: "I know that you just met me and this must seem *very* strange, but I came here because I know what he did, and even though I can't take away the pain, I can promise you one thing, your step-father will *never* hurt you again."

Marissa: "How can you know that?"

Susan: "I just know. He is never coming back. I promise."

When Susan realizes that Alejandro's death has prevented Marissa from enduring sexual abuse, she is able to achieve transcendence. By recognizing the good that resulted from his death, Susan is able to justify her role in his death. She is able to achieve transcendence by changing her perspective and focusing on the higher purpose of protection for both Marissa and Gabrielle she fulfilled. When Susan focuses on protecting Marissa she is able to reject the notion that she should feel guilty, as she believes that the good that resulted from his death compensated for the bad from her behavior. Through

transcendence, she begins to work towards guilt redemption by framing Alejandro's death from a new perspective.

Susan: Guilt Redemption in “What’s The Good Of Being Good” (Season 8 Episode 12)

Susan is able to further justify Alejandro's death with transcendence because she encourages Marissa to tell her mother about the sexual abuse, as Marissa was afraid to tell her mother when Alejandro was around. Alejandro's death not only prevented Marissa from becoming a victim of further abuse, it allowed Marissa to be honest with her mother about it. In addition, Mrs. Sanchez is able to justify and accept Alejandro's death after learning what he did to Marissa. Witnessing Mrs. Sanchez and Marissa begin to heal allows Susan to validate her new perspective of Alejandro's death, in which she finally achieves guilt redemption through transcendence.

Lynette: Character Analysis

Lynette is the mother of five children, one infant, two children in elementary school and two older sons who have moved out of the house for college. Currently, she and her husband Tom, are having marital problems and they decided to separate as their constant fighting has escalated. She likes to be in control and is known for trying to control and manipulate others.

Lynette: Guilt Alleviation in “Secrets That I Never Want To Know” (Season 8 Episode 1)

Although both Susan and Lynette feel guilty while burying Alejandro, Lynette experiences guilt very differently than Susan as there are only a couple of examples of Lynette's guilt and it only takes her a few attempts to absolve her guilt. For instance, the only examples of Lynette's guilt are an inability to sleep, nightmares about Alejandro and

a general feeling of uneasiness. Her guilt is not as problematic as Susan's because she uses scapegoating and transcendence soon after Alejandro's death. Lynette blames Bree for her involvement in hiding Alejandro's death, just like Susan does:

Bree: "We all made a pact that night..."

Lynette: "Well you weren't exactly asking anyone's opinion that night were you, Bree?"

Bree: "What is that supposed to mean?"

Lynette: "It means you elected yourself chairman of the dead guy committee and started making decisions for everyone."

Since Lynette did not feel as if she had a choice with regard to hiding Alejandro she casts Bree as her scapegoat because Lynette claims that she never would have gotten involved with Alejandro's death had it not been for Bree.

Lynette: Guilt Redemption in "What's To Discuss Old Friend" (Season 8 Episode 10)

Although Lynette utilized scapegoating, she primarily uses transcendence. For example, when Lynette tells her husband about Alejandro, she tells him that she was just helping out a friend. Therefore, by fulfilling a higher purpose of protection, loyalty and love, Lynette is able to justify her behavior by framing the situation to focus on the positive outcomes of her behavior. Furthermore, she believes her involvement in the crime is selfless as she put Gabrielle and her family's needs before her own. By constructing the situation from this perspective, Lynette disregards the potential consequences for being an accessory to murder. Her use of transcendence allows her to view her actions as admirable instead of illegal or wrong. Transcendence not only impacts how she understands her behavior, it changes how she thinks of herself, as transcendence allows Lynette to be glorified for her selflessness. Thus, transcendence

allows one to redeem oneself of guilt while simultaneously glorifying oneself. One reason Lynette experiences less guilt than Susan is because she redeems herself earlier in the story, thus with transcendence Lynette is able to avoid guilt entirely.

Bree: Character Analysis

Bree is a single woman, once widowed and recently divorced. Her relationship with her adult children is troubled as they are resentful of their traditional upbringing. She is a recovering alcoholic, yet she relapses and attempts to commit suicide. Bree is known for having obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, as she is constantly repressing her emotions and is obsessed with maintaining appearances. Her conservative values are exemplified through her membership in the National Rifle Association, Presbyterian Church and the Republican party. Despite her traditional values, she has covered up three different murders throughout the series. Bree's friends consider her the strongest character as she has encountered several tragic events in her life. Although she is nurturing to her friends, she is also very judgmental of those who do not live up to her standards. Bree was motivated to help conceal Alejandro's death in order to seek forgiveness from Carlos for concealing Alejandro's crime.

Bree: Guilt Redemption in "Secrets That I Never Want to Know" (Season 8 Episode 1)

Although Bree exhibits more guilt than Lynette, she also only displays a few examples of guilt. Bree begins utilizing transcendence when they are burying the body, as she declared: "This is a very bad man, he attacked our friend and her husband protected her and now we are gonna protect them." Since Bree believes that Alejandro deserved to die because he sexually abused Gabrielle, she is able to justify his death. By justifying his death, Bree uses transcendence to fulfill a higher purpose of protection, loyalty and love

for Gabrielle's family. When Bree justifies hiding Alejandro's death, she uses language, which Burke (1962) explains allows one to achieve a rhetorical advantage, as Bree is able to create a different perspective of the situation. With language, Bree is able to construct Alejandro's death not as murder, but as protection, which allows her to temporarily avoid guilt.

Bree: Guilt Alleviation "The Art Of Making Art" (Season 8 Episode 5)

Although Bree utilizes transcendence, she begins to feel guilty, as exhibited through her use of mortification:

Bree: "... I haven't been feeling very spiritual lately."

Reverend Sykes: "It's not uncommon for us to lose our way spiritually from time to time, to feel, in the woods."

Bree: "...It's just that I feel like maybe I'm not worthy of God's love right now. That I've lost my connection to Him."

Reverend Sykes: "But here's the good thing about God, Bree. He's easy to find. Just seek out the people who are in need and there He is."

She does not feel "worthy of God's love" because she acknowledges that her actions were wrong, even though she justified them. In order to partially achieve mortification, Bree volunteers at a soup kitchen hoping that doing something good will compensate for her role in Alejandro's death.

Bree: Guilt Alleviation and Redemption in "Always in Control" (Season 8 Episode 7)

While helping her neighbor Ben with a development project breaking ground where Alejandro was buried, Bree confesses to Ben about the incident:

Bree: "He was a horrible man."

Ben: "You know who this was?"

Bree: “He hurt a child, someone I care about very much and he was gonna hurt her again.”

Ben: “Did you kill him? Tell me you didn’t kill him, I need to know before I go to the police.”

Bree: “I didn’t kill him. My friend did and I helped bury him here.”

Bree’s confession represents an attempt at mortification because she does not fulfill the necessary elements of mortification including punishment, seeking forgiveness and confessing to those one has wronged.

However, she also uses transcendence within this confession by justifying her actions with two different explanations, demonstrating how mortification and transcendence can be combined. First, Bree claims that Alejandro deserved to die because he was a bad person. Next, she justifies her actions by claiming that his death prevented Gabrielle from being hurt again. After this use of transcendence and mortification, Bree is purged of guilt.

Gabrielle: Character Analysis

Gabrielle is a stay-at-home mom for her two daughters while Carlos runs a successful investment corporation. In earlier seasons, Carlos goes to prison for importing goods that were made by slave labor and he is arrested for hate crimes against gay men, which explains Gabrielle’s concern that he will go to prison for Alejandro’s murder. As a young teenager, Alejandro sexually abused Gabrielle and as a result of the abuse, she ran away from home as her mother did not believe her and she wanted the abuse to end. Gabrielle has a passion for beauty and shopping, as she spends significant time at the spa, salon and mall. She is known for being very selfish, yet despite her selfish attitude she is a good friend to Lynette, Bree and Susan.

Gabrielle: Guilt Alleviation in “Secrets That I Never Want To Know” (Season 8 Episode 1)

Unlike Susan, Lynette and Bree, Gabrielle does not feel guilty because she utilizes transcendence and scapegoating to construct Alejandro’s death from a unique perspective:

Every noise I’d hear at night, it was him. Every dark alley I’d pass, he was waiting for me. When I lay in bed, I was afraid he’d come find me. He was in my dreams and my nightmares. I couldn’t escape him. That’s what I had to live with, until now. For the first time I’m not scared, you did that for me...yes you may have taken a life but you also saved one. So if it’s absolution you’re looking for, I give it to you.

Her statement exemplifies scapegoating as she blames Alejandro for his own death because if he hadn’t tried to attack her, he would not have accidentally been killed. In addition, she believes he deserved to die because he abused her. However, her perspective also exemplifies transcendence because she justifies concealing his death by claiming that she is protecting her family and in doing so she fulfills a higher purpose of protection, loyalty and love. For instance, she and Carlos could potentially be imprisoned which would have severe ramifications on their daughters. Thus, her use of transcendence glorifies her actions instead of condemning them. In addition, by using transcendence Gabrielle is able to begin avoiding her guilt.

Gabrielle: Guilt Alleviation in “What’s The Good of Being Good” (Season 8 Episode 12)

In this episode, Gabrielle utilizes a combination of transcendence, scapegoating and mortification. First, Ms. Sanchez, Alejandro’s widow, returns to visit Susan after Susan’s conversation with Marissa, her daughter. After Mrs. Sanchez returns, Susan introduces her to Gabrielle and suggests that the two of them talk about Alejandro. During a conversation with Mrs. Sanchez, Gabrielle admits that Alejandro molested her

and alludes that he is dead. This confession exemplifies both mortification and scapegoating, as she is honest with Mrs. Sanchez while blaming Alejandro for his own death because he abused her. She uses scapegoating to gain sympathy from Mrs. Sanchez, so that Mrs. Sanchez will view his death from Gabrielle's perspective.

She also uses transcendence in her conversation with Mrs. Sanchez by conveying how Alejandro's death prevented Marissa from becoming a victim of abuse again. Both Gabrielle and Susan use transcendence to show that the death of Alejandro was beneficial for Marissa. Furthermore, she uses transcendence to demonstrate that Alejandro's death was not only beneficial, but necessary for protecting Marissa. By focusing on the positive aspects of Alejandro's death, Gabrielle avoids guilt while influencing how Mrs. Sanchez understands the incident.

The next manifestation of transcendence occurs when Gabrielle points out that Alejandro's death gave Marissa the opportunity to confess to her mother. Furthermore, it also created an environment in which Mrs. Sanchez was able to believe Marissa. Therefore, she is able to justify his death by initiating communication between Marissa and her mother. Since Gabrielle's mother never believed her, it is crucial to Gabrielle that Mrs. Sanchez believe Marissa, thus Gabrielle protects Marissa from the perpetual consequences of keeping abuse a secret, which is her higher purpose. Gabrielle not only prevents Marissa from encountering more abuse, she prevents Marissa from experiencing some of the perpetual consequences associated with sexual abuse. Thus, Gabrielle protects her family as well as Marissa, which reinforced her justification, allowing transcendence to be effective.

Summary of Analysis

This analysis revealed that Susan, Lynette, Bree and Gabrielle each addressed guilt differently. Whereas Susan felt the most guilt, Gabrielle does not feel any guilt, and Bree and Lynette experience hardly any guilt, topics that will be explored in the conclusion. Each character used transcendence, which allowed them to effectively avoid their guilt; an important finding that will be further discussed in the conclusion. However the characters also used a combination of guilt alleviation and avoidance methods as the Burkeian process of guilt purification proved to be ineffective and temporary at times. The methods of guilt alleviation may also prove to be a reflection of each woman's character, because most women exhibited some of the same methods of guilt alleviation as they did in the first episode analyzed, "Guilty". In the next section I will look at the similarities and differences between the methods of guilt purification used during season one, compared to season eight. I will also focus on the messages and values conveyed by the use of transcendence, the relationship between one's personality and their method of guilt purification and the way in which sexual abuse against women is portrayed on *Desperate Housewives*.

Discussion and Conclusion

The general objective of this rhetorical analysis is to contribute to the field of rhetorical criticism, particularly in the area of media criticism. Specifically, the goal of this study was to uncover the how *Desperate Housewives* is a type of redemptive media, by examining guilt redemption on the show. The dramatic analysis focusing on the guilt-purification-redemption cycle provides a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence of guilt and the guilt alleviation or avoidance methods utilized on *Desperate Housewives*. Although the analysis focused on the guilt-purification-redemption cycle, it revealed that transcendence is ultimately contingent on purpose, one of the elements of the dramatic pentad. The findings have revealed why transcendence was the primary method of guilt alleviation, the implications of utilizing transcendence and the impacts this study has on rhetorical criticism.

Guilt Redemption Cycle: Ineffective Purification

This study has provided new insight into the guilt redemption cycle that was not discussed in the literature. We learn that sometimes attempts at purification do not guarantee guilt redemption. For instance, Susan utilizes mortification several times, yet mortification does not redeem her of guilt. My study demonstrates that in some instances, one must repeatedly go through the guilt redemption cycle when purification methods do not redeem one of guilt, until redemption from guilt is achieved. To help clarify this process, Figure 1 demonstrates the guilt redemption cycle whereas Figure 2 demonstrates that the guilt redemption cycle must be repeated until redemption from guilt is achieved. Thus, we conclude that sometimes one may utilize several attempts at purification until one is redeemed of guilt.

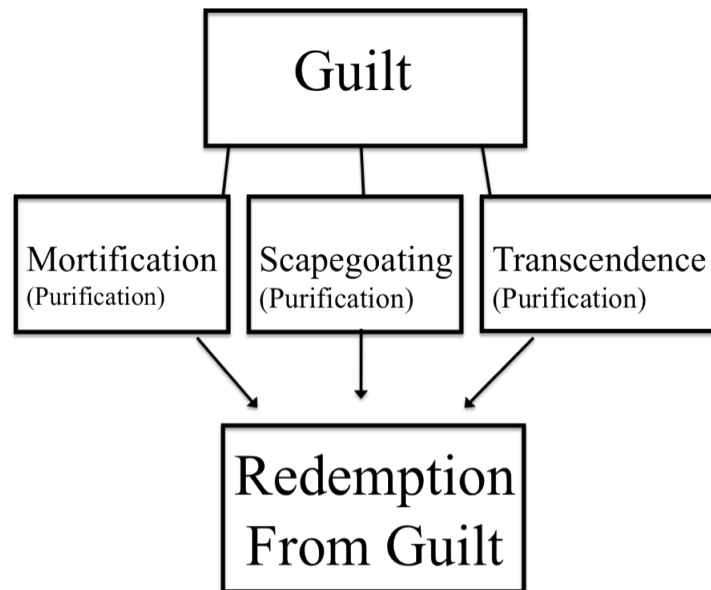


Figure 1. The Guilt Redemption Cycle

This diagram illustrates the dramatic process of the guilt redemption cycle as proposed by Kenneth Burke. These steps illustrate how the utilization of a given purification method allow one to be redeemed of guilt.

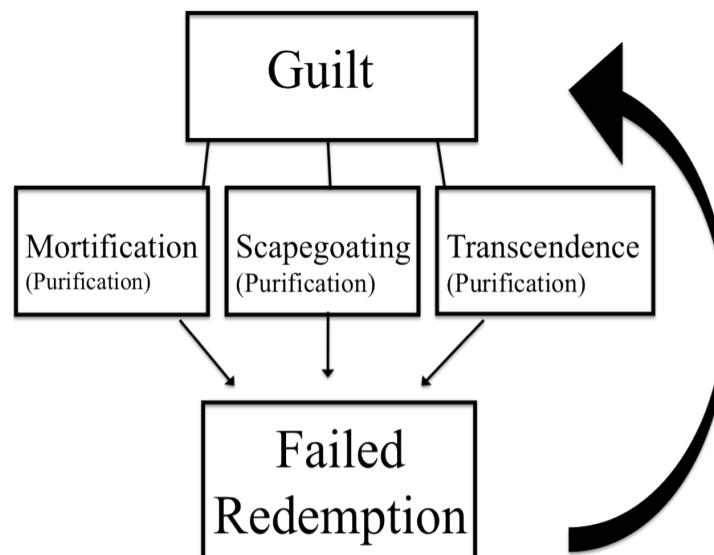


Figure 2. The Guilt Redemption Cycle as exhibited on *Desperate Housewives*

This diagram illustrates the continuation of the guilt redemption cycle on *Desperate Housewives*. The bolded arrow demonstrates that one will repeat the guilt redemption cycle when purification does not lead to redemption from guilt and one will continue through this cycle until redemption is achieved. Thus, several attempts at redemption are sometimes needed as the utilization of mortification, scapegoating and transcendence does not guarantee redemption.

Transcendence: Primary Method of Guilt Alleviation

Although the characters used various method of guilt alleviation, ultimately transcendence was the primary method that effectively allowed the characters to avoid guilt because after utilizing transcendence the characters no longer exhibited guilt. The prevalence of transcendence on *Desperate Housewives* reveals three significant findings: the characters justified their actions by using transcendence which transformed their perspectives and glorified their actions.

Justification Through Transcendence

First, the characters justified their behavior with protection for Gabrielle's family and Marissa. Since using transcendence allows one to move to an elevated point of reflection and understanding of their own humanity (Olsen & Morgan, 2010), the character's elevated position allows them to justify their behavior because of their new perspective. Therefore, the characters are able to justify their actions by asserting that the good from their behavior (protection) outweighs the bad (Alejandro's death).

Justifying the Higher Purpose: Protection, Selflessness and Loyalty

The effectiveness of transcendence on *Desperate Housewives* reveals that one can avoid responsibility for their behavior by fulfilling a higher purpose, which on the show is protection, selflessness and loyalty. This reveals that acts can be justified if the higher purpose achieved is worthy enough for justification. Yet, in which circumstances is the higher purpose justifiable and is the higher purpose contingent on the act itself or external factors? For instance, were protection, selflessness and loyalty suitable higher purposes because of the nature of sexual assault or due to how the characters framed their behavior? Furthermore, can a higher purpose be justifiable for one act but not another act

of the same degree? Are there acts that cannot be justified, regardless of the justification used? Although the show does not directly answer these questions, it encourages viewers to consider their own opinions about these issues. This analysis has demonstrated that protection, selflessness and loyalty are important values on the show, as protection often requires one to be both selfless and loyal. These values are central to the show because they are often used as the higher purpose, which I will discuss in the following sections.

Desperate Housewives suggests that on the surface an act may be wrong, yet the act cannot be judged until the higher purpose is accounted for. In addition, the show also demonstrates that sometimes one must do something bad in order to achieve something good. Protection as the predominant higher purpose works to challenge one's understanding of right and wrong as it demonstrates that wrong behavior may have honorable motives while showing the fine line between right and wrong. The prevalence of protection also urges viewers to consider if the end justifies the means. Thus, the show exhibits how protection can be justifiable for even the most sinful of actions. On the other hand, although the show often depicts characters using protection as a means of justification, this does not indicate that the show endorses such behavior, highlighting the complexity of the show. Thus, utilizing protection as one's higher purpose asks viewers to consider how factors such as motives impact the morality of an act. In their study of *Desperate Housewives*, Olsen and Morgan (2010) found that although the characters sin, they are consequently punished for their behavior, which was not revealed in my study. Instead my study illustrated that although the character's behavior is wrong, their motives are not. By understanding how the characters justify their actions, one can further understand a character's behavior.

Transcendence and Perspective

In order to understand a character's behavior we must look beyond their justification in order to understand how their use of transcendence impacted their perspective, as transcendence gives one a rhetorical advantage through perspective adjustments. With transcendence one is able to shift the focus from their sin to the good that resulted from their sin. Thus, the good created by the higher purpose becomes atonement for one's sin. One not only transcends a situation by fulfilling a higher purpose, one uses their higher purpose as atonement. Transcendence reframes a situation in order to allow one to become responsible for their higher purpose, while forfeiting responsibility for the original act. *Desperate Housewives* reveals that honorable motives can construct even the most terrible actions as good. Therefore, the show exemplifies a significant concept within rhetorical theory by demonstrating how our perspectives influence our behavior. This analysis has provided insight about transcendence, as transcendence is a cognitive process. The process of transcendence includes one creating a new perspective of their behavior and guilt while fulfilling a higher purpose, which allows them to avoid guilt.

Guilt Avoidance Verses Guilt Alleviation

Differences between guilt avoidance and guilt alleviation are noteworthy because these differences provide explanations for the character's methods of purification, as they did not alleviate their guilt, they avoided it. By changing their perspectives they denied that their behavior caused guilt, therefore they did not need to alleviate their guilt because they avoided it instead. After guilt is avoided one is no longer able to utilize guilt alleviation, as no such guilt exists to be alleviated. Although the characters utilized

several methods of purification, they utilized guilt alleviation prior to guilt avoidance, as guilt alleviation methods were ineffective independent of transcendence. Thus, we learn that when transcendence is used to avoid guilt, guilt alleviation methods cannot be effective as transcendence removes guilt from the situation. The characters deny that concealing Alejandro's death caused guilt as their motives were to protect each other and guilt is not found within protection; as protection in itself does not violate the rules of the hierarchy. In shifting their perspectives the characters emphasized their motives, motives which allowed them to avoid guilt and achieve redemption.

Perspective and Choice

Transcendence provides the characters with a rhetorical advantage as they contend that they did not have a choice when addressing Alejandro's death, making their behavior appear instinctive instead of cognitive. Thus, if they did not have a choice in the matter they also cannot be responsible for their actions, eliminating the possibility that mortification could be effectively utilized. This concept of choice is a prominent theme throughout the series as the characters continually claim that their decisions were not a result of personal choices. For instance, Lynette and Susan blame Bree for forcing their involvement in Alejandro's death, as Bree believes their only decision was to conceal the murder. Thus, each character utilizes transcendence to mitigate their involvement in his death by eliminating their choices. *Desperate Housewives* shows viewers how people can rhetorically eliminate the need for decision-making in order to purge their guilt.

Transcendence as Glorification

The rhetorical advantage of transcendence allowed the characters to glorify themselves for their sacrifice and for protecting each other. Therefore, transcendence not

only allows one to fulfill a higher purpose, it elevates one's character. For instance, the characters on *Desperate Housewives* are not viewed as co-conspirators to murder; they are constructed as loyal friends, willing to sacrifice anything for each other. We learn that transcendence can change both how an act and how an individual is perceived.

Transcendence: Effective in Guilt Alleviation

In developing a shared understanding of Alejandro's death the characters justified their actions using four different elements: protection, retribution, prevention and closure. Specifically, they protected Gabrielle's family, Marissa and each other while affirming that he deserved to die. His death also prevented further instances of abuse and provided Gabrielle with closure, as she was no longer afraid of him. These four elements provide a strong foundation of justification, which explains the effectiveness of transcendence. Furthermore, since each character achieved redemption through transcendence, their mutual understanding of their behavior reinforced the notion that no character should feel guilty.

The uniformity of transcendence reveals two findings about *Desperate Housewives* and dramatism. First, transcendence may not be a reflection of how one assumes guilt as it may be contingent on external factors. For instance, transcendence may have been used as a symbolic response to sexual assault, as they believe Alejandro deserved to die. Therefore, we learn that there is a conditional relationship between the method of guilt purification used and external factors surrounding an act. Furthermore, the relationship between group unity and transcendence is significant as it suggests that the method of guilt purification one chooses may be dependent on the method of purification used by one's group. This analysis revealed that transcendence was effective

because the characters were able to maintain their newly developed perspectives after utilizing transcendence so they no longer felt guilty.

Transcendence and Protection

The prevalence of transcendence on the show reveals that protection is a reoccurring theme on *Desperate Housewives*, as it is considered proper justification. For instance, the series begins as Mary Alice commits suicide to protect her son from learning that she stole him as an infant and killed his biological mother thus, fulfilling a higher purpose of protection. Since she is able to justify her suicide with transcendence, we are able to shift focus to her motive instead of her behavior, potentially impacting not only how her friends think of her but how the audience may perceive her as well. Another example of transcendence and protection occurs when Paul Young's second wife, Beth, commits suicide in order to donate her kidney to Susan, who will soon die without a kidney transplant. Similar to Mary Alice, Beth's motive of saving Susan's life is more notable than her suicide. The use of protection as a higher purpose on the show demonstrates how transcendence shifts the focus from one's behavior to their motive and that sometimes one must do something wrong in order to achieve a higher purpose.

Transcendence Instead of Mortification or Scapegoating

Although explanations for the prominence of transcendence have been clarified, explanations for the absence of mortification and scapegoating require further inquiry because the characters' attempt to alleviate guilt using mortification or scapegoating was ineffective. First, mortification was not realistic within this fictional story, as mortification would entail reporting Alejandro's death to law enforcement, subsequently implicating each character involved in his death. Thus, this would have been an

unrealistic story line for a fictional television show focused on providing entertainment and maintaining ratings. Although Susan and Bree attempted to utilize mortification, they were not willing to fulfill all the necessary components of mortification in order to protect their friends. The prevalence of transcendence and protection on the show send the message that protection is more important than honesty.

Scapegoating Verses Transcendence

Although scapegoating and transcendence appear similar, scapegoating did not prove to be effective in alleviating guilt. Scapegoating was ineffective because the characters had similar roles while concealing his death, thus blaming each other would ultimately cause them to blame themselves (which would be mortification). Furthermore, since protection is a prominent value on the show, the utilization of scapegoating would not have allowed the characters to fulfill the higher purpose of protection. In addition, scapegoating would have highlighted the evil within their behavior instead of emphasizing their honorable motives, potentially impacting how viewers perceive the characters.

Transcendence and Motives

Transcendence contains two primary elements, as it not only allows one to justify their actions, it allows one to simultaneously achieve a higher purpose. Therefore, the use of transcendence draws a strong connection between motives and actions by emphasizing the importance of motives when examining actions. This analysis revealed that transcendence and purpose are closely interconnected as transcendence can highlight the purpose of one's act in order to remove focus from the act. Although transcendence and purpose are two distinct elements of dramatism, transcendence heavily relies on purpose

in order to achieve justification and a higher purpose. For instance, the characters' decision to hide Alejandro's body cannot be understood without first gaining an understanding of their purpose. Understanding the purpose of their actions demonstrates how their purpose may be more significant than their actions alone.

Character Personalities and Transcendence

The personality of each character as well as their former uses of guilt purification potentially impacted how they addressed guilt. This part of the discussion will concentrate on the ways in which their personality impacted their use of guilt alleviation or guilt avoidance as well as how their method of guilt alleviation or avoidance may have reflected their character.

Susan: Utilization of Mortification and Transcendence

Susan's attempt at mortification and use of transcendence was typical of her character. For instance, earlier in the series when Susan accidentally burns her neighbor Edie's house down, she uses mortification when she confesses to Edie and accepts the punishment for her behavior. Recall in the first part of the analysis, Susan also uses mortification after snooping around Mike's home. However, she utilizes transcendence throughout the series as well. For example, after her daughter, Julie, is nearly strangled to death by a neighbor boy, Susan almost kills the boy, justifying her behavior by claiming that she is protecting Julie from being hurt again. In this example as well as in the story arc I examined, Susan justifies her behavior with protection; further demonstrating the prevalence of protection on the show.

Lynette: Utilization of Transcendence

Recall in the analysis of the episode “Guilty”, Lynette used both mortification and scapegoating after she took her children’s ADD medication. However, her use of transcendence after Alejandro’s death was typical of her behavior throughout the series. For instance, when her teenage son is wrongfully accused of a crime, the man who pressed charges threatens to kill him, so Lynette plans to run over the man with her car, in order to protect her son from being killed. Although Lynette does not end up killing the man who threatened her son, her plan to do so is an example of transcendence because she was going to justify her decision with protecting her son.

Another example Lynette’s use of transcendence occurs when she lies under oath to an arbitrator when Bree’s son Andrew is trying to be emancipated. Lynette lies for Bree by telling the arbitrator that Bree is not an alcoholic, even though she is. This is an example of transcendence because Lynette justifies her decision to protect Bree because protecting Bree will prevent her from losing her son. Thus, Lynette’s use of transcendence after Alejandro’s death was typical of her behavior as she constantly makes sacrifices in order to protect those she cares about.

Bree: Transcendence and Appearances

Recall from the analysis that Bree uses transcendence when she chooses to cover up her son’s drunk driving accident that ultimately kills Juanita. Another example of Bree’s use of transcendence occurs when her neighbor Katherine accidentally shoots and kills her abusive ex-husband in self-defense. Bree helps Katherine devise a cover story for what happened and lies to the police so that Katherine will not be charged with murder. Her use of transcendence after Alejandro’s death emulates her personality, as

Bree is a perfectionist who is obsessed with keeping up appearances, which transcendence allows her to do.

Gabrielle: Utilization of Scapegoating and Transcendence

Gabrielle's use of scapegoating after Alejandro's death is consistent with how she alleviates her guilt throughout the series. In the first part of the analysis in the episode "Guilty" Gabrielle uses scapegoating to blame her affair with John on her husband. Later in this season, after having a fight with Carlos, she starts her affair with John again, and uses scapegoating to justify the affair by blaming Carlos. Another example of her use of scapegoating occurs after her and Carlos divorce and she marries the city major, Victor. When Gabrielle learns that Victor only married Gabrielle for political gain in the Latino community, Gabrielle begins having an affair with Carlos, blaming Victor. Therefore, her use of transcendence after Alejandro's death is not consistent with how she usually addresses guilt.

Gabrielle is unique in that she is the only character who utilizes a method of purification that is different from her typical methods of purification. However, this could be due in part because Gabrielle was a victim of sexual abuse. Specifically, when Gabrielle has previously utilized scapegoating throughout the series, she was not a victim. Thus, her utilization of transcendence is victim's response to sexual abuse as her understanding of Alejandro's death is different from how the other characters perceive his death. We see that Gabrielle does not feel guilty for Alejandro's death as his death represents vengeance from her perspective as she believes he deserved to die for abusing her. She also believes that he brought on his own death by attacking her again and killing him (albeit accidentally) was the only way of permanently stopping the abuse. His death

provides Gabrielle with closure for the first time as she is no longer afraid of him as she tells Carlos, “I couldn’t escape him. That’s what I had to live with, until now. For the first time I’m not scared.” Therefore, we see that Gabrielle has several ways of justifying her involvement in Alejandro’s death and such justification allows her to begin healing from the sexual abuse as she contends that her behavior is merely a response to Alejandro and more specifically, a response to sexual abuse. We see that sometimes the purification methods used by the characters are similar across the series, whereas sometimes their purification methods are dependent on the nature of their behavior, the severity of their guilt or as we see in Gabrielle’s situation, extenuating circumstances in which one’s behavior is a direct response to the sinful behavior of others.

Character Relationships

As discussed in the literature review, Shuler et al. (2006) and Hoth (2010) contended that the friendships between the women on *Desperate Housewives* were not genuine as they often hide important information from each other. Specifically, the characters, despite being friends, frequently lie to each other (Tupan & Natalia, 2008). The secrecy within the characters’ friendships is described as a lack of self-disclosure, an essential element within genuine relationships (Schuler; Hoth; Tupan & Natalia). Yet my analysis did not reveal this, as I discovered the strength and authenticity of the characters’ friendships. Although the characters keep secrets from one another, this does not imply that they are not loyal friends as their involvement in Alejandro’s death demonstrates the strength of their friendship and willingness to make tremendous sacrifices for one another.

The type of self-disclosure previously discussed describes the balance between expression versus privacy and revealing versus concealing because “We like to have a group identity but at the same time have private aspects of ourselves that we keep from others.” (Tupan & Natalia, 2008, p. 239). Therefore, the characters on *Desperate Housewives* do not avoid self-disclosure, they merely select the information they choose to share. Although they sometimes have low levels of self-disclosure among each other, the characters exhibit the importance of their friendships through the loyalty of their actions.

Unilateral Concession and Friendship

Alejandro’s death challenged the friendship between the characters as interpersonal conflict began to emerge during Alejandro’s burial when the characters were arguing about burying him. Despite resistance from Susan and Lynette, the characters proceeded with his burial, which represents what Hargie (2010) describes as unilateral concession, that occurs within interpersonal conflicts and negotiations when individuals relinquish in order to preserve the friendship of those involved in conflict. Thus, Lynette and Susan yielded to Bree and Gabrielle’s demands in order to preserve the friendship between the women. Unilateral concession reinforces the notion that the friendship between the characters is authentic as Susan and Lynette prioritized their friendship over their own opinions and desires.

Secrecy, Cooperative Principal and Friendship

As Alejandro's death created tension between the women, their relationship dynamics began to change, exhibited through increased conflict between the women. For instance, they exhibit what Tupan and Natalia (2008) identify as violations to cooperative

principal, in which they begin lying to one another in order to protect each other. Thus, even through their dishonesty they are concerned with protecting each other, further exemplifying the significance of protection on the show. Through their dishonesty they maintain a level of concern for each other, which is common because according to Tupan and Natalia one often lies for the benefit to whom they are lying. Although interpersonal tensions were apparent throughout the story I did not focus on them within my analysis, as they were not necessary for understanding guilt redemption. Therefore, the strain on their friendship provides a foundation for a potential area of further research on the show that could focus on the characters' friendships.

Protection, Family and Transcendence

Although family values are central to the show they are portrayed in unconventional ways as these values are exhibited through protection of one's family. The use of transcendence allows characters to demonstrate the importance of family by justifying their behavior with protection for their family. For instance, Bree covers up her son's car accident, Susan nearly kills the neighbor boy who almost strangled Julie to death and Lynette attempts to kill the man who threatened to kill her son. Despite these dark themes on the show, *Desperate Housewives* honors the immense sacrifices the characters make for their families. The predominant values of family and protection suggest that one's actions can always be justified when one is protecting one's family. The combination of family and protection work together to challenge viewer's conceptions of right and wrong by challenging viewers to consider circumstances in which they would violate their own beliefs and morals, for their own family.

Comparisons with *Desperate for Redemption*

As discussed in the literature review, Olsen and Morgan (2010) applied Burke's guilt-redemption-purification cycle to *Desperate Housewives*. Although there are similarities between my study and theirs, the findings are significantly different, perhaps because we looked at different episodes in the series. For instance, Olsen and Morgan argued that although the show depicts sinful behavior the characters are ultimately punished for their behavior. Yet my analysis revealed just the contrary as the characters were not punished for hiding Alejandro's death. Olsen and Morgan also claimed that examples of guilt redemption on the show are consistent with conservative values since the characters often alleviate their guilt using mortification. However, mortification was not the prominent method of guilt alleviation in my analysis.

My analysis does support some of the premises in Olsen and Morgan's study in that the mere exposure of an act on the show does not indicate that *Desperate Housewives* endorses the act. Although the show depicts the women concealing a murder, it does not encourage doing so, as the depiction of these dark issues challenge how viewers think about such acts. For instance, Susan struggles with determining if Alejandro deserved to die which challenges viewers to consider who deserves to die and if people have the authority to make that kind of decision. The show also challenges viewers to critically think about why someone does or does not deserve to die. These timeless questions provide viewers with the opportunity to critically engage with the show by considering some of the paradoxes the characters face. Although *Desperate Housewives* proves to be a piece of redemptive media as described by Olsen and Morgan, the way in which it is redemptive has changed throughout the series to construct the

characters not as deeply flawed, but as profoundly brave and noble for fulfilling a higher purpose.

My study supported additional findings from Olsen and Morgan (2010) as it confirmed that *Desperate Housewives* shows how the choices we make are often not easy. As previously discussed, the characters often do not believe that they have a choice due to the complexity and difficulty of deciding between two choices, each that contain ramifications. This issue is exemplified when the characters must decide either to bury Alejandro or report his death to law enforcement. On one hand, they recognize the right thing to do is report his death as an accident to the police, however they are concerned that doing so may imprison Carlos. Thus, we see that either choice the characters make has severe (potential) ramifications, highlighting the difficulty of the choices they encounter. *Desperate Housewives* does not encourage viewers to make particular choices between such dichotomies, the message the show sends is that some of our choices inherently contain both good and evil; thus choosing *either* right or wrong can be problematic.

Sexual Abuse and The Guilt Redemption Cycle

A discussion of sexual abuse is central to this analysis as the story arc revolves around this issue and sexual abuse is portrayed in a unique manner. Since one in four women are victims of sexual abuse (Miller et al., 2007), this particular story line has the potential to resonate with numerous viewers. In addition, this story is told from the perspective of sexual abuse victims, which impacts how the issue is framed. Although the literature focused on gender and feminist issues within *Desperate Housewives*, sexual abuse was not one of the issues discussed. Therefore this analysis provides insight of how

this issue is portrayed on the show and a foundation of how this issue can be further studied on the show.

Sexual Abuse on Television

A discussion of how sexual abuse is depicted on television creates an understanding of how the portrayal of sexual abuse on *Desperate Housewives* relates to other televised depictions of the issue. Sexual assault has become increasingly more prevalent on television in recent decades (Custers and Van den Bulck, 2012). Yet, feminist scholars have criticized depictions of sexual assault on television for not providing an accurate portrayal of the issue according to Custers and Van de Bulck. However, *Desperate Housewives* provides an accurate portrayal of the issue in several different approaches by focusing on victim blaming, self-blaming, fear of reporting abuse, showing Latinas as victims and depicting sexual abuse by a family member instead of a stranger. Thus, the show accurately depicts contemporary issues surrounding sexual abuse. For instance, *Desperate Housewives* portrays stories of minorities as victims of abuse as well as abuse occurring within the victim's family. *Desperate Housewives* also shows that sexual abuse can have long-term consequences on victims. The accuracy of sexual abuse depictions through Gabrielle and Marissa's experiences constructs *Desperate Housewives* as a medium that creates awareness and advocacy for sexual abuse victims. However, a closer analysis of sexual abuse on the show may provide new and different findings from my own. Thus, in order to create a comprehensive understanding of the issues on the show, feminist theories may need to be applied to this particular story arc.

Reporting Sexual Abuse and Long-Term Consequences

The story I analyzed highlights some of the long-term consequences of sexual abuse. For instance, “Despite the devastatingly high rates of sexual assault among women, sexual victimization is consistently documented to be one of the most underreported of all violent crimes” (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012, p. 265). Both Gabrielle and Marissa’s stories exhibit this issue as neither of them reported the abuse after the onset of the abuse. One reason Gabrielle and Marissa did not report the abuse is because they were concerned that no one would believe them. In Gabrielle’s case, not many people believed her when she first told them about Alejandro, and Marissa was concerned that her mother in particular would not believe her, as she did not want to divide their family. Both of their experiences highlight the challenges of reporting sexual abuse to law enforcement, family and other authority figures as victims of sexual abuse often are not believed, so they are hesitant to report the abuse.

Another issue this story highlights is that only 5% to 10% of sexual assault victims ever seek counseling from a mental health professional (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012). Gabrielle’s story in particular addresses this as she explains going to counseling was difficult since mostly everyone she told about the abuse did not believe her. Thus, she was concerned a therapist would not believe her either. However, she also admits that she wished she had sought help earlier as counseling was an essential component that allowed her to begin the healing process. Therefore, this story advocates that regardless of how difficult one finds it to seek professional help and report abuse, it is one of the most crucial steps a victim must take in order to begin healing.

Victim Blaming, Guilt and The Scapegoat

Another issue concerning sexual abuse, victim blaming, is visible throughout this storyline. As Orchowski & Gidycz (2012) explain, “Between 25% to 75% of women who disclose sexual victimization report that they are responded to in a way that leaves them feeling hurt, that they were not believed, or that they were blamed for the experience” (p. 266) the research suggests that victims are often blamed for being assaulted, which is prominent in Gabrielle’s experience. Alejandro, a nun from Gabrielle’s school and her mother blame her for the abuse, claiming that she wanted it and deserved it. Victim blaming not only places blame on the victim as opposed to blame on the perpetrator, it implies that the victim *deserved* the abuse. Victim blaming causes guilt, another long-term consequence of sexual abuse. Although this is a different type of guilt than the guilt I focused on, this type of guilt reveals how victims of sexual abuse are cast as the scapegoat by their perpetrators as well as outsiders. By looking at victim blaming within sexual abuse using Burke’s guilt redemption cycle, we see that some of the long-term consequences of sexual abuse revolve around guilt and the difficulty of alleviating or avoiding this type of guilt. We also learn more about victims of sexual abuse, as they are not only burdened with guilt, they are cast as outsiders and according to Burke (1962) represent all that is wicked or wrong in the world. Thus, victims of sexual abuse, like the scapegoat, are alienated from groups to which they belong, which impedes their ability to confess, receive help and obtain closure, which I will continue to discuss in the subsequent section. Although these results are preliminary, these findings provide a foundation for studying sexual assault victims using a Burkeian lens. In addition, these

findings also suggest that a potential area for future research includes studying the scapegoat and how the scapegoat addresses their burden of guilt.

Sexual Abuse and Secrecy

As a result of victim blaming, victims often do not report abuse because they are ashamed and develop self-blame, as exhibited in Gabrielle and Marissa's stories. According to Miller et al. (2007) victim self-blame is one of the most widespread issues caused by sexual abuse, which is problematic as it often leads to other issues such as depression and an increased likelihood the victim would be sexually assaulted in the future. For instance, one reason Marissa does not report the abuse is because she is ashamed and embarrassed and blames herself for not stopping the abuse which is a factor that prevents her from reporting the abuse.

Gabrielle also keeps the abuse a secret because of how people responded to her, yet, she also keeps the abuse a secret from herself as well by denying how it negatively impacted her. On the surface Gabrielle has a seemingly perfect life; however underneath it is evident that she has been hurt because of the abuse. This aspect of the story suggests that it is imperative not to hide sexual abuse from others or oneself, as this further escalates the ramifications of sexual abuse. When Gabrielle is able to accept the abuse as something that is part of her past, she is able to move past the abuse and begin healing. The mere presence of these particular issues surrounding sexual abuse on *Desperate Housewives* creates awareness to viewers of some of the predominant problems and misconceptions surrounding sexual abuse.

Implications on Rhetorical Criticism

This study provides the field of rhetorical criticism with a framework of how the guilt-redemption-purification cycle can be used to study media, particularly fictional television. Furthermore, it also revealed a new way that *Desperate Housewives* could be looked at, as most of the literature examines gender on the show. This study differed from the previous study that applied Burke's guilt-purification-redemption cycle to the show, and revealed different ways the characters addressed guilt through transcendence.

Transcendence, Act and Purpose

From this study, rhetorical scholars are able to view the interconnectedness of the act and purpose of the dramatistic pentad. Furthermore, this study expands the unique relationship between the purpose of the pentad and transcendence. This thesis provides a foundation for applying dramatism to fictional works such as television programming as this study revealed how characters can change their own interpretation of their behavior.

Rhetorical Advantages of Language

This study works towards an academic understanding of fictional television as a rhetorical artifact as this study demonstrates how characters come to understand and interpret their behavior through language. The way characters interpret their behavior has important implications on the values and messages conveyed within a show and the meaning of such messages. In addition, rhetorical criticism of television is unique as it shows the actions of the characters as well as how the characters frame their actions with language. Thus, the comparison between the act and how characters describe the act is interesting as it highlights differences between the two. Since fictional television shows

communicate messages through characters, television is a valid artifact to use in rhetorical criticism.

Transcendence and Consequences

One of the most important implications of this study is the messages and values communicated by the use of transcendence. This study revealed that the use of transcendence emphasized the importance of protection as a form of justification. However, this study also revealed that the characters ultimately did not face consequences for covering up Alejandro's death because they used transcendence. Thus, *Desperate Housewives* conveys the message that one can justify even the most appalling behavior and avoid consequences for their behavior if the justification utilized is deemed worthy enough.

Critical Audiences and Philosophical Paradoxes

It is important for viewers to become critical audiences in order to reflect on the messages conveyed within television and film, as these messages have the potential to impact one's worldview. This was important in my analysis of *Desperate Housewives* since many critics and audiences "fail to recognize the complexities of the show" (Olsen & Morgan, p. 332). For instance, the show was widely critiqued for the pervasiveness of sinful behavior on the show. Yet, although a show depicts sinful behavior such as murder or adultery, this does not indicate the show is endorsing such behavior, as this cannot be determined until a critical analysis is applied to the artifact. I found that *Desperate Housewives* was not endorsing sinful behavior, it was challenging the audience beliefs and values surrounding such behavior by encouraging the audience to think of particular issues in new ways. For instance, many would agree that being an accessory to murder is

wrong, yet *Desperate Housewives* challenges this belief by depicting how both the intentions and outcomes of a murder can be good. Many of the philosophical ethical questions raised on the show encourage viewers to be critical of the messages they are exposed to, while examining their own beliefs and values.

As formerly discussed, *Desperate Housewives* has faced criticism and resistance from groups concerned about the lack of morals and family values present in the show (Olsen & Morgan, 2010). However, a closer analysis demonstrates that moral lessons and values such as family, love, loyalty and protection do exist on *Desperate Housewives* throughout unconventional methods as the show must be evaluated by critical viewers in order to be fully understood. As such, Olsen and Morgan classify the show as a form of redemptive media in that sinful behavior is accompanied by attempts at redemption. Therefore, the behavior on *Desperate Housewives* must be judged in conjunction with the motives and redemption that accompany such behavior. A critical analysis revealed that in some regards, Alejandro's death was positive as it prevented Marissa from being raped again. However, if the outcome of a sin is ultimately good, does this imply that the good outweighs the bad and does the outcome justify the act? Do good motives justify wrongful behavior? Questions such as these could be explored in further research, which I will continue discussing in the subsequent section.

Study Limitations

One of the problems with rhetorical criticism is that it is largely subjective due to personal interpretations. Although the methodology aims to eliminate the subjectivity of rhetorical criticism, some bias always exists. Specifically, other rhetorical scholars may understand examples of guilt and guilt purification differently than I did, particularly

because guilt purification is often symbolic. The critic's individual judgments and values concerning the stories and characters on the show may further impact how the critic categorizes guilt purification methods and the implications and meanings of such methods. To address the subjectivity of this study I propose that multiple studies using various theories could be used to analyze the episodes that I studied to invite multiple interpretations of the same artifact.

Another concern addresses the nature of the artifact itself, as *Desperate Housewives* is a fictional artifact that aims to provide entertainment with an objective of obtaining high ratings, viewership, publicity and awards. Within a fictional artifact such as *Desperate Housewives*, many of the characters are involved in unrealistic stories, as such, elements of the show that address the character's responses to guilt may not accurately portray human responses to guilt. Furthermore, fictional artifacts do not address every aspect of a character's life, making it difficult to accurately evaluate the methods of purification. For instance, although Lynette does not appear to feel guilty, this does not indicate that she does not feel guilty; as the show's producers may have chosen not to include her guilt within this particular story. Although we do see that the show exemplifies the dramatic process of guilt-purification-redemption, elements of this process may have been removed.

Potential Future Research

By using the results from my study as a foundation, there are several areas of potential further research that could be explored. The next step after this study would be to do another Burkeian analysis of different story arcs from the show including other characters aside from the four main characters I analyzed. Since the findings from my

study significantly varied from the findings of Olsen and Morgan's (2010) study, it is probable that examining a different set of episodes in the series would yield different results and new insights about *Desperate Housewives*, dramatism and rhetorical criticism.

It would also be interesting to utilize a dramatisitic analysis when examining shows similar to *Desperate Housewives*, categorized as redemptive media. For instance, another area for future research would include examining several television shows that have a prevalence of guilt then comparing these shows based on the methods of guilt purification used. For instance, redemptive television shows similar to *Desperate Housewives* would include shows such as *House of Cards*, *Scandal*, *Weeds*, *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*. These shows would be appropriate texts to analyze using dramatism because of the significance of guilt on each show. Since there is limited research in the field of communication focusing on *Desperate Housewives*, the show could be analyzed using other rhetorical communication theories. For instance, audience responses and perceptions of the show are an area that could be explored as most of the research on the show does not address the program's audience.

Instead of focusing on rhetorical criticism, *Desperate Housewives* could be analyzed using interpersonal communication theories. For instance, although the relationships between the characters were strained after Alejandro's death, I did not focus on this part of the storyline, albeit their relationships are a significant part of the story. Thus, this same story arc could be examined utilizing a different communication theory as there is limited research looking at the interpersonal relationships on the show; specifically with regard to self-disclosure and interpersonal and group conflict.

An additional area for future research would include studying the show using feminist and sociological theories about sexual abuse since sexual abuse was the foundation of the story arc I examined. In addition, there are a few instances of sexual abuse throughout the series, thus the show could be analyzed looking at all the instances of sexual abuse and how this issue is framed. Although there is abundant research concerning feminist and gender issues within *Desperate Housewives*, most of the research focuses on earlier seasons. Thus, the show as a whole could be looked at incorporating later seasons when applying feminist and gender theories.

Conclusion

A dramatic analysis of *Desperate Housewives* reveals that as one employs transcendence, purpose gains importance while the importance of the act is minimized. This analysis has also revealed that transforming one's perspective provides one with an immense rhetorical advantage and power over one's situation, which demonstrates the vast capabilities of language as language can change not only one's own perspective but the viewpoints of others as well. Throughout this study, *Desperate Housewives* has emphasized the struggle of various philosophical ethical and moral dilemmas, which provides a greater understanding of not only *Desperate Housewives*, dramatism and rhetorical criticism, but of human nature itself.

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