

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA  
PROGRAMA DE PÓS GRADUAÇÃO EM INGLÊS: ESTUDOS  
LINGUÍSTICOS E LITERÁRIOS

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**“I DON’T SPEAK GIRL”:  
PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN IN *GREY’S ANATOMY***

Dissertação submetida ao  
Programa de Pós Graduação em  
Inglês da Universidade Federal de  
Santa Catarina para a obtenção do  
Grau de Mestre em Letras.  
Orientadora: Prof.<sup>a</sup> Dr.<sup>a</sup> Susana  
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Florianópolis

2016

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Cechinel Gonçalves, Mariane

"I Don't Speak Girl": : Portrayals of Women in Grey's  
Anatomy / Mariane Cechinel Gonçalves ; orientadora, Susana  
Bornéo Funck - Florianópolis, SC, 2016.

65 p.

Dissertação (mestrado) - Universidade Federal de Santa  
Catarina, Centro de Comunicação e Expressão. Programa de Pós  
Graduação em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários.

Inclui referências

1. Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários. 2. Letras.  
3. Feminism. 4. Grey's Anatomy. 5. Representation. I.  
Bornéo Funck, Susana. II. Universidade Federal de Santa  
Catarina. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês: Estudos  
Linguísticos e Literários. III. Título.

Folha de assinaturas



To all people out there fighting for a better live.  
To all women in the world who suffer. Keep fighting!



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the two years of the Master's program and in the process of writing this thesis, some people were of great importance for me. So, my special thank you goes to:

My advisor, Professor Susana Bornéo Funck, who was the one to introduce Feminist Theories to my academic life. Thank you for always being open to talk and giving suggestions for my research.

All the literature professors I had during my academic life, especially the ones who followed my research. Thank you for opening up the literary universe for me and broadening my knowledge in the area.

All Linguistic professors present in my academic life. Thank you for showing and raising awareness for the area. Although I chose literature, linguistics is always present for all English students.

My boyfriend, who was always supportive and willing to discuss my research. Thank you for the company and the support.

My best friends, Dayane Evellin and Maria Eduarda, who always support me both in my academic and in my personal life. Thank you for being there for me!

All my friends, whose names I will not write, not to run the risk of forgetting someone. Thank you for the support, the laughs, the reflections and the company.

My family, who, though not always understanding my need to study and to dedicate my time to my research, were kind and supportive.

Finally, I would like to thank CAPES for the financial support that allowed me to dedicate 100% to the master's program.





*Meredith Grey: "There comes a point in your life when you're officially an adult. Suddenly you're old enough to vote, to drink and engage in other adult activities. Suddenly people expect you to be responsible, serious, a grown up. We get taller, we get older. But do we ever really grow up? In some ways we grow up. We have families. We get married. Divorced. But for the most part, we still have the same problems that we had when we were 15. No matter how much we grow taller, grow older, we are still forever stumbling. Forever wondering. Forever young."*

*(Grey's Anatomy, 4x08)*

**ABSTRACT**  
**“I DON’T SPEAK GIRL”:** PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN IN  
***GREY’S ANATOMY***

This research deals with the representation of gender in television. Its general objective is to investigate the portrayal of women in the television series *Grey’s Anatomy*. The focus is specifically on four women, two of whom are heterosexual, namely, Meredith Grey and Cristina Yang, and two of whom are homosexual, namely, Calliope Torres and Arizona Robbins. The purpose is to verify how the four aforementioned characters are presented in terms of their private and professional lives. Aspects such as the portrayal of heterosexual and homosexual relationships, the deconstruction of traditional roles, and the relevance of the series for today’s society are taken into account when carrying out the analysis, which considers specific moments from the series and their connection with feminist and media studies, as proposed by bell hooks (1996), Adrienne Rich (1980), Judith Butler (1999), David Gauntlett (2002) among others. In addition, studies regarding television series are discussed as well. Based on the evidences encountered, it can be said that *Grey’s Anatomy* attempts to portray women’s different concerns, regarding career, family, and sexual orientation. Moreover, the series is generally recognized for attempting to deconstruct patriarchal values, which is still a relevant issue for the feminist movement today.

**Keywords:** *Grey’s Anatomy*, feminist studies, media.

Number of pages: 68

Number of words: 24087



**RESUMO**  
**“EU NÃO FALO LÍNGUA DE MENINA”:** RETRATOS DE  
MULHERES EM *GREY'S ANATOMY*

Esta pesquisa aborda a representação de gênero na televisão. Seu objetivo geral é investigar a representação das mulheres na série televisiva *Grey's Anatomy*, especificamente em relação a quatro mulheres, duas das quais são heterossexuais, ou seja, Meredith Grey e Cristina Yang, e duas que são homossexuais, ou seja, Calliope Torres e Arizona Robbins. O objetivo é verificar como as quatro personagens acima mencionadas são retratadas em termos de vida pessoal e profissional. Aspectos como a representação de relações heterossexuais e homossexuais, a desconstrução de papéis tradicionais, e a relevância da série para a sociedade de hoje são levados em consideração na análise, que aborda momentos específicos da série e suas ligações com os estudos feministas e de mídia, propostos por bell hooks (1996), Adrienne Rich (1980), Judith Butler (1999), David Gauntlett (2002), entre outros. Além disso, estudos sobre séries de televisão também são discutidos. Com base nas evidências da série, pode-se dizer que *Grey's Anatomy* tenta retratar diferentes preocupações das mulheres, quanto a carreira, família e orientação sexual. Além disso, a série é geralmente reconhecida por tentar desconstruir valores patriarcais, que é um tema relevante para o movimento feminista ainda hoje.

Palavras-chave: *Grey's Anatomy*, estudos feministas, mídia.

Número de páginas: 68

Número de palavras: 24087





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## INTRODUCTION

### “SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT”<sup>1</sup>

This research deals with the portrayal of gender in television. Gender Studies is an interdisciplinary field mainly concerned with the analysis of identity and representation. It has a strong connection with the feminist movement, since it deals with the representation of femininity and masculinity. The field began to gain power in the late 1960s, along with the second wave of feminism (Pilcher and Whelehan, ix), which, as stated by bell hooks (2000), “gained momentum when it found its way into the academy” (20), that is, when scholars began to problematize issues raised by the movement. In this sense, Gender Studies have also had a great importance in popular culture, in which television is included. According to John Storey (1993), “popular culture has been the object of a great deal of feminist analysis” (126), for the different media that constitute popular culture have attempted to portray gender, either in a stereotypical way, in which women are depicted as pure, maiden like and, sometimes, as submissive, or in a more balanced way, in which women transgress the former traditional characteristics and can occupy the same professional and social spaces as men.

### **Gender and Television**

The issue discussed in this study deals with the complexity of the depiction of female characters in television, more specifically in the TV series *Grey's Anatomy*. This challenge in the representation of women arises from the fact that in the last fifty years or so women have begun to occupy different spaces in society, which has had an impact on the family and on the labor market. Historically, there is an association between women and the domestic environment. However, this connection has been progressively deconstructed, as some programs have attempted to break traditional stereotypes of femininity, although they are still present in television. Besides, recent advances in Gender Studies and feminist critical theory, with their focus on the constructed character of identity and on the differences among women, along racial, economic and cultural lines, have rendered it somewhat difficult to portray femaleness as a monolithic entity.

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<sup>1</sup> “Something to talk about” is the title of the sixteenth episode of the second season of *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-06).

Although many television programs still portray women as submissive and dependent on men, thus perpetuating patriarchal values, issues such as building a successful career and dealing with contemporary social expectations (e.g. being pretty, delicate, well educated, polite, thin, etc.) have begun to be addressed in what concerns women's lives. However, to discuss these issues is not always positive, since they are often discussed from a male perspective. A new perspective has been approached when these issues started to be discussed by women, as women became part of the creation of television programs. Although the presence of women in the process of making television programs should be seen as positive, in the sense that the representation of women would be more inclusive, it is important to highlight that there are women that think as men, thus perpetuating patriarchal values. Still, in this context, television plays an important role, since it can represent and influence the construction of new models of living and consider new issues relevant for society, especially for women, when seen from a new perspective.

In contemporary television, important changes in the portrayal of gender have been observed. However, these changes appear to be occurring more strongly in relation to female characters, both heterosexual and homosexual, as they have become more powerful, a fact that is observed in the social places they occupy. As Andi Zeisler (2008) points out, "in the 1970s [. . .] women were no longer just playing the role of the sweet, pliant housewife. They were going to work, getting divorced, having abortions, standing up for injustice" (n.p.)<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, male characters are still mostly represented as strong and as providers, being portrayed mainly in social and professional spaces. What seems to be happening in television programs is an attempt to balance maleness and femaleness, through a more positive and powerful depiction of female characters. Women, although still belonging to the domestic sphere, also participate in other social and professional spaces, such as the workplace and politics. Still, some of these portrayals may have a negative side, since some women are portrayed stereotypically as bossy and considered "bitches", in an attempt to be feared in these new social spaces they occupy. Men, on the other hand, are much less frequently represented as belonging to the domestic environment, except as providers.

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<sup>2</sup> Andi Zeisler makes a contextualization of the portrayal of women in pop culture, from the 1940s to the present. For more information, see her book "Feminism and Popular Culture".

Taking into consideration the changes that have been occurring in many television programs, more specifically in television series, the specific context of investigation of this research concerns the television series *Grey's Anatomy*. The series is created by Shonda Rhimes, and has been aired since 2005, broadcast by the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) in the United States and by Sony Entertainment Television in Brazil. Previous television series have dealt with the issue of gender, such as *I love Lucy* (1950s), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), and more recently, *Masters of Sex* (2013-), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-), and *How to Get Away With Murder* (2014-). However, three characteristics of *Grey's Anatomy* emerge as positive factors for the choice of this series for an analysis of gender issues. First, *Grey's Anatomy* seems to have a sharp view of women, that is, it considers the differences among them, enhanced by the fact that it is written by a woman and its main characters are women. Second, similarly to what Judy Syfers' pointed out in "I want a wife" (1971), *Grey's Anatomy* explores humorously the challenges faced by working women. Third, *Grey's Anatomy* problematizes gender relations, bringing new vitality to the representation of women.

As argued by Lauren Wilks (2012) in her article entitled "Is Grey's Anatomy on the Wave? A Feminist Textual Analysis of Meredith Grey and Cristina Yang",

[t]his series also approached medical television in a manner different from its predecessors – there was an emphasis on character building, to encourage audience members to get to know the surgical interns at Seattle Grace Hospital, the fictional hub of action in *Grey's Anatomy*. (5)

In this sense, the characters' personal lives are also addressed. The program also attempts to portray women's different concerns regarding career, family, and sexuality.

Nevertheless, *Grey's Anatomy* is generally recognized for attempting to deconstruct patriarchal values. According to Wilks (2012), for example, *Grey's Anatomy* "challenges preexisting media stereotypes of women and promotes feminist goals, specifically the equal treatment of women as complex individuals with interests as diverse and legitimate as their male counterparts" (1). *Grey's Anatomy's* impact on contemporary television was confirmed when the series won the Golden Globe® Award in 2007 and also by its many Emmy nominations.

### “Second Opinion”<sup>3</sup>: unveiling the theoretical background

The present review of literature consists of works addressing the issue of gender, which is the focus of this research. Taking into consideration its objectives, I will first present a discussion about Gender Studies, followed by a general view on gender representation, more specifically about the representation of women, as well as the concept of identity. I will also discuss Queer Studies, since I will analyze characters with non-normative sexualities. Then, since I will analyze a television series, I will present a brief discussion regarding television and media studies, its impact on people and the importance of this medium for today’s society.

Gender Studies is an interdisciplinary field concerned with human sexuality and with the social and cultural assumptions about what it means to be male or female and about how women and men should relate to each other. Within this broad area of study, it is important to highlight the difference between sex and gender. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her groundbreaking book *Epistemology of the closet* (1990), discusses the differences among sex, gender and sexuality. She points out that these three terms “whose usage relations and analytical relations are almost irremediably slippery” are often confusing and that, therefore, “the charting of a space between something called ‘sex’ and something called ‘gender’ has been one of the most influential and successful undertakings of feminist thought” (27). As for the third term, Sedgwick highlights that “the whole realm of what modern culture refers to as ‘sexuality’ and *also* calls ‘sex’ – the array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges, in both women and men [. . .]” (29), is also often blurred with the other two.

Another theorist that approaches the differences between sex and gender is Ann Oakley. She points out that

‘Sex’ is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. ‘Gender’ however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. (Oakley, 1972, 16 qtd. Delphy, 1996, 33)

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<sup>3</sup> “Second Opinion” is the title of the sixth episode from the ninth season of *Grey’s Anatomy* (2012-2013).

Oakley's distinction of sex and gender is very important, since the difference between these terms might be blurred. In addition, Oakley's statement brings into question the roles assigned to each gender and to what extent these roles are biologically or culturally determined.

In addition to what Oakley pointed out, Jane Flax states in her article "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory" (1987) that there are two ways of thinking gender. She points out that gender can be understood "as a thought construct or category that helps us to make sense out of particular social worlds and histories" or "as a social relation that enters into and partially constitutes all other social relations and activities" (630). In other words, gender is related to cultural aspects, and it will vary according to the characteristics that are designated to each sex. Flax also mentions that it is important to highlight that this concept "will vary by culture, age, class, race, and time" (630). In Western society, in which this research is inserted, historically there has been a clear division between masculinity and femininity, with women being assigned roles related to domestic life, such as mothers and housewives, and men being seen as public figures, being expected to work outside the home and provide for the family. Although this division has been increasingly destabilized, as women are becoming more participative in the labor market, many of the traditional beliefs still persist and need to be addressed and deconstructed.

Here the concept of identity becomes fundamental. In this research I consider Stuart Hall's perspective of post-modern subjects, which are

conceptualized as having no fixed, essential, or permanent identity. Identity becomes a "moveable feast": formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. (598)

Simone de Beauvoir's (1976 [1949]) assertion that "one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman" (267) is one of the key concepts to define gender. Her statement asserts that being a woman is culturally constructed, that is, the way women act in society is imposed; it is not a biological given. Likewise, men's identity is a product of social and cultural norms, though they are constructed differently. According to Ann Ferguson, in her book *Blood at the Root: Motherhood, Sexuality & Male Dominance* (1989), men are expected to fulfill the roles of lovers and of being a reference in their groups of friends (81). Men's identity,

however, has not changed as much as women's, for men are still expected to be the providers, a patriarchal value that remains strong in today's society. With the rise of the feminist movement and the changes it brought into women's lives, hegemonic masculinity felt threatened, because the "feminist demands for reciprocity threaten both aspects of masculine gender identity" (81), that is, being lovers and providing a reference in their groups. This feeling of threat creates a conflict in men and women's relationships, which often is explored as a power conflict.

To talk about this conflict, one should be aware that it is difficult to detach feminism from patriarchy for they are connected concepts. Socially and culturally, men have always been considered superior to women. However, as highlighted by Sheila Radford-Hill (1986), "the central task of any movement for social change is empowerment" (159); thus, the feminist movement claims for women to empower themselves and to fight patriarchy. Although in the 1980s the academy and feminists discussed the empowerment of women, reality was different, as women still suffered forms of dominance. Ann Ferguson (1989) has written about how men were and are still dominant, and how women, through the feminist movement, try to deconstruct this *status quo*. According to her,

in a sense, the vast majority of women, [. . .] have no choice but to struggle with individual men for women's and sexual liberation, since we must continue to relate to men in personal ways (as employers, relatives, politicians, etc) whether or not we chose them as lovers. In this process, we must struggle to recodify the symbolic meanings of our sex/affective interactions with men. (225)

In an attempt to change the *status quo*, contemporary women, at least in most Western societies, are trying to define themselves as detached from men, that is, they are trying to find their own identity, without being related to men as daughters, sisters and wives. However, as Ferguson states, this task demands a great endeavor, for women will always be in contact with men.

Bell hooks, in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), also discusses the issue of women's independence and male dominance. She agrees that "we know now that work does not liberate women from male domination" (49), because women suffer the effects of male domination in all spheres of society. However, women have



become more daring and are less amenable to being dominated. As hooks states, “we do know that if a woman has access to economic self-sufficiency she is more likely to leave a relationship where male domination is the norm when she chooses liberation. She leaves because she can” (49). Therefore, women’s liberation from male dominance becomes an important issue for debate among feminists, as women empower themselves and make decisions on their own.

The fact that women have been entering the labor market in large numbers and pursuing careers as a form of independence and self-fulfillment has brought into discussion important issues related to their traditional roles in the domestic sphere as mothers and caretakers. According to Nancy Chodorow (1978), “women not only bear children. They also take primary responsibility for infant care, spend more time with infants and children than do men, and sustain primary emotional ties with infants” (3), an argument that reinforces stereotypes, especially that of women as primarily mothers. As the number of working women has been increasing, these stereotypes, as well as family arrangement, should be reevaluated and changed.

In discussing the issue of motherhood, Adrienne Rich (1979) distinguishes between “motherhood as *experience*” and motherhood “as enforced identity and as political *institution*” (196-97). The problem she sees in motherhood is that “all mothers are expected to experience motherhood unambivalently and in accordance with patriarchal values; and the ‘non-mothering’ woman is seen as deviant” (197). Although nowadays women supposedly have the choice of being mothers or not, those who opt not to have children are still the target of comments regarding their sexuality and gender, as if being a mother is a primordial aspect of being a woman.

Bearing in mind the issues presented above, representation becomes a fundamental concept in this research. Although the concept of representation is rather complex and problematic, it is important to deal with it theoretically before attempting to analyze how female characters are depicted on television. Teresa de Lauretis, based on Foucault’s theory of sexuality, in her essay “The Technology of Gender” (1987), in which she approaches the issue of gender representation, states that “gender, too, both as representation and as self representation, is the product of various social technologies” (2). That is, what people see represented is the result of several “technologies”, or, in other words, social practices. De Lauretis also argues that “the construct of gender is both the product and the process of its representation” (5), since representation is not merely the picture of a pre-existing reality but

also its construction. More specifically, regarding the representation of women, de Lauretis points out that it is important to acknowledge “the differences among women or, perhaps more exactly, the differences *within women*” (2). By saying that, she also calls attention to categories such as race, class and sexuality, categories that render femaleness a complex, non-monolithic concept.

In terms of sexuality, Jane Flax (1987) has stated that “[f]emale sexuality is sometimes reduced to an expression of male dominance”. However, “such a definition leaves unexplained how women could ever feel lust for other women and the wide variety of other sensual experiences women claim to have” (639). In an attempt to detach themselves from male dominance and patriarchy, women have sought sexual liberation, and as bell hooks (2000) points out, “one of the first issues which served as a catalyst for the formation of the movement was sexuality – the issue being the rights of women to choose when and with whom they would be sexual” (25). In this context, television plays an important role regarding the representation of women.

Indeed, much of the recent discussions on sexuality has been approached and incorporated by television. *Grey’s Anatomy* has contributed to women’s sexual liberation, since the female characters in the series are owners of their sexual life. In addition, in the context of this research, non-normative female sexuality becomes an important issue for discussion, since two of the women who will be analyzed self-identify as lesbian and bisexual. Regarding the issue of lesbian identity, Adrienne Rich in her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), approaches heterosexuality as being imposed, and not necessarily part of the natural order of things. In this sense, she problematizes the very concept of being a lesbian, by arguing that “[. . .] heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a *political institution* [. . .]” (637). For her, heterosexuality is imposed on women by male power and she makes a list of its characteristics, including “the power of men to deny women [our own] sexuality, [. . .] or to force it [male sexuality] upon them, [. . .] to confine them physically and prevent their movement, [. . .] to use them as objects in male transactions” (638-9). In addition, Rich calls attention to the “erasure of lesbian existence” (640), claiming that women tend to bond since early life, by being friends at school and showing publicly their friendship. Therefore, lesbians are not taken seriously because society tends to believe that such a thing is just a phase.

Still on the issue of women's sexuality, Monique Wittig, in her article "The Straight Mind" (1980), agrees with Rich in relation to male domination. She states that "[t]hese discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their [men's] terms" (8). In other words, society is heterosexual, and the basis on which it is constructed is heterosexual as well. Consequently, people with non-normative sexuality cannot have voice, since they are not part of heterosexuality. In addition, Wittig points out that "[. . .] straight society is based on the necessity of the different/other at every level. [. . .] But what is the different/other if not the dominated?" (12), reinforcing that male domination pervades women's and minorities' lives.

Following the increasing concern with the study of gender and sexuality in the last decades, David Gauntlett (2002) points out that "there is a growing amount of evidence that society is becoming more accepting of sexual diversity" (13). One of the reasons why this is happening is that the media is seeking to explore this so called diversity. However, as Shonda Rhimes, the creator of *Grey's Anatomy* stated in her speech at the Human Rights Campaign<sup>4</sup> gala in Los Angeles (2015),

I really hate the word 'diversity.' It suggests something ... other. As if it is something special, or rare. Diversity! As if there is something unusual about telling stories involving women and people of color and LGBTQ characters on TV. I have a different word: normalizing. I'm normalizing TV. I am making TV look like the world looks. Women, people of color, LGBTQ people equal way more than 50 percent of the population.

That said, although the world is multiple, through the media, people become aware of different identities, ethnicities, cultures, and portrayals of gender. In this scenario, *Grey's Anatomy* is a great example, since it portrays "the differences *within women*", mentioned by Teresa de Lauretis, that is, women who are often as strong and as powerful as men, and women who opt to follow or not the heterosexual matrix. Thus, in the context of popular culture, alternative views of

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<sup>4</sup> Shonda Rhimes was honored in the Human Rights Campaign Gala for depicting LGBT issues on television.

femininity become more visible, since TV is a medium that reaches out to everyone.

Bell hooks, in an interview given to the Media Education Foundation, argues that by using movies and other media in class, she can ally theory with what is being seen. She also calls attention to the fact that popular culture has the power to influence people's thoughts, as well as have an "impact as the primary pedagogical medium for masses of people". In addition, hooks defends that "whether we're talking about race or gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is, it's where the learning is". As perhaps the most widespread of the mass media, TV acquires special importance in such pedagogy.

Regarding television history, according to Gary Edgerton (2007), television started its history in the nineteenth century, for "the dream of transmitting images and sounds over great distances" became "an increasingly common aspiration of scientists and inventors in the United States" (xi). After World War II television became one of the greatest cultural and political influences for the changes in Western society, having become "the centerpiece of American culture by the end of the 1950s" (129). In addition, reality and fiction, that is, what was on television, started to converge. As stated by David Halberstam, "many Americans [. . .] felt closer to the people they watched on television than they did to their neighbors and their distant families" (qtd. in Edgerton, 129), which highlights television's importance to people's lives.

More specifically about television series, its story began with sitcoms, an abbreviation for situation comedies, which became popular in the 1940s. According to Edgerton, *Mary Kay and Johnny* (1947), *The Goldbergs* (1949), *Life of Riley* (1949) are some of the most famous sitcoms, which took place in a domestic environment and had working-class people as their characters. By showing daily life situations with humor, sitcoms attracted the audience who could identify with the characters. The popularity of television series has grown since then. Nowadays there is a great variety of such programs, encompassing many genres, such as romance, drama, comedy, sci-fi, adventure, among others. Contemporary society is, thus, still influenced by television, for "the typical person in the United States watches approximately four hours of TV each and every day" (Edgerton, xii). The great variety of programs that are offered in television also reflect the need people have for this medium. As Ivia Alves (2015) has discussed in her article "A inclusão das 'diferentes' nas séries televisivas", "there has been, in the last decades, a transformation on TV, specifically on paid TV, that the

public has not yet realized, but that makes it at least curious, to focus on the analysis of the products from this media”<sup>5</sup> (65).

Concerning female characters in television series, until the 1970s they accounted for less than 40 percent of the roles (Gauntlett 36). However, from the 1980s on, women started to appear more, although still occupying mainly the roles connected to the domestic sphere, such as mothers, daughters, and wives, which reinforced stereotypes. Taking into consideration that women, for culturally being related to the domestic environment, were the target audiences for television programs, “studies in the 1970s consistently found that marriage, parenthood and domesticity were shown on television to be more important for women than men” (Gunter qtd. in Gauntlett 36), which also reinforced that family and the domestic life were women’s concerns. Still according to Gauntlett,

it could be said that in the 1990s, to a certain extent, programme makers arrived at comfortable, not-particularly-offensive models of masculinity and femininity, which a majority of the public seemed to think were acceptable. Producers thus seemed to give up on feeling that they might need to challenge gender representations. (48)

That is to say, the homogeneous audience led the producers not to change the format of television programs and, therefore, gender roles were not changed either. This impasse, consequently, did not allow space to promote social changes in relation to gender representation, since the public accepted what was being displayed on television.

Considering that TV affects the lives of everyone who has access to this medium and has the power to influence people’s minds, Pierre Bourdieu (1996) points out that TV “enjoys a de facto monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the population and what they think” (18). His statement, in a way, relates to the effect television has, that is, it might both affect and reflect people’s thoughts and contribute to creating and spreading ideals in the population. In this sense, the great variety of television programs that are exhibited contain traces that represent the way people behave, which also serve as model for them, forming the cyclic process recognized by De Lauretis (1987)

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<sup>5</sup> My translation. Original: “houve, ao longo das últimas décadas, uma transformação na TV e especificamente na TV fechada de que o público ainda não se deu conta, mas que torna, pelo menos curioso, se deter na análise dos produtos provenientes dessa mídia”.

as “technologies of gender”. More specifically about television series, which is the object of study of this research, the way these programs are constructed is attractive to the audience. New episodes are aired generally once a week and they are re-run at different times of the day, so that the audience can watch them. In addition, the duration of each episode varies from 20 to 50 minutes. Also, as Shonda Rhimes said in the Human Rights Campaign (2015), people “should get to turn [their] TV and see [their] tribe, see [their] people, someone out there like [them] existing”. That is why the characters on TV series are based on real people, who identify with the wide range of presented identities (nerds, housewives, heterosexual, homosexual, among others).

Queer identities have been depicted in television series, although only recently, given the fact that the first openly gay character appeared in prime time television in 1981, in a soap opera called *Dynasty* (1981-1989), and the first lesbian kiss happened in 1991, in the series *L.A. Law* (1986-1994) (Summers, 2005, 6-8). Drawing a comparison with cinema, television and cinema have different ways of portraying queer subjects. As Diane Raymond (2003) points out, “[i]ndeed, one might argue that television is light years ahead of mainstream film, whose “gay” characters still seem to be confined to psychopathic murderers [. . .] or lonely, asexual best friends [. . .]” (102). Her statement highlights the fact that television is a more open space for the representation of queer identities, due to its heterogeneous public. Mainstream cinema, on the other hand, is a more fixed medium with an established audience, a fact that does not allow for much variety in social roles.

Television series, in recent years, have also become sources for academic research. These studies take into account the popularity of television and its power to influence people’s minds, as well as the fact that many television series, including *Grey’s Anatomy*, have attempted to deconstruct patriarchal views of men and women. In spite of such critical view, according to Diane Negra (2003), “the 1990s/early 2000s have been characterized by heightened pressures to define women’s lives in terms of romance and marriage”, which are values related to patriarchy. No matter its ideological position, the fact remains that television has a great impact on gender roles. From a feminist perspective, television programs have a social duty to fulfil, which is to change ideals from the past and create new perspectives towards gender roles.

## **“We All Remember the Bed Time Stories of Our Childhood”<sup>6</sup>: analyzing television from a feminist perspective**

The general objective of this research is to investigate the portrayal of women in the television series *Grey's Anatomy*, specifically, four women, two of whom are heterosexual, namely, Meredith Grey (Ellen Pompeo) and Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh), and two of whom are homosexual, namely, Calliope Torres (Sara Ramírez) and Arizona Robbins (Jessica Capshaw). I have chosen these characters in order to make a contrast between what is considered the norm (the heterosexual) and what is considered deviant. The focus is, therefore, on gender and sexuality. Bearing this in mind, the specific objectives are to verify how the four aforementioned characters are portrayed in terms of their private and professional lives.

In order to guide this study, the following research questions are proposed:

- 1) How does *Grey's Anatomy* portray heterosexual and homosexual relationships and what are the main issues involved in such relationships?
- 2) What is the contribution of *Grey's Anatomy* to the deconstruction of traditional roles imposed on women by society?
- 3) How is the depiction of women in *Grey's Anatomy* relevant for the struggles of the feminist movement today?

To achieve these objectives, the ideal would be to analyze all aired episodes of the selected program, a total of 250 episodes. However, due to time and length constraints, I have chosen not to select episodes, but important moments of the eleven finished seasons of the series. The choice of the moments took into account their relevance for the selected characters' private and personal lives, as well as moments that focus on the characters' actions towards family, relationships and career and on how their choices may reflect new social roles for women in contemporary society. Although I will focus on dialogues in the analysis of the selected moments, some references will be made to visual aspects, such as *mise-en-scène* aspects will be made, in order to give support to the analysis. In addition, some screenshots will also serve as illustration for the analysis.

One of the reasons why I chose this series is because it portrays different women and, in my view, it deconstructs ideals of femininity

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<sup>6</sup> Season 5, episode 1.

and beauty. Although the four characters here analyzed might not be exactly representative of alternative physical types (although it might be argued that Callie does not fall into the stereotypical image of a skinny woman, other female characters can be cited in order to illustrate this preoccupation in the series as a whole. Miranda Bailey (Chandra Wilson) is a black woman, short and overweight who has grown in her career, becoming chief of surgery. Izzie Stevens is blond, tall and skinny, but she is poor and had to work in order to pay for her education. Amelia Shepherd (Caterina Scorsone) is a drug addict and fights against it, in order to be a good surgeon. These are a few examples of how *Grey's Anatomy* tackles intersectionality, becoming truly representative of femaleness.

It is also important to emphasize why I chose this specific series to work with. As a researcher and a feminist, I have become interested in the representation of women, particularly on television. I believe that the present study should contribute to the understanding of contemporary portrayals of gender in television through the perspective of Gender, Feminist and Cultural Studies. It is also important to mention that, by bringing feminist theories into discussion, allied with a popular television program, this study should contribute to the view people have towards gender issues. This research is also of great personal importance, because, being an enthusiastic of television series and a *Grey's Anatomy* fan, I believe that television is a way to promote changes in society and raise awareness for issues that remain a taboo nowadays. Finally, developing this study will broaden my own understanding of the representation of women, as well as my theoretical background regarding gender and feminist studies.



## CHAPTER I

### “A CHANGE IS GONNA COME”<sup>7</sup>: a new view towards heterosexual relationships

Meredith Grey (voiceover): *Can two people really be meant to be? M.F.E.O? Soul mates. It would be nice if its true. That we all have someone out there waiting for us, us waiting for them. I'm just not sure I believe it.*  
( I was Made for Loving You, *Grey's Anatomy* S09E07)

Meredith Grey and Cristina Yang are two of the protagonists in *Grey's Anatomy*. Both women are heterosexual and throughout the series have a few relationships with men. Although both women subscribe to the traditional marriage contract, their representation is not stereotyped, since they at first have interests other than marriage. By presenting this somewhat new perspective on women, the series attempts to raise important issues in relation to heterosexual relationships and to how women can empower themselves, both in the workplace and within the relationship. Taking this into account, in this chapter I will discuss how their heterosexuality is addressed and how this representation may influence society.

Meredith Grey, being the main character of the series, is the focus of the action. She is an aspiring doctor, whose mother was a pioneer in the field of general surgery. Meredith often faces situations in which her relationship with her mother is addressed, mainly because of the pressure and influence her mother forced on her. As she grew up having the hospital as her second home, she has an urge to be as good as her mother, as a surgeon. However, the pressure to be a good doctor has caused in Meredith a great insecurity towards life. As she defines herself, she is “dark and twisty”, which is a recurring sentence throughout the series. Through voiceover, in many episodes the viewer learns about these insecurities, which revolve around professional and personal life.

Cristina Yang, a Korean descendant, is independent and competitive. She was the top student of her class at Stanford University and wants to become a great surgeon. Her colleagues claim that she is too serious and has a cold heart, but she defends herself, saying that she is focused and does not let anything get on her way of becoming a talented surgeon. Cristina also has issues with her mother, but in the

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<sup>7</sup> “A Change is Gonna Come” is the title of the first episode of the fourth season (2007-2008).

personal life only. Her mother raised her in a traditional way and wants her to get married and have children. Although focused on her career, Cristina also has to deal with issues involving men and family.

It is also important to highlight the fact that both characters seem to have control over their lives. As Lauren Wilks (2012) points out, in the beginning of the series, “Meredith and Cristina still demonstrate decisional, political, and operational control of situations at points over the course of the series despite their lower station in the hospital” (10). In addition, throughout selected moments that occur within the eleven seasons to be analyzed in this research, it is possible to notice how the characters grow, both in terms of professional relations and in their personal choices. Thus, as will be discussed later in this chapter, their actions convey an empowerment, which leads to their independence.

Considering the aforementioned women, the objective of this chapter is to discuss the lives of two heterosexual women, namely Meredith and Cristina, both in terms of personal and professional choices, as well as their sexuality. As pointed out by Martha M. Lauzen, David M. Dozier, and Nora Horan in their article “Constructing Gender Stereotypes through Social Roles in Prime-Time Television” (2015), citing Eagly & Steffen (1984),

characters inhabit professional and personal roles. A character’s professional life reveals what that character does for a living. A character’s personal life reflects her or his romantic relationships and friendships. Through the enactment of these roles, prime-time characters reveal their most basic social functions as breadwinners, spouses, and friends. Social role theory suggests that knowledge of these basic roles provides the content for gender stereotypes. (200)

Therefore, discussing these two instances (personal and professional roles) is of great importance within Gender Studies. In this chapter, two of the proposed research questions will also be discussed. One addresses the portrayal of heterosexual relationships and the other deals with the contribution of the series to the deconstruction of heterosexual female identity in contemporary society.

## **“Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head”<sup>8</sup>: Meredith’s and Cristina’s private and personal lives**

As Meredith and Cristina are the protagonists of the series and are present since the first episode, the great majority of the scenes is focused on them. Thus, there is a larger number of situations that allow a discussion of their characters. As previously mentioned, *Grey’s Anatomy* is focused on how young doctors build their careers, so the private environment almost never appears on the screen. However, from season eight on, the characters’ homes become a recurrent scenario in the series, which allows more space for the discussion of personal issues. This might be because the original characters from season one have by then become residents with established careers. Thus, their personal and private lives are used as a source for new plots and conflicts involving domestic and family life in the program.

Regarding Meredith, her background is explicit since the first season of the series. Every episode begins with a voiceover narration, which are mostly from her. Throughout the voiceovers, the audience learns Meredith’s doubts and fears, as well as how she feels towards situations she has to deal with. For instance, she says

[. . .] Being an adult? Totally overrated. I mean seriously, don’t be fooled by all the hot shoes and the great sex and the no parents anywhere telling you what to do. Adulthood is responsibility. [. . .] and if you’re training to be a surgeon, holding a human heart in your hands, hello? Talk about responsibility [. . .]<sup>9</sup>.

Through this example, the viewer acknowledges her personal struggles and insecurities. In addition, as already mentioned, her relationship with her family, first her mother and father and then her husband and children, are also addressed in the series.

In relation to Meredith’s position towards family, she comes from a home where her mother did not have time to be with her and her father left when she was a child, because he could not handle the pressure of raising his daughter and having an absent wife. Thus, she is very concerned with building up a family herself. When she says,

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<sup>8</sup> “Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head” is the title of the first episode of the second season (2005-2006).

<sup>9</sup> Season 1, episode 5.

“People want high power careers, I get that, but they should think twice before having kids”,<sup>10</sup> she is showing her concern about having responsibility towards a child, especially considering the professional life, because she knows that a child demands attention and proper care.

Concerning Meredith’s relationships, since the first episode of season one, she and Derek Shepherd (Patrick Dempsey) engage in a love relationship. Derek is a neurosurgeon who has just moved to Seattle from New York. He becomes the chief neurosurgeon in the same hospital Meredith works. They met at a bar and learn that they work in the same place the day after they have sex. By the end of season one, both Meredith and the audience acknowledge that Derek is married and he moved to Seattle because his wife cheated on him with his best friend. This comes as a shock to Meredith, thus making her discredit love relationships. However, after Derek divorces his wife, he and Meredith engage in a love relationship.

Meredith and Derek’s relationship was unstable,<sup>11</sup> until they got married at the end of season five. Until then, he was often seen in her house. However, as more people lived there, they did not have an agreement regarding domestic tasks. What is clear is the fact that Meredith does not care much about food and clothes. She is seen eating cereal and leftovers, and picking up used clothes to wear. Derek, however, seems to be more careful about those things, breaking the commonly held view that women are perfect housekeepers and the men are messy.

In relation to Meredith and Derek’s domestic life, it was not explored in the series until they got married and adopted Zola, in season eight. As parents, at first it seems that they try to divide the tasks. For instance, often both Derek and Meredith are seen taking Zola to daycare and playing with her at home. In addition, Derek is portrayed tying Zola’s hair and putting her to bed. Although he does that, there is an episode in which everybody stares at them, because Zola’s hair is a mess, and Derek’s hair is neatly done. This might be an indication that their roles are not clearly divided, since Derek fails to get it right. Still, showing the father doing these things is important in television, since not many families have this kind of arrangement, as usually the wife

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<sup>10</sup> Season 3, episode 8.

<sup>11</sup> Meredith discovers that Derek is married. Although it was a broken marriage, and Derek showed signs that he loves Meredith, he decides to give his marriage a second chance. However, as his wife cheats on him again, they divorce and Derek and Meredith get back together.

takes care of the home and the children. According to Jim F. Harris (n. d.), “men, who define themselves through separation from others, would be less engaged with interpersonal relations than women, who define their selves through relations with others” (4). Consequently, as pointed out by Heidi Hartmann (1976), “in our society the sexual division of labor is hierarchical, with men on top and women on the bottom” (193). Thus, men would be more connected to the public life and women to the domestic and emotional lives, but the series attempts to blur this division, since both Meredith and Derek are portrayed playing public and domestic roles.

In season nine, Meredith, although happy with her husband and daughter, shows the negative side of having a family. She tells Cristina: “Please tell me you’re as miserable as I am. We are potty training and I am wearing an apron!”<sup>12</sup> This could be a comment on the double role of women or an indication that she would rather be working than doing domestic tasks, because in that moment she defines herself as being “miserable”. In the same season, Derek gets more involved with work and Meredith is often taking care of Zola and the house alone. In addition, she gets pregnant, which makes her slow down at work, which jeopardizes her professionally. Nancy Chodorow (1978) has discussed the issue of women as primary caretakers. She questions biological facts, since only women can bear children, against social constructs, that historically women have always been at home taking care of the children. However, nowadays, as both women and men have professional lives, the family arrangement needs to be changed, as *Grey’s Anatomy* tries to portray.

The domestic life starts to get heavy for Meredith in season ten, because Derek is offered a job in Washington DC. He starts to work harder and travel. For instance, in an episode she asks Derek to pick up their children at day care. Derek does not go, because he is involved in his work. Later Meredith and he have an argument. She tells him: “For three hours I didn’t know where my children were”.<sup>13</sup> She also complains that she can no longer focus on her career, because Derek is working too much and she has to take care of the children (this issue will be addressed in the next section). With Derek being absent, apparently Meredith is the one who worries and takes major responsibility towards the children, although Derek was the one who wanted to start a family.

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<sup>12</sup> Season 9, episode 5.

<sup>13</sup> Season 10, episode 20.

In relation to Cristina, her life story takes a while to be unveiled. She does not say much about herself, as she is focused on her career and on learning as much as she can. Her sharp sentences and lack of humor make her seem bitter and bad tempered. In addition, she rarely smiles, which contrasts with Meredith's personality. Throughout the seasons, the audience learns that her father died when she was a child and her mother raised her in a traditional way. In spite of that, Cristina does not want to build up a family. One moment in which her mysterious personality is approached is in season two, when her boyfriend, Preston Burke (Isaiah Washington), says: "You don't ask a lot of personal questions and you're very hard to get to know".<sup>14</sup> She agrees and, since she does not want to share anything about her personal life, she changes subject. Her reaction suggests a lack of emotional empathy. As mentioned above, women are traditionally related to the interpersonal side, but this does not seem to happen with Cristina.

As for her domestic life, she is not often portrayed inside the house. As she is a workaholic, there are not many scenes in which she is seen doing domestic tasks. The first time her apartment is shown is in season two, when her boyfriend asks her to move in with him. She takes him to her apartment and it is a mess. There are clothes and food wrappers on the floor and on her furniture. Her mess might be a sign that she does not care about domestic life. She does not clean and probably does not cook. In other scenes inside the home, she is seen eating cereal or other boxed food, which endorses the hypothesis that she does not cook. Besides her obvious dislike of housekeeping, one of Cristina's strongest positions regarding her life is her opinion about pregnancy. Since season two, it is very clear that she does not want to have children.

Cristina dealt with issues involving pregnancy in two moments. One is in season two, when she collapsed because of an extra uterine pregnancy and lost the baby. When, later on, Preston asks her what she was planning on doing with the baby, Cristina replies "I wasn't gonna have it. The baby. We barely knew each other. I was an intern, and there was no way that we could have...".<sup>15</sup> Preston then, tells her "It's okay. I just wanted to know. I want to know things". Their dialogue reveals her reluctance to show her feelings, and also that he accepts her. The other moment is in season eight, when she discovers she is pregnant and decides to have an abortion. This moment will be addressed later on in

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<sup>14</sup> Season 2, episode 9.

<sup>15</sup> Season 2, episode 13.

this chapter. By deciding not having children, Cristina brings to the surface the issue of motherhood as institution, as proposed by Adrienne Rich (1979). Women often feel co-opted by patriarchal values to fulfill the role of mother. The feminist movement has struggled with this tradition, since motherhood should be a choice. However, a change in this *status quo* is somewhat difficult. Therefore, the importance of popular programs such as *Grey's Anatomy* lies in bringing other perspectives towards issues such as motherhood.

### **“Put me in Coach”<sup>16</sup>: working women on television**

In the beginning of the series, the viewer acknowledges that both Meredith and Cristina want to become surgeons, as they enter together a class of surgical interns at Seattle Grace Hospital. In the hospital, they face challenges, related not only to medicine but also to ethical questions and personal beliefs. The fact that a television series portrays women within a professional environment is a reflection of today's society, a fact discussed by Alvanita Almeida, in her article “No comando: mulheres no comando na mídia televisiva” (2015). She points out that “women have been represented in cultural products occupying these new social roles, reinforcing stereotypes or rethinking them critically”<sup>17</sup> (41). Her study also highlights the importance of television series as a cultural product, as she states that this media is “a vehicle of values, beliefs and formation of new identities. The categories of gender, class, ethnicity and generation are broadly represented, allowing the viewers a more critical view of the relations highlighted in such productions”<sup>16</sup> (42). Hence, the author complies with the idea discussed by bell hooks, that television has the power of raising awareness and influencing people's thoughts.

It is in this context, where women have started to occupy new social roles, that Meredith Grey is placed. As stated before, she is insecure professionally, because her mother was a great doctor and she

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<sup>16</sup> “Put me in Coach” is the title of the seventh episode of the eighth season (2011-12).

<sup>17</sup> My translation. Original: “as mulheres têm sido representadas nos produtos culturais ocupando esses novos papéis sociais, reforçando estereótipos ou repensando-os, criticamente” (41).

“[. . .] veículo também de valores, crenças, e de engendramento de novas identidades. As categorias de gênero, classe, etnia e geração estão fartamente representadas, cabendo aos interlocutores uma visão mais crítica acerca das relações evidenciadas em tais produções” (42).

often feels that she will not reach the same level. She always tries her best during her learning process. However, her relationship with Derek is often part of this insecurity and, therefore, impairs her work. For instance, in season two she does not feel like going to work, because Derek decided to give his wife a second chance (see footnote 11). Meredith does not want to go to the hospital both because she is sad for not being with the man she loves and because she will see him and his wife at her workplace. Yet, with Cristina's incentive, she goes to work.

An important professional moment for Meredith is when she has to choose a surgical specialty, in season eight. She got very close to neurosurgery, which has Derek as the chief. However, she decided not to choose neurosurgery as her specialty, because, even though she and Derek tried to work together, they always ended up fighting, which influenced negatively their relationship. In this moment, Meredith is not prioritizing her career, which could be rather problematic, since she chose not to become a neurosurgeon because of her boyfriend.

In season nine, Meredith has to struggle in order to keep her career growing. She has another baby, which makes it difficult for her to keep the same rhythm at work. In addition, she cannot count on Derek, and they often argue about it, though, as image 1 illustrates, the camera shows them at the same level, as neither one is portrayed superior to the other. One of these arguments may be observed in the dialogue below:

DEREK. Why are you yelling at me? I had a big surgery.

MEREDITH. So did I! But you didn't answer your phone. She [Zola] cut her head, and you didn't answer your phone. So I had to go comfort her, which means that I didn't get to do my surgery, a heart/liver transplant. Those never happen, and I didn't get to do it.

DEREK. I'm sorry, but that is not my fault.

MEREDITH. It is your fault. Because you didn't answer your phone!

DEREK. I was in a surgery.

MEREDITH. I shouldn't have to choose between being a good mother and being a good surgeon.

DEREK. I never asked you to do that. Never have I asked you to do that.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Season 10, episode 5.



Image 1: Meredith and Derek' discussion.



In this dialogue, it is clear that Derek prioritizes his work rather than his family. Although he is interested in his children, Meredith is the one who takes responsibility towards them, which confirms Sara Ruddick's (1989) statement that "typically a mother assumes the primary task of maintaining conditions of growth" (20). In addition, Meredith's concern about being a good mother and a good surgeon reflects the reality of women in society. Having to prioritize either family or career becomes a problem, especially when they do not have someone to lean on.

As Meredith grows both professionally and as a person, her wishes become evident, especially regarding her career. By the end of season ten, as Derek is offered a job in Washington DC (the series takes place in Seattle), he assumes that Meredith will go with him, since he asked the government for a position as a resident for her. However, as he asks her to sign the paperwork for her transfer, she becomes doubtful, also taking into consideration the fact that he had promised her that he would slow down, stay more at home with their children, so she could build her career. Considering the development of the story, Cristina had an important role for Meredith in what concerns her choices, especially the one being addressed here. In the last episode of season ten, as Cristina is moving to Zurich, she says to Meredith: "You are a gifted surgeon with an extraordinary mind. Don't let what he wants eclipse what you need. He's very dreamy, but he's not the sun. You are".<sup>19</sup> These words made Meredith make up her mind about moving to another city. She chose to stay in Seattle, which, professionally, was the right decision to make, since she was developing a clinical trial and was establishing herself as a renowned surgeon, continuing her mother's

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<sup>19</sup> Season 10, episode 24.

legacy. The impact this decision had in their relationship will be discussed later in this chapter.

As for Cristina, she is often described as competitive by her colleagues. She was the best of her class at Stanford and she wants to be the best intern. Her passion is for cardiothoracic surgery: “I’m married to cardio”,<sup>20</sup> she says. She is always trying to get the best cases, that is, the ones that need surgery, so she can develop her surgical skills. An example that shows her commitment to her job is in season two, in which she has an extra uterine pregnancy, which results in an emergency surgery. Even though she just had a surgery, she walks through the hospital carrying the serum, trying to work.

At some point, however, she is lost, professionally speaking. After Preston left, there is another cardiothoracic attending at the hospital, Teddy Altman (Kim Raver), but they do not get along well. Cristina tells Meredith:

Nothing is happening to me. I don’t know what I am doing. I’m like chasing after surgeries I don’t care about. Do you know how long it’s been since I held a heart in my hands? I miss Burke. It’s not the relationship or the sex. I miss... everyday he was here I held a heart.<sup>21</sup>

Her outburst shows how much she wants to follow the career of cardiothoracic surgeon, as other fields and procedures do not thrill her. After a while, Cristina confronts Teddy, because she will leave Seattle. Cristina talks to her, trying to make her stay:

CRISTINA. Dr. Altman, wait, wait. What do you want? More money? 'Cause I'll talk to the Chief.

TEDDY. No.

[. . .]

CRISTINA. Wait, wait, wait. No one's ever believed in me like this. You believe in me more than I do. And I need that. I'm gonna die here without that.

TEDDY. (*talking over her*) Cristina it's more complicated than that.

CRISTINA. (*trying to talk over Teddy*) Tell me what you want and I will make it happen—

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<sup>20</sup> Season 4, episode 6.

<sup>21</sup> Season 6, episode 5.

TEDDY. I want Owen! [Cristina's boyfriend]  
 CRISTINA. Fine. Take him!<sup>22</sup>

At this moment, Cristina is prioritizing her career over love. Unlike Meredith, who gave up being a neurosurgeon because of her boyfriend, Cristina puts her relationship in second place, even considering leaving her boyfriend. As Wilks (2012) correctly points out, “Cristina resists marriage and acceptance of traditional female roles, which indicates that her character would choose her career over fulfillment of traditional feminine roles” (17). Meredith, on the other hand, prioritizes the relationship, which is an indication of her romantic view of life.

Another important moment for Cristina regarding her career is in the tenth season, when she develops a clinical trial. With her results, she is nominated for the Harper Avery Award, a very important prize for doctors in the series. However, she does not win, not because she was not the best, but because the Harper Avery Foundation runs the hospital she works in, and they did not want the winner to be from the hospital. After ten years, Cristina has built a solid career, thus being recognized for it. By the end this season, Cristina is invited to go to Zurich to give a talk about her clinical trial. When she gets there, she learns that her former boyfriend, Preston Burke, was the one who invited her. She gets confused at first, because she thinks he wants to get back together with her:

CRISTINA. Is this some ploy to get me back in your life? Because I'm not interested.

PRESTON. (*turns a picture around on his desk, pointing it at Cristina*): My wife, Edra. (*turns another picture around*) That is Simone, she's 5. Vivianna just turned 4. I'm happy, Cristina. Edra is the love of my life. She's my world. My family is my world. [. . .] Edra wants to be a mom. She trained as a surgeon, and she gave it up. Now she stays home and takes care of the kids. She's supportive of me, of my dreams.

CRISTINA. Well, that's good for you. I'm happy for you.

PRESTON. When you do what you and I do as fiercely as we do it, you need somebody that's willing to stay home and keep the home fires burning. That's the only way you and I are ever

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<sup>22</sup> Season 6, episode 11.

gonna have someone. [ . . . ] I know that you've become a magnificent surgeon. And you've become everything I dreamed you'd be. You should be in a place like this. You should consider it.<sup>23</sup>

Preston has recognized that Cristina is a great surgeon. In their dialogue, it is clear that, for him, traditional roles assigned to women are important, as his wife gave up being a surgeon to stay home and take care of the children, something Cristina would never do. This moment might be problematic in the representation of women because, even though Cristina fought for her career, the recognition and opportunity to run a department in a hospital came from the man who left her. In spite of that, Cristina argues with him, in search for an explanation as to why he wanted her in Zurich:

CRISTINA. You think that I want to work for you again? I never wanted to work for you. I wanted to be you. The best thing that ever happened to me was you walking away from our wedding. It made me stand on my own two feet. I am better for it. You are better for it. [ . . . ] So why bring me here? Why offer me a job you know I can't resist? You gonna dangle the carrot, and I'm supposed to chase at it until you snatch it away? I don't want the job.  
[ . . . ]

PRESTON. I don't want you to work for me. Us working together would destroy my marriage, my life. The way I loved you was consuming, and eventually... you hold the carrot, and I'll be chasing you. I have a family now, a life that... a life I want. [ . . . ] I don't want you to work for me. I want you to take over for me. I am leaving. Edra's parents are in Milan, and she wants to be closer to them. [ . . . ] This place is yours, Cristina, if you want it. Do you?<sup>23</sup>

Cristina accepts the job and finishes her part in the series.

With the evidence presented in this section, one can verify that both Meredith and Cristina are focused on their careers. However,

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<sup>23</sup> Season 10, episode 22.

Meredith feels responsible for the home front, as will be discussed in the next section. In spite of that, they try to be even with the male characters professionally. Though Cristina is more focused on her career, Meredith also gets recognition and success. Both women achieve success in different ways, since Meredith sometimes puts her career in second place and Cristina always prioritizes her profession.

### **“Where the Boys Are”<sup>24</sup>: heterosexual relationships**

One of the most discussed features in *Grey’s Anatomy* is relationships. In the context of prime-time television, love relationships are always in evidence. In this section I will discuss a few moments that are crucial for heterosexual relationships in *Grey’s Anatomy*, more specifically the ones involving Meredith Grey and Cristina Yang. Issues such as power and family will be addressed.

Meredith and Derek’s relationship is the longest in the plot of the series. They meet at a bar and then discover they work in the same place. Their relationship has been through different phases and several break ups. During the break ups, Meredith has other relationships, but none that makes her forget Derek. In season three there is an important sequence regarding Meredith’s relationship with men. She wants to choose between Derek and Finn (Chris O’Donnell), her dog’s vet. In a scene, the men are arguing in front of her and she says:

Enough! This is not dating... I want moonlight and flowers and candy... and people trying to feel me up... nobody is trying to feel me up! Nobody is even looking at me! I’m an intern... do the two of you have any idea how much effort it takes to do all this? I’m waxed, I plucked and have a clean top on and the two of you are looking at each other! [. . .] My fantasy is not two men looking at each other! [. . .] No talking until one of you figures out how to put on a date! I want heat, I want romance... damnit! I want to feel like a freakin’ lady!<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> “Where the Boy’s Are” is the title of the seventh episode of the third season (2006-2007).

<sup>25</sup> Season 3, episode 3.

She wants to feel loved, not disputed. Also, with this speech, she is taking control over her love life and demanding what she wants from men. However, this sequence might be contradictory, because she refuses being treated as an object of dispute, but she still upholds the romantic stance of being courted, so it is expected that men would try their best to win her love. In this moment, two sides are shown, the one in which women are portrayed as being romantic and the one in which women empower themselves and express what they want.

Between the two men, Meredith chooses Derek and in season five they get engaged. As they talk about the engagement, Meredith says she does not want to wear a ring. She continues, saying “I’m not a church bride”<sup>26</sup>, thus refusing a traditional wedding and contradicting the view that women dream about wearing white and having a big celebration. She wants it to be simple, dictating the way she would like their wedding to be.

In the last episode of season five, Meredith and Derek get married.<sup>27</sup> By the end of season six, Derek talks to Meredith about having children. They have a conversation about it:

DEREK. Just thinking how pretty you are, and how pretty our children will be.

MEREDITH. Children, like multiple?

DEREK. Let’s start with one and see how it goes.<sup>28</sup>

Later, when talking to a colleague, Alex Karev (Justin Chambers), Meredith tells him: “He wants me to have a baby”. Alex asks her if she actually wants to have a baby and she says: “A baby doesn't want me. I had the worst mother in the world. I would be the worst mother in the world”. This thought may be her fear of becoming a mother, of being responsible for another human being. Meredith’s doubt evokes one of the discussions that the feminist movement has in today’s society. Alvanita Almeida, in her article “Beleza, profissão e maternidade: configuração da mãe em *The Good Wife*” (2015) points out that “now [. . .] there is a search to define the terms mother/maternal/motherhood, problematizing the issue, since motherhood is one of the pillars of

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<sup>26</sup> Season 5, episode 20.

<sup>27</sup> Meredith and Derek were planning to go to the City Hall. However, as their schedule was busy, they decided to write their vows on a post-it. In their terms, it is “a post-it wedding”.

<sup>28</sup> Season 6, episode 19.

patriarchy and a component of female identity”<sup>29</sup> (136). Although in the beginning of the series Meredith was not willing to be a mother, she accepts this role and tries to get pregnant. She does, but has a miscarriage and then Derek suggests that they adopt a baby.

One last event that is relevant for discussion regarding relationships happens by the end of season ten. Derek is planning to move to Washington DC because of his new job and Meredith tells him: “I think I need to stay here”,<sup>30</sup> and argues that he promised to give her a year to dedicate herself to her research and he lied. She adds: “I found a way to make it work with my job, my kids, and my research with less help from you, and I did it”.<sup>29</sup> Derek replies, saying “You’re being selfish” and Meredith answers: “I have to be Derek, because you believe your career is more important than mine”. Derek tries to convince her to go to DC, but she says she does not want to leave Seattle. At this moment, there is a rupture in their relationship. Through one perspective, though, this rupture is positive, since Meredith stands up for what she wants and does not let her love for Derek be in the way of her career and also does not let him be the dominant part of the relationship, thus defying patriarchal values.

Regarding Cristina, she is involved in serious relationship with two men during the series. The first one is Preston Burke, a cardiothoracic surgeon, and the second is Owen Hunt (Kevin McKidd), a trauma surgeon who used to work in Iraq. In the first relationship depicted in the series, Cristina does not seem to care much about feelings. At first it was only sex, but then Preston wanted to get more serious. In season two, he asks her “Where are we?” (in terms of their relationship), and she says “Ok, we are a couple. Whatever, don’t make a big deal about it”.<sup>31</sup> Later, he asks her to move in with him. Cristina is reluctant, and Preston tells her:

I am Preston Burke, a widely renowned cardiothoracic surgeon. I am a professional. And more than that I am a good and kind person. I am a person that cleans up behind myself. I am a person that cooks well. And you, you are an

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<sup>29</sup> My translation. Original: “Agora [. . .] busca-se redefinir os termos mãe/maternal/maternidade, problematizando a questão, uma vez que a maternidade, é a um só tempo, um dos pilares do patriarcado e um componente da identidade feminina” (136).

<sup>30</sup> Season 10, episode 24.

<sup>31</sup> Season 2, episode 5.

unbelievable slob. A slovenly, angry intern. I am *Preston Burke*. And you, you are the most competitive, most guarded, most stubborn, most challenging person I have ever met. And I love you. What the hell is the matter with you that you won't just let me?<sup>32</sup>

She replies, saying “I gave up my apartment 20 minutes ago”. With her answer, she is showing commitment in the relationship, that is, she is willing to live as a couple.

Their relationship grows, until Preston proposes by the middle of season three. However, Cristina does not answer right away. A week later, Preston tells her: “You’re still not wearing the ring. It’s been one week I proposed”<sup>33</sup> and she replies: “It’s under advisement”. Cristina seeks advisement with Meredith’s mother, who was also a surgeon. Their dialogue is short, but helpful:

ELLIS. You're good. Sharp under pressure. You'll make an extraordinary surgeon.

CRISTINA. (*long pause*) Dr. Grey, I have to ask you. Will it get in my way? Can I have both? Can I be a great surgeon and have a life? Because there's this man who just asked me to marry him and I know you tried to have both, but you split up with Meredith's dad. I know this is none of my business, but –

ELLIS. It is none of your business. (*pause*) And I didn't try hard enough.

CRISTINA. Thank you.<sup>33</sup>

Cristina’s questions reflect her inner doubts. In a way, these questions pervade most women’s lives, since nowadays it is common for women to have jobs and family, and to balance these two is often a task that demands effort.

Although Cristina accepts the proposal, she is very strong on her position of not being sentimental. She tells Preston: “I don’t do rings. Don’t expect me to change. I’m a surgeon, just like you. And we’ll have money. We can hire a wife”<sup>33</sup>. Her response reminds of Judy Syfers’ “I want a wife” (1971), in which she compares the academic lives of a male and a female professor, describing how good it is for a

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<sup>32</sup> Season 2, episode 18.

<sup>33</sup> Season 3, episode 14.



man to do everything he wants and is expected to do, regarding professional life, to get home and find a house ready for him to enjoy and rest. Another interesting fact about Cristina and Preston's marriage is that Preston seems to be more interested in the wedding than she is, which does not follow the traditional stereotypes for men and women. For instance, in an episode he asks her to try some cakes. She says "I don't have time for wedding cake"<sup>34</sup>, as she is studying for an exam. Later on she says "I don't care" and Preston answers "Learn to care or I'll get another wife". Then Cristina says: "I love all cakes". Her reaction shows that she is not interested in the cake, but she also does not want to lose her boyfriend.

By the end of the season, their wedding ceremony is being organized. On the day of the wedding, which is a traditional ceremony, Cristina goes to the hospital. She is humiliated and, in a way, feels that she lost her identity (see image 2). She tells her superior:

You have to let me cut because I am standing here, eyebrowless, with no dignity left. I am a surgeon, Dr. Bailey. But right now I don't feel like one, I feel like – like somebody else. Do you know what that's like to not feel like yourself?<sup>35</sup>

Image 2: Cristina begging her superior to be on a surgery.



Her outburst confirms her position since the beginning of the series. She is focused on work and other things do not seem important, not even her wedding. Just before the ceremony, however, Preston goes talk to Cristina, because she is taking a while to enter the church. The dialogue is as follows:

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<sup>34</sup> Season 3, episode 21.

<sup>35</sup> Season 3, episode 25.

CRISTINA. I'm ready. I'm fine. Meredith talked me down. Really. I'm fine. Go go go. I'll be right behind you.

PRESTON. I'm sorry.

CRISTINA. Oh, no. I can do this. I had a momentary freak out. But now I'm fine. I can do this.

PRESTON. But you don't wanna do this. I'm up there waiting for you to come down the aisle and I know you don't wanna come. I know you don't wanna come but you'll come anyway because you love me. And if I loved you, if I loved YOU, not the woman that I'm trying to make you be, not the woman that I hope you'll become, but you. If I did, I wouldn't be there waiting for you. I would be letting you go.

CRISTINA. I am wearing the dress. I'm ready. And maybe I didn't want to before but I want to now. I really think I want this.

PRESTON. I really wish that you didn't think. I wish you knew.<sup>35</sup>

In a scene after this dialogue, Cristina is at Preston's house and Meredith is with her. Cristina tells Meredith "He's gone. I'm free. Damn it",<sup>35</sup> and starts to cry. She feels suffocated by the wedding dress and, ultimately, asks Meredith to take it off (image 3). Their relationship, as will be discussed later on, shows signs of sisterhood.

Image 3: Meredith helps Cristina.



Although the actor who plays Preston Burke left the series because of problems with the cast,<sup>36</sup> the way Shonda Rhimes chose to make his last appearance is meaningful, since she could have planned for Cristina to leave Preston. In this way, it seems that Preston could not handle being married to a “deviant woman” and decided to leave her. However, as mentioned before, in season ten Cristina tells him that the best thing that has happened to her was that he left her. It is also worth mentioning that in the fourth season Cristina does not get involved in any relationship. She resents the fact that Preston won an important award, the Harper Avery and, although she helped him professionally, he did not mention her name in the article that received the prize. It seems that she cares more about him not recognizing her professionally than leaving her at the altar, thus endorsing the fact that Cristina cares more about her profession than her love life.

The second relationship that Cristina has is with Owen Hunt, in the fifth season. It is a troubled relationship, since at first Cristina did not want to be involved with another attending doctor, but she fell in love with him. Second, Owen has PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder) due to the period he was in the war and, as a couple, they have problems caused by this disorder. For instance, there are some moments in which Owen is aggressive. He also has nightmares and sleepwalks. In one of the episodes he tries to choke her during sleep, which makes Cristina be afraid of him. However, she wants to help him, which is rather problematic, since it reinforces the idea that abusive boyfriends just need help.

In the seventh season, Cristina and Owen get married<sup>37</sup>. In the same season, they discuss about having children. For Owen it is important to build a family. Although they are in a stable relationship and Cristina has grown in her career, she maintains her position of not having children. In a conversation, they argue about it, as transcribed below:

CRISTINA. I think that I have veto power. I mean, I think that you don't bring a human being into this world if one of the parties, like the

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<sup>36</sup> Isaiah Washington used homophobic language to insult a co-star, which made Shonda Rhimes fire him. This incident was also important for some political decisions the writer made in terms of diversity in the series.

<sup>37</sup> The wedding is somewhat improvised, since Cristina has been in a plane accident and suffered from PTSD. She accepted the wedding as some kind of scape valve for her suffering, since she could not work because of her trauma.

mother, doesn't want it. I mean, what's left to discuss?

OWEN. Alright, let me get this straight, you've made a decision and I have no say, zero. So, what if I think having a family is a huge part of what it means to be alive? [. . .] We got married not because you're... a basket case but because we loved each other and we wanted a life together. So, you don't get to threaten walking out just because I had the gull to express an opinion that is different to yours. You need to think about it. You have an obligation to at least pretend that you care what the hell I want.<sup>38</sup>

Image 4: Cristina and Owen arguing



In relation to image 4, the fact that Cristina is standing up and Owen is seated might indicate her empowerment in the relationship. Regarding the content of their argument, it seems that Owen has a traditional view towards relationships. For Owen it is important to have children. On the other hand, Cristina has the right to choose not to be a mother. As bell hooks (2000) points out, “reproductive rights [. . .] remain a central feminist agenda” (29); therefore it is important to address this issue in a popular series.

In another episode, the couple has a fight, because Cristina found out she is six weeks pregnant. As their dialogue shows, Cristina does not give in, despite Owen’s desperate arguments:

CRISTINA. There's no way we're doing this. Do you hear me? I am not this uh, uh, beautiful vessel

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<sup>38</sup> Season 7, episode 16.

for all that might be good about the future. I'm not carrying your hopes and dreams. [. . .] I don't want a baby. I don't hate children. I respect children. I think they should have parents who want them.

OWEN. I want them. I want them, and maybe you could to. I believe ... Your life can be bigger than you think it is. I know you can contain more than you think you can. I'm not saying we do this. I am just saying, let's think. Let's see what kind of life we can imagine. Cristina Yang ... I imagine such a huge life for us. [. . .] I want this. I can do this. This does not have to be your problem. It'll be my problem. You wouldn't even ...

CRISTINA. What, notice? It'll be a baby. I'm not a monster. If I have a baby, I'll ... I'll love it.

OWEN. That's the problem. That you'll love it. That ... that's a problem that we can work with.

[. . .]

CRISTINA. Okay, but you know what? There is no compromise. You don't have half a baby. I don't want one. Okay, I-it isn't about work. This isn't a scheduling conflict. I don't want to be a mother.<sup>39</sup>

Cristina does not take into account Owen's opinion. She tells him: "I made an appointment to terminate the pregnancy. I'm sorry if this upsets you. I'm sorry if this isn't what you wanted. But I cannot talk about it anymore".<sup>39</sup> He tries to make her change her mind, but she says no. He says: "[. . .] you denied me part of the decision, because you denied me a marriage".<sup>39</sup> Through this response, it seems that for Owen a marriage is not complete if the couple does not have children. This moment in the series is rather problematic, both because of the idea of traditional marriage and of abortion as a personal issue. Nowadays, one of the strongest claims of the feminist movement is regarding women's bodies. Most feminists believe that women should have the right to end an unwanted pregnancy, an issue that raises enormous controversy. For bell hooks, the right "to choose whether or not to have an abortion is only one aspect of reproductive freedom" (29). For hooks, women should have access to "safe, legal and affordable" abortion. In the case of Cristina, she chose to have an abortion in order to prioritize her career, but also because she never had the wish of becoming a mother.

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<sup>39</sup> Season 7, episode 22.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that her abortion does not revolve around access or affordability. In a way, Cristina was in a privileged position in relation to other women, such as the ones bell hooks refers to.

After the abortion, Cristina's and Owen's relationship becomes troubled, because Owen often brings up the fact that Cristina had an abortion. They go to couple's therapy, but it does not actually help. At one point, Cristina questions Owen because she thinks he is cheating on her. She asks "Do you love me?"<sup>40</sup> and he answers "I love you so much that it hurts. [ . . . ] It hurts to love you. I'm not cheating on you with Emily, but I did cheat on you"<sup>39</sup>. They talk about it and try to make amends, but Owen packs his things and leaves the apartment.

Their relationship is basically just having sex and, in season nine, Cristina goes to another city to work in another hospital. They try a long-distance relationship, but after some time Cristina says "We can't do this anymore"<sup>41</sup>, and Owen tells her they should divorce. Even after they divorce, Cristina and Owen have a relationship. She goes back to Seattle and, although they no longer live together, they often meet and have sex. However, after some time, the issue of having children is brought to surface again. This time, Owen is considering adopting a child. Cristina talks to him:

CRISTINA. Derek watches Zola put apple sauce in her ear and he's enchanted. You felt that way with Ethan. [the child he wants to adopt]

OWEN. You're reading way too much into this.

CRISTINA. Okay, if you could stop for a second and listen to your heart...

OWEN. Cristina, you don't know what I want in my life...

CRISTINA. Am I enough, Owen? Do you really believe I'll be enough?

(They are both silent)

CRISTINA. I wish it were different.

OWEN. No, no...

CRISTINA. I'm sorry.

OWEN. Cristina...

CRISTINA. Owen... it already happened.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Season 8, episode 17.

<sup>41</sup> Season 9, episode 3.

<sup>42</sup> Season 9, episode 24.

Cristina feels that Owen wants more than she can give. In this sense, she perceives that their relationship has no future. Consequently, as her two relationships have ended because the men wanted children, in the subsequent season of the program, Cristina does not have any relevant relationship. She has casual sex, including with Owen<sup>43</sup>, but no feelings attached. She focuses on her career, which is what she loves and wants to be good at.

### **“The Face of Change”: heteronormativity at stake**

It is a fact that *Grey’s Anatomy* attempts at having an open view towards relationships. Throughout the series, several kinds of relationships appear in the program, including the one that will be discussed in the next chapter. When it comes to heterosexual relationships, *Grey’s Anatomy* approaches issues that pervade the reality of such relationships, for instance, the attraction for other people, betrayal, building up a family, personal interests, and the characters’ concern with their careers.

An important feature regarding the portrayal of women has been discussed by bell hooks (2000), as she states that

[w]e all knew firsthand that we had been socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see ourselves as inferior to men, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other with jealousy, fear, and hatred. (14)

In *Grey’s Anatomy*, this traditional rivalry between women is almost absent. That is, women seldom look at each other with jealousy regarding appearance and rarely compete for the attention of men. In a way, Meredith and Cristina being best friends, defies this stereotypical view of women as enemies. However, it is worth mentioning examples of female rivalry in the series. For instance, in season four, Callie envies her husband’s friendship with Izzie Stevens (Katherine Heigl). In season two, Meredith and Addison Montgomery-Shepherd (Kate Walsh), Derek’s former wife, compete for Derek’s love.

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<sup>43</sup> Cristina and Owen divorced in the tenth episode of season nine, due to bureaucratic problems related to a plane crash. Since Owen is the chief and Cristina was on the plane, there was a conflict of interests.

Although traditional rivalry between women is approached, it is not the focus of action in *Grey's Anatomy*. Through the main characters' friendship, the series attempts at deconstructing this view. In a way, their friendship can be seen as sisterhood and it subverts the idea of women as rivals. They have always supported each other, although sometimes their friendship was shaken, especially regarding professional competition. In addition, hooks points out that “[f]eminist sisterhood is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes” (15). In *Grey's Anatomy* not only do Meredith and Cristina support each other, but the majority of female characters do the same. In this sense, the series depicts women in a nontraditional way, which contributes to the deconstruction of patriarchal values in television.

In relation to the traditional roles imposed on women, *Grey's Anatomy* attempts to deconstruct them. While “traditional portrayals of women [. . .] serve the dual purpose of seeming ‘natural and normal’, while simultaneously perpetuating the gender hegemony” (Merskin, 2006, p. 5, in Lauzen, 2008, 201), *Grey's Anatomy* shows a different perspective towards women. By portraying women seeking a competitive career, the series shows that the traditional view that women are supposed to be relegated to the domestic sphere, being housewives and mothers, is being renewed. Especially by bringing to the fore issues such as marriage, career, motherhood and abortion, the series addresses concerns that have been dear to the feminist debate for decades. Though not offering easy solutions or moral evaluations, it highlights their permanence and relevance for contemporary women in Western society.

Bearing in mind the analysis presented, one can say that one of the main issues involved in heterosexual relationships is having children. In this case, motherhood is addressed in contrast with career. Both Meredith and Cristina tend to prioritize their careers. Although Meredith builds up a family and leaves her career in second place, she manages to reconcile both family and work. In this context, the deconstruction of traditional roles assigned to women happens in two ways. For Meredith, it happens because she chose not to give up being a surgeon and not to be under her husband's choices (when he moved to Washington DC). As for Cristina, she does not subscribe to patriarchal values, as she does not become a mother and succeeds in her career.

It is also important to notice that female characters remain the focus of attention, with their male counterparts acting in supporting and somewhat foreseeable roles. There are also issues related to the participation of men in pregnancy and abortion, for example, though it



seems that the male characters in the series are rather imposing than discussing the question with their female partners. The three men that were mentioned in the analysis, Derek, Preston and Owen, seem to have a traditional view towards marriage and family, that is, they want the women to be mothers. As a matter of fact, they do not seem to consider the women's point of view towards motherhood. It seems that the change in the deconstruction of gender stereotypes has been occurring mostly in the female characters, at least in *Grey's Anatomy*. In addition, as pointed out by Anne J. (2008), "male characters [. . .] positioned as the more emotionally open partner in their (heterosexual) relationships, [. . .] while their female partners resist both emotional intimacy and such normative visions of domestic bliss" (n.p.). In the case of Meredith, she agreed with Derek, since she believed that she could have a family and still be successful as a surgeon. However, without the help of her partner, she had a hard time doing it. It is also important to highlight that the series does not show how she managed to pursue her career and take care of the children. It is known by the audience that the hospital has a daycare and her children stay there, and also that she contacts babysitters, but the routine arrangement of the family is not approached often.

Finally, as bell hooks (2000) stated,

Certainly many women in relationships with males often found that having a newborn baby plummeted their relationships back into more sexist-defined roles. However when couples work hard to maintain equity in all spheres, especially child care, it can be the reality; the key issue, though, is working hard. And most men have not chosen to work hard at child care. (82)

Thus, in spite of the great achievements of women, the issue of career versus family seems to have remained a female dilemma, though men still find that having children is an essential part of a stable relationship. It will be interesting to see, in the chapter that follows, how this and other family issues fare in non-normative relationships.



**CHAPTER II**  
**“SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM”<sup>44</sup>: alternatives to the heterosexual contract**

*Miranda Bailey (to Callie): If you are willing to stand up in front of your friends, and family, and God, and commit yourself to another human being, to, to give of yourself in that kind of a partnership, for better or worse, in sickness and health, honey, that is a marriage. That is real. And that's all that matters. Besides, girl, I got legally married. To a man! In a church! Look how well that turned out.*

(White Wedding, *Grey's Anatomy*, S07E20)

Despite its primary objective as entertainment, *Grey's Anatomy* raises some important social issues among its multiplicity of themes, one of them being female sexuality. By presenting women characters both inside and outside of the traditional heterosexual marriage contract, the program attempts to show a different perspective towards femininity and social standards. Although the program focuses on issues that are still complicated to deal with in society, “*Grey's Anatomy* depicts a world where discrimination, whether based on gender, sexual orientation, race, or even disability, is almost always individual, never institutional or systemic” (Anne J., n.p). In this context, two of the women characters that fall into nontraditional representation of sexuality are Calliope Torres and Arizona Robbins.

Latin-American Calliope Torres (Callie) is an orthopedic surgeon. Her first appearance in *Grey's Anatomy* is in the second season, in which she was interested in a male character, George O'Malley (T. R. Knight). She is presented as an attractive woman, who is independent and sure of her actions, as she is the one who takes the first move towards George. Later on, as will be discussed in this chapter, she discovers herself as being bisexual, through a relationship with another doctor, Erica Hahn (Brooke Smith). According to Kaela Jubas (2013), Callie “both embodies stereotypes of Latinas, as she is sexually uninhibited and hot-tempered, and challenges gender and racial stereotypes, as she comes from a wealthy family and enters a specialty that remains one of medicine's most masculinized areas” (135). Shauna

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<sup>44</sup> “Shock to the System” is the second episode of season seven (2010-11).

Swartz (2006) has also discussed the issue of representation of lesbian Latinas. She argues that “characterization certainly taps into existing notions of Latinas as family-oriented” (177). Swartz’s statement might become a problem because the term “family oriented” can be interpreted in various ways. For instance, it might mean that Latina families are traditional and do not accepted lesbian daughters. Or, it might mean that all Latinas seek to have a family, which fits into the female stereotype of being housewives and mothers. However, for me, Swartz statement also brings the problem faced by Latina lesbians, which is to identify themselves as having a non-normative sexuality, that is, lesbians or bisexual (which is the case of Calliope) and, therefore, being outcasts in their traditional families.

Arizona Robbins has her first appearance in the fifth season. Her characterization conveys the hegemonic way lesbians are represented in television, as Kate Meakin (n.d.), in discussing this issue, has argued: “lesbian characters [are portrayed] as white, feminine, thin, and traditionally attractive” (13). Arizona is a pediatric surgeon and she is presented as being a positive person. Regarding her sexuality, she tells Callie she has always been aware of her queerness, as she says “I never had boyfriends. Ever. I had a poster on my wall of Cindy Crawford, and I wasn't just looking at her mole. It wasn't news to my mom when I brought somebody home named Joanne”.<sup>45</sup>

Bearing in mind the issue of nontraditional coupling, this chapter will discuss the two previously mentioned characters’ non normative sexuality along with an attempt to discuss two of the proposed research questions. One of them deals with the portrayal of homosexual relationships in *Grey’s Anatomy*, and the other relates to the contribution of *Grey’s Anatomy* to the deconstruction of traditional roles imposed on women by society. In order to do this, I will discuss selected moments of the series involving the two characters, and bring some of the theoretical background proposed by Jane Flax, bell hooks, Adrienne Rich, among others.

### **“Moment of Truth”<sup>46</sup>: Callie’s and Arizona’s personal lives**

Callie and Arizona, like Meredith and Cristina, are busy surgeons. Thus, their domestic private lives are not very well explored in the program. When Callie first appears in the series, she lives in the

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<sup>45</sup> Season 6, episode 5.

<sup>46</sup> “Moment of Truth” is the twentieth first episode of season eight (2011-12).

hospital in order to be close to work. As for Arizona, her domestic life does not receive any attention until after she and Callie get married. Still, their lives at home and their familiar routine does not appear much, which goes against what most television programs show. For instance, Heather McIntosh (2014), in a study about a television program named *The Big Bang Theory* (aired since 2007), found out that “the three main female characters do appear in work situations at different times, but their locations remain primarily in the domestic ones” (197), as it is traditionally portrayed. In *Grey’s Anatomy*, the female characters appear mostly in their workplace, which is also where they discuss their personal lives.

In spite of the fact that domestic life is not the focus of the program, there are some important features to discuss in relation to the characters’ private lives. The first one is related to family. As mentioned above, Arizona was always aware of her sexuality and she did not experience prejudice on the part of her family. On the other hand, Callie, who was married to a man once, discovered she was bisexual only as an adult. She experienced some prejudice, mainly from her mother.

Regarding domestic life, it is mainly approached after Sofia is born. Sofia is Callie’s daughter, born from a heterosexual relationship she had with a friend of hers, Mark Sloan (Eric Dane). Callie got pregnant when the two women broke up, when Arizona was in Africa (this issue will be discussed in the next section). Callie and Mark had previously had a relationship in which they only had sex, there were no feelings attached. Presenting women’s sexual liberation is a positive feature in television, since it is not common for television series, soap operas and movies to have an open view towards female sexuality.

As Arizona and Callie decide to try to be together again, Arizona also becomes the child’s mother. After Sofia is born, Callie, Arizona and Mark take turns in taking care of the child. In the depiction of their routine, Callie turns out not to be the kind of mother she expected to be before having a baby, as she had said previously that she wanted to be a mother. In many moments, she seems detached from her daughter, as she often asks Mark to babysit for Sofia, because she wants to be alone with Arizona. In addition, she often forgets Sofia’s assignments for daycare. Mark is seen many times taking Sofia to daycare and spending time with her, probably because Callie is working. On the other hand, Arizona seems to bond with the baby, despite the fact that she did not want to have children. She is seen carrying Sofia and playing with her and, ultimately, she asks Callie to sign a paper saying that Sofia is her daughter as well, in case anything happens to Callie.

One crucial moment that affects Callie and Arizona's private lives happens by the end of season eight. Arizona and other doctors were in a plane crash, in which Arizona broke her leg. As a consequence, Callie had to decide to amputate Arizona's leg, so she would not die. Losing the leg had a great impact on Arizona, which also influenced her relationship with Callie. During most of season nine, Arizona does not leave the house and, consequently, Callie has to take care of all the domestic work and their daughter, because the baby's father, Mark, died in the same plane crash. Arizona's and Callie's sex life is also affected by the amputation. There are some scenes in which they try to engage in sexual activity, but often Arizona asks if they can leave it for another time and Callie says "Here we go. We are not having sex tonight".<sup>47</sup> Arizona's depression also prevented her from working, since she felt she was not herself without one leg. However, after getting over this moment, with the help of other doctors, Arizona goes back to work and becomes very active in relation to Sofia. In many moments throughout the latest seasons, Arizona is seen taking the child to daycare, playing with her, and being concerned about her well being.

As parents, Callie and Arizona have different views towards raising a child. They often disagree regarding raising Sofia, as can be observed in their dialogue below:

ARIZONA. What did we miss? [they were late for a meeting]

CALLIE. We'd know if you just put her stupid tights on her.

ARIZONA. I was talking her into, okay? She was getting onboard.

CALLIE. Hm, she's 2. At a certain point she doesn't have to be onboard. She has to be in daycare. So you pick her up and you yank her tights on her.

ARIZONA. That's what you do. And then she cries.

CALLIE. Yeah, because you wasted all that time cajoling her, so now I have to be the bad cop. If you just made it clear in the first place that she has no choice.<sup>48</sup>

Through this example, the audience assumes that the couple has

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<sup>47</sup> Season 10, episode 18.

<sup>48</sup> Season 9, episode 13.

difficulties in raising their child, which is something that both heterosexual and homosexual couples face. Despite their differences, the couple talks about having another child. This decision will be discussed in more detail further on in this chapter.

### **“Take the Lead”<sup>49</sup>: professional lives**

As *Grey’s Anatomy* is set in a work environment, Seattle Grace Hospital<sup>50</sup>, the characters are always concerned about their careers. As doctors, they spend most of their time in the hospital and their private lives often conflate with their professional lives, a reason why it is often difficult to separate the characters’ private lives from the professional ones. In many moments, the characters discuss important personal issues in their workplace. In addition, the characters often share their doubts with their friends, who are also doctors, which contributes to bringing the private life closer to the professional one.

In terms of professional life, both Callie and Arizona are enthusiastic in relation to their jobs. Callie is a resident orthopedic surgeon and she is presented as a very powerful character. Arizona occupies a powerful place as well, as she is the chief of pediatric surgery. In addition, they always look for the better solution in order to consider their patients’ well being. By portraying powerful women who are passionate about their jobs, *Grey’s Anatomy* challenges the traditional view in which men are public figures, that is, work outside the home, and women are relegated to the domestic life.

As both characters are focused on their careers, they consider their professional lives when making decisions regarding their personal lives. One moment in which the professional life is taken into account is in season seven, when Arizona wins an award and is offered a fellowship to develop an important work in Africa. She decides to go, in spite of being in a serious relationship with Callie. In this moment, Arizona prioritizes her career. Callie decides to go to Africa with Arizona, because she wants to continue the relationship, but at the airport, they fight over it. Arizona tells Callie that winning the award was the best thing in her career and that through that opportunity she can

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<sup>49</sup> “Take the Lead” is the third episode of season eight (2011-12).

<sup>50</sup> The name of the hospital is changed twice throughout the series. It changes to Seattle Grace Mercy West Hospital in season six, and to Grey-Sloan Memorial Hospital in season nine.

change lives. Her speech reveals that their relationship is interfering in this important moment in her career, as Arizona tells Callie:

I won the Carter Madison grant. Do you know how rare that is? Do you know how special that is? This is the biggest opportunity of my professional career. I- I get to go to Malawi with almost unlimited funds and help children, help tiny humans who otherwise never see a pediatric surgeon. I get to change lives. That's the dream. I am living the dream. And I am over the moon about it, or... or I would be but you are ruining it for me. First with your whining and now with your fake smiley passive aggressive enthusiasm. You are ruining Africa for me.<sup>51</sup>

Callie answers that she does not want to go to Africa but she wants to be with Arizona, so she is trying to be happy about the trip. At this point, for Callie, the relationship is more important than her career. Arizona says she does not want to go to Africa with Callie and they break up. A few episodes later, Arizona is back, and she tries to get back together with Callie (this moment will be referred to with more details in the next section).

Callie's achievements in her professional life become prominent in season nine, when she develops a research with cartilage. She gives lectures and works hard for her research to work. She even says "My dreams are big and bright, and filled with extremely shiny machines that grow cartilage out of the thin air"<sup>52</sup>. Consequently, in season ten she and Derek start working in a project about brain mapping, which will help patients that use prosthetic legs. They developed together the sensors used in their research, but the government wants Derek to use them in his research in Washington DC. Callie does not give in, as she threatens to sue Derek, saying "The sensors are material that you co-developed with me in service of research I started and invited you to participate in. If you attempt to impair my access to these materials, I will have you prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law"<sup>53</sup>. As Callie fights for her rights, Derek agrees on sharing the sensors. In this moment, Callie is

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<sup>51</sup> Season 7, episode 7.

<sup>52</sup> Season 9, episode 20.

<sup>53</sup> Season 10, episode 16.



empowering herself, professionally, as she does not accept being impaired.

Another moment in which professional interests come to the surface is in season eleven, when Arizona is offered a fellowship in another specialty. She and Callie were thinking about having another child, but Arizona chose to dedicate more time to studying. Once again, she considers her professional life before making decisions regarding her personal life.

### **“Invest in Love”<sup>54</sup>: same sex relationships**

One of the major issues in *Grey’s Anatomy* are personal relationships. More specifically, love relationships are always in evidence in the program, with an open view towards sexuality. At first, the series portrayed queer patients, such as homosexual and lesbian couples and transsexuals. As the storyline developed, queer sexualities were also approached through the main characters, the doctors. By the end of season four, two leading characters, Callie and another doctor, Erica Hahn, kiss. They start a relationship and, as neither one has experience in lesbian relationship, their new discovery is portrayed as a learning process for both of them.

This process of discovering their “new sexuality” is portrayed through questionings about being with a person of the same sex, especially from Callie. She tells Erica she is not sure if she wants to be with a woman, and she is in doubt about her sexuality. After an attempt to have sex, Callie tells Erica: “I’m not cut off for this. Touching and having sex with a girl”<sup>55</sup>. Then, as an indication of Callie’s accepting a new kind of relationship, she asks Mark to give her tips about being with a woman. This moment is rather problematic, in the sense that Callie is reproducing a patriarchal notion of heterosexual relationships. The fact that she resorted to a man to help her might be a problem considering feminist and lesbian perspectives, which aim for women’s independence from men, as the work of Adrienne Rich (lesbian continuum) and Monique Wittig so well illustrate. Although the scenes involving Callie’s learning process with Mark are somewhat funny, considering the program’s feminist view, moments like this affect the ideology being presented. After learning with Mark, Callie and Erica try having sex

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<sup>54</sup> “Invest in Love” is the title of the eight episode of the sixth season (2009-2010).

<sup>55</sup> Season 5, episode 5.

again, and both enjoy it. As Erica Hahn leaves the series, in season five, Arizona appears and she and Callie start a relationship.

Regarding the first research question, concerned with the portrayal of homosexual relationships in *Grey's Anatomy*, more specifically, homo affective relationships, the program attempts to discuss contemporary issues related to sexuality that pervade our society. However, these issues do not deal with homophobia, which happens in society and is currently one of the most important struggles of the feminist movement nowadays. By presenting solid homosexual relationships, the program also raises awareness about diversity, or, in Shonda Rhimes' terms, "normalcy". In fact, according to Amber K. Regis (2012), "the lesbian has certainly enjoyed greater visibility in recent years" (144), a fact that is largely due to television series. Other characters related to the couple do not show prejudice against them because of their sexuality, with the exception of Callie's parents. Her father is the first to learn about her queer sexuality, as Callie introduces Arizona as her girlfriend. He is very shocked and does not accept it at first. He even brings a priest, in season six, to talk to Callie about her sexuality. Her father claims that homosexuality is a sin. However, he comes around with his opinion, because he does not want to abandon his daughter. Later on, in season seven, Callie's mother appears. She comes to Arizona and Callie's wedding, but does not seem comfortable with her daughter's relationship, which is revealed by her speech: "Do you know how devastating it is to raise a child, to love a child, and know you won't see that child in heaven: You are not a bride. And I am not the mother of a bride. This isn't your wedding"<sup>56</sup>. What happens next is not clear in the program, but it seems that Callie cuts relation with her mother, as her mother does not appear and is not mentioned anymore.

Regarding Callie's friends, at first they seemed surprised when learning she was dating women, because she used to date men. However, her colleagues accept it and support her new discovery and her relationship with Arizona. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the majority of the action in the program happens inside a hospital and in a bar, where doctors and other people that work in the hospital go to have fun. In this case, there might be a gap in the presentation of non-normative relationships, since the environment in which the action takes place is biased, that is, is created for the purpose of approaching such relationships and the issues involved in them. Since the story happens in non-conservative social scenarios, they might create conflict when seen

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<sup>56</sup> Season 7, episode 20.

from the more traditional point of view of the heterosexual patriarchal family.

Moving to the evidence regarding same sex relationship, an interesting moment in Callie's and Arizona's relationship is after Arizona goes to Africa, in season seven. Callie is upset and she starts to "have fun" with a friend of hers, Mark Sloan, although after a few sexual encounters she tells him that having sex with him makes her miss Arizona. Then, Arizona comes back from Africa, after realizing that she was not focusing enough on her work there because she could not stop thinking about Callie. After a few uncomfortable meetings at the hospital during work, Arizona tries to get back together with Callie and she apologizes, saying "I'm so deeply sorry for hurting you. Because I am so in love with you that I'll spend the rest of my life telling you that. I will apologize to you everyday if that's what you need"<sup>57</sup>. Callie does not seem to feel committed to Arizona anymore, as she answers "This might be news to you, but you are not the only one in this relationship. There are two of us. And you came back today, but I didn't".<sup>55</sup>

A factor that complicates Callie's decision to accept Arizona back is that she is also confused because she has just discovered she is pregnant, in season seven. At first, Callie seemed upset about her pregnancy, because it happened in a very difficult moment for her, since her girlfriend had left her and she got pregnant in a non-stable relationship. With Arizona's insistence on going back together, Callie says to her: "Do you want another chance? Today I found out I am pregnant with Mark's baby. How about now?"<sup>58</sup> and Arizona cannot hide her surprise. After discussing the issue and making arrangements, Arizona decides to be with Callie.

Even though Arizona and Callie decide to give one more chance to their relationship, some doubts are still present, especially from Arizona, because of the baby's father. She says:

Okay, can we just be honest about the fact that is some kind of bi dream come true? I mean you get the woman that you love and the guy best friend who's also a great lay and then you get a baby. I mean, you get it all. Me, this is not my dream. My dream doesn't look like this.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Season 7, episode 11.

<sup>58</sup> Season 7, episode 12.

<sup>59</sup> Season 7, episode 16.

Arizona feels that she is being left aside in their relationship, since Callie has her pregnancy to worry about. By saying how she feels, Arizona is standing up for herself, and thus, as she was not happy, empowering herself in the relationship. Even in same sex relationship, empowerment becomes important, especially in this case, in which Callie has some sort of relationship with a man.

In addition, it is possible to notice that Arizona is jealous about Mark. She organizes a baby shower for Callie, even though she finds baby showers annoying. She does not know what Callie wants, but Mark does. At the baby shower, Mark says he knows Callie, she is a traditional catholic girl. The feeling of not knowing her partner as much as Mark does makes her somewhat jealous, given the fact that Callie also wants Mark in her life, since he is her baby's father. After the baby shower, Arizona bursts out and tells Mark: "You're a better woman than I am"<sup>60</sup>, admitting that she does not fall into the stereotypical view of women, who traditionally like baby showers. Later, as both women talk to each other, Callie tells Arizona "I know how annoying I must be to you right now. But since I was four and I got that doll that crap its pants for Christmas, I wanted a kid because, other than cracking bones, this baby's my dream"<sup>60</sup>. Once again, Callie is stating her wish of become a mother.

As an act of peace, after the baby shower, Callie invites Arizona to go off for the weekend, just the two of them. During the trip, in the car, they have a talk:

ARIZONA. Do you blame me? I mean he gets most of you. The straight you, the Catholic you, the girl who loves baby showers. I just get, you know, the gay you, which is really only about twenty minutes a night... Not even. Since you just feel too fat to even let me touch you lately.

CALLIE. Look, I am doing my best here to make sure that you are happy, and that Mark is happy and that the tiny person growing inside me is happy. I don't know what else I can do to be honest. Please tell me. Cause I'll do it. Whatever will make you happy, I will do it.

ARIZONA. (*pauses*) Marry me.

CALLIE. (*laughs*) What?

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<sup>60</sup> Season 7, episode 17.

ARIZONA. I mean, it. I love you more than anything but I want more. I want commitments, I want rings, so, marry me.<sup>60</sup>

Once again, Arizona is empowering herself in the relationship, in the sense that she states her feelings, as she feels that Callie is slipping away. Their dialogue also reveals that their sexual life is not going well, and that Callie worries about her appearance, since she feels “fat”. Arizona finds in the proposal a way of getting Callie committed to her.

During Arizona’s and Callie’s relationship, they also have to deal with complicated issues. For instance, by the end of season nine, Callie finds out that Arizona cheated on her. They have a fight and Arizona brings back what happened after the plane crash. She says “You weren’t on the freakin’ plane! You want it? The street cred, the badge of honor, the warrior wounds? Then great, stick out your leg and I will go grab a bone saw and let’s even the score!”<sup>61</sup> Callie is upset and replies “It always comes back to the leg?” and Arizona says she no longer trusts Callie, since she broke her promise of not cutting Arizona’s leg. Arizona also claims that Callie did not lose anything, she did (referring to the leg) and Callie says “Apparently, I lost you”.<sup>60</sup> In this moment, the couple is going through a crisis. Arizona cannot forgive Callie for deciding to amputate her leg, and Callie does not understand why Arizona is mad at her, because all she did was save Arizona’s life. As an act of escape or, perhaps, an attempt at relieving the pressure off their relationship, Arizona cheats on Callie.

In season ten, they go to couple’s therapy. In an episode related to events from four months ago, before they break up, the spectator learns that before the fight mentioned above, Callie and Arizona were planning on having another child. They discuss about who should get pregnant<sup>62</sup> and Arizona says she will have the baby. The decisions involving the new baby are not widely explored in the series. However, in one episode, there are three scenes that summarize what has happened: Arizona and Callie are choosing a sperm donor; Arizona tells Callie she is pregnant; and Arizona tells Callie she lost the baby. Later,

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<sup>61</sup> Season 9, episode 24.

<sup>62</sup> The events described in this paragraph happen in only one episode of *Grey’s Anatomy*, season ten, episode nine. The episode encompasses four months of the story.

Arizona tells Callie she does not want to get pregnant again because she cannot handle another loss.<sup>63</sup>

One year later in the series plotline, they talk again about having another baby. This time, Callie is going to get pregnant. However, she finds out she cannot get pregnant again, because she became sterile after a car accident. Arizona says she could do it. However, she does not seem to be sure about it. The couple, then, agrees on not having another baby, and Callie tells Arizona “We just got good again. Now we’re too fragile. And something like this, if this goes badly, we won’t make it. I’m not gonna put us in that position”.<sup>64</sup> By saying that, she infers that she wants to save their relationship.

### **“White Wedding”<sup>65</sup>: deconstruction of traditional gender roles**

In the case of Callie and Arizona, the ultimate break of traditional gender roles is depicting a couple with non-normative sexualities. Although their wedding was traditional, as the brides were wearing white dress (Image 5), the fact that they are not heterosexual gives room for the representation of non-normative couples. Consequently, traditional arrangement in which men are providers and women take care of the house and the children is not possible, which gives room for some changes. For instance, both of them have the same responsibilities, which are being providers and taking care of the family. As they do not play either the men's or the women's traditional role as in a heterosexual relationship, they both share these responsibilities. Even though, as mentioned before, *Grey's Anatomy* does not focus on the domestic aspect of love relationships, a few aspects related to the traditional roles assigned to women are challenged through Arizona and Callie’s relationship. These aspects, related to family and house routine, will be addressed in this section.

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<sup>63</sup> Both referring to the miscarriage and to the fact that her brother had died in the Iraq war.

<sup>64</sup> Season 10, episode 23.

<sup>65</sup> “White Wedding” is the title of the twentieth episode of the eight season (2011-12).

Image 5: Callie and Arizona's wedding.



It is important to mention that the fact that Callie and Arizona have non-normative sexualities does not affect their careers. There is no prejudice on the part of their colleagues or patients. They are excellent at their work, and being bisexual or lesbian does not influence the recognition of what they do. In addition, it is important to highlight that the fact that they are free to live their sexuality might influence on their emotional being, that is, they do not have to worry about being left aside or recognized as good professionals because of their sexuality.

Callie has a more traditional family background. Her parents are Catholic and she did not know she was bisexual until she was an adult, so it was a shock for her family to acknowledge her sexuality. In addition, as pointed out by Carrie Nelson (2012), Callie's "characterization manages to avoid the stereotypes commonly found in explicitly bi characters, allowing her to be a positive, realistic, three-dimensional bi woman" (n.p.). Maybe because of the way she was raised, Callie has a strong connection to family. Throughout the programs' seasons, she mentions that she loves children and that she wants to be a mother. Specifically, she tells Arizona: "I want to have a baby at some point in my life. That's all. I really...I have to have a baby".<sup>66</sup> She makes this very clear, because Arizona, despite being a pediatric surgeon, does not want to have children. Once again, like the heterosexual relationships discussed in the previous chapter, one of the parties has the wish of becoming a parent. Regardless of sexuality, it seems that parenting is a recurring theme for couples on television.

One aspect that can be highlighted in Callie and Arizona's relationship is related to the gendered division of labor, as discussed by

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<sup>66</sup> Season 6, episode 18.

Nancy Chodorow and Adrienne Rich. As the couple is formed by two women, inequality derived from sex/gender does not necessarily happen. In relation to the second research question, *Grey's Anatomy* seems to try to deconstruct traditional roles imposed on women by society. By portraying a female homosexual relationship, the program shows a different view towards gender roles and familiar routine, taking into consideration that “[a]lternative family structures are rarely discussed honestly in media” (Nelson, 2012). However, the fact that Arizona is more focused on her career and Callie is more connected to the family might be seen as a reproduction of the traditional male-female arrangement. In fact, as pointed out by Kate Meakin, depictions of non-normative relationships may be quite contradictory, because they revolve “around love, family, marriage, and raising children” (n.p.), thus falling into the traditional heteronormative arrangement. It is important to highlight that this is not a negative aspect of lesbian/homosexual relationships. However, it is worth calling attention to the fact that, just as it happens with heterosexual couples, not all same sex couples want to get married and raise children. In this sense, *Grey's Anatomy* leaves aside the representation of non-normative couples that do not wish to follow the heteronormative tradition.

Still on the issue of motherhood, according to Kellie Burns (2012), being lesbian or bisexual and a mother “disrupts normative models of motherhood” (60). In addition, “[l]esbian families are empowering and subversive models of family because they redefine the normative gender order and shift the way that gender acts to organize domestic spaces” (60). Thus, *Grey's Anatomy* attempts at deconstructing the traditional family arrangement. Moreover, as discussed by Burns, lesbian families tend to share domestic tasks in a more balanced way than heterosexual families do (60). (This was Debora’s comments on Burns. Debora questioned “Do you have any reference for that?”, referring to this last sentence. Burns wrote that, so I add the page number in which this information can be found)

Furthermore, as Meakin states, “[i]n attempts to attract viewers to this sub-genre, themes are consistently glamourised and sexualised, rarely bearing any relationship to the actual lived experiences of women” (n.p). Although her article deals with lesbian relationships in a television series set in a prison as setting, her argument is valid for *Grey's Anatomy* as well. The fact that Callie and Arizona are feminine, beautiful and from middle class is a way of attenuating and glamourizing lesbian relationships, but in reality there are other ways lesbian identify in society.



One last thing to consider regarding the deconstruction of traditional roles is related to bell hooks' discussion about the media. She believes that media is a "pedagogical medium for masses of people" and that it has importance in raising awareness for relevant issues, such as race and gender. Hooks (2000) points out that

[t]he degree to which lesbian partnership was as good as or better than heterosexual bonds was usually determined not by both parties being of the same sex but by the extent of their commitment to breaking with notions of romance and partnership informed by a culture of domination's sadomasochistic assumption that in every relationship there is a dominant and a submissive party. (87)

In this context, *Grey's Anatomy* contributes to destabilizing relations of power derived from gender, since both parties have the same gender.

Lauren Wilks (2012) also discusses the importance of television as a means for studying gender representation, through *Grey's Anatomy*. Quoting Sheila Rowe, she claims that "television specifically has been identified as an 'increasingly important medium for exploring and interpreting social change and beliefs'" (2). In spite of certain limits and contradictions, the series does contribute to a more inclusive view of female sexuality by making homo affective relationships visible. For, as many feminist critics have remarked, we are the stories we tell.



## CONCLUSION

### “HERE’S TO THE FUTURE”<sup>67</sup>

*Meredith Grey (voiceover): “What if, one little thing I said or did could have made it all fall apart? What if I’d chosen another life for myself, or another person? We might have never found each other. What if I’d been raised differently? [. . .] What if...? What if...? What if...? Your life is a gift. Accept it. No matter how screwed up or painful it seems to be. Some things are going to work out as if they were destined to happen. As if they were just meant to be.” (If/Then, Grey’s Anatomy, S08E13)*

With the rise of both feminist criticism and cultural studies in the second half of the twentieth century, the issue of representation gained center stage. As the study of Teresa de Lauretis (1987) illustrates, gender representation should be understood not merely as a mirror image of the way things are (or seem to be), but as a projection of how “reality” might be envisioned. In this sense, TV series as a widespread mode of popular culture work to construct new possibilities of representation at the same time that, as products for consumption, they attempt not to alienate the viewer.

As discussed throughout this research, *Grey’s Anatomy* plays an important role regarding the representation of women. The examples provided, though few, are evidence of issues that pervade women’s lives, both the ones that conform to heteronormativity and the ones that do not. Moreover, the fact that *Grey’s Anatomy* attempts to represent women in a nontraditional way is evidence that contemporary television programs are becoming aware of the multiplicity of female identities that exist in society. In addition, the series’ liberal tone and the discussion of challenges that women face, contribute to the popularity of the program (Jubas, 2013). It cannot be overlooked, however, as we have seen in the preceding analyses that, although innovative, *Grey’s Anatomy* also reiterates some existing paradigms.

The major innovation is perhaps the focus on women as career-oriented, in an environment which is highly competitive. However, unlike male characters in similar situations, whose personal lives are

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<sup>67</sup> “Here’s to the Future” is the title of the twentieth third episode of the fifth season of *Grey’s Anatomy* (2008-09).

more often than not irrelevant, the women in *Grey's Anatomy* do have emotional attachments, reinforcing the relational aspects traditionally associated with femininity.

If we consider the lives of the four female characters analyzed in the previous chapters, we can conclude that in terms of professional life the four of them are concerned with their careers and consider it when making decisions regarding their personal lives. However, issues such as relationships and motherhood have some effect on the professional life. For instance, when Meredith gets pregnant, she has to slow down at work and, after she gives birth, the domestic sphere becomes one of her concerns.

Regarding their personal relationships, the four women have different views towards it. Meredith seems to have a more romantic view, while Cristina is practical and does not let relationships disturb her career, given the fact that she gave up a relationship to occupy a high position in a hospital abroad. Arizona also gave up a relationship in order to work in Africa, but she changed her mind and went back to Seattle to be with Callie, who resembles Meredith's way of perceiving a relationship.

Some issues have arisen during the analysis, such as motherhood, career and family. Once more, regardless of their sexuality, the four women present different ideals towards these issues. Regarding motherhood, Cristina, Meredith and Arizona share the same idea of not having children. However, as the story develops, Meredith and Arizona accept this role, even though Arizona does not get pregnant. Cristina sticks to her opinion and does not embrace the role of mother. Callie is the only one that has the wish of having children. Traditionally, motherhood relegated women to the domestic sphere, thus preventing them from achieving social and economic freedom. However, nowadays, women have achieved more social and economic independence, as well as the right to choose whether they want to be mothers or not. By depicting women that have interests other than being mothers, *Grey's Anatomy* questions traditional gender roles and also provides an alternative model for women who want to have careers and family.

Concerning their career, throughout the series, the audience followed Meredith and Cristina grow professionally. Both of them had doubts and moments in which they were not the best, but in spite of that, both became renowned surgeons. Callie and Arizona already had established careers when they first appeared in the series. As previously mentioned, Meredith's career was left aside when she gave birth, which

did not happen to Callie. This could be because Callie always had people to help her in the domestic tasks, and Meredith, as Derek started working in Washington D.C., had to take care of the children and the house alone.

As for the men, the three men mentioned as love partners seem to have a traditional view towards family and marriage. For them, having children is important, even though they might not want the responsibility of taking care of them, which is the case of Derek. Thus, the series seems to reflect the perception of many feminists (perhaps even of non-feminist women) that men have not changed as much socially as women have.

Taking up the first of the research questions presented in the Introduction, as to the portrayal of women in heterosexual and homosexual relationships, we could say that some basic issues, such as having children, taking care of them and being responsible for housekeeping, are equally portrayed. Sexual orientation do not seem to affect gender roles significantly. Nevertheless, making a comparison between the homosexual and the heterosexual families presented in *Grey's Anatomy*, there is a clear difference regarding power relations. In the heterosexual relationships presented, the men often want to have control. However, being a television series with a feminist perspective, *Grey's Anatomy* presents powerful women, who do not accept being submissive, thus trying to balance the power in their relationship. In contrast, the homosexual relationship analyzed does not present issues regarding power, though it has issues involving betrayal, which also happens in Cristina and Owen's relationship. In a way, betrayal is a recurrent theme in the portrayal of love relationships in television, since love triangles are sources for plot development.

Another issue that pervades all relationships is family. Building up a family is a serious issue in the context of the series, given the fact that the people depicted have high-power careers. Here again, the four women have different views towards it. Cristina does not want to embrace the role of being a mother, thus defying the norm that relegates women to the domestic sphere. Meredith and Arizona also questioned themselves and at first did not want to become mothers. However, they changed they minds and proved that it is possible to reconcile career and motherhood. Finally, Callie represents the stereotyped woman that dreams of having children.

Regarding sexuality, as bell hooks (2000) stated, "one of the first issues which served as a catalyst for the formation of the [feminist] movement was sexuality – the issue being the rights of women to choose

when and with whom they would be sexual” (25). In this sense, the four women analyzed share an open view towards sexuality and do not hide the fact that they are sexually active. Meredith, Cristina and Callie often talk about their sexual encounters and their desire for having sex. Arizona does not talk about her sexual life, but she does not hide the fact that she is lesbian. This portrayal of female sexuality is in a way a deconstruction of the patriarchal perspective, in which women are not allowed to be sexually active and have pleasure. Thus, being sexually liberated also contributes to the (trans)formation of women’s identity. In *Grey’s Anatomy*, as it should be in society, they are free to live their sexuality.

Thus, besides presenting women in highly competitive professional roles, another contribution of *Grey’s Anatomy* to the deconstruction of traditional roles imposed on women (the second research question) lies in the fact that the series deconstructs patterns of femininity. In addition, another way in which *Grey’s Anatomy* contributes to the deconstruction of female stereotypes is by acknowledging women’s sexual freedom. Furthermore, in terms of the third research question, by focusing on the differences among women, the series highlights the complexities of the category “woman” and contributes to the anti-essentialist stance of contemporary feminisms.

Finally, by presenting issues that pervade women's lives, such as career, motherhood, and sexuality, *Grey’s Anatomy* raises awareness in the audience as to the importance of the media in everyday life. By bringing a feminist perspective into a television program, the series also contributes to the view people have towards gender issues, especially the ones concerned with the empowerment of women, given the fact that many women still suffer violence in oppressive relationships and are diminished in the workplace even today. Therefore, the depiction of women in *Grey’s Anatomy* is relevant for the struggles of the feminist movement, as it brings social and gender issues to a popular medium.

### **“Seal our Fate”<sup>68</sup>: limitations and indications for further research**

I agree with bell hooks when she says that studying popular culture can be an important tool to reach theory, and also that media influences people. That is why more research involving media of all

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<sup>68</sup> “Seal our Fate” is the title of the first episode of the tenth season of *Grey’s Anatomy* (2013-14).

kinds, series, movies and television programs should continue to be developed, in order to raise awareness of issues that people face in their everyday lives. In addition, due to time and length constraints, I could only analyze four characters in *Grey's Anatomy*, leaving aside issues such as race and class. Thus, I believe that this series can be a source for more studies concerned with other aspects of the feminist movement. Moreover, other popular television series should be studied and problematized. Since television is a popular mass media tool, it is important to analyze its impact in society, as well as investigate how television represents and sometimes presents alternatives to issues that are still often considered taboo in our society.





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