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### **Gender and Sexuality in *Friends***

*Friends*, a ten season TV show which aired on NBC from 1994 to 2004 is often referred to as “America’s favorite sitcom.” The show centers around a twenty-something, white, straight, and cisgendered group of friends. It takes place in New York City, primarily in a coffee shop where the six main characters spend so much time that viewers begin to wonder how they are able to afford rent for their luxuriously spacious apartments. The episode “The One With the Male Nanny”(2003) centers around Ross, a highly educated college professor, and Rachel, who worked as a waitress before entering the fashion industry, searching for a suitable nanny for their daughter. This particular episode displays striking examples of stereotypes of masculinity, femininity and heteronormativity. These themes are also prevalent in the series as a whole.

It is impossible to analyze text through a lens of gender or sexuality without taking into account intersectionality. Intersectionality is a theory that explains “how gender is not a separate part of identity but is related to all other parts of a person’s identity”(DeFrancisco and Palczewski 8). In other words, one cannot analyze a person’s gender identity without taking into account all other aspects of

their identity, such as race. In the episode “The One With the Male Nanny,” Ross and Rachel conduct several interviews to find a nanny for their daughter. Toward the beginning of the episode, they are shown finishing an interview with a middle aged Latina woman. The interview appears to have gone well, but as the woman leaves, she asks if they “do random drug testing,” and that if they do, she will “need three days notice.” The only person of color featured in this episode was cast as a drug user, perpetuating the damaging stereotype that people of color are more likely to use drugs than white people. *Friends* has an all white cast, and when people of color are featured on the show, they are typically presented in extremely stereotypical ways.

The rest of the episode revolves around a male nanny who both defies stereotypes of masculinity and perpetuates harmful stereotypes of femininity. This scene opens with Ross and Rachel sitting in their living room feeling defeated after several unsuccessful interviews to hire a nanny for their daughter. Together, they look over the resume of Sandy, the final candidate that they will interview. They notice that Sandy has impressive credentials, including a degree in childhood development. They agree that Sandy seems to be the perfect candidate for the job when they hear the doorbell ring: Sandy has arrived. When Ross and Rachel open the door, it is clear that they did not expect Sandy to be a man. The camera pans to their faces: jaws dropped and eyes wide open. Sandy is a male in a traditionally

feminized role, presenting a gender contradiction to Ross and Rachel. The theory of gender contradiction explains how “people live with multiple (apparent) inconsistencies in their singular, coherent bodies”(DeFrancisco and Palczewski 21). Sandy takes care of children for a living, which contradicts stereotypes of masculinity.

During Ross and Rachel’s interview with Sandy, it becomes apparent that Ross is deeply uncomfortable that Sandy is not behaving within the set of characteristics that are deemed masculine. Sandy expresses sympathy toward Rachel by acknowledging how hard it is to leave one’s child in someone else’s hands. Rachel swoons at Sandy, a man who expresses “caretaking, supportiveness, [and] empathy,” characteristics that are normally labeled as feminine(DeFrancisco and Palczewski 10). The camera zooms in on Ross who is painfully confused. Not only is Sandy a man in a traditionally female role, but he also expresses stereotypical feminine characteristics. After a long silence Ross looks at Sandy with his eyes wide open and asks “Are you *gay*?” in the same tone one might ask “Are you *crazy*?” He views Sandy through a lens of heteronormativity: the notion that being heterosexual is normal and right (DeFrancisco and Palczewski 13). In other words, he sees that Sandy expresses several stereotypical feminine qualities including sympathy and sensitivity, and through his heteronormative perspective, being attracted to males is also a feminine characteristic. Throughout the series of

*Friends*, we can see that Ross does not feel secure in his masculinity. He is geeky and seldom has luck with women in comparison to his more masculine presenting friends. He is self-conscious about his own performance of masculinity. Michael S. Kimmel's piece "Masculinity As Homophobia," describes how men feel "contempt for anyone who seems sissy, untough, uncool"(103). Kimmel also illustrates that men feel vulnerable around other men who are deemed feminine because they "fear that other men will unmask [them], emasculate [them], [and] reveal [to] the world that... [they] are not real men"(104). When Ross sees Sandy carrying himself in a feminine manner, he not only thinks of Sandy as inferior to other men, but he feels that Sandy's comfortability with his masculinity is a threat to his own.

Throughout the rest of the episode, Sandy goes on to present female stereotypes in an exaggerated and offensive way. Despite Ross's extreme discomfort, Rachel tells Sandy that he has the job as their daughter's nanny. While attempting to tell them how thankful he was, Sandy breaks down crying. Sandy is playing a caricature of a woman. His character is exaggerating the stereotype that women are overly emotional, and that they are too weak to have a handle over their own emotions. It is important to create characters that defy gender stereotypes on TV, but Sandy's identity is presented as a joke. These damaging stereotypes of

femininity perpetuated through Sandy send a clear message to the audience of *Friends* that people who have feminine characteristics are not to be taken seriously.

Many children across the U. S. grew up watching *Friends* in the late 90's and early 2000's. In 2015, all ten seasons of the show became available for streaming on Netflix, which gave the iconic NBC series a whole new generation of fans. Millions of people are exposed to the damaging stereotypes of masculinity and femininity that are prevalent in *Friends*, and also practically all mainstream media platforms. Considering the messages children and young adults absorb about gender and sexuality, the widespread internalized misogyny that exists in the U. S. is no surprise. Mainstream media, such as shows like *Friends*, reflects values and beliefs of society. However, media can also have the reverse effect on society. Mainstream media must create complex characters that are free to embody aspects of masculinity and femininity without the constraints of gender roles. In the absence these basic minimums, children will continue to live through these extremely limited gender stereotypes, holding them back from their true, authentic selves.

### Work Cited

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