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# Mediated Bodies: The construction of a Wife, Mother, and the Female Body in Television Sitcoms, *Roseanne*

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After first examining several theoretical concepts related to the construction of gender on television and the way in which women are characterized, this paper examines the television show *Roseanne* to explore the way it changed the representation of a feminist on television. No longer did women have to be childless and career-minded to be equal to men or, in some cases, better than men, as the character Roseanne Conner reveals on the show. Rather, women were able to articulate their feminist outlooks through their opinions, expressions, and actions. I break the show into four distinct notions of gendered representations: socioeconomic status: the “choice” to work; women and the body: disrupting the “imperative” to be thin; husbands and wives: navigating the “second shift” in the home; and women as parents: resisting the “perfect parenting/perfect children” discourse.

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## Introduction

When Mary Richards went to Lou Grant to get a job in the opening episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, women in the world could celebrate a little bit, for there was now a female lead character on television who was not a mother or housewife. Rather, she was a single working woman who was okay being single and was not looking for a man to support her. She supported herself and did not apologize for living the life of a single woman who wanted to have fun. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* portrayed the *ideal* single working woman. Mary never had to worry about money, even though she got paid less than her male counterpart; she was the kind and mild-mannered woman; she respected others no matter what; she always called her boss “Mr. Grant” while everybody else on the show called him “Lou”; and she never lost her hat even though she kept throwing it up in the air. The characteristics of Mary Richards mirror some of the professional-related challenges that women were fighting for during the second-wave feminist movement—to be treated equally as a man in a professional environment.

Is it possible, then, for a woman whose primary job is to be a wife and mother to be considered a feminist? To demand equality for all genders while still fulfilling the typical “female roles” that a wife and mother are traditionally supposed to do?

The answer is yes and *Roseanne*<sup>1</sup> showed the world how. After first examining several theoretical concepts related to the construction of gender on television and the way in which women are characterized, this paper examines the television show *Roseanne* to see the way it changed the representation of a feminist. No longer did women have to be childless and career-minded to be equal to men, as I argue was the standard representation of a feminist up to the debut of *Roseanne*. Rather, I conclude, women were able to articulate their feminist outlooks through their opinions, expressions, and actions.

## **Methodology**

To best answer my research question—How did *Roseanne* dispel or address certain common arguments as related to gender including women in the workforce, the female body, and parental roles?—I examine the television show and my results via the lens of cultural studies with an emphasis on feminist theory. In the subsequent discussion, I answer my research question by providing a textual analysis of the television show *Roseanne* and then positioning it within a historical context. Working off concepts of the standpoint theory and notions of framing, as related to gender, I outline four ways in which *Roseanne* presented storylines that countered common societal norms including socioeconomic status: dispelling women’s presumed “choice” to work; women and the body: disrupting the “imperative” to be thin; husbands and wives: navigating the “second shift” in the home; and women as parents: resisting the “perfect parenting/perfect children” discourse.

There are many episodes of the series that deal with gender related issues. Thus, I had a plethora of episodes to use when researching this paper. After viewing the entire series of *Roseanne* I conclude that each episode usually has two main storylines involving different characters (sometimes the storylines overlap, sometimes not.) I ultimately decided on episodes that had gender storylines as the main plot of the episode. For example, if a character made a gender or sex related joke or comment but it had nothing to do with the plot of the episode then that show was not counted in this research—there were numerous episodes for this category. However, if a character’s action was one of the main plot points, it was counted in this research. For example, an episode in which *Roseanne*’s middle child, Darlene, gets her first menstrual period and an episode when *Roseanne* was at odds with her teenage boss over work issues were both included in this study. I narrowed the results down to six episodes in which all are analyzed below.

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<sup>1</sup> When discussing the television show I will use the term *Roseanne*. When discussing the character of *Roseanne* Conner I will use the full name or simple the first name, *Roseanne*. When discussing the actress, *Roseanne* Barr, I will use the name Barr.

### **Sex Roles**

The concept of the Other has been explored by feminists for years, most notably by Simone de Beauvoir, especially when examining the relationship between men and women in the male-dominated world. The philosophical concept of the Other plays an important role in examining not only women in television, but the relationship between genders. The Other is the opposite of the concept of the Same, or an identity equating similarities between two notions. Thus, the Other infers that there are differences between the dominant notion, most often the self, and the Other, the “abnormal” notion. This is equitable to the difference between men and women. Men have been considered the dominate sex thus making women the Other. Beauvoir’s well-known work, *The Second Sex*, illustrates the meaning of Othering in the title of the book, alone. And she opens by addressing the use of women as an offense to men: “In the mouth of a man the epithet *female* has the sound of an insult” (de Beauvoir, 1952, p. 3). But the framing of women as an Other in media texts reflects the “construct[ed] and reconstruct[ed] social reality” (Tuchman, 1997, p. 30) of society. This is important because it “provides a focus that can effectively foster an understanding that the exclusion of women... has not been a naturally occurring phenomenon” (Friedman, 2009, p. 167), but rather has been constructed based on the state of society at the time. One common way women are framed as an Other on television is through the portrayal of defined sex roles.

Sex roles are related to the perceived gender of a person and are not necessarily related to the biological sex of an individual. Sex roles help define how either sex should behave and look, meaning “sex roles are social guidelines for sex-appropriate appearance, interests, skills, behaviors, and self-perceptions,” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 3). To go further, sex defines if a person is biologically male, female, or intersex. Gender is what a person identifies as male, female, both, or neither, and is not necessarily related to the specific sex of that person. Sex roles define how a person of a certain gender is supposed to behave, such as women wearing makeup or having an hourglass figure. For men, the sex role encompasses things such as having noticeable muscles or growing facial hair. These roles are a specific kind of stereotype and “persons *not* conforming to the specified way of appearing, feeling, and behaving are *inadequate* as males or females. A boy who cried is not masculine and a young woman who forswears makeup is not feminine,” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 5). While I argue that some leeway occurred in the loosening of sex roles, as I will point out occurred in *Roseanne*, the reasoning that Tuchman makes is still applicable today.

The influence of television “indicates that the media encourage their audiences to engage in such stereotyping. They lead girls, in particular, to believe that their social horizons and alternatives are more limited than is actually the case,” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 30). To understand how women are presented in

television, several critical cultural approaches in feminist theory must be addressed. Social constructionism theory posits, as its name suggests, that an object, practice or norm is constructed based on the rules of society. DeFrancisco and Palczewski note the theory focuses on “*how* individuals construct meaning and related inequalities by *doing gender*,” (2007, p. 52) indicating that subconscious actions that indicate gender were, at one time, learned. This also indicates that gender inequalities are not caused by a specific person or group.

### **Gaze**

The concept of the gaze, originally identified by Laura Mulvey in 1975, outlines the unequal power relationship as men look at women—often times unwanted looks—and the three looks that constitute the male gaze. As Mulvey outlines, the first look concerns men gazing at women who are thus turned into objects since “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*,” (1975, p. 11). The second look connects the spectator with the male gaze and thus objectifies the woman on screen:

The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. (Ibid., p. 12)

Thirdly, Mulvey’s last look is the camera “gaze” as represented as an extension of the male eye, thus the camera is capable of transforming into

... the mechanism for producing an illusion ... an ideology of representation that revolves around the perception of the subject; the camera’s look is disavowed in order to create a convincing world in which the spectator’s surrogate can perform with verisimilitude. (Ibid., p. 18)

Before moving forward the terms audience and spectator must be properly defined. Audience is identified in the more literal sense as those who consume the media while spectator refers to the subject position or a viewing position as constructed by the representation (Walters, 1995, p. 89-90). Is it possible for men to create films, including sitcoms that contain fictional storylines, without the implications of the male gaze? Mulvey’s original point left little room for any type of female or oppositional gaze. Specifically, Walter’s outlines Mulvey’s male gaze as having sound “sociological implications regarding the internalization of male standards of beauty and the orientation of women toward male approval and ‘performance’ for male desire” (Ibid., p. 65), addressing the concept of sex roles.

This is where critiques of Mulvey's male gaze appear<sup>2</sup> and give way to ideas of counter gazes, particularly notions of the masquerade, as outlined by Mary Ann Doane. The theory of such counter gazes argue that the audience is aware of the gaze and thus is not totally constrained by it. More specifically, scholars DeFrancisco and Palczewski position any form of a counter gaze in relation to the audience: "media's positioning of the audience is not determinative as long as audiences are conscious of media's attempt to position them. Audience members can reposition themselves" (2007, p. 251). While this interpretation provides the audience with the power to "reposition" given the known constraints of the gaze, Doane's interpretation of the masquerade concerns the idea of distance between oneself and one's image:

The masquerade ... holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic.... [masquerade] involves a realignment of femininity, the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. (1982, p. 81-82)

For Doane, distance from the image is imperative in order for masquerade to be affective and for the female spectator to comprehend and dissect the image, thus making it manipulable and readable. Any masculine tendencies or concepts of masculinity are confounded by the masquerade and thus the male gaze is subverted by the image.

## **Roseanne**

### ***Socioeconomic status: Dispelling women's presumed "choice" to work***

The television show *Roseanne* was noted for being one of the first shows to portray a blue-collar family where both parents worked outside the home, and the lead characters were overweight without that topic serving as the show's main jokes and gags. There were predecessors to *Roseanne* that combined some of these elements, most notably *All in the Family* from the 1970s. *All in the Family* revolutionized the industry by addressing ideas and themes never before discussed on television including racism, women's liberation, menstruation and menopause, rape, homosexuality and many more. In addition, it was one of the first shows where class and economic issues became a focal point of the series. But *All in the Family*, just as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, was broadcast during the heart of

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<sup>2</sup> Over time Mulvey, herself, has critiqued, expanded on, or modified her original assessment of the male gaze. See Sassatelli, R. (September 2011). Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28(5).

second-wave feminism when topics such as women in the workforce, birth control, and the rights to equality were hot-button issues.

When *Roseanne* debuted in the late 1980s, the show portrayed several still-taboo topics such as economic means and social standings, menstruation, weight issues, birth control and domestic violence. While there were shows that touched on some of these topics in the past, such as *Maude* and the aforementioned *All in the Family*, the subjects were (and some could argue still are) considered controversial or unmentionable. Most of these topics included the main character, Roseanne Conner, a working mother of three (later four), who worked not because she wanted to, but because she had to. The most prominent aspect of the character Roseanne, I argue, and what made the show so successful, was that she was not what a wife was supposed to be, she was not what a mother was supposed to be, and she was not what the ideal woman was supposed to be. She portrayed what some women in her social status often had to go through. They did not have nannies to watch their children, they did not have time to exercise, they did not fully depend on their husbands for everything but rather the two adults formed a team, and they did not think a woman should be devalued simply because she was a wife and mother. The show “explicitly sought to give representation to working-class families and, thus, made claims for being ‘authentic,’” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 217). Roseanne was a character never really seen before on television. She was loud and opinionated, out of shape, and did not let the conditions of her social or economic status identify her as anything other than a feminist.

Throughout the run of the series Roseanne Conner held many jobs, most of them tedious positions in a factory, fast food restaurant or hair salon. From a feminist perspective, a working woman was often seen as a positive component towards equality. However, in the case of Roseanne the opposite was true. She did not choose to work, she had to work. The working class nature of the Connors did not give Roseanne a choice of job or many options when it came to a career. She did not have a career but worked in ostensibly low-paying jobs for the money, plain and simple.

In one episode during season two, Roseanne gets a job working at a fast food chicken restaurant with a 17-year-old boss. Roseanne needs weekends off to take care of her children, something she made clear from the beginning of the job. But, since her teenage boss cares more about his car than people, he fires her when she refuses to work weekends. Roseanne becomes angry at the arrogance and inconsiderate nature of this young boss and attempts to explain why she needs that low paying job.

Roseanne: I need that job, and I hate like hell that I do, but I need it. And, I'm not working there because I need an allowance. I'm

paying for a mortgage and putting food on the table and buying clothes for three kids. But, I don't think you'd even understand that. I don't think you understand anything. You're not grown up enough, yet, to understand that your life doesn't always turn out the way you plan it to be, and sometimes you end up doing stuff you thought you'd never do in a million years, but you still have to do it 'cause there's nothing else you can do. (Whedon, 1989)

Here the audience sees the sacrifices that Roseanne has made in order to provide for her children. As reflected in the ten-year projections examined by Borisoff and Chesebro, women still realize and assume that, “regardless of their own professional aspirations, they, and they alone, will assume primary responsibility for child care” (2011, p. 117). Roseanne knows that she is responsible for her children and any “professional aspirations” she has is all in the name of the children. As she states in a season three episode after her oldest child gets in trouble and the school’s principal asks if she has a career, Roseanne responds that, “Hey, my children are my career” (Foster and Madison, 1990). This indicates that her children are not only her responsibility as a mother, but are also her responsibility in the work place. She does not have a career in the traditional sense of the word, because she puts her children before everything else.

Since this show defined itself as “authentic” (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p. 218), and with the media attention the show received as a result of the portrayal of Roseanne Conner, it can be deduced that this was one of the first times working motherhood was addressed as difficult and underappreciated in a prime time program. June Cleaver from *Leave it to Beaver*, the stereotypical perfect mother who always wore her pearls and had children who seldom misbehaved, no longer represented the circumstances of mothers. Now it was Roseanne Conner, and the everyday challenges she faced powerfully resonated with women viewers.

It should be noted that the show *Roseanne* was on television for nine seasons, but the premise of the show changed significantly from season eight to season nine. At the opening of the last season, the Connors won the lottery of over \$100 million and the working class family became the wealthy elite. This financial difference impacted the entire makeup of the show, including the way in which Roseanne Conner and other female characters were portrayed. On her blog, Roseanne Barr said that, “the roseanne (sic) sitcom was based on my real life” (Barr, 2006) and she wanted the show to represent the changes she went through, including becoming rich. The entire concept of *Roseanne* was based around a family in constant struggle to make ends meet and the day-to-day labor it took to raise children. It is curious, then, that the writers would flip that model and have the Connors win so much money. While the Connors stayed in the same house, it was redecorated with expensive new furniture. Gone were the days of

Roseanne and Dan, Roseanne's husband, in entry-level jobs. Now they did not work at all. Jackie, Roseanne's younger sister and constant companion on the show, met a Royal Prince and started to date him. The season is filled with outrageous plots, such as meeting Hillary Clinton and Dan running off to California to have an affair, and many montage sequences where Roseanne dreams she is in other shows, such as *Evita* or *I Dream of Jeannie*.

In the final episode Roseanne reveals that the entire show is fake and nothing more than a fabrication she made up to make life easier. The characters are real, but she changed anything she did not like. The Connors did not win the lottery; Dan actually died of a heart attack instead of having an affair; Bev, Roseanne's mother, was revealed to be gay early in season nine but actually it is Jackie who was a lesbian; and Roseanne's daughters married different men. The reason this is so significant is because the characters changed in season nine, especially Roseanne. She no longer needed to have a job or work at home, and as a result Barr's "domestic goddess" routine, the self-titled moniker to describe her comedic role, deteriorated (Rowe, 1995). When Roseanne realizes Dan had an affair with a nurse in California, she does not stand up for herself. Instead, she partly blames herself for Dan's cheating. The Roseanne of the early seasons would never doubt herself in the same way that Roseanne of season nine did. Since she no longer had the home, Roseanne was not able to express herself in the same way and she lost an aspect of her "everyday working mom" characteristics that made her so endearing to viewers.

### ***Women and the body: Disrupting the "imperative" to be thin***

Another ideological conflict that Roseanne presents is the weight and body image of the main characters. Both Dan and Roseanne are overweight, however their weight does not become the punch line for the jokes, as had previously occurred on shows with overweight characters (and is still done, see the current show *Mike & Molly* where two obese people are at the insult of all the "fat jokes"). The characters do not apologize for their weight and break many stereotypes that are assumed about overweight people. For example, society looks to thin people as the ideal weight and that only slender is sexy. However, both Dan and Roseanne were attracted to each other and there were many references to their active sex life. This goes against common ideologies in society that identify skinnier as better and only thin people may have sexual desire (Han, 2003; Heineken, 2003; Rowe, 1995).

The show did address the issue of weight on several occasions. During the second season an episode, aptly titled "I'm Hungry," showed Roseanne as she tried to stop eating sweets and go for walks. She was prompted to do this by her coworkers in the beauty shop where she worked and was motivated to do this for appearances. Many of the comments were about how she would look better and

Roseanne was driven to start the diet after her jeans no longer fit. The humor in the episode comes from her struggle to abstain from her favorite foods and at the end she is able to fit into her jeans. However, after this episode Roseanne goes back to eating the same food the family eats, including the fast, easy meals and junk food.

In another episode Roseanne owns a loose meat sandwich shop, and she conducts an impromptu television interview with a local news station asking the question about the health value of high-fat beef. The interview is conducted by a thin and perky reporter, Cindy, who is not accustomed to the blue-collar nature of the sandwich shop and Roseanne.

Cindy: Hi. Is beef back?

Roseanne: Well, I just want to say that the only thing I don't like about fat is that it doesn't have any sugar in it.

Cindy: Okay, but, um, doesn't a fatty diet, I mean, won't it make you fat?

Roseanne: So? A lot of people are fat, you know. In fact, I think more American women look like me than you, you know. Yeah, but when you watch TV, there's like no fat people on there or anything, like, when I watch that show *Friends*, you know, that has all those whiny girls that are nothing but hair and bones, you know, and like, I watch them and they're like drinking those triple espressos and stuff and I'm just like "Hey! Go for the muffins!"

Roseanne: (Cindy tries to pull the microphone away but Roseanne keeps talking) It kinda bugs me, you know, because, uh, you know, I feel like, hey, I eat the same amount of food that they eat, I just don't puke when I'm done.

Roseanne recognized that models and skinny actresses are not the standard to which women should try to achieve, but rather that more women looked like her. She was the normal in a world where skinny ruled (and still does) and by referencing *Friends*, Roseanne was acknowledging that, "thin media images had negative effects on viewers' body image dissatisfaction and eating disturbance" (Han, 2003, p. 65). She pointed to the skinny reporter as an exception to the natural shape of American women, thus reversing the normative rules of society and turning the reporter into an Other. In this instance, the skinny woman becomes the abnormal while Roseanne maintains her status as the healthy person by indicating that she does not throw up after eating. By not apologizing for her looks and recognizing that she is a sexual individual, Roseanne created a

new image of a mother in her home and workplace. She no longer had to be thin to exude strength and sexiness, but could be overweight and still powerful.

***Husbands and wives: Navigating the “second shift” in the home***

This family did not shy away from their blue-collar status, or “white trash” as they called themselves in several episodes, but embraced it. Many of their social activities involved drinking generic beer, watching a lot of television, going to the mall, or getting a group together to go to the bowling alley. There was no money for luxuries or extravagant adventures. In addition, the family ate “everyday meals” like macaroni and cheese, hotdogs, and packaged desserts. Usually on television, especially in situational comedies, the poor were constructed as an Other going against the dominate of the middle-class or wealthy family (Moss, 2003). Othering is done in the same manner for the poor as with women and the “lumping together of ‘others’ is based on a profound ignorance of the cultures of various groups” (Kramarae, 1996, p. 31). Up to the point of *Roseanne*, feminism was expressed through the working women trying to get ahead in her career, such as Mary Richards in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. But Roseanne Conner did not have a career choice. Her education level, social standing, and economic situation did not allow for it. Instead of addressing inequality in the workforce, Roseanne did it at home. She did not have the luxury of expressing her independence by getting ahead in her job so, through her demeanor and opinions, she expressed whatever was on her mind and made it clear that she ruled the house.

Roseanne was not shy about her numerous opinions of her family and friends and was known to butt into people’s lives to give her two cents. She told everyone what she felt, when she felt it. This was played up in later episodes with numerous references to Roseanne as a “people person.” But what makes this so significant is it reveals another way the character of Roseanne was able to express her views on feminism and, in turn, be a feminist. She ruled the household and everyone knew it. She did not retire away from the norms of a “wife’s duties” but embraced them knowing they need to get done.

However, Roseanne let Dan, her husband, know that she was doing most of the work and he was not immune from her sarcastic wit and jabs. And these insults that Roseanne launched at Dan were not reserved for only fights. They usually occurred in everyday conversations, essentially making them a part of their lives. In the same episode where Roseanne works at a fast food chicken restaurant, she is snappy at her family and it is obvious she does not like her job.

Dan: (after Roseanne snaps at her daughter) Honey, feeling a little tense? Irritable? Peckish? Maybe it’s your hair color.

Roseanne: Maybe it’s my job.

Dan: Maybe you should quit that job.

Roseanne: And do what? All the power jobs are taken. Margaret's running England. Vanna's turning the letters over and Delta Burke has her own damn TV show. Are you gonna be late tonight?

Dan: Nah, I only got a half day's worth of finishing work to do.

Roseanne: Well I gotta go 'cause I got a staff meeting and my boss freaks out if anybody's late. You mind getting dinner tonight?

Dan: (Dan looks at Roseanne with a dumb yet flabbergasted look) Okay! Yeah! What'd I gotta do?

Roseanne: Well you stand up, and you go over here and take this stuff out of this cold box. (Roseanne moves to the refrigerator) Brr. And then you trot it right over here and stick it in this hot box. (She goes to the oven).

Dan: (Dan looks at her as if this was hard to comprehend) What was that middle part again? (Whedon, 1989)

This exchange is not only humorous but also discloses a lot about the relationship Roseanne has with Dan, and her relationship with how she sees herself in the world. The idea that Dan would have to get dinner for the children is played up for laughs, but this is telling about his lack of assistance with household chores. In this scene he plays the dumb husband, unable to understand the refrigerator and oven and what is needed to make a meal. In other words, unless it involves grabbing a beer from the fridge or fixing a needed appliance, Dan is a foreigner in the kitchen. This is not his territory and those definitive lines between the husband and wife are in place. But in *Roseanne* the characters recognize those lines and the limits that they impose.

This is not to say that Dan does not love his children and wants them to achieve a great deal of success, but "what is required to assure this success, however, becomes problematic when it is presumed that mothers, and only mothers, are best suited to child care" (Borisoff, 2005, p. 6). Those problems are prevalent in this scene, as Dan really does not know what to do to make dinner and he recognizes that. However, Dan and Roseanne make a joke about the situation. The above exchange also uncovers how Roseanne views her place in society. Even though she does not have the education level or any type of experience, she deems herself worthy enough to be compared to well-known women including Margaret Thatcher, Vanna White, and Delta Burke. This conversation sums up what Roseanne entailed. It did not try to break any gender rules, but rather exposed

them and all their attributes. Even with several episodes that play with the societal construction of gender, the norm is returned at the end. However, by playing with gender it reveals the way in which society defines the binary of boy/girl and man/woman.

***Women as parents: Resisting the “perfect parenting/perfect children” discourse***

Roseanne Conner was a loving mother who wanted the best for her children, as every mother is “supposed” to want. However, the difference is that the show *Roseanne* recognized that motherhood can be, and for some women is, exhausting, complicated, messy and, at times, annoying. “Roseanne attacked sexism by name and the suffocating, hypocritical norms surrounding the new momism straight on” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 217). The show did not shy away from many problems that parents and children face. In the pilot episode, the two daughters argue about who was talking first, a banal argument that many children have, and after breaking up the fight Roseanne quips “this is why some animals eat their young” (Williams, 1988). In the same episode Roseanne fights with her husband, Dan, about his lack of helping out around the house yelling at him: “Well, you better try a little bit harder. You know why? You better come down off of your throne right now and start helping me out around here, ‘cause I’m getting fed up” (Williams, 1988). She is angry that Dan has not helped out more around the house, such as fixing dinner. At the same time this fight is going on, she goes to the cupboard to get two boxes of macaroni and cheese.

Through this fight Roseanne reveals that she is also fed up with the everyday events of her menial job in a factory, her arguing kids, and her husband who needs to participate in more tasks in the home (in Roseanne’s opinion). Yet, she is not perfect herself and never pretends to be. The macaroni and cheese is not a healthy dinner for children, but after a long day of work, errands and coming home to a messy house, macaroni and cheese is the easiest and fastest option. As Douglas and Michaels point out, compared to other mothers on television, Roseanne “took up as much space as she wanted without apology, she cackled, yelled, and delighted in the insults she hurled at her kids, and...she appeared often in the workplace as an actual working mother” (2004, p. 218). Roseanne took the cuteness out of motherhood and displayed it as an everyday, tiring, and often thankless responsibility that must be done to ensure the children’s well being. Roseanne loved her children, but recognized that they took a lot of time, money, work, and sometimes just got in her way.

Roseanne Conner expressed her feminism through her place in the home, but the *Roseanne* show also displayed new takes on feminism through the other characters as well. The three children grew up on the show and experienced many changes that teens go through including menstruation, losing your virginity, using

birth control, and masturbation. One episode focused on Darlene, the middle child and youngest daughter, a tomboy who excels at sports. Dan wants the entire family to watch a scary vampire movie, but Roseanne is hesitant as she does not want the youngest child, DJ, to wake up in the middle of the night with nightmares. To reassure her Dan promises to get up with any child who has a nightmare that night. So, Roseanne is a bit surprised that it is Darlene who wakes up in the middle of the night and not her other children. Roseanne spends the entire night comforting Darlene. She is exhausted the next morning and makes sure that Dan knows it. Roseanne was the one who automatically cared for the child while Dan did not even wake and he is confused the next morning as to why Roseanne is so tired.

After a series of back and forth dialogue it is finally revealed that Darlene got her period for the first time. In one scene, Roseanne tells her sister, Jackie, about Darlene and that Roseanne wishes Darlene would talk to her about her feelings and not shut down like she has.

Jackie: The poor kid's just been sentenced to forty-five years of monthly inconvenience.

Roseanne: (sarcastically) Gee Jackie, I hope I can find a way to pass that enlightened wisdom on to my daughter.

Jackie: You will, just tell her about all those famous athletic women types, and how they all get their periods too. (McKeaney, 1989)

This exchange is notable for several reasons. First, it plays into the stereotype that menstruation has always been and always will be an inconvenience for women. As if it is something that women must deal with on a monthly basis and is anything but empowering. However, Roseanne recognizes that stereotype and does not want to impart the same negative notion to her daughter, which shows that she does not believe the period is a negative aspect of a woman's makeup. Roseanne tells Jackie that even if Darlene does not feel it, this is something to celebrate as "she's finally becoming a full fledged member of the woman race" (McKeaney, 1989), indicating a mutual bond that should be recognized. Later in the episode when Darlene inquires about any good thing that happens as a result of menstruating, Roseanne mentions her three children. While menstruating does not define what makes a woman, it is a large component of a woman's existence and something that most women can relate to. Towards the end of that episode, Roseanne walks into Darlene's room as she is throwing away her basketballs, baseball gloves, and football gear.

Roseanne: What're you doing?

Darlene: Getting rid of all this junk.

Roseanne: Oh, I get it. You think you gotta leave this stuff behind you now. Like women have to give up baseball gloves and start wearing aprons and stuff.

Darlene: All I know is I'm not shaving my legs or wearing pantyhose like Becky.

Roseanne: You think I make Becky put on makeup and wear perfume?

Darlene: No.

Roseanne: No. She does it because she always liked that kind of stuff. That's the kind of woman she wants to be.

Darlene: Well, that's not the kind of woman I want to be.

Roseanne: Well, then what're you throwing all your stuff away for? These are a girl's things, Darlene, as long as a girl uses them. (McKeaney, 1989)

Roseanne's notion that her two daughters, Darlene and Becky, are completely opposite, one a tomboy and the other a girly girl, and yet each uniquely a woman, is a direct response to the feminist movement of that Roseanne Barr grew up in. Darlene should not be forced, in this case from societal pressure, to give up the sports activities that she loves simply because she got her period.

Roseanne displays her view on feminism and motherhood by allowing her two daughters to develop into their own personalities, but she also allows her son the freedom to behave to his desire and comforts. This is seen in an episode titled "Trick or Treat" where DJ, Roseanne's son, wants to dress up as a witch for Halloween, complete with broom, long pointy nose, and red sparkly shoes. Dan does not like this, as he wants DJ to dress up in a "boy costume" such as a vampire or ax murderer. Roseanne says that he was able to pick his own costume and that is what he chose, however Dan wants other ideas and suggests he dress up as a warlock, or a male witch. However, to do this, Dan takes away his broom, which disappoints DJ.

There are several points at play here. First there is the inequality with which Dan views his children. It was okay when Darlene dressed up as a pirate, traditionally a boy's costume, but it is not okay for DJ to dress as a witch. Dan counters this by saying that he does not want his son to get beat up for wearing a girl's costume, but when Darlene wore a boy's costume that was cute. Men must conform to the

societal pressures of what it means to be a man, indicating that, “masculinity is predominantly a communication issue and masculinity itself a social and symbolic construction...masculinity is a product of human interaction; it is social construction” (Chesebro, 2001, p. 38). Dan was trying to ensure that his son conformed to the social construction of masculinity, despite the fact that his son was only around nine years old. Roseanne disregarded these societal norms and as another option suggested DJ dress up as Madonna. Even on Halloween, the one day where seemingly all rules surrounding gender are thrown out the door in the name of dressing up, Dan did not want his son’s gender identity to be touched in any way. “Men must enact certain roles if they are to be viewed as masculine” (Chesebro, 2001, p. 38), and DJ broke his role by dressing up in a girl’s costume. In the end, Dan realized that in order for DJ to be happy he must be himself, which means dressing up as a witch.

This episode also has fun with the opposite scenario, too. Roseanne dresses up as a lumberjack for her costume and, after her car breaks down, Roseanne and Jackie end up at a local bar. Once there Roseanne decides to have a little fun and begins to socialize with a bunch of men playing pool with one specific middle-age and overweight man bragging about having sex with a model. The tone is obvious that he is fabricating this story, but the other men in the group believe what he says. However Roseanne sees right through the story and begins to insult the storyteller. After leaving the group, Roseanne joins Jackie and begins to explain the social interaction between the men.

Roseanne: Hey, it reminds me of that movie where that lady hung out with a bunch of gorillas, but they accept her as one of their own.

Jackie: Oh cool. Yeah, what’d they talk about?

Roseanne: Well, okay, the head gorilla, he’s like standing around telling these sex stories, and the less dominate gorillas are just standing around believing it.

Jackie: So, what’s so new about that?

Roseanne: Well, I think I finally figured out why they do it.

Jackie: Oh, do tell.

Roseanne: Well, it’s like if one of them actually has sex then it seems like maybe the rest of them have a chance, too.

Jackie: Oh, so you think that’s it, huh?

Roseanne: Oh, yeah, it gives them a feeling of hope and pride.  
(Abugov, 1990)

The men in the group are conforming to nearly every characteristic of what it means to be masculine and, as Roseanne points out, if they do not have a certain characteristic they make it up. In this scene, sex is the indicating factor of what makes a male manly. Since the man is not having sex he fabricates a story in order to increase his masculinity around his buddies. Also, Roseanne uses the metaphor of gorillas to describe the men. As Kramarae discussed, this type of label is arbitrary and takes on different meanings in different circumstances (1996, p. 24). Gorillas as a metaphor can be used positively to represent strength and intelligence. However, in this circumstance, Roseanne uses it negatively to indicate the men are wild, unable to communicate, and act like primates.

Later, the same man attempts to pick a fight with Roseanne, unaware that she is a woman. Dan walks in at that time and tells the guy to leave Roseanne alone by stating "He's my husband...anybody that messes with him messes with me" (Abugov, 1990). Dan then proceeds to give the man a sexy-eye-look and says in a loving voice "Do you want to mess with me?" (Abugov, 1990) Here, Dan repels the man by questioning his sexuality. The undertone is that Dan would be gay and coming on to the other man. However, since it was already indicated that the other man will do anything to ensure his masculinity stays intact in front of his buddies, by manufacturing a story about having sex with a model, he is not going to do anything that would question his sexuality and thus runs away leaving both Roseanne and Dan alone.

## **Conclusion**

Even though season nine saw a huge shift in the entire composition of the show, *Roseanne* portrayed women on television in a way that was not popular: there were strong and weak characters; they were overweight and underweight; smart and stupid, and did not live a life of luxury. Indeed, the diverse characters, both male and female, indicated that there is not one "right" or "wrong" gender role. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* showed audiences that woman could be single, independent, work hard and still live a happy and fulfilling life, even if it was a bit extravagant given the financial salary that Mary Richards presumably made. *Roseanne* took that same concept but showed the other side of it. Women did not have to be powerful working people in order to be viewed as important members of society. Roseanne had few of the characteristics that second wave feminists were fighting for: she did not get equal pay, she put her family and children first, and she financially depended on her husband (though he depended on her too). But she was able to express her feminism in different ways. She imparted on her children that they needed to be exactly who they are, even if that meant a daughter who liked to play baseball and basketball and a son who liked to

dress up as a witch. Roseanne did not let anyone walk over her and she did the horrible jobs that she had to do for the money, but she demanded respect for her work. Roseanne showed that there are cases when being a wife and mother is exhausting and dirty. However, living in that traditional female role did not deplete her equality status. Roseanne Conner was the character who demonstrated that women could be equal to men, and she would not have it any other way.

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