Faith & Reason Honors Program

SENIOR THESIS

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Thesis Title  Television, Women, and True Self-Worth
Thesis Sub-Title
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Year          2009
Foreword

Over the past decade, I have known a remarkable number of girls who have dealt with a variety of body issues; one as serious as requiring multiple hospital admissions for an eating disorder, others who are constantly dieting and counting calories and obsessing about their physical attributes. One evening two years ago, some of my friends were picking apart the bodies of the models in a catalogue, and their words affected me more than I ever thought they would. I was disturbed by how many flaws they found with some of the most beautiful women in the pictures. It was upsetting to consider what my friends must have then thought of me, of each other, and most importantly of themselves, as they were commenting on the thickness of one of the models’ thighs and another’s bony elbows. I wondered why they felt the need to pick apart the bodies of other women, why they seemed to be so dissatisfied with their own bodies, and what caused them to see the female figure through such critical eyes. I also wondered how I managed to reach nineteen years old without acquiring an eye as harsh as theirs (though I certainly did not escape it altogether).

I realize that there is a world of influence on every person’s life that I could never begin to dissect. In the case of my friends, I have learned that many of the differences among us stem from our upbringings more than anything else. However, women in the media have undoubtedly had an effect as well. Girls today are bombarded with images of celebrities in movies, magazines, on book covers and of course on television. The women have shiny white teeth, manicured nails,
perfectly coiffed hair, trendy outfits, are thin, and are airbrushed. However, we tend to ignore that last bit when commenting on their beauty. We also tend to forget that these women can afford stylists and personal trainers to pamper them before every photo shoot or on-screen appearance.

Why, then, do we still put these celebrities up on pedestals? Moreover, do any of them actually deserve it? All our lives we are instructed to “be ourselves” and “be happy with who we are.” But the attention that many public figures receive, both negative and positive, makes it harder and harder for each new generation of women to find satisfaction with their looks. As a result, plastic surgery, diets, and ‘miracle’ dietary supplements from foreign countries are gaining rapid popularity.

After four years at DeSales University, and having been raised in a basically non-religious household, I have come to gain an appreciation for Salesian spirituality. I have found that the teachings of Saint Francis DeSales are rather all encompassing for humanity, not just Catholics. In addition, I think that the point of his messages is what is missing in the media and society today. St. Francis teaches to “be who you are and be that well,” while the media suggests we should all be like the stars featured on our favorite TV shows. This is an unhealthy and unrealistic message to all people; and the most vulnerable are our children who are the most easily influenced. When I was three years old, my mother told me I was no longer allowed to watch a children’s cartoon called The Noozles because after viewing an episode, I would behave disrespectfully like the little girl on the show.
Children do not even realize how easily affected they are by what they are watching, and if their parents are not involved enough to guide them, they have no chance of learning what is and is not appropriate. As an actress considering a career on television, I believe that it is the responsibility of the media to help instill proper principles; thus this project has become quite personal. It is the media’s duty to help lift our society to a higher place of humanity instead of bringing us down with what we portray in the entertainment shows of television.

It is important to explore what this higher place of humanity is, and what we must know to reach it. Television’s portrayal of women has changed over the past fifty years, and it has affected women in America. The basis of this effect must not only lie in the looks of the women we watch on a daily basis, but within the characters they portray as well. Do these characters actually depict the average woman in America? It is safe to say that in most cases, no, they do not. Nor are they worthy of the high regard in which we often hold them. Women must find a greater source for determining their personal self-worth, and that can only come from finding satisfaction within themselves, entirely unrelated to the undeserving role models on television.

Introduction

Every day young girls get home from school, turn on the television and watch their favorite characters on their favorite shows. It is part of our culture as Americans, and it is not often questioned—but maybe it should be.
We live in an age that is continually emphasizing and investigating the need for equality among men and women. We tell our children that women can hold any position a man can, and vice versa. Over the past few decades, we have seen a growth in the number of female CEOs, doctors, construction workers, as well as male nurses, secretaries, and more. Post-secondary education, which was at one time a primarily male institution, is now attended by at least as many women. There is no doubt that our country has bridged many gender gaps over the last sixty years. Why is it then, that our television shows still paint inappropriate and unrealistic pictures of both women and men? More importantly, what messages are being sent to young people across the nation who watch these shows on a daily basis?

As a society, we need to examine who and/or what is defining the image of perfection that women aspire to emulate. Are our role models, as they are portrayed in the media, based in reality or are they extreme stereotypes of what the media chooses to expose in society? The timeless teachings of St. Francis de Sales instruct us to respect ourselves and develop healthy self-images with our own unique qualities as the foundation. Regardless of religious affiliation, this advice is valuable to all human beings.

Since its widespread introduction into our homes in the 1950s, television has been an ever-growing medium. Today, there are hundreds of different channels airing thousands of different shows and events from the past as well as the present. It is the easiest way to be updated on the day’s news, as well as to be entertained.
Television connects us to other people by providing a common ground for discussion; a great new episode that aired last night is an easy conversation starter. Yet much has changed about what is shown on television since its early years, and thus what messages are being conveyed to our youth.

At the start of television, real women were typically housewives taking care of their homes and families. Today, women are much more career-driven and often find a way to both raise a family and become a part of the work force. Many television shows have evolved to depict this, however there are very few programs that also depict a healthy balance between the two lives. Over the past few decades, many studies have examined the portrayals of occupational and marital roles in television’s prime-time shows. “Overall, the findings indicate that female characters are more likely to have identifiable marital roles whereas male characters are more likely to have identifiable occupational roles.”

The following pages will examine a selection of popular television shows from each decade from the 1950s to the present, with emphasis on who the prominent women in the show were and what positive and/or negative qualities they represented. At the conclusion of each decade’s section is a short commentary on how American women might have viewed the characters on the shows, as well as how the roles play into the moral search of personal self-worth. Following the examination of the decades is an exploration of what women should be searching for when trying to find personal satisfaction, based, in part, on the teachings of St. Francis de Sales.
In addition to the research I have done, I conducted my own survey of American women in different age group in to further explore television viewing habits as well as the range of influence female characters had upon these viewers. I circulated surveys (created specifically for each target age group: nine to twelve year olds, fifteen to eighteen year olds, and women over thirty; see Appendices A, B, and C) to gain a better understanding of how real girls and women are affected by the media. I asked a variety of questions about the amount of television watched each week and admirable qualities found in actresses and characters. The responses to these queries have influenced the direction of this thesis, and some of the findings are included as well.

**Female Characters of the Past**

**The Fifties**

The 1950s depicted women like Lucy Ricardo on the *I Love Lucy Show*, an impish woman whose central conflict tended to be “between her nature and behavior and society’s expectations of her.” Lucy was the central point of the show. Her actions and ideas created the plot, the conflict, and the comedy. Lucy showed viewers, with her limitless energy and animated facial expressions, that being comical was an attractive feature in a woman. “She had no vanity and donned bizarre clothes and unbecoming postures, even impersonating a seal to accomplish a desired end.” The show still airs today. Interestingly though, her character was
not heroic. In fact, Lucy was rather imperfect and caused some kind of trouble on almost every episode.

In many episodes, her goal was to find a way into show business, any kind of show business. She impersonated musicians, dressed like showgirls, wheedled directors, and pretended to be an actress. Critics have said that show business represented a medium in which a woman could gain success and power while holding onto her femininity rather than acting aggressively or masculine. This is important to recognize since Lucy did not show her femininity in the typical 1950s way; she really was inept as a housewife and was unsuccessful in the marketplace and in show business as well. Most frequently, she jeopardized the financial security of the family or her marriage. True to the societal standards of the time, her husband Ricky almost always bailed her out of whatever trouble she managed to get into. He assured her that he had no interest in the glamorous musicians or singers or actresses that Lucy emulated, he paid for the financial mistakes she made, or he created the plans to resolve any other havoc she wreaked. Although it was these plot lines and ridiculous characteristics, along with her remarkable aptitude for physical humor that made the show so funny, the messages that went out to women viewers were not that of an independent woman, or even a successful woman of the time. However, it can certainly be argued that Lucy was a much better role model than the women we watch today. Self-acceptance was a big part of the message that women viewing television in the 1950s could take away from episodes of *I Love Lucy*. 
The Sixties

The 1960s brought about two very opposite roles of Lucy’s imp. First, there was the traditional housewife seen in Mary Tyler Moore’s character of Laura Petrie on The Dick Van Dyke Show. Laura “depicted a wife and mother who was attractive, competent, kind, considerate, and conscientious.”5 Part of her role as a domestic woman was to be attractive, and even somewhat glamorous. Her husband clearly recognized her value, and often bought her gifts to demonstrate his love. Of course Laura was also seen doing chores and errands. Her image was definitely positive through the eyes of her husband, friends and neighbors. The stereotype of the wife character, seen also in June Cleaver on Leave it to Beaver and Donna Stone on The Donna Reed Show among others, aired the image of a woman who was successful in the home. They were the perfect examples of everything that was considered socially acceptable for women at the time. However, these were also strong women in that they often were shown as the advisors to their husbands. Their good judgment and high moral standards proved helpful to their men time and again. They contrasted their male characters physically as well. They were seen standing straight upright and with square shoulders while their husbands were often lounging on chairs or leaning against walls and doorframes. Still, their femininity and gentleness was never compromised as they frequently guided their husbands or children toward the decent and moral choices that presented themselves in various episodes.6
The second popular character of the decade was the witch, made popular by the series *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*. In both shows, as well as others, the protagonist woman had supernatural powers, yet also ran the household. *Bewitched* told the story of the Stephens family. Samantha, the witch, was married to Darrin, and in later episodes was mother to Tabitha. However, she was not the only witch on the show; Tabitha had inherited her mother’s powers, and Samantha’s own mother Endora and her Aunt Clara were frequent supernatural visitors, among others. Samantha’s distinctiveness came not from her magical powers, but from her superb wit. Many conflicts within the episodes stemmed from her meddling mother or curious neighbors. Luckily, Samantha’s clever use of trickery always saved the day. She showed audiences an appropriate use of dominance, exercising it only in matters dealing with her immediate family. She had no interest in affairs outside of her own home and family, especially those concerning men. In fact, she often made such affairs seem insignificant and even foolish.⁷

This was the main struggle in the series: the power struggle between man and woman. There was no doubt that witchcraft topped humanity, yet this was not all that was superior in Samantha. When her father, the warlock Maurice, appeared in any episode, he was a force to be reckoned with. His name was mentioned with respect and awe, and his arrival was preceded by the crash of thunder. His magic was stronger than Samantha’s was and Endora’s, yet
Samantha never failed to best him with her charm and trickery. She seldom chose to use her magic if she could solve a problem with “cajoling and manipulation.”

Jeannie, on *I Dream of Jeannie*, possessed qualities quite similar to Samantha’s. Jeannie consistently found ways to deceive her ‘Master’ Major Anthony Nelson and his astronaut friends. Again, the man of the house held a job in which he was a figure of authority and supposedly very intelligent, yet Jeannie repeatedly found ways to outsmart him. The witch character, Jeannie especially, is a descendent of the imp from the fifties. She wants to find ways into the man’s world, “but unlike Lucy or the others, she had the power to alter the consequences... the witch reflected her time.” Her message to young viewers was one of “feminine protest and affiliation” as an independent character with a sense of her own power. Of course, neither Jeannie nor Samantha was actually a realistic role model for women. No matter how impressive their intelligence and quick thinking was, in the end they always relied on their magic for help. No mere mortal could do what they did, and thus no average woman watching can realistically aspire to be like either character. Similarly, if either character were changed to be a more realistic role model as a simple human, the premise of the shows would have been entirely lost.

The 1960s was a period of major change in America. Both racial and gender gaps were closing as our society took huge steps forward toward greater equality. The television programs followed suit, and yet the characters previously discussed were not drastically changed from their predecessors. The strength that Laura,
Samantha, and Jeannie all showed was subtle and witty rather than blatant and domineering. This subtle strength was valued by their husbands and families, at least most of the time. The men in their lives appreciated how they could solve problems no matter who got into them in the first place. Audiences appreciated the femininity of the characters that was never lost with their gained strength. All three women were attractive, wearing skirts more often than pants and with their hair always done, typical of women at the time. Had any of these characters shown overt strength or power over their husbands and their situations, it is likely that audiences would not have responded nearly as well. Although society was growing more accepting of assertive females in the 1960s, seeing them on television may have been too much for the viewers of the day.

Women viewing television in the 1960s saw characters with subtle strength and femininity. Real women could emulate the qualities that Laura demonstrated as she cared for her family and successfully ran her household. Although Jeannie and Samantha were unrealistic role models because of their supernatural abilities, they too displayed strength and competence in the home. Women aspiring to be like these characters could do so without compromising their moral standards.

The Seventies

By the 1970s, female participation in the workforce had increased to over fifty percent from below forty percent in 1960. To follow suit, television producers James L. Brooks and Allan Burns got behind the idea for a show about a working
woman. Featuring an already familiar face, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* became quite the sensation, winning twenty-five Emmys by its end in 1977.12

Moore played Mary Richards, an associate producer in a small newsroom in Minneapolis. "*Mary Tyler Moore* is generally acknowledged as the first popular and long-running television series clearly to feature the influence of feminism. Although the show’s creators consistently claimed that *Mary Tyler Moore* was about character, not politics... writer-producer James Brooks stated that ‘we sought to show someone from Mary Richards’ background being in a world where women’s rights were being talked about and it was having an impact.’"13

Although it was not the first sitcom to feature a working-woman, in the world of television, it is historically accepted as the first to present work as a satisfactory core for her life rather than simply a prelude to or replacement for marriage.

“The Mary's image as an unmarried career woman with a responsible job other than a secretary or a teacher was a major break from television tradition. She was not a widow, had no children, and was working because she wanted to build her own life and career... the program presented, without fanfare, women as being capable of interests beyond housework, marriage, and crazy sitcom schemes.” 14

The writers wanted her to be a “whole person,” unaffected by the fact that she was single and female. To achieve this, Mary became a sister, daughter, and even a mother to her friends and co-workers on the show.15

Mary Richards had just the right combination of the sweet girl-next-door with the old-fashioned values of integrity and sincerity mixed with the “spunky New Woman” to allow the show “to ride the currents of social change, endorsing
modernity at the same time as it hallows tradition.”16 This “New Woman” of the 1970s was one who looked for an end to sexism and the acceptance of a woman interested in working as well as or instead of being a homemaker, wife and mother; she was a more “progressive character.”17 A 1991 study showed that many middle-class women found The Mary Tyler Moore Show to be a realistic and positive depiction of the life of an independent woman who was well-liked and attractive as well as successful and self-sufficient.18 The responses to my own study proved the lasting impression the show had on women viewers at the time. When asked what female character they most admired as a child, thirty years later, many women still remember how they enjoyed watching Mary when they were growing up.

Charlie’s Angels was another popular show in the late 1970s. Featuring three beautiful women, six actresses in all by the time it went off the air, the show got a lot of attention, both positive and negative. Some aspects of the show were undoubtedly empowering for women, yet they were outweighed by all of the superficial elements. The premise of the show, to have female detectives fighting crime, was undeniably exciting. In the first season, the original Angels were former policewomen who had been recruited by Charlie Townsend to be his special detectives. As the cast changed, the subsequent Angels filled different roles, such as a previous Angel’s younger sister or a modeling student with a criminal record. One thing that remained the same though, was the glamour of the women.19

Jaclyn Smith, Kate Jackson, and Farrah Fawcett created the original crime-fighting Angels. Cast mainly for their looks, these women, as well as the succeeding
three, are still remembered for their beauty on screen. Their costumes were often form fitting and low-cut, and a number of episodes showed the women in bathing suits, including string bikinis. On a number of occasions, it was clear that the actresses were not wearing bras beneath their clothing, leading to the coining of the term “jiggle TV.” It was clear that audiences were tuning in for the sheer pleasure of watching the Angels flaunt themselves on screen rather than for the depth of the plots, mainly because there was no depth. In fact, creator Aaron Spelling even said, “on this show, we’re more concerned with hair-dos and gowns than the twists of the plots.”

The actresses agreed; three years after leaving the show Kate Jackson recalled the scripts being “so light it would take a week to get to the floor if you dropped it from the ceiling.” It was not just the lack of clothing and weightless plots that spawned criticism though, the whole premise of having three women work for one man was often a subject in question.

Some critics likened Charlie Townsend to a pimp and the Angels to his prostitutes. Others simply thought of him as a stereotypical, chauvinistic bachelor. Both his yacht and mansion were always seen with beautiful, scantily-clad women parading around. However, it has also been argued that Charlie’s Angels is really meant to be a feminist show and that Charlie himself is somewhat of a “feminist hero” (Branham 2). This position presents Charlie as a man who truly appreciates a woman for all she is worth. He certainly appreciates her beauty, but he also recognizes the value in the female’s intellect. Why else would such a powerful man hire women to do what was generally understood to be a “man’s job”? Charlie was
respected and loved by his Angels who would gladly do whatever he asked of them. They were fully compensated for their work, and even received a number of bonuses from their boss as was seen in episodes that took them on vacations to Hawaii or led them to great shopping sprees. A number of Charlie’s ex-girlfriends were seen throughout the series and none of them ever had anything negative to say about him either.\textsuperscript{22}

As for the Angels, no one denies that they often used their feminine wiles for their personal gain in solving a case. However, it should also be remembered that they used their wits and on occasion their physical training to apprehend the criminals. The women continuously found themselves in situations where they needed to outsmart the men they were trying to capture, and with the help from their fellow Angels, they never failed.\textsuperscript{23} The loud statement of three beautiful women appearing as more than simple eye-candy is often overlooked when critics discuss the show. This goes to show that even when strong women are portrayed on screen, audiences still view them as sex objects. If the show had aired with three less-than-attractive women as the Angels, it never would have gained the popularity that it did. Of course, this is partly due to the weak scripts, but more so to the inherent problem that our society finds sexuality so captivating.

Defined by some of the characters appearing on television in the 1970s, the ideal woman was a scantily clad manipulator. The strong, confident working-woman depicted by Mary Tyler Moore at the beginning of the decade quickly degenerated into a woman valued for her shapely figure. Real women who watched
such shows as Charlie’s Angels and aspired to be like the Angels would determine their own worth based on how they measured up to an image created by television producers. This is in direct contrast to the lessons taught to us by St. Francis de Sales regarding self-image.

*The Eighties*

Surprisingly, the 1980s brought a couple of shows with very little sex appeal that became hits nonetheless. In a decade when what was once considered taboo was suddenly becoming a part of pop culture, a number of television shows were trying to present some old fashioned ideals in modern situations. The family became an important subject on a number of shows including *Who’s the Boss?*, *Family Ties*, and of course *The Cosby Show*.

*The Cosby Show* began in 1984 and focused on the daily trials and tribulations of a successful African-American family in Brooklyn, New York. The series was based on an impressive comedy sketch about child rearing that Bill Cosby had done on NBC’s *Tonight* show. It was unique in that it was the first show to depict a black family as securely upper-middle class. The family was comprised of Cliff and Clair Huxtable, played by Bill Cosby and Phylicia Rashad, and their five children: Sondra, Denise, Theo, Vanessa, and Rudy.

Cliff was an esteemed gynecologist and Clair was a practicing attorney as well as a successful mother, wife, and homemaker. For having such high-powered jobs, it is interesting to note that Cliff is often seen in his office, as it is attached to the house, whereas Clair is rarely seen at work, except occasionally working
through papers at her desk at home. However, unlike earlier shows from the fifties and sixties, both parents are consistently shown attending to their fair share of child rearing responsibilities. The dynamics of the household clearly portrayed a generally even standing ground between husband and wife.

Supporting the strength of Clair’s character on the show were the roles of each of the daughters. At the outset in 1984, Sondra was a student at the prestigious Princeton University. Later in the series, she became a wife and mother who remained close to her family, clearly another strong female role model though it was a smaller role. The second oldest daughter, Denise, had a much more eclectic personality than the rest of her family, but she too attended college, and later became a successful photographer and travelled to Africa. In the last three seasons, Denise also had a husband as well as a stepdaughter, Olivia. Despite her free-spirited personality, Denise managed to become a loving stepmother and wife, respected by her whole family.24

In addition to the strong characters on the show, many lessons within the episodes had a central theme of female issues. It would be hard to avoid this in a household with a working mother of four daughters! One episode, entitled “Planning Parenthood,” even discusses the difficulty of motherhood combined with a career when Clair’s sister considers starting a family. The younger sisters are often in the spotlight as well, playing both feminine little sisters as well as tomboys. Young Rudy joins the football team on the episode “Rudy Suits Up,” but later in the
series, she is often seen borrowing clothing and makeup or getting relationship advice from her older sisters.\textsuperscript{25}

In all, \textit{The Cosby Show} was one of the best presentations of women on television. The three grown up Huxtable women, Clair, Sondra, and Denise, were portrayed as strong, educated women successfully balancing careers with their roles as loving mothers and wives. All five women were attractive, yet never seen as sex objects as they wore more appropriate clothing focusing attention on their characters rather than their figures. The men on the show all loved the women, respected their career choices, and valued their talents within the home. The show truly depicted a successful American family dealing with real-life situations, respectful and respectable men, and strong yet loving women.

Another family sitcom that became popular in the eighties was \textit{Kate and Allie}. This show examined a new kind of family life: instead of a traditional household with the mother, father, and children, this show's household was comprised of two single mothers and their combination of three children. Following the theme of sisterhood, which had its beginnings in \textit{Charlie’s Angels}, shows like \textit{Designing Women} and \textit{Cagney and Lacey} became popular as they explored the theme of sisterhood. \textit{Kate and Allie} also focused on the bonds of women, within the realm of a single home.

\textit{Kate and Allie} were friends since childhood, and when each found herself divorced and raising children alone, they moved into a New York City apartment together. Interestingly, the characters still fit the stereotypical parent roles. Kate
was a more independent than Allie was, and supported the “family,” while Allie had a more traditional sense to her and tended to the domestic duties.

Both women were attractive though not as glamorous as the women appearing on Charlie’s Angels, but they did not need to flaunt their looks to appeal to viewers. Instead, the situations of two divorcees raising children in New York portrayed by realistic and comedic actresses were appealing enough to sustain the show for six seasons. The practical challenges of “adjusting to a new lifestyle and to living closely with new people, dealing with children’s issues, beginning to date again, [and] securing financial stability” are relatable to all single parents. However, the series also looks more deeply into the greater concern of gender identity during a decade when traditional gender roles were in transition.

“Allie Lowell has submerged her own identity in that of her husband and most of the series’ trajectory tracks her journey toward autonomy. Kate McArdle, on the other hand, has a stronger sense of her own identity, but must constantly struggle for equality at work and for the assurance that her goals will be respected in any love relationship.”

The overall span of the show also sends out a positive message to women, as Allie was successful in her pursuit of independence; in the fifth season, she accepted a marriage proposal with as much assurance of herself and her own goals within the relationship as of the meaningful relationship itself. Kate still had not met a man with life goals matching hers, but viewers were sure she would not fall into a marriage that was less than she hoped for. In addition, Kate and Allie owned a
thriving catering business together, making them successful working-women as well.28

The female characters depicted on programs airing in the 1980s brought back a higher moral standard that had been lost in the preceding decade. Viewers could identify with realistic characters in various domestic, work, and romantic situations. These characters illustrated strength and competence as they balanced the different aspects of their lives. They grew to be comfortable with themselves over the course of their series and sent a positive message of self-acceptance to American girls and women.

*The Nineties*

Familial women were at the heart of television in the 1990s as well. *Roseanne*, which began in 1988 and aired for nine years, was nearly the polar opposite of its sitcom forefather *The Cosby Show*. It centered on a blue-collar family living in Illinois, and was matriarchal rather than father-based. Roseanne Conner showed audiences what life is like for a struggling family in lower-middle class America. She worked “long hours in a plastics factory to supplement the income of her husband, a none-too-successful self-employed contractor.”29 Yet the show did not reject the lifestyle, it simply let out its frustrations with it. Roseanne was undeniably the power in the household with her loud mouth and brassy attitude, but there was an understanding between her and her husband Dan.

With three children, Darlene, Becky, and DJ, each very different from the others, Roseanne and Dan faced plenty of comical predicaments over the years.
Though they often looked at parenthood through a sarcastic, even scornful eye, there were enough scenes of affection to assure audiences that “the stability of the family was never truly in doubt... The Conner family was not genuinely dysfunctional, despite all the rancor.”³⁰ Although she may not have been the greatest of role models for aspiring young women with her distaste for work and her lack of class, Roseanne was a woman who loved her family no matter what situation arose.

Another middle-class all-American family popular on TV in the 1990s was the Taylors. Tim “the Tool Man” Taylor, his wife Jill, and their three sons Brad, Randy, and Mark, became one of America’s favorite families in 1991 as Home Improvement gained popularity. The overall premise for this show was to lightly satirize gender roles. Tim was interested in everything stereotypically masculine, especially ‘fixing things,’ though he never seemed to be totally successful with any of his repairs. Jill was the optimal wife and mother, a good homemaker and supportive of all of her boys’ endeavors. As the show went on, she pursued her education with a degree in psychology. The idea of his wife becoming more educated than he was threatened Tim, but in the end, he saw the value in her pursuit of a degree and recognized its significance to Jill.³¹

The show-within-the-show “Tool Time,” however, did feature a bit of a sex object in the role of the Tool Time Girl Heidi Keppert. Preceded by Pamela Anderson in the role of Lisa, Debbe Dunning became the beauty of the show, often appearing in short shorts or low cut shirts with work boots and a tool belt. As the
series went on however, Heidi’s character grew in depth as she got married and finally announced her pregnancy. In spite of her sex appeal, she became a truly loveable character and was a good friend to the Taylors.

Jill Taylor was a strong woman in a cast of mainly men. She was never overshadowed by them, and they never truly disrespected her. Jill, played by Patricia Richardson, was a real woman who struggled with weight issues, wanted more from a career, and was teased by her children and husband. She looked to her neighbor for advice and complained to her mother about her poor cooking skills. She was far from perfect, yet she was undeniably loveable and respectable. She was a definitively good role model for young women.

The end of the nineties brought a greater downfall for the women seen on television. In 1998, HBO aired the pilot episode for the now world-famous Sex & the City. Based on an actual newspaper column, the show’s creator, Darren Star,

“wanted to try his hand at a comedy, a comedy about sex from a female point of view, which was totally uncharted on TV...He didn’t like the way networks tended to handle adult sexuality: in a wink-wink, nudge-nudge style, euphemistic and adolescent. Instead, he wanted to create a true adult comedy in which the sex could be handled in an up-front and honest way.”

What he created turned out to be hit for women coming of age at the end of the century. Following shows like Baywatch, which only existed to afford men the opportunity to drool over gorgeous women in bathing suits and women to envy models with silicone-enhanced bodies, Sex & the City specifically targeted a female audience. As the show became more popular and edited versions began airing in
syndication on TBS, audiences watched Carrie Bradshaw and her three friends prance around New York City in their seemingly infinite wardrobes of designer clothing. Their sexual escapades were the basis for nearly every episode. Although each character represented a different type of woman in America (Miranda became the single mother balancing a child and a career, Charlotte was the homemaker, Samantha the high-powered career woman, and Carrie represented the more average, independent woman who happens to have an obsession with shoes), the show did not give a realistic image for women to aspire to be. These women were incapable of establishing successful, long-term relationships and found short-lived sexual relations as a way of life.

How could it be that four women, each with the strength and intelligence to live autonomously in the “city that never sleeps” while successfully maintaining their chosen careers, have such a difficult time with their heterosexual relationships? If any positive message from this show is to be found, it might be the recurring theme of the strength of sisterhood. If nothing else, Carrie and her friends demonstrate to American women how to rely on each other and support one another without judgment or ridicule.

Audiences in the 1990s were witness to a change on television. The beginning of the decade showed women with whom female viewers could identify. Jill and Roseanne were wives and mothers who cared more about their families than about their personal images. The end of the century brought much more superficiality with its new programs. Focusing on selfish behavior, material goods,
and sexuality, shows like *Sex & the City* offered female audiences a look at characters with low moral standards. However, the lives of these women were glamorous, and rather than being scorned for their poor choices, they were idolized.

*The Present Decade*

Girls today can be influenced by many inappropriate television shows. The majority of nine to twelve year olds watch between seven and fifteen hours of TV each week, according to the results of my study. They are watching shows like *Hannah Montana* and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, which spotlight teenagers consumed with materialistic products and sexual encounters. Older girls are tuning in to shows like *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Desperate Housewives*, which are certainly less realistic in artistic form. The ideals of women on television in the past twenty years have changed drastically – and not for the better.

*Hannah Montana* features a pubescent girl leading a double life in the music industry. This industry is known for its superficiality, and Miley Stewart/Hannah Montana, portrayed by Miley Cyrus, plays right into this. Having moved from Tennessee to Malibu, she is transitioning into a new lifestyle, one that is much more focused on material goods than on moral choices or familial concerns. She is whiney and self-centered most of the time. She is becoming one of the biggest superstars preteen girls in America have ever seen.

One would be hard pressed to find a girl between the ages of five and fifteen who does not know Hannah Montana. However, one would find that the majority of these girls have a difficult time differentiating between real life and fiction because
the actress’s first name is the same as her character. Although Miley Cyrus may be growing older and making decisions as the sixteen year old that she is, her fan base is still significantly younger than this. The newer music she is releasing might be appropriate for teenagers, but the elementary age girls who watch her show and look up to her do not recognize that Miley Cyrus’ music is different from Miley Stewart/Hannah Montana’s. Hannah Montana has become a household name with the help of the upcoming movie and massive merchandising. Little girls across the country can be found wearing *Hannah Montana* t-shirts, backpacks, and even sneakers and jackets, and toting *Hannah Montana* lunchboxes, notebooks, purses, etc. Nearly every store with a pre-teen clothing section has racks of Hannah gear. *Hannah Montana* make-up is a big-seller as well, which could easily influence the younger girls in the target audience to start wearing make-up, and thus to “grow up” too soon.

*The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, presently in its first season, depicts a fifteen-year-old girl who became pregnant after having sex for the first time. Amy Juergens is a thin, attractive French horn player who meets Ricky at band camp, the new stereotypical location for sexual exploration as made popular by the infamous *American Pie* movies. Feeling pretty for the first time, based on his compliments, Amy moves exceedingly quickly into adult relations and sleeps with him just days after their first meeting. The point of the show is to illustrate the consequences of sex before one is ready. Aiming to get girls talking about the problems with having sex before marriage (or at least before being an adult in a
committed relationship), the show chronicles a girl in a situation that would have been taboo on television in the not too distant past. However, in the midst of this attempt, the show also romanticizes teen pregnancy by having Amy’s parents and friends help her excessively and unconditionally. Not only did her mom Anne, played by Molly Ringwald, help her get a job, but when Amy did not like the job at the hot dog stand, her friends found her a better position in a daycare center. Additionally, Amy finds herself dating a boy other than the baby’s father, Ricky. Ben Boykovich proclaims his love and intentions of marrying her, even though she is carrying someone else's child. Moreover, his father is entirely supportive of young Ben’s plans to marry Amy. Of course anything is possible, but it is unrealistic and unfair to the young viewers to depict a blossoming love with promises of a happy ending for a fifteen-year-old that is pregnant.

In reality, a baby’s teenage father (biological or otherwise) is unlikely to have the necessary skills to be a successful father.

“Teenage fathers are usually bewildered by the news of the impending arrival. Their own fathers, statistics show, were often phantom parents, and the young men have very little idea of what a father is supposed to do. Notes Debra Klinman, project director of the Bank Street College study of teenage parents: ‘A lot of fathers want to love their babies and do the right thing for them, but they don't see how to do what is right.’”

Additionally, even today, many pregnant teenagers are shunned by their families and friends, and are sent to special facilities, such as Second Chance Homes, designed specifically for teenage mothers. Often the teen and the baby depend on assistance from the Department of Social Services and/or other community
agencies. Once that child is born, life becomes even harder for the new mother, assuming she chooses to keep her baby. Fifteen-year-olds simply are not ready to be parents. They cannot offer financial security, competent parenting, or even true stability—all things a baby needs. In the season finale of *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, Amy complains about being tired and asks her mother to warm the bottle for baby John. Instead of making Amy take the responsibility she should, and deal with being tired as all mothers must, Anne sends Amy back to bed and warms the bottle for her grandson.

For a show supposedly trying to present the consequences of premature sex, it is gravely unsuccessful. The production team tries to portray Amy’s decision as a poor choice, yet in the season finale it comes out that Anne and her new flame David Johnson slept together on their first date, though she is barely separated from her husband, Amy’s father, at the time. Add to this mix the character of Amy’s schoolmate Adrian, who only sees herself as a sex object, and who offers herself to Ricky again at the hospital on the day of his son’s birth. Then there is Grace who is the token virgin planning to wait until marriage, but takes birth control pills just in case. The only character on the show who seems to have any sense whatsoever is Amy’s thirteen-year-old sister Ashley. For an eighth grader, she always seems to know what is going on and manages to set a good example for viewers by turning down cigarettes and getting out of a situation with a boy that might have developed further than she wanted. Surprisingly, this show’s creator, Brenda Hampton, is the
same woman who was responsible for 7th Heaven (1996-2007) which targeted the same audience yet was filled with powerfully positive messages and role models.

The shows on television geared toward an adult audience are no better. Desperate Housewives, which premiered in 2004, is set in the fictitious community of Fairview on Wisteria Lane and chronicles the lives of five women. Four of the five are mothers and one a grandmother. Four are on their second or third marriages. Episodes have included every inappropriate and unfathomable situation from affairs with underage gardeners to secret child adoptions and births to cold-blooded murders. There are no limits to what these women find themselves involved in.

Beneath the glitz and glamour, and looking past the continuous marital, financial and legal scandals, the show has delved into deeper issues as well. Both characters Lynette Scavo and Susan Mayer have proven that they are willing to make great sacrifices for the good of their children. Gaby Solis learns a lesson in self-worth when she discovers that her husband really does love her for more than just her looks. Additionally, Lynette dealt with being diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Disease and fighting a battle against the illness with the support of her family and friends. This continues the earlier television theme of sisterhood and female bonding; Desperate Housewives constantly demonstrates the values of friendship as the women rely on each other for help and support. Still, these positive aspects do not negate the damage that can be caused by the portrayal of four married women as lying, cheating, unscrupulous characters.
None of these women is a realistic portrayal of the typical American housewife, but rather, a hyperbolic interpretation of struggling wives. Certainly none of them is a respectable role model for female viewers of any age. The few redeeming qualities any of the women may have are overshadowed by the poor choices they make if not by the overall demoralization of women on the show.

Another program that has been popular in recent years is the medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy*. Set in Seattle Grace Hospital, the ensemble cast is just as concerned with their intermingled relationships as with their careers and patients. The show equally portrays women and men in the high-powered medical profession. Although the Chief of the hospital is a man, a number of episodes have suggested that his successor may be a woman. Attending and resident doctors are represented by both genders. However, none of the women on this program is able to maintain a healthy balance between her work life and her personal life. Dr. Miranda Bailey’s struggle of splitting time between her son and husband at home and her impressive surgical position at the hospital leads to marital problems. Additionally, with the sole exception of the Chief, all of the characters are romantically connected to their co-workers. In reality, co-worker relationships are strongly discouraged and sometimes forbidden in workplaces. Because they all work together, there are frequent scenes of sexual rendezvous in the staff lounges, and everyone knows the extent of each other’s personal relationships. Not one of the characters, male or female in this case, has been able to successfully sustain a marriage, demonstrating
that it may be impossible to balance a career and a home life, though there would certainly be many Americans who would disagree.

Present day audiences are hard pressed to find worthy female role models who have high moral standards, are competent in various domains of their lives (work, home, relationships), and present an image of self-acceptance. Characters, both young and old, are self-centered and concerned with the superficial aspects of their lives. Aspiring to be like the characters we view today is destructive to the individual and to society.

**A Search for the Human Person**

The preceding pages detail what women have been watching on television over the last fifty years, and discuss some of the messages being delivered to the audience. But what is at the heart of the problem with television's portrayal of women? Is the media really at fault for what women take away from the shows they watch? Much of the blame certainly must fall on the media for putting the programs on the air in the first place, but perhaps women need to take a moment to examine their own lives, ideals, and beliefs. Why is it that women are so interested in the scandalous lives of the desperate housewives and sexy gals of the city? Is it because we idolize the glamour we see in the way they lead their lives, or is it just the opposite that we are comforted by feeling that our own lives have turned out better than theirs have? Why are children identifying with pop stars leading double lives and teenagers with sexually active fifteen-year-olds? Maybe it is because our
society no longer upholds strong values and neglects to teach our young girls the importance of conviction and confidence.

It is natural for young girls to look up to friends, relatives, or celebrities who are older. It is also natural for them to want to grow up as quickly as possible because they cannot wait to wear makeup, or babysit, or drive a car. As television is the most accessible medium for observing the habits of older girls, children look up to the characters they see on television as well. Without the guidance of parents and strong adults in their lives, the girls are left to themselves to interpret what reality truly is. They may be misled by the distorted portrayals on television.

Women have always struggled with self-image. St. Francis de Sales encountered a young woman with unrealistic expectations for herself. In response to her distress, St. Francis wrote to her:

“For I am sure you will note that those interior troubles you have suffered have been caused by a great multitude of considerations and desires produced by an intense eagerness to attain some imaginary perfection. I mean that your imagination had formed for you an ideal of absolute perfection, to which your will wished to lift itself; but frightened by this great difficulty -- or rather impossibility -- it remained in dangerous travail.”

His point that women must measure themselves against attainable standards rather than “imagined perfection” is well taken. Unfortunately, this advice is not given to enough young people today.

In my study, I learned that girls’ definitions of beauty are connected to the images put forth by the media. When asked what qualities make a girl most beautiful, the responses varied from appropriate answers such as personality and
self-confidence to superficial qualities including hairstyles, good clothing, and accessories. The following chart illustrates these responses from thirty-nine nine to twelve year olds and thirty-nine fifteen to eighteen year olds.

![Qualities That Make a Woman Most Beautiful](chart.png)

It is because of just this that our responsibility as a collective group of grown women and men must be to instill the importance of standards and principles in America’s youth. We need to provide good examples for young people to look up to. As the adults who are choosing to bring new life into the world, we should be responsible and capable enough to raise our children with high moral standards to the best of our abilities. And we need the media to help in this endeavor, as there is clearly no escaping its influence on society. Parents, teachers, older siblings or friends need to discuss the shows they see their children watching. Internet blogs on The Secret Life of the American Teenager’s website show a comment from a twelve-year-old girl who thinks she is interested in becoming pregnant. Fortunately for this child, the site’s “advice-givers” handled this case appropriately by
explaining why a twelve-year-old should not be considering such a life-changing decision. However, if this girl had been talking to her parents about the show on a regular basis, perhaps she would not even consider such an idea to begin with. Initiating such dialogue must be a priority of parents if they are to maintain open lines of communication with their children.

So where should adults start when discussing what it means to be a woman—to be a human—with their daughters? Many of the teachings of St. Francis de Sales are a good basis. Whether one associates with the Catholic religion is inconsequential, the teachings can be seen as a point of departure for further lessons on a personal level.

“For almost four hundred years, many people have been attracted to St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) because they see him as a very human saint, as one who has a deep and profound understanding of what it means to be human and how the human heart works.”35 St. Francis de Sales is often referred to as a ‘Christian Humanist’ which simply means that he did not look upon man as disgraceful, but rather was always “on the side of our nature” and looked for the good in everyone. Even if a person proved himself incompetent or despicable, St. Francis would defend him and work to help him better himself.36 He cared about what it meant to be human, and spent his life meeting people and sharing guidance whenever he was able.
St. Francis de Sales, of course, connects humanness to the study of God, teaching that because human persons were made in the likeness of God, being human is thus inseparable from God.

“This The Christian must love his body as the living image of that of our incarnate savior as coming from the same stock as his and hence belonging to him by parentage and consanguinity’ (Treatise, 3:8; Oevres 4:193). This is why the central truth of Christian humanism, viz., that we are made in the image and likeness of God, is intended to engender a healthy self-image and self-respect.”

It seems that St. Francis DeSales is saying that just as a Christian shows his respect and love for God, he must show the same for himself. To defile our bodies or disrespect ourselves is to do the same unto God. For any person who may not believe in the Christian God, this analogy might seem pointless as an effort to gain self-respect. However, the importance of respecting ourselves is not lost even if God is taken out of the equation. The essential message in this passage is that we all, as humans, are meant to cherish ourselves and take the best possible care of what we were born with. Additionally, we have to recognize within ourselves what our realistic limitations are. St. Francis de Sales was sure that every person was beautiful in his or her own unique way and that God loved everything about each person. If it was so easy for this man to believe that his God could love everyone for who they are, why, then, is it so difficult for us to look in a mirror and love ourselves for who we are?

It may very well be this difficult because of the pervasive influence the media has on our lives. Our perceptions are warped to recognize beauty only in the images
of the celebrities and models we see on television (and in other media). It is damaging for women to compare themselves to stars who are taken care of by an entourage of stylists, personal trainers, and make-up artists. Yet these are the standards women measure themselves against and these are the characters women aspire to be like, as is evidenced by the responses to my survey. A significant number of the adult women wrote that at one time in their lives, successfully or not, they did try to copy a hair or clothing style made famous by a favorite actress. This demonstrates that the media’s influence on a young girl can be strong enough to last in her memory twenty or thirty years later.

In the 1950s women were idolizing Lucy Ricardo and June Cleaver as wives and mothers. During a time when traditional family values were more important than a woman’s appearance, the popular programs reflected the societal ideals. This is not to say that Lucy and other stars were unattractive, but rather that the emphasis was not on their looks despite the fact that they may have been beautiful. Furthermore, *I Love Lucy* showed the world how to be comfortable in one’s own skin. Lucy the actress (hereafter referred to as Lucille), was a strong woman who was capable of holding her own on a television show based on her comedic talents. Her animated faces and physical humor could only have been executed so precisely by someone who truly had a healthy self-image. Paradoxically, Lucy the character was always looking for something more. Her attempts at breaking into the glamorous lifestyle of show business failed repeatedly, always landing her in zany situations. At the end of the day, however, Lucy always ended up home safely with
Ricky, proving that there was no need to go out in search of something greater in the first place. Women were able to glean a positive message from *I Love Lucy*, and still can when reruns air.

Self-image messages from 1960s television shows were generally positive as well. Although physical appearance seemed to be becoming more notable, emphasis was still on the character and her value as a homemaker. Laura Petrie, Samantha Stephens, and Jeannie were all beautiful women, though they were rarely seen concerned with their looks. Their self-respect was observed in how they related with their families (or in Jeannie’s case, Master). They each took care of themselves emotionally as well as physically so that they were always prepared to help their men or children however possible, most often with their wits. Thus, any viewer would see an example of how to balance her strength and assertiveness without losing touch with her femininity.

The 1970s marked the turning point for the messages audiences were receiving from the female characters they watched. Mary Richards held onto the values of the past, though she applied them to a new situation: the workplace. Her character was meant to be a “whole person,” and it showed. Female viewers saw a competent, single woman capable of taking care of her co-workers as well as her duties as an associate producer. It is undoubtedly for this reason that Mary Tyler Moore is still so beloved by Americans today.

Following *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, however, were those controversial ‘jigglers’ on *Charlie’s Angels*. Though they were meant to be empowering female
detectives, they really offered little more to audiences than mindless sex appeal for an hour each week. With purposeless plots and frequent beach locations, *Charlie’s Angels* objectified women like no other program had before. A testament to this is how the actresses themselves viewed their show. Cheryl Ladd once said “if somebody views me as a sex object, something mindless and soulless, that I resent. But if people think I'm sexy, that’s wonderful. If I can help anybody get through puberty, I say good!” Tanya Roberts told People that the show “may jiggle more than other shows, because there are three of us and three times as much jiggle!” In 1994, Farrah Fawcett exclaimed to the same magazine, “And that ‘jiggle’ thing! What was that about? Look at the show compared to what’s on today. There was nothing that sexy in our shows.” Although the nineties certainly brought about sexier shows than what the Angels were a part of, at the time, *Charlie’s Angels* was just a lesson on how to use femininity as a way to manipulate men. The fact that the actresses do not seem to notice how unseemly they were just goes to show how ignorant they were of their own self-worth. If St. Francis de Sales had been around to witness this particular TV show, he more than likely would have been disappointed to see women with such little self-respect that they would stoop to using their sexuality to get jobs completed.

The 1980s showed a return to the more traditional values of the home. The Huxtables were a full family with strong ties and values. Clair and each of the daughters had goals and aspirations, and worked to achieve them without stooping as low as the women in the previous decade had. Kate and Allie were each striving
to be better people as well. They sought more out of life than they had known in their marriages, thus showing women how to seek a greater life. Though none of the women was unattractive, once again, their looks were not the focal point of the shows.

The beginning of the 1990s followed this pattern of focusing on character rather than beauty. The women were capable and dominant in their homes, and portrayed loving mothers and wives. The end of the decade brought a radical change to television women with the four femmes-fatales of *Sex & the City*. Suddenly there was an emphasis on clothing, sexuality, and materialism, the likes of which had never been seen, even in *Charlie’s Angels*. There was no consideration of high moral standards or healthy self-images for any of the women, and therefore no constructive role models with whom women could identify.

Today’s female characters have perpetuated this downward trend and it is becoming prevalent in programs geared towards younger children as well. The media fails at showing us characters we can aspire to be like. However, if the media is trying to show us characters with fewer morals than we find in ourselves to make us feel better about our own weaknesses or failures, they are succeeding. If this is the case, then it is the responsibility of our older generations to discuss with our children why we should seek to be greater than the images presented to us on television. If not, we could become entwined in a downward spiral of morality as the media sinks lower and we follow staying slightly “above” in order to feel ok about ourselves.
Conclusion

“Be who you are and be that well,” the basis of Salesian teachings, sounds like a simple principle, but for young women today it may actually feel nearly impossible. Besides what we see on television, everywhere we go we are bombarded with instructions on how to eat better, look better, feel better, sleep better. Women especially are targeted, with how to “Look 5 Years Younger” or “Burn Even More Calories” (Shape Magazine) to improve their looks, how to “Live Debt-Free” (Redbook Magazine) or get a “Clutter Free” house (Good Housekeeping Magazine). And of course, Cosmopolitan Magazine always offers advice on how to have “Sex That Brings You Closer” or “Sexy Little Tricks That Add Bliss” so you can “Love Your Life”. Whether in checking out at the grocery store or waiting for a doctor, there is no escaping the constant advertisements for self-improvement and images of superficial perfection.

Rather than allowing the media to define societal ideals, we must empower individuals with enough self-respect and self-acceptance that their own worth becomes apparent and essential to their identity. Girls and women are allowing themselves to be defined by who they watch and emulate.

Amid the countless networks with their inappropriate shows filling our televisions, Hollywood stars and the shameless so-called ‘newscasters’ who constantly critique the celebrities’ styles and behaviors flooding our computers, and airbrushed magazine covers with enticing captions at every store and waiting room, women have no chance at ignoring the superficiality society is pushing at them.
How can a person disregard these constant reminders that there are thinner, prettier, tidier, healthier people out there? It’s nearly impossible. Instead, we need to find ways to overcome these labels by teaching our children, our young girls, what is important to being a beautiful woman, a beautiful person. This starts in the home, with the parents; and as a new generation of people grows up to be the next set of writers, producers, and actors, perhaps they will try to revamp the television we watch today. In the early days of television, sitcoms were not seen as anything more than entertainment. Television was not used as a parenting tool, it was often time the family could spend together. Today many children have televisions with cable in their own rooms and watch whatever they like whenever they like. Children learn values from the shows they watch, and they rarely discuss what they have seen with their parents so they draw their own conclusions on whether their favorite characters have made good or bad choices.

The people responsible for what appears on this widely accessible medium needs to recognize the influence it has on its audience. Television screens are found in many places—doctor’s waiting rooms, employee’s lounges, hotel lobbies, restaurants, stores, as well as people’s homes. Broadcasts can affect people passively as they are exposed to programs that happen to be on (unlike print media that people must actively choose to absorb by reading). Television producers must accept this responsibility and consider the potential wide-reaching influence of their programs. The viewing audience must demand that program choices include shows that send a positive message with role models our youth can look up to.
The damage that can result from a poor self-image is significant. Eating disorders are not developed on a whim, girls starve themselves or purge after meals because they want to become as thin as the women in their magazines. For some the trouble is not a diagnosed eating disorder, but it is constant dieting, or an obsession with clothing or make-up or finding some other way to hide behind a superficial element. By allowing ourselves to be affected so severely by these advertisements and images, we are feeding into the present trend of the degeneration of the woman.

It is interesting to note that one of the most memorable actresses on two of the most influential sitcoms of the 1960s and 1970s gets little pleasure out of watching television today. When asked if she still wants to work, Mary Tyler Moore responded with “Oh, God, yes... I love it. But when one looks at what’s happened to television, there are so few shows that interest me.”

As an aspiring actress, this exploration of some of television’s most famous female characters has become quite personal. With a new understanding of the media’s influence on American women, I have adopted it as my mission to only portray characters that will have a positive effect on society. We must not allow others to define the standards by which we measure ourselves. As a media, and as a society, we must empower girls and young women so that they may gain a greater self-worth and continue the cycle with their daughters. It is my hope that my generation of writers, producers, actors, and directors will see the holes in the television programs we create so that we can break the trend of the degeneration of
women. Perhaps with our influences, television will finally undergo the transformation it needs. Maybe then, with the help of the media, American women will be encouraged to find their own unique qualities and create their own personal definitions of perfection. When women begin to use their own ideals as a way to assess their self-worth, then, maybe, they will finally understand what St. Francis DeSales meant by “don't desire to be other than what you are, but desire to be thoroughly what you are.”

Endnotes


3 Meehan 22.

4 Meehan 26.

5 Meehan 44.

6 Meehan 45.

7 Meehan 97.

8 Meehan 98.

9 Meehan 100.

10 Meehan 100.


12 Meehan 174


15 Dow 25

16 Dow 25

17 Dozier 211

18 Dow 26


20 Branham 1

21 Branham 1


23 Branham 2


25 Hunt


27 Catron

28 Catron

29 Lichter 189


35 Pocetto


37 Pocetto

38 Branham 2

39 Branham 2

40 Branham 2

41 Lichter 3


43 Pocetto

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Works Cited


*Titles, character names, and dates of series were referenced on <http://www.imdb.com>.*
Appendices
Appendix A: Survey for 15-18 year olds

School: ___________________________  Age: _______  Grade:_______

About how many hours of television do you watch each week? ________________________________

What female TV character did you most admire as a child? Why? ________________________________

What female character do you most admire now? Why? ________________________________

Which current television actress do you most admire? Why? ________________________________

Is there an actress and/or character you dislike? Who and Why? ________________________________

Have you ever tried to look like a television character or actress? (For example the “Rachel” haircut from Friends) ________________________________

Have you ever based a decision in your life on what a television character might do, or has done? ________________________________

What qualities would you like to see portrayed in a woman on TV? ________________________________

What qualities make a woman most beautiful? ________________________________

How interested are you in the lives of the actresses you watch on television? (Circle One)
Very Interested  Somewhat Interested  Barely Interested  Not at All Interested

Appendix B: Survey for Adults

Age: _______  Hometown: ____________________________

About how many hours of television do you watch each week? ________________________________

What female TV character did you most admire as a child? Why? ________________________________

What female character do you most admire now? Why? ________________________________
Which current television actress do you most admire? Why? ________________________________

Is there an actress and/or character you dislike? Who and Why? ________________________________

Have you ever tried to look like a television character or actress? (For example the “Rachel” haircut from *Friends*) ________________________________

Have you ever based a decision in your life on what a television character might do, or has done? 

What qualities would you like to see portrayed in a woman on TV? ________________________________

Are there any shows/characters you would encourage young women/girls to watch as a positive influence? ________________________________

Any you would discourage as a negative influence? ________________________________

How interested are you in the lives of the actresses you watch on television? (Circle One)
Very Interested               Somewhat Interested               Barely Interested               Not at All Interested

Appendix C: Survey for 9-12 year olds

School: ___________________________
Age: ________
Grade: ________
About how many hours of television do you watch each week? ________________________________
What female TV character do you most admire? Why? ________________________________

Which TV actress do you most admire? Why? ________________________________

Is there an actress and/or character you dislike? Who and Why? ________________________________

Have you ever tried to look like a television character or actress? (For example clothes like Hannah Montana’s) ________________________________
Have you ever done something just because a character on TV has done it?

What qualities make a girl most beautiful?