A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF *THE CLOSER* AND *SAVING GRACE*: FEMINIST AND GENRE THEORY IN 21ST CENTURY TELEVISION

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Television is a universally popular medium that offers a myriad of choices to viewers around the world. American programs both reflect and influence the culture of the times. Two dramatic series, *The Closer* and *Saving Grace*, were presented on the same cable network and shared genre and design. Both featured female police detectives and demonstrated an acute awareness of postmodern feminism. *The Closer* was very successful, yet *Saving Grace*, was cancelled midway through the third season. A close study of plot lines and character development in the shows will elucidate their fundamental differences that serve to explain their widely disparate reception by the viewing public.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

American television is a complex and multi-dimensional industry linking finance, technology, creativity, and culture. An analysis of television programming and reception is a window into the business of entertainment. Two recent cable network series, *The Closer* (2005-2012) and *Saving Grace* (2007-2010), were received very differently by the viewing audience, although they had a number of common elements. *The Closer*’s ratings set new records for a cable network series, lasted seven seasons, and produced a successful spinoff. *Saving Grace*, on the other hand, was abruptly cancelled midway through the third season. The purpose of this study is to explore the reasons for the markedly different receptions within the framework of the behemoth that the television industry has become.

According to the 2010 U. S. Census, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that “…watching TV was the leisure activity that occupied the most time, accounting for about half of leisure time, on average, for those age 15 and over” (BLS). In spite of a decade of unemployment and financial crises, television flourishes. Global television sales grew by nearly 18% in 2010. The worldwide number of television sets sold daily surpasses the number of births (Collins). The medium’s global presence provides the television industry the largest target market in history.

Motivated by the increasing popularity, the industry responds with a constant stream of technological advances, which has permanently altered viewing habits no longer constricted by time and place. Blogs and chat rooms provide opportunities for discussions among people whose sole trait in common is an interest in the same
television fare. The advent of cable and DSL multiplied the number of available channels, breaking the long monopoly of the Big Three: NBC, CBS and ABC. Video-on-demand and online streaming permit recent films or current series to be watched at leisure. This surfeit of choices encourages the development of niche audiences, as cable networks settle for lower ratings, but increased loyalty. Dedicated fans have access to additional background information via websites and DVD features, such as actor and director interviews or outtakes.

The big winners are shows that integrate mainstream viewers with truly dedicated fans that participate on numerous platforms, e.g. blogs or fanfiction. Networks spend substantial sums developing websites for popular or promising shows to lure spectators, often young generations born in the digital era. “Users keep a site alive through their labor, the cumulative hours of accessing the site (thus generating advertising), writing messages, participating in conversations, and sometimes making the jump to collaborators” (Terranova 48-49). Network-controlled websites protect the image of both the show and the network, even while fans generate much of the content at no cost. Independent online sites allow fans to write their own episodes based on characters that appear on commercial television, inventing relationships, often of a sexual nature, that run counter to the producers’ intent. Networks weigh promotional value provided by dedicated fans against the industry’s need to avoid offending the broader mainstream audience.

Fandom itself is undergoing a transformation. Some theorists question the traditional binary of cult vs. mainstream fan.
Fan activities such as online posting and speculation, fiction-writing based on the originating TV show's characters, and textual interpretations revolving around specific characters and relationships, have all now begun to revolve around what might otherwise be thought of as 'mainstream' TV shows. (Hills, *Mainstream* 69-70).

Jane Espensen, a successful writer for television, known for her work on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Angel* (1999-2004) best describes the numerous ways audiences become sutured into series, stating,

If you want audience members who don’t just turn on the television faucet, but who actually buy DVDs, tune in for special events, and find their way to the network’s web sites for commentaries, video blogs, and downloads, then you want an involved audience…You want a show that feels real, that challenges its audience to watch carefully, pay attention, listen hard, take the lessons, love the world. You want a cult. (53).

Cult audiences translate to dollars for networks that survive by attracting a reliable corps of consumers across multiple platforms. TNT, one of the earliest successful cable networks, excels at using its websites and promotions to capture audiences on several levels. This practice worked particularly well with *The Closer*, but failed for *Saving Grace*, a reminder that ultimately the viewer determines a show’s success, regardless of promotional efforts to influence audiences. Television programming is largely formulaic, relying on former successful shows for design and content. Yet a new series, no matter how derivative, is not guaranteed a loyal and
enthusiastic fan base. Certain television series resonate with the viewing public while others fail to retain enough consumers to remain commercially viable.

A few decades after television debuted, film studies began incorporating television programming. “Why study television? …because it is undeniably, unavoidably ‘there’…Television enters into the everyday lives of so many different people in so many different places in so many different ways” (Allen 1). Television studies encompass broad theoretical applications, of which genre studies and feminist theory are two. A textual analysis of both series will focus on two components in particular: the detective genre—specifically the police procedural sub-genre; and postmodern feminism and sexuality.

_The Closer_’s writers challenged the general audience with a different puzzle to solve each week, in the classic tradition of the mystery genre, and crimes were often replicas of actual events. In contrast, the crimes proffered in _Saving Grace_ were sketchy and inconsequential compared to the intense apocryphal drama surrounding the lead character. The writers and producers of _The Closer_ demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the television audience and how viewers want to be challenged, yet want their reality reaffirmed. Feminists want to see women succeed in traditionally male-dominated careers, women as agents, not accompaniments. Yet women are still not allowed to “break the rules” without suffering consequences, the way men are. In accordance with patriarchal doctrine, Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson, _The Closer_’s lead character, was brought to heel by the system she defied, something the audience could understand and appreciate. The creators of _The Closer_ stayed within suitable cultural bounds while offering the female audience a smart, authoritative woman with
whom to identify. In contrast, *Saving Grace* offered very few viewers a character with whom they could relate. Sexual transgressions within limits are acceptable, even titillating to viewers, but only if they do not deconstruct heterosexual romance. In *Saving Grace*, the lead character, Grace, stretched the limits too far for many by flaunting her disregard for all norms, sexual and otherwise. In spite of many similarities, the two series' treatments of genre, feminism, and sexuality differed significantly and contributed to their contrasting lifespans.
CHAPTER 2
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
The Detective Genre

Long before the advent of film and media, mysteries held a venerable place in English fiction, and a voracious public has followed the exploits of many famous detectives as they cannily solve the puzzles presented to them. Edgar Allen Poe is largely credited with introducing the detective genre to fiction in 1841 with the character C. Auguste Dupin, featured in his short story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (Craig 12). He went on to write numerous tales, many of which have produced feature length films. His lasting influence on the genre is recognized by the Mystery Writers of America, which presents annual awards in his name to outstanding mysteries in literature, television and film, known as the “Edgars,” for short. Another fictional detective with long lasting renown is Sherlock Holmes, first introduced as a sleuth in 1887 by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The character can still be seen 123 years later in film and television productions. Holmes was known for eccentricity, but the personality of the protagonist can take multiple forms: “the spectacular detective, the philanthropic detective, the travelling detective, the comic detective, and the impeccable detective…[as well as] the ‘elderly busybody’ detective” (Craig 11). Thus mystery or crime-solving provides an open and versatile narrative structure set in diverse locales and across other genres. The label “detective genre” is a broad umbrella for various sub-genres that occasionally overlap: law enforcement, police procedural, private investigators, courtroom dramas, and even reenactments of actual crimes.

Courtroom dramas add another dimension, but routinely include a mystery to be solved: *Perry Mason* (1957-1966), *Matlock* (1986-1995), *Law & Order* (1990-2010), and *Law & Order: SVU* (1999-present). The science-fiction genre merged with crime-solving in *The X-files* (1993-2002). Hour-long docudramas explore lurid unsolved crimes, and hand-held cameras record officers on duty in a variety of reality TV productions. Many of these series have been syndicated and can be presently viewed on cable channels.
The casting of such well-known and highly regarded actors as, Rock Hudson, Gary Sinise, Laurence Fishburne, David Caruso, Tom Selleck, James Arness, Andy Griffith, Carroll O’Connor, Howard Rollins, and James Garner, is sufficient evidence that networks and producers attach considerable value to these productions and have high expectations for their longevity and advertising potential.

The above listings constitute only a fraction of programs related to the detective/police genre. In 2003, Elayne Rapping wrote, “the proliferation of discourse on crime and criminality, law and order, have overwhelmingly come to dominate media fiction and nonfiction” (253). More recent productions provide excellent examples of American television’s “blurring of the distinction between series and serials…the increased tendency toward serialization” (Kozloff 92), often called hybrids. The traditional series introduces a dilemma and progresses through the course of the show to the solution. Serials, on the other hand, offer unresolved plot lines at the end of the hour, e.g., soap operas and mini-series. Detective programs today often contain both a narrative arc, as the murder du jour is solved each week, and open-ended stories revolving around the personal lives and/or career developments of the characters. Those stories only attain resolution during the final few episodes of the production’s last season, if at all.

Given the enduring popularity of the detective or crime-solving genre, the topic has been thoroughly examined in theoretical literature. One writer asserts,

In mysteries a cultural context is more thoroughly revealed than in any other genre of literature. Through the crimes, an audience can understand not only the fears of a particular society but also the level of calumny that society assigns to a
crime. As each generation has needed a particular set of qualities in its defense, so the detective has provided them. Through the detective's response to particular crimes, the reader can learn the delineation of forgivable and unforgivable. (Griswold 1)

These words pertained to published fiction and may seem somewhat pretentious when applied to television, long considered formulaic and predictable. Nevertheless, the popularity of the genre cannot be disputed.

The detective genre has long encompassed a subgenre featuring female detectives. Literary theorists/historians generally credit the first fictional female detectives to two British authors, W. S. Hayward’s *Revelations of a Lady Detective* and Andrew Forrester’s *The Female Detective*, which appeared almost simultaneously on bookstands in 1864, only 20 years after the genre’s debut by Edgar Allen Poe (Bredesen i). Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan chart the development of literary lady detectives from the earliest beginnings through the 1970s. By the 1920s, prototypes of literature’s familiar characters had made an appearance. Most notably, Anna Katherine Green who created the crime-solving Amelia Butterworth in 1896 adopted the aforementioned elderly busybody character. Thirty-seven years later, Agatha Christie took that prototype and made her a legend in the figure of Miss Jane Marple, the protagonist in *Murder at the Vicarage* (1932). Television would turn her into an icon. Miss Marple first appeared on American television in 1956, but the British Broadcasting Corporation produced all twelve of Agatha Christie’s novels featuring *Miss Marple* (1984-1992). Subsequently Angela Lansbury would star in the long-running CBS series, *Murder She Wrote* (1984-1996), based on a similar character, the elderly genteel woman who has
unlimited time and resources to solve crimes and prevent murders. As famous as Miss Marple and Sherlock Holmes have been, they have had a great deal of competition from other protagonists who specialize in onscreen crime solving.

Many female police officers can be seen in ensemble series, but a few carried shows long before the series analyzed here, such as Anne Francis as *Honey West* (1965-1966) and Angie Dickinson in *Police Woman* (1974-1978). The recent success of *The Closer* has inspired a number of new series: *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010-present) which replaced *Saving Grace* directly following *The Closer* on TNT, *In Plain Sight* (2009-present), and *Body of Proof* (2011), being the most notable. An American version of BBC’s *Prime Suspect* opened in 2011, but lasted only one season. The highly acclaimed British version, starring Helen Mirren, was a hard act to follow. In 2009, a series of documentaries aired on the Lifetime Channel depicting policewomen on the job in Dallas, Memphis, Cincinnati, and other metropolitan areas.

Pertinent to this study, several theorists have focused specifically on female detectives. Frances A. Della Cava and Madeline H. Engel discuss the tendency for female sleuths to be “almost universally liberal and politically correct” in contrast to male detectives who bend or break the rules and routinely resort to violence (49). Kathleen Klein explores the subject in detail in *The Woman Detective: Gender & Genre*. She is particularly interested in the ways women detectives are depicted as torn between work and their private lives. Klein further notes that fictional female detectives are shown in contrast to male detectives who are depicted as more experienced and more adept at defending themselves physically. The women often need to be saved by the superior male from their own misjudgment or incompetence (187). For example, quality
productions from the BBC, such as *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries* (2006-present) and *Dagliesh* (1983-2004) feature less experienced women in subordinate roles. In spite of these limitations, one theorist explains the success of the female detective sub-genre unequivocally.

Through all the changes in social attitudes, and through all her varied incarnations the woman detective stands out as the most economical, the most striking and the most agreeable embodiment of two qualities often disallowed for women in the past: the power of action and practical intelligence (Craig 246).

The women who wrote about female detectives 150 years ago recognized the limitations placed on women by the dominant patriarchal social structure and created characters that were able to extend beyond their boundaries by successfully solving crimes, thereby exercising agency while benefitting society in ways that could not be faulted.

**Feminist Theory**

Feminist critics have participated actively in film theory from the early days of second wave feminism, 1960s and 1970s, motivated by a growing impatience with the interpellation of women into the abject and degrading roles of “madonnas, whores, vamps, scatterbrains, bimbos, gold diggers, schoolma’ams, nags, sex kittens” offered them by the male-dominated media and society (Stam 171). Feminist theorists intervened in the prevailing psychological and semiotic debates and offered contrasting views of gender and relationships as depicted in the world of film. Television, however, was regarded as mindless entertainment for years after becoming a fixture in American households; therefore recognition of its potential to both influence and reflect public
mores was slow in coming. In the 1970s, British film theorists turned their attention to television, but the medium would not be considered for serious study in the United States until the 1980s. After noting a paucity of women critics at a conference in 1980 in New York, Ann Kaplan organized an event at Rutgers University that focused on the representation of women by broadcasting networks (250).

The movement itself urged all women to rethink their roles and the ways they had been co-opted by patriarchal society in the media. Laura Mulvey expanded on Lacan’s theory of the “gaze” and drew attention to the passive roles forced on women in film as opposed to the active, multi-faceted male characters. Feminists began to apply similar analyses to television. The tradition of depending on biological determinism to define male and female genders shifted to an understanding of the development of feminine and masculine identities as responses to social conditioning, further weakening the argument that the dominant patriarchal ideology was the natural order of things. Ann Kaplan addresses feminist theory as applied to television specifically, describing the progression from bourgeois to liberal to radical to post-structural, wisely allowing for crossover and hybridization. She then follows these movements to point out the shift from essentialist to anti-essentialist approaches to the formation of gender identity. Anti-essentialism ran parallel to post-structuralism, opening up discourse in all facets of social studies, not just media theory. Kaplan urges a systematic approach to the study of the apparatus of television, the technology, texts, and reception, to find meaning. (247-254) The organization of this analysis follows her recommendation.

Eileen R. Meehan and Jackie Byars furnish additional insights into the development of niche audiences now common to cable television with an examination
of the Lifetime channel in “Telefeminism: How Lifetime Got its Groove, 1984-1997.” Their article details the industry’s efforts to capitalize on a growing segment of the viewing audience: women with disposable income no longer relegated to the role of housewife. The channel ventured into original programming to redress the lack of existing content showing female protagonists. Their essay describes various ways in which the daring “woman-centered” concept became a subtle reinforcement of existing white patriarchal ideology. Stories portrayed women as victims. If the rescuing protagonist was female, a strong male character was included to enable her—an obvious example of hegemonic negotiation to avoid alienating the dominant order. Interestingly, the authors attribute the initial survival of the network to its purchase of the syndicated Cagney & Lacey (1981-1988) series that finally provided the network a reliable audience. A brief discussion of this seminal feminist television series is included here.

Showcasing strong women actively participating in a traditionally male arena was an anomaly in the 1980s, but is less so in the 21st century. In Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women, Susan Faludi presented an exhaustive study of how, in the eighties, dominant interests in American society attacked the precepts of second wave feminism. The significant gains women made during the sixties and seventies were countered with crude attempts to demean images of working women, particularly those who had broken into fields largely reserved for men. Faludi devoted an entire chapter to explain how television in the eighties portrayed female characters in the old stereotypes of whores, madonnas, or bimbos. The author hailed Cagney & Lacey, however, as an important exception because it featured “two strong, mature, and fully formed female
characters” (Kindle 3510). With almost bitter irony, Faludi then goes on to chronicle the constant interference by network executives with the show’s feminist content.

As third wave feminism developed, a much more nuanced reading of television programs was encouraged, pushing past the binaries of pleasure/danger and the limitations of earlier theorists. Analysts now recognize that viewers are able to identify with multiple genders and roles concurrently, and are not limited to the either/or binary of male/female. Several theorists encourage women to enjoy television without feeling guilty, while acknowledging the inherent flaws to be found in media produced for mass consumption. Rather than label texts as good or bad, women are free to decode them for meaning without making value judgments. For example, in an analysis of an episode of The Sopranos, Merri Lisa Johnson states that “that while the narrative of ‘University’ may seem to move toward the restoration of the patriarchal order, the monstrous oppressiveness of the order has been exposed, and the episode’s attitude towards this restoration is, if not ironic, at the very least tragic” (50). Some analysts now defend works that objectify women if the central point of view belongs to the woman, thus placing an emphasis on the injustice of patriarchal ideology.

Some scholars question the distinction between second wave and third wave feminism. Rather than defining feminism as generational, many see it as amorphous – reflecting the many different backgrounds and cultural underpinnings women bring to their individual negotiations with patriarchy, heterosexuality, and white dominance. In an analysis of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Michele Byers states

What I mean to suggest here is that “feminist”—like any other label—is paradoxical, ambivalent, and fluid. It means different things to different people at
different times and it is and has been used to advance different political agendas. Contemporary American television is rarely seen as a place that fosters feminist expression, although many people, including myself, keep looking for moments where some version of “feminism” is being articulated (184).

This approach is partly an effort to stem the sometimes rancorous divide between second wave feminists who remember the protracted battles for equal opportunities and economic independence with later generations who grew up assuming that their advantages were inherent to the society.

Another feminist scholar of recent years notes that pleasure derived from television viewing need not be cause for apology or defense, even though substantial reinscriptions of dominant ideology are apparent. Instead of asking “Is this show feminist or not? Or is it feminist enough…many feminists take it for granted that all shows on television today contain a mixture of feminist, postfeminist, antifeminist, and pseudofeminist motifs” (M. Johnson 19). Johnson also credits television as educational by dispersing information about alternative ways of living. It furnishes for many a “sole window into big-city subjects like homosexuality, singlehood-by-choice, multiculturalism…” (3). Those who live in isolated communities and share traditional values have access to programming that is not only nationwide, but global in scope.

A Prototype: Cagney & Lacey

An analysis of two police procedurals featuring women as leads would not be complete without a brief discussion of Cagney & Lacey. In 1974, at the crest of second wave feminism, Barbara Corday and her long-time writing partner, Barbara Avedon, developed a full length feature film script, motivated by Molly Haskell’s feminist
denunciation of the film industry in *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Overall, television in the 1980s was better known for series modeled after *Charlie’s Angels* (1976-1981) than for the serious treatment of feminist issues envisioned by the creators of *Cagney & Lacey* episodes. Rejected by all the major studios the script was finally accepted by CBS as a made-for-TV movie, in 1981 serving as a pilot for a weekly series. The first season of *Cagney & Lacey* was scheduled opposite ABC’s *Nine to Five* (1982-1988), a comedy about working women. Both suffered in the ratings, and CBS cancelled the show.

Many network executives found early episodes offensive, one saying, “These women on *Cagney and Lacey* seemed more intent on fighting the system than doing police work. We perceived them as dykes” (quoted in D’Acci 30). Executive producer, Harvey Rosenzweig, by then married to Corday, was able to persuade CBS to air one more episode in the spring of 1982 in place of a rerun of *Trapper, M.D*. Ratings for that show were surprisingly high, and the series was renewed for a second season. Again ratings were low, but the series had collected a loyal female viewership among affluent and educated people, working women and college students, similar to the niche audience Lifetime tried to attract in 1984. When cancelled again, thousands of letters sent in by the audience persuaded CBS to reinstate it. In the spring of 1984 executives approved seven more episodes.

The narrative revolves around two women recently promoted to detectives in the 14th Precinct of the New York Police Department. They begin the series as partners and remain so throughout. Christine Cagney (Sharon Gless) is a single, ambitious woman who is promoted to sergeant in the 1984-1985 season. The writers managed to deal
with serious issues facing career women in the eighties. Although Cagney is single and assertive, she is clearly identified as heterosexual. She deals with a number of personal transitions and choices relevant to ambitious single working women in the 1980s. Throughout these very real crises her partner is both her staunchest ally and her most outspoken critic. Mary Beth Lacey (Tyne Daly), in contrast to Cagney, is a working wife and mother whose primary concerns are domestic. In one episode, Lacey is diagnosed with breast cancer, and her options are explored in detail, allowing the viewer to hear logical arguments for each course, but advocating none in particular, a deliberate approach writers use to offer multiple perspectives on serious issues without advocating any single point of view.

After *Cagney & Lacey’s* first season, the program’s strong stance on feminist issues irritated network executives concerned with advertising dollars. The writers accommodated market demands and gradually shifted emphasis to focus on the friendship between the two leads and their personal lives. In a clear response to the pressures to appease the network while retaining the female audience, the story lines retreated from struggles to be perceived and treated as equals in an overwhelmingly male-dominated work environment to narratives that explored traditional women’s issues. Action scenes were re-written, and the detectives were less likely to be seen actually apprehending perpetrators on screen, as in the early seasons. Instead, plots revolved around talking scenes where Cagney and Mary Beth discuss work and home experiences, still focused on problems of interest to women, but minus the edginess of the earlier episodes. The strategy worked, and CBS eventually produced *Cagney & Lacey* for four more seasons, cancelling for good in 1988. During the 1990s four made-
for-TV reunion movies were aired. *Cagney & Lacey* clearly offered female audiences in the 1980s a message that resonated.

Theorists drew meaning from *Cagney & Lacey* to define and discuss socio-cultural issues such as the women’s movement, gender studies, class distinctions, and ideological hegemony. Particularly comprehensive is Julie D’Acci’s book, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey*, a detailed analysis of the evolution of the series and the constant battles with network management. Respected theorists, Danae Clark and Robert Thompson, wrote insightful essays devoted to the groundbreaking program. Iconic feminist Gloria Steinem was an early supporter. Television theorists were virtually unanimous in recognizing the significance of both the enthusiasm with which female audiences responded to the challenges faced by these two women at home and in the workplace, and the struggle that the producers and writers had to stay on the air. Later woman-centered serial dramas offered in prime time would owe the creators of *Cagney & Lacey* a debt of gratitude for fighting the good fight, even if compromises to the original idea were necessary during the an era that strove to contain and even erase the gains made by women in the 1960s and 1970s. There is little in the way of academic literature pertaining *The Closer* and *Saving Grace*, so a focus on their content is required to explore the series’ impact on viewers and methods of negotiating with dominant ideology.
CHAPTER 3

THE CLOSER

On June 13, 2005 *The Closer* (2005-2012) premiered on Turner Network Television. In a few months, viewers in Sweden, the United Kingdom, Italy, Israel, Iceland, and Spain would join what would become, for a cable network, the crowd. Eventually the series would be seen in dozens of countries, from Brazil to Singapore to New Zealand. The formula for *The Closer* was virtually fool-proof: a summer prime time opening, a respected film actor as lead character, and a well-produced police procedural that fuels the public’s fascination with law and order. In addition, the almost infinite diversity provided by the multi-cultural Los Angeles setting indulges America’s appetite for images of wealth, celebrity, and decadence amid starkly contrasting views of gangs and gangsters, immigrants and the homeless. Consistent with the current television environment, the series features numerous women in prominent roles: elected officials, attorneys, business owners, and, of course, Hollywood celebrities. The hybrid format is familiar: a recurring cast whose lives and characters are revealed in ongoing weekly narratives, i.e., serial; and a dramatic narrative that is resolved each episode, i.e., series. The chief architect of the series is James Duff who is also the principal writer and an executive producer. He is openly gay and his sensibilities inform the tone and direction of the series. He negotiates skillfully among the various ideologies represented by the law enforcement system, the feminist community, and the heterosexual patriarchal culture.

*The Closer*’s pilot establishes the characters in the ensemble cast. Kyra Sedgwick plays the lead, Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson, of the Los Angeles
Police Department. She enters the realm as a newcomer, having relocated from the Atlanta Police Department. Her position as Deputy Chief was created by Assistant Chief Will Pope (J. K. Simmons) to investigate priority homicides, cases involving high profile individuals. Johnson is met with undisguised hostility from every male member of the newly formed squad who resent being subordinated to an outsider. They had expected the position to be filled by Captain Taylor (Robert Gossett) via an in-house promotion from their old division, Robbery/Homicide. Taylor campaigns relentlessly to replace Johnson and serves as her primary antagonist. Chief Pope contributes to the squad's antipathy by admitting to an earlier affair with Johnson when they were both stationed in Washington D.C. In the course of the series, it becomes clear that Pope would like to rekindle the romance, in spite of the presence of a second wife and Johnson's new romantic partner, FBI Agent Fritz Howard (Jon Tenney). At the same time, he manipulates her and uses her achievements to further his own career. The fourth principal male character is Sergeant David Gabriel (Corey Reynolds) who becomes Johnson's aide after overcoming his initial resentment. Gabriel is a young African American with a master's degree in public administration and ambitions beyond the police department. After resigning to protest her hiring, along with the rest of the team, he gradually begins to respect her abilities, as do his colleagues. He, like Pope, Taylor, and Howard, is much more attuned to political repercussions than is Johnson. They act judiciously to further their own careers, in contrast to Johnson who heedlessly pursues killers, regardless of personal consequences.

The remainder of the ensemble cast features characters that are stereotypical, although they evolve as the series progresses. The three senior officers are Lieutenants
Provenza (G. W. Bailey), Andy Flynn (Anthony John Denison), both single, and Mike Tau (Michael Paul Chan) a Chinese American, married to a Japanese woman. Tau has the most expertise regarding the large Asian community in Los Angeles. Detective Julio Sanchez (Raymond Cruz) serves that purpose for the Hispanic community and is the squad’s expert on the city’s vast multi-ethnic gang populations. The team is rounded out by Detective Irene Daniels (Gina Ravera), a young, attractive African-American woman. The remaining regulars are the technician, Buzz Watson (Philip B. Keene) and the L.A. County Medical Examiner, Dr. Crippen (James Avery) who is replaced by Dr. Morales (Jonathan Del Arco) in the third season.

Genre

*The Closer* adheres more or less faithfully to the acceptable practices followed in the creation of a police procedural. Detective series based on actual news reports are fairly standard, some narratives more disguised than others. TNT executives already had this in mind when they tasked Duff with creating a companion series to *Law & Order* (1990-2010), a series which provided NBC a dominant prime time market share for more than two decades. When *Law & Order* was syndicated, TNT acquired distribution rights and continues to air episodes. Easily recognizable headlines were a resource for *Law & Order* writers and plot lines, although the judicial resolutions did not always conform to the actual trial verdicts. *The Closer* adhered to this model. Also like *Law & Order*, the crimes are often graphic, but the actual murders are not displayed on screen, only the aftermath which can be sufficiently brutal to ensure a preliminary warning that the program may contain scenes unsuitable for some audiences. The writers and directors drew from real events, and made the productions as authentic as
possible, given the constraints mandated by the legal profession. In one interview, Duff states, “The truth is the most interesting thing you can tell… the more authentic our world becomes, the more authentic the characters inside become.” To this end, Duff employed two consultants to ensure that the narratives would be realistic: a former prosecutor, Gil Garcetti, Los Angeles County District Attorney, and Mike Berchem, LAPD detective. In preliminary planning meetings Duff asked Garcetti what he wanted most to take to trial in order to convict. His reply, “That’s easy – a confession,” thus establishing the basis for each episode (“The Art of Interrogation”).

The confession provides weekly closure, anticipated from a dramatic television series, and a basic element of the detective genre. The title itself evokes a resolution. Usually the killer’s identity is revealed gradually, encouraging the audience to participate in identifying the perpetrator. Red herrings are presented to keep the viewer guessing. Johnson’s role is drawn from classic characters, such as Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple, whose superior intelligence is required to unravel the mystery. The Closer takes advantage of increasingly sophisticated forensic sciences showcased on recent popular series, such as, Body of Proof, Bones, and the CSI franchise. Virtually every episode includes a scene depicting the medical examiner demonstrating his findings on the body of the victim. Other sophisticated forensic evidence is usually presented by Tau who represents the brains of the squad, and a nod to the intellectual achievements of a growing Asian-American population.

The series features real-time issues, such as terrorism, illegal immigration, the Mafia, the drug trade, and returning veterans with post traumatic stress disorder. By the third season, Johnson is threatened with forced downsizing, an issue faced by many
police departments nationwide. “Serving the King” offers a complex two-part episode revolving around the CIA, Johnson’s former employer, and their efforts to locate a high-ranking officer who has become a double agent for the ‘Army of Allah.’ In “Borderline” coyotes transport illegal aliens across the U.S./Mexican border, abandoning them when capture is imminent. The immigrants die of dehydration, locked in the back of a truck. A hit man for the Mafia becomes an informant in order to join the eyewitness protection program, causing Sanchez to remark bitterly that the mob gets all the attention while gang violence is virtually ignored (“Overkill”). A trained Army sniper returns from Iraq to discover that his wife was killed in a drive-by shooting. He goes on a killing rampage, randomly murdering gang members using the skills he acquired in war (“Show Yourself”). Numerous episodes revolve around the manufacture/importation and marketing of drugs, both prescription and banned substances, and subsequent territorial rivalries cause multiple murders, planned and random (“Four to Eight,” “Live Wire,” “Tijuana Brass,” etc.).

Throughout the series, the viewer gets a visceral sense of Los Angeles, a microcosm of the world’s extremes. The juxtaposition of luxury and homelessness, fame and exploitation provide stark contrasts. Traffic congestion is pervasive. Gang names are drawn from the locations of the city blocks where they predominate: Five Trey, Six Deuce, and the Catorces (“Slippin’,” “Four to Eight”). Flynn wisecracks about “tar pits in the middle of the city…and they say L.A. has no center” (“Serving the King”). This self-awareness is matched by the self-reflexivity of television production itself. One episode merges voyeurism with Hollywood culture as it details the methods of the paparazzi, a profession based solely on fueling the public’s fascination with celebrities. In a jab at
American consumerism, Johnson describes the contents of the victim’s hotel room “a closet full of Prada, lots of credit cards, and no savings…the American Dream” (“Out of Focus”). Viewers are invited to fantasize about the fashionable elite, disdain the superficiality, or do both simultaneously.

Surveillance is a predominant theme throughout, reinforcing government’s encroachment on individual privacy in order to ‘maintain order,’ using fear to leverage control. The ubiquitous video cameras that infiltrate much of the American environment are prominent inside and outside the squad room. Crimes are recorded on security cameras, crime scenes are photographed by investigators, witness interviews are viewed by monitor and saved, and suspects confess on camera. Johnson plays the role of ‘director’ of these ‘productions’. Season Three opens with a view of the crime scene through a camera lens, and the television audience sees through the eyes of the videographer. Graphics of the camera’s viewfinder appear on screen: framing, auto-focus messages, and zooms. Later, shots of the crime scene are interspersed with shots of the actors viewing themselves on the video monitor. The television audience watches actors watching themselves on screen. Throughout the series, the power of the news media is showcased, further blurring the line between what perception and reality. Reporters slant crime stories to sensationalize events, so often the ‘news' is more a melodrama created by the station than a description of actual events (“Controlled Burn,” etc.). Upper management makes decisions based on public perception rather than facts. These themes resonate with an audience grown increasingly skeptical of American media coverage.
The idea that appearance is untrustworthy is symbolic of the broader dichotomy between truth and fiction which is a primary theme throughout the series. In self-reflexive mode, the series makes a point of describing actors as deceptive, they “lie for a living” (“About Face”). Johnson is the consummate liar – lying to suspects to obtain confessions in a paradoxical obsession to get at the ‘truth’, “lying to my Daddy for so long” (“Grave Doubts”), and lying to avoid repercussions for violating department policy. In an episode which references her former career with the CIA, subterfuge is explored in depth. Commissioner Andrew Schmidt (William Daniels), her previous handler now retired, describes espionage as: “Stealing information, passing secrets, reading other people’s mail, blackmailing foreigners, lying to your friends and loved ones about your daily lives - we are most days gray people doing gray jobs, shadows in a world of black and white.” Pope comments at the end of the episode, “The CIA is embarrassed by an intelligence failure…but they should be used to that,” in another nod to recent events (“Serving the King, Parts 1 and 2”). 

The universal and historical popularity of crime drama guarantees viewers will at least tune into the early episodes of a new ‘cop show.’ When these viewers evolve fairly quickly into loyal fans, the program is satisfying the basic requirements of a successful series. Treatment of genre is a significant contributor to the fulfillment of the nebulous contract between producers and viewers. Cast members are diverse and individualized, but function successfully as a team under the autocratic management of a flawed leader. *The Closer* offers stories drawn from deep-seated and seemingly intractable social and economic disparities: real issues in real time facing America today. While the solution to these problems remain unresolved, the weekly murder mystery always is
solved. The investigations face obstacles, social, economic, and political; and the plots suggest numerous false leads and suspicious characters who may be guilty, but not necessarily of the crime in question. Enough complexities are present to challenge viewers to outsmart the detectives, but not enough to overly tax viewers’ grasp or attention span. The writing is intensely self-aware and uses the Los Angeles setting to maximum effect.

Gender Identity and Sexuality

In order to understand the series’ success, it is necessary to take a close look at the character that is the epicenter of the show, Johnson. Duff did not initially intend to cast a woman in the lead role, but was persuaded to do so by Greer Shephard, a female co-producer, who wanted a show that featured a “fully developed female cop, a childless career woman in her forties” (“Breaking Down The Closer”). Once Duff was convinced to build the series around a woman, he wanted to present her as feminine. As he put it, “I'm very proud of the fact that we proved that women could be the lead in a procedural show without losing their femininity. We worked very hard at not making a woman succeed because she could act like a man, but making a woman succeed because she could be a woman” (Bryant). The belief that women should not have to adopt male behavioral patterns to be successful at work is promoted by third wave feminists who encourage women to retain their own identities in whatever form they choose. Duff wanted to create a character that reflected this ideology – a biological female who achieves her professional goals while retaining distinctly feminine traits not ordinarily associated with the top ranks of (male) law enforcement. Determining whether
or not the Johnson character succeeded in melding these qualities requires a detailed examination.

The pilot opens at a crime scene teeming with detectives and forensic technicians. Johnson arrives and immediately claims jurisdiction for her newly created ‘Priority Murder Squad’, soon revised to ‘Priority Homicide Division’, when she points out that her letterhead reads ‘PMS.’ When challenged by Taylor, she brusquely reminds him of her title and authority, which earns her the sobriquet ‘bitch’, said both to her face and behind her back. Johnson’s territoriality, coupled with arrogance, impatience, insensitivity, and a single-minded focus on her goal, are traits usually gendered masculine. When these traits are present in a female, the description becomes pejorative, as in, ‘bitchy.’ Whether masculine or ‘bitchy’ her behavior is universally resented. By the end of the first season she has alienated three important entities: an Assistant DA, an FBI agent, and Taylor. When forced by Pope to apologize in order to avoid a formal reprimand, she tells them,

Ms. Powell, I am sorry that I was unable to ignore your general level of incompetence in the wrongly obtained conviction of an innocent man. Agent Jackson, I deeply regret that you gave a terrorist two million dollars of the FBI’s money and followed him for six months without learning that his wife was having an affair. Captain Taylor, I apologize to you for not being born in L.A., but after seeing your work, I can honestly say that try as I might I cannot think of any fair reasonable system on earth where I wouldn’t outrank you. (“Standards and Practice”)
In subsequent episodes, she consistently alienates powerful individuals who might have been her allies. By the end of the series, her unwillingness to compromise destroys her career with the police department.

At first glance Johnson’s character seems compatible with a profession known for alpha personalities. Yet Johnson is first and foremost an ‘other,’ southern and girlish, an anomaly in the upper ranks of metropolitan law enforcement. Both the squad and the occasional suspect ridicule Johnson’s southern accent as a way of diminishing her power, echoing much of America’s general disdain for all things southern. During a power play, Commander Taylor asserts, “We’re not playing this game by Atlanta rules anymore” (“Serving the King, Part 1”). She is occasionally referred to as “Scarlett O’Hara,” evoking both the Deep South and sexuality. In “Standards and Practices” Provenza does an extended parody of her mannerisms, barking orders, and imitating her highly exaggerated “Thank ‘YEW.’” In an interview, James Duff discloses that he is from the south and goes on to explain that in the Deep South, the words “thank you” can mean “go to hell, leave me alone, please shut up… or simply thank you” (“Breaking Down The Closer”). Johnson wields the term with a forced smile, twisting the old symbol of southern gentility into a blunt assertion of dominance.

Costume further serves to distinguish Johnson from the rest of the cast and becomes an important motif as well, conveying her general disinterest in fashion norms, corresponding to her propensity for ignoring standard police procedures. Her usual attire of flowered skirts matched with solid sweaters or jackets, includes an oversized black handbag, and pointed-toe high heels, all indicators of excessive femininity, but neither professional nor stylish. This is consistent with the individual woman’s freedom
to choose her own style, advanced by postmodern feminists, rather than succumb to the pressure to conform. The problem is that Johnson is not secure in her choices. In “Fatal Retraction” Flynn describes a woman as “blond, petite, and common…trashy,” then looks at Johnson and smirks, “you know the type.” An expression of uncomfortable self-recognition flits across her face. A character scornfully describes Johnson’s clothes “from J. C. Penney’s” causing the same reaction (“The Butler Did It”). A bulky beige sweater appears when Johnson is under the greatest stress, demonstrating both provinciality and vulnerability.

Johnson’s insecurity regarding her appearance is heightened by Hollywood’s standards for glamor and beauty. When she tells Howard that L.A. standards make her self-conscious about her looks and wardrobe, he responds, “Let me take you to Santa Barbara so you can really feel inadequate” (“Pilot”). In the second episode the Hollywood subculture is brought into sharp focus when the wife of a popular actor is murdered. Johnson’s investigation allows the writers to exploit Hollywood’s obsession with the superficial, as Johnson investigates several women with whom the husband has had affairs: his wife’s personal assistant, hairdresser, shopper, and make-up artist. She visits them under the pretext of employing their services, even purchasing beauty products, clothes, and services at her own expense. At the end of the day, her appearance is so transformed that Pope fails to recognize her. She complains to her parents by telephone that she cannot afford the time and money required to meet Los Angeles’ fashion dictates, vowing to return the merchandise. She eventually keeps two dresses, and they become icons for her ambition, as she wears them to events
important to her career, reinforcing the importance of appearance for advancement ("About Face").

In "Saving Face," Johnson visits a plastic surgeon, a profession intrinsic to Hollywood. He mistakes her appointment for a patient consultation. Before she can identify herself, he supposes that she wants to do something about her large mouth and recommends a more muted shade of lipstick. Later, she asks Detective Daniels if her bright red lipstick gives her a "giant mouth." Daniels answers tentatively, causing Johnson to inquire, “Why didn’t you ever tell me?” Daniels replies, “The same reason I never said anything about your sweaters.” The self-doubt that Johnson reveals identifies her as a ‘typical woman’, guilty of the vanity she so disparages in others. Other traits signify Johnson as stereotypically female. She loses things, her phone, keys, and handbag, etc. She has a terrible sense of direction and relies on Gabriel to chauffeur her through Los Angeles traffic. When under stress she seeks immediate gratification by reaching for the ever-present candy she keeps hidden in her desk drawer and handbag. These traits are often gendered female, but are actually more characteristic of childishness. Johnson becomes particularly infantile in the presence of her parents, especially her father. While providing comic relief and making her a more sympathetic character, these behaviors underscore immaturity and reinscribe dominant patriarchal ideology.

The assurance and command Johnson demonstrates as deputy chief are countered by indecision and impulsive behavior in her personal life. When approached romantically by Howard, she conveys mixed signals, and approach-avoidance behavior. Johnson soon becomes dependent on Howard, professionally and personally, and they
marry in the fourth season. He not only provides access to federal records in criminal investigations, he is also the primary caretaker of the home. When Johnson’s parents appear unexpectedly, she evades responsibility for entertaining them and leaves Howard to assume that duty while she ‘solves her case.’ She interrupts him, cancels their personal plans at the last minute, and pays scant attention to his concerns. He, in response, occasionally loses patience with her, but is never harsh. He skillfully manages her moods and temper, only rarely giving her an ultimatum with which she eventually complies. He often functions as rescuer, in spite of her insincere protests. At one point she tells him that he is too sensitive. He replies, “I thought women liked that.” She says, “That’s just what we say” (“You Are Here”). This is a reiteration of the stereotypical woman who may deny it, but really prefers the ‘strong, silent type’ who will control his emotions and make the final decisions.

Although her aggression and his seeming passivity might hint of a reversal of gender identities, Howard is the dominant party to the relationship. He is the calm rational male dealing with an emotionally immature and egocentric female whom he loves because of her weaknesses rather than in spite of them. Her frailties allow him to sustain the power bestowed on him by physical strength and patriarchal culture. The two are firmly posited as a couple within a mainstream heterosexual value system. Johnson’s relationship with Howard is indicative of the ways that the creators of *The Closer* negotiate with an industry that has always been dominated by men at the highest financial levels. The traditional courtship and marriage recreated on screen also serves to retain an older, more conservative viewing audience. Johnson’s supposedly ‘feminine’ traits are not representative of a postmodern feminist, but stereotypical of the
scattered blonde, popular in classic Hollywood cinema. This image, contrasted with her professional persona, adds an element of unpredictability, which heightens the suspense that retains audiences, but is also another quality long ascribed to women.

Although Johnson’s character exhibits a number of stereotypical feminine qualities, she portrays others that run counter to type. Johnson is childless and has never faced the challenges of accommodating the needs of someone more dependent than herself. In “Flashpoint,” Lt. Flynn refers to her “armor-plated Wonder Bra” after she has been especially insensitive. The juxtaposition of steel casing with an iconic symbol of feminine sexuality and the maternal, i.e., the breast, evokes the Amazons, mythic women known for their prowess in battle, rather than nurturing ability. Season Three includes a diagnosis of premature menopause and eventually she undergoes a hysterectomy. She takes advantage of her visiting niece by asking her to watch over a teen who is hospitalized after being beaten by other teens. As the two begin to bond, Johnson clandestinely tapes their conversation and uses it to close the case, making no effort to disguise the source of her information. Her niece is furious and feels betrayed and used; Johnson is stunned at her reaction (“Maternal Instincts”). She lacks the ability to empathize and or put another person ahead of her own compulsions.

Other episodes depict Johnson’s ignorance or indifference to the intense bond many women have with their children. One grieving mother bitterly resents Johnson’s insensitivity and confronts her with, “You’re not a mother” (“Fantasy Date”). Johnson hears this comment repeatedly from parents in crisis. In one episode an autistic teen is involved. His doctor describes him as “…very intelligent, but he does have issues. He’s unemotional. He says inappropriate things. He’s very literal minded, fixated on minor
details. He gets agitated when his routine is altered. He’s extremely uncooperative when anyone or anything gets in the way of him doing what he wants.” This description is not lost on the team, provoking Flynn to ask, “Does he have a Georgia accent?” Later in the episode Johnson confesses to the mother that “sometimes I get so wrapped up in myself I just forget about everything else.” She responds, “I understand. I have a son just like that” (“You Are Here”). This further underscores Johnson as not only developmentally immature, but obsessive. Her focus on a single priority, ‘her case,’ skews her perspective such that her personality is unbalanced. The ‘female cop’ that Shephard wanted is present, but the ‘fully developed’ does not appear.

The suggestion that Johnson borders on being emotionally unsound is a recurring theme. Pope exposes his own misogyny, and reinscribes the patriarchal dictum that women are irrational, by repeatedly alluding to her as unbalanced, even while taking advantage of her accomplishments to further his own career. In the Pilot, Gabriel informs Pope that Johnson is unavailable because she has a “personal crisis.” Pope responds, “Personal crisis? That’s called her life!” In another episode the mother of a child who died in surgery accuses the doctors of malpractice. Pope insists that is “the opinion of one hysterical woman.” When informed by Johnson that she and Daniels believe her story, he responds, “Make that three hysterical women” implying that all women are as irrational (“Heroic Measures”). In one episode Johnson is questioning a psychiatrist when he stops to apologize for “slipping into shrink mode.” Johnson replies, “I bring that out in people” (“Flashpoint”). Not only does she fail to defend herself, but she seems to acknowledge that she might be unstable. In an interview, Duff explains that he deliberately created a one-dimensional character whose pursuit of one priority
took precedence over all other aspects of her life (Bryant). In the narrative arc of the series, Johnson faces the ultimate consequences of her neglect, as she loses much of what has defined her.

Pope’s misogyny is not an anomaly, but typical of attitudes in an environment skewed hypermasculine. Sexism is a recurring theme throughout the series and the serial aspects of the show. At one point, Pope discourages her from going out to interview gang members since “they don’t respond well to women.” She replies, “They don’t respond too well to white men or police officers either so I can’t make things worse” (“Four to Eight”). Season Three includes a story line that depicts Daniels and Gabriel in an affair, a violation of department policy. When Gabriel informs Johnson, she orders him not to talk to her about it again. When the affair ends badly, the pair’s mutual hostility is so palpable that Johnson threatens both with transfers if they cannot control their antipathy. Privately, Daniels complains to Johnson that the squad blames her alone for the office tension. Johnson replies, “Learn how to deal with the boys’ club who criticizes you more than him for the same issue…detective. That’s the only way things are going to change around here, and I hate, hate, hate talkin’ about it!” (“Police Files”)

The implications of this brief exchange are significant because it speaks directly to the issue of the feminist/feminine dichotomy. Johnson is telling Daniels to rely on her own strengths to succeed in a male-dominated career. She is suggesting that women’s assimilation into the upper echelons of leadership is not served by endless discussions about unfair treatment at the hands of the patriarchy, but by learning how to negotiate within that environment to achieve individual objectives. Women are stereotypically seen as having a need to discuss personal issues at length in contrast to men, who are
presumed to avoid emotional revelations. Johnson’s message to Daniels rejects these stereotypes and insists there are better ways to negotiate a balance of power within patriarchy. In other words, her message is that focusing on intrinsic inequities in the system is not as effective as working within it for individual objectives. Ultimately, the popularity of the series, *The Closer*, may not be contingent on how feminine/feminist the lead character is, but how she functions within a challenging patriarchal environment – hegemonic negotiation within the existing ideology.

Pope’s misogyny is surpassed by the oldest member of the division, Provenza. In “The Big Picture” an internet ad features a scantily clad ‘escort’ named “Strawberry Lollipop,” prompting Provenza to wisecrack, “looks like an all-day sucker to me.” In “Flashpoint” he provides a running commentary of his fantasies as he watches the interview of a 16-year old via video monitor. He justifies his offensive comments by drawing attention to the girl’s generous display of cleavage and her proud acknowledgment of an affair with her psychiatrist. When Provenza is admonished by a disgusted Johnson, he is unrepentant. Later, news of Johnson’s past affair with Pope becomes common knowledge, and Provenza notes that this recent information has caused his new boss to move “up a notch in my sexual imagination.” Lt. Flynn shares Provenza’s lust for and discomfort with women in general, particularly women in power. Flynn is repeatedly insubordinate to Johnson throughout the first season. In “Standards and Practices” Johnson tells him “You have not said one nice thing to me the entire time I’ve been here.” He responds, “You have great legs,” to the team’s amusement. Flynn and Provenza are stereotypical of middle-aged men in male-dominated careers.
unaccustomed to dealing with women on equal terms, and particularly unwilling to be outranked by a woman.

Another predictable purveyor of sexism is Detective Julio Sanchez, second generation Mexican-American – a stereotype of the lascivious male Latino. He is sexually aggressive, but only verbally, making lewd comments and suggestions to co-workers, although he does not speak of all women with the negative tone shared by Flynn and Provenza. Consistent with his culture, he is respectful of older women and paternal with children. The most frequent victim of his inappropriate sexual aggression is the long-suffering Detective Irene Daniels. She parries his unwanted suggestions with varying degrees of irritation in an effort to belittle him, which only serves to amuse him. Daniels is painfully aware that a great deal of the squad’s antipathy toward Johnson is due more to the fact that she is a woman than that she was recruited from outside the department. When the squad engages in Johnson bashing and sexual innuendo, she walks out in disgust. Women in the squad are not physically accosted by the offensive men, and though they are annoyed, they do not appear cowed by their male co-workers. The sexism demonstrated on screen seems to be an effort by the creators to portray the very real obstacles women face in the workforce. Johnson’s ability to succeed in the face of intrinsic opposition due solely to her identification as a woman resonates with female viewers. However, while the politically correct writers depict sexism as pervasive and offensive, men overwhelmingly dominate the cast and narratives.

The characters who demonstrate the most overt sexism are the same ones who display the most intense homophobia: Provenza, Flynn, and Sanchez. One episode is
designed to ‘educate’ viewers about transgender surgery. It revolves around a retired detective played by the well-known film actor Beau Bridges. Bridges is not only highly respected as an actor, but is often cast as a conventional family man. The choice of this sympathetic actor who identifies heterosexual, and who is quite comical in the role, lessens the negative reaction that more conservative viewers may have to the topic. He plays Provenza’s retired partner, George Andrews, who has been brought back to assist in solving a recent crime similar to an old case. George arrives as Georgette, wearing a flowery dress, broad brimmed hat, and heels, and calmly explains that he had always felt like a woman in a man’s body, so he finally had transgender surgery. He has not, however, changed his sexual preference and still desires women. Provenza refuses to speak to him, but Johnson insists they work together to solve the case. In the course of the program, a great deal of information is proffered about the surgery itself and the motivations for making that choice. By the end of the show, Provenza acknowledges grudgingly that Andrews is essentially the same person he regarded highly in the past ("Make Over"). This episode is just one example of the way the series’ creators introduce postmodern queer theory to a broad spectrum audience. Numerous non-heteronormative sexualities are presented without judgment, and the treatment of homosexuality is consistently sympathetic.

In a different vein, the relationship between Flynn and Provenza is drawn as a bromance, one in which women play marginal roles. Occasionally Provenza will develop a short-term romance with a woman, even to the extent of becoming engaged in spite of his multiple divorces. Flynn is always skeptical, and the fleeting romances end abruptly and unpleasantly. While no physical intimacy is implied between Flynn and Provenza,
their relationship goes beyond ‘bromance’. The two have a tight homosocial bond which includes constant bickering about the same issues, often sounding like an old married couple. In one episode, they flirt with two flight attendants who invite them to their apartment. The ensuing evening makes it clear that the significant relationship is between the two men, rather than with the women they are trying to seduce. This sexual ‘triangle’ evokes a ‘shared’ sexual experience, whether or not the two involved parties are physically intimate with each other. This idea of a shared male sexuality is even more explicit in an episode about a dead police officer who made a habit of seducing his fellow officer’s wives or girlfriends, rather than seeking his own mate (“Blue Blood”). In these instances, The Closer’s writers leave such implications to the audience, ensuring that viewers who are reluctant to entertain the possibility of latent sexual desires between two men are not challenged directly with a script that leaves no room for interpretation.

The entire ensemble cast is gendered heterosexual until the advent of the new medical examiner, Dr. Morales (Jonathan Del Arco) who is introduced in the third season. Morales is neither tortured nor sadistic, presented as brilliant, conscientious, and balanced, an example of the way television has improved upon Hollywood’s representation of gay characters. He becomes the source of information for Los Angeles’ gay scene, explaining various social customs when homosexuals are involved in a murder investigation. His sense of humor, called black humor, is often associated with professionals who deal intimately with death. He comments on one victim admiringly, “buff guy…pumpkin ravioli in his stomach…lucky to find it around here” (“Dumb Luck”). He describes four burn victims with a combination of fast food
terminology and a reference to the macabre film, *The Sixth Sense* (1999). “I see dead people, lots and lots of dead people, two smoked, two extra crispy, and then this lady here – the combo platter” (“Controlled Burn”). Repeating the use of take-out food as metaphor, Morales excises a wound for evidence and asks Johnson, “Do you want that to go?” (“Problem Child”)

Morales is well aware of the homophobes in the squad, but is confident in his sexuality and derives amusement by making them uncomfortable. In a demonstration of how a murder was performed, he asks Gabriel to stand behind him and put his arm around his neck, as though to choke him. Morales takes hold of his arm and turns his head, looking up flirtatiously at the taller man, “Now not too tight!” Gabriel winces, revealing his discomfort with their proximity (“Tijuana Brass”). Morales’ character represents postmodern media’s recognition of the normalcy of those who are not ‘hetero’-normal.

The recurring cast members appeal across gender and generational spectrums to sustain a loyal audience. Conservatives from an older generation have a voice in Provenza, as he expresses confusion and frustration with changing social mores. His views are countered by a guest star or younger squad member who explains a postmodern perspective. Johnson aligns with the progressive viewpoint, but does not get involved in lengthy discussions, consistent with her handling of the Gabriel/Daniels affair. The postmodern blurring of gender identity and sexuality is symbolized in part by one specific motif: Johnson’s cat, which she refuses to name and persists in referring to as ‘he’ even after she produces a litter, in this way underscoring her own reluctance to attach gender labels. (When the cat dies and is replaced with a new male kitten,
Johnson refers to him as ‘she.’) Johnson herself is a blend of hyperfeminine traits reflected in her personal style and pretense of helplessness contrasted by the assertiveness and agency she exhibits, typically considered masculine.

*The Closer’s* crime narratives abound in sexual themes, a reliable contrivance which sutures an audience to a series. The very first ‘confession’ is obtained from a devout Catholic who murders her romantic partner (unconsummated) when she learns that ‘he’ is a woman who cross-dresses to avoid detection and has a male lover. The first episode signals the audience that the series includes motives which are non-heteronormative. Homosexuals and queer characters are often victims of religious beliefs or hate crimes. They have limited expectations that the police, themselves guilty of homophobia, will protect them.

The normalcy of the various queer characters does not prevent them from committing the occasional murder, motivated by the same impulses that drive heteronormative people to extremes. One man kills his younger domestic partner with a baseball bat because the victim is planning to leave him for another man, taking half the community property. He tries to disguise the murder as a hate crime and carries him into a nearby gay bar. Patrons there describe similar attacks on gays in the neighborhood. The medics and police take nearly an hour to appear and are accosted by the angry group who accuses them of ignoring crimes against homosexuals. Provenza demonstrates both an irrational fear of HIV and a lack of compassion when he hands out extra pairs of latex gloves to investigators, advising “You’d better double up on the protective gear. I see there’s been a ‘homocide,’” a term which has made its way into the *Urban Dictionary.* Priority Homicide Division is assigned the case because the
crime occurs in a district represented by a gay activist on the city council who prefers the murder to be a hate crime, in order to publicize the ongoing discrimination his constituents face (“Batter Up”). In spite of Provenza’s caustic comment, The Closer does not present AIDS as a ‘homosexual’ issue. The only episode which deals directly with HIV involves the heterosexual pornography industry (“Head Over Heels”).

Other sexual themes deal with internet escort services, sites for sexual role-playing, adultery, and bigamy. Cross-dressing is practiced by both victims and suspects. Sanchez displays both sexism and homophobia when he tries to seduce a sexually provocative witness, whom he surreptitiously kisses. The witness turns out to be a male cross-dresser who is actually the murderer. While the squad snickers, Sanchez hands over the case rather than face the prisoner again (“Junk in the Trunk”). Another episode features a victim who is a cross-dressing evangelical Protestant minister (“Forgive Us Our Trespasses”). Online sites offering sadomasochistic services are explored in one episode, prompting Gabriel to ask, “What is it with you white people and whips?” Tau informs Johnson that a particular site under investigation got a “million hits.” She is astounded, “in one year?!” He replies, “per week” (“Fantasy Date”). While some viewers may find this shocking, the scene is tempered by the comedy.

In spite of the humor which runs throughout the series, the series’ story lines are grim and occasionally gruesome. The exploitation of women by a dominant patriarchy is a common theme. One episode deals with illegal immigrants who are victimized not only by household employers, but by immigration officials who consider sexual favors a job entitlement (“Good Housekeeping”). Another show deals with a violent pedophile who justifies his actions by blaming the seven-year-old girl for seducing him (“Ruby”). One
episode features a Russian mob connection who brutalizes the women he hires from an escort service, but is protected from prosecution by the FBI because of his role as informer (“The Big Picture”). One story depicts teen-aged boys competing to see who can have sex with the greatest number of virgins, using any means necessary, including drugs and violence (“Cherry Bomb”). These stories are particularly harsh because they are more realistic than fictional and occur in real time to real women every day across the nation and the world.

A review of the series’ handling of postmodern feminism and sexuality, as seen by the text, reveals an acute awareness of current theories and practices in Western culture, particularly the American Metroplex. That the program was able to sustain such a large audience (and lure a substantial international following) speaks to its ability to juxtapose controversial issues with sufficient comedy and convention to create an acceptable hour of entertainment—a juggling act of various perspectives that included a diverse audience, the limitations of the television medium, and the demands of network executives.

Reception

The Closer’s success surpassed expectations. In its seventh and final season, it ranked No. 1 in basic cable’s scripted series (Gorman, August 15, 2012). The series’ finale drew 9.1 million viewers making it the summer’s most watched cable telecast (Kondolojy). The show received nominations and/or awards for acting, ensemble acting, writing, and best series by the Primetime Emmy Awards, Screen Actors Guild Awards, Golden Globe Awards, and various other organizations. The Closer’s success “has helped usher in a wave of opportunities for mature actresses over the past half-decade,
including Holly Hunter in *Saving Grace*, Mary McCormack in *In Plain Sight*, Jada Pinkett Smith in *Hawthorne*, and Glenn Close in *Damages*” (Goodale). In 2012, the series entered its seventh and final season, not because of declining popularity, but because Kyra Sedgwick announced her intent to pursue roles in feature films. *The Closer* has been syndicated and past episodes are aired on at least two channels.

*The Closer’s* commercial airtime was in great demand. One of its prominent sponsors was The Hershey Company. Since candy consumption is Johnson’s response to stress, the product placement often occurs at peak moments in the narrative. The promotion is reinforced with a bridge ad for Kit Kat or Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup. Another prominent placement appears as Johnson applies lipstick from a Revlon Gift Bag. Both the product name and the lipstick shade are also written into the script (Bennett). Other overt placements include Sprint Overdrive, T-Mobile, and Prius Gen3 appealing to a younger, technologically sophisticated and ecologically sensitive, demographic. These viewers quickly recognize obvious commercialism. Out of fifteen tweets to *Brandspotting* pertaining to *The Closer*, 80% were negative, criticizing the placements as “clunky,” “cheesy,” or “obnoxious.” While the tweeters indicated no intent to quit watching the show because they were irritated by the overt placements, sponsors nevertheless have no way to measure the effect on sales of the offending product.

*The Closer* capitalizes on the digital age, integrating mainstream audiences with dedicated fans wired to their computers. Turner Network Television features *The Closer* on its website, offering viewers a score of opportunities to interact online. The site offers access to full episodes, available for purchase with a link to Amazon.com. The menu
features weblogs from Duff, and the fashion designer, Greg Lavoi, as well as a “Behind the Scenes” page which provides the consumer with ‘inside’ information. The site also furnishes clips, recaps, games, blogs, and photo galleries. A click on “Brenda’s Corner” opens up links to “Brenda’s Fashion Evolution,” “Comfort Food Recipes,” and “Greatest Hits.” A “Community” section offers message boards, a newsletter, “Fan Wiki,” and mobile alerts. The “Fan Wiki” page exhorts consumers to “…pop on by and help out with the ‘Episodes Guides’ from previous season by adding what you know” and has a separate link for spoilers addressing them with, “This section is a co-dependent match made in heaven for those of you who can’t wait to spill rumors about The Closer, and those of you who can’t wait a week to find out what will happen next.” The page urges the user to “Apply to be a Writer,” giving fans an open invitation to provide content. Finally, a shopping section links to souvenirs and DVDs of the show.

By monitoring the website TNT can control and protect the image of both the show and the network. The cable network has a Facebook page dedicated to the show with more opportunities for interaction. These multiple venues provide prime examples of Terranova’s description of free “labor.” TNT is more than willing to take advantage of the unpaid work that goes into summarizing plot lines and creating message boards because this effort prolongs interest in the show and sustains the “hype” that Gray describes as an integral part of promotion (Kindle 140-145). For the writers of The Closer fanfiction, the players of The Closer games, and the followers of ‘Brenda Leigh’s’ fashion transitions, the show does not begin and end with an episode. When entertainment news announced the closing of the series, one fan blogs, “I’m still in denial…I’m soooo sad. The show still has life and I ‘luv’ Brenda and Fritzy…I luv them
all” (Trecycup, *TNT*). This viewer’s attachment to the show is exemplifies the kind of loyal following Jane Espensen describes as the goal of a successful television writer.

Often the labor provided by consumers takes an entirely different slant on the characters than the one intended by the producer, showing the downside of encouraging viewer participation. Fanfiction for *The Closer* is available on the web via both dedicated sites and user-generated Facebook pages. Several authors have posted original ‘episodes’ which depict the married Johnson in a lesbian relationship or having an affair with Flynn (*Fanfiction*). Another poster puts Johnson in the role of an abused wife (*Fanfiction*). Deconstructions of Johnson’s marital commitment and her carefully delineated heterosexuality, run counter to TNT’s efforts to position her as conventionally heterosexual.

On the heels of Kyra Sedgwick’s Emmy win for best actress in a dramatic series, *The Closer* saw a spike in viewers. Unfortunately (at least as far as advertising revenue goes), they were all aged 50+ viewers (Seidman). The appeal of the show to older viewers is predictable. Johnson and Howard’s characters are over 40; half of her squad is over 50, as is Chief Pope. Johnson’s parents, in their 70s, appear in seasons three through seven. In a vivid example of multi-media promotion, the January 2011 issue of *Good Housekeeping* features Kyra Sedgwick on the cover with “My Marriage is My No. 1 Priority” in quotation marks, thus reinforcing her own image as part of mainstream culture. Since her husband of 24 years is the very famous actor Kevin Bacon who directed a few episodes of *The Closer*, this comment is somewhat disingenuous. Their lifestyle could hardly be described as mainstream. The magazine itself signifies tradition and old media. Founded in 1885, it focuses on women’s interests and the family. Of the
five million readers, predominantly women, eighty percent are married. It has the widest circulation of any women’s magazine today, featuring articles on diet, recipes, beauty tips, and child-rearing guides. Not only does Good Housekeeping represent home and family, the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval signifies ‘quality’ as well. About The Closer Sedgwick says that she fought to keep “Brenda’s almost perverse addiction to sugar in the show because it’s both common and personal” blurring the separation between character and actor (Harel). The question of whether or not Kyra Sedgwick had a sweet tooth before starring in a series sponsored by The Hershey Company is not an idle one, given James Duff’s claim to have originated the candy motif himself (“Breaking Down The Closer”). She adds that she can be “scattered,” and “lose stuff,” also “fragile and vulnerable,” further inviting the viewer to see the character as a ‘real person’ with whom women can identify (Belkin).

A spin-off, Major Crimes (2012-), immediately followed The Closer’s final episode. It also features a highly acclaimed film actor, Mary McDonnell, as Captain Sharon Raydor, a character introduced in The Closer’s fifth season. As lead character in the spin-off, Raydor presents a very different style. Her clothing is conservative and professional. She is the widowed mother of two grown children, and projects a quiet compassion, and insight into human motivation. Raydor recognizes Pope’s agenda immediately and warns Johnson, who is dismissive. Johnson wields power impulsively and callously; Raydor is controlled and diplomatic. Johnson skirts the law and LAPD policy; Raydor adheres to them conscientiously. Aware of consequences, she avoids Johnson’s mistakes. She does not alienate those who oppose her, but mediates, allowing them to register success while she achieves her objectives. James Duff may
have intended to create the postmodern woman in Brenda Leigh Johnson, but he actually succeeded with Captain Sharon Raydor. She is a feminist who is also very much a woman: strong, rational, and nurturing. Whether or not the viewing audience will respond to a mature woman as enthusiastically as they did to a quirky, demanding individualist remains to be seen, but the show begins Season Three in June, 2014.
CHAPTER 4
SAVING GRACE

In the summer of 2007 TNT introduced Saving Grace, strategically scheduled following The Closer, assuring at least initial interest from viewers who were already tuned to a show featuring a female law enforcement officer. Season 1 of Saving Grace averaged 6.4 million viewers, but by the third and final season, only 3.5 million people were watching. Fox cancelled the show in spite of the fact that TNT had already requested a fourth season. The Closer and Saving Grace bore notable similarities: high quality production values and writing, and experienced actors in the recurring cast ensemble experienced very different fates with the viewing public. Both were police procedurals featuring well-known female leads. Yet, The Closer produced a successful spin-off and still appears as syndicated re-runs more than a year after the series finale. Saving Grace retired to Netflix streaming soon after the series ended. This contrast in longevity has root causes in the social norms and expectations that spectators bring to the television viewing experience and the rationale behind industry decisions which may never be fully known.

The series was produced by Fox Television Studios and starred acclaimed film actor, Holly Hunter, playing a detective, Grace Hanadarko, of the Oklahoma City Police Department. The basic premise of the series is reflected in the title. Grace’s transgressions have attracted God’s notice, and he sends the angel Earl (Leon Rippy) to make a final offer of redemption. The ensemble cast revolves around Grace. Her best friend is Rhetta Rodriguez (Laura San Giacomo), the forensic pathologist for the Oklahoma City Police Department. Unlike Grace, Rhetta is the married mother of two.
Detective Hamilton aka Ham Dewey (Kenny Johnson) is Grace’s lover and partner. Other recurring cast members include Detectives Butch Ada (Bailey Chase) and Bobby Stillwater (Gregory Cruz). Well-known African American actress, Lorraine Toussaint, plays Captain Kate Perry, head of the Major Crimes division. She and Grace began their careers together in the Vice Squad, and they are friends. Grace’s family members appear occasionally, particularly her preteen nephew, Clay Norman (Dylan Minnette). (For the most part, first names will be used in this chapter, reflecting the significance of the title character’s name to the narrative and the informal Oklahoma City setting.)

Nancy Miller, the show’s creator and chief writer, is responsible for the premise, story lines, casting, and production, and her beliefs and experiences imbue the settings, narrative structure, themes, and iconography. She wanted to feature a location that was in the “heartland,” rather than in the metropolitan areas that have dominated police procedurals (“Commentary”). Miller is a native of Oklahoma City, and she recreates the state’s ethos in the show. Opening credits appear across an isolated two-lane highway through the flat prairieland that comprises much of the state. Utility poles on the right and an old barbed wire fence on the left border the road. The farmland sprouts oil-pumping units in place of crops. Tornadoes touch down from dark rolling clouds and skim the surface. The landscape rolls toward the camera as though the viewer were driving down the deserted road. The original theme song on the soundtrack is a blend of country and blues. Characters are named after towns in Oklahoma: [H] Anadarko, Dewey, Ada, and Stillwater. Bobby is of Native American/Hispanic heritage and his long black hair is tied back behind his head. Grace’s grandfather is Choctaw, and a couple of episodes feature aspects of his ethnic heritage. Grace clips feathers in her hair and
occasionally braids several strands of her long blonde hair. Even Angel Earl wears jeans and chews tobacco. Scenes show horseback riding, deer hunting, and farmers working the land. Beer drinking at the local bar is a favorite past-time. The cattle auction in the pilot showcases the legendary Oklahoma City stockyards, denoting the importance of the industry to the state.

**Genre**

Many elements of *Saving Grace* can be found in conventional sub-genres. Every week a crime is solved, consistent with a police procedural, but the episodic element is overshadowed by the overarching theme from classic Christian ideology: God in the eternal struggle with Satan for the souls of men and women. Television dramas featuring good versus evil are fairly common. Recent examples include *Touch* (2012- ), *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), the sequel *Angel* (1999-2004), and *Supernatural* (2005- ). *Touched by an Angel* (1994-2003) portrays a manifestation of angels most similar to Earl in *Saving Grace*. It offers no fewer than three anthropomorphic representations of the divine who occasionally take on an unearthly translucent aura. Like Earl, they too are sent by a forgiving God to help humans get through troubled times. Neither series advocates a specific religion per se, but both emphasize forgiveness and redemption with clear references to an afterlife, characteristic of the Christian faith.

Besides the religious themes of faith and redemption, one other narrative dominated the series. Prior to September 11, 2001, Oklahoma City was the scene of the worst terrorist attack in history on American soil, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building on April 19th, 1995 (Boyle 2001). Miller was in Los Angeles
working on scripts for *Law & Order* at the time, but states that she was “devastated” when she heard of it (“Commentary”). The bombing and aftermath are presented in the pilot via flashback and form the motivational rationale for the entire series. Grace’s sister was killed, leaving a 19-day-old infant, Clay. Grace broke with God and the Catholic Church after experiencing the loss of her sister and the trauma of locating victims in the rubble, many of them small children. The final scene of the pilot shows Grace and Clay walking beside a chain link fence around the Oklahoma City National Memorial dedicated to the victims. They stop in front of a photograph of Clay’s mother, attached to the fence alongside many others. Shots of the memorial appear intermittently throughout the series. Characters reference the event in every episode of the first season, remembering precisely what they were doing and how many loved ones they lost in the crisis. Both Grace’s father and a brother were firefighters and aided in the rescue/recovery operations. One episode deals with the disappearance of a young man whose father was killed in the bombing. After recovering the man from the rubble, Grace befriended the family. Their home has a plaque bearing the title of the episode; “A Survivor Lives Here” which Grace explains was given by the city to all the families who lost people in the attack. This is just one example of the many specific references to the Murrah Building bombing throughout the series. At times, the show resembles a docudrama in an effort to educate the viewing public regarding the details of that act of terrorism.

In the first episode, Grace is driving home from the bar, drunk and erratic, loses control of the car, and hits a man standing beside the road. She unsuccessfully tries to resuscitate him and utters the words, “Dear God, please help me.” Suddenly Earl
appears, “I’m Earl. What do you need?” She yells that he is a “nut case,” and he reacts by unfurling enormous shimmering wings, a jarring contrast to the green plastic spit bottle he holds. She loses consciousness and when she revives, she is standing with Earl on the top of a butte overlooking the Grand Canyon (“In the Beginning”). It is the first of many such transmigrations Grace will experience throughout the series in Earl’s efforts to convince her he is sent by God.

Stylistically, Saving Grace has some components of a feminist fable. Her body is extremely toned and the striations of musculature in her arms and legs are prominently displayed, evocative of the mythic Athena or the Amazonian women. The diminutive Grace easily overpowers much larger men. Many scenes with the angel Earl are dreamlike and surreal. Coincidences and miracles occur throughout the series, again asking the viewer to accept a fantastical perspective of everyday life. Earl and Grace wrestle for her soul in the ruins of the Acropolis, a cell tower visible in the distance (“Bring It On, Earl”). It is gratifying for women to see the diminutive Grace put a large man in a half-nelson, but her abilities are not innate, but derivative. These scenes draw on fantasy and mythology, but the ultimate source of the superhuman power is not the woman at the center, but her male angel who invariably refers to his “boss” as “he.”

Miller is a lifelong Catholic and Saving Grace makes no attempt to mask its message of repentance and reform with clear religious overtones. Churches are featured in a number of episodes and religious icons are pervasive. One episode involves a priest who works with Latin American immigrants, often illegal. When a parishioner witnesses a murder at the cheap motel where she cleans, he offers her sanctuary to protect her from deportation. Grace visits him looking for the witness and
from habit starts to dip her hand into the holy water at the entrance to the sanctuary. She hesitates at the last moment and walks on, depicting her internal struggle between the idealistic religion she was taught as a child, and the destructive experience she suffered at the hands of a that religion’s representative. A life-sized crucifix is displayed prominently behind the altar, and rows of small votive candles are shown at the side. When Grace complains to Perry about the inaccessibility of the witness, she learns that the parish bishop has pressured local authorities to honor the church’s historic power to offer sanctuary. Grace is disgusted with the city’s capitulation to the church in order to avoid bad publicity and further incensed that the Catholic Church wields power over secular authority ("Bless Me Father for I Have Sinned").

Although Catholic, Miller does not turn a blind eye to the decades (centuries?) of institutional abuse within the monolithic religious organization. The endemic pedophilia committed by Catholic clergymen is explored in depth when it is revealed in the pilot that the parish priest at the Catholic school molested children for years, including Grace. Rhetta discovers Father Murphy (Rene Auberjonois) is living in Tulsa at an upscale retirement home for Catholic priests. Grace rages at the injustice that allows Father Murphy to spend the remainder of his life in beauty and comfort after he has damaged so many. When Grace’s brother, Father John (Tim Irwin), hears the story, he is sickened by the travesties committed by the priest. He goes to the home and knocks Father Murphy to the ground, in a gesture consistent with a masculine code of behavior: men must protect and avenge women and children, even if they are men of God.

In the next sequence, Grace acts on her fantasy and kidnaps Father Murphy with the intention of executing him, but ultimately cannot. A former male victim of the
pedophilic Murphy murders him the next day. Not only is this victim guilty of murder, he is subsequently found to be abusing the eleven-year-old daughter of his fiancé. This sequence reinforces patriarchal ideology that considers the molestation of a boy child more heinous than the abuse of a girl, at least in the minds of many males. The episode showed clearly that although Grace had the identical experience, she could not bring herself to murder the perpetrator. The male victim did kill the priest, and until his own acts of abuse were revealed, his motive for murder seemed justifiable, not only to him, but to the community, as well. It further depicts the tragic reality that victims of abuse perpetuate the cycle. The narrative excoriates the wealthy Catholic patriarchy that knowingly allowed the exploitation to continue for generations. Despite the depraved nature of the offense, these two episodes make the argument that redemption is available even to child predators, further alienating Grace (“Tacos, Tulips, Duck, and Spices” “Have a Seat, Earl”).

The concept of free will is presented as the path toward redemption, but events are so manipulated by divine forces that the future seems preordained. Grace is given a chance to redeem her soul, but the opportunity is contingent on her efforts to change. Earl purportedly enters Grace’s life by invitation, but he has arranged the illusion of a car accident to provoke a confrontation. The angel’s struggle with Grace over her soul begins and continues throughout the life of the series. In the bondage episode Earl appears after Ham leaves and also refuses to release her, telling her that if he did, “God would throw a flag for interference.” Her phone rings, and she begs him to answer it for her. He replies, “God doesn’t like us doing phone surveillance.” The uses of sports metaphors to express the will of a powerful and omniscient God add humor and irony to
emotionally charged scenes and serve to balance the serious premise of the show. When Earl will not release her from the bonds, she asks, “How do I get out?” “Start leading a different life…You need to get ready for whatever God has planned for you” (“A Language of Angels”). The dialogue’s message is contradictory. Earl claims that Grace has agency, then constantly reminds her of God’s purpose for her life, implying predestination.

Although Catholic motifs are prominent, other religions play a role in the series. A recurring character, Leon, is a prisoner on death row whom Earl also serves as the man’s last chance angel. Leon converts to Islam before his execution and is surprised when Earl does not abandon him. Instead, Earl provides him with a prayer mat and directs him to due east in the prison cell. Leon’s faith helps him accept his impending execution. Native American death rituals and a belief in the spirit world is explored in several episodes as Grace’s grandfather faces Alzheimer’s and considers taking his own life, an option in his Choctaw culture that contemplates death as part of life rather than an end to it (“Hear the Birds?”). These alternatives to Christianity are taken seriously and handled with respect by the producers of the show. Earl tells Grace that God does not insist on church attendance as a prerequisite for redemption. In one episode, Grace enters her house to find it overflowing with religious icons from nearly every world religion and sect: Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, among others, furnished by Earl in an effort to appease her antipathy for religion, based on her experience as a child with the Catholic Church. Earl explains that all the religions lead to redemption if they are practiced in the right spirit (“Bless Me, Father, for I Have Sinned”).

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As afore-mentioned, the Murrah bombing is key to the series’ closure, which seals Grace’s fate. Earl foreshadowed her death when he described her charisma as “divine heat,” and compared her to Joan of Arc (“Bless Me, Father, for I have Sinned”). Just as Earl was an anthropomorphic representation of God, so Satan appears in human form in the final episodes, as a character named Hut Flanders (Gordon McDonald). Grace has a sexual encounter with him before realizing his true identity. The series’ finale shows Grace discovering Hut’s pickup truck secreted in a large storage unit. The back is filled with ammonium nitrate fertilizer and diesel fuel, two components of the Murrah Building bomb. Flanders intends to recreate the Murrah bombing, but with an even larger venue. Realizing that she cannot kill him (Satan is immortal) before he deploys the bomb, Grace tosses her lit cigar into the truck bed – preventing the act of terrorism but self-immolating in the process. As the rest of the cast arrives at the scene grief-stricken, one has to wonder if the sentiments portrayed expressed the sense of loss felt by the show’s creator who was so personally invested in the program.

Gender Identity and Sexuality

In Saving Grace the narrative revolves almost solely around the very human lead, a flawed character familiar to the detective genre, though the lead is more often male. She is promiscuous and irreverent. The opening sequence shows Grace and Ham, nude, engaging in energetic sexual activities, a scene which gives viewers early notice that the series will include graphic scenes of sexuality. Most of the actors are attractive and very fit and their appearance contributes to the series’ physicality. Grace is often seen partially nude or scantily clad, and participating in uninhibited and
impersonal sexual encounters. Her unemotional libido and strong physique signify
Grace as powerful and in control, but Holly Hunter is only five feet two inches tall. Ham
and Butch effortlessly lift her off her feet, subverting her invulnerability in a purely
physical manner, but creating a more sympathetic character. The stereotype of the
dependent woman who needs a man to take care of her is initially deconstructed, only
to be reinscribed when Grace allows herself to be picked up like a child. Ultimately, the
series fails to meet standards set by feminist theorists in significant ways, and the
writing reveals the ambivalence felt by many American women in their efforts to gain an
equal measure of respect and power in a patriarchal culture.

Ham is, as he puts it, addicted to Grace, but her emotional unavailability has
prompted him to marry, and he is now torn between desire and guilt. Abruptly halting
mid-coitus in the opening scene, he tells her, “I can’t do this anymore…It’s wrong,
Grace. Look, it’s over…it’s the last time. I mean it.” He pleads with her to swear to God
that it will not happen again. Stating that she does not believe in God, he responds,
“You don’t feel bad about this a bit, do you?” to which she glibly replies, “I’m not the one
who’s married.” After he leaves, the camera tracks Grace in a series of short takes. She
showers with the blinds open, posing naked, grinning at the Peeping Tom next door
while he gapes. She picks up her nephew Clay and his girlfriend after school and takes
them for a joy ride in a police car, careening through the city with the siren blaring. The
camera refocuses rapidly from medium range to close-up to medium close-up with
canted angles, framing Grace in the center foreground. Rapid crosscuts emphasize her
reckless behavior. The sequence reveals her indifference to convention and a
propensity to disregard authority.
In almost every episode in the first season, Grace has casual one-night stands with other men while maintaining the ongoing affair with Ham. She runs into a former fling at the local bar where she meets Rhetta after work and takes him home (“Bring It On, Earl”). In another episode Grace uses sex to comfort the shy Medical Examiner after his pet cat of many years dies (“Would You Want Me to Tell You?”). He replaces it with one nearly as old, hoping to repeat the experience. One opening scene shows her in a bedroom romp featuring bondage with a younger man whom she met at the grocery store. She ends up handcuffed to her bed face down when he bolts after learning she is a cop. Ham finds her and is so disgusted that he leaves her there (“A Language of Angels”). Another time, the Peeping Tom’s nephew visits, and he and Grace have a couple of dates, prompting Rhetta to utter the episode’s title line, “This is Way Too Normal for You.” A passionate liaison soon follows. Butch is also drawn to her, and their past affair is renewed when they are thrown together for a case (“Yeehaw, Geepaw”). Ham is extremely jealous and eventually the tension leads to a brawl between the two men (“It’s Better When I Can See You”).

Grace ignores Ham’s vulnerability and occasionally fuels the rivalry. When he confronts Grace about the bondage incident, she counterattacks, accusing him of leaving his wife early in the morning so that he would have time for a “quickie” with her before work (“A Language of Angels”). Butch has more experience with women than Ham and contains his feelings for Grace, telling Earl that he ended their affair in the past because “she is dangerous” (“Yee Haw, Geepaw”). In contrast to the fairly realistic portrayals of romantic angst, the twelfth episode is a humorous parody of Grace’s sexual antics. A Los Angeles defense attorney, famous for employing sensationalist
tactics, subpoenas a dozen of her sexual partners and lines them up in police headquarters for depositions. Grace expresses no embarrassment whatsoever, joking that, “That was just summer. If he brings up fall and winter, we’re gonna’ need a bigger office” (“Is There a Scarlet Letter on my Breast?”). Her character invites voyeurism, and the other characters (and many viewers?) live vicariously through her bold abandon of social norms. That Grace’s breaches of sexual boundaries are so well tolerated in a community skewed especially patriarchal is improbable, if not impossible, exacerbating the challenge to the viewer to suspend disbelief on yet another front.

In another departure from realism, the captain is a woman whose position of authority is never challenged or questioned by the men serving under her in the historically male vocation. Perry is politically astute, a skill which has allowed her to advance to her position. In one scene Grace asks her, “Since when did you get all political?” she replies, “Since I found out how to get my own office in this department” (“Bless Me, Father, for I Have Sinned”). What is realistic is Perry’s realization that any misstep will not be excused nor rationalized as readily as mistakes made by male supervisors. In addition to Perry’s unusual status in the department, Grace routinely takes charge of investigations, establishing priorities and designating responsibilities, even though all the detectives hold the same rank. Her directives are matter of fact and relaxed, indicating that her assumption of control is not only tolerated by the men, but taken for granted. A woman creates the series and women’s points of view predominate. The complete absence of male resentment of their authority reflects wishful thinking more than reality, again stretching the limits on believability for the audience. It bears noting here that some postfeminists argue that the need for feminism
has run its course and that the desired changes in the social order demanded by second wave feminists are in effect.

In contrast to the deference that male detectives show to Perry and Grace, sexism in the community is widespread, and male characters exude an unusually strong sense of entitlement in an economy long dominated by ranching and oil production. At a cattle auction where Grace is looking for a suspect, a rancher makes a pass at her, refusing to accept a brush off. When he grabs her arm, she punches him hard in the jaw. Her lieutenant receives a call from the governor’s office that informs him that the man is an influential campaign contributor who can be vindictive. She is forced to apologize, so under duress, she visits his ranch. He grabs her again, demanding with a smirk that she now owes him sexual favors. She decks him again in another fanciful scene designed to please women who have had to stifle their resentment of sexist behavior (“In the Beginning”). In a later episode this same rancher notifies the police that a 20-ton bronze statue of his prize bull, worth a million dollars, has been stolen. He considers it his lucky talisman, the source of his continued business success, and he is fraught with anxiety. Just as the thieves are melting down the statue, the detectives recover the hindquarters, enormous genitals intact. Although that is all that remains, the rancher is ecstatic. This graphic representation of virility is sufficient in and of itself to ensure his continuing power and privilege and serves as ironic comic relief in a show that sometimes unrelentingly serious (“Would You Want Me to Tell You?”).

The entire recurring cast is identified as heterosexual, and competition delineates their relationships. Sports and gambling are pervasive, and many of the bar scenes depict the team playing poker or betting on college football games and amateur
contests, such as darts or pool. Butch played football for the University of Texas and displays UT paraphernalia prominently to remind the team that the Oklahoma Sooners have not won a game in a long time. They play pranks on each other constantly and needle one another prying for weaknesses. The atmosphere of competition makes the men particularly vulnerable to doubts and suspicions. Grace and Rhetta match the men contest for contest revealing their own competitive natures, but with a twist (“Yee Haw, Geepaw,” et al). Women are stereotypically seen as less competitive than men, except with each other. In this case, the two friends are unconditionally supportive of each other and conspire together to defeat the men. Grace and Rhetta have been friends since first grade and their long-term relationship is the most stable in Grace’s life. Miller said she created their relationship to counter the “titty” shows portraying women as snide and backstabbing towards one another (“Commentary”). (Unfortunately, this observation of television programming in the 21st century sounds very similar to Corday’s rationale for writing Cagney & Lacey thirty years earlier.)

Several episodes deal with marital infidelity within the recurring cast, but men commit all the betrayals. Besides Ham’s extra-marital affair with Grace, which eventually leads to divorce, Rhetta’s husband, Ronnie (Benito Martinez) is caught with another woman. He lies after being confronted, and the resulting damage to their relationship and loss of trust is explored over several consecutive episodes. Rhetta is Catholic and does not believe in divorce, but reconsiders when she realizes the extent of his deception. In one very unrealistic sequence (another female fantasy?) Ronnie consents to a lie detector test which is “inconclusive.” Grace and Rhetta discuss her options in detail. As Rhetta comes to term with her own suffering, she excoriates Grace
for indulging in affairs with married men when they cause other women so much pain, but she places the blame squarely on the husbands who cheat (“That Was No First Kiss,” “Popcorn,” “Looks Like a Lesbian Attack to Me,” “Am I Gonna Die Today”).

Homophobia underlies much of the banter in a culture highly charged with a strict definition of what it is to be a man. In one scene in the bar, Butch and Ham are shooting pool while Grace observes. Ham has only recently become aware of the old affair between Butch and Grace, and cannot hide his resentment. Butch, not realizing the extent of Ham’s feelings, jokes with him. The tension between them mounts and in an effort to defuse the situation, Butch says he is going to “take a piss” just as Ham utters the same line. Both hesitate, deferring to the other to “Go ahead.” Grace mocks them by asking; “So two men can’t go the bathroom at the same time?” In the bathroom Ham and Butch stand at opposite ends in front of the urinals, pretending to read news clippings posted on the wall, careful not to look down (“Bring It On, Earl”). The scene reiterates patriarchal reliance on male genitalia as a symbol of masculine power, while also revealing a vulnerability created when one physical attribute becomes essential to self-identity.

Non-heteronormative sexual relationships are featured in a few of the episodic story lines. They are problematic and serve as motivations for murder. The first episode to feature a queer sex triangle does not air until the 23rd episode, midway through the life of the series. A woman’s body is found floating in a pool at the home of a famous architect, William Drugh (Elias Koteas), who was out of town. The crime scene investigation reveals the owner’s tantric sexual practices. The episode deals with concepts surrounding non-Western approaches to sexual love. Framed prints display
maxims throughout the house, “There is but one temple in the house of God and that is the body of a woman,” and “A woman’s wishes are God’s wishes.” Grace is curious and obtains books describing Eastern sexual philosophies, which she discusses with Earl. He briefly describes a few sacred Hindu scriptures and concepts that deal with sexuality. He discusses the “Brahmin…Shiva and Shakti…Mundaka Upanishad…the supreme cosmic spirit.” He refutes Grace’s claim that Catholics think sex is just for “making babies,” saying “There’s a lot of hogwash out there about sex and religion. Not one major religion thinks sex is bad…Some Eastern religions think sex is a way of getting closer to the divine.” This sequence seems to elevate women and affirm non-normative sexuality, implying that rather than a threat to Western social order; sex is beneficial to individuals. Yet only women’s bodies, not women, are revered, and the plot line reinforces monogamous heterosexual ideology. Furthermore, Catholic feminist issues, such as the ordination of women, contraception, and abortion, are never addressed.

The victim is a married woman, Rebecca, who was part of a sexual triangle with the architect and another woman, Saxona (Marina Black). After interviewing witnesses, Ham describes the relationship in basic terms, “Saxona loved Drugh; Rebecca loved Saxona.” Of note, Ham uses the man’s last name, but only the first names of the women, signifying their subordinate status within the arrangement. Butch and Bobby interview Rebecca’s husband, Penn Navarro (Ramon De Ocampo), and he discloses ambiguous feelings about his wife’s sexual activities outside the marriage, “Rebecca did what Rebecca wanted. It was the thing I loved most and the thing that drove me crazy.” Bobby replies, “My wife with a woman could be interesting. My wife with another man --
someone’s going to get hurt.” Bobby’s words foreshadowed the resolution of the crime, since the husband finally confesses to murdering his wife in a jealous rage. (“The Live Ones”)

Navarro expresses the internal battle between desire and anxiety many heterosexual men feel when confronted with autonomous women. They are attracted to and challenged by the woman’s agency, but once she is won they fear her independence and seek to control her. Film noir is replete with femme fatales who are usually punished for their independence and sexual liberation. Navarro’s admission triggers Bobby’s anxiety as well, since he has recently returned from an undercover assignment and suspects his wife of having an affair with Butch during his absence. Bobby acknowledges a tolerance, even an interest, in the idea of his wife being sexually intimate with another woman. Not only are sexual acts between women unthreatening, they can provide voyeuristic pleasure to the male viewer. By objectifying women, their agency is diminished and their power dissolved. At the same time, Bobby makes it clear that his wife’s infidelity with a man would be completely unacceptable, to the point of provoking violence on his part, to someone revealing his own anxieties about the loss of control over his wife’s sexuality. In spite of Earl’s enthusiastic support of Eastern philosophies and sexual pleasure, the episode does not exonerate those who practice unconventional sexual relationships. Ultimately the characters are revealed to be self-absorbed and narcissistic, responsible for driving a heteronormative male to murder if not themselves guilty, similar to the pain Grace inflicts by her indifference to societal norms. Again the initial deconstruction of patriarchal ideology is reinscribed by the end of the episode.
The very next episode revolves around a different love triangle. A woman, Vanessa, is found murdered. She was involved with her older male professor who is married. Her best friend, Ginger (Tanisha Lynn), has been in love with Vanessa secretly since the third grade, but their relationship waned once Vanessa went off to college. Ginger is hurt and critical of the older lover, and in an effort to reconnect; she surprises Vanessa at the park and reveals her feelings. Vanessa rejects her advances and is accidentally killed in a fall while trying to distance herself from her childhood friend (“But There’s Clay”). In a similar vein, a woman, Maura (Clea Duvalle) is found severely beaten, and her female partner, Jillian (Karina Logue), is suspected, but there is no proof. In an attempt to provoke Jillian’s jealousy, Grace arranges a meeting with Maura and engages her in a passionate kiss, knowing that they will be interrupted by Jillian who proceeds to give Grace a vicious beating. Grace not only fails to defend herself, she provokes Jillian into escalating the violence. Jillian is then arrested for attempted murder of a police officer (“Looks like a Lesbian Attack to Me”).

These three episodes depict lesbian relationships as problematic and prone to violence. Two of them portray intensely jealous lesbians, one repressed and one in a domestic partnership. In the latter episode, Grace’s masochism is extreme, as she seems to derive pleasure from a cruel beating. The series routinely depicts Grace as suffering from injuries on the job or excruciating hangovers, but this is the first time she is shown enjoying the experience. Her voluntary submission to a brutal beating and her satisfied expression at the outcome runs counter to feminist ideology which discourages images of women as willing victims of violence. The depiction of angry, dysfunctional lesbians is also a violation of many postmodern queer theorists, which promote the
normalcy of women who form relationships outside the dominant heteronormative culture.

Grace takes advantage of the sexual freedoms women have demanded since second wave feminism, but at the cost of intimacy. Her feelings for Ham are intense, but she is rife with indecision when he is finally free. She squanders her strength and energy in reckless behavior and substance abuse. The show allows a female viewer to enjoy moments of empowerment where she can imagine herself exacting revenge on a misogynist or indulging in casual sex on a whim, but these fleeting pleasures do not comprise the whole of a life well lived...for men or women.

Reception

Production was extended long enough to resolve plot lines and provide closure. An article in The Hollywood Reporter stated that Fox was disappointed in international and DVD sales (Andreeva). Stuart Levine, a spokesman for Fox Television Studios echoes Jonathan Gray’s conclusion that highly successful series must create synergy among numerous platforms in today’s competitive climate. Levine explains the cancellation by stating:

In today’s rapidly changing television world, shows need to drive revenue off too many sources in order to be profitable for all the partners. Unfortunately, the economics of the series mandated stronger international and ancillary revenue than the show was able to generate. We thought an appropriate ending after three extremely successful seasons was the best outcome for all parties involved.
DVDs are available for purchase, but all on-line episodes were withdrawn from the TNT website immediately after the series ended, and the episodes have not been syndicated. This is not true for other TNT series that have ended. The replacement was another police procedural featuring female leads, *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010-present), so it is unlikely that the sub-genre itself was at issue. A recent press release had this to say.

After premiering in 2010 with what was at the time the biggest ad-supported series launch in cable history, *Rizzoli & Isles* went on to become one of cable’s most popular series. In 2012, the third season of *Rizzoli & Isles* drew more than 7.5 million viewers to rank among the year’s Top 3 original series on basic cable. It also ranked among the Top 15 original series with adults 25-54 (2.7 million).

(Bibel)

In contrast to *Saving Grace* viewer popularity has grown rather than dwindled for the replacement series.

Viewer reactions to *Saving Grace* tended to be more polarized than mixed. Some viewers, accustomed to watching *The Closer*, featuring the quirky, but more conventional Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson were clearly shocked by the sexually transgressive Detective Grace Hanadarko. The following comments were posted on a website dedicated to television ratings and reviews.

“I'm not going to watch this trash…” – LindaN

“Hunter is swearing, drug addicted, slutty cop who we can't root for.” – LelanK

“…But the most offensive thing about the show is that people think it's Christian.” – td (Doyle).
The program was clearly polarizing for viewers. While many found it offensive, others resented the focus on Christianity, particularly Catholic, given the controversial publicity surrounding the organization. The limits of viewers’ capacity to negotiate acceptable readings that allow them to enjoy shows even if they do not reflect the individual viewer’s philosophy were breached by *Saving Grace*.

If Grace’s moral failings were not sufficient to incite controversy, then certainly her last-chance angel, Earl, pushed the limits for traditional Christians. His tobacco-chewing, earthy persona far surpassed the impudent angel Tess (Della Reese) in the series *Touched by an Angel*. Tess and her co-angels also served a kinder, gentler God than does Earl, and they were more predictable characters: Tess as the protective Black Mammy authority, Monica (Roma Downey) as the beautiful, sympathetic Madonna, and Andrew (John Dye) as the wise and serene Angel of Death. *Touched by an Angel* lasted for nine seasons, indicating that anthropomorphic angels are not controversial per se.

Christians were not the only ones who rejected the premise of the series. Many non-believers were offended as well, as seen in the following example.

I would love to be positive about this show since Holly Hunter is so good and the nitty gritty atmosphere is so appealing. However, the christian religious framework is offensive for a non-christian. Is this the effect of 8 years of quasi-theocratic government? Are we required to put up with angels, gods and Jesus in the middle of our cops and robber shows? Is TNT part of the 700 Club? Maybe it will get better but I won't watch after the first show. (*Metacritic*)
Another viewer quit watching the show after the episode, “Looks Like a Lesbian Attack to Me.” She was not offended by the sexual content, but she refuses to watch programs depicting women being victimized (Wardell). Successful series juggle multiple perspectives and make every effort to avoid alienating any large block. Saving Grace did neither. The religious content was not sufficiently reverent for believers and too preachy for non-believers. The conservative Christian base recoiled from the hedonism, and the secular audience rejected the salvation premise. Other viewers were positive, many expressing appreciation for any television series that offered something out of the ordinary. (Doyle). Saving Grace was created in the relatively liberal television environment of cable TV, one in which sexuality and graphic violence are the norm. Cynical and irreverent material is commonplace, but Saving Grace included themes that may have made viewers uncomfortable. Some viewers may have been uneasy with a female character whose appetite for casual sex resembled a stereotypical alpha male, blurring the lines between sexuality and gender identity. Some male viewers may have winced at the emphasis placed on male vulnerability created by feelings of love and sexual attraction which were portrayed to be as strong or stronger than women’s. The series also showed the limited support systems for men who are not free to confide in each another, the way Grace and Rhetta do.

Critics had mixed reviews, but almost all heralded the talents of Holly Hunter, and the ensemble cast, if not the premise and script. Critics and users alike almost unanimously dismissed the crime-of-the-week plot lines as boring and formulaic. The following example is representative.
Although ostensibly another female-lead cop franchise a la *The Closer*, catching bad guys proves an afterthought in this strong character-driven piece, so much so that it's easy to wish the title character was a veterinarian or something -- anything less predictable than a homicide cop… Series creator Nancy Miller cut her teeth on "Law & Order," but the cop plots are so secondary they're frequently lost in the shuffle. (Lowry)

Another reviewer had positive comments, if unenthusiastic.

…Leon Rippy, calling himself Earl and acting as rock-star seedy as John Travolta in Nora Ephron's *Michael*—may be able on radiant wings to prestidigitate his tobacco-spitting self anywhere in the world in nanoseconds…It [the action] is frantic with chop-socky crosscuts and jujitsu camera angles, as if the mean streets of Oklahoma City had gone to film school. But it relies on intelligence and resourcefulness rather than divine providence. This means that half the show is safe to watch even by those of us who are agnostics about reality itself…(Leonard 2007)

Reviewers reflected the mixed responses of the general audience - uncomfortable with the melding of unlike sub-genres while appreciating the creative artistry of the show.

The inclusion of painful realities in American life must have made the show difficult for many viewers to watch. Besides the insecurity caused by the 9/11 attack, the lead was a study in troubled relationships, a contributor to marital instability, an alcoholic with an open wound from early childhood trauma. While lead characters are often flawed, and difficult current events are common narratives in prime time television, usually some closure is provided, either within a compelling hour-long plot line or in the
gradual transformation of the main character. Saving Grace offered neither. Grace was never rehabilitated, unless the season finale could be termed redemption by fire. Many relationships remained problematic and unresolved. The series presented hard questions but offered no definitive answers. On cable network television, the somber tone and grim realities played more like a Greek tragedy than an end of the day diversion.

The series format faced other challenges. Episodes were interrupted by commercials and failed to mesmerize the way classic melodramas, gritty dramas, and documentaries shown on the Public Broadcasting System prime cable do. The somber tone and grim realities portrayed are reminiscent of the very different, critically acclaimed production of Angels in America (2003). Perhaps, if Saving Grace had been developed as a mini-series with a dramatic arc and closure, the show would have attracted the right audience. As it happened, Saving Grace, committed to the portrayal of death, redemption, evil, and beneficence was unable to negotiate a middle ground.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

The study of individual programs reveals information about the audience and the culture that informs that audience. “Television is...one of the ways our culture talks to itself about itself” (M. Johnson 19). Genre studies and feminist theory provide valuable insights into society’s development and the ways issues and preferences change over time. A close textual analysis is an effort to distill messages from the entertainment vehicle in a search for meaning. This study concentrated on two similar dramatic series, *The Closer* and *Saving Grace*, both of which were initially welcomed by viewers who are inundated with choices. Yet *The Closer* captured a loyal audience that gradually chose not to the watch the subsequent program, *Saving Grace*.

The disparities between *The Closer* and *Saving Grace* begin with the treatment of genre. Police procedurals draw on the public’s fascination with mysteries and law enforcement which is deep-seated and of long-standing. The absence of a complicated crime story in *Saving Grace* may have bored viewers accustomed not only to closure after an hour, but to being challenged by the twists and turns events take during the course of solving crimes. From a narrative standpoint, the limitations of the dual themes of religious redemption and the Murrah bombing in *Saving Grace* became obvious once the novelty of witnessing an Oscar-winning actress in an outrageous and fantastical role had faded. Since Grace must virtually carry the entire series, many viewers are left with no one with whom to identify. Latter episodes in the second season depict other characters’ personal dilemmas, but those stories seem mundane compared to the otherworldly struggle for Grace’s soul. The prosaic Oklahoma City ambiance fails to provide viewers a change of scene or an escape from the commonplace at the end of
the day, and viewers may have found it difficult to resolve the incongruity of the ordinary landscape with an apocalyptic fable.

_The Closer_, on the other hand, offers a constantly changing milieu to viewers who are accustomed to the lightning pace of moving images in postmodern media. The narrative shifts rapidly from comedy to drama to melodrama in unexpected ways. Setting and costume give _The Closer_ another advantage over _Saving Grace_. The multi-ethnic population within the sprawling Los Angeles metropolis runs the gamut from extreme wealth to abject poverty, providing a universal context for viewers, contributing to the success of international sales, elements that were not present in _Saving Grace_.

The supporting cast of _The Closer_ represented multiple facets of American life faced with dilemmas common to 21st century America, and with whom a diverse audience could relate—an older generation of white men wondering what happened to their inherent rights to power; an ambitious, educated young black man frustrated with the slow pace of progress within an entrenched bureaucracy; and the equally ambitious and discouraged mid-level managers who have seen their competence superseded by canny political maneuvering. The mystery of the week shares equal screen time with the individual dramas of the squad members, and cases are often drawn from high profile news reports, also providing viewers a context with which they are familiar.

Character development in the two series provides more similarities between the programs than does genre treatment. Tenets of third wave feminism can be found in both _The Closer_ and _Saving Grace_. Johnson and Grace, as lead characters, act with agency in their careers. They assume positions of power and demonstrate natural leadership abilities. They rarely defer to authority figures, male or female. Both women
openly express sexual desire and pleasure in sexual intimacy. These traits are consistent with postmodern feminism, but in other aspects the characters are flawed postfeminist role models. For example, lying comes easily to them, a trait that patriarchal ideology typically ascribes to women who are regarded as manipulators, who use artifice to exercise their will. Neither character is evocative of a positive and self-assured woman.

Johnson accepts a high-ranking position from her married ex-lover who attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to renew the affair. Her willingness to acquiesce to these terms to further her ambition is troubling, and her consistent refusal to recognize the manipulation is too ingenuous to be believable. She refuses to accept that Pope deliberately undermines her after she becomes a threat to his career. When she is encouraged by the political hierarchy (and the department’s female employees) to interview for the position of police chief, she responds with ambiguity. Since Johnson does not face the demands of child-rearing or an unsupportive spouse, her hesitation seems out of character, given her forceful use of power. Her internal debate seems to stem from a reluctance to anger Pope, although this too is atypical. These doubts are hardly indicative of a postmodern feminist who need not seek male approval to further her goals.

The lead character in Saving Grace presents an alternative choice for a career woman. Grace shows no interest in moving up the career ladder in local law enforcement. Postmodern feminism encourages women to achieve as much or as little career success as they choose. While her lack of ambition is acceptable, her job performance is all too often impaired by her addictions to alcohol and sex. Her own
effectiveness is weakened, and her careless behavior causes discord and emotional turmoil in the workplace. Johnson may show too much sensitivity to Pope’s feelings, but the indifference Grace displays is antithetical to the image of a mature woman, a role model for younger women.

The work environment is not the only setting in which Johnson and Grace represent traits that fail to meet the standards of postmodern feminists. Grace remains fundamentally the same throughout three seasons—reckless and irreverent. She may earn redemption by sacrificing herself to prevent another bombing, but she does not change. Johnson does become increasingly self-aware after she is held accountable for disdaining regulations and abusing those who obstruct her. By the final season, she is sued in civil court and publicly humiliated. She begins to doubt herself and recognizes that her own single-mindedness has cost her career, the message serving as a cautionary tale for ambitious women.

Both women are depicted as sexually desirable. Johnson marries by the third season and portrays a loving and faithful wife. Since her husband is an FBI agent, his status is higher than her position in a police department, posing no threat to male viewers who can enjoy the female character’s dependence on her husband, both emotionally and professionally. Episodes often close in the bedroom with personal exchanges in scenes obviously intended to signal a progression to sexual intimacy. Other successful series include similar closing scenes that focus on a heterosexual couple. In *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), the two leads, Frank Furillo (Daniel J. Travanti) and Joyce Davenport (Veronica Hamel) are shown in bed coming to peaceful terms with
their often contentious roles of police lieutenant and public defender, respectively. In an analysis of *L.A. Law*, one theorist described similar scenes as an example of

...*L.A. Law*’s most obvious and insistent fantasies: a utopian heterosexuality, a *complementarity* of men and women in the face of the massive disorder instigated, in the previous fifty-five minutes, by the intersections of the law and gender. Frequently the concluding shot assures that however tough the women of *L.A. Law* may be in their legal battles with men their challenge to patriarchy does not extend into the realm of sexual preference or desire. (Mayne 95)

The clear message is that while women may participate in the powerful realms of law and law enforcement, at the end of the day, they must be shown to be loving and supportive partners in a committed heterosexual relationship with man who is at least of equal, if not superior standing.

Grace, in contrast, is promiscuous and aggressive, adopting a more intimidating sexuality. “The conflation of female detective and femme fatale configures a sexual energy that threatens to exceed patriarchal control and containment within the heterossexual economy” (Jones 32). This statement referenced Sara Paretsky’s title character, *V.I. Warshawski*, but is equally descriptive of Grace. In the final analysis, however more or less threatening, both characters are stereotypical—the loyal wife or the whore, ubiquitous in television.

*The Closer* incorporates another significant issue prominent in today’s political and social spheres: non-normative sexuality, in a way that reflects an awareness and support of postmodern queer theory. Dr. Morales is an intelligent and fully developed homosexual male character who is often the only voice of reason in highly charged
situations. Several episodes examine various sexual sub-cultures with insight and sympathy for members challenged by patriarchal ideology on every side. These images, rather than proving offensive to viewers, may have broadened the base of the show’s appeal. The success of *The Closer* reflects a postmodern acknowledgment of the many powerful and diverse aspects of sexuality that constitute human existence, roles obscured through much of America’s film and television history. *Saving Grace* rarely includes allusions to unconventional sexual relationships in the story lines, and generally these characters are pathological and violent, potentially offending yet another segment of the audience. *The Closer* was careful to limit negative images of transgressive sexual behavior to the weekly story line, whereas In *Saving Grace*, the primary transgressor is the lead character. A brief discussion about how *The Closer* and *Saving Grace* compare with *Cagney & Lacey*, an important prototype, may add historical perspective.

Corday stated that one of her motivations in creating *Cagney & Lacey* was to show two women being supportive of each other, much like men were in buddy movies, in order to counteract the widespread perception that women undermine one another in the workplace. In this respect, the relationship between Grace and Rhetta is very similar to that between Cagney and Lacey. The friends share personal confidences, are mutually protective, and discuss options when faced with a crisis. They are non-judgmental, but free to criticize when needed. Lacey and Rhetta are in long-term marriages with children. Lacey experiences more difficulties balancing marriage and a career than does Rhetta, some thirty years later, although Rhetta’s marriage is challenged by her husband’s infidelity.
Like Grace, Chris Cagney is single, and though not as sexually casual as Grace, has a series of liaisons with men, most of them brief. In the mid-eighties, her sexual relationships were a source of controversy for some viewers, and certainly for network executives. Cagney is openly ambitious, yet always seems to be searching for the right guy. The men she chooses are also aggressive and successful, and the combination does not work. The backlash against second wave feminism made it difficult for television programs to imply that a woman did not need a man in her life to identify as heterosexual, and that women must choose between marriage and a career. Susannah B. Mintz decries “television’s incessant repetition of reductive images of women—as sexually objectified or marriage material, as incomplete without heterosexual romantic fulfillment…” (77) In order to stay on the air, Cagney & Lacey had to temper its original feminist message that encouraged women to explore their potential for success outside the home.

Grace and Cagney occasionally expressed an undercurrent of bitterness and anger, which Johnson did not. Cagney’s was directed at the male bureaucracy’s resistance to considering her as capable of taking a position of authority that would place her over men. Grace’s disdain was aimed at the patriarchy of the Catholic Church, a global institution that has stood unwavering against the encroachments of women into positions of power. Second wave feminists are often decried as humorless men-haters by both the establishment and even postmodern feminists. Viewers who have made it through a hard day may have little appetite for reiterations of the inherent injustices of a class of society many see as privileged when they want to relax at the end of a hard day.
*The Closer* was particularly successful at suturing the audience to a prominent and commanding female character while circumventing the inherent disapproval that patriarchal influences often bestow on dominating women. The series was easily renewed each year until Sedgwick chose to leave. The writers of *The Closer* could delve into non-heteronormative sexuality within the weekly story lines, as long as the sexualities and gender identities of the recurring cast were firmly placed in mainstream America. They achieved a delicate balance: deconstructing many historic biases of American culture, but reinscribing others so that the show was able to appeal to a broad audience without offending the ever-powerful television executives and advertisers. Consequently, *The Closer* could appear to be an example of postmodern, cutting edge television, while avoiding the truly controversial land mines that polarize society today—a balance not achieved by *Saving Grace*.

*The Closer* avoids controversy regarding the lead's sexual behavior by presenting her in a romantic marital relationship which leaves no opening for disapproval from traditional viewers, and pre-empts speculation about her sexual orientation. Johnson, unlike the other series' leads, has no close women friends and is especially antagonistic to Captain Raydor, despite Raydor's efforts to support Johnson's career. Raydor demonstrates the encouragement for other women that is seen in the relationships between Cagney and Lacey and between Grace and Rhetta. Johnson portrays the stereotype—a woman who sees other powerful women as obstacles or threats to her position as an exceptionally successful female in a male-dominated environment. *The Closer* and *Saving Grace* did not have to confront the same issues as those facing the creators of *Cagney & Lacey* in the 1980s. Yet only *The Closer*
sustained audience popularity and critical acclaim over time, while the other two series struggled to stay on the air.

Certainly the series made comprises to avoid offending more traditional viewers, and was thus able to sustain its large, multi-cultural international audience. Even while outspoken feminists decry these compromises, television still constitutes the single most shared use of leisure time. Feminists themselves debate the significance of this abandonment of principle for passing enjoyment. The editor of *Third Wave Feminism and Television* argues that

This “negotiated reading” is not, as some third wave feminists have argued, an instance of turning away from the hard work of personal and cultural transformation. It is, rather, an acknowledgement that incremental shifts in power may be the most we can hope for, and that the kinds of pleasure available to women in the current media culture include the pleasures of oppositional reading as well as the pleasures of seeing feminist concepts dramatized on television (Johnson 11).

In a sense, the fundamental choice for today’s feminists is to see the television glass as half-full or half-empty, a choice that is both universal and intensely personal. This more gracious acceptance of the realities of patriarchal ideology is consistent with third wave feminism. What many third wave feminists fail to realize is that they are able to afford a more sanguine approach to patriarchy because many have walked through the open doors battered down by the generation before.

In the final analysis, the nature of the medium itself plays the most significant role in a successful series. Survival depends on pleasing as many disparate viewers as
possible and offending or boring as few. Conveying a serious message or creating a mesmerizing experience is virtually impossible in an hour-long period broken by commercials. The writers of a successful network series understand their limits and their audience, many of whom seek an entertaining diversion from the day’s realities, rather than a epochal war between good and evil.
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