

Gender Stereotypes in Desperate Housewives

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Odjel za anglistiku

Preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

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Zadar, 2018.



Izjava o akademskoj čestitosti

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Zadar, 26. rujan 2018.

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1 Introduction

Creating a TV series which will entertain people but still make them pay attention to problems which are happening in the world around them and which need to be resolved is not very easy. However, Marc Cherry, the creator of the series, managed to do just that. Marc Cherry attempted to raise awareness about the pressure housewives all over the world are encountered with. That is one of the reasons why I decided to deal with some of the social problems which appear in this TV series. Therefore, in this paper I decided to analyze representation, stereotypes, gender roles and gender inequality in this very famous TV series officially named *Desperate Housewives*.

This paper consists of six sections, while section four has six subsections and section five has one subsection. After introduction, I will begin with the topic of this paper, so the second chapter will offer a summary of the plot of the series *Desperate Housewives* and give some general information about the series. In the third chapter, Stuart Hall's theory of representation will be dealt with and the way it influences our perception and our expression of the concepts in our minds to the world around us. The fourth chapter will be based on stereotypes, but more specifically on the housewife stereotype which is constantly present in the series. As a part of this chapter, housewife stereotype will be analyzed by using five main female characters of the series (Gabrielle Solis, Lynette Scavo, Bree Van De Kamp, Susan Mayer and Edie Britt) and I will rely on the summary and previous analysis of Janet McCabe and Kim Akass's work titled *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence*. Moreover, in the fifth chapter, gender roles and gender inequality will be dealt with and I will also provide some examples from the series where these problems noticeably appear. Finally, I will summarize what I have analyzed in the paper and give conclusion on this topic while suggesting some further research.

2 Desperate Housewives

Desperate Housewives is a TV show created by Marc Cherry and it is produced by ABC Studios and Cherry Production. It can be said that this TV show successfully combines comedy, drama and mystery. The show is set on Wisteria Lane, fictional street in the fictional town of Fairview in the fictional state called Eagle State and it follows the lives of a group of women. The TV show consists of eight seasons which cover thirteen years of these women's lives, set between 2004 – 2008 and 2013 – 2017. The focus in this paper will be mostly on the first season, on some episodes of the second season, and on the beginning of the season six. In my opinion, in the first season and in the beginning of the second season people are encountered with the characters for the first time and stereotypes which are present in the series are more noticeable in the beginning of the series than in later seasons. Furthermore, the beginning of the sixth season is also being analyzed because the issue of gender inequality is very noticeable there and should be discussed. The women in the series are trying to lead a perfect life, but due to constant secrets, lies and mysteries it is getting more and more problematic for them to succeed in that. Marc Cherry, the producer of the series said that Wisteria Lane represents idealized modern American society and that people living in it hide themselves, the truth, frustration, secrets and many other unpleasant emotions behind the perfect façade, mowed lawns, clean streets and apparently perfect families (Akass and McCabe 38).

The main female characters in this TV series are: divorced mother Susan Mayer (starring Teri Hatcher), the married semi-employed mom Lynette Scavo (starring Felicity Huffman), widowed homemaker Bree Van de Kamp (starring Marcia Cross), unemployed trophy wife Gabrielle Solis (starring Eva Longoria) and last but not least divorced careerist Edie Britt (starring Nicollette Sheridan) (Kaufer Busch 95). It can be said that these women

are to some extent emotionally unstable and neurotic. All of these characters represent a different version of a housewife who does not work at all or works from home (Akass and McCabe 63). The story is narrated by their late friend Mary Alice Young (starring Brenda Strong) after she committed suicide in the pilot episode. In the first season Mary Alice narrated: “Beneath the peaceful façade everyone has secrets and we need to think carefully before digging them up” (“Running to Stand Still”) and indeed every single one of them has a dark secret that will, as the series progresses come out.

The show is sometimes dramatic and sometimes comedic. For example we see extremely comedic situations with Susan and Edie while they compete to win over Mike’s attention or when Gabrielle mows the lawn late at night in an evening gown to save John (her gardener and lover) from getting fired. Furthermore one of more dramatic situations is seen in fourth season when a tornado descends onto Wisteria Lane, leaving it in debris. What is more the show also has great examples of combining drama and comedy, which makes it a dramedy¹, into one, for instance in Lynette’s case – her inability to control her kids is both funny and tragic because the stress pressures her into becoming addicted to her sons’ medication pills. Another great example is the chase between Gabrielle and Carlos’s mother Juanita, who is trying to catch Gaby in the midst of cheating on Carlos with her gardener and when she finally manages to do so she gets run over by Bree’s intoxicated son Andrew. What is more, the show doesn’t lack mystery as well. One of more mysterious situations was connected with Mary Alice and her suicide or with Martha Huber and her murder.

These women are different in their own way, but they have one thing in common – they are all desperately unsatisfied with their lives. Furthermore, my main focus will be on these five main female characters (Susan, Lynette, Bree, Gabrielle and Edie) because they are all interesting in their own way and every single one of them has characteristics which

¹Dramedy – successful combination of comedic and serious subjects.

typically appear when one analyzes stereotypes, furthermore those characteristics can be seen in women all around the world. Through their roles I will try to analyze the identity of a “traditional” housewife (stereotypes, everyday struggles, etc.), gender roles and gender inequality.

Although the show was a huge success, it was not easy for Marc Cherry to find people who would accept it. Furthermore, critics had different opinions about the series; many found it quite unpleasant, while the others thought of it as a great take on feminism. Even though some critics think of the show as advertising feminist others disagree because it seems that these housewives are not really interested in gender equality or in feminism. According to Kim Akass and Janet McCabe:

“Each housewife seems to be living a pre-feminist paradigm. Bree fits the female stereotype enshrined in the commercials and sitcoms of the 1950s, when mothers were domestic divas who never got mussed or muddled. Lynette is the stereotypical frazzled mother overwhelmed by her domestic duties. Susan deserted by one man, is engaged in a desperate search for another. And Gabrielle is the beautiful, selfish conniver out to get everything she wants no matter what she has to do to get it. Together they comprise a panoply of stereotypes perpetuated by film and television and derided by feminists. Their difficulties can be traced to two sources: marriage and family” (137).

The initial message of this series seems to be the “incommensurability of the feminine and feminist mystiques” (Kaufer Busch 94). Message which is conveyed through *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the city* (both of these series are often compared to *Desperate Housewives*) series is different than the one conveyed through *Desperate Housewives*. *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* series “portray women who choose the traditional feminine roles that feminism sought to eliminate. Both shows portray the feminine mystique as more desirable than the feminist mystique because the former is rooted in human nature, or the natural differences

between the sexes” (Kaufer Busch 95). *Desperate Housewives* suggest that finding fulfilment is harder than it seems, because husbands, children and homes are insufficient source of happiness for women (Kaufer Busch 96).

Marc Cherry got the idea for the show in 2002 after seeing on the news that the Texan woman named Andrea Yates was found guilty for drowning her five children in a bathtub. Even though he was shocked by Andrea’s act his mother Martha said that sometimes she also wanted to do the same thing. Then it occurred to him that if his mother, who always wanted to be a housewife and a homemaker, was sometimes thinking of killing everyone around her then probably every woman has that same thought from time to time (Akass and McCabe 3). Therefore, it can be said that *Desperate Housewives* is a direct product of “mother-gone-crazy tale” (Akass and McCabe 44). He created the show to give support to housewives all over the world, to show them that it is quite normal to have those feelings, as he once described it: “The show is actually a love letter to all the women out there who have issues and are trying their best to be stay at home moms” (Akass and McCabe 123).

3 Representation

Stuart Hall said that representation has somewhat of a double meaning because it means to present, to image or to depict the image of something. The word representation has a meaning that something that already existed is just presented again or represented by the media, and that is probably what most people consider representation to be. Another meaning of representation can be seen with politicians who represent us, or to say it in other words they stand in for us, they say what we are thinking when we cannot say it ourselves. “Representation is the production of meaning of the concepts in our minds through language.” In general, the notion of representation is the idea of giving meaning, it is “the way in which meaning is somehow given to the things which are depicted” (Hall, Stuart. “Representation and the Media: Featuring Stuart Hall.”).

“Representation is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the ‘real’ world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events” (Hall15). Furthermore, it is “an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things” (Hall 15). Representation consists of meaningful signs which are organized into different types of languages in order to generate meaning (Hall 16). To exemplify, birds chirp and fly, however the image which is created in our minds when we think of a bird or so to say the concept of a bird is not able to chirp or fly. What is more, according to Stuart Hall we can differentiate two systems of representation (17).

The first system is the one which connects all kinds of objects, people, etc. in our minds by using concepts or mental representations which enable us to make sense of the world around us. It is the one which connects the thought of for example bottle in our minds with the object in real life. Additionally, if talking about the *Desperate Housewives* series one

would probably make the connection between a thought of a gold-digger and the character of Gabrielle. Furthermore, we are not talking about some random concepts, but rather about concepts which are organized and have complex relations with each other. What is also interesting to mention is the fact that the concepts which our mind creates are different from person to person, so two people might have a different mental image of a certain object or person, etc. which makes them perceive the world differently, for example if one person thinks that a handsome man has to be tall and have dark hair and blue eyes it does not necessarily mean that the other person feels the same. For that another person a handsome man can be tall, blond man with dark eyes. However, individuals may see the world in a different way but if you belong to the same culture or to at least to similar culture those concepts will still to some extent be similar. This first system gives us possibility to provide things, people, etc. in the world around us with meaning – whether those things are abstract or not (Hall 17).

Moreover, even if we are confident that we know what the meaning of something is, we still have to have some kind of tool to explain that meaning to others and that is when the second system or to say it in other words, the language system is introduced. We need to be able to say what we think, or to explain concepts which appear in our minds. We can come across different kinds of languages such as sign language, facial language (facial expressions or gestures), we can also say that certain fashion style is a type of a language, etc. and all of them help us to transfer the meaning from our minds to the world (Hall 18, 19).

The general term that we use to refer to images, sounds or words which carries meaning is sign and all languages consist of meaningful signs (Hall 18). But how do we know that a mental image of a four legged animal which barks is connected with the word dog? That is when the codes play a huge role. According to Stuart Hall they establish a link between a concept and a sign and they help us make a connection which concepts are referred

to what when we hear or read which sign (21). They are the ones which enable us to communicate meaning without any problems.

Furthermore, Hall distinguishes three theories which tend to explain how we can represent meaning through language and those are “reflective, intentional and constructionist or constructivist approach” (24). In the reflective approach language reflects true meaning. The second or intentional approach states that the speaker is the one who lays down his meaning through language, so the speaker controls what he or she wants words to mean. And the third approach or the constructionist approach points out that we must not mix material and symbolic world because material world is used for people to exist while the symbolic is the one in which meaning, language and representation can function (Hall 24, 25). They do say that the material world exists, but they argue that material world does not convey meaning, moreover according to constructivist, language system or any other system that we use to represent our thoughts conveys meaning (Hall 27).

Furthermore, representation is sometimes mistaken for stereotype, but it is important to understand the difference between representation and stereotypes. Representation enables people to see things as they are, while stereotypes are based on a popular belief or prejudice that certain individuals or groups of people have the same characteristics. However, it can be said that representation and stereotypes are sometimes and in some way connected. If media or society in general constantly represents certain groups in a particular way people create stereotypes. To exemplify, if media constantly in movies, series or newspapers portrays African-American’s as less worthy than white people, as ruthless, disrespectful or even dangerous, people will probably create an image in their minds which would make them think that all black people are like that and then that thought creates stereotypes or it even leads to a bigger problem – to racism for example.

4 Stereotypes

Firstly, I would like to state what stereotype in general is: “a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category” (Coupland and Jaworski 270). Creating stereotypes can also have some very much needed functions: “reducing the complexity of incoming information; facilitating rapid identification of stimuli; and predicting and guiding behaviour” (Coupland and Jaworski 271). To put it in other words, creating stereotypes enables us to simplify our society to a great extent and what is more, in that way we put people in certain categories and expect that those people have all of the characteristics which are typical for that category (McLeod, “Stereotypes”). Nikolas Coupland and Adam Jaworski believe that three very important aspects of stereotyping exist or can be identified: the first aspect is categorization based on characteristics such as sex, ethnicity and speech style, the second one is based on interest, abilities, traits, etc. and it is believed that people belonging to a certain group have to be similar to each other, and in the third aspect the set of attributes is given to the member of that specific category (271).

It seems that nowadays people constantly create different stereotypes, so we have, for example: housewife stereotype, stereotype about Asians, gender stereotype and many more. Not to mention the fact that by creating stereotypes we put pressure on people to live up to those characteristics which certain stereotypes have. For example, when talking about gender stereotypes it can be said that boys are often characterized as strong, unemotional, determined, fearless, easy to talk to, and if a boy or a man acts differently or if he shows emotions, fear, etc., he is instantly considered as unmanly. On the other hand, girls are depicted as too emotional, weak, indecisive, difficult to understand, and if a girl acts differently, she is judged by other women or by the society in general. Moreover, if one is to talk about stereotype about Asian people, he or she could say that it is generally thought that

Asians are very good in mathematics or that they are extremely smart, which of course does not have to be the case. Although, it may seem like stereotypes are negative, it does not have to be true, they can also have positive outcomes and can be considered as compliments like stereotyping women as emotional and caring does not have to be negative.

4.1 Housewife Stereotype

The important stereotype for the topic of this paper and stereotype which I am going to analyze is the housewife stereotype. According to Ellen Seiter, being a housewife means that you need to acquire different skills and you also need to be able to shift your focus from one task to the other (75). To exemplify, you need to be able to clean or cook and take care and entertain your child at the same time. Moreover, the “perfect housewife” also needs to look pretty and be dressed in fashionable, tight-fitting clothing all the time, of course with a smile on her face. If she were to act differently or if she would not follow the “rules” she would be immediately considered as a “bad housewife”. These are some of the problems which main protagonists in this TV series are encountered with. Neither one of them can be considered as a “perfect housewife”, at the end of the series at least, because all of them have many flaws which a “perfect housewife” should not have.

Gabrielle, Susan, Lynette and Bree seem to be best friends, and according to the perfect housewife stereotype that also represents one of the characteristics which a perfect housewife should have – she should have a close relationship with neighbours and other housewives. They are represented like they know everything there is to know about each other, but in fact they know nothing. They all think that the others lead a great life, like they do not have any problems, but that is completely false. For example, their lack of interest or knowledge in each other’s lives can be seen in the episode “Suspicious Thoughts” in the first

season when Susan found out that Gabrielle was cheating on Carlos with John. Susan was utterly disappointed because she thought that Gabrielle would never do something like that to Carlos since she saw what Karl's affair did to her. She was also shocked to find out that Gabrielle was doing that because she was not happy with her life, which never even seemed to occur to Susan, who thought that Gabrielle's life was like a fairytale.

It can be said that *Desperate Housewives* in a way makes fun of these standards that a traditional housewife should meet, for example: Lynette is displayed as a jealous, abject woman and through her character it makes fun of housewife's ambivalence and through character of Bree, who is demonstrated as cold and dysfunctional, the show makes fun of the housewife's over-investment in housework (Akass and McCabe 126).

What I find extremely interesting with these housewives is that they are the ones who do the saving, unlike the traditional opinion, which is depicted by popular culture, that the housewives are the ones who need to be saved. On one hand they act completely innocent, like they do not have a choice, like they need to obey all the rules and like they have to do what they are told, but on the other hand they are in charge of their own lives, they take matter into their own hands. To exemplify: when Susan thought that Paul is hiding his son Zach, she tried to find out where he is by asking him directly, but when Paul refused to tell her the truth she decided to investigate the matter alone and to get the answers that she wants ("Running to Stand Still"). Another example is when Bree advised Lynette to buy a nanny cam to spy on her new nanny if she had doubts about her (which Lynette did), and she said: "Trust is overrated" ("Come Back to Me"). She here again shows an example that they should take matter into their own hands if they want something to be done, or if they want to be certain that something is as it appears to be.

4.1.1. Gabrielle Solis

Gabrielle Solis is probably the most beautiful housewife in the suburbs. Before she married her husband Carlos she was a very successful supermodel. Carlos and Gabrielle are the most successful, high-class members on Wisteria Lane (Akass and McCabe 61). Gaby and Carlos had three daughters: Jaunita, Celia and Grace. She is depicted as a completely materialistic character, as a gold-digger, manipulative woman, who married her husband because of his money. Why is Gabrielle considered manipulative? Well, she always managed to trick people into doing what she wants – she established her modelling career by seducing one of the photographers and when she decided that modelling was not for her anymore she seduced Carlos into marrying her. She even confirmed being manipulative by saying to Bree in the episode “Come in, Stranger”: “Oh, for God’s sakes, Bree, you’re a woman. Manipulate him. That’s what we do.” Even though it looks like she is happy and satisfied because of the things Carlos buys her, she feels lonely, sad and bored. She never imagined her life to turn out the way it has, she wanted something more. Because of that feeling of loneliness and boredom that was following her constantly she came up with a “great idea” and started cheating on Carlos with their young gardener John. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe described Gabrielle as a drowning woman and said that her lover John, a teenage boy, is her life-raft (36).

Unlike other housewives Gaby is without a doubt extremely selfish. Even the priest, when she came to confess her sins, said that she is a “selfish child” in the episode “Guilty” (Akass and McCabe 186). The priest is not the only one who finds Gabrielle selfish or childlike. Carlos and his mother also think of Gabrielle as an incapable woman, as we saw in the first season in the sixth episode when his mother Juanita proposed that they fire their housemaid and Gabrielle said to Carlos: “You expect me to take care of this place all by myself?” to which Carlos responded: “Other women manage.” What is more, other housewives have children and clean their houses and do necessary chores all by themselves

and she does not want any of it. She does not want to have children (and when she had her first daughter Junita she did not know how to act and became a bad mom) and she does not want to do housework which was visible in the second episode of the first season when she said to Carlos that she was so bored that she almost cleaned the entire house.

On the other hand, she completely changes her behaviour after the major storm that happened in season four. Carlos was injured during that storm which led him to become blind and in my opinion that was the one of the reasons why she changed her behaviour and became like other housewives. She had to become the provider for her family which made her see the world from another perspective. What is more, later she finds out that Juanita is not her real child. Her real child, Grace was accidentally replaced by Juanita in the hospital, and Gabrielle tried to do everything she can to get custody over Grace, because she wanted to be with her and she wanted to give her the best life she could. This again proves that she has changed since the beginning. She proved that she is not as selfish as she was.

4.1.2. Bree Van De Kamp

It can be said that there are many different descriptions of Bree Van de Kamp. According to Kim Akass and Janet McCabe Bree Van de Kamp is “a domestic goddess devoted to making a perfect home while driving her husband and teenage children demented in the process” (3). Moreover, Kaufer Busch described Bree as “Martha Stewart figure who chooses to play the role of the happy housewife heroine” (95). I would say that Bree Van de Kamp is a typical 1950s housewife, who is an excellent cook and whose house is always spotless. She always looks impeccable. Bree is married to Rex, they were together since college and they have two “perfect” children, son Andrew and daughter Danielle.

Even though it seems like everything is fine, or to say more than fine in Bree’s life, she is struggling because her marriage is actually disastrous and she has a very problematic

relationship with her children which later leads to her becoming alcoholic. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe said that in the show “Bree is represented in terms of what she does or what she is known for rather than how she herself feels” (91). Bree is different from the rest because we do not see her for who she really is, we meet her through certain roles, but we do not get to know her on a more personal level (Akass and McCabe 92). Bree only worries about what other people will think and that is to some extent relatable to every woman or even man in today’s society. We all try to mask our problems so that other people would think that we are living this “picture perfect” life. But the real question is how far a person would go to try to keep that false image of his or her life? In Bree’s case there is no limit – she would do anything just to hide the fact that her life is falling apart. In the first season when her husband said that he wanted a divorce, she managed to persuade him to go to couple’s therapy and she lied about it, saying to her friends that she and Rex are taking tennis lessons. What is more, when her son Andrew ran over Carlos’s mother and eventually killed her she covered it up. Possibly the reason why Bree behaves that way is because she wants everything to be as it was in 1950s, when family was the most important thing. It can be said that the only difference between Bree and 1950s housewives is their body shape, well at least that was the difference in the beginning of the show. 1950s housewives were voluptuous and had an hour-glass figure, while Bree is skinny, tall, basically she is “the slimed-down” version of the happy 1950s homemaker (Akass and McCabe 83).

4.1.3. Lynette Scavo

Unlike Bree who always looks impeccable, Lynette Scavo is constantly in baggy clothes and covered with children’s food or baby spit. She is probably the most relatable housewife of all because she makes other women who are watching the show feel better about themselves because they see that they are not the only ones who struggle with motherhood.

As pointed out by Kim Akass and Jane McCabe: “Lynette’s daily nervous breakdown is refreshing, and perhaps even groundbreaking” (44). Lynette is “smart, manipulative, merciless, and ruthless, which allows her to always obtain what she wants” (Fernandez-Morales 678). She was an extremely successful high-profile career woman before she gave it all up to raise her children and to become stay-at-home mom, at least in the first season.

The idea to become stay-at-home mom was not completely hers, but rather her husband’s because he said that children do better with stay-at-home moms and he added that “It would be so much less stressful” (“Pilot”). Her husband’s name is Tom, who is an advertising executive and is constantly travelling for work, and they have five children (four appear from the beginning of the series and the fifth appears only later), three sons: Preston, Parker and Porter and two daughters: Penny and Paige. Everyone appears to be judging Lynette. Maisy Gibbons judges her saying that Lynette does not know what time management is, because she did not finish the costumes for the school play on time (“Running to Stand Still”). Kim Akass and Janet McCabe pointed out that even Susan judges Lynette because of her parenting skills in the episode “Come Back to Me” (125). According to Mary Alice she gave her a judgemental look which practically said: “You should learn to control your kids, after all, they’re your responsibility”. Lynette is having serious difficulties with her children, especially her three boys in the first season because they are very disobedient and she did not know what to do with them or how to control them and was on a verge of a mental breakdown, and instead of Tom helping her he was completely clueless about the whole situation.

Due to extreme stress of being a fantastic mom and a great wife, which she could not endure, she became addicted to her children’s medication called “Ritalin” (Akass and McCabe 124). The look on Lynette’s face shows us that she does not relish the role of a mom or a housewife. However, she still tries to keep an image of the perfect stay-at-home mom,

and we see that from the first episode of the first season (“Pilot”) when she bumps into one of her old colleagues from work Natalie Kline and when she asks her if she loves being a mom Lynette lies and says “It’s the best job I’ve ever had” (Akass and McCabe 37).

At the end of the season one, Lynette gets an opportunity to be a career woman again because Tom decides that he from now on wants to be stay-at-home dad, and again it is his decision that puts her back in the business world and not her own. However, after some time Tom realizes that taking care of children is more stressful than having a “real” job as we see from the second season when he said, in Lynette’s words “being a mom is like being an E.R. doctor – there are no days off” (“Next”).

4.1.4. Susan Mayer

Susan Mayer is a single parent to a daughter Julie (starring Andrea Bowen). Susan was married to Karl Mayer (starring Richard Burgi) who cheated on her with his secretary Brandi and then left her with an explanation “The heart wants what it wants” (“Pretty Little Picture”). After he left her she was devastated, but she was not ready to give up on love, she was constantly in search for an adequate husband. It was obvious that Susan wanted to be married again – “she is the wife who was and the wife who would be” (Akass and McCabe 64).

Susan is in a way different from the rest of the housewives because she is not stay-at-home mom – she is employed, however she works from home, she writes and illustrates children’s books which allows her to have a life similar to her friends. Furthermore, Susan is the only one of them depending on her teenage daughter or so to say “incapable of mothering her child” (Akass and McCabe 122) because she is emotionally unstable after Karl left her and it seems like Julie is the mom and Susan the daughter (Akass and McCabe 37). When Susan asked Julie to do her a favour for which Julie needed to pretend to be a bulimic, even Julie said and I quote: “Mom, when this is over, we need to talk about your parenting skills”

(“Running to Stand Still”). The only thing that makes Susan really happy in the first season is the appearance of a plumber called Mike Delfino (starring James Denton). She attempts to win him over and she manages to do so. Susan and Mike even get married and have a son called Maynard James Delfino (M.J.), but her happiness will not last long as Mike gets killed later in the series and she again ends up alone.

4.1.5. Edie Britt

Edie is a serial divorcee on Wisteria Lane, she divorced multiple times. She is pretty, sexy and successful. She has a son called Travers but he appears for the first time in the third season. She works as a real estate agent and she is the only one of the housewives with a “real, outside the house” job, at least in the beginning. Even though she has a professional job, which means that she has an office at least, we never see her in the office, we only see her trying to sell houses on Wisteria Lane which makes it look like she also has a life similar to the other housewives (Akass and McCabe 64). However, it can also be said that she is the “outcast” she does not really belong in the fantastic four group. Edie constantly had to draw attention on herself because she was not getting one from her so-called friends. Neither one of them liked her nor wanted to hang out with her, and she sometimes used lies, tricks and blackmail just to join their team. Edie represents everything that they had to give up in order to become the perfect wife and the perfect mother (Akass and McCabe 64). Although Susan and Edie are rivals (both trying to seduce Mike Delfino) Susan is the only housewife that could be comparable to Edie, due to the fact that both of them desperately want a man. However, Susan wants to get married, while Edie just enjoys having a lover in her life and that is probably why she sleeps with almost any man possible. Edie’s character has changed a lot throughout the seasons, but unfortunately just when the other housewives accepted her as one of their own she died due to an electric shock.

5 Gender Roles and Gender Inequality

Before talking about gender roles and gender inequality which women in *Desperate Housewives* face, it is my opinion that it is important to understand the difference between sex and gender. “Gender denotes the cultural constitution of femininity or masculinity, the notions concerning what is ‘appropriate’ to either gender, and the ways in which these serve ideologically to maintain gendered identities” (Wolfreys 74). In the past it was maybe possible to consider sex and gender as synonyms or as representing the same thing, but today, in modern day society one must not consider gender and sex to be the same thing. According to Trier-Bieniek and Leavy “sex is biological; it is psychologically what prompts us to be assigned as male or female” (2). Sex “represents the socially acceptable, and socially acquired, forms of being either male or female” (Wolfreys74). According to Wolfreys, gender then represents everything that a certain person does – from the clothes he or she wears, to their makeup, hairstyle, posture, voice, basically everything that person does (74). Based on these definitions of gender mentioned above, gender does not depend on sex, a person may have male sex but have feminine characteristics (what is culturally accepted that a woman does) or it can be the other way around – a woman with masculine characteristics.

On the other hand, gender can be the reason why people are encountered with inequality on almost daily basis. Gender leads us to create stereotypes and people are being judged if he or she does not behave according to what is culturally acceptable for either male or female. By stereotyping gender people are creating gender roles or “the expectations of what boys and girls, men, and women should do” (Levesque 1143). Probably one of the most obvious distinctions which stereotyping gender has created is the division of labour, meaning that particular jobs are assigned to women and men, and they are expected to follow that division. In the past tasks which were given to women had to be compatible with them being able to give birth and raise children, and some of those jobs included growing fruit,

vegetables, flowers etc. (Levesque 1143). Furthermore, men were assigned with “more demanding tasks”, such as hunting (Levesque 1143). Today, that division of labour still exists and if either man or woman tries to avoid doing the assigned job (for example, if a woman wants to have a career instead of being a housewife) he or she faces gender inequality. Gender inequality represents “the disparities between women and men based solely on their gender rather than on objective differences in skills, abilities, or other characteristics. These inequalities may be obvious (e.g., not receiving the same pay for the same job) or subtle (e.g., not being given the same subjective opportunities for advancement)” (Wienclaw 96). Although society made a huge step in the right direction when it comes to gender inequality there is still a long way to go. It has been pointed out by some researchers that society partially portrays a false image about gender equality because in America and probably in the whole world women still do almost eighty per cent of the childcare and practically two-thirds of the housework, while men in general spend only about twelve minutes in solo childcare.

Women are still constantly coming across different kinds of obstacles in achieving something and those obstacles or barriers are usually too high or they are even being completely excluded from some professions. In the following subsection, 5.1., I am going to deal with the inequality some of these women in *Desperate Housewives* face, when they refuse to conform to the accepted standards.

5.1 Gender Inequality in Desperate Housewives

The division of labour, which I already mentioned above, causes a lot of discrimination especially for women. Although, there has been a considerable growth when it comes to female employment rate, the problem of work quality still remains disproportionate (Yuracko 49). Society often thinks that women are incapable of handling anything more than housework, so when a woman wants to have a successful business career she has to work

twice as much, at least, just to prove herself to be worthy of managing the same kind of work as a man.

Marc Cherry decided to present this problem through the character of Lynette Scavo. She is the housewife who dealt with this kind of discrimination. She once had a very successful business career, but she decided or was forced to quit her job to be a stay-at-home mom, because her husband thought that she would not be able to give her full attention and care to their children. When she decided to return to work she was judged. Her co-workers did not think that they are able to rely on her because she is a mom, they thought that her children will always be her priority (that she would instead of working late go home to be able to kiss her kids before bed, or that she would miss an important meeting just to manage to be on time for her kids talent show, etc.). When she proved herself again to be capable of doing everything she was doing before she quit for the first time and when she was being considered for a promotion, she got pregnant again. However, Lynette decided to keep it a secret (for the first ten episodes of the sixth season) because she was afraid that Carlos will fire her once he finds out about the pregnancy. She wanted to prove to him that she can still handle all of the work necessary while being pregnant. However, although she proved herself to be capable of that kind of work even while being pregnant, when he found out he gave her two options: to move to Miami or to quit. When she denied doing either of these two things Carlos tried to do everything he could just to make her quit, because he knew that if he fired her just because she is pregnant it would cause a lot of controversy.

6 Conclusion

Taking everything into consideration, we can see that trying to analyze *Desperate Housewives* is not as easy as one would think. Although it may seem that this show is created just to make people laugh I think that it has much more to offer. *Desperate Housewives* deals with many different issues which appear in our everyday lives and because these characters are so thoughtfully created watchers can relate to them and it helps them to deal with those similar problems. This paper dealt with some of the issues which appear in the TV series *Desperate Housewives*, such as stereotyping women, creating gender roles and with gender inequality. Therefore, after providing summary of the plot and giving general information about *Desperate Housewives*, Stuart Hall's theory on representation and on how people perceive representation was analyzed. Moreover, the topic of stereotyping and its definition has been given, additionally I continued on explaining why creating stereotypes leaves negative consequences on other people. Housewife stereotype has been analyzed in the following subsection, mostly through five main female characters from the series. Gender roles and gender inequality are also some of the issues which stereotyping creates and although the rate of gender inequality is becoming lower, it still remains as a big problem in our society. What can be seen from this is that creating stereotypes is dangerous and in my opinion one should avoid characterizing and labelling people. Even though women and men are considered as equal there are still some situations which proved that this is not true and we saw that from the last subsection in Lynette's case, where she was not taken seriously and was discriminated just because she was a mother of five children. All in all, I also think that further research about some other social problems which appear in the series could be done, for problems such as racism or sexual orientation.

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**REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN, STEREOTYPES, GENDER ROLES AND
GENDER INEQUALITY IN *DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES*: Summary and key
words**

A TV series that provides entertainment and something to think about is not very easy to create. However, Marc Cherry managed to do just that and that is probably the reason why his TV series *Desperate Housewives* is so successful. Many social issues which appear in this TV series make people think about their everyday behaviour and how that behaviour affects other people. Therefore, this paper deals with some of those problems which are present in the series like representation of women, stereotypes or more specifically with the housewife stereotype, gender roles and gender inequality.

Key words: Desperate Housewives, representation of women, stereotypes, housewife stereotype, gender roles, gender inequality

REPREZENTACIJA ŽENA, STEREOTIPI, RODNE ULOGE I RODNA NEJEDNAKOST U SERIJI DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES:

Sažetak i ključne riječi

Seriju koja pruža zabavu i potiče ljude na razmišljanje nije baš lako stvoriti. Međutim, Marc Cherry je uspio napraviti upravo to, što je vjerojatno jedan od razloga zašto je njegova serija *Desperate Housewives* tako uspješna. Mnogi društveni problem koji se pojavljuju u ovoj seriji potiču ljude na razmišljanje o njihovom svakodnevnom ponašanju i kako to ponašanje utječe na druge ljude. Stoga, ovaj završni rad bavi se nekim od tih problema koji su prisutni u seriji kao na primjer: reprezentacijom žena, stereotipom ili malo specifičnije stereotipom kućanice, rodnim ulogama i rodnom nejednakosti.

Ključne riječi: *Desperate Housewives*, reprezentacija žena, stereotipi, stereotip kućanice, rodne uloge, rodna nejednakost