

How has
representation of
homosexuality
changed in the media



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I am going to examine how mass media representations of homosexuality have changed over time whilst looking closely at the text 'Will and Grace'. After the termination of the ABC sitcom, 'Ellen', it didn't seem like there was going to be any show with gay characters as their lead cast, so it came as a shock when NBC's new show, 'Will and Grace' premiered. The show was co-created by David Kohan and Max Mutchnick and it premiered on Monday, September 21 1998 at 9.30pm.

It featured Grace Adler (Debra Messing) as a strong willed, slightly neurotic interior decorator who lives with her best friend, Will Truman (Erick McCormack), a handsome gay lawyer in their New York apartment. The show is mostly about the trials and tribulations they face in their lives, both personal and professional. In their personal lives are their two best friends gay, narcissistic, immature, silly, effeminate and extremely insulting Jack McFarland (Sean Hayes) and Karen Walker, a rich spoilt, shallow socialite.

The show's huge success led to it being nominated for an award and led to the entire cast being nominated for two Emmy's and two of the cast winning it. It was so successful it was moved up to NBC's most coveted spot at 8.00pm on Thursdays, a place The most obvious uncommon convention is the fact that it features two gay men as lead characters. The two of them 'Are foils representing diversity within gay masculinity, a diversity which argues for and against gender stereotypes about gay men' (Queer (UN) Friendly Film and Television, James R.

Keller). 'Will is masculine without machismo but with a hint of camp' (Queer (UN) Friendly Film and Television, James R. Keller). Jack is his exact opposite;

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he is flamboyant in both word and deed and he is highly effeminate. The difference in their characters is made more obvious through the mis-en-scene. Will is usually seen in darker clothe colours usually dark blue, grey or black whilst Jack is in lighter colours, usually sky blue. Will's characters steers away from the usual stereotypes of gay men.

He is not presented as the butt of jokes or the villain; in fact, his character is more like the 'new-man' characters that are emerging. He is reminiscent of the everyday men we see on TV, Frasier in 'Frasier', Ross in 'Friends' and Greg in 'Dharma and Greg' except that he has the occasional sex with men. He is a successful lawyer who works ordinary hours like normal heterosexual men; he is shown to be extremely loyal to his friends and is always there to bail them out of trouble they seem to get into all the time.

Jack, on the other hand is the quintessence of all the negative things about gay stereotypes. He is fickle in all his relationships, he does not get a job until season 7 of the series, he relies on Will to take care of him, and he is the exact opposite of will's character. He is made lovable with his childlike humour and his flamboyancy. Even though he is often the butt of most jokes, we usually laugh along with him. Even though the two characters are very different, they share one similar trait, they are gay and proud to be so.

Because Will's character has been so heterosexualised, he is constantly seen to be reminding us about his sexuality with little jokes and slight reminders. In episode 92, series 4, when Will takes Elliot, Jack's son, to his two day basketball game he is sarcastically asked by a fellow father if he is gay to which he laughs and replies 'Yes, been a proud member since '89'. In the

pilot episode of the sitcom, Jack's queerness is confirmed when Grace tells Jack 'My dog knows you're gay', to which Will adds, 'Dead people know you're gay'.

To study representation successfully we have to understand the term, Stuart Hall defined representation as 'The process by which members of a culture use language to provide meaning'. (Stuart Hall 1997 *Representations: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publications Ltd). This implies that representations are not fixed notions and their interpretations can vary from one individual to another.

Gill Swanson backs this up by her observation that 'There can be no absolute version of how things are but only many competing versions'. Lusted, David. *The Media Studies Book: A Guide for Teachers*. London: Routledge). There has been an overall willingness by Hollywood to create gay stereotypes. These stereotypes have been well documented in various texts be it TV, *Ellen*, *Gimme Gimme Gimme* or film, *Vitto Russo's Celluloid Closet*. These stereotypes arise as results of having to characterize a character in the 30minutes slot allocated to that particular TV programme or in the case of films because of ignorance, prejudice and an unwillingness to change attitudes.

Hollywood has historically been conservative, and as an institution of power, it could be argued that its nested interest lies in maintaining the dominant order and ideology. This is why it often endorses hegemonic representations in its popular narratives. Even though there has been a recent increase quantitatively in the amount of gay characters in on TV, the representations

are not always just constructive but they are also destructive. They are often presented as the villains in films or the butt of jokes on sitcoms.

According to the book, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* by Harry M. Besnhoff (reviewed by Patrick Cook), there has been much written about homosexuality as an emblem of monstrosity. In the film, *Hannibal*, Mason Verger is presented as the villain. This is quite ironic because he was the victim, he was victimised by the real monster in the film, Hannibal Lecter but we are made to pity Hannibal and hate Mason. He is presented as disabled and is quite monstrous to look at. It is implied his disability is because of his sexuality.

His sexuality is synonymous to paedophilia and not much time is spent differentiating between the two sides to his sexuality. The 'wrongness' of his sexuality is encoded through the entire set-up of the scene where his sexuality costs him his face. The music played is diegetic, the tempo is fast, and upbeat, it is almost anti-climatic. The lighting is dim and his face is obscured both by the lighting and the mask he is holding up against it. The angle is low and he is made to look large like he is looming over the audience in an evil kind of way. The shots used are medium close-up.

He and Hannibal are in a room surrounded by mirrors that reflect a lot of images of him. He breaks the mirrors and uses the glass to repeatedly slash off chunks of his own flesh; it is as if this symbolises him killing himself. This is further obvious later in the film we come to realise that he is no longer gay and has turned to a religious path, a psychotic one though. Because heterosexuality is reinforced everyday on TV as the normal way of life,

homosexuality is implied to be abnormal and is often portrayed as the main identifying factor in the characters life.

According to the article, 'Representing Gay Men on American Television', there are four stages of media representations; the first stage, non-representation which is a total lack of acknowledgement of the group by the media, the second stage, ridicule, which portrays them as flawed characters or buffoons, the third stage, regulation, which shows them as the protectors of the existing social order and the last stage, respect, which depicts them as they are in real life, just like every 'normal' person.

The media's representation of gay characters has become less negative with time. There have been increasing media productions, which portray them just like every other person, and them being gay is not the central storyline rather it is just another part of them, not much different from them being blonde or a fire fighter i. e. a multidimensional character. A new successful genre has evolved, it includes a relationship between a straight and gay character. Films like 'My Best Friends Wedding, The Next Best Thing' all portray a gay man and a straight woman as the "perfect couple".

Even though these representations are meant to be positive, some critics have argued that such representations still 'marginalize and silence gay and lesbian experiences'. It implies that the only way gay people can be represented on TV is if their sexual experiences are silenced and if they are shown to live the 'normal' heterosexual life. In this new genre, the gay men are seen to live with these straight women and they even act like normal heterosexual couples, In lots of cases they are even mistaken for a couple.

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This new genre has attracted a diverse range of audiences all across. The audience range from the teens who are more tolerant to the idea of same sex relationships to the older and more mature audiences who even though are already set in their viewing habits, does not offend their sensibilities. In order to study representation successfully we have to first examine the historical and cultural reason behind why it is this way. In the 1800's and early 1900's sex researchers did studies on a subject that was rarely ever discussed; homosexuality.

One of the sex researchers, Richard von Kraft-Ebbing determined that ' All non-procreative sex was a perversion. He claimed that women who had sexual feeling for other women were men trapped in women's bodies' (Decades of Denial: Hollywood's Portrayal of Lesbianism. 1930-1970, Alison A. Grounds) and he classified them as ' sexual inverts' whose behaviour was considered abnormal and perverted. These sexologists continued to spew theories that discredited homosexuality and deemed them monsters. The term homosexuality soon became synonymous with monsters and anything that was considered bad or evil.

By the end of World War 1, almost all Americans were aware of work by the most famous sexologist, Sigmund Freud, he stated that ' Homosexuality was a sign of arrest in psychosexual development but did not necessarily need to be cured' (Decades of Denial: Hollywood's Portrayal of Lesbianism. 1930-1970, Alison A. Grounds). Post-Freudian psychologist concluded that homosexuality was a pathological flight from normal heterosexual relationships. Other psychologists named it a disorder and it was officially registered as a disease.

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During this time, people increasingly turned to Hollywood to provide them with an escape from the great depression and the turbulence in their everyday life. The movies that were produced were a great source of entertainment and the images reflected the happenings of society at that time. Soon there were threats of outside censorship on the content of the films being shown. This threat moved Hollywood to set up the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) in the late 1920's in an order to avoid outside censorship.

Its first administrator, Will Hays, the MPPDA formulated the Motion Picture Code in 1930. The code was made so that Hollywood films did not lower the standards and morals of the audience. Any film containing any explicit love scenes, prostitution or sex perversions were censored and any storyline that hinted at homosexuality was not allowed to be viewed. Therefore any films that had attempted to depict homosexuality were considered to be in violation of the Code. This Code was even more severely enforced when the Catholic Church's Legion of Decency criticised the industry.

This Code implied that Hollywood films had the power to influence its audiences. It assumed that they were passive audiences who soaked up everything like a sponge and questioned nothing. Of course, the implementation of this code only encouraged more subtle representation of homosexuality on the wide screen. James Whale, an openly gay director, directed the Universal Studios hit, *Frankenstein*. Even though the movie did not contain anything that went against the Code, it depicted some overt homosexuality. It featured a pair of males who formed the "domestic queer couple".

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James Whale and other successful directors such as Bela Lugosi and Boris Karlof went on to direct more successful movies that did not openly feature any gay scenes but had gay undertones. On October 3, 1961, the Motion Picture of Association of America approved of a change in the Production Code, which allowed depiction of homosexuality as long as it was “treated with care, discretion and restraint”. Again, these changes reflected the changing attitude of the audience. Even though it was not entirely positive, it was still step up from when there was no hint of homosexuality allowed on the screen.

The audience were willing to watch films that depicted homosexuality as long as it socially condemned them. Homosexuality was allowed to be depicted on screen as long as it was made out to be something evil and the only way out of it was to self-destruct. In October of 1969, the National Institute of Health urged states to abolish laws against private homosexual intercourse between consenting adults and in 1973 homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Associations lists of psychiatric disorders.

These changes were not only in the psychiatric departments, by 1980's there were visible homosexual images in mainstream films. There were films featuring gay characters that did not end in self-realisation and death. Films like *Personal Best* (1982) featured two openly gay characters, even though their relationship didn't last, it didn't end as a result of self realisations and later lead to self condemnation and hence suicide. In 1997, ABC aired the first sitcom to openly feature a gay character, *Ellen*. *Ellen* was about the life of a young gay woman living on her own.

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The show did well until the main star; Ellen Degeneres confessed she was gay. Ratings dropped and later on the show got cancelled for being 'too political and too gay'. It seemed even though the audience was ready to watch a show about a fictional lesbian character they were not quite ready to embrace a real live one. After the cancellation of Ellen it seemed that there could never be a show with a lead gay character on TV, which was why it shocked everyone in the TV industry was shocked when network executives at NBC picked up a television sitcom called 'Will and Grace'.

The name 'Will and Grace' is quite misleading about the show's true storyline. Therefore, even though the sitcom has had the best representations of homosexuality on mainstream TV; it still reflects some of the general attitude of the audience. The name is quite deceptive and lets the audience think it is another 'Dharma and Greg' sitcom, a straight sitcom. The two leading gay characters Will and Jack are the antithesis of each other. Even their name shows how different they are.

Will signifies courage and resolution, which he displays in his everyday life whilst Jack is a name commonly associated with jokesters and pranksters. Even though both of them differ almost completely, they defy the usual gay stereotypes. In a lot of Hollywood productions, gay people have been presented as cross dressers and a cross between a man and woman. The sitcom dispenses away all these negativity. Jack and Will are frequently seen to go to the gym like normal straight men. Both of them have been represented in uncommon representations; respectable middle class citizens.

Jack's character does bend to convention slightly in the fact that he is effeminate and is extremely conscious of his looks. In the 116th episode series 6, Fagmalion Part 4, a medium close up shot of Will and Jack on a dimly lit street as they argue about a person whom they both like reveals the extent of Jack's vanity. Jack's face is contorted in anger as he yells at Will claiming he would never forgive him if he dated Barry to which Will looks at him contemplatively and tells him he looks older when he is angry.

This immediately makes Jack smile and comment on how lovely it was Will was going out with Barry and just so he would not look older, he smiled the rest of the conversation and wished Will happiness with Barry. Will and Jack are not the only gay characters to appear. The sitcom features a lot of gay guest stars who have come and defy and conform to the usual conventions surrounding representations of gay people. On the 115th episode, series 6, Fagmalion part 3, bye bye beardy, Will and Jack give a new just-came-out-of-the-closet Barry a makeover.

Most of this scene is shot in a hair salon. The hair salon is a barbers shop or one for men but one that is frequented by women. This is obvious in the colours used. There was a lot of soft colour, pink and blue and hair products on the shelf. When we first see Will and Jack together, Will is asking Jack's opinion on how his hair looks. This is more common to what we've come to expect of gay stereotypes but it then defies conventions when Will remarks 'I asked them to cut it street but not too street that I can't walk through Brooklyn'. This shows that gay men are still like normal one.

They do not want to be thought of as sissies. Even though he wants to look good, he does not want it to make him look feminine. Again this instinctive male dislike to be referred to as feminine is shown when Jack comments to Barry that ' I would never do anything to jeopardise my friendship with Will who wears a wig and a dress', here they use referral to women as an insult to one another. I believe even though gay stereotypes have improved drastically over the years, there is still room for more improvement.

The odd usual gay stereotype still pops up occasionally in ' Will and Grace'. The 115th episode featured Beverly Leslie, a ' close' friend of Karen walker. His character is effeminised in every possible way. His clothing consists of pink tank tops with tight little trousers. When they go to play tennis at the country club, he wears a white shirt with matching white shorts that he keeps pulling up. The camera angle on him is usually high angle to emphasise how small he is. He is married to a woman who is the breadwinner of the family.

We do not really see him, but when we do, it is either at gay functions or in the salon. The first time we meet him is in the salon, where he is getting his nails done. His character is the very epitome of gay stereotypes the industry should try to avoid. The one that defines them by a set of standard rule that is quite inflexible. If the stereotypes change then the conceptions behind gay people will also change and perpetuate more positive portrayals of them in mainstream Hollywood.

The portrayal of Will and Jack is a huge step up from the usual representations, Even though being gay has been put as a main aspect of

their lives, the entire storyline does not revolve around it. They are portrayed as having normal lives like straight people, they are not made out to be evil or malicious, and rather they are kind and good people. Jack's character has been made more palatable to the audience by making him and Will out to be a kind of surrogate heterosexual couple. It seems in this way NBC and other American audience are willing to tolerate homosexuality on mainstream television.