

# Writing on gender in popular culture essay



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Popular culture is one of the richest mines for finding what a society thinks is important and for making meaning out of disparate threads of that society.

Television and sitcoms in particular, have long been considered empty entertainment, completely devoid of any meaning, designed to make you laugh at the end of a long day. The King of Queens has never tried to be a meaningful show, or even to have “very special episodes,” which is what makes it so valuable as a repository of gender stereotypes. One of the longest-running and highest rated sitcoms of the latter part of the 20th century, King of Queens averaged 11 million viewers over its nine year run (Ryan). The King of Queens revolves around Carrie and Doug Heffernan, a working-class couple living in Queens, New York. Doug works as a delivery person for IPS, a package delivery company, and Carrie works as a legal secretary. They do not have any children, but Carrie’s widowed father, Arthur Spooner, lives with them.

The only other significant recurring characters are Doug’s group of male friends, who will be discussed later. Much of the humor comes from the tension of the relationships between Carrie, Doug, and Arthur, as well as the general stagnation of the main characters. An additional common source of humor is the supposed dichotomy between Doug (overweight and uninterested in his appearance) and Carrie (thin, beautiful, and fashionable). Critics believe that this is outweighed by Doug’s easygoing nature and Carrie’s demanding one (Karnasiewicz). The New York Times characterized their relationship as such: The greatest challenge to Doug’s *modus Vivendi* comes from Carrie, and the result is the series’ elegant equilibrium.

Exuberant, open-book, gluttonous Doug is married to a woman of cosmetics, schemes and guile. His inertia, it turns out, is their shared honesty; but her guile is their ambition, and it's what allows them to keep moving (Heffernan). The episodes revolve around minor, innocuous incidents, which are resolved in 22 minutes. I chose two episodes to analyze from the end of the third season, "Class Struggle" and "Do Rico".

These episodes exemplify two of the gender stereotypes that King relies on: that men are the pursuers in sex, and that female friendships are impossible due to competition between women. Both of these stereotypes rest on a claim of being natural; women are naturally uninterested in sex, naturally jealous of each other, and naturally competitive. Their very existence in an innocuous sitcom gives credence to this "natural" argument, presenting gender stereotypes as fact. This is precisely the reason why critically analyzing popular culture is so important – because it is through popular culture that ideas and ideals are transmitted.

In Joanne Hollows' work on feminism and popular culture, referred to what is at stake in feminist cultural studies: by analyzing the ways in which different forms of feminine identity are made to mean, and also by exploring how these representations are lived, a different notion of feminist cultural studies becomes possible, one which can make an intervention within 'the popular'. This offers a way of understanding how feminist cultural studies is itself engaged in a struggle over representation and can intervene in policies which have 'real' effects (Hollows 32). The relationships between culture, representation, and gender are numerous. It is through mass media and popular culture that these relationships are given shape and meaning. King

of Queens, because of its popularity and its banality, is an excellent subject for an examination of these relationships. King of Queens relentlessly flogs the same tired stereotypes about women, men, and sex.

Doug is often shown persuading, begging, and pleading with Carrie to have sex with him. This perpetuates the stereotype of heterosexual women as being uninterested in sex and heterosexual men as sexual hunters. While this may well be the case in some heterosexual partnerships and individuals, it is regularly used in live-action sitcoms as a stock humor device. The fact that Carrie is thin, made-up, and traditionally beautiful, while Doug is big, red-faced and sluggish only reinforces the logical endpoint of that stereotype – that women marry a person for ‘ who they are’ while men marry a person for what they look like.

The misrecognition of desire serves a dominant culture of heteronormativity – the subtle or not so subtle enforcement of particular kinds of heterosexual identity as the norm. The commonsense idea that heterosexual women don’t really enjoy sex with men, or as much as men, is a form of cultural sex-policing (Albury xxi). This policing of female desire rears its ugly head when Carrie actually does show desire. In the episode “ Do Rico,” Doug imitates the Italian accent of his new co-worker, Rico, turning Carrie on. While Doug is initially overjoyed that he has found something to entice Carrie into bed, he later reflects that her obvious desire has made him feel insecure and unwanted, especially after Carrie meets Rico, who is younger and more athletic than Doug is.

This is resolved when Carrie begins to imitate the equally strong Italian accent of Rico's girlfriend (also young and attractive, although no more or less so than Carrie herself) and they are both turned on enough to enjoy their role-playing without assuming it means they are unhappy with their own relationship. In the final scene, Doug and Carrie's post-coitus bedroom, where they are cuddled together in an obvious state of bliss, is juxtaposed with a glimpse into the real life of Rico and his girlfriend, who are having decidedly unsexy relationship squabbles of their own. The message is that female desire is dangerous, and unless contained within a properly monogamous, heterosexual marriage (remember, Rico is not married to his girlfriend), it is shameful, hurtful, or both. Because Doug and Carrie are entirely monogamous as well as married, a little sojourn into "bad girl" territory turns out to actually be good for their marriage.

Still, the entire plot is set into motion by Doug trying to get Carrie to stop paying bills and come to bed. His desire is active, while Carrie's is passive (Albury xxii). It is only in the final scene, when Carrie suggests using role-playing as a part of their sexual repertoire, that she actively pursues what she desires sexually. Even then, it is done quietly, in a non-threatening manner, all the while telling her husband that she doesn't actually desire Rico, that it is Doug she loves and wants. There are glimpses of moving beyond the virgin/whore archetype, but any suggestion of freakiness on the part of Carrie is quickly subsumed beneath her marital vows. There are several peripheral characters who are, by and large, Doug's friends.

He has three recurring male friends Deacon, Spence, and Richie, as well as a cousin, Danny. Deacon's wife Kelly was on the show for several seasons and

was treated as a friend of Carrie's, although their relationship seemed to be part and parcel of Doug and Deacon's friendship. Other than Kelly, Carrie has not had any recurring female friendships on the show. This is in contrast to Doug's close male friendships, which are often a part of the plotlines. In the episode "", Carrie decides to go out with some of the women who work in the same law office where she works, and calls Doug to beg off a movie night they had planned. Carrie jokes, " Oh come on, girls night out! I could make some new friends.

Or just friends, period." Despite shows like *Sex and the City*, it still remains an anomaly to see close, long-term female friendships in popular culture. More often than not women are pitted against each other in competition, whether for jobs, men, or power. In her analysis of women in popular culture, *Where the Girls Are*, Susan Douglas describes the dearth of female friendships in mass media: It's obvious that images of female friendship, cooperation, mutuality, and love - you know, like in real life - have been as rare as a day without a male sporting event on TV. No wonder female collective action is so difficult to imagine, while boys operating as a team, patting each other's butts and supporting each other's efforts, is a taken-for-granted image in the media (291).

On *King*, Doug's male friendships are matter-of-fact: those relationships do not interfere with his marriage to Carrie, or to his job. The only friction between Carrie and Doug, in the episode " *Richie's Song*" is about Carrie not getting along with Richie's girlfriend. Likewise, although Carrie is excited about the possibility of forming female friendships, we are soon assured that, really, women are just too catty to be close friends with one another. It turns

out that several of the women Carrie went to dinner with had assumed Carrie was a lawyer, and began to treat her differently (and poorly) when they found out she was actually a secretary.

Carrie is made to feel both less than these women and not quite as much of a woman – through her cardinal sin of excelling at and being satisfied in a non-professional job. Later, when Carrie is recounting the incident to Doug, she describes, in tears, how hard it normally is for her to get along with other women, “ I’m finally hanging out with women who didn’t annoy the crap out of me.” She is having a good time until the other women cattily make Carrie into an outcast because of her occupation, and, though this goes unstated, her class. This leads her to go back to college (apparently this happened to occur just before the start of the semester, because she is writing her first philosophy paper a week after the ill-fated dinner), much to the despair of Doug.

There is never another mention of Carrie’s co-workers, since they were never meant to be real friends for Carrie in the first place. They were cultural symbols, representative of the competition and jealousy that women are supposed to feel towards each other. Before the truth about Carrie’s job is revealed, the conversation revolves around pretending to be younger, eating cake even though one of the women has a school reunion the following week (gasp!), and you can insert whatever hoary cliché you prefer about what they discussed next. This interaction with other women, one of the few glimpses we get of Carrie in such a situation, involves not only the antagonism and rivalry that are supposed to typify women’s friendships with each other, but also the ‘ casual’ small talk that women are often shown

having with each other in popular culture. The notion that women form friendships on the basis of diet, fashion, and age discussions is reiterated in this scene even as we are shown how easily these discussions devolve into a struggle for ultimate womanhood.

As Douglas notes, the women's lib slogan "Sisterhood is Powerful" has been "redramatized and repackaged to convey the opposite: that when you get a bunch of women together all they do is fight" (291). On *King*, not only does Carrie not get along with nearly all women, but for the most part she doesn't seem to need any relationships other than the ones she has with the two men in her life: her father and her husband. Her interactions with other women are used to dramatic effect to further the plot, but once the episode is over, and the other women have been dispatched, we are left with a narrow and static definition of female friendship. These episodes are illustrative of the rote manner in which much of the mass media deals with gender role stereotyping.

Still, this does not mean that the *King of Queens* is a 'bad' show, or that there are not messages with subversive power within it. One of the most important critiques of second-wave feminist ideas about liberation (from housework, marriage, and sex roles) has come from working-class communities like those depicted on the show. There is a thread of Roseanne, that paragon of feminist subversion in popular culture, in *King of Queens* as well. Both shows are "informed by feminist concerns yet at the same time [critical] of some of the assumptions of feminism" (Hollows 198). Those assumptions "were dependent on a position of privilege and a freedom from the pressures of everyday working-class life" (Hollows 198).



King may easily fall back on such stereotypical fare as 'women dislike sex' or 'women are competitive with each other', but there are numerous examples of ways in which Doug and Carrie co-exist in an egalitarian manner, and nothing is made of it when Doug does the laundry or the groceries, or when Carrie has to work late. It is this constant give and take that allows room for feminist analyses to flourish, and provides for critique informed by multiple viewpoints. King of Queens, for all of its flaws, is not meant to be perfect - it is, after all, a reflection of individuals, and of a larger society, that is still far from perfect in terms of what is commonly viewed as the proper place of women. Related essay: "Gender and optical illusions"