

Female Anti-Heroes in Television

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Abstract

This paper examines the theme of female anti-hero characters in the modern television landscape in the context of Stuart Hall's (1973) "Encoding and Decoding" model, John Ellis' "Television Production" (2004) essay, and Theodore Adorno's theory of standardization in his essay "On Popular Music" (2009). Three characters I will focus on are Annalise Keating from ABC's *How to Get Away with Murder*, Cookie Lyon from Fox's *Empire*, and Amy Jellicoe from HBO's *Enlightened*. All three of these protagonists are anti-heroes – a central character with flawed attributes. Annalise Keating is a brilliant but dangerous defense attorney and law professor. Cookie has a great deal of assertive power but comes from a long line of drug history. Amy Jellicoe is an ambitious former executive with good intentions, but constantly creates havoc at work and at home. Hall's "frameworks of knowledge" will help to describe the sensation of this type of television show with flawed female protagonists. John Ellis' "Television Production" essay will help me explain how standardization and routines help develop security for the industry and audiences. Adorno's theory of standardization will help to explain how this type of television show is becoming standardized because of an increased presence of strong, powerful, and flawed female characters on television.

When the world was introduced to Tony Soprano in HBO's *The Sopranos*, the spark was created with intrigue of morally flawed protagonists. Soprano was depicted as a crooked family man that tried to balance everyday family duties with managing his mob activities. Don Draper in *Mad Men*, Walter White from *Breaking Bad*, and Dr. Gregory House from *House* are just a few of the many male anti-heroes that have captured the world's attention. Today, female anti-heroes are becoming a dominating force and are making their mark in the television landscape.

Annalise Keating from ABC's *How to Get Away with Murder (HTGAWM)*, Cookie Lyon from Fox's *Empire*, and Amy Jellicoe from HBO's *Enlightened* are among the recent major presence of independent, intelligent, and assertive female anti-hero characters. These no-nonsense women are being given the capacity to show their good and bad sides and have their stories told along the way. These characters are celebrated for their power and strength and for the many emotions they take their audience through, such as anger, sadness, joy, or happiness. Viewers root for these characters, possibly because they relate to the truth that people are not perfect – they do bad things, get caught up in messy situations, and cause problems even if they are trying to do good. This connection between the reality of the viewer and story of the character is an exercise of Stuart Hall's frameworks of knowledge on the encoding side of his "Encoding and Decoding" model. Hall explains in his essay how knowledge is the product of real relations and conditions, stating, "Discursive 'knowledge' is the product not of the transparent representation of the 'real' in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions" (Hall, 1973, p. 511). The audience may be able to better connect to a show's character because of the imperfect choices they are make. Humanity is far from perfect and these flawed heroes are prime examples.

The many twists, turns, and jaw-dropping moments of these character's stories are major ways in which they captivate their audiences. You can hate them for their bad antics but root for them, and praise them for their strength, at the same time. Female anti-heroines are becoming a ruling theme in today's most glorified shows. Series creators are sometimes forced to go even darker with their characters so that their anti-hero persona is more eminent. This was the case of Viola Davis' character Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder*. Creator Pete Nowalk was told to make Davis' character more of an anti-hero, saying, "When I originally pitched the show to ABC Studios, they encouraged me to go darker with Annalise (Viola Davis) to make her more of an anti-hero, which surprised me" (Wagmeister, 2015, Best Note section, para. 5). This creates a framework of knowledge for series creator Pete Nowalk and producer Shonda Rhimes.

ABC is home to several shows featuring female anti-heroines including *Scandal* and *Greys Anatomy*, in addition to *How to Get Away with Murder*. The network's push for a darker anti-hero Annalise Keating in *HTGAWM*, and the repetitive nature of their shows with leading female anti-heroines, relate to Theodor Adorno's theory on standardization. John Ellis' discussion on standards and routines in the television industry can also be applied. Ellis states, "Television production has become routinized because television watching has become such a central part of everyday life...The routines provide security, both for the industry and for its audiences" (Ellis, 2004, p. 276). This is a kind of "if it's not broke, don't fix it" idiom. If a network knows from experience that a certain type of show always produces good viewership and ratings, they will most likely be inclined to continue to use that format or "routine" when crafting or picking up new shows.

Since audiences have become consistently attracted to flawed heroes, Adorno's view of pseudo-individualization is also relevant. Pseudo-individualization translates to the illusion of

choice. The network has the ability to create many different types of shows but they know that to appeal to a mass audience they will have to follow a standardized format they know will work – in this case it is the female anti-hero protagonist format. In his essay, Adorno discusses pseudo-individualization in terms of popular music, stating,

“Standardization of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them, as it were. Pseudo-individualization, for its part, keeps them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them, or ‘pre-digested’ (Adorno, 1941, p. 69).

In the case of ABC, they are providing, what Adorno calls “pre-digested material,” for their customers or viewers. Their shows with female anti-hero characters are no longer innovative but have become an accepted standardized format. Throughout the following, I will summarize the characters Annalise Keating, Cookie Lyon, and Amy Jellicoe, relating each to the leading female anti-hero character format based on Adorno’s theory of standardization. In my discussion, I will argue that television shows with leading female anti-hero characters have become a standardized format of television that captivates audiences through the ability to connect with real-life brokenness and imperfect, flawed individuals.

Annalise Keating – How to Get Away with Murder

Annalise Keating has the qualities one would expect of their criminal law professor: brilliant, sophisticated, and creative, except, she’s not your average professor and defense attorney. Keating is sexy, glamorous, unpredictable, and dangerous. Viewers were introduced to Annalise on the first day of the semester at Middleton Law School where she met her soon-to-be interns, Connor, Asher, Michaela, Wes, and Laurel, and the rest of her students. Keating exudes confidence as she storms into the class, saying, “I’m Annalise Keating, and this is Criminal Law

100 – or as I prefer to call it – *How to Get Away with Murder*” (Rhimes, 2014, Pilot). At the start of the series, it seems that Annalise has everything one would hope for – a successful career and loving husband, Sam Keating. Later on, her student, Wes, uncovers that she is having an affair with Nate Lahey. From then on, it becomes clear that her marriage is in trouble and the twisted events Annalise involves herself with begin to unfold.

The first season is centered on finding out who killed Lila Stangard, a student of Sam Keating – and also who killed Sam Keating, himself. When the body of Stangard was found in a water tower, Annalise talks with Sam about the discovery since she was one of his students and she mentions that the boyfriend probably did it. Annalise gets a hold of Sam’s phone and finds messages between him and Lila. When checking the phone again, Annalise finds that Sam has deleted the messages. The fearless Annalise rushes to her detective-boyfriend Nate with the idea that her husband may have killed her. Flash-forward, Annalise’s student, Wes, got a hold of Lila’s cellphone that has a naked picture of Sam on it. Annalise confronts Sam about the situation and he admits he had an affair with his student, Lila.

Late in the first season, it is revealed that Wes killed Sam in an attempt to stop him from choking Lila’s friend (and murder suspect) Rebecca. The students removed Sam’s body from the house and took it to the woods where they burned it. When Wes went back to the house to get the trophy-turned-murder-weapon, Annalise was at the house and aware of what happened to Sam. She is the one who gives the advice to burn the body and was visiting her boyfriend, Nate, whose wife is dying from cancer, while her students were carrying the body of her dead husband out of the house. Annalise later frames Nate as Sam’s killer but the case gets dismissed. Season two of *HTGAWM* opened up to a major 12.4 million viewers according to Nielsen records reported by Variety.com’s Rick Kissell (2015). The season starts with a flash-forward to

Annalise lying on the ground after being shot, and the time leading up to the incident is carried out throughout the season. It is also revealed that Annalise is bisexual and had a romantic relationship with her classmate, Eve Rothlow (Famke Janssen), who Annalise called to represent Nate in his defense case against the murder of Sam Keating.

There is a constant twisted nature of trying to cover up different situations, both in Annalise's defense cases and in her own life. All of these situations involve her law students and many result from Sam Keating's murder. Annalise goes to extremes to defend her clients, whether innocent or not. She is not afraid to tamper with evidence or let her students sleep with people for information. An audacious dame, Annalise is meant to uphold the law as an attorney, but has no problem breaking it.

Cookie Lyon – *Empire*

Cookie is the vibrant ex-wife of Lucious Lyon and the co-founder of Empire Entertainment. The beginning of the first season depicts Cookie returning home from prison with hopes of claiming her influence in her sons lives and half of her company. Mother of Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem, Cookie is an ex-dug dealer from Philadelphia, who served 17 years in prison after a drug-deal-gone-bad. She often reminds her ex-husband Lucious that it was her \$400,000 in drug money that started their company.

Cookie is a very talented music producer with a keen ear for the hip-hop genre. In the first season, she puts her talent and life at risk when the FBI convinces her to snitch on her former accomplice Frank Gathers, and testify against him court. Cookie is the epitome of a strong woman. She has no problem barging into a board of directors meeting and insisting on being treated as a co-owner, never fumbles over her words, and isn't afraid to slap back – that's if she doesn't throw the first punch.

Cookie has a controversial approach to parenting. She missed out on caring for her kids as children while she served her 17-year sentence, but has no problem punishing them as young adults. There is a scene in the first season where Hakeem is completely disrespecting her and she beats him with a broom. While she is protective of her kids and wants to have all three of them on her side and working together, Cookie isn't opposed to picking sides and creating a divide between her three sons. In the first season, Cookie coaches her son Jamal as he becomes a competing artist against Hakeem. The tables turn in season two when Jamal sticks by his father's side and Hakeem joins Cookie as she starts her own label, Lyon Dynasty.

Amy Jellicoe – *Enlightened*

Amy Jellicoe is a former executive at Abaddon Industries. Her disastrous personal life resulted in the destruction of her career. She took a leave of absence from work to spend time at a Hawaiian rehab center. Upon her return to California, Amy felt she was destined to produce change in the world around her. In doing so, Amy constantly creates havoc at work, among her current and former colleagues, and at home with her mother, who she is forced to move back in with after losing her high-powered job.

Throughout the two-season stint, Amy hacks into emails of the corporate executives that contain damaging information. She seeks to bring these ethically corrupt executives to justice by obtaining their emails and giving them to a newspaper reporter known for his corporate overthrow articles. While Amy has underlying good intentions, she puts herself in a position of obtaining documents illegally. She tends to constantly make herself look bad with her outbursts and disorganized motives. Amy is “the good guy,” but goes about her mission – to take on corporate America and make a difference – in the wrong ways. In the final episode Amy poses the question of whether or not she is an agent of change or creator of chaos. Her ideas to produce

positive change makes her an “agent of change,” but the way she goes about trying to produce that change makes her a “creator of chaos.”

In an interview with ABC News, actress Laura Dern, who plays the character of Amy Jellicoe and is the co-creator of the HBO series, talks about the creation of Amy’s character. When pitching the show to HBO, Dern stated her ideas for Amy’s character with the question, “What if Lucy became Norma Rae?” (ABC News, 2013). This creates a framework of knowledge based on Hall’s “Encoding and Decoding” model. Erin Brokovich for HBO is another framework of knowledge that can be used to describe the show and Amy’s brave desire and ability to take on the task of corporate overthrow.

Conclusion

While the three characters – Annalise, Cookie, and Amy – are flawed in different ways, they each represent a type of standardized flawed female protagonist. This type of character is becoming standardized because they are being used in many shows across the television landscape. Female anti-heroes have become so popular because they represent the modern world we live in. The traditional hero has become too un-relatable. Viewers can connect with characters that make mistakes and whose stories include the brokenness that is part of our humanity. An article by Jonathan Michael in *Relevant Magazine* on “The Rise of the Anti-Hero,” states, “Characters who shine as morally pure and upright don’t ring true to us anymore, because it’s not what we see around us in the world” (Michael, 2013, para. 13). Characters who represent what we see in our society are more believable and relatable, which is the essence of an attractive story. Each character’s brokenness can be related to in real life. Annalise hurts Nate, who she loves, by framing him for her husband’s murder. In reality, many of us hurt the people we love, whether it be in big or small ways. Cookie is flawed because of her drug dealing, which is

something that occurs in our society. People can also relate to Cookie's reformed ways after serving her time. Amy is clumsy, awkward, and accident-prone, and many can relate to having bad days that start with spilling our morning coffee.

Another form of standardization throughout the characters is that they have good intentions but they get themselves caught in situations that produce flawed characteristics. Annalise is, at the core, an extraordinary defense attorney who wants to do good for her clients. Except in doing so, she takes part in a variety of nefarious activities. Cookie is a very talented music producer with hunger and ambition to succeed, but her bold choices, very often, "stir the pot." Amy has the desire to produce positive change but does so by causing chaos in the lives of the people around her. She is passionate to a point that gets her into trouble. Referring back to Adorno's idea of pseudo-individualization, each flawed character is different in their own way, which is relatable to the illusion of choice that we have from pseudo-individualization. We know that we have the choice to watch any of these characters but in reality, each viewer is watching the same type of show no matter which one they are watching, since each of these characters are a representation of flawed strong women.

While each of these characters has made bad decisions, they each have had to deal with consequences and acknowledge accountability. Annalise may not have killed her husband Sam but she knew about his murder and helped dispose of his body. When a motivated prosecutor is determined to have Annalise convicted as Sam's killer, Annalise has to go on trial and face the possibility of conviction. Cookie may be an example of the American dream but she served 17 years in prison for her drug-dealing days. She sacrificed her freedom so her ex-husband Lucious could make their mark in the entertainment industry and provide their family with a privileged life. Instead of doing what she was hired for, Amy spends her time at work accessing private

emails of executives containing damaging information. At the end of the series, executives became aware of her plan to disperse the damaging information in a newspaper article. She was called into the CEO's office and had to explain herself before getting fired and warned of possible legal charges.

In Adorno's essay, he describes how popular music will always go back to the same experience, saying, "...the hit will lead back to the same familiar experience, and nothing fundamentally novel will be introduced" (Adorno, 1941, p. 64). The same goes for these television shows. The details of each character's story may change but they all go back to the overall idea, or "big picture," of flawed female protagonists.

With the success of each of these shows, there is the desire to create similar shows because of previous success. Adorno discusses how one successful song leads to many imitations, stating, "As one particular song scored a great success, hundreds of others sprang up imitating the successful one. The most successful hits, types, and 'ratios' between elements were imitated, and the process culminated in the crystallization of standards" (Adorno, 1941, p. 67). Since the "female anti-hero" character has proven to be a success in the past, similar shows will imitate their predecessors by following the same routine, in hopes of obtaining that same success.

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