

The Portrayal of Women on Gilligan's Island and Possible Effects on Viewers

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The representation of women in the media are often unrealistic. Examples of this are found in the TV series Morowitz (1998) cited as the "most syndicated television show in history, the 1970's American sitcom *Gilligan's Island* (p. 4). An analysis of the way women are portrayed in the series reveals stereotypes that could have a negative effect on viewers.

Gilligan's Island is the tale of seven tourists shipwrecked on an unchartered tropical desert island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. Each episode tells the story of their attempt to get back to civilization. Morowitz (1998) explained, as a child, creator and producer Sherwood Schwartz' favorite book was *Robinson Crusoe* and the series was meant to be an allegory. It is "the quest for escape from Western civilization and the impossibility of achieving that goal" (p. 4). As we will see, stereotypes of women were not left behind in this escape.

The main character in the story is the bumbling first mate Gilligan. He is a happy-go-lucky young man that always wears a red and white long-sleeved shirt and white sailor hat pulled down over his ears. He means well but unwittingly foils all attempts to get off the island, his antics providing much of the humor in the show. Skipper, commander of the wrecked ship, is an overweight man who wears a sloppy blue polo shirt and a captains' hat. He is a forceful, yet lovable leader. Then, there is the somewhat boisterous millionaire, Thurston Howell III who represents what Morowitz defines as the "bourgeois society" (p. 7). His money is his power and he uses it to buy his way through each situation. Always in his shadow is his wife, whom he calls Lovey. Her wardrobe is endless and she seems unaware that they are stranded on an island. She expects "somebody to come ashore every Thursday to dust the island and polish the

coconuts" (Schwartz, 1988, p. 60). The movie star, Ginger, is a beautiful red-head with a curvaceous body. She is not very bright and relies on charm to get her way. Her allure is largely lost on the Professor, who has the brains that she does not. He is an average looking man who believes himself more intelligent than the other castaways. Rounding out the list of characters is sweet Mary Ann, a pretty farm girl from Kansas.

Gender Disparity in Gilligan's Island

Beginning with the opening credits and theme song of Gilligan's Island, gender disparity is seen. The ratio of men to women on the show is 4:3, while half of the U.S. population is female (Smith & Choueiti 2010, p. 6). Three of the men are listed before even one of the women and then she is introduced only as another character's wife. Less than a dozen of the ninety guest stars on the show were women. This is reflective of what Long and Simon (1974) found in their study of women's roles on TV programs. Eight of the shows they examined had to be eliminated from the study because there were no regular appearing female characters. However, every show examined had at least one male character (p. 108). Further, Tuchman reported that women have been underrepresented on TV since its advent. In 1952, 60% of the prime-time roles were for men. By 1973, it was 74% (qtd In Shoemaker & Reese, 1991, p. 45). This is a gross underrepresentation of women considering that Smith and Choueiti (2010) reported women make up over half the U.S. population (p. 6). The likely reason for such disparity, and stereotypes as well, is what Mack and Ott (2014) call the "logic of safety," which they define as the media's tendency to avoid the risk of doing anything different than what has been successful, i.e., profitable, in the past (p. 378). Understandably, stereotypes work well in creating characters that the audience can quickly understand, however, this is not without ill effect on viewers.

Other Stereotypes

Submission on the part of the women and domination by the men are a stereotype seen from the first day on *Gilligan's Island* in the flashback episode, "Birds Gotta Fly." As the men begin to assess damage to the ship and decide what to do, Skipper orders Mary Ann and Ginger to go wash all the clothes. They quickly and obediently comply. That act proved to be a precursor to the constant portrayal of women throughout the sitcom. Twenty episodes into the series, in "St. Gilligan and the Dragon," Metz (2012) stated the women become frustrated they do not have their own hut and tell the men they will not do any more domestic chores until the men have heard and responded to their concerns. In reply, the Professor tells them that it is men who have always made the decisions (p.p. 38-39). Not taking the women seriously, the men laugh as the women collect their belongings and move to the other side of the island. This treatment of women continues throughout the entire *Gilligan's Island* series, episode after episode, with the woman most often referred to as "the girls." However, the men are rarely called "the boys." As these examples show, females are not often found to occupy positions of authority on television (Long & Simon, 1974, p. 110). They are seen in traditional roles such as cooking and cleaning and as dependent on men. Tuchman pointed out that when depicted with men, women are most often shown in an inferior capacity (qtd. In Shoemaker & Reese, 1999).

Another disparity seen in the TV show is body types and sizes. While the men are various shapes and sizes, ranging from chubby Skipper to gangly Gilligan, the three women are more similar than different. Both Mary Ann and Ginger are thin and shapely and the older Lovey, is just slightly heavier but not at all overweight. One of the few women to guest star on the show, Zsa Zsa Gabor, in the episode "Erika Tiffany Smith to the Rescue," is very similar in type and size to Lovey. Such limited body sizes are not a true portrayal. Silverstein reported that 33% of

women in the U.S. are a size 16 or larger (qtd. In White & Brown, 1999). This is typical in media. Women are often portrayed with less diversity types than men (White & Brown, 1999, p. 391).

Another stereotype observed in *Gilligan's Island* is the depiction of age. In "Waiting for Watubi," Lovey, who is in her mid-60s, wears a conservative white, below the knee, loose fitting dress with a matching three-quarter length shawl, and long white gloves that extend up under the shawl. There are no close-ups of her face and she wears heavy make-up. She carries a parasol, keeping her face in the shade so no wrinkles are seen. As an older woman, Morowitz (1998) explained, she is not portrayed as an "object of desire." Her manner of dress is that of one who does not meet the "requirement of youthful beauty" and whose use is to "serve as a comic companion to her husband" (p. 7). Harwood explained, in media, once a woman has aged she is not considered for parts as a sexual being, but rather more marginal roles that are off center stage (qtd. In Sink & Mastro, 2017).

Opposite of the older woman's dress, the younger women in the show are arrayed in a way that emphasizes their figures as much as was possible on a family TV show in the 1960s. Most of the first season and into the second, Ginger is seen most of the time in a snug fitting, flesh-colored evening gown that hugs every curve of her body. Her make-up is thick and her lashes are long. The other young woman, Mary Ann, the country girl, is always seen in laundered and ironed clothes, generally short shorts with a shirt tied up showing her midriff, or a form fitting cotton dress or skirt and a freshly made up face. Smith & Choueiti (2010) said females are more likely than their male counterparts to be young, scantily clad, and attractive (p. 6). In television, appearance is important for the female characters. Even in family shows, Smith and Choueiti (2010) report the percentage of females shown in sexy, figure-hugging or alluring

attire is 24% compared to just 4% for males, with women are more likely, (18.5% vs. 5.6%) to have skin exposed between their mid chest and thighs (p. 3). It must be noted that none of the four men on *Gilligan's Island* wear form fitting clothes, in fact, their clothes are a more relaxed fit.

One episode, "All About Eva," clearly demonstrates the way women are portrayed as sexual objects on the program. A plain looking Eva arrives on the island wearing a matronly business suit and thick, ugly black framed glasses and her hair pulled back tightly in a low bun. She tells the castaways she left society to live out her life alone. She says is ugly so no man would ever want her. The women set out to "fix" her and transform her into an exact replication of Ginger. She looks sexy and beautiful and is promised that now men will find her irresistible. Dow (1996) reported that "women on television... tend to project the message that attractiveness, particularly to the opposite sex, is important" (p. xx).

Effects

These inaccurate portrayals of women on *Gilligan's Island* are important to consider because of the effects they may have on viewers. Dill & Thill reported that depictions of women on TV are known to influence attitudes and beliefs that people have about gender roles (qtd. In Sink & Mastro, 2017). Watching the relationships portrayed on *Gilligan's Island* might give viewers the idea that women are not meant be equals, but rather what Smith and Choueiti (2010) referred to as "eye candy" and as "less valuable and less capable" than men and boys. Young viewers may not notice an imbalance in the way genders are portrayed, making misrepresentations of women seem normal and thereby masking the need for change in the media industry (p. 7). Looking at it from a cultivation perspective, Sink and Mastro (2017) proposed that watching large amounts of prime-time television, which *Gilligan's Island* was

created for, may have the potential to cause a person to assimilate unhealthy ideas about female submission and male dominance (p. 19). Henderson- King E. and Henderson-King D. reported that different unrealistic portrayals of body types and sizes can increase pressure on women to obtain a certain look and when some find they cannot they may develop a negative body image. Henderson-King E. and Henderson-King Dr. reported that when the media make it seem like only slim women are beautiful, this may cause heavier women to feel unattractive and undesirable (qtd. In White & Brown, 1999, p. 386).

Conclusion

In sum, children and teens that watch family television programming like *Gilligan's Island* are, as Long and Simon explained in 1974, not likely to learn anything about “new roles and perceptions that women today have of themselves or want for their daughters” (p. 110). As Sink and Mastro (2017) reported recently, some stereotypes may have declined, but others, such as the portrayal of men as dominating and women as seductive has not, meaning television today is not at all a “golden age” for women as some mistakenly believe it to be (p. 3). The streaming, DVD and video game market is already flooded with the likes of *Gilligan's Island* that inaccurately portray women and little can be done about that. However, the future of media can be different. The fact that outdated stereotypes are still being used in media produced fifty years later is cause for alarm and signals the imminent need for both change in the industry and more ongoing media literacy education in schools and colleges.

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