

“And I Started Wondering. . . .”: Voiceover and Conversation in *Sex and the City*

Premiering on HBO on June 6, 1998, *Sex and the City* was an instant cultural touchstone. The series was the highest-rated cable comedy series for two years in a row, and *Time* magazine featured the show’s four stars on the cover with the headline “Who Needs a Husband?” (Akass and McCabe, Introduction 2). While the series sparked multiple fashion trends and copycat columns, it was its frank discussion of female sexuality that intrigued and angered critics and audiences alike. The format and structure of the 1998-2004 series harkens back to many of its female-centered sitcom foremothers, but the no-holds-barred style of conversation and narration opens a space for discussion and introspection about the place of the contemporary single woman in our society, both among the characters and for the audience. In their introduction to *Reading Sex and the City*, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe contend that

Sex and the City references a classical Hollywood tradition of screwball as well as innovative TV sitcoms about single girls in the city, like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* . . . and *Rhoda* Carrie is cut from the same mold as her screwball predecessors with her sharp witty dialogue and pratfalls. Just as she is aware of how the representation works, the series rearranges and adds to the conventions of these changing generic expectations. (12)

The humor in *Sex and the City* is firmly grounded in the series’s romantic entanglements rather than in the more general experiences of a

single woman making her way in the world, however. When the humor does not come from the man of the week, it arises from Carrie or one of the other women's sense of embarrassment over something that happened with a man. For instance, in the first season episode "The Drought," Carrie is finally settling into a relationship with the glamorous Mr. Big when she accidentally passes gas while in bed with him. While Big laughs it off, and her friends sympathize but still make fun of her, Carrie becomes convinced that this momentary "unladylike" lapse has broken the sexual mystique for him. This fear that men will no longer find a woman attractive if she reveals her true self stands in contrast to the relationships among the four main female characters, who consistently reveal their secrets and insecurities to each other. While many of the show's storylines reinforce traditional notions of heterosexual romance, the conversations both among the women and between men and women, as well as Carrie's voiceover, open a space for analysis on why these heterosexist ideas persist even among educated, feminist-minded women.

The use of voiceover makes public what we often keep private, particularly in regard to female sexuality and desire. Because the voiceover is firmly embodied in Carrie and oftentimes voiced directly to the audience, a feeling of intimacy and honesty is established between the viewer and the main character. Her narration also serves a purpose in presentations of female-male conversations, as she functions as an interpreter and fills in the "gaps" between what is spoken and what is actually meant between men and women. These cross-gender interactions stand in contrast to the mostly narration-free conversations between the four main female characters, in which there is a sense of mutual self-disclosure and honesty and therefore no need for an interpretation. Because the viewer is privy to these instances of "girl talk" as well as Carrie's narration, a feeling of closeness is established between Carrie and the viewer, in spite of the glamorous upper-class lifestyle on presentation in the series.

Like many of its urban-setting sitcom peers, the notion of family in *Sex and the City* is based not on biological ties but instead on the bonds of community and friendship. In fact, the bonds of friendship often appear to supplant the bonds of family, as the women reiterate time and again how lucky they are to have each other since they will always be there for one another in ways that men and relationships can't be. Carrie explains, "The

most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't. But, in the end, they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself" ("Take Me Out to the Ballgame"). In her essay "Women's Friendships, Women's Talk," Jennifer Coates claims that, while friendships differ in role and purpose in various cultures, anthropologists "have demonstrated the key role female friendship plays in women's lives, whether on Crete, where the harshness of women's circumscribed lives is made bearable by friendship with other women, or in central Australia, where solidarity and mutual support are vital in the maintenance of aboriginal women's traditional practices" (246). Women's friendships are uniquely gendered, characterized by intimacy, mutual self-disclosure, and a focus on talk, while friendships among men tend to be built upon sociability and a focus on activity and lack the self-disclosure typical in women's friendships (245).

This sense of "mutual self-disclosure" is displayed throughout the series. In her discussion of this female tendency to share, Coates writes, "stories are an intrinsic part of the talk of women friends. Telling stories fulfills women friends' need to keep in touch with each other's lives; moreover hearing about others' experience helps to place our own experience in an explanatory framework" (247). Deborah Tannen also explores this notion in her book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. She contends that, for women,

Telling about a problem is a bid for an expression of understanding ("I know how you feel") or a similar complaint ("I felt the same way when something similar happened to me"). In other words, troubles talk is intended to reinforce rapport by sending the metamessage "We're the same; you're not alone. [. . .] Furthermore, mutual understanding is symmetrical, and this symmetry contributes to a sense of community. (53)

By situating one character's problem as an issue familiar to all the characters, the series exposes how social constructions of gender affect women's everyday lives and establishes a sense of intimacy with the audience, representative of a conversational style Tannen describes as conveying a sense of "we're close and the same" (28). While many of Tannen's prescriptions for cross-gender communication have been criticized for a failure to recognize the power differentials at play in cross-gender interac-

tions,¹ her discussion of these differences is worth considering in the context of the presentations of heterosexual relationships seen in *Sex and the City*.

Sex and the City explores this intimacy through the characters' interactions as well as extending an invitation to the audience to do the same, as the female viewer is able to compare her own experiences to the relationship problem of the week. Coates contends that this type of intimate storytelling provides a "very particular sort of pleasure." However, according to Tannen, this type of pleasure can only be accomplished when there is symmetry across the troubles under discussion. In the fourth season episode, "Couлда, Woulda, Shoulda," Charlotte arrives for brunch upset and wanting to discuss her problems conceiving. Miranda remains silent during the conversation, and Charlotte asks, "What's with the eyes? You're just sitting there. You haven't said a word and you're making 'the eyes.'" When Miranda confesses that she is pregnant and planning to have an abortion, an asymmetry of fertility and maternal desire is established between the characters. Charlotte recognizes that Miranda's unplanned pregnancy, as opposed to her own fertility problem, is the more likely thread of commonality among the women, and says, "I'll leave. You can just sit here and have your abortion talk." Charlotte is correct in her assumption, as the remaining three women participate in a story round, with Carrie and Samantha sharing the stories of their own abortion experiences in an attempt to reassure Miranda that she is not alone in her predicament. However, when Miranda decides against going through with the abortion, symmetry is reestablished between her and Charlotte. Charlotte arrives with flowers, a nervous offering to "do whatever it is flowers are supposed to do in a situation like this." Miranda tells her that she has decided to keep the baby, and this shared sense of maternal desire (albeit in different degrees) heals the asymmetry of fertility between them.

The power and pleasure of female friendship conversations can also be seen in the use of Carrie's voiceover in the show. Very rarely does her voiceover interrupt a conversation between the four women, indicating the "no-holds-barred" type of female friendship Coates describes. In contrast to the all-female scenes, Carrie's voiceover usually begins, ends, and often interrupts scenes between male and female characters, signifying that male-female communication is not always as straight-forwardly honest as fe-

male-female interactions. Tannen describes this difference in *You Just Don't Understand*:

Women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence, [so] communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles. Instead of different dialects, it has been said that they speak different genderlects. (42)

Carrie as narrator and newspaper columnist functions as researcher and interpreter, for herself and the audiences of her column and the series, in these male-female interactions. Tannen writes that “Much—even most—meaning in conversation does not reside in the words spoken at all, but is filled in by the person listening” (37). Carrie as narrator fills in these gaps, serving as an intermediary between the character speaking and the audience listening.

The voiceovers are another example of the intimacy between the women, as the information and insight provided by Carrie’s narration comes from her conversations with the other women. For instance, in the season two episode “They Shoot Single People, Don’t They?” Carrie narrates the evolution of a date between Samantha and William, a salsa bar owner who tempts Samantha with his frequent and early use of the pronoun “we” in making plans for the future. Carrie tells the viewer, “At first Samantha listened, fascinated, detached. It was rare to hear a man use the ‘we’ word, so comfortably so early on. . . . Pretty soon she gave in. She lay back, opened up, and let the ‘we’ wash over her.” The scene then immediately cuts to Samantha describing her date to Carrie in a morning-after phone call that mirrors Carrie’s narration. She recounts the events from her date, providing ample evidence that she has “let the ‘we’ wash over her” as she fantasizes about what her summer in the Hamptons with William will be like, rehashing much of the same information we saw in the previous scene. While it could be argued that Carrie as narrator is omniscient and a separate character from Carrie Bradshaw, an alternate source of her power as narrator could be the information gleaned from her friendships with the other women, given how her column often intersects with her narration.

In her book *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Kaja Silverman defines the disembodied voiceover in classic film as “a ‘voice on high,’ like that of the angel Joseph in Capra’s

It's a Wonderful Life, a voice which speaks from a position of superior knowledge, and which superimposes itself 'on top' of the diegesis. To the degree that the voiceover preserves its integrity, it also becomes an exclusively male voice" (48). Silverman asserts that in order for a voiceover to have authority within the text for the audience, it must remain apart from the characters and action of the story: "the voiceover is privileged to the degree that *it transcends the body*. Conversely, it loses power and authority with every corporeal encroachment, from a regional accent or idiosyncratic 'grain' to definitive localization in the image. Synchronization marks the final moment in any such localization, the point of full and complete 'embodiment'" (49). The less visible and more anonymous the body behind the voiceover, the more reliable it is believed to be, as well as being more likely to be male.

In her research, Silverman found only one example of a disembodied female voiceover in Hollywood cinema, 1949's *Letter to Three Wives*, which is markedly different from any of its male counterparts. Silverman writes,

Although it "hovers" above the image track, in an invisible spatial register, it occupies the same temporal register as the other characters, and often comments upon events as they occur. Moreover, although the "owner" escapes the viewer's gaze, her appearance is a frequent topic of conversation. . . . The disembodied voiceover . . . is thus curiously both corporealized and diegeticized. (48-9)

In the cinematic texts Silverman discusses, the female cannot escape corporealization.

In contrast to the cinematic narrator, *Sex and the City* places narrative power squarely on the shoulders of the main character, even going so far as to have Carrie narrate directly into the camera in early episodes. Despite this definitive embodiment, however, her voice functions as an omniscient authority in the text; even in scenes in which Carrie the character is not present, Carrie the narrator hovers above the action, summarizing and theorizing. Because her voiceover often converges with her column, her narration becomes the impartial journalistic gaze, even when that gaze is focused on herself. She is both inside and outside of the plot, subverting the traditional Hollywood formula of what constitutes integrity in voiceover. Silverman contends that embodied voiceover "functions almost like a searchlight suddenly turned upon a character's thoughts; it makes audible what is

ostensibly inaudible, transforming the private into the public” (53). However, in classic film, this searchlight is only turned upon the character embodying the voiceover. Carrie turns this searchlight upon all of the characters, turning not only her own body “inside out” but also those of her female friends. This making public of the private occurs on multiple levels, as Carrie’s narration exposes the women’s innermost thoughts and fears not only to the outside world of the viewer but also to the inside world of the show itself through Carrie’s column.

Carrie’s voiceover functions as part of the larger project of the series to give voice and visibility to women’s issues that have traditionally been considered private, such as female sexual desire, by eschewing the traditionally disembodied male voiceover and giving viewers access to Carrie’s audible and thoroughly embodied narration. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe assert that the show “challenges prohibitions and breaks the silence, so that women can begin to tell their stories and speak about sex differently” (“Ms. Parker and the Vicious Circle” 196). In early episodes, characters confess their feelings about sex and relationships directly into the camera, presumably prompted and encouraged by Carrie. Although this style of directly addressing the camera was phased out, it can be assumed that Carrie’s research methods did not change and that the knowledge she shares in her column and narration comes from frank discussions with friends and acquaintances. These conversations, whether they take place over cocktails with all the women on a Friday night or in an early morning phone call, are part of a long tradition of “girl talk” as well as the more specific consciousness-raising tactics of the second-wave women’s movement. While the characters are rarely driven to take public, political action about these issues, the honesty makes the personal political by allowing the women, as well as female viewers, to recognize the commonality and, at times, gender-specific nature of their problems.

Carrie’s narration through the voice of her column provides a device through which to talk about the relationship problem of the week. The thesis question of her column appears in voiceover narration as well as being shown to the viewer visually as Carrie types it on her laptop or jots it down on a cocktail napkin. Unlike *Ally McBeal*, which used voiceover to emphasize “the direct contrast between Ally’s private speech and her public actions” (Smith 64), voiceover in *Sex and the City* functions first as an indi-

rect revelation (when only the viewer is privy to her words) and later a public one within the world of the series (when her column is published) of the emotions and fears women are reluctant to reveal, with Carrie and her friends standing in as the Everywoman. This literal publication of women's innermost thoughts becomes a feminist act in that it gives a public voice to female heterosexuality. While it could be argued that the voice expressed in the series only works to further entrench traditional notions of the differences between male and female sexuality, this expression of female sexual desire, and even the overt acknowledgment of its existence, was a radical move in the world of late 20th century television.

In his essay "Sex, Confession, and Witness," Jonathan Bignell writes that *Sex and the City* "establishes a 'structure of feeling' in which the TV audience is invited to participate" by drawing on "modes of confession found in talk shows in which individuals perform their identity by means of confessional discourse, and by bearing witness to the tribulations of others" (167). The first season of the series featured on-the-street interviews, as well as scenes where Carrie spoke to the audience in asides. Both of these devices featured the character speaking directly into the camera, emphasizing the confessional style of *Sex and the City*, both the column and the series.

In the first season episode "Secret Sex," the confessional tone is multi-layered, presenting a contrast between public words and private actions. For her first date with Mr. Big, Carrie decides to wear the "naked dress," a clingy, lingerie-style garment that almost exactly matches her skin tone, from a recent promotional photo shoot. Charlotte interprets her wardrobe choice as a sign that she plans to have sex with Big, but Miranda backs up Carrie's denials with the clarification that "she's not going to have sex, she's just gonna look like sex." In the conversation that follows, the four characters discuss how to navigate the double bind of female sexuality faced by women in the post-sexual revolution world of the show. The women's viewpoints range from keeping a guy in a "holding pattern" for five dates to "just don't screw on the first date and you'll be fine" to "a guy can just as easily dump you if you screw on the first date or if you wait until the tenth." Carrie leaves the conversation when her date arrives, and the audience follows her into the hallway, where she directly addresses the camera, "The truth is, I was dying to sleep with him. But isn't delayed gratification the definition of maturity?" With this final confession before

her date, Carrie illustrates the divide between what a woman wants and what she thinks is appropriate, a divide that can be particularly deep when it comes to sexuality. By situating her admission in the context of a “private” confessional, the insinuation is that there are still some emotions (namely, lust) to which one should not admit in public settings. However, the insinuation is subverted through the voicing of these desires through the main character of the show, a character position which, in the world of television, is supposed to be the most “relatable” to the audience.

In her discussion of *Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal*, and *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*, Amanda Lotz asserts that

[These shows] use first-person narration, characters’ conversations with themselves and imaginary people, and fantasy sequences to create rich character development through conventional narrative structures. These techniques exhibit the rich inner lives of the characters and effectively strip a layer of surface to reveal their uncertainties and flaws to a degree that is less evident in other dramatic narrative types. The nakedness of the characters’ innermost thoughts, fears, and desires creates an intimate relationship between audience and character. (90-1)

Through confessing her desire to sleep with this mysterious new man in her life, Carrie gives voice to her own sexual needs and desires, and by addressing this confession directly to the camera, she establishes a relationship with the audience, encouraging them to find their own sexual voice. While her articulation of sexual desire is somewhat tempered through its situating as a “private” confessional, when socially contextualized against the backdrop of the late 1990s, with its national discussion of “sexual relations” with White House interns and the continued backlash against second-wave feminism, this frank admission of female sexual desire on television becomes a progressive moment.

While the ending of the episode bears out this subversion, Carrie’s reaction to having slept with Big on the first date indicates that she still somewhat believes that she can ruin the possibility of a real relationship by giving in to her desires. The show moves from the two kissing in the limo almost immediately upon entering it to a shot of a bed with rumpled sheets, with Carrie and Big wrapped in blankets on the floor below. In voiceover, she tries to reassure herself, “I can’t be hemmed in by rules; I go with my emotions. I mean some of the greatest romances of all time began with sex

on the first date. . . I bet.” She continues, vowing, “I will not be the first one to speak, and, if he never calls me again, I’ll think of him fondly—as an asshole.” Immediately after this promise to herself and the audience, however, she breaks the silence. “That was really and completely. . . on the first date. I mean, I didn’t plan that you know. What do you think?” Several emotions are conveyed through this utterance. She is reluctant to define the experience, as she trails off before providing an adjective to the adverbs “really and completely.” She then switches to denial, wanting him to know that she is not the “type” of woman who normally has sex on the first date. Finally, unable to read his reaction in the first two attempts, she asks for reassurance: “What do you think?” She is trying to establish an emotional intimacy, allowing him the space to explain his own feelings about the physical intimacy that has occurred between them. He pauses to move his arm from under Carrie before answering, “I thought it was really pretty great, but what do I know? You feel like having some Szechwan?” Big is focusing on the message level of talk, answering Carrie’s immediate question and offering up an activity to extend their time together. Carrie, however, focuses on the metamessage level of the conversation and wonders if there is a deeper meaning to his words, asking in voiceover, “Has Mr. Big discovered my weakness for great sex & greasy Chinese, or was going out to dinner merely a diversionary tactic to keep me from spending the night?” This voiceover is representative of the overlying problem of their relationship—Carrie’s tendency to question the metamessage behind Big’s message-focused conversational style. Her voiceover functions as a nagging voice in her head, undercutting unmediated female sexual desire. However, this voiceover is not meant to indicate that women should not act on sexual desire; rather, it serves as a recognition of the complex relationship many women have to their own sexuality.

While elements of direct address to the audience and the (wo)man-on-the-street interviews were quickly phased out of the show, the confessional tone remains with the use of Carrie’s voiceover and scenes of the women discussing their lives in the bedroom and in the office. In their essay “Ms. Parker and the Vicious Circle: Female Narrative and Humour in *Sex and the City*,” Akass and McCabe write that Carrie’s voiceovers adopt “the language associated with fairy tales, movie romance, or other feminine fictions [;] her commentaries set up expectations that offer a playful per-

spective on what we see” (185). While her pun-filled narration creates a playful tone, it also gives a voice to the usually unspoken fears of women. By overlaying humor over the discussion of these difficult issues, *Sex and the City* provides a space for the dissection of patriarchal norms surrounding romance and mixes the ironic with the earnest as the characters make fun of each other for their devotion to their quest to find the perfect man. While many of the storylines and their resolutions reinforce stereotypical notions of male-female romantic relations, it is the discussion of these norms that is potentially empowering. The variety of viewpoints expressed, from the overtly sexual Samantha to the repressed Charlotte, from the openly feminist Miranda to the “Everywoman” Carrie, opens a space for imagining different ideas of what could be, even if the specific conclusion lands in a more traditional middle ground.

While the series does place an emphasis on the importance of finding the perfect man, it does not assert that female (hetero)sexual desire is linked to attraction to a particular man; instead, it illustrates that sexual desire is a fact of life for both women and men. The season one episode “The Turtle and the Hare” explores the notion of “settling,” whether it be settling for a man or for a battery-powered orgasm. The episode opens with Carrie’s narration setting up a sort of modern-day fairy tale: “In a city of perfect people, no one was more perfect than Brooke. She was an interior designer who only dated A-list guys. For Brooke, every Saturday night was like the senior prom. So, when she got married, we were all dying to see which one had made the cut.” The “once upon a time” style narration is undercut, however, when Miranda asks, “Was I the only one who remembered that Brooke once described this man as more boring than exposed brick?” As the girls make their good-byes to the newly married couple, Brooke whispers to Carrie, “It’s always better to marry someone who loves you more than you love them,” solidifying the idea that this is no fairy-tale ending but rather a rational, if somewhat emotionless, decision made after weighing all the options and possible outcomes. As she later tells Carrie, “We think we’re Carolyn Bessette. One day John-John’s out of the picture, and we’re happy just to have some guy who can throw around a Frisbee.” The idea of “settling” is also explored through Carrie and Big’s relationship, as Carrie contemplates what taking marriage off the table means after he tells her that he has no intention of getting married again. She briefly consid-

ers marrying Stanford, her best friend who is unable to collect his inheritance given to those in his family upon marriage because he is a gay man. Stanford promises her everything but sexual intimacy (with him): “We’re best friends. We make each other laugh. We both sleep with men. This is not a bad idea at all. [. . .] Think about it. Who else would keep you in expensive shoes and encourage you to cheat?” (“The Turtle and the Hare”). After considering the other options around her—marriage to a man “who loves you more than you love [him]” or a marriage-less future with Big—the notion of marrying a good friend and finding sexual satisfaction on the side starts to seem like the best option. And while this option is eventually shown to not really be an option, as Stanford’s grandmother/keeper of the inheritance reveals to Carrie that she knows Stanford is gay and she is not willing to part with her money for a “sham” marriage, the time Carrie spends considering her options forces her to be honest with Big about her feelings. As Big prepares dinner for them, she bluntly tells him, “I do want to get married someday. Maybe not today, but I don’t want. . . I can’t date somebody that won’t. What’s the point?” Big indirectly addresses her concerns with a brief cooking lesson: “Definitely too much salt. I mean, it’s all in the timing. You gotta brown the garlic before you put in the onions, know what I mean?” While his language is guarded in a stereotypically masculine fashion, Carrie understands him, and the metaphorical assurance that marriage is not completely off the table is enough to make her want to continue the relationship for the moment. Big’s coded language is a textbook example of Tannen’s definition of male-gendered communication, but the fact that Carrie comprehends what he is telling her illustrates that cross-gender communication and understanding is not impossible to achieve.

The series investigates this notion of female desire and how women mediate their own personal longings and aspirations in a culture that often places contradictory expectations upon them. While these four main characters are presented in an upper-middle class, heterosexual, urban fantasy of sorts, the core issue at the heart of the show—that relationships, both romantic and platonic, provide a refuge from the confusion of modern-day life—is applicable across lines of class, race, and sexuality. And while it celebrates the restorative power of human interaction, it also recognizes the complexities of communication, particularly between a woman and a man.

The difficulty of cross-gendered communication is reaffirmed in “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” from season three. At the wedding rehearsal dinner for Charlotte and Trey, Miranda tells the others about her speed dating experience, which was only successful when she lied and said she was a stewardess instead of a lawyer. Carrie’s (new) boyfriend Aidan joins in, trading quips and barbs with the women as easily as they do with each other. However, when he jokingly calls Miranda a liar for her deception, Carrie’s voiceover interrupts the casual ease of the scene as she contemplates her recent infidelity. “I was the liar. I’d finally ended my affair with Big, but the guilt of lying to Aidan was like a hangover I couldn’t sleep off,” she tells the audience. Here, as throughout the episode, Carrie’s voiceover gives the confession she is desperate to give to Aidan.

The problem of communication across genders is most obviously symbolized through Samantha’s romantic encounters with Trey’s heavily accented Scottish cousin in the episode, but Carrie the narrator links Samantha’s problems to her own when she says, “Samantha wasn’t the only one feeling lost.” While dressed in a devil t-shirt, Carrie ponders honesty and relationships through voiceover:

I started thinking about honesty. Maybe the whole idea was overrated. Maybe coming clean is the ultimate selfish act, a way to absolve yourself by hurting someone who doesn’t deserve to be hurt. I cheated on a test in the fifth grade with two friends. They confessed, got grounded, and failed the class. I never told anyone, and it never mattered. In a relationship, is honesty really the best policy?

However, honesty is not the only issue at work here. As we hear her thoughts, we see that she is torturing herself for her actions; because she is unable to forgive herself, she can not imagine Aidan forgiving her either. Tannen contends that, “to most women, conflict is a threat to connection, to be avoided at all costs,” and Carrie’s fear that this conflict would permanently sever her connection with Aidan illustrates this idea (150).

In each scene with Aidan, she finds a moment to tell him, but she cannot move the words from her head (voiceover) to her mouth (actual dialogue). In another scene where she stops short of telling him, she tells the audience, “I could feel the words bubbling inside me. But if I told him, could he still love me? I wasn’t ready to find out.” The words continue to “bubble” with more frequency the longer she waits. When Aidan catches

her smoking at three a.m., he tells her that he can accept this “flaw,” further cementing his characterization as the understanding boyfriend and displaying the male tendency to focus on problem-solving in communication. Carrie’s voiceover is frequently inserted into their conversation about flaws until she finally says that she needs to tell him something, but she finishes the thought as narrator instead: “But suddenly I couldn’t tell him. I was afraid if I did, he’d never look at me that way again. So I didn’t.” Despite his assurances that he loves her, that “flaws are the best part,” she is unable to tell him.

In the scene in which she finally does confess, there is no voiceover narration. In an uncharacteristic move for the show, the episode shifts directly from a scene featuring Miranda to Aidan showing up at Carrie’s apartment before Charlotte’s wedding without Carrie providing a connective thread between scenes. She is frazzled, both from running late and from the strain of her secret. Aidan has wrapped a picture of the loveseat he has built for Charlotte and Trey as a wedding gift and tells Carrie, “I thought maybe one day I’d build us a love seat.” Earlier in the episode, he explained how the loveseat was a metaphor for two people coming together, flaws and all, and making each person stronger in the process. Carrie is unable to think about a future with Aidan, and she avoids his attempts to hold her, reflecting how she has withdrawn both physically and emotionally. He finally confronts her non-verbal communication, and she explains what she has been only been expressing in voiceover throughout the episode. There is no internal dialogue through narration here; she has to release the words without thinking about them first. He reacts exactly as she had feared, telling her to go to the wedding on her own. With her infidelity, Carrie has upset the balance of the relationship, and now that Aidan is aware of this asymmetry, he cannot continue the conversation.

As one of the few examples of a male-female conversation without a voiceover to summarize and analyze the action, this scene stands in stark contrast to the conversations between the four women, the more typical voiceover-less type of scene. In the brunch-style scenes, voiceover is unnecessary; because of the extent of self-disclosure on display, there is no need for Carrie to fill in the gaps between what one says and what one means. Aidan had proven himself capable of casually participating in this more feminine style of communication with Carrie’s friends, but when he is one-on-one with Carrie and confronted with a more unpleasant topic of

conversation, he reverts back to the stereotypically masculine lack of self-disclosure. There is no need for Carrie to narrate her own thoughts and motivations because she has revealed all of them to him, and she is unable to narrate for Aidan, because he has not exposed anything to her. When he does finally reappear after the ceremony, he does not reveal any more about his feelings other than “I just know myself. This is not the kind of thing I can get over. I just need to be on my own for a while. Me on my own. I really loved you.” The use of the past tense is significant here because it reveals that Carrie’s affair has changed how he feels about her, that this is one flaw that is not the “best part.” As Carrie walks away from her past with Aidan, she returns back to the present-tense love of her family of friends. In voiceover, Carrie sums up the connection between her and her friends and their ability to communicate with and understand one another no matter the circumstances. “It’s hard to find people who will love you no matter what,” she tells the viewer, “I was lucky enough to find three of them.” While the overt message in her parting words is the contrast between romantic and platonic love, her claim could also be made about finding someone who will understand you no matter what, something Tannen would contend is much harder to find across gender lines.

While *Sex and the City* did not change the reality of life for single women and should not necessarily be seen as a prescription for how to have a healthy and equitable heterosexual relationship, the series did open popular culture’s eyes to the reality of female sexual desire, and its influence can be seen in other female-centered sitcoms from *30 Rock* (2006-) to *Cougar Town* (2009-). Akass and McCabe assert, “while the women are still attracted to patriarchal stories of happy ever after and fairy-tale romance, women talking about sex, creating humour and sharing laughter are changing the script” (Introduction 13). Conversation and self-disclosure serve to strengthen the bonds of female friendship among the characters on the show as well as making the viewer feel as though she is part of this sisterhood of friends. Through its exploration of the battle of the sexes and the interactions between the female friends as they try to make sense of that battlefield, the series provides an opening for female viewers to continue their own conversations about sexuality and relationships in the twenty-first century.

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Notes

¹See Alice Freed's "We Understand Perfectly: A Critique of Tannen's View of Cross-Sex Communication."

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