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### Analyzing "The D.E.N.N.I.S. System"

The artifact I will be reviewing is the tenth episode of the fifth season of *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia* entitled "The D.E.N.N.I.S. System" through the feminist Theory of Objectification. In "The D.E.N.N.I.S. System," the D.E.N.N.I.S. System serves as a step-by-step means of objectifying a woman according to the seven features of objectification outlined by Martha Nussbaum. The episode "The D.E.N.N.I.S. System" centers on one of the five main characters, Dennis Reynolds, who I've discussed before relating to feminist theory as it relates to methods of acquiring and manipulating women. In this episode, Dennis teaches the Gang (Frank, Dee, Charlie, and Mac) a system he has crafted and perfected over the years, called: The D.E.N.N.I.S. System. The D.E.N.N.I.S. System is a six-step acronym that "is a comprehensive approach to seduction" and "the key to winning any girl's heart."<sup>1</sup> The **D.E.N.N.I.S.** System stands for **D**emonstrate value, **E**ngage physically, **N**urture dependence, **N**eglect emotionally, **I**nspire hope, and **S**eparate entirely. These six-steps of the D.E.N.N.I.S. System, taken all together, demonstrate a systematic approach to objectifying women as part of male sexual conquest. According to Glenn Howerton, the actor who portrays Dennis Reynolds: "What's sick about this system is that it actually does work." Beyond the episode itself, The D.E.N.N.I.S. System has been shown to be widely applicable when understanding the process of toxic relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> Read more at: <https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org/viewtopic.php?f=104&t=15528>

The context of which this episode was made is that *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia* is a sitcom where:

Each member of The Gang exhibits unethical behavior and antisocial traits such as extreme selfishness, pathological dishonesty, narcissism, aggression, excessive drinking and substance abuse, unregulated emotions, cruelty, and absolutely no regard for the people around them, while also displaying acute codependency, stupidity, and a surprising lack of awareness of basic social norms. The comedy of the show emerges from these extreme character traits resulting in conflicts that lead The Gang into absurd, dark and painfully embarrassing situations, typically ending with them getting their comeuppance, but never learning their lesson. This allows the show to mine a variety of socio-political and economic issues for satire and dark humor, while keeping the characters in a state of relative stasis conducive to the long-running sitcom format.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of Dennis Reynolds, by whom the eponymous system was created, the flawed character traits which he possesses are extreme narcissism and psychopathic behavior, which include, but are not limited to, the objectification of women for not only sexual gratification but to increase his own ego. Dennis and The Gang in general are understood as not good people and therefore usually they do a subversive reading of their moral behavior, however sometimes themes in the show are nuanced in order to balance the other end of what people should do or accept. The show as a series of artifacts exists to satirize human nature, but in the episode “The D.E.N.N.I.S. System,” this artifact in particular intends to satirize male pickup artists, dating coaches, and those who apply their techniques.

The episode “The D.E.N.N.I.S. System” starts with Dennis Reynolds proudly sharing an angry voicemail of a recent girl he dated, saying: “Hi, Dennis, it's Caylee. I was just calling to let

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It%27s\\_Always\\_Sunny\\_in\\_Philadelphia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It%27s_Always_Sunny_in_Philadelphia)

you know that I hope you die! You are obviously a terrible person with no regard for anyone but yourself! I never, ever want to see you again, you steaming pile of horsesh\*t! Go to hell!” The visceral hatred she holds is taken as proof by Dennis that he at one point truly obtained her love. When questioned by his sister Dee and the rest of The Gang of what he meant and how went about this, Dennis proclaims to them that “I have a system, a foolproof system... for getting any chick's undying love and devotion for life.” The scene cuts to Dennis in front of a poster board where he explains that “There is a careful, systemic approach... that has allowed me to become the playboy that I am today.”

According to Dennis, “... the first step to any erotic conquest is to ‘**D**’ - **Demonstrate** your value.” In the most recent case of performing the D.E.N.N.I.S. System; Dennis met “a cute pharmacist” named Caylee whom he describes as his “subject.” Dennis states that “I demonstrated my value to her by filling a prescription. I told her, ‘It's for my grandmother. She's quite ill.’ Thus demonstrating my value as a loving grandson and an all-around great guy.” It's at this point that Dennis' sister Dee asks him if he's forging prescriptions now, to which Dennis replies “that's the easy part.” The basic idea behind “D - Demonstrate value” is actually quite common among pickup artists and dating coaches. It follows any kind of reciprocal relationship which people enter into to offer something in return, which entices another into valuing your companionship. What Dennis does though is blatantly underhanded and manipulative. He fakes having an ill grandmother and forges a prescription for the sole purpose of fooling Caylee into believing he is a valuable, caring man. The way in which Dennis treats Caylee through immediate and intense lying would fall under the third feature of objectification which is “inertness.” By Dennis making up a bogus story of a sick grandmother and making a fake prescription to elicit feelings towards him, Dennis assumes that Caylee lacks agency to figure out

that the prescription isn't authentic. Ironically, this very thing proves to foil Dennis later on in the episode when he returns to try and recapture Caylee. Caylee confronts Dennis' second fake prescription by telling him "I don't think your grandmother exists, Dennis." which bewilders Dennis, causing her to state "Uh, yeah. I looked into it. There's no, um, Dr. Toboggan in Philadelphia either." Dennis was not expecting Caylee, a pharmacist, to actually have the agency to figure out that Dennis' prescription is made up.

"Once you've demonstrated your value, you are going to want to ask her out. Once you've asked her out, you move on to 'E.' 'Engage physically.'" This second step in the D.E.N.N.I.S. System appears very straight forward as to how it would apply to objectification. The terms physically and objectification may as well be paired together in a thesaurus. Dennis proceeds to explain how the way he engages physically with Caylee is by going on a preplanned trap of a date where he makes false plans to go to a restaurant he knows will be closed. He brings her back to his apartment with a movie and a pizza, then stages a made-up problem with his roommate that leads to having their date on his bed in his bedroom. Dennis states "And once we're on my bed, it is game over. I engage her physically and the sexual waltz begins." Aside from the usual deceit that occurs leading up to this, the main thing that can be spotted is the fifth feature of objectification which is "violability." Dennis states that his reasoning for making false plans to go to a restaurant so that he can skip right to putting her on his bed is that "I personally try to engage the girl physically without ever going on the date, which to me is really just a waste of time and money." Dennis is very clear about how quick he is to violate her boundary-integrity through getting to barely know her. A counterpoint to this might be the modern existence of hookup culture that attempts to make these kinds of interactions less victimizing towards women

than they actually are by implying a woman's willingness on her part to want to generally engage in these activities.

"Okay. Now, once you've had sex with a woman, she will naturally start to depend on you. Okay? All women do this. ... Which brings me to the first 'N.' 'Nurturing Dependence.' You're gonna want to nurture that dependence that she's feeling on you now, guys." It's at this point that Dennis goes on to explain the multiple ways you can "nurture dependance" on you as a man. One method is to "Have her car towed. Or you can slash her tires. Either way, make her depend on you for rides." Dennis carries his psychopathy even further by explaining his "personal go-to, which is to create a fictional, angry neighbor who is threatening her... and tell her you'll take care of him." He explains how you can call the woman through a pay phone and then, modifying your voice, threaten the woman with violence. It is from there that Caylee rushes to the safety of Dennis' apartment out of fear for her life. There are many ways that Dennis' Nurturing dependance can be viewed, but what stands out most is the methods which Dennis uses to nurture her dependance on him fall under the seventh feature of objectification which is "denial of subjectivity." Now to say that Dennis is treating his girlfriend Caylee "as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account" is a bit of an understatement. He's impersonating a crazed killer sending threatening messages to her so that she will rush to Dennis for safety. If that doesn't demonstrate not taking someone's feelings and experience into account then I don't know what does.

"Now, if you've completed all the other steps properly up to this point, she'll naturally want to take the relationship to the next level. But you're not gonna do that. You're gonna do the exact opposite. Pull back, guys. Pull back. Which brings me to the second 'N,' 'Neglect Emotionally.'" It's from here that Dennis purposely makes himself less available to him when

she needs him. Dennis states you must temporarily cut off all contact with her while continuing to do things that cause her to remain dependent on you. In typical Dennis fashion, he goes rather extreme and states “Maybe that fictional, angry neighbor that you've simulated comes back, and this time you're not around to cool him off.” In a similar fashion to how Dennis describes doing the third step of N - Nurturing dependance, Dennis yanks the needed access to him back, which causes the woman to become “This will frighten the sh\*t out of her. Okay? And she'll start getting really mixed up because you're not there to protect her.” This still very much falls under “denial of subjectivity” but to an even worse degree wherein you’re causing a woman to feel serious danger.

“She'll start questioning her self-worth, start questioning her- her self-esteem. And that's the perfect time to ‘I’... ‘Inspire Hope’” It’s at this point when the woman feels at her lowest, you give her hope of your return. “In Caylee's case, I went to her window and I screamed... ‘Caylee, listen. Listen. Wait. I want to tell you that the reason I was distant is because... I was afraid that you were gonna break my heart... and I got scared. But I'm not scared anymore, baby. I love you. I need you.’ And then, naturally, we bang.” “And this is the best bang of all because it's very emotional for her. You see, she thinks she's broken through my tough exterior... and coerced affection from a man who is afraid to love.” Along with the previous two steps, Inspire Hope appears to be in the camp of “denial of subjectivity,” as the whole point is to yank back a woman emotionally in order to elicit a certain preferred emotions reaction from her. Part of this reaction though is the use of the woman’s body both physically and emotionally and therefore can also be paired with violability, as the woman’s trust is misused in such a way that it allows her to participate in something she wouldn’t if she weren’t aware of what was about to happen, and what is about to happen? “And then I slink out into the night, never to talk to her again. ...

That's right. I 'S'... 'Separate Entirely.'" The point of Separate Entirely is to end the mission with the subject and bring the D.E.N.N.I.S. System to a close. Again, this could fall under "denial of subjectivity," as it is meant to deceive a woman into thinking she's won the graces of the man in the previous step, only for him to use her before leaving.

Over the course of the episode "The D.E.N.N.I.S. System" members of The Gang go about attempting to implement the D.E.N.N.I.S. System. When Dennis visits Caylee back at the pharmacy to "Re-D.E.N.N.I.S." her, he is rejected. It's at this point he runs into his wingman Mac, who says he has his own system for the women after the D.E.N.N.I.S. System which is called the M.A.C., or, **M**ove-in **A**fter **C**ompletion. The M.A.C. entails going to women who have been subject to the D.E.N.N.I.S. System and "I wait till you're done with them. Then I swoop in, give them shoulder to cry on, and then we hump. You've been humping these girls after I'm done with them?" to which Mac responds "Oh, yeah, dude." Then right after they're both done talking, Frank moves in asking them what they're doing there. When they ask him what he's doing, Frank says he's there for the **scraps**, which, while not an acronym, is Frank's way of taking that which 'remains' after the D.E.N.N.I.S. System and the M.A.C. have been implemented. The reason I bring this up is that it perfectly encapsulates the sixth feature of objectification which is "ownership." The idea that each of the guys have their turn using another woman and that there is an order to which each of the men are entitled at some point to the woman.

With all that's been explained so far on the D.E.N.N.I.S. System, one might take a very straight forward assumption that the artifact is an entirely subversive reading on the values of male objectification through use of tactics aligned with the D.E.N.N.I.S. System. What we discover though is a more nuanced, if not somewhat occluded reading. One part of the artifact

that flips the D.E.N.N.I.S. System on its head is when the character Dee, who is Dennis' sister, starts dating a man named Ben with the expectation of countering anything he does that she interprets as appearing related to the tactics of the D.E.N.N.I.S. System. Ben, who is a genuinely nice man, takes Dee on a picnic. He blindfolds her and leads her to the spot and reveals the picnic as a surprise. Dee suspects that Ben is trying to incorporate some aspects of the D.E.N.N.I.S. System and says "I know what's going on. I- I'm on to you, guy. You bring me out here to some landfill in the middle of nowhere, you blindfold me so I have no idea where I am... I'm gonna depend on you to get home!" Dee, trying to assert her feminine independence, walks off to find her way home. When Ben asks if she wants him to take her home, or if she needs bus fare, or if she needs better shoes to walk, Dee responds with "Stop trying to make me depend on you, okay? I'm fine all by myself, buddy! I'm doing just fine by myself." Dee falls into a ditch while walking away from Ben, causing him to help her. This occluded event of the story sticks out to make up for the steps of the D.E.N.N.I.S. System that are not inherently bad, such as codependency between the sexes, by demonstrating that sometimes it is good for women to rely on men. After all men and women are put together so that neither is alone and that they can help one another, but this is bad when it is only used out of manipulation for selfish, one sided gain.

In conclusion, the D.E.N.N.I.S. System, and its various cousins, are all well established ways to objectify women. The artifact is against the objectification of women by making the examples of how to romance women as horrendous as possible, but at the same time the artifact reiterates the importance of healthy relationships that do rely on valuing one another, codependence, hope, and so forth. Therefore the artifact "The D.E.N.N.I.S. System" is a subverted reading of female objectification but with occluded elements towards certain traditional gender norms.