GENDER AND GENRE:

Situating *Desperate Housewives*

By Lisa Hill

Desperate Housewives (ABC) Season 6, 2009–2010. Episode: Nice Is Different Than Good. Air date: September 27, 2009. Shown from left: Dana Delany, Eva Longoria Parker, Marcia Cross. *Photo courtesy of Photofest.*

Abstract: This article situates *Desperate Housewives* in a broader sociocultural context by examining its treatment of gender and genre. It is argued that the audience's knowledge of the generic conventions and gender stereotypes upon which the show draws allows them access to *Desperate Housewives*'s interrogation of contemporary social convention.

Keywords: gender, postfeminism, soap opera, suburbia, television

When *Desperate Housewives* premiered in October 2004 on the ABC television network in America, it was hailed an instant hit. Described as an "intoxicating mix of sex, camp and middle-aged angst" (Jefferson 97), Marc Cherry's darkly comedic series achieved both critical acclaim and commercial success, attracting almost twenty-five million U.S. viewers each week (Peyser and Jefferson 48). Now in its seventh season, *Desperate Housewives* is seen in more than 150 territories internationally (Neill 28), and although the shine may have rubbed off for some critics, ongoing audience support ensures that the show continues to win the ratings war (Toff C2). To determine what has both attracted and sustained audiences on this scale, it is useful to situate the show in a broader sociocultural context and look at its most prominent (interrelated) features—its treatment of gender and genre. Drawing on representations of women, gender stereotypes, and generic techniques from a range of literary, filmic, and televisual sources, *Desperate Housewives* plays on the past and its audience's existing cultural knowledge as a means through which to access and interrogate contemporary social convention.

One of the most distinguishing features of *Desperate Housewives* is its treatment of gender: it is a show about women. Four female protagonists (Bree, Gabrielle, Susan, and Lynette) are drawn together by the suicide of their friend and neighbor, Mary-Alice Young, whose serene, dulcet tones navigate the narrative and provide an elevated perspective from which the secrets, "truths" and domestic struggles of Wisteria Lane are unearthed. The stories of the seemingly disparate group of friends are interwoven as they slowly reveal to one another (and the audience) the complexities of their lives and the dynamics of their relationships, both within and beyond their white-picket fences. Behind the picture-perfect facade of suburbia, and beyond their assumed roles as wives and mothers, these women (and the men in their lives) serve to provide the gendered spectator with multiple and varied sites for identification. Continuing the ongoing discourse of women, domesticity, and familial relationships throughout television history, *Desperate Housewives*'s representations of women and femininity are at the heart of the show's construction, reception, and, consequently, its success. This genealogy is acknowledged by situating the women wholly in the domestic realm, where television has traditionally put them.

From the introduction of television, shows such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–57), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–63), and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–66) positioned the role of women in the family and placed them firmly in a domestic domain. For example, the lead character of *I Love Lucy*, the zany Lucy Ricardo, is foremost a wife (and by the second season a mother), who, despite her antics outside the home, is consistently returned to that role by the conclusion of each episode. The iconic June Cleaver and Donna Stone serve to uphold the role of the "perfect American housewife and mother" by always being "neatly-groomed, lovely, good-natured, thoughtful, and capable" (CNET Networks). Similar ideals were evident in *Bewitched* (1964–72) and *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70), whose central characters, Samantha and Jeannie, were also defined (and sought to be contained) within domestic spaces. However, while conceding to conventional gender roles, the shows from the second half of the 1960s began to empower their leading ladies—albeit with "magic." As Susan J. Douglas suggests, this accounts, at least in part, for their success. She argues that *Bewitched* was

> one of the few shows with an appealing female lead character who offered female viewers a respite from, as well as a critique of, male domination. . . . Samantha embodied important contradictions, for she was a happy, respectable suburban housewife who exerted power beyond the kitchen or the living room. She was at once traditional and modern. (Douglas 127)

Continuing to situate the woman in the home, television used a variety of domestic comedies to explore the role of the suburban housewife. In the later part of the twentieth century, the housewife had transformed from the responsible, middle-class Donna Stone and Samantha Stevens (magic aside), to the working-class Peg Bundy in *Married . . . with Children* (1987–97) and the ironically self-proclaimed "domestic goddess" Roseanne Conner in *Roseanne* (1988–97). As well as positioning women in the family and the home, all the aforementioned shows enjoyed similarly high ratings, sustained success over multiple seasons, and longevity through continuing reruns (Spigel). Rather than dismissing these programs as simple entertainment, they can be viewed as functioning as important texts that reflect the social milieu in which they were created. *Desperate Housewives* not only maintains

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ties with the above succession of domestic comedies, but also with more recent comedies that focus on the sex lives of thirty-something, Generation X women.

Generation X refers broadly to those born between the early 1960s and the late 1970s. As Rebecca Huntley explains, "It has been called the 'Me Generation', too selfish and self-absorbed to commit to a marriage, children, saving money or a permanent job. [They] postpone taking on the responsibility of adulthood to the last possible moment" (7). Based on Candace Bushnell's 1997 novel of the same name, HBO's *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) is a show arguably all about urban Generation X women. One of the most popular shows at the turn of the century (Creeber 154), *Sex and the City* marked a watershed moment in television history by breaking with convention and offering new representations of women on the small screen. The show examined the lives of four independent women, aged in their thirties, living in Manhattan, and focused on their sex lives and sexuality. It was simultaneously controversial and acclaimed, receiving numerous awards across its six seasons and achieving international success and a wide and loyal fan base.[1] Laura Tropp argues that "[p]art of the fascination of *Sex and the City* for viewers, critics, and scholars is that it attempts to challenge traditional notions of sexuality and femininity' (861). Astrid Henry identifies these challenges to convention in the way the show expresses the "liberating potential of sexuality," a respectful acceptance of difference and characters' empowerment through self-determination (ctd. in Blachman 152). To further distinguish these women from more traditional representations, they are situated in an urban environment that highlights an urban versus suburban dichotomy. In these ways, *Sex and the City* presented new ideals and expectations for women. While incorporating features of the traditional domestic shows examined earlier, *Desperate Housewives* also embraces the new representations of women put forward by *Sex and the City*; hence, critics Marc Peyser and David J. Jefferson's description of the show as "Sex in the Suburbs" (48).

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Setting *Desperate Housewives* in the suburbs is central to the show's discourse, as suburbia connotes an identifiable ideal and linear conformity while facilitating an inverse darkness where all is not as it seems—and not only on Wisteria Lane. Suburbia has come to represent a model of domesticity and community in which both social and physical boundaries are defined. Historically, the suburbs were established on the periphery of the city as an antidote to the inner-city slums of the postwar period: a bastion of middle-class respectability and moral authority (Blunt and Dowling 118). The new suburbs represented cleanliness, order, open spaces, and privacy, all contained within the ubiquitous fences that regulated the community and socially insulated its inhabitants. Roger Silverstone asserts that the suburbs were essentially shaped by what they were not: "Not nature, not culture; not country, not city; suburbia is a physical embodiment of a mythical solution to an essential contradiction" (8). Subsequently, suburbia is a liminal space—a "place that is forever in between" (Ferber, Healy, and McAuliffe xvii). It is also a space explored in a range of dramatic and fictional texts:

> From Ibsen to Osborne, from Flaubert to Updike, the intensity of bourgeois suburban life has been subject to deep analysis, a clawing away of the superficial harmony of domestic order, a revelation of the stresses and the strains of status, a constant ringing challenge to the patina of barely achieved authenticity. (Silverstone 6)

By setting the show in the suburbs, *Desperate Housewives* taps into this heritage and alerts its audience to the ongoing negotiation and construction of social convention. This implication of artifice is further supported by a surreal aesthetic, a precedent evident in Australia's televisual and cinematic treatment of suburbia.

Australia's relationship with suburbia is personified in Barry Humphries's satirical creation, Melbourne housewife Edna Everage. Developed on stage, the character first appeared on film in the 1970s, most notably as Aunt Edna in "The Adventures of Barry McKenzie" (1972). As Tim Rowse contends, Humphries tapped into the popular consciousness by capturing "a moment between suburbia as hell and suburbia as green heaven" (in Feber, Healy, and McAuliffe xvi). Following Humphries's lead in the distinctly Australian style of critical yet affectionate satire, the films *Sweetie* (1989), *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994), *The Castle* (1997), and more recently, the television shows *Kath and Kim* (2002–07) and *The Wedge* (2006–07) have come to be stylistically grouped under the banner of "suburban grotesque" (Button 2; Quinn 23). Lorraine Mortimer identifies the common features of this type of comedy as including an "uneasy edge, a preoccupation with and questioning of the notions of home and family, a certain sadness and toughness, [and] a bad taste aesthetic" (10). As in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), the highly stylized visual treatment of suburbia in these texts serves to draw attention to their artificiality, and in doing so, as Karl Quinn observes, "offers the hope or the possibility of transgression of narrowly defined parameters of normality" (26). In *Desperate Housewives*, the pristine and heightened facades of Wisteria Lane provide a stark contrast to the dark and dramatic lives unfolding behind the closed front doors and illuminates the sinister underbelly of the suburbs—the scandal beneath the surface.

Desperate Housewives (ABC) Season 6, 2009-2010. Episode: How About a Friendly Shrink? Airdate: January 17, 2010. Shown from left: Marcia Cross, Kyle MacLachlan. *Photo courtesy of Photofest.*

Also concerned with exposing hidden scandal was Grace Metalious's 1956 novel *Peyton Place*, which was adapted into a film by the same name in 1957, and then made into a night-time television serial from 1964 to 1969 in a format consistent with what is now recognized as soap opera. Following the lives of three women struggling to come to terms with their identity and sexuality, the themes of social inequality, hypocrisy, adultery, lust, and murder in a small town are explored. *Desperate Housewives* draws on these same themes as well as many of the generic conventions that the *Peyton Place* serial helped establish. Multiple characters and plots; continuous storylines developed from episode to episode; emphases on dialogue, problem-solving, and intimate conversation; and a realist presentation are defining features of the soap opera genre, which burgeoned in its daytime format (Ang; Brown; Brunsdon). Dealing with social relations in a social world, the soap opera provides a space in which a wide range of social issues can be examined in greater depth than other fictional forms allow. As Laura Stempel Mumford explains, in soaps "story lines always explore a variety of character reactions to any development and deal constantly with the consequences of people's actions" (103). As all events take place in a fictional community, storylines around social problems "necessarily pay close attention to the implications for the entire community" (Mumford 103). Although soap opera may languish in status within the television industry, its popularity and ability to sustain narrative and audience interest has seen the appropriation of its conventions to a higher status through prime-time shows (Brown 189). *Dallas* (1978–91), *Dynasty* (1981–89), *Knots Landing* (1979–93), *Beverly Hill 90210* (1990–2000), and *Melrose Place* (1992–99) all maintained strong links with soap conventions.[2] More recently, the prime-time dramas *ER* (1994–2009), *The West Wing* (1999–2006), *Lost* (2004–), *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–), and *Heroes* (2006–) have adopted the multiple plotline structure and continuous (or infinite middle) serial format of the genre.

The political editor of London's *Sunday Express,* Julia Hartley-Brewer, describes *Desperate Housewives* as "*Sex in the City* meets *Six Feet Under* meets *American Beauty* . . . meets *Knots Landing.*" As with the aforementioned prime-time dramas, a wider mixing of generic conventions has become more apparent in the television industry. The early 1990s series *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) most notably combined elements of soap opera, drama, comedy, and thriller genres in a manner similar to *Desperate Housewives*; however, while *Twin Peaks* was received as a cult or art house show, *Desperate Housewives* has attained mass appeal and achieved broader, sustained success. Jason Mittell argues that "[t]he mixing of genres is a cultural process enacted by industry personnel, often in response to audience viewing practices" (7). In the thirteen years that separate *Twin Peaks* and *Desperate Housewives*, audiences have accepted the blending of generic conventions, become more sophisticated in reading the texts, and, as Steven Johnson affirms, are now rewarding narrative complex-

Desperate Housewives (ABC) Season 2. Episode: They Asked Me Why I Believe In You. Airdate: October 23, 2005. Shown: Nicollette Sheridan (as Edie Britt). *Photo courtesy of Photofest.*

ity by tuning in (65). Such complexity and the producers' accommodation of audience demands (traditional in daytime soaps and evidenced by scene and casting changes in the pilot episode in response to advanced screenings)[3] certainly account, in part, for *Desperate Housewives*'s success. But as Mittell contends,

> [j]ust as Foucault asserts that discourses are always processes of power, genres are also constituted by power relations. Genres are not neutral categories but are situated within larger systems of power and thus come "fully loaded' with political implications. (19)

Thus, the audience's acceptance and facilitation of generic changes represents more diversified perspectives and is indicative of wider social and political changes.

In the case of *Desperate Housewives*, which is primarily concerned with a feminine and familial discourse, social and political change in terms of gender and the representation of women is particularly relevant and evident, as it is a show that could have arisen only in a postmodern, postfeminist world. Drawing attention to its own construction and blurring generic boundaries, *Desperate Housewives* embodies postfeminism in its knowing, yet self-reflexive examination of women in contemporary society. Informed by and incorporating feminism, postfeminism also critiques feminism and re-identifies with traditional representations of women and femininity (Brooks; Whelehan; Richardson). As Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young explain,

> [t]he generations of women coming of age after the women's movement of the 1960s find themselves in an ambiguous position: they have indubitably benefited from feminism's push for education and access to the professions, but they still experience pressures from without and desires from within for romance and family. In short, they are caught between competing demands to be strong and independent while retaining their femininity. (9)

The inherent tensions at work in postfeminism are not only at play in *Desperate Housewives* but are announced by the title and series' title sequence.

In literal terms, the word *desperate* means to be reckless from despair, to be without hope or to be very serious or dangerous (*The Macquarie Dictionary*). Creator Marc Cherry relates his inspiration for both the title and the show to a comment made by his mother while watching coverage of the 2002 trial of Andrea Yates, a young Texan mother found guilty of drowning her five children (Sayeau 44). Cherry claims he sought to examine the notion of desperation in relation to women and their social and familial choices and explains that in the show, "[a]ll these women have made some kind of choice in their life and are in various stages of regretting it. That's where the desperation comes from" (ctd. in Peyser and Jefferson 50). Beyond Cherry's own explanation, the title operates on a number of levels. The sexualized aesthetic of the series' pre-release publicity fueled the assumption that the term *desperate* made reference to sexual desperation, drawing on stereotypes of bored and lonely housewives such as those depicted in *Hollywood Wives* or the prime-time soap *Knots Landing*. But this supposition is deceptive, because rather than regressing to an established convention, the pairing of the two previously disassociated words *desperate* and *housewives* serves to transgress previous stereotypes. As Rosemary Neill suggests, "Until the advent of this show, the word housewife was almost a put-down; it reeked of Mr. Sheen, frozen veg and quiet subjugation" (28). She claims that "[w]ith its glamour, intrigue and women who stand up to their men, this dangerously dysfunctional neighborhood has reclaimed the word housewife for generations of overlooked women" (28). Moreover, Ann Oldenburg maintains that the advent of *Desperate Housewives* on television screens "shows how much our society and the notion of a 'housewife' has changed" (9). Thus, the

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show (arguably with success that is in no small part due to the title), recognizes a cultural climate in which not only do women have choices that include staying at home as a "housewife," but that this option is accepted to the extent that the term can now be satirized.

The term *housewife* became widely used in popular culture in the 1950s, and while at its inception it was associated with the positive and restorative features of the postwar domestic and familial ideal, it took on derogatory or negative connotations with the advent of second-wave feminism that set itself up as "other" to housewives (Johnson and Lloyd). In *The Second Sex,* Simone de Beauvoir asserts that "[w]oman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home—that is to say, immanence" (471). She identifies housewives as representative of all that is wrong with women's lives and claims that the subservient and endlessly repetitive daily work with which they are engaged prevented their pursuit of self-actualization or self-realization (449). Germain Greer similarly condemned the full-time housewife by likening housework to slavery (222). Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) took a less revolutionary stance, but was no less influential in arguing that women should refuse the image of the "happy housewife" and an identity defined by their husbands and strive to develop plans that incorporate their whole lives as women, not just one part of it (Johnson and Lloyd 8–9). However, as Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd argue in *Sentenced to Everyday Life,*

> [i]n exhorting women to "leave home" and find their fulfilment in the world of work, early second wave feminists provided a life story though which women could understand themselves as modern individuals and find the means for their self-actualisation in the world of work. But in doing so feminism confirmed the very way in which home and everyday life had been understood in modernist thought and hence the way it had banished women to the edges of modernity. (154)

In this way, the separation of work and home life, the gendered distribution of labor in the home, and the social importance of work are not challenged. Johnson and Lloyd propose that in light of this narrative, the history of the home and the role of the housewife should be reexamined. They conclude that

> [r]ather than the housewife being victim or failed self, she needs to be recognised as central to the history of the feminist subject and a useful reminder of how the project of feminism has itself been built on this tradition of domesticity as source of critique of the contemporary social world. (160)

It can be argued that only from a sociohistorical standpoint that acknowledges this position can a show with a title (and content) that plays with the word *housewife* become a mainstream hit.

Reinforcing the title's postfeminist allegiance and sense of play, *Desperate Housewives*'s title sequence depicts a series of iconic images of women throughout history that are manipulated into pop-up vignettes. The images convey domesticity and, according to the sequence producers, yU + co, "the history of female angst" (DMN Editorial 2004). As producer Lane Jensen explains, "[e]ach one calls to mind one of the gripes women have faced over the years from infidelity to a husband who can't pick up after himself" (DMN Editorial). The images chosen include *Adam and Eve* (1526), by Lucas Cranach; Egyptian wall paintings; *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife* (1434), by Jan Van Eyck; *American Gothic* (1930), by Grant Wood; a version of *Campbell's Soup Can,* by Andy Warhol; and Lichtenstein-inspired images by Robert Dale (Geldzahler; Hughes; Idato 4; Lancioni). The emphasis on the biblical story of Adam and Eve is made clear with the final image of the characters standing under an apple tree, each holding a red apple, connoting original sin and woman as temptation. The socialized relationships between men and women are clearly foregrounded, with the Jan Van Eyck portrait depicting marriage in Renaissance times, and one of America's most iconic images of man and wife, Wood's *American Gothic* (Biel). Andy Warhol's quintessential pop art piece is a commentary on consumerism, a defining feature of the domestic ideal for housewives in the 1950s and 1960s, and Robert Dale's image both foregrounds and parodies gender roles and relations. These iconic images signal the show's position in an ongoing popular culture discourse and demonstrate an acute awareness of a gendered dialogue, adopting a feminine perspective in the playful and knowing animation of the artworks.

Another device that demonstrates the show's self-awareness and provides a feminized lens on the action is the calm and deliberate narration of Mary-Alice Young. In the discipline of literary studies, it is considered that this type of narration is used to ensure that the reader is given "the sense that the scene's potentially infinite complexity is reduced, ordered and explained to us through the organising and filtering consciousness of a narrator" (Hawthorn 10–11). In *Desperate Housewives*, the perspective provided is that of the recently deceased neighbor, Mary-Alice. Robert Butler notes that "the dead-man talking is part of a long tradition" (3). From Roman playwright Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Thomas Kidd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, the use of a ghost as a narrator is an established literary device (Butler 3). Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones* (2002) provides a contemporary example. Crossing over to cinema, Billy Wilder's classic film *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and, more recently, Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999) provide filmic examples of narratives guided by a deceased character, with William Holden's portrayal of screenwriter Joe Gillis in the former and Kevin Spacey's Lester Burnham in the latter. However, rather than being used in a more traditional sense as a means to enact revenge or to solve the mystery of who has killed them, the implementation of posthumous narration in *American Beauty* and in *Desperate Housewives* appears more concerned with providing a specific perspective. That the narrator is dead lends weight to his or her point of view, promotes an ethereal authority, and elevates the mundane and the ordinary to something of greater importance (Jermyn 175–76). Certainly, both *American Beauty* and *Desperate Housewives* utilize the deceased narrator to set the tone of the narrative—although it is one that is more tongue in cheek than

the classic texts identified above and consistent with what Richard Alleva describes as "a comedy of self" (19).

Within the narrative, however, a key function of Mary-Alice's character is to draw the stories of the four central women together. In this way, *Desperate Housewives* is a framed narrative. Like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1387–1400) and *The Arabian Nights* (c.1450), an overarching narrative provides the framework within which a number of tales are then told (Abbott 25). In the pilot episode, as the camera zooms down from an aerial view of Wisteria Lane with people dressed in black walking into the Youngs' house, Mary-Alice establishes her role in the narrative: "I was laid to rest on a Monday. After the funeral, all the residents of Wisteria Lane came to pay their respects, and as people do in these situations, they brought food." She then uses the food they bring to the wake as a metaphor for each character and segues into their individual stories, including flashbacks and real-time scenes as each enters the house. Lynette Scavo's takeaway chicken highlights her hectic lifestyle, Gabrielle Solis's spicy paella connotes exoticism and overt sexuality, and Bree Van De Kamp's color-coded baskets of muffins display her proficiency and attention to detail, whereas Susan Mayer's inedible macaroni and cheese signals her domestic deficiency. The four women then sit down at Mary-Alice's kitchen table together, where a flashback of them in the same chairs having coffee with Mary-Alice a year earlier (discussing Susan's discovery of her husband's affair), effectively encapsulates the show's whole dynamic. These scenes establish the characters' relationships with one another, the centrality of the women in the narrative, the domestic space in which the action takes place, and the infused element of darkness and intrigue as they question why Mary-Alice killed herself as her husband, Paul, listens in from the next room. It is the mystery surrounding Mary-Alice and her suicide that frames the first season, and although this narrative question is resolved and another is established in its place as the seasons progress, importantly, Mary-Alice's presence remains.

Considering *Desperate Housewives*'s first season alone, suburban gothic can be seen to have comfortably relocated to Wisteria Lane: the picture-perfect facades, the dark secrets, the haunting memories, and the discovered document that threatens to expose the past.

As well as using a framed narrative—a familiar trope of gothic fiction, evident in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and more recently, Glenda Adams's *The Tempest of Clemenza* (1996)—*Desperate Housewives* reveals its affinity with the gothic genre and exploitation of gothic themes. Traditionally, these include love, sexuality, seduction, murder, death, decay, secrecy, and perversions behind the veneer of virtue (Edmundson). As a means of exploring humanity's darkest fears, elements of the gothic have endured from their inception in eighteenth-century fiction to the horror films of the 1930s and slasher flicks of the 1970s and 1980s. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, gothic traits have been appropriated in literature, film, and beyond. Mark Edmundson argues in *Nightmare on Main Street* that "American culture at large has become suffused with Gothic assumptions, with Gothic characters and plots" (xii) and cites Stephen King, Quentin Tarantino, modes of psychotherapy, television news programs, and *Oprah* as exemplars of its reach. Examining the series *Twin Peaks*, Lenora Ledwon argues that

> its very fluidity and resistance to boundaries make the Gothic a particularly apt genre for television. . . . *Twin Peaks* taps into this Gothic resistance, creating a Television Gothic characterised by a polysemous mingling of "authentic" representations which constantly forces the viewer into an uneasy oscillation between ways of understanding. (260)

Robert Mighall similarly acknowledges the transportability of gothic conventions and has been credited with coining the term *suburban gothic* (Beckwith 363). He describes the literary genre as a nightmare of "modernity and anonymity, where appearances of respectability can be deceptive, and where, in place of legends, the burden of the past is recorded in legal documents or memories, to be discovered by blackmailers or detectives" (Mighall 129). Considering *Desperate Housewives*'s first season alone, suburban gothic can be seen to have comfortably relocated to Wisteria Lane: the picture-perfect facades, the dark secrets, the haunting memories, and the discovered document that threatens to expose the past. The extended subsequent seasons introduce new characters, representing new threats to the careful balance of suburban life and the social conventions it represents.

The tension between what is real and what is unreal that typifies the gothic genre recurs throughout almost every aspect of *Desperate Housewives.* The title—in which each word evokes its own sociocultural meaning yet suggests another when the two are combined—foreshadows this uneasiness with authenticity. The narration by Mary-Alice does as well. She is set up as the perfect housewife, only to be revealed in the first moments of the series to be the most desperate of them all, having taken her own life. Importantly, it is the very inclusion of familiar tropes, gender stereotypes, and cultural references (such as those in the soap, domestic comedy, and gothic genres explored above) that allow the audience access to a text that essentially seeks to expose, if not disrupt, those generic and gendered conventions.

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NOTES

1. *Sex and the City* was successful in the United States, Australia, Canada, Europe, and Asia, and won four Emmys, three Golden Globes, and a Screen Actors' Guild award (Creeber 141). As well as the box-office success of the *Sex and the City* movies, the strong fan base for the TV show is evidenced by ongoing DVD sales, the popularity of *Sex and the City* tours through New York City, and the continued maintenance of fan Web sites.

2. One of *Desperate Housewives*'s intertextual strengths is that many of the cast have appeared in one or more of the prime-time soaps at some stage of their career. For example, Marcia Cross featured in *Knots Landing, Melrose Place,* and *Everwood*; Doug Savant in *Knots Landing* and *Melrose Place*; Nicollette Sheridan in *Paper Dolls* and *Knots Landing*; and Jesse Metcalfe in *Passions*.

3. Changes such as the actor for the role of the young gardener, John Rowland, and sections of the narration are explained by Marc Cherry on the audio commentary of the "Pilot" episode on the DVD set *Desperate Housewives: The Complete First Season* (2005).

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