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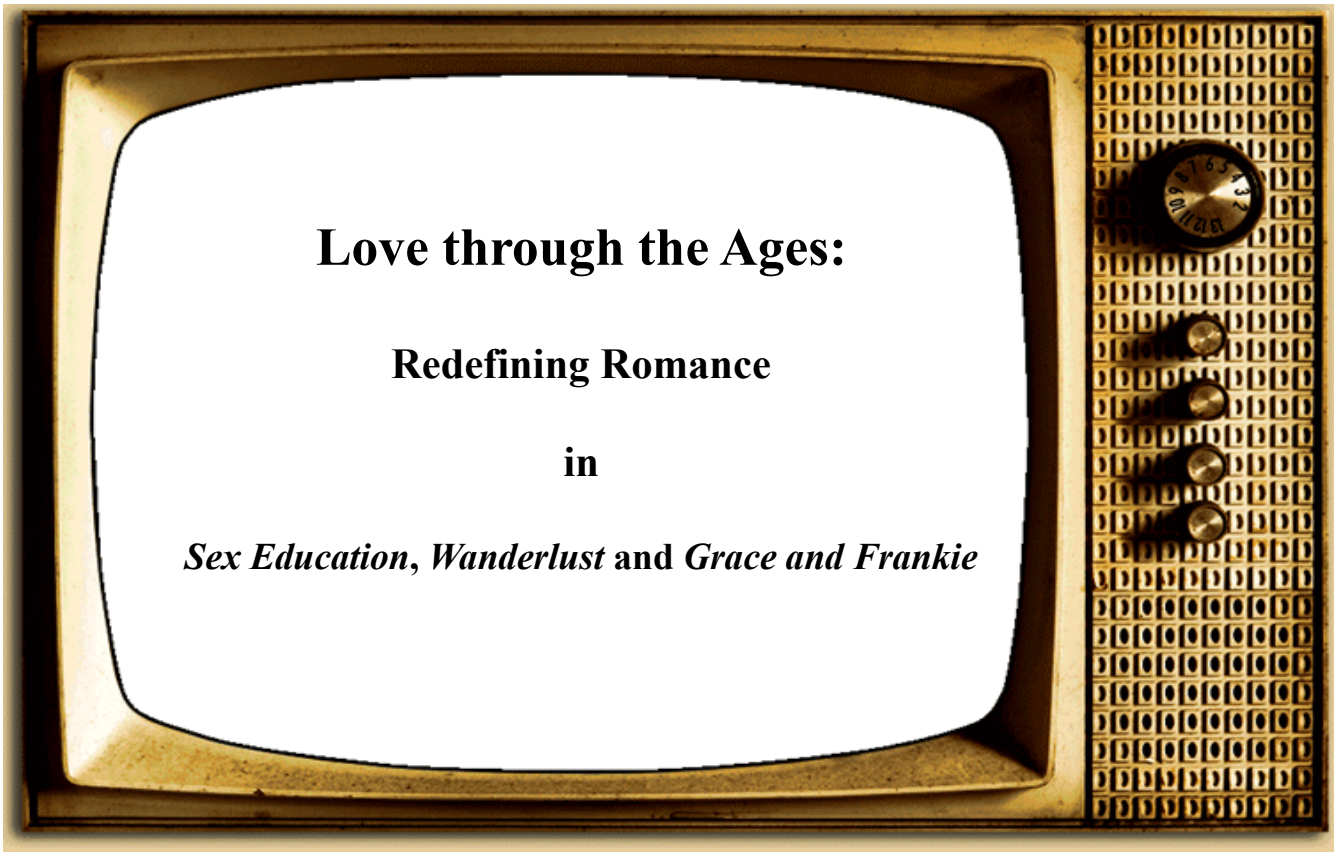
Thesis Literary Studies

October 2019



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Introduction and Literary Review

> "Everyone knows how romantic comedies end: with a kiss." (Glitre 1)

> "Romance fiction is deliberately removed from actual life." (Weisser 181)

> "[Rom coms] were the movies most interested in how ordinary people connect. And they're essentially gone. This is moviemaking that explores a basic human wonder about how to connect with a person who's not you. And here we are dancing on its grave." (Morris)

Kathrina Glitre's first quote introduces a 2006 analysis of the persistence of romantic comedy conventions from the 1930s to the 1960s. The second is from the introductory pages of *The Glass Slipper* (2013) in which Susan Weisser discusses post-feminist romance literature. The third is from *The New York Times* writer Wesley Morris in a 2019 piece on the disappearance of the romantic comedy. These three quotes are only a selection of similar views expressed in various publications and all seem to reach the same two conclusions: romantic comedies have no grounds in reality and the genre has essentially been declared dead.

The aim of this thesis is to contest these claims and demonstrate that television has shaped the new iteration of romantic comedy, using *Sex Education*, *Wanderlust* and *Grace and Frankie* as leading examples.

Glitre's work does not discuss works after 1965 but scholars such as Steve Neale, Frank Krutnik, Kathleen Rowe, Tamar Jeffers McDonald and William Paul have researched the genre up until the 2000s and all present the idea that the romantic comedy as a genre adheres to traditional gender roles and romantic values, showing little innovation: "It is extremely rare for a romantic comedy to end without the union of a couple; it is equally rare for the union to involve people other than the two lead actors. In other words, we usually know how the plot will be resolved just by looking at the opening credits" Glitre says (2). In "Conforming Passions: Contemporary Romantic Comedy" (2002), Krutnik argues that although the genre of romantic comedy can be aware of the artificiality of its conventions, it still adheres to them. Jeffers McDonald, in *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (2007), agrees that "although the current romantic comedy seems to have acknowledged the difficulties of finding true love, it nevertheless continues to endorse the old fantasies" (14). Romantic comedy, says Jeffers McDonald, stems from traditional practices of courtship, gender relations, and sexual intimacy (13) and the contemporary romantic comedy is "irrelevant to modern life" (Grindon 59). A few critics challenge this notion. Rowe, for instance, finds that although romantic comedies do uphold traditional values, they also allow a space for independent and progressive women and social changes that many other genres do not (60). In "Between Friends: Love and Friendship in Contemporary Hollywood Romantic Comedy," Celestino Deleyto argues that the genre has undergone continuous change in representing society's views on love and romance and that the genre increasingly allows alternate 'happy endings'. Still, the belief persists that romantic comedy spreads a false consciousness about gender relations, courtship and sexuality, and films that subvert such traditions or include criticism of these notions are deemed to fall outside the genre (Grindon 78). Many have found that the Hollywood romantic comedy is ideological in its

promotion of illusions about romantic love, promoting “an ideal which can only exist elsewhere” (Glitre 6). Even the screwball comedy, applauded for its witty dialogue, unconventional women and ‘battle of the sexes’, still adheres to the “inherently conservative” status quo: “The idealization of the couple and the convention of the happy ending encourages the audience to indulge in blissful daydreams about finding their true love” (Grindon 77). In *How To Write A Romantic Comedy* (2000), Billy Mernit says that ultimately, “the hidden challenge of every romantic comedy lies in getting the audience to believe that two people absolutely must end up together” (Mernit 125). In short, there seem to be quite clear-cut rules for the romantic comedy, and these rules go back to where the contemporary romantic comedy grew its roots; the works of Shakespeare, William Congreve, Oscar Wilde and Jane Austen. Northrop Frye, who discusses the genre in “The Argument of Comedy” (1949) and “The Mythos of Spring: Comedy” (1966), proposes theories of romantic comedy’s history, narrative, setting, plot and characters. He traces the genre back to the classical ‘New Comedy’ and establishes its ongoing conventions, spanning the works of Shakespeare up to the twentieth century motion picture. Whilst contemporary critics acknowledge the interest and influence of Frye’s findings, they are also critical of them. Glitre and Rowe criticize him for being too focused on male possession, for dismissing a couple’s difficulties in finding common ground and for failing to recognize the importance of historical change in the genre (Glitre 12-13; Rowe 107-110). Frye ascertained the importance of romantic comedy as a genre by highlighting the ongoing conventions, but it is contemporary critics like Rowe, Glitre and Jeffers McDonald that contributed to a more precise research into the genre and its transformation. Neale writes about the ideological and structural characteristics of romantic comedy and Krutnik’s examination of the cycles of romantic comedy in film inspired Leger Grindon’s further research. Jeffers McDonald examines specific subgroupings of the ‘rom-com’

and “The Impossibility of Romance: Hollywood Comedy, 1978-1999” (2002) by William Paul concludes that romantic comedy’s weakness is that it fails to portray a sincerely and believable union of lovers. Where Krutnik and Neale find that romantic comedy affirm traditional romantic values and gender roles, Paul argues that these films reflect scepticism towards love precisely because they paint such an idealistic and incredible picture. Leger Grindon uses these different interpretations to explore the history of the Hollywood romantic comedy and its conventions in *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy* (2011). Grindon points out that a history of romantic comedy calls for a model that underlines the evolution of these conventions and the cause of these changes: “The key link between external changes and internal changes is the social conflicts animating a genre” (Grindon 73).

A genre must draw from related cultural phenomena in order to persist and the romantic comedy has certainly done so. Neither Frye nor the researchers mentioned above limited the genre to romance novels. Genres are not determined by texts alone and neither can they be determined solely by a certain plot element, in the case of the romantic comedy, ‘the happy ending’. Glitre is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, saying that “everyone knows how romantic comedies end” (1) but if genre must be determined in light of historical instances, and a genre then is an ongoing process of transformation, then we cannot, in fact, know how romantic comedies end. The rules and values of romantic comedy must change as the rules and values of society do. In his 1978 essay “Romantic Comedy Today” Brian Henderson proclaimed that the contemporary comedy was made ‘impossible’ as a result of important changes in western sexual culture, gender relationships and identity and he subsequently predicted the death of the genre as a whole. “Famously misguided” says Deleyto about this in *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, because romantic comedy has in fact undergone a transformation that has allowed it to survive

and thrive by offering variants of the traditional happy ending. So, the genre has maintained its popularity throughout its move from novels to film and now to television as well. This is notable, since both romantic comedy and television have been dismissed as forms of entertainment from which "intelligent people must keep a certain distance" (Bigsby xi). For a long time, romantic comedies were considered a fantasy whilst television existed mostly to paint an idealized picture of the American way of life (Bigsby 360). Today however, television is the most popular form of mass entertainment and reflective of whatever issues are most alive in society. Human relationships have always been of interest and our modern, technologically advanced, society has entered a new era in terms of connecting with others. We, the "denizens of our liquid modern society" no longer have bonds that are unbreakable or that are expected to be long-term (Bauman 33). In *The Glass Slipper*, Weisser said that "romance is the new marriage" (2). We grew up with the idea of the 'happily ever after' and the hope to find 'The One', but today, we have to marry the opposing ideals of finding 'The One' and achieving success through independence and prioritising self-love. As Morris says in *The New York Times*: "The work of partnership has to wait. There's too much personal work to be done […] You know what they say: How you gonna love somebody else if you can't love yourself?" This conflict influences the way we look at the concept of the romantic comedy and subsequently the way we apply it. As society's most used medium of self-reflection, contemporary television reflects this conflict and adds a new chapter to the genre of romantic comedy.

As mentioned above, the aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how the conventions of romantic comedy have been adapted and reapplied to represent a new phase in romantic comedy in both content and chosen medium. To do so, it is important to investigate the definition and evolution of what we now call the "romantic comedy". I shall do this by delving into some of the

major research that has been done up until now and by tracing the history of the romantic comedy. I shall investigate how romantic conventions are used in canonical romantic comedies and which societal changes influenced these portrayals. Finally, I shall take an in-depth look at the way in which certain romantic topoi are employed in three modern-day romance stories and how these stories, by reflecting current society's views on romantic love, signify a new stage in the genre of romantic comedy.

Romance fiction inevitably reveals much of the romantic values and traditions of its time, reflecting cultural and societal changes that promoted changes in the romance literature. This literature in turn may contribute to further such changes. As Michael Mack attests: "Literature not only represents to us our world but it also shows us ways in which we can change the world or adapt to changes which have already taken place" (8). Naturally, much of the research has been focused on books and cinema. Although the focus of this thesis centres around three television series, I shall first look at the history of romantic comedy on film, as it is in the cinema that the romantic comedy most flourished. Below, I explore the history of romantic comedy to demonstrate how literature's romance conventions were upheld through nearly a decade of film- and now television making. Then television's representation of the romantic comedy shall be addressed for if we are to look at the way romance fiction has evolved, television can no longer be excluded. In this thesis I shall analyse the portrayal of romance in three popular Netflix shows, namely *Sex Education*, *Wanderlust* and *Grace and Frankie*. I shall analyse the use of genre conventions in the three television shows and demonstrate the ways in which they reflect societal changes, qualifying them for the new phase in the genre's continuous transformation.

It would be impossible to encompass all takes on romance in pop culture, but with these three ongoing works I believe I can show the updated romantic comedy for every generation and

also include a wide variety of backgrounds, cultural contexts and sexualities, which is key to representing current Western society. My chapter plan will focus on these three series and their interpretation of romantic conventions. Chapter I will focus on tech-savvy adolescents in 2018 in *Sex Education*; Chapter II will move on to romance post-marriage in *Wanderlust* and Chapter III discusses relationships among divorced pensioners in *Grace and Frankie*. In doing so, I will demonstrate that society's changed conventions have resulted in a new phase for the romantic comedy in both content and form.

Retracing Romantic Comedy's Conventions

In *The Glass Slipper,* Susan Weisser declares that although traditional ideas about romance have somehow managed to survive the feminist critiques, love stories "in text and in life are pretty clear apples and oranges" (182). She finds that romance stories are removed from reality, relegated to fantasies and escapism. In *The New York Times,* columnist Alice Mathias argues that technology has replaced "the classic process of romance". In that same newspaper, the popular "Modern Love" column offers modern takes and opinions on love and romance, many of which echo Weisser and Mathias. Mathias' claim, alongside Weisser's and Morris', may lead us to wonder what this "classic process of romance" is precisely, and what has caused it to end, if indeed it did. How have these writers arrived at the conclusion that 'romance' is no longer part of our lives as it once was, but has instead become relegated to a mere fantasy. Even to begin answering that question, one has to take a closer look at the definition of romance and how this has been cultivated throughout the years in terms of literature. The term 'romance' has a long history of changing semantics and "for all the ease with which we use the word 'romance' today, the birth of the category itself was a contested and tempestuous affair" (Lee 301). According to Lee, we think of romance now "as a vast literature of love" (292) and films that have "romance and comedy as primary components or are without other components" are romantic comedies (Henderson 12). As mentioned earlier, both romance novels and romantic comedies are often spoken of derisively and disregarded as fantasies. Film and novel romances offer many wondrous romances that end in marriage, but this is at odds with both the history of marriage as an institution, and with our society's changing views on marriage, independence and romance. Traditional ideas of what romance is supposed to look like do not correspond with our

every-day experiences. In *Modern Love* (2003), David Shumway examines the history of Hollywood romances and explores what these films reveal about society's discourse on romance and marriage. He leaves out television for reasons that will be explained later on. Shumway's main claim is that the discourse of romance has resulted in a 'spin-off' of sorts: the discourse of intimacy. He explains his theory by way of in-depth looks at staples of romance: the classic tragedies of romance, namely *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Casablanca* (1942), the screwball comedies such as *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *The Lady Eve* (1941), the cynical romance comedies like *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Moonstruck* (1987) and the typical Hollywood romantic comedy that flourished in the 1990s, such as *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *Runaway Bride* (1999). It is because a work reflects its time and society that a reader can identify with the protagonists and will respond emotionally to a narrative. The narrative may be regarded as a fantasy but its audience must be able to identify with it in order for it to be successful. This can only be done by acknowledging the audience's real life experiences.

Shumway establishes that, in the 19th century, the novel became a medium of mass entertainment that had the power to engender emotional involvement in its readers, in the form of 'identification'. Although film is a different medium, these love stories have their "pedigree" in the literary classics that include Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Oscar Wilde, and therefore share certain conventions (Morris). Like Deleyto, Leger Grindon finds that the romantic genre has continuously undergone a transformation fuelled by an equally changing society. Grindon outlines consecutive phases specifically within the romantic comedy genre which are driven by the major conflict, the model plot, the major characters, the function of masquerade, the use of setting and the viewer's emotional response. These elements make up the genre's conventions

and it is the employment of these elements that reflects society's values surrounding romance. Below, I shall briefly explain these conventions and their function as representational device.

The major conflict exists in three varieties. There is the generational conflict, in which the couple must oppose an authority figure who insists on a different social tradition. In this conflict, it is the old society that opposes the new and stands in the way of change. As in literature like Jane Austen's or Shakespeare's, this may be a male (father) figure or a high-ranking member of society. A second major conflict is the battle between sexes, which reflects and plays upon the gender culture dominant within society. This conflict "testifies to the evolving qualities characterizing opposing gender cultures" (Grindon 4) and also reflects the changing status of women in modern times. The real-life opposition between gender cultures is often a source of tension in romantic comedies and has subsequently become a dominant conflict. A third is the "widespread conflict of personal development versus self-sacrifice" (5). Increasingly, romantic comedies reflect the belief that both men and women must establish self-reliance in order to find happiness in a healthy relationship. This is a relatively new development that did not come into fruition until what Grindon calls the 'nervous romances' and Shumway refers to as 'relationship stories' such as *Annie Hall*, *Moonstruck* (1987) and *Broadcast News* (1987). Part of this new type of romantic comedy is the conflict of monogamy in the context of long-term versus temporary romances, and the importance of deep friendship as a meaningful alternative to sexual relationships. The increasing presence of homosexuality, says Grindon, "presents a related challenge" (6) because homosexual or non-heteronormative characters and storylines have been limited in mainstream film and television. Finally, and very importantly, there is the "internal struggle" that presents a possible conflict in a romantic comedy: "The internal conflict between scepticism and faith in love" plays a very large role in the

contemporary romantic genre (8). These conflicts establish the discourse upon which the remaining conventions are constructed.

The plot of the romantic comedy is generally understood to be: “The couple meets and falls in love. Obstacles intervene to separate the lovers. The body of action involves wrestling with the obstacles until the couple can be united, usually in marriage” (9). These intervening obstacles vary because they are shaped by “the courtship practice, sexual mores and gender culture” of its era (9). Mernit’s plot model for the romantic comedy “follows the intuitive logic of a credible courtship” and includes the expression of a desire, the meeting of the potential lovers, the journey, the conflict, the choice, the crisis, the epiphany and the resolution (109-17). The resolution often offers the well-established conventions of a happy ending but the contemporary romantic comedy knows a variety of alternative resolutions. Grindon emphasizes the addition of the so-called ‘ensemble plot’, or “multi-protagonist narratives” that offer multiple would-be couples and a multitude of resolutions to story-lines (11).

The conventional characters of the romantic comedy are categorized by Grindon as “the lovers and their helpers” versus “the obstacle figure” (12). Though these staples are still found in the majority of the contemporary romances, the obstacle figure, familiar as the “father as the ruling patriarch” or a particular authority figure (12) may now be a friend, a religious or cultural difference, an ex-lover or (a part of) society. The lovers must be in possession of a personality ‘that stands out from the crowd’, the individual must be seen and understood, identified with and recognized as a human being who rises above the typical. This is often established by introducing more characters and more couples to showcase the primary couple as a counterpoint, both in a positive and negative sense. As friends have replaced relatives as the “chief social grouping” (Shumway 164), they tend be the ‘helpers of the lovers’ in modern romances.

A similar development can be seen for the 'masquerade', which may be literal, such as Rosalind in *As You Like It* (1603) and Viola in *Twelfth Night* (1602) and its contemporary adaptations such as *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *She's the Man* (2006). As the genre expanded, however, varieties began to form here too. Crossdressing characters still make an appearance, but more often seen forms of masquerades include using disguises to seduce the other (or same) sex, assuming an alternate version of oneself, for instance by creating dishonest profiles on dating websites or pretending to be another person for a moment to gain entrance to invite-only events. Jeffers McDonald emphasized the masquerade as a key trope in the romantic comedy, even if only in the form of fooling one's self (13). Grindon further explores this matter, concluding that this is because "the aspiration to satisfy your partner transforms the self into realizing unsuspected qualities" (17). A fundamental conflict within the genre of the romantic comedy is the internal struggle of multiple personalities within the self. Masquerade becomes an instrument through which characters explore their identity in a quest for love (18).

Romantic comedy conventionally constructs a setting for transformation. As forests and islands did in Shakespeare and Elizabeth's travel in Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* (1813), so does the contemporary romantic comedy make use of the same techniques. Taking the characters out of their routines lives allows them to be open to transformation. This relocation or removing from routine does not have to entail a relocation to a different country, setting, or living space. It can also be psychological, even though many romantic comedies use the physical relocation in order to create a speedy but still credible transformation and courtship. Northrop Frye named these settings "the green world" which can be literal, as in Shakespeare, or metaphorical, as in the series discussed in this thesis (182). Aside from the removal of the characters from their routine lives, there is the setting of the story at large. Ultimately, the setting in a romantic

comedy must provide a situation for the characters in which, contrary to their normal routine, repressions fade and emotions come forward (Grindon 20).

As attested by Shumway and Grindon, and the reader that made romance literature so popular, key to a credible romance is that the audience can identify with the protagonist. Experiencing human struggles and the development of romance through the eyes of the protagonist and witnessing the transformation of a character and subsequent growing bond between characters encourages 'identification'. Up until recently the central question to any romantic comedy was: "will these two individuals become a couple?" (Mernit 13). Grindon claims that, more than the plausibility of the main couple, the heart of successful love stories today is that they deal with dramatic conflicts central to human experience. There is recognizable drama in such narratives, serious problems, but the process often appears to be light-hearted, instilling a confidence in the audience that, in the end, matters will be resolved in a hopeful, positive, way. "If humor established the tone," says Grindon, "courtship provides the plot" and in the broad sense of the romantic comedy, this remains true (2). Mernit says that "the transforming power of love is the overarching theme" and more than anything, romantic comedy engages in "the discourse of love, representing the shifting practice of, and the evolving ideas about, romance in our culture" (2). This is demonstrated once again by the genre's television iteration.

The framework of romantic comedies arise from genre conventions set by authors such as Shakespeare, Austen and Wilde and are therefore a continuation of this genre. *Sex Education*, *Wanderlust* and *Grace and Frankie* are a continuation of these stories and they too reflect the cultural and social values and constructs of their time. Even if reflection can only happen in hindsight and these series are still ongoing, we can study these works in the context and tradition

of the romantic comedy and draw the conclusion that though they reflect many changes in many ways, they still adhere to the conventions set by the genre a long time ago.

The Transformation of Romantic Comedy in Cinema

To fully understand in which ways these works represent evolvement for the genre as a whole (as a framework of conventions), it is important to first establish a context. To do so, we must take a look at the history of the genre in film and television. Because television is only now starting to be seen as a serious alternative for films, most literature on the conventions of screen romance focus on films. In *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, Grindon identifies nine cycles of romantic comedy, which I shall briefly summarize.

The first cycle is the transition to Sound Cluster (1930-3), in which Hollywood made the transition from silent comedies to films that included and highlighted a humorous treatment of speech and wise-cracks that was more theatre than natural dialogue. However, as dialogue worked its way into films, censorship came into play. As a result, writing had to be clever enough to allude to and suggest more than it had permission to do.

Due to the stock market crash of 1929 and the aftermath of WWI, “hard times were banished from romantic comedies” (Grindon 30) and romantic comedies showed wealthy people in luxurious settings far removed from ‘real life’. By taking these stories away from a natural and believable setting and withholding the real-life crises, these stories would not be considered realistic, merely a form of entertainment.

The Screwball Cycle (1934-42) followed from the release of *It Happened One Night* (1934) and, alongside *The Thin Man* (1934), formed a turning point in the history of the romantic comedy. Films such as *The Awful Truth* (1937), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *His Girl Friday* (1940) and *The Lady Eve* (1941) form the greatest hits of this cycle and the genre in general. These films presented a new form of courtship and married life. Instead of traditional gender

roles, it showed strongminded individuals who entered into marriages that "honoured each as autonomous individuals and found its joy in their special partnership; child rearing and family values were beside the point" (Grindon 33). These comedies offered a positive outlook and offered humour and light-heartedness: "these familiar challenges were portrayed […] with a belief that the crisis could be mastered" (32). The screwball comedy also showed admiration for and belief in unconventional and independent women. These comedies paved the way for 'the battle of the sexes' as the major conflict in the story. It can be argued, as Grindon also points out, that a point of criticism is that these films still often end in a (re)marriage of people, even when a different resolution would seem more plausible. Glitre discusses this trend being due to the Production Code, which ensured that "there is no alternative to marriage" (44). Kisses, embraces or any portrayal of passion were not permitted on screen and so the tale of romance and courtship had to take place as if in denial of sex. Writers, filmmakers and actors were required to "persuasively stage a courtship while concealing its most fundamental motivation" (Grindon 34). It is both the intensification of dialogue and the restrictions of censorship that give the screwball comedy its quick-witted banter and strong characters: "The very style of screwball, the complexity and inventiveness and wit of its detours…cannot be explained without the recognition of the censors" (Rubinstein 45) and it is also why the screwball couple often seem more like friends and partners than lovers (Grindon 36). This last notion is particularly interesting as romantic comedy makes increasingly more room for friendship as an alternative to romance.

The WWII Cluster and Home Front Romantic Comedy (1942-6) was born from a problematic time for the romantic comedy. Filmmakers explored ways to shape the romantic comedy to wartime condition, wanting to both maintain the genre's popularity and support the

military crusade (Grindon 38). Many attempts failed to be successful because the audience found the films to be indifferent to the war conditions, offensive to the situation or implausible. The war also prompted a return to more traditional gender roles. The "equality of the companionate romance developing in screwball was eroded" and gender differences were reinforced (40). This "reverse of the old screwball pattern" persisted through the decade with women portrayed as having to compromise their career in order to achieve success in romance. By the end of WWII, the romantic comedy, "sapped of its wit and energy", seemed to be dying out as a genre (42).

The Post-War Cluster (1947-53) saw traditional gender roles re-established which heavily influenced the romantic comedy. "The separation between masculine and feminine sphere seemed enormous; men felt a perpetual threat to the stability of their masculine authority, while women were beginning to question the normality of traditional feminine roles" (Henry Jenkins 253). Where the screwball cycle emphasized the gender conflict by portraying differences in gender, class and power and gained a sense of realism, the post-war romance highlighted the gender differences. Banter in the screwball comedy is part of the courtship ritual, but in the post-war cluster, it is used to erupt and aid conflict which alienates man and woman more than it brings them together.

The Comedies of Seduction Cycle (1953-66) signified a new turning point. In 1953, Marilyn Monroe appeared in three films and in the first edition of *Playboy*, Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* and the Production Code was losing its hold. Such events let the idea take shape that seduction leads to romance and that sex is part of courtship. The films of this time reflect the slowly loosening moral codes and discourse around sex, but they do not show sex on screen. As Jeffers McDonald explains: "The sex comedy builds its plot around the prospect of sex and discusses it blatantly but sex rarely takes place and never

on screen" (43). Instead, the seducer fails in his attempts and agrees to get married, reaffirming traditional values, despite the absence of conventional romantic courtship and even lack of love. In these films, "the opposite sex is viewed as the enemy to be conquered rather than as a helpmate" (Glitre 157). Marriage prevails in the end, showing that these films do engage the dominant conventions of its genre (Grindon 48). It must be addressed that in this same era, a polar opposite to Marilyn Monroe's characters was equally successful. Doris Day represents the more straight-laced opposite, often portraying a hard-working professional woman with a backbone and a desire to be married and raise a family. However, as Grindon points out, where Monroe's characters more embodied a male fantasy than a credible woman, Day's moralistic characters "robbed the comedies of their erotic energy" with happy endings that seemed more an inevitable convention than a true match of mates (49). In the early sixties, society was shaken by the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the death of Monroe. The Beatles rose to fame, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* and the contraceptive pill became accepted fact. So much change shifted the ethos surrounding sex, romance and marriage and this signalled a need for an evolved romantic comedy.

The subsequent Counter-Culture Cluster (1967-76) signifies the genre's search for a new format. The social turmoil of the recession, the Vietnam War, marginalized groups, women's changing roles, the rising divorce rate and more blatant discussion of sexuality had to have their effect on the romantic comedy. The Production Code's strict standards for sexual representation had been eroding since the fifties but in 1968 was replaced by a new ratings system that allowed filmmakers more freedom. The question that followed from this, however, was: "Can sex be openly posed?" which caused anxiety among filmmakers. It was precisely the more explicit treatment of sex, says Brian Henderson, that caused the "death of the genre" (317).

The Nervous Romance Cycle (1977-87) is the first cycle that followed a period of uncertainty for the genre. Because filmmakers were unsure of how to handle their freedom in terms of on-screen sex and passion, parody came to dominate the genre. Parody discussed sex, courtship, romance, marriage and love but it allowed people to turn it into a joke and shy away from serious discussion. Shumway refers to these films as 'relationship stories'. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik call them 'nervous romances' and Jeffers McDonalds names them 'the radical romantic comedy'. All agree that Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977) paved the way for this cycle, which includes films like *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) and *Broadcast News* (1987). Again, this development in the romantic comedy intersects with key changes in society; the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal and economic stagnation lead to melancholy, cynical, sharp-witted films. The public discussion of the abortion issue played a key role as well, allowing politics to shape the tone of these films perhaps more than ever. Jeffers McDonald also notes that "an emphasis of the self is a key element in the romantic comedies of this era" (67). These narratives centre around the question of "what went wrong?" and then looks to deconstruct relationships through discussion and internal reflection. Krutnik writes that these 'nervous romances' "betray an intense longing for the restitution of faith in the stability of the heterosexual couple as some kind of bulwark against the modern world" (63). The ideal of 'one true love' is replaced with the idea that one may have a series of companions over a lifetime and that a healthy relationship with oneself must take precedence. This is where Shumway sees the distinction between the traditional romance and the discourse of relationships (157-187); Where the traditional romance is the traditional courtship ending in a marriage, relationship stories portray an adjusted idea and practice of intimacy in lieu of the fading faith in the institution of marriage. Sex here plays an active part, but instead of being a reward, it often leads to anxiety

and tension. It is in these relationship stories that the external obstacles to romance change from parents, rivals or even specific societal rules, to internal conflict. Sex and relationships become part of the quest to self-fulfilment, rather than a means to a marriage. In these stories, the shift in gender roles and the women's movement undermine the traditional romantic values. However, rather than bring men and women together, these diverging gender cultures remain obstacles between them (Grindon 57). It seems to be here that the so-called old-fashioned romances become labelled as nostalgic fantasies.

The Reaffirmation of Romance Cycle (1986-96) was a direct response to the cynicism of the nervous romances. Neale calls this return to optimistic happy endings "the new romances" (294) and Jeffers McDonald refers to them as "the neo-traditional romantic comedy" (85-105) but they agree on the timeframe and the films that make up this genre. A leading example is 1989's *When Harry Met Sally*. When comparing this film to *Annie Hall*, the differences become clear. Despite having similarities in set-up, dialogue and characters, *Annie Hall* has a more cynical wistfulness, whereas *When Harry Met Sally* ends on the notion that a 'happily ever after' is plausible. This era and its films reaffirm the belief that love is 'real' and can lead to a long enduring commitment. The eighties and nineties have a background of Thatcher, Raeganism, the AIDS crisis and a decline in marriages, yet its films are characterized by a reaffirmation of traditional romantic values. Neale claims that the "dominant ideological tendency" in this era is to move women towards more traditional female roles (294-8) and that many of the social changes that are present in the nervous romances, like a discussion of sex and more freedom for women, are being resisted in the romantic comedies of the nineties. Krutnik writes in 2002 that this 'new romance' return to traditional female roles and romance values, is still the dominant trend in romantic comedies. Jeffers McDonald concludes that the "backlash against the nervous

romance fails to recognize the problems of forming a lasting relationship in a contemporary society" and she sees the reaffirmation of traditional romance conventions as a retreat from realism (85-105). Grindon agrees that "the elimination of sex from courtship removes the screen romance from the experience of the audience" and makes "the romantic comedy irrelevant to modern life" (59).

The Grotesque and Ambivalent Cycle (1997-Present) that follows focusses on romantic comedies from the late 90s and upwards. Grindon uses William Paul's essay "The Impossibility of Romance: Hollywood Comedy 1978-1999" (2002) to talk about the trend in these comedies consciously to refer to its own genre and its conventions. In doing so, these films show their audience that they are aware of the conventions they work within, setting them apart from 'real life'. This trend is what Paul refers to as "quotation". Another trend is "Impossibility", meaning that this era's films tend to use parody or grotesque situations to create a story and a couple that seem completely implausible. The couple must end up together, or the genre's conventions would not be upheld, but their union is implausible. Paul concludes that the genre's inability to provide credible couples arises from our culture's uncertainty about gender roles and an unwillingness to acknowledge love as a uniting force (Grindon 61). People enjoy watching romantic comedies but categorize them as fantastical, not reflective of real life experiences. By the late 1990s a shift can be detected. The reaffirmation of traditional romantic conventions has faded and the uncertainty and scepticism Paul addressed, often combined with grotesque humour, found in situations involving masturbation, voyeurism, fetishes, menstruation, physical jokes and sex as a whole, are now a dominant factor. Films like *There's Something About Mary* (1997), *The Wedding Crashers* (2004) and *Knocked Up* (2006) are often referred to as 'sex comedies'. Grindon and Paul reason that vulgarity is liberating: "Laughter breaks down restraint.

[…] As a result, sexuality is closely allied to the grotesque, even though the grotesque is usually at odds with romance. This paradox […] becomes a pivotal point for contemporary romantic comedy" (Grindon 63). As mentioned before, romantic comedies construct obstacles for the lovers to overcome and with the eroding of many of the conventional social obstacles, these obstacles tend to become psychological ones. In the films made in the late 1990s and 2000s, this reveals itself in the form of doubt and scepticism concerning love. The trends of scepticism and grotesque humour resulted in a new important trend that blends these two. This trend is identified by David Denby in *The New York Times* as 'the slacker-striver romance', in which directionless guys are paired up with ambitious professional women. In films such as *Failure to Launch* (2006) and *Knocked Up* (2007) the women are portrayed as capable, mature and independent, while the men seem stuck in juvenile behaviour patterns. "The slovenly hipster and the female straight arrow" are the dominant trend in this cycle, but they are "strangers to anyone with a long memory of romantic comedy" and it remains unclear throughout why they should be together. Because these unconvincing pairings do not endorse but negate romance, this trend further establishes what Denby calls the "disenchantment of the romantic comedy". It is important to note here that Denby wrote in 2007 and Grindon in 2011. In 2019, the television landscape, if not cinema, has undergone quite a transformation and could therefore be added to form a tenth cycle that reflects social turmoil, cultural differences, gender cultures and sex to be realistically portrayed in a way that still adheres to the conventions of its genre. Likewise, Shumway's book might today add a new chapter, allowing television to add to the landscape of the romantic comedy. Therefore, this cycle might be re-titled 'The Grotesque and Ambivalent Cycle 1997-2010', allowing room for the new cycle to which *Sex Education*, *Wanderlust* and *Grace and Frankie* belong.

In conclusion, the romantic comedy is still a thriving genre in film and on TV, but as society underwent changes, so did the way in which the genre was practiced. Jeffers McDonald, Krutnik, Neale and Paul all write about films up until the late 1990s and Grindon's research goes up until the late 2000s and all conclude that the contemporary romance is in one way or another implausible. Writing in 2019, Morris is convinced the romantic comedy has become extinct. However, I believe that a new transformation has led to a new cycle. This new cycle can be found on television instead of in the cinema, and to understand how television has slowly become a viable alternative to film, the changing dynamics in film and television must be briefly addressed.

The Transformation of Television

Up until 1985, there had been very little scholarly research into television genres, and despite milestone publications such as Stuart Kaminsky's and Jeffrey Mahan's *American Television Genres* and Brian Rose's *TV Genres* in 1985, the romantic comedy was not established as a genre in television. *American Television Genres* examined quiz and game shows, police stories, soap operas, science fiction and horror, comedy, detective programs, and news; the more extensive *TV Genres* surveyed police series, detective shows, Westerns, medical melodramas, science fiction and fantasy TV, situation comedies, soap operas, American made-for-TV movies, docudramas, news, documentaries, sports telecasting, game shows, variety shows, talk shows, children's programming, educational and cultural programming, religious programming, and television commercials" (Edgerton 4). The romantic comedy was not included as a genre because many genres include an element of romance in their story lines but still belonged to a different category than 'romantic comedy'. Of course, the abovementioned publications stem from the eighties and things have changed since then. Shumway's *Modern Love* was published in 2003 and its focus is the portrayal of love and marriage in mass media. The critics mentioned in this thesis so far, focused on film, not television and Shumway does the same because "television is the most conservative in its representations of love" (215) and although it may seem a strange claim to modern tv audiences who are used to television shows like *Game of Thrones* and *Sex and the City*, both filled with uncensored language and nudity, Shumway is not entirely wrong. Until as late as the 1990s, television, like the novel before it, was dismissed as low-quality entertainment. Television was "fast-food entertainment" and "mind candy" (Bigsby xii). For a long time these disparaging remarks were considered justified.

Television existed to give the viewers what they wanted in "low attention span stuff" (Bigsby 76). Television networks' income came from advertisers whose main goal was to appeal to as large an audience as possible. This often meant no nudity, no foul language, no societal anxieties or issues: "You could not write about anything that relates to adult reality" (Bigsby 8). In 2019, the television landscape looks quite different. These days, in television is "where you have the freedom to do interesting things'(Yost qtd. in Sepinwall 423). TV has become a true writer's medium, allowing writers to reflect on complex issues (Bigsby 10-14). The Sundance Film Festival has significant TV presences and film actors regularly opt for television jobs over feature films. "You get to tell unique and very sensitive stories in television and there's really very few places you get to do that today" says TV writer Mark Duplass (qtd in Sepinwall 436). Not only the definitions of romance and love have changed greatly only very recently, so has our mode of story-telling.

Two major developments are at the helm of this new era of television: the rise of HBO and the emergence of recording and streaming services. HBO was around as a network in the 70s and 80s but from the 90s onwards, it changed its tactic. HBO was a paid cable service, which meant that, instead of having to cater to advertisers, it only had to cater to their paying viewers. To attract these viewers, they had to offer them what they wanted and what they wanted, turned out to be *The Sopranos*: "*The Sopranos* changed everything, it rewrote the rules and made TV a better, happier place for thinking viewers" (Sepinwall 36). This may seem like a fan statement, but it is a sentiment shared across the entertainment industry. With *The Sopranos*, HBO showed what was possible in terms of television: "People looked at it and thought, 'My god, you can do on television what I thought people only did in movies'" (Bigsby 15). With their slogan, "It's not TV. It's HBO", the network distanced itself from network television and its limitations, allowing

creators the freedom to make the show they wanted with minimal interference. To demonstrate: network television did not allow any swear words to be written into their shows. The pilot episode of HBO's *Deadwood* contains the word 'fuck' 43 times in a 60 minute episode. "There is an enormous pressure in network television to sand off the rough edges and those rough edges are usually the best parts of a show" (Cuse qtd. in Sepinwall 181). HBO did not demand what Chase calls a "moral code" or any kind of message. Instead, they offered tv creators nearly free range to make what they wanted and changed the face of television; Starting with HBO's *The Sopranos*, television had entered its own "era of the 'auteur" (Sepinwall 72). However, HBO did not long keep its monopoly on this different way of television and soon after *The Sopranos*, other networks dared to follow in its footsteps. Shows like *The Wire*, *Deadwood*, *The Shield*, *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* embraced the newfound freedom in television, including swear words, alcohol, sex and nudity. These popular shows used their characters to address race, addiction, sexuality, religion, care and other real-life issues (Sepinwall 31). Accounting for and engaging with reality and current events was a new development in a landscape that, up until the 90s, had tried mainly to offer content that could not offend anyone. This surge of new television shows also meant new kinds of faces on television. Faces that before would not have had a place on prime time TV. "The dramas of the revolution had been dominated by middle-aged white male anti-heroes" (Sepinwall 436) but today, there are more shows with complex female heroes, prominent characters of colour and a variety of sexuality. A large number of these new type of TV shows are based on journalism, on non-fiction books and on current events.

Alongside this development, another one came into play: the emergence of DVDs, streaming services and social media. The technology used to enjoy and engage with TV shows had advanced to the point where people could become immersed in a show at any given time.

DVD box sets and DVRs made it easy for people to catch on to a show, it allowed people to go back and re-examine certain episodes and the internet allowed people to search for fellow fans, discuss storylines at length and speculate about possible plot twists. “The boom in technology and viewing options created an avenue that hadn’t existed before” (Sepinwall 304). Then Netflix, the “grenade that has blown it all to bits”, drastically changed “both the manner in which people watch individual shows and the way they pay to access them”, essentially creating “a vast library of some of the best television ever made available to its audience” (Sepinwall 430). With the Netflix phenomenon arrived the binge-watching culture. ‘Netflix and Chill’ is now the average pastime and, in a modern sense of romance, the typical date night. Streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime and Disney+, have led to “the rise of the cord cutters”; more and more people abandon cable television completely and use streaming services only (431). This development offers both success and possible failure to new shows. “As far as I can tell”, says media studies professor Anne Helen Petersen, “the general sentiment goes something like this: if it’s not on Netflix, why bother?” (qtd. in Sepinwall 431). Naturally, changes are written about in retrospect, but with the ‘Netflix and Chill’ generation, we seem to be entering new territory. Weisser quotes Vivian Gornick saying that “it’s difficult to find a contemporary Jane Austen or Charlotte Brontë, whose work combines the traditional fantasies of happy-ending romance with literary genius and a serious artistic critique of society” (Weisser 211). Cinemas in 2019 show few traditional romantic comedies and the “rom-com of yesteryear is pretty much extinct” because the modern audience does not respond to these stories any longer (Morris). I aim to demonstrate that the romantic comedy is nowhere near extinct and we are not ‘dancing on its grave’, but it is now found in a different place. Television is where we “engage with the immediate realities of the world” (Bigsby 18) and today’s romantic comedy reflects everyday

life. Perhaps in the 1990s, there was a surge of longing for the escapism of traditional romantic comedy, but a new generation has grown up and with them, a new chapter can be added to the history of literary romance. Television has become a cultural experience, the medium through which society converses with itself "about what it thinks is important" (Bigsby xii) and one thing occupying people's minds in terms of love, is how to manage instilled, perhaps out-moted, notions of romance and reconcile these with the modern liquid society Bauman describes.

In 2019, stories of romance are not simply "of how a man married, or failed to marry, a woman" (Lewis 10). As mentioned earlier, people need to be able to identify with what's happening on screen and the popularity of Netflix series like *Sex Education*, *Wanderlust* and *Grace and Frankie* proves this point. Modern works such as these reveal that we are aware of the conventions, the scepticism, the struggle and yet the wish persists to believe in the happily-ever-after. It is a fantasy of which we have become ashamed and the fight against as much as the desire for it, is the conflict that drives modern tales of romance. In the following chapters, I shall analyse how three popular television shows reflect the current discourse on romance and demonstrate how television has led romantic comedy into a new era.

I

Living a Teenage Dream; Sex, Drugs and Romance in *Sex Education*

Fig. 1. *Sex Education* promotional poster for season 2.

Maeve: “Are you going [to the Happily Ever After Ball]?

Otis: “It’s an appropriated American tradition that celebrates sexism and peddles an unrealistic portrayal of romantic love, so no.”

Maeve: “Ritualized teenage fun sucks.”

(“Episode 7”. 00.01.5)

//

Eric: “Everyone is either thinking about shagging, about to shag, or actually shagging.”

(“Episode 1”. 00.07.37)

//

Aimee: I’ve been wanking all night. I ate four packets of crumpets and I think my clit’s about to fall off.”

(“Episode 6”. 00.43.04)

The quotes above are illustrative of how the discourse on romance and sex has transformed. *Sex Education* might be deemed a ‘sex comedy’ with its unapologetic discussions on all things sex-related and its willingness to show them all on TV. The show does not include these things for shock value or humour, however, but because these topics are part of a teenager’s life and should be included in an honest reflection of it. The premise of *Sex Education*, built around secondary school students dealing with relationships, is not unconventional and on paper might look like any other high school romance. Yet the writers

have adapted the genre's conventions to reflect the modern teenager's struggles with sex and romance as no other show has done so far. *Sex Education* applies the established conventions of a well-known narrative but aims to take "tried and tested tropes and subvert them and look at them from a new perspective" (Thompson). It does so in particular by talking about sex- and intimacy-related issues in an honest but sensitive way, through setting, cast and camera work also play a significant role.

First, the show takes place in an unspecified country and town, combining American elements with British ones and a general "eighties" feel in decor. Creator Laurie Nunn wanted to pay homage to iconic romantic comedies like *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink* and this aesthetic is clearly seen in the setting and décor. The students attend an American-like high school where the top athletes play American football and wear Letterman jackets, but where they also appoint 'head boys'. The characters speak with a British accent and it is specifically mentioned that their country does not have a president ("Episode 4". 00.27.10). It takes the characters and the viewers out of their routine setting, but it plays into the conventions enough to ensure familiarity and identification.

Second, there is the thing that enables the show to address modern sex and relationships the way they do: Otis' mother Jean is a sex therapist. Once this becomes public knowledge in school, Otis becomes the go-to person for advice on all things sexual and romantic because if he raised by a sex therapist, they reason, he must at least know more than they do. Otis is a virgin who cannot masturbate to completion, a story arc which spans the course of the season, so in the practical sense he may know less than his fellow students. Regardless, he lets himself be carolled into setting up a 'sex clinic' at school with his 'business partner' Maeve. Although Otis is reluctant at first to offer advice on something he feels he knows nothing about, he discovers a

talent for it. Sex issues, it turns out, often link to emotional issues, insecurities within relationships, lack of trust, sexuality issues and other deeply personal matters, and here Otis can indeed offer wisdom. As someone who has spent a lot of time on the side line and learning the basics of psycho-analysis from his mother, he knows which questions to ask. Holding office in the school's deserted bathrooms, he occupies one stall while the 'client' occupies the other and lays their anxieties at Otis' feet. As a show that builds its episodes around Otis' 'sex clinic' it has seasonal story arcs, as well as stand-alone sex-related 'issues' each episode. These serve to address any issue regarding sex and relationships that plays a part in the lives of the characters as well as the typical teenager in the real world. This set-up allows the creators to create a new setting for their characters and include any cultural background, sexuality and issue.

This leads to the culturally diverse cast that includes a variety of sexualities and relationships. In 2019, culturally diverse casting is part of a new natural stage in contemporary TV, but up until the earlier 2000s, it was revolutionary to cast racially or culturally diverse characters (Sepinwall 436). Netflix has taken an important step by ensuring diversity in culture, race and sexuality. In *Sex Education*, diversity is the norm and this diverges from the traditions of romance tales in which heterosexual relationships within the same culture remain the dominant subject matter (Shumway 59). In *Sex Education*, "you have a black gay character from a traditional African family, who enjoys dressing up in drag. An East Asian representative in a lesbian couple. A bisexual character doubling up as the school bully. A black head boy with two mums who are in an inter-racial relationship. An Asian gay guy in the "popular" group. And no one makes a big deal about it. Netflix really went and *did* that" (Shadijanova). With this cast and setting, *Sex Education* ensures a wide audience may see themselves represented as part of the norm, no matter how 'different' they feel they are. However, the five core characters are

conventional enough to ensure recognizability for the audience. Otis is the familiar shy and awkward teen who falls in love with a girl who is 'out of his league'. Otis' best friend Eric is openly gay and the daily target of the school bully, Adam. Otis' crush is the rebellious Maeve, who dresses in black and smokes in the bathrooms and Maeve's friend Amy is Adam's ditzy but popular girlfriend. A closer look reveals that most of their story lines also meet the general conventions. Otis has a crush on 'bad girl' Maeve but she does not register his feelings. Instead, she advocates against romance because she refuses to have what she calls "a Cinderella complex" ("Episode 7". 00.01.56) but she secretly likes the school's most popular jock. Eric ends up in a sort-of romance with his bully, Adam, whose behaviour appears to be the result of his sexuality crisis. These story lines are not unlike others we have seen in television shows aimed at teenagers: "All of this might feel a little cliché if it didn't hit so close to home" explains Sophie Benoit, but "while *Sex Education* falls into this teenage fantasy, it also inverts traditional stereotypes, changing the way sexual roles are usually presented on television". *Sex Education* is aware of its audience and it creates a space for questions they deal with.

Moreover, there is an equal focus on what sex means to and entails for young men and women equally. There's the male discomfort and embarrassment about having a large penis, the fear of not 'lasting' long enough during sex, the uncertainty of what oral sex actually entails. The men in the series are just as anxious as the women. Then there is the "game changing" case the show makes for women, from the lesbian couple who don't know how to 'scissor', to the 'nerdy' Lily, who gets her sex ed from fanfiction but because of this, knows exactly what she likes (Hamlett). One of the most telling conversations and representation of today's confusion about romance and relationships, takes place when Amy tries to convince Maeve to get a boyfriend because "it's the best". "Why," Maeve asks her, "what's so great about it?". Amy cannot provide

an answer and leaves it at a shrug ("Episode 4". 00.27.28). Nunn especially wanted to ensure a realistic portrayal of sex and consent issues because although *Sex Education* is a tribute to iconic eighties films, she wanted to address the things these films got 'wrong' in terms of sexualizing men and women and issues of consent (Thompson). In this "confusing and impossibly complicated realm of modern sexuality" representation in literature is key both to allow identification and to create any lasting effect (Gilbert).

The presence of technology and all its possibilities and drawbacks is an indispensable element in this. Because not only are teenagers undeniably having sex, they are "doing so "21st-century style, with mass texts and dick pics and humiliating gifs" (Gilbert). Navigating one's way through the minefield of growing up while taking things such as leaked nude photos, sexting and cyber bullying into account, must be included in contemporary teen romance. As Meg Shields attests, "social media has […] really done a number on the way we relate, interact, and express love for one another". This brings to mind what Zygmunt Bauman says in *Liquid Love* about the consequences of virtual proximity and its effect on relationships: it "renders human connections simultaneously more frequent and more shallow, more intense and more brief" (1168). Representation of this "largely unchartered territory" is an important development particularly because this brings about issues that earlier generations have not had to deal with and that we have not seen representation of: "Navigating sex and other human activities in the Information Age is absurd. No other generation has had to reckon with nudes leaking on Snapchat" (Shields). Social media and smartphones are an essential part of a teenager's life in western society now and it comes with a manual that is in the process of being written.

This then leads to the critical 'identification'. As Shumway wrote, the friend group has become the chief social grouping (164), but topics this intimate are difficult to discuss even with

friends. By talking to Otis, students allow themselves to be open about their issues and talk it through with another person. Grindon gathered that putting characters in a new setting allows them to be vulnerable, which is true for the main characters as well as the supporting storylines each week. This is equally monumental for the people watching it. As viewers, we are essentially the clients in that bathroom stall, exposing secret insecurities and hoping for reassurance. It is not a breaking of the fourth wall and the viewer is never directly addressed, but it does create a deeper identification with characters than other topics might allow: "[*Sex Education*] knows the difference between ridiculous and ridicule and the result tends to be richer, more nuanced" (Shields). By representing cultural and sexual diversity and a wide variety of issues for Otis to discuss, the show allows viewers to identify with characters that, had it not been for the sex-related angst they (re)present, they might never have identified with otherwise. Even if one does not identify with any other presented aspect of a character, whether it be their looks, background, fears, family issues or hopes for the future and even if their experiences resemble nothing from one's own life, a character expressing fear that they might be bad at oral sex or wonder about the aesthetics of their intimate parts, might still be something one identifies with. This is not a fear or doubt that would have found expression in any other show and it offers real comfort while it simultaneously affords safety because it is both fiction and humorous. Such intimate knowledge of a character encourages strong identification and emotional involvement.

In doing so, *Sex Education* offers actual sex education. Popular culture plays a significant role in educating young people (Brophy-Baermann 19) and research has shown that a realistic use of sex in the media results in young people actually having sex in a safe manner (Nighingale). In reality, 'sex ed' programs in school are often outdated and include next to no information about body image, consent issues and LGBTQ sex (Carleton). *Sex Education* takes

these real-life classes and makes them informative after all: "*Sex Education* rips band-aids off everything from virginity to abortion to mother/son boundary issues to the need for better LGBTQ sex ed—with heart, pain, compassion, and humor. This is how actual people experience all things sex" (Nightingale). For teenagers, the awakening of sexual urges, the discovery of romance and heartbreak are forming experiences and if, as Shumway argued, "the experiences matter more than the outcome", the experiences warrant a portrayal that reflects real life. *Sex Education* enables teenagers to take part in this discourse with their peers in a safe and educated manner.

To illustrate further how *Sex Education* incorporates today's discourse on sex and intimacy, and the anxieties attached to it, I have selected three pivotal moments from the series. The first moment is the conversation between Otis and his best friend Eric, about Otis' inability to masturbate. This ongoing conversation is one of many, spread over episodes, and it is indicative of the tone of the series. The fact that Otis "can't wank" is something Eric jokes about in the very first episode but it is in a clearly loving manner and there is an established trust and love between the two ("Episode 1". 00.05.37). Otis' masturbation problems are linked to intimacy issues that get resolved throughout the series, which he talks about with Eric. For instance, when Otis has a wet dream about Maeve and he is upset and nervous about this, he confides in Eric, who replies: "Chill out. You jizzed your pants, you're not Hannibal Lecter" ("Episode 3". 00.16.09.). This evolving storyline and subsequent conversation about it with Eric is shown in a direct and humorous but sensitive and realistic way. Though the vocabulary and topics are brazen, the actual conversations are not crude or gimmicky. Instead, they emphasize the value of communication: "Eric teases Otis about not being able to masturbate, but it's not cruel or meant to emasculate him. They can joke about it **because** they also talk about it. Their

conversations about sex are never about bragging rights, cruelty towards someone else, or shaming others. It's always personal for them" (Benoit). This is as much a development in contemporary romantic comedy as it is in society's discourse on sex. Otis' 'clients' allow the series to address serious current issues that are not necessarily part of the main character's story lines, but are important to address. An example of this is a conversation Otis has with fellow student Liam. Liam has been chasing after a girl named Lizzie. He tries many grand gestures but she continues to turn him down. He takes his problem to Otis because he cannot understand why his actions have not worked:

> Liam: I don't understand why Lizzie won't go to the ball with me. I have tried every romantic gesture in the book.
>
> Otis: Have you tried asking her?
>
> Liam: That's the first thing I did. She said she was flattered but she wasn't dating. But things change though --- and she *was* flattered.
>
> Otis: Well --- I know it's hard, but if you've asked her and she said 'no', then I think you've got your answer.
>
> Liam: But --- Maybe her dad squished the message on the cake with his foot and she doesn't know I'm still interested?
>
> Otis: You said you sent her a letter.
>
> Liam: Yeah --- It was full of glitter and green Jelly Babies. I know she likes them. But the post is unreliable. It might not have arrived.
>
> Otis: And you also spelt out 'I Love You' on her lawn in leaves.
>
> Liam: Yeah, but that could've blown away.
>
> Otis: I think the answer's 'no', Liam.

> Liam: But she hasn't actually said *no*. And girls love big gestures right? Like Jackson singing to Maeve Wiley and now they're together.
>
> Otis: That's different. Maeve actually likes Jackson. And it would have been inappropriate if Jackson had continued to make grand gestures to a girl who made it clear she wasn't interested. Do you understand, Liam? No means no.
>
> Liam: --- Unless it means yes?
>
> ("Episode 7". 00.02.53)

It would be easy to portray Liam as a creepy boy who refuses to take 'no' for an answer. However, Liam does not mean harm, he is sincerely confused as to when declarations of love are appropriate and when 'no' actually means 'no'. Like many, Liam was taught that perseverance is romantic and 'no' could also mean 'yes' (Groszhans). This is a genuine topic in today's society and many studies have shown that there is a significant link between the films people watch and their romantic interactions and expectations (Groszhans). In this '#Metoo' era, much is being written about the glorification of dangerous and unhealthy behaviour in romance fiction. The romanticizing of stalking, obsession, violence or predatory behaviour leads to problems for men as well. Anna North said about this: "Boys learn at a young age, from pop culture, their elders, and their peers, that it's normal to have to convince a woman to have sex, and that repeated small violations of her boundaries are an acceptable way to do so—perhaps even the only way" (qtd. in Beck). Where changing gender roles and values are causing confusion, misunderstandings and even violence, it is important to have a show that attaches value to open conversation, where rejection is commonplace and where men as well as women openly help each other through their sexual shortcomings and misadventures: "How often have we seen romantic, sexual guys who respect what both they and the other person want, while still being written as masculine, fully-

formed characters? Almost never," (Benoit) but the male characters in *Sex Education* are not divided into 'good guys' and 'bad guys'. They are all young men trying to figure out romance and sex by leaning on what they have been taught and they all make mistakes along the way. The influence of romantic comedies and romantic conventions plays a part in how teenagers perceive romance and in their expectations of it. *Sex Education* is aware of these conventions and refers to them repeatedly. Like in the conversation between Liam and Otis, it does not criticize the conventions so much as point out the flaws. "*Sex Education*—a show that's sensitive and sweet-natured and smutty to its core—seems to hint that no matter how bad it looks out there, there's hope to be had after all" (Gilbert).

Another example can be found in the second pivotal scene, in which Mauve tells Otis how she feels about the notion of 'happily ever after': "You know in rom-coms, when the guy finally realizes he's in love with the girl, and he turns up with a boom box outside her house, blasting her favorite song, and everyone in the audience swoons? Yeah, that makes me sick" ("Episode 4". 00.30.04). This scene is important because it sets the scene for the love triangle of Otis, Jackson and Maeve by both criticizing and honouring the romantic comedy's conventions. Otis is in love with Maeve but Maeve and Jackson, not knowing about Otis' crush, confide in him about their sex life. The convention that one character is presented as the foil to the hero is directly addressed, as well as the convention that the 'good guy' always does the 'right thing'. One would suspect the show wants the viewer to root for Otis, but Jackson is an equally suitable guy. It is Jackson who genuinely says that Maeve may be 'The One', although he is mocked for it by Otis. Then, when Jackson asks Otis for advice on how to win Maeve's heart, Otis recommends going for "grand gestures, rom-com grand. Heart on your sleeve, running through the rain" ("Episode 4". 00.35.40) because he believes it will drive Maeve away from Jackson.

When Jackson fails to impress Mauve with his usual technique though, he invests in books and music he learns she likes. He heads to the library for Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and then continues to bring up Woolf's writing in conversation. In the end, it is not Virginia Woolf that wins her over, but Jackson climbing on a table and serenading her. Despite her objections, she falls for the romantic grand gestures because she falls for Jackson. This in turn sets off story lines like Liam attempting to win over Lizzie despite her repeated rejections of him and Otis' realisation that love "isn't about grand gestures, or the moon and stars. It's just dumb luck. Sometimes you like someone who doesn't like you back and it hurts", no matter what tricks you try ("Episode 7". 00.40.51). This experience leads to realisations for the main characters and their responses to it are nuanced and realistic.

A final scene to demonstrate *Sex Education*'s approach to the genre is the conversation between Otis and Aimee about her sex life. Aimee does not know how to enjoy sex, so she resorts to things she believes are sexy or cool during sex, which her new boyfriend Steve does not like. When she asks Steve: "You wanna cum on my face?" in the middle of sex, he is confused. "No. I like your face," he replies, "Do you really want me to do that stuff?" ("Episode 6". 00.14.35) She is unsure in answering and Steve tells her he thinks she is performing for his pleasure, instead of enjoying it. "What do you want?" he asks her, and Aimee has no idea:

> Aimee: Steve says his 'thing' is girls properly enjoying sex. He says he can tell I'm being fake.
>
> Otis: Well, are you?
>
> Aimee: Yeah, I'm always fake.
>
> ("Episode 6". 00.14.52)

It turns out that Aimee does not masturbate and has no idea what she likes. When Otis instructs her to figure it out, she is appalled, “Ew. So basically you’re prescribing a wank?”, the scene that follows shows Aimee trying different positions, humping pillows and using a hair-dryer on her neck (“Episode 6” 00.15.55). *Sex Education* is not the first to talk about sex, nor the first to show masturbation. However, few have done so “in a particular realistic, or in such an emotionally honest, educational, or direct way” (Hamlett).

What these scenes reveal in particular, is that the problems that students consult Otis for are sex-based, but they begin with individual insecurities that influence their relationships. These insecurities are difficult to talk about because they are so intimate. The awareness of its subject matter is what makes *Sex Education* an important modern iteration of the romantic comedy.

Bertrand Russell said: “Answering questions is a major part of sex education. Two rules cover the ground. First, always give a truthful answer to a question; secondly, regard sex knowledge as exactly like any other knowledge” (141). *Sex Education* aims to do just that, signalling a change in the discourse on intimacy: “It's strides ahead of similar teen shows about sex. In *Sex Education*, sexual issues like erectile dysfunction and sex injuries aren't laughed off—they're given serious thought and discussion” says Brabaw in her discussion of the show with real-life sexual therapists Megan Davies and Vanessa Marin. The clients’ reactions to their sessions with Otis are realistic as well, say Davies and Marin, and most of his therapy sessions are very true to reality: “Otis addressed issues such as low or no desire, pain during sex, lack of orgasm, erectile dysfunction, and sexual orientation issues,” Davis says. “We have a tendency to shame and silence discussions of sexuality and sexual issues, but Otis was able to help his peers to remove the shame” (Brabaw) and this is important for a generation growing up discovering themselves and each other, and doing it in an age where social media tends to distort views of

reality. By actually talking about their bodies, their sexuality, and their issues, the characters as well as their audience can have their questions answered and their doubts reassured.

In conclusion, *Sex Education* represents a new phase in the romantic comedy genre because it applies the conventions in such a way that its modern viewers see their experiences represented. Perhaps it is strange that the "best, most nuanced advice about sex and intimacy" these days is found on Netflix shows, but "it's also oddly cheering" because this may finally signal a change in society at large (Gilbert). Shields agrees: "Narratives about encountering sexuality haven't always been sex positive. They haven't always made space for consent, sexual health, and female pleasure" (Shields) but *Sex Education* might contribute to a change in this area, especially since it speaks to a wide audience of teenagers in the midst of forming experiences and it does so without losing its hopeful and optimistic attitude.

II

Love and the Marriage: Romance in the Long Run in *Wanderlust*

Fig. 2. *Wanderlust* promotional poster season 1.

> Joy: "Look at it like this….When a car breaks down, you don't just --- you check under the bonnet, have a root around, try to find the source of the --- then you set about fixing that specific problem. You don't just go out and buy a new car."
>
> Alan: "I gotta say, it's a pretty shoddy analogy, Joy. Because what you're talking about is hitchhiking. It's leaving the car, our beautiful old car, on the side of the road and thumbing a ride --- and ideally, all things being equal, getting your rocks off with whoever happens to be behind the wheel."
>
> ("Episode 2". 00.00.50)

This bit of conversation between a husband and wife of over twenty years illustrates the main question and conflict of *Wanderlust*: What constitutes 'a good marriage'? The criteria for a successful marriage are ambiguous. Plenty of manuals and self-help books can be found on the subject, but they will offer a variety of opinions, criteria and arguments. The matter of fidelity itself is equally disputable. Where one might argue that a marriage is in bad shape when spouses pursue sexual relationships with third parties, another might say that a committed relationship does not require monogamy. The role of sex within a relationship is much discussed but there can be no manifesto suitable for all. The importance of sex, romance and marriage, and their interrelatedness, is deeply personal and therefore continually debated. The only thing that can be posed is the general consensus of this debate in society at a given time, but even then there are plenty of individuals who think 'outside the box'. *Wanderlust* essentially represents this debate and in doing so asks many questions about marriage, one of which is "whether or not a romantic

commitment requires sexual fidelity. And if it doesn't, then why don't we consider that?" (Payne qtd. in Mellor).

Wanderlust's main characters, Joy and Alan have been together long enough to have three nearly-grown-up children. They love each other, rely on each other and respect each other but as the pilot episode reveals, they also have a burnt-out sex life. Instead of opting for a separation, Joy suggests an open marriage to satisfy their sexual needs. They agree to give this arrangement a try, appearing confident in their ability to remain emotionally loyal to each other. "It's the difference between a meal and a snack perhaps", says Alan, who seems to have less faith in this proposed solution than Joy does ("Episode 2" 00.02.39). The series' six episodes let the consequences of such an experiment unfold, providing setting, plot and conflict in a contemporary 'crust'. While Joy embarks on short-lived adventures with different men, Alan begins a romantic relationship with fellow teacher Claire. *Wanderlust* then shows the possible consequences of such relationships. Neither Joy or Alan have been in this type of relationship before and they have not really discussed rules or limits. "The characters don't quite know what they're doing – they never call it an 'open marriage' or 'polyamory', they're sort of shambling through it" says the writer of the show, Nick Payne (Mellor). As we watch Joy and Alan fumble, many uncomfortable questions are posed to the characters and their viewers. They have to decide what and what should not be discussed at home, with their children, their friends, their family. Parameters and limits must be established and questions considered. Questions that people have but that are very uncomfortable acknowledging, Payne says. "In a public setting, it's very, very difficult. Really trying to have an honest conversation about it. It's such an emotional subject" (Mellor). Shumway summarized that romantic comedies are essentially about people trying to make new rules as the old ones lose their hold. *Wanderlust* reflects the current discourse on these

rules in what Franklin calls a “romantic comedy about polyamory”. In *The New York Times*, Mike Hale likens the show to a Richard Curtis ‘rom-com’, “demonstrating the same ability to jump between labored comic business and somber melodrama”. More than a romantic comedy about polyamory or a Richard Curtis film, the narrative of *Wanderlust* may be seen to resemble what Stanley Cavell called a ‘comedy of remarriage', with a couple on the verge of separation who are distracted temporarily by other romantic suitors, but are eventually reunited. While the series maintains many of the genre’s conventions, the way in which it discusses awkward topics such as one’s (boring) sex life, adds an interesting reversal of some of these conventions.

Although *Wanderlust* includes an ensemble cast of sorts, Joy and Alan’s children experience romances of their own that entwine with their parents’ lives eventually, the conflict, setting and plot revolve heavily around Joy and Alan. Romantic comedies long remained loyal to conventional courtship and the assumption that marriage is the ultimate goal. This is partly true for Joy and Alan who experienced a conventional courtship that lead to marriage, but it also challenges the notion by starting the narrative twenty years into Joy and Alan’s ‘happy ever after’ and addressing issues that come with that territory, such as the importance of sex. In this way, Wanderlust is a ‘comedy of remarriage’ with an abundance of (talk about) sex. Joy and Alan wish to remain married to each other but they also admit that they have lost interest in each other as sexual partners, forcing both the characters and the audience to think about what defines a happy marriage. If sex and romance are an integral part of marriage, then Joy and Alan might not truly desire to remain married to each other. What is it that they are looking for, or perhaps more accurately, what is it that they feel they are missing? Joy and Alan may represent any committed couple watching the show, as well as anyone desiring a long-term relationship. This might make for uncomfortable viewing because, as Payne pointed out, these are uncomfortable

conversations to have (Mellor) but it also nearly forces the viewer to take part in this debate. This is emphasized by the criticism the series garnered, which focused greatly on the unrealistic portrayal of middle aged married life, especially in terms of sex. When *Wanderlust* first aired, it was met with an outcry over its contents. It was labelled 'filth', 'raunchy', 'porn', and Joy's character was criticized for being unrealistically comfortable with her body and having an unrealistic sex drive (Hopkinson). Additionally, many reviews make a note of that fact that , contrary to expectations, it is Joy who first offers up the idea of an open marriage. The fact that this is seen as striking, is interesting as the series itself reflects this same assumption in society:

> *Wanderlust* makes an admirable effort to subvert gender stereotypes. […] Alan immediately gets involved with Claire […] And even though society tells us that women tend to be guided by their hearts rather than libidos, it's Joy who finds herself drawn to multiple men and playing the field with a seemingly more carefree attitude than her husband (Chaney).

Early reviews focused on the unrealistic presence of sex in Joy and Alan's life and on their frank discussion of their desires: "No one wants to see real sex. It's far too close to home" (Fox). There was no such response for *Sex Education*, which includes much more explicit sex and nudity. Sex then, is for the young? In an interview for *Grace and Frankie*, discussed in the third chapter, Jane Fonda suggests that "today's society doesn't like people with wrinkles to be talking about sex" (Barr). As Payne alluded to, people are put off by scenes that include intimate discussions about (unsatisfying) sex because they encourage discourse. However, as society is slowly coming to talk about it publicly, so is romantic comedy. For that reason, *Wanderlust*'s attempt to reflect this conversation comes at the right time for its genre.

Additionally, it is not only Joy and Alan's take on romance that is shown. Their children try to make sense of their parents' relationship as well as their own love lives. They object to their parents' open marriage, but it is from personal hurt more than disapproval or shock. Their youngest son begs them immediately to not split up. "We're not going to get divorced," Joy assures him, "This is just about sex. What this is not about is love" ("Episode 3". 00.04.08). Throughout the series, Joy insists on this separation, saying that she does not foresee any effect on their children ("Episode 3". 00.02.58) but the effect is immediate. Tom is trying to figure out why he wants to kiss his best friend more than his attractive date. His parents' take on sex and love makes matters more confusing for Tom, his inability to separate love and sex only ending in heartbreak. Daughter Laura tries to find romance by means of internet dating and is confronted with men who are mainly looking for casual sex. This, as viewers who have experience with internet dating may recognize, disheartens her and makes her sceptical about the concept of romance. Where before she found comfort and hope in her parents' lasting happy marriage, she is now forced to reconsider the notion of it. Daughter Zoe returns home when the relationship with her girlfriend ends and explores a romance with a neighbour who is divorcing her husband because she has realised she is gay. Including the developing storylines of Tom, Laura and Zoe allows *Wanderlust* to reflect contemporary approaches to romance, as well as "make a point about how relationship patterns are established when we're young, and how instinctive it is for anyone at any stage of life to seek comfort, escapism, and a sense of identity in other people" (Chaney). Notably, while Tom, Laura and Zoe seem sceptical about long-term relationships, they do pursue their idea of romance. The main couple, however, experience many emotions during their experimental time but we see little actual change in their relationship with each other. Their

reunion in the final episode feels more resigned than purposeful while their children, cynicism and confusion to spite, are granted a significantly happier ending.

Equally important to the narrative is Alan's 'other woman', Claire. Claire's ideals differ from Joy's, not only because their personalities differ, but also because Claire represents a different generation of women with different expectations. Claire is mystified by Alan's arrangement with Joy, but she is interested in a relationship with Alan and since they have 'permission', she cannot think of a reason not to pursue one. They begin dating, but Claire is not as comfortable with the arrangement as she might want to be. She is embarrassed when people find out about it and she does not know how to interact with Joy. This intersects with the moral code of the society they live in. Joy and Alan live in a suburban neighbourhood and as a relationship therapist and a teacher respectively, they are confronted with society's discourse on relationships and marriage. Because Alan rather openly courts Claire, their colleagues are quick to know about their relationship and Joy's work suffers once her open marriage becomes known to some of her clients. This is not without consequences because what Alan and Joy are doing goes against the norm, even if this norm is flexible. Joy is willing to disregard any criticism, but she cannot escape the consequences in her professional life: "There's a certain degree of hypocrisy….trusting our marriage to someone whose own marriage is so clearly in a state of disarray" says one of her regular clients ("Episode 4". 00.38.44). Alan is less eager to put aside the criticism because he inherently agrees with it. The main conflict is both internal and external; It might be difficult to defend one's open marriage when one's social circle criticizes it, but it is much more difficult when one agrees with the criticism. Joy and Alan's marriage is in trouble, not necessarily because they have had sex with other people, but because their motivation for doing so is very different. Their ideas of what a happy marriage constitutes and how their

marriage can be ‘saved’ do not match up. It is not society’s norms or their friends’ criticism but their own that causes their marriage to crumble.

Television has seen its fair share of marriages in trouble but the romantic comedy has not often seen a loving marriage held under the light to expose its unravelling seams. This might be due in part because marriage as an institution is less powerful today and a divorce no longer has the shock value it once did. Of course, marriage never has been a guarantee for a happy life, but it did once mean a guarantee for wedded life, an income and a spouse with which to raise children. These days, none of these things are assumed even when one does get married. Underneath the surface layer of a happy marriage are still the individual’s expectations, desires and anxieties and these have not often had the chance to be aired. In *The All-or-Nothing Marriage*, psychologist Eli Finkel examines how expectations of marriage have begun to climb Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: “Just a few generations ago, the ideal marriage was defined by love, cooperation, and a sense of belonging to a family and community. Today’s newlyweds want all that *and* prestige, autonomy, personal growth, and self-expression” (Catron), essentially expecting from a partner to fulfil needs it used to take an entire community to fulfil. In this day and age, there are conflicting social expectations at work and although we crave independence, we also crave an intimate connection with another person. According to Bauman, this has become a source of great anxiety because we no longer associate romance with long-term commitments, and we are less willing to make ourselves vulnerable to another person. This results in an individualized society in which long-term connections are no longer the norm and ‘virtual connections’ takes us further away from achieving intimacy. “The romantic definition of ‘till death do us part’ is decidedly out of fashion […] rather than more people rising to the high standards of love on more occasions, the standards have been lowered” (Bauman 192). As

Shumway also concluded, the 'happily-ever-after' of long-term commitments is being questioned and marriage is no longer the ultimate goal. *Wanderlust* illustrates this modern belief and explores what happens within a marriage when partners choose to explore and develop outside the confines of their marriage.

As in chapter I, I have selected three moments from the series to illustrate and support the idea of *Wanderlust* as representative of a new chapter in romantic comedy. The first is Joy and Alan's conversation about their sex life in the pilot episode. This scene shows Alan and Joy as a couple that are at odds with, but also committed to, each other. Their recent attempts to have sex have not been gratifying and both find themselves sexually attracted to others. In this scene, Joy admits that she is bored with their sex life:

> Joy: I'd like to enjoy having sex and ideally, I'd like to have more of it. Outside this room. Not just beneath these sheets, keeping our voices down, once or twice a month. *If* we're lucky. But --- if you don't --- if you don't mind --- the way it is, then --- I think you need to say something.
>
> Alan: Sounds to me like you're saying you've had enough. Of us. Of me.
>
> Joy: That has nothing to do with ---
>
> Alan: I mean, the sex is boring, we've not been honest. In fact, we've been lying to each other.
>
> Joy: I mean, yes, those are all statements of fact, but ---
>
> Alan: As is the fact that for most people, this would mean the end of their marriage.
>
> Joy: I don't give a shit what this would mean for most people.
>
> Alan: So --- then, you tell me --- How do we come back from this?

> Joy: Okay, look at me. I'm not saying I've had enough. I am nowhere near having had enough. I love you, I love being with you, I love that we have been together as long as we have but yeah, we have a problem because ---
>
> Alan: I love you too.
>
> Joy: So you should.
>
> Alan: Okay --- So --- When you say you want to have more sex, do you mean more sex with *me*?
>
> Joy: Well --- Do you want to have sex with *me*?
>
> ("Episode 1". 00.52.43)

This scene is filmed in an unremarkable bedroom. They are dressed in well-worn pyjamas, appearing tired and frustrated. The entire dialogue appears to be filmed in one long take while the camera switches from Alan's face to Joy's in close-up, to a view of the entire bedroom. The switch in coverage and point-of-view is interspersed with shots of the couple in the same frame, shot from slightly farther away. This pits the two against each other, yet keeps bringing them together; They might be at odds but they want to meet in the middle. By the end of the scene, they have done so literally, if not emotionally. By having the actors play the entire scene in a long take, the conversation can play out in a halting and stuttering, but natural way. This enhances the familiarity of the scene, even if it is uncomfortable to watch, and establishes Joy and Alan as a couple with whom the audience might relate. Toni Collette and Steven Mackintosh are well-known and respected actors who are conventionally attractive and the show appears to use natural-looking light, which adds to a realistic look and feel. The conversation between Joy and Alan is not one that flows easily, the words coming with much hesitance. Writer Nick Payne is a playwright lauded for his plays *Constellations* and *If There Is I Haven't Found It Yet*, about

"the chaos and comfort of human relationships" that include quick-witted characters and snappy dialogues (Rooney). For *Wanderlust,* he deliberately wrote the dialogues to be stilted and unsure. That does go against the conventions of romantic comedy, particularly the screwball comedies of remarriage, where dialogue tends to flow wittily and entertainingly: "The fact that the characters can't really talk in *Wanderlust* is probably not that TV-like […] It's an attempt at hyper-naturalism, the inarticulacy is part of what the show is wrestling with" (Franklin). This inarticulacy is what makes the series an apt reflection of real-life experiences, where such talk would not flow easily either. This highlights the idea of *Wanderlust* as a comedy of remarriage, but simultaneously emphasizes the inversion of that convention. In these comedies, the banter plays a major role specifically because sex cannot be shown or discussed. In *Wanderlust*, there is a profusion of sex and of talk about sex, but the banter has been replaced with hesitant jokes and stuttering declarations. Aside from the language and tone of voice, this scene illustrates both people's desire *and* unwillingness to talk about these matters. The conversations Joy and Alan have about their sex life and their marriage are not necessarily pleasant to watch; it is uncomfortable and intrusive precisely because these topics are too. Joy and Alan are the conduits through which these things can be said and this scene immediately poses questions concerning marriage, love and sex. Alan's questioning "how do we come back from this?" is what sets up the characters' conflict for the remainder of the series.

The second scene takes place 4 episodes later but in many ways continues the dynamics of the first scene. Filmed in a sparsely-lit kitchen, again in one long take that reads more like a play than a television show, it shows a fight between the couple as a result of Joy defending their open marriage to their critical friends and colleagues. The viewer has been able to see Alan's careful doubt even as he pursued a new romance and though it is never spoken aloud, the viewer

understands that Alan would never have proposed the same arrangement. Alan, one is led to conclude, would not have been unhappy to continue as he was. Joy is the advocate for their open marriage and she resents their friends and family for criticizing them and for judging their marriage as being 'in shambles'. In this pivotal scene Alan confronts her about publicly discussing their arrangement and how embarrassed he is about this:

> Joy: And would you consider it more or less of an embarrassment if we were just cheating on each other? If we'd decided to break up, get a divorce and cut the kids in half and spend the weekends ferrying them back and forth? Would a second or maybe a third wedding? How about a whole string of successful marriages? Would you consider that more or less of an embarrassment? People need to grow the fuck up!
>
> Alan [laughs derisively]: Oh, they're the ones who need to grow up, are they? I see. I get it now. They're the ones who ---
>
> Joy: We have every right to live –-
>
> Alan: Joy, listen to yourself! I never should have let you talk me into this.
>
> Joy: Into what?
>
> Alan: Any of it. All of it.
>
> Joy: What's that supposed to mean?
>
> Alan: It means --- It means---, I'm losing track of where we're even at! We seemed to be doing fine --- Why this persistent moving of the goalposts?!
>
> ("Episode 4". 00.53.28)

Again, the conflict at work is not between society versus Alan-and-Joy, but Joy versus Alan. This scene takes place after a costume party, which results in Alan and Joy shouting at each other whilst dressed as, respectively, Adam Ant and Madonna during the *Desperately*

Seeking Susan-era. This might have given the scene a slightly ridiculous tone but Joy's costume in particular is telling. *Desperately Seeking Susan*, about a bored housewife who questions her marriage, chases adventure and commits adultery, makes great use of the genre's convention of 'masquerade' among others and, significantly, ends with the main couple divorcing. The costumes offer a mask, but also reveal much about Joy and Alan's viewpoints and their conversation is more unmasked than it has been so far. Alan and Joy use different tones and words than in the first scene. They are less hesitant and more confrontational, frustrated with each other and unafraid to voice their opinions. Joy expresses her resentment, implying that people around them are childish for not respecting their choice, while Alan clearly implies that it is them that need to "grow up". For the first time, he wonders out loud what the point of this arrangement is. Why, he seems to ask, could they not just be satisfied with what they had. The real question underlying this is why Joy cannot when Alan would have been. He has developed feelings for Claire but he holds Joy responsible for this ("Episode 4" 00.54.36). This is the moment the couple is forced to acknowledge the consequences of their decision and despite their intentions to remain a unit, they find themselves on opposite sides of the debate. This realisation is the catalyst for the events of the final two episodes.

The third vital moment is one of these events. At this point, Alan is spending the nights at Claire's and is trying to get used to a different dynamic. Claire has different routines, is messy, does not own an ironing board. It is these things that we see Alan struggle with most. He seems to have relocated his routine and his behaviour to his new relationship. He wants to be and still acts like a husband to his wife, but he is met with resistance from Claire. In turn, Claire realises she lives with 'a husband', but not hers. In this scene, this dilemma comes to light after Claire

comes home after work and finds her apartment cleaned, the candles lit and Alan home with groceries:

> Claire: Alan, what the fuck?! What is this? What are we even doing right now? I mean, ultimately --- What is the ultimate aim?
>
> Alan: Well, I suppose I was --- I was under the impression that we were trying to make a go of things.
>
> Claire: Then what?
>
> Alan does not really have a response to this, but Claire then informs him that she ran into Joy at the shop.
>
> Claire: And she looked at me --- She looked at me like ---
>
> Alan: I'm sorry, this was ---
>
> Claire: I was looking at ironing boards! Fucking ironing boards! And she was there and I went up and --- and my entire arsehole practically leapt out of my mouth.
>
> Alan: What did she say to you?
>
> Claire: She said exactly what ought to be said to someone like me.
>
> ("Episode 6". 00.18.02)

Imaginably, most viewers will find Claire's position understandable. Yes, she is in a relationship with a man she loves and who loves her back, but their relationship exists by the grace of his wife's permission. This scene is particularly interesting because despite the frank conversation between Claire and Alan and the domesticity that comes from the clean and inviting house, soft lighting and the obvious affection these characters have for each other, it does not feel intimate. Instead, it becomes clear that Alan and Claire do not know each other very well and have not given the future of their relationship much thought. Even though they are in love and there is no

deceit towards Joy in play, Claire likens her relationship with Alan to an affair and herself to a mistress. Although her relationship with Alan could be a long-term one, it is not what Claire's always envisioned love to be and it does not meet her expectations of romance: "This isn't starting to feel a little at all fucked up to you? […] To me, this doesn't really feel like love" ("Episode 6", 00.20.35). Though Joy insists the experiment has "nothing do with love" Alan has realised that, for him, "it's impossible trying to separate it all" ("Episode 3" 00.54.27). Marrying Claire's ideas of romance and love with the reality of Alan's life offers not only questions about this particular relationship but also forces one to consider once more what criteria a romance must adhere to, to be considered 'real'. Belying the heart of the discourse is that though we all want love to come along, we apply restrictions as to how it should come along. Joy, Alan and Claire, as well as the supporting characters and indeed the viewers, all have different ideas about what 'love', 'commitment' and 'romance' entail, which is a complicated but realistic reflection of real relationships.

Wanderlust jumps straight into the twentieth year of Joy and Alan's happily-ever-after and illuminates the various problems that exist within a comfortable, and by no means bad, marriage and reflects the inarticulacy of this discourse: "It is about the inability to communicate. It's about language and a culture of repression, about shame and embarrassment that means we struggle to talk about things or find the right words" (Franklin). The dialogue includes purposeful stuttering and halting conversations about uncomfortable topics in a narrative that resembles the comedy of remarriage, but lacks the joyful reunion. The couple reunite, but they appear more weathered and damaged than they were at the start. *Wanderlust* does not portray romance or a happy marriage as an unachievable goal, but rather than a happy ending, it leaves viewers with questions; it redirects your attention away from the television and makes you

question your own relationship (Waardenburg): “It doesn’t ask you to play armchair therapist, but it does encourage approaching the material as though it contains no easy answers—which, of course, it doesn’t. Relationships don’t, either” (Shoemaker).

III

Stuck in the Middle: The Changing Rules of Romance in *Grace and Frankie*

Fig. 3. *Grace and Frankie* promotional photo season 3.

Amanda: Anyway, he had tattoos, but not the good kind of tattoos. You know, like the sexy electricians with the big, nice, thick forearms. You know, that guy? No. These were faded and wrinkly. Like a sad old sailor.

Frankie: Oh, no.

Jason: But you slept with him?

Amanda: He had a cute dog. What about you?

Jason: Nah. No one since Asian Larry Hagman.

Amanda: Aw. Frankie, are you out there yet, having fun?

Frankie: Actually, I need to talk to you guys. It's about --- feelings.

Amanda and Jason: No. Nope. Can't go there.

Frankie: I'm not ready for a big romance.

Jason: Well, who has time for that?!

Amanda: Yeah, it kinda makes me want to nap just thinking about it.

("The Chicken". 00.16.44)

This conversation between friends would not seem out of place in *Sex Education* or *Wanderlust*, but in *Grace and Frankie* it is the love life of a group of over-seventies being discussed. While Otis and his classmates attempt to navigate the murky areas of first-time love, sex and romance as teenagers in 2018, and Alan and Joy try to do the same within the context of their 20-year old marriage, the titular Grace and Frankie are attempting to reshape their lives post-divorce. Having been married to their husbands for over 40 years, neither Grace and Frankie

nor society at large would expect these husbands to announce their homosexuality, their affair with each other and their intended marriage in the space of one dinner. Yet this is precisely what happens in the pilot episode, appropriately titled “The End”. Now, divorce is no longer an anomaly, homosexuality is more accepted than it has ever been, and a husband leaving his wife to marry another is not unique to real or fictional life. In this case, however, all parties are in their late sixties and the husband wishes to end his marriage in order to marry another man. The premise of *Grace and Frankie* unfolds in this pilot episode, in which most of the conventions of the romantic comedy are immediately established. Plot, characters and setting are laid out in the very first scenes, in which about-to-retire business partners Robert and Sol announce to their wives that they wish to spend their remaining years ‘out’ and together. Grace and Frankie are taken abruptly from their routine and put in a new and completely unexpected situation. “Now what?” Grace asks Frankie in the final scene of “The End” as they pack up their lives and move into a new setting, new dynamics, a new type of life (00.34.11). *Grace and Frankie* is not novel in most of their subject matter. What makes *Grace and Frankie* unique is the age group it chose to (re)present these matters. It provides the narrative with the backdrop of the more old-fashioned notions these men and women grew up with, as well as a more contemporary outlook. Instead of young lovers finding opposition in their parents’ values, *Grace and Frankie* took the parents and set them down to come of age all over again in a new setting, with their meddling children as both ‘helpers’ and ‘obstacle figures’. The focus of the series, with Grace and Frankie as its main pairing, is as much on self-love, self-development and the importance of friendship as it is on sex and romance. For the Netflix generation, this is “very familiar territory, as is the way the show leans into its progressive values […] it's a non-traditional and fresh story line." (Bowen). *Grace and Frankie* offers a glimpse of what modern society may look like through the

eyes of a generation that grew up with different values and their adjustment to our modern age. *Grace and Frankie* signifies a new phase in romantic literature via the demographic of the main couple, the inclusion and discussion of gender equality for this age group and the marrying of developing notions of romance, sex, love and marriage through generations.

First, a leading cast of characters in their seventies bring with it a set of issues and possibilities relatively ignored in this context so far. As Grace and Frankie experience the same obstacles as, for instance, their daughters do, they also have to deal with more age-specific issues: Are they getting too old to drive, can they still maintain their house? Can they live independently or do they need help or assistance or medication? Can they maintain a healthy sex life when their physical health is declining? "The series […] tackles the issues of aging and being a woman, but also covers themes that women of all ages have in common. From finding your real self after a long marriage ends to dating and sex at advanced ages to how women need each other and the value of maintaining friendships" ("Why We Love"). This offers perspective on things in a way that only age and experience can: "When you are young, everything is: 'What if? Should I? Maybe I need to? What I am supposed to? What do I mean?' It is a lot of not knowing. When you are older, it is all that time behind you. You say: 'It did not kill me then; it will not kill me now'" (Fonda qtd. in Seligson). This attitude is woven into the show, where Grace and Frankie struggle with the same issues their children deal with, romance, sex and womanhood, but they do it with the experience that comes with being 70 years old.

Additionally, the men play a role in the discourse too. Sol and Robert build a life so different from what they are used to and grew up to expect, that it brings tensions and uncomfortable moments. The men want to be 'out' but this entails having to inform their business relations as well as all their friends who mostly belong to an age group largely

unaccustomed to such changes. We see criticism and homophobic behaviour as much as support from all angles and neither are particularly dramatized. The lens is largely focused on their own process. Many of the options available to them now have been unknown to them and feel unnatural. The moment they get invited to a drag queen bingo night, for instance, or when their children organise a penis-themed bachelor party. Some of these plots are included for comedic effect, but not solely for that purpose. As Mernit and Grindon said, humour allows awkward or difficult topics to be discussed in a safe way (Grindon 70) and *Grace and Frankie* makes great use of this strategy. When the pair tries to decide how to refer to each other, for instance, it becomes clear that this is a different discussion for a gay couple in their seventies than it might be for a couple in their twenties. At the same time, it points out the fragility of this topic and experience:

> Sol: So…..what should we call each other? I like 'boyfriend'. It's got a kick.
>
> Robert: Nooo, we're too old for that. Long-time companion?
>
> Sol: No, too retro-sad. It's from a time before famous people would play gay in movies. ("The Funeral". 00.05.09).

Being 'allowed' to be openly gay is relatively new, in TV as in society, and this is highlighted through the series by seeing Robert and Sol in situations that are still shocking to them. Seeing other homosexual couples offering public displays of affection, for instance, is less comfortable for them than they would like, even as they are aware of where this comes from. "Amazing isn't it? They're so uninhibited," Robert comments upon seeing two men kissing in public, "I suppose it's generational. I might be so inclined if I were 25" ("The Goodbyes". 00.16.12). Again, this is not a notion much addressed in mass media, and in that aspect alone, the series adds significant discourse to the television landscape, "illuminating as it does the gap between the depiction of

young gay life […] and the terrible old-queen clichés […] with a little examined in-between: that is, men in their 70s who are only now coming out after a lifetime spent in heterosexual drag" ("Martin Sheen"). It is important to note that the actors who play Robert and Sol, Martin Sheen and Sam Waterston, are both famous and famously straight, which was a point of contention for a part of the audience: "Because we all know they're straight, mainstream America isn't offended at seeing them play in their new openly gay lifestyle, like talking about gay stuff or acting it out when they kiss. We're all in on the joke. No one is made to have uncomfortable thoughts" (Laughtivist). There is safety in having such famous leading men play gay characters because the knowledge that it is not 'real' makes it more acceptable for the general audience, yet this is what allows the series to introduce ideas to an audience that might otherwise not be susceptible.

Then there is the discussion of marriage as an institution across generations, as well as the inclusion of gender equality. The show addresses the social conventions of their generation and juxtaposes these with the conventions of new generations. Romantic comedies are essentially about people trying to make new rules as the old ones lose their hold (Shumway 178) and Robert and Sol fully embrace this time of new rules, wherein marriage is an option for them. Their children are upset that their fathers are leaving their mothers, but not that it is for another man. In fact, this presents an interesting conflict because as Brianna points out: "Would [we] be cool with it if they'd been cheating with women for the last 20 years? Please. There'd be blood. Or bullets. Something like that" ("The Dinner". 00.23.18). Similarly, Bud tells his father that it is difficult to be mad "because you're gay! If you'd have been fucking around with women for the past 20 years, we wouldn't be here" ("The Dinner". 00.25.38). Grace and Frankie entered the discourse of romance when a heterosexual marriage was the assumed goal, and suddenly find

themselves part of a new generation that offers plenty of viable alternatives. As mentioned above, C.S. Lewis said about romance stories that they were essentially about watching a man marry or fail to marry a woman (10). Today, this statement demands changes not only in gender but in the ultimate goal. Marriage is no longer the aim, an intimate and fulfilling relationship with both ourselves and a partner is. In the new wave of romantic comedy, it is intimacy instead of marriage that the characters desire, which puts the traditional happily-ever-after in question.

This leads to the importance that *Grace and Frankie* places on friendship as the main relationship. In "Between Friends: Love and Friendship in Contemporary Hollywood Romantic Comedy", Deleyto contests the view that romantic comedies require a traditional happy ending: "The genre's central theme is not so much that conventional union [of the heterosexual couple], as the vicissitudes of the emotional and sexual relationships between the characters" (29). Deleyto found that "in a growing number of contemporary romantic comedies, heterosexual love appears to be challenged, and occasionally replaced, by friendship" (29). This is certainly the case for *Grace and Frankie* in which is the co-dependent relationship between the two women becomes more important than any other relationship on the show. This corresponds with the increasing attitude in society that although marriage is still often a desired outcome, marriage should not be the goal of one's life. Government institutions still tend to assume that marriage is the primary unit of care, but this is not realistically how people are living their lives (Catron). There are "serious repercussions" of putting marriage at the centre of one's life and this realisation is why people want to see different kind of stories (Depaulo qtd. in Catron). David Shumway concluded in 2003 that this new attitude is reflected in the contemporary romantic comedy, which he says is built around the idea that when it comes to romantic relationships, "there is always hope that the next one will be better" (169). This corresponds with the

conclusion Zygmunt Bauman came to in *Liquid Love* (2003), in which he discusses the transformation of intimacy as a result of "rampant individualisation, consumerism, and rapid social and technological change" and the frailty of human bonds without the security of a life-long partner (136-736). Bauman argues that, in modern courtship, especially the digital variant, the dominant attitude is that "the next one will be better" and one can "always press delete" (Bauman 65). Many narratives are still built on the idea that "marriage is the best answer to the deep human desire for connection and belonging" but that is no longer the only kind of happy ending (Catron). It is this variety of options, and the anxieties that come with them, that is addressed in modern romantic comedies such as *Grace and Frankie*. Like the developments that allow for same-sex marriage, alternative happy endings and blended families, *Grace and Frankie* shows an awareness of the transformation society and its genre has undergone and allows room for the tensions these generational shifts may cause.

To support these arguments, I shall again include three pivotal moments in the show. The first two moments focus on the two main characters separately, juxtaposed with one another, which highlights their differences. The third shows the two women as a front, juxtaposed with their families and their former husbands. Together, these three scenes demonstrate the desired development within the romantic comedy narrative, the changing dynamics between the characters and a meaningful 'happy ending'.

The first moment is a sequence in which the aftermath of the dinner-party begins. We see both couples in their homes, getting ready for bed and on the morning following, preparing for what appears to be weekly brunch with the kids. The camera moves back and forth between Grace and Robert's house and Frankie and Sol's, emphasizing the contrast between their lives. Their houses are very different and so are the couples in them. Grace and Robert live in a stately

house, with a black-and-white colour scheme, flower arrangements and tasteful art, but they show very little affection and seem to lead very separate lives. This becomes obvious when we see Grace at her vanity table, slowly removing her hair pieces, eyelashes and facelift bungees. Robert knocks on her door and Grace hurries to hide these gadgets from him before allowing him entry. She does not want to engage in a conversation with Robert but she does express her anger at his betrayal. Robert expresses surprise at her anger, saying he expected her to be relieved at the idea of a divorce. The conversation that follows feels like it is a rare honest one between them:

> Grace: I feel like the last 40 years have been a fraud.
>
> Robert: Oh, come on. Only the last 20.
>
> Grace: No, you don't get to do that. You do not get to pretend that this is nothing.
>
> Robert: You're right. It is not nothing. But let's be honest, were you ever really happy with me?
>
> Grace: I was happy enough. So, we didn't have the romance of the century. I thought we were normal. I thought we were like everybody else. I thought this was life.
>
> Robert: And I thought there was more.
>
> ("The End". 00.07.17)

As Robert leaves her room, Grace tells him: "It would have been easier if you'd died" (00.08.18).

Harsh as that may seem, for Grace it may be true. Had Robert died, she would have been alone but she would not have had to go through the shame and betrayal of this situation. Grace appears to feel the loss of her expectations more than the loss of her relationship with Robert. They spend the night in separate bedrooms with the viewer left to wonder if that was the norm already

anyway. These scenes cut back to Frankie and Sol, whose relationship and life sharply contrast Grace and Robert's. Frankie and Sol's house seems to match Frankie's look and personality with its earthly tones, rugs and animal prints, hammock chairs and artefacts from different cultures. Their home seems to radiate warmth and so does Sol and Frankie's marriage. Though Frankie is clearly upset, she and Sol talk about their feelings and Sol is truly upset at the idea of leaving someone he deeply loves. Frankie tells him to sleep in the den, but soon after joins him there because she cannot remember how to sleep without him next to her. They spend the night hugging instead. In the morning, Frankie and Sol tell their sons Bud and Coyote about their father's plans. The situation is upsetting and confusing for all involved but these scenes betray affection between the family members and little hesitation to speak or listen. To highlight the contrast, the camera moves back to Grace asking Robert to "pretend to be straight for one more brunch" as they wait for their daughters, Brianna and Mallory, to arrive in a flawlessly set dining room (00.10.41). Though Grace did not want to tell her daughters yet, it turns out they already know, having heard from Bud and Coyote. The atmosphere, even when Brianna and Mallory are there, is much more formal than at Frankie's house. Brianna and Mallory offer crude jokes, Valium and alcohol to comfort her mother, while Bud and Coyote try to console Frankie with spiritual advice. In this sequence, all major characters are introduced, the dynamics between them are revealed and plenty of ground for conflict is set up in the juxtaposition of the main couple. The age element is also immediately introduced. Grace and Frankie both refer to their "remaining years to spend alone" (00.11.31) and Brianna wonders if there are therapy groups for "ex-wives of men who turned gay in their seventies" (00.13.06). It is also in these scenes that Grace and Frankie first refer to their expectations of marriage. Returning to *Wanderlust* once more, when Alan and Joy conclude they have grown dissatisfied with their marriage and ask

themselves “Now what?”, they speak very frankly about the reality of marriage, affairs and divorce. Their hesitance to be open about their desires has to do with their internal conflict and how “appalled” most people around will be (“Episode 2”. 00.01.27). To a certain extent, the four characters in *Grace and Frankie* deal with the same conflict. Grace, Frankie, Robert and Sol stem from a different generation and no matter how openminded an individual, this generation came with certain values and expectations concerning marriage. As Grace exclaims: “I did everything right. I stood by him for over 40 years. I raised his children. I shopped with his mother. I did every single thing so he wouldn’t have to worry about it. I played by all the rules! Why didn’t you tell me there weren’t any rules, it’s not fair!” (“The End”. 00.29.32). Grace feels betrayed by those rules because she did everything “right” and did not get the result society ‘promised’ her. Frankie too has trouble accepting the state of things. When Sol tells her about his plans to marry Robert, because “We can do that now.” Frankie responds: “I know. I hosted that fundraiser!” (“The End”. 00.04.40). When she demands to know why Sol chose this time in their lives to make this decision, he asks her when else he should have done so, she responds: “You don’t! You ride out the clock and stay miserable! I’ve got news for you. The next chapter is not that long” (“The End”. 00.06.04).

Frankie, for all her open-mindedness, grew up with expectations similar to Grace’s, and must now re-align her liberal views with her response to what is happening in her own life. Both women have to deal with not only their internal conflict regarding marriage, romance and love, but also their generation’s values and expectations. Where they spent decades married to the same man, expecting this marriage to last until death, they are now single women in their seventies. Suddenly, they are in new territory which, as it traditionally does in the romantic comedy, introduces both obstacles and possibilities. One of these is the search for love and

romance. Grace struggles with the idea of being alone more than she does with the idea of being without Robert. She wants a partner and is much quicker to search for a new one than Frankie, whose grieving process is less about being without a partner and more about being without Sol. The fact that they had a loving marriage greatly influences the process of their divorce and Frankie is reluctant to suffer a romance and heartbreak again.

This leads to the second pivotal moment, which is a sequence of scenes that show Grace and Frankie discussing their love lives and their expectations thereof. These scenes reveal much about the modern dating scene and romantic values, and are directly linked to their relationships with Robert and Sol. After Frankie is asked out by a romantic interest, she asks friends for advice during lunch, the dialogue of which heads this chapter (p 62). The way this scene is set up is a staple of romantic comedies: a circle of friends having drinks while discussing sex and romance, the camera seeming to join the group as a friend arriving late, falling in mid-conversation. It does not matter that we have not seen these friends before, or that we will never know who 'Asian Larry Hagman' is. It is indicative of a history between the friends, an allusion to many such lunches. This establishes a context in which Frankie can plainly speak about private matters, as the relationship with Grace is not yet deep enough to make that plausible at this point. Frankie poses her dilemma to her friends: she has been asked out by a business colleague she likes, but with whom she does not want a 'big romance'. Her friends are understanding, immediately dismissing the idea as exhausting.

Frankie: So what's between business colleagues-with-chemistry and a big romance?

Amanda: Sex.

Frankie: Well, what's between business colleagues-with-chemistry and sex?

Jason: Occasional sex.

Frankie: Well, what's between---

Amanda: Honey, if somebody wants something more in a relationship eventually it's going to involve sex.

("The Chicken". 00.17.50)

This scene is interesting in the context of the current discourse on love and intimacy and current romantic values, but also in relation to this age group. Frankie's friends are not necessarily younger, but they have more experience in the modern dating scene. Their conversations and opinions through the show support both Shumway and Bauman in their claims that today's world of romance is no longer focused on long-lasting commitments. Frankie takes her dilemma back to Grace, who has been experiencing her own boyfriend trouble. She has a new boyfriend, Guy, to whom she refers as "magical, transformative, life-changing", yet she exhibits the same behaviour she used to adopt with Robert. She lies about her likes and dislikes in order to keep her partner happy. She fakes hobbies and favourite meals, explaining that "when you're in a new relationship with someone you care about and you want them to be happy, you lie to keep them happy" ("The Invitation" 00.21.36). Frankie confronts Grace about her masquerades but Grace cannot bring herself to stop because if "I don't do the things [he] loves to do, he might find someone else" (00.21.50). Both women try to juggle romantic relationships that come with obstacles loyal to the tradition of romantic comedy, but also introduces issues that are more age-specific. Obviously, sex at an advanced age is addressed, including contemporary views on body image and physical fitness, an example of which can be found in a third vital moment.

In this scene, Grace and Frankie tell their family they are going into business together. Both families, including Robert and Sol, are present and the dynamic seems indicative of how it has always been. Robert and Sol seem to automatically interact with their ex-wives the way they

always have while the children bicker in the background, but Grace and Frankie will no longer accept this. Grace and Frankie are outraged at the way they tend to be dismissed by their family and by society. This issue threads through the series, and in this scene they speak up about it. They announce to their family they are embarking on a business adventure to develop vibrators for women suffering from arthritis. This has a comedic effect at first, but soon it becomes clear for both the characters and the audience, that this should not be perceived as funny. As they explain why older women have sexual difficulties, their family cracks jokes, presumably the same jokes the audience is making at home. It is moments like these that lets the series make its case for geriatric people, who experience all that life throws at their younger counterparts and offers a fresh, often new, perspective: "Grace and Frankie refuse to be cast aside at a time when people and society tend to ignore women, and it's inspiring to see them find their voices as single women in their seventies" ("Why We Love"). This scene pushes subject matter like sex at an advanced age, the role of women in society and also further establishes the relationship between Grace and Frankie.

Grace: We're making vibrators for women with arthritis.

Frankie: Yes! Vibrators. Brilliant.

Mallory (heavily pregnant): Please, let my water break.

Brianna: I think I just blacked out.

Grace: Oh, grow up! Older women masturbate too.

Frankie: And we have vaginas!

All kids: Mom!

Brianna: I highly doubt there is a vibrator market for older women with arthritis.

Grace: There is. I'm in agony. Our blood doesn't flow as easily and our genital tissue is more delicate. The longer it takes to orgasm, the more you irritate it. I did some reading. I mean, shouldn't older women have it better than this?

Mallory: Seriously, how do I explain to my children that their grandma is making sex toys for other grandmas?

Grace: I'll tell you what you can tell them, honey. We're making things for people like us, because we're sick and tired of being dismissed by people like you.

Frankie: Mic drop. Let's go home.

("The Coup". 00.24.47)

The entire exchange consists of frank dialogue, there is no hesitance to Grace or Frankie's statements anymore. Instead, they counter the arguments thrown their way in language that shows how they embrace this new time in their lives. The conflict starts with Grace wanting to prove her point but Frankie immediately plays along with Grace, the pronouns changing from "I" to "We", despite the many fights the two have had. Frankie's concluding "Mic drop. Let's go home", referring to their shared house, sees Grace and Frankie leave together as rap song "Push (In It to Win It)" plays over their slow-motion exit. This scene reinforces Grace and Frankie as a couple more than any scene before. This scene in particular reveals how much their relationship has changed, not just with each other but with their families as well. Where Grace and Frankie started out as women whose lives and personalities stood in sharp contrast to each other, the juxtaposition is now between Grace and Frankie versus the rest of their families. They are now effectively the couple opposing dominant figures with different values. What lends them strength and confidence is not only their personal development but also the realisation that they count on

each other's support. In many ways, they have found in each other the partner they lacked before.

It seems obvious since the title of the show is *Grace and Frankie*, but their lives intertwine increasingly as they go from enemies to reluctant roommates and friends to each other's best friends to, in the end, the person they value and prioritize most. The development of this relationship also adheres to the conventions of the romantic comedy and is particularly reminiscent of the screwball comedy. As one example of many, there is the following exchange that takes place in the morning, Grace sorting through her wardrobe when Frankie walks in carrying groceries:

> Frankie: How about a kale smoothie, fresh from the farm?
>
> Grace: No, thank you, I already didn't drink the one you gave me yesterday.
>
> Frankie, taking notice of all the discarded clothes: Oh my, did all the other fancy ladies get beamed back up into the mothership without you?
>
> Grace: I'm saying goodbye to the old me.
>
> Frankie: You gonna burn them? Because if you don't we could make an army of business-casual scare crows.
>
> Grace, taking in Frankie's outfit: Am I to assume you had another 'business meeting' with Jacob or are you returning a ring to Middle Earth?
>
> ("The Chicken". 00.01.52)

Exchanges such as these make up a large part of the dialogue between Grace and Frankie. They are comfortable sniping at each other and making fun of each other, but as their relationship grows, the annoyance is replaced with fondness and fondness turns into love. Following the

conventions of a romantic comedy, Grace and Frankie eventually find themselves prioritizing their relationship above others and leaning on each other for support.

In conclusion, even if "a show about two septuagenarians who are forced to rebuild their lives after their husbands leave them isn't a television show description that screams millennial engagement" (Bowen), it engages them because the drama is recognizable and yet there is a comforting optimism in the series. Grace and Frankie go through a lot of personal and relationship drama but they come through as they have done for fifty years and they do so with a smile. Fonda (Grace) and Lily Tomlin (Frankie) produce the show and it is their experiences that power the show's storylines: "You don't become wise by having a lot of experiences: you become wise by reflecting on the experiences that you have had and understanding what their meanings hold for you in your life" says Fonda (Seligson). The past decades have seen many cultural and social changes which have influenced the way we look at and talk about romance, intimacy, sex and love. *Grace and Frankie*, spanning several generations, reflects on many of these changes without straying from the conventions of the genre and its eternal optimism.

Conclusion

Despite the many changes and interpretations romance fiction has seen, the idea persists that romantic comedies promote fantasies rather than reflect real life. Weisser claims that romance fiction is removed from real life and Gornick argued that a romance of quality story telling that includes a social critique and a happy ending is difficult to find. Guerrasio says we no longer feel connected to romantic comedies and Morris mourns the fact that rom coms are "essentially gone". This thesis aims to prove otherwise. Romantic comedy is still alive and remains as popular as ever, but as our romantic values and our experiences change, so do the way these stories are told. Romantic comedy engages with our discourse on romance and relationships and though they may be packaged differently, they are essentially what they have always been: stories about relationships, about intimacy, about the human experience of connecting, intimately, with another. Romantic comedy helps us process these experiences and "what better way to process a figurative and literal clusterfuck than through stories? To re-write the narratives we wished we'd had, that we still need to hear and that we need to pass on" (Shields).

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