

How Popular Media Represents Social Class, Ageism, and Sexuality: An Analysis of the Netflix Original Series *Grace and Frankie*

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Audience Analysis (137 words): The domestic situation comedy *Grace and Frankie* was first released on Netflix on May 8, 2015. This hit show is now Netflix's longest running original series with 6 seasons and one more to come. *Grace and Frankie* is marketed towards a middle-class audience, mostly adult women, who can afford access to the online and streaming media provider. These viewers are located around the world, with the majority being in the United States, and mostly in cities or areas where there's a reliable internet connection. The readers of my final paper also are members of the middle class, have access to Netflix, and have an interest in the show *Grace and Frankie*. The values these audiences hold are to learn how to become aware of how the media presents social class, how it features ageism, and how it represents sexuality.

Social class, ageism, and sexuality affect all of us. From the places we live to the clothes we wear, all are representations of our social class status, our age, and our sexuality. The media influences the way we perceive these things. On popular television shows like *The Honeymooners*, *The Flintstones*, and *The Simpsons*, the working-class male character is shown as an "inept bumbler" or a "buffoon" (Butsch 20). During commercial advertisements, beauty companies try to get you to buy different creams and serums that can reverse the aging process and make you "stay young" (Tortajada et al. 1-2). Until more modern and popular shows like *Modern Family*, *Schitt's Creek*, and *Euphoria* were released, a lead and/or reoccurring openly LGBTQ+ character was an uncommon find. We are exposed to these representations frequently, if not daily, and they alter our own opinions on these topics almost always without us being aware that they are. It is important to be conscious of how popular media presents social class, ageism, and sexuality to us, and a great way to practice this is to analyze how a show or movie you enjoy presents these things. Here is my analysis on the popular Netflix series *Grace and*

Frankie, which upholds dominant cultural mythologies by sweeping the issue of class under the rug and glamorizing the wealthy, while also positively representing sexuality and defying ageist assumptions.

Grace and Frankie aired on Netflix for the first time on May 8, 2015. It is now Netflix's longest original series with six seasons, all containing thirteen episodes, and the finale season projected to air sometime in 2021. It also has a Rotten Tomatoes's average tomatometer score of 89% and an average audience score of 90% ("Grace and Frankie"), so it is safe to assume that *Grace and Frankie* is a popular and well-liked domestic situation comedy. The first season of the show takes place in San Diego, California, and it follows Grace Hanson and Frankie Bergstein after their husbands, Robert Hanson and Sol Bergstein, confess to them that they've been having a secret affair with each other over the past twenty years and now wish to get married. This obviously comes as a shock, since both Grace and Robert and Frankie and Sol have been married for over forty years. The rest of the season explores how to manage with change. Grace and Frankie have to learn how to cope with not being with their now ex-husbands anymore, how to date again as women in their 70s, how to understand their husbands' sexuality and why they would've kept it a secret for so long, and how to be friends after years of despising one another. Robert and Sol have to learn how to be an openly homosexual couple after years of hiding and how to set boundaries with how close they should be with their now ex-wives. The couples' children, Brianna Hanson, Mallory Hanson, Nwabudike "Bud" Bergstein, and Coyote Bergstein, have to learn how to be one large family unit, even though they are all adults, and how to come to the terms with the fact that they now have two dads.

While the show already seems complex enough, it becomes even more so when you start to analyze how *Grace and Frankie* represents social class. It reinforces mythologies about class

in America by glamorizing the wealthy. Within the first two episodes, we learn that all of the main characters, with the exception of Frankie's adopted son Coyote, are part of the middle and upper-middle classes. Grace is retired, but she is the founder and owner of Say Grace, which is her cosmetics company. Robert is a practicing and successful divorce lawyer, so while he and Grace were together, they became respected members of the upper-middle class. Sol is also a practicing divorce lawyer and now that he is with Robert, he too is a member of the upper-middle class. Frankie is also a member of the upper-middle class, even though she is a self-proclaimed hippy and an art teacher to ex-convicts, due to her association with Sol and Grace ("The End"). Most of their children belong to the middle class as Brianna is the CEO of her mother's very successful cosmetics company, Mallory is a mother of two and has the luxury of being a stay at home mom since her husband is a doctor ("The Credit Cards"), and Bud is a lawyer at Robert and Sol's firm ("The End"). So, with that said, this Netflix series is less than sensational with how it represents social class, as almost all of its characters represent only one class, the wealthy middle class. According to Diana Kendall, "Although some media frames show the rich and famous in a negative manner, they still glorify the material possessions and lifestyles of the upper classes" (Kendall 417), thereby glamorizing the wealthy. *Grace and Frankie* does this often, especially when you just analyze Grace. The show provides her with several character flaws, as she is an alcoholic that claims "Alcohol has its own rules" ("The End"), to validate her excessive drinking, she pops pills that aren't prescribed to her when she gets worked up, which is often, and she is very insecure about her old age. However, the show tries to get us to look past these issues by reinforcing just how successful and well off Grace is. They show us the beautiful beachfront home she co-owns with Frankie and gets to live in, that she never cooks for herself (she only ever eats out or orders in), she never wears the same outfit

twice, she only owns Apple products, etc. They even show her at the grocery store walking past her own face on a box of hair dye that her company produces (“The End”). The show glamorizes Grace’s wealth and success to get us to not focus on her character flaws, which thereby provides an example of how they glamorize the affluent.

Grace and Frankie also creates a unifying middle class, “By ignoring the poor and blurring the lines between the working people and the upper class” (Mantsios 615). Coyote, for example, should technically belong to the poor and/or working class, but he is swept into the unifying middle-class bubble with all of the other characters due to his connections with them. In the second episode, we find out that he is unemployed, is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, and is currently sleeping on his brother’s couch for free until he works things out (“The Credit Cards”). He is also portrayed as untrustworthy, lacking impulse control, and generally more childish than the other characters of his age, which would put him into the working-class male character stereotype of the “inept bumbler” (Butsch 20). Also, for the most part, in popular media, “the poor and their problems are hidden” (Mantsios 611), which is clear as the show tries to draw less attention to Coyote’s struggles by making fun of them, instead of actually dealing with them. For example, in episode thirteen, Bud finds an old birdhouse and Coyote promptly grabs it from him and says, “Oh, I’ll take that. It’s the closest I’ll get to having my own place” (“The Vows”). By masking his problems with humor, the show is hiding the true extremes of his issues, which in this case is homelessness, in order to place him in the uniting middle-class bubble, instead of the poor/working-class bubble he belongs to. Also, since all the other characters are middle class and successful, just his association with them blurs the line between him being a working-class individual and a middle-class character. Through the inclusion of Coyote’s character, *Grace and Frankie* reinforces several cultural mythologies by promoting the

idea of American exceptionalism and showing how class difference is overcome through hard work and perseverance, which Coyote does by stating he's ninety days clean and is shown trying to go back to school ("The End"). It even emphasizes how one's class status is a matter of individual will rather than the result of larger social and economic forces, by showing that even though he was born into a wealthy and positive home, it's only his fault that he became an addict and is bumming off of his brother. This, of course, isn't the case, as he grew up in a home where drugs, like marijuana, were frequently, albeit responsibly and safely used, so he was introduced to the idea early on that drugs were okay. He, however, became addicted to cocaine, which is extremely addictive and very dangerous.

While social class representations in the show are important, *Grace and Frankie* is quite successful at representing gendered ageism and defying ageist assumptions. In episode five, Brianna tells Grace while she's creating an online dating profile that, "You can't say you're 70. Say you're 64" ("The Fall"), and in episode six, Grace asks Frankie, "Am I trying too hard to look young?" ("The Earthquake"). These are just two of the several instances where Grace falls prey to mainstream ageist assumptions that "all women are obsessed with trying to look and act young while being anxious over growing old" (Tortajada et al. 1). Frankie, however, provides a juxtaposition to Grace's concerns as she embraces her age and doesn't care to look younger. In episode 8, Frankie even goes as far as creating a natural lubricant for aged women as a way of empowering them and stating that women of any age should be sexually active if they choose, without feeling ashamed or embarrassed ("The Sex"). While Grace becomes more empowered by her age as the seasons progress, there are a few instances in the first season where Frankie's ways affect how Grace sees herself. In episode five, for example, Grace goes to the hospital after she falls and when her Doctor asks if she has had any other surgeries, she says no, but

Frankie is quick to ask if she's sure and then gestures to her cheek bones. This suggests that Grace has had a cosmetic procedure done, which she did, and Grace remembers that, but instead of being embarrassed, both women simply laugh about it ("The Fall"). This just shows that Grace is slowly getting to a place where she sees her attempts to stay forever young, humorous and unnecessary and by addressing the complexities of ageing, *Grace and Frankie*, "makes a point against gendered ageism" (Tortajada et al. 1). As the seasons continue, the show time and time again, strives to empower women, but especially older women. So, while the show isn't perfect as it appeals to mainstream conventions like not showing an aged naked body (Tortajada et al. 1), it does a great job at least addressing the issues of gendered ageism and ageist assumptions.

The show also does a pretty good job at presenting LGBTQ+ characters. For starters Robert and Sol are main characters in the show, which is significant in itself as non-heterosexual characters aren't often seen in lead roles, until more recently that is. For instance, Disney just released its first animated movie with an openly gay character on March 6, 2020, called *Onward*. So, with that, it's safe to assume that an openly gay lead character is still a relatively new occurrence among popular media. On top of being lead characters, Robert and Sol also happen to be homosexual men in their 70s, which is progressive and goes against assumptions that it's only the younger generations that are engaging in queer relationships. Often when popular media features a LGBTQ+ couple, the characters are young and usually never appear older than thirty or forty. For example, hit TV series like *Modern Family*, *Schitt's Creek*, and *Euphoria* all feature a younger gay couple. *Grace and Frankie* also tries to focus more on the complexities of Robert and Sol's relationship, rather than just flaunt the fact that these two characters are gay in order to appear that they are progressive. For instance, in episode eleven Sol proclaims, "I'm not gay in

order to shed conventions! I'm gay because I love this man" ("The Secrets"), after being asked about his relationship with Robert and why they're choosing to be public now. This is important, since popular media outlets sometimes employ the use of queerbaiting, "a marketing technique for fiction and entertainment in which creators hint at, but then do not actually depict, same-sex romance or other forms of LGBTQ representation" ("Queerbaiting"), in order to draw in a larger audience. Robert and Sol also aren't the only homosexual characters on the show. In episode twelve, Robert and Sol have a bachelor party in which they invite a handful of their closest friends, five of which are other gay men that they've become close with through the years ("The Bachelor Party"). Two of those men, Peter and his spouse, appear in several episodes within the first season and even more often in the later seasons.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we are all influenced by popular media's presentations of social class, ageism, and sexuality. While TV shows, movies, and other popular media platforms are becoming more inclusive and showing more realistic portrayals of the different classes, ages, and sexual identifications, there is still plenty of work to be done, since producers will continue to recycle stereotypical character molds because they know they will get views. *Grace and Frankie*, while not flawless, encourages audiences to raise questions about gender, sexuality, and ageist assumptions (Tortajada et al. 1), and also provides examples as to how popular media tends to sweep the issue of class under the rug and glamorize the wealthy. Our job as viewers is to be aware of how the media is presenting these topics, so we can separate their influence from our own opinions.

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