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*Friday Night Lights* and Gender

*Friday Night Lights* focuses on a high school football team in the small, fictional town of Dillon, Texas, and on the lives of the people involved. The show uses football as its central theme to represent masculinity and a real American identity, and it demonstrates the challenges young men face in order to live up to societal standards of strength and dominance. However, the show also sheds light on the pressures women face by being in a “man’s world”. The creators of the show were aware of the stereotypes surrounding women such as Tami Taylor, Becky Sproles, Lyla Garrity, Tyra Collette, and Jess Merriweather, and they actively sought to complicate and challenge these stereotypical roles. The series challenges gender stereotypes of women as it follows these women on a search for their identities, and the audience gets to see the repercussions that occur when a character steps out of her “role”. *Friday Night Lights* also displays that female characters in sports narratives do not have to be limited to one specific role, and that they have the freedom to reinvent themselves and explore their identities without emasculating men.

Goodall (2012) discusses the impact that media have on young viewers. She states that stereotypes seen in the media affect how people perceive the world, and people may begin to act based on the stereotypes associated with a specific gender. Goodall concludes that certain gender stereotypes that accurately depict gender roles are positive and useful in storytelling, but other stereotypes can be negative if they portray a certain social norm that is not necessarily true (Goodall, 2012). She further concludes that implementing media literacy programs that critically analyze how gender stereotypes influence a person’s behavior can be helpful for young viewers and can impact how gender is depicted in the media. *Friday Night Lights* is influential for young viewers because it challenges the stereotypes and social norms surrounding women, and portrays women in strong roles.

Dozier, Horan, and Lauzen (2008) conducted a study that examined female and male roles in prime-time television from 2005 to 2006. They concluded that female characters are generally associated with interpersonal roles such as romance, family, and friends. In contrast, male characters are more likely to be in work-related roles. The creators of *Friday Night Lights* wanted to challenge these roles, especially surrounding females, and show that women can inhabit a wider variety of roles not limited to interpersonal situations. Tami Taylor, wife of Coach Taylor, is one character on *Friday Night Lights* that demonstrates she is more than a stereotype. She is depicted as a positive role model for young adults and is much more of a central character in the show than how women are usually seen. Mays (2011) discusses an interview with actress Connie Britton and creators of the show in which Britton originally declines the offer to play Tami Taylor. She didn't want to be a background character lost in the theme of masculinity, but the creators assured her that they would create a character for her with dimension and a real voice.

Seltzer (2011) discusses the role Tami Taylor plays in the world of football and masculinity and states that she is a molder of women, but that she is also often laboring in her husband’s shadows. Furthermore, Seltzer discusses the treatment that a student, Lyla Garrity, faces as she is labeled as a “slut” or “whore” for sleeping with her disabled boyfriend’s best friend, Tim Riggins. Tim is punished for his actions, but is quickly forgiven and resumes his high-power position in football. However, because of her gender, Lyla faces relentless harassment from her behavior as seen in episode ten titled “It's Different for Girls”, thus exhibiting the double-standard involving men and women (Berg, 2006). Seltzer concludes that her identity has inverted from pure and virginal to impure and slutty.

Young women in society are under a much harsher, less forgiving spotlight than men, as exhibited by *Friday Night Lights*. They are limited to strict rules that govern their sexuality, appearance, behavior, and identity, and if they were to go against their given identity, they would be labeled as another identity entirely. Women, particularly in sports narratives, are depicted as supportive characters without much depth or dimension to them. They live vicariously through the men whom they support, further highlighting the power that men have in society. It is common for a sports film to have female characters in a specific one-dimensional role and uncommon for the character to develop further than what is expected in the role. The creators of *Friday Night Lights* were aware of this norm and wanted to demolish the “uncommon” wall that constrains women. The women of Dillon, Texas prove that they do not have to be limited to one specific role and can explore their identities without being masked by the men.

Unlike the stereotypical television drama wife, Tami Taylor is never masked by her husband’s shadow as Seltzer stated. Rather, she is creating her own path of success and proving her power and worth every day. While her husband excels at being a football coach, Tami excels at being a life coach. She sees the best in people and empowers them to reach their true potential (Berg, 2006). It is merely Coach Taylor’s ego and power that prevents her from reaching her full potential. In the series finale episode titled “Always”, Tami is offered a shot at her dream job and wants her family to support her. Tami says to her husband, “It’s my turn babe. I have loved you and you have loved me and we have compromised, both of us… for your job. And now it’s my turn to talk about doing that for my job” (Katims & Waxman, 2011). Coach Taylor agrees, and the family moves together to support Tami. This interaction between the two shows how supportive she has been throughout Coach Taylor’s entire coaching career, but also how women don’t have to just be the cheerleaders in a man’s world. Women have the ability to stand up for themselves and play a bigger part in this world of masculinity.

Another aspect of Tami Taylor that shows character dimension is her ability to help struggling girls without her own opinions getting in the way. Instead, she tackles the crisis head-on and provides a comforting support system. This is especially prevalent in season four episode 10 titled “I Can’t” when Becky Sproles is struggling with a pregnancy (Carpenter & Mann, 2010). Becky loses her virginity and ends up pregnant and initially wants an abortion. However, she struggles with the decision because her mother had her at a young age as well, and Luke Cafferty, the boy she slept with, advises her to think more about her choice. She turns to Tami for advice and rather than yelling at her, Tami follows guidance protocol and gives her unbiased advice (Carpenter & Mann, 2010). Becky asks Tami what she would tell her own daughter if she were in a similar situation, and Tami replies, “I would tell her to think about her life, think about what’s important to her and what she wants and I would tell her she’s in a real tough spot and then I would support whatever decision she made” (Carpenter & Mann, 2010). This conversation further highlights the type of woman Tami is: loving, supportive, and a strong role model for young women and girls.

Tami also proves that she is more than just a pretty wife by showing resilience and having a voice. In subsequent episodes of season four, Tami is faced with blame for Becky’s decision. Luke Cafferty’s mother attempts to get Tami fired because she believes Tami told Becky to get an abortion. Tami displays her strength and resilience by standing up for Becky at a school board meeting (Berg, 2006). Abortion is a subject that is very rarely seen on television, and *Friday Night Lights* provided an honest portrayal of the realities of teen pregnancy. These episodes show strength in both Tami and Becky – in Tami for bravely facing a war between her personal and professional lives and giving advice with sympathy, and in Becky, for being able to openly talk about her situation without losing her femininity and making the right choice for herself in the midst of controversy.

Another character that displays strength and goes against stereotypes is Lyla Garrity. Lyla first fills the stereotypical role of the high school cheerleader devoted only to her star quarterback boyfriend, but her role soon unravels as the series unfolds. She demonstrates that traditional roles that are undervalued and stereotyped can quickly become complicated. Lyla faces difficult decisions throughout the series that allow her to fully explore her identity and reveal her true self without shame of being someone else outside of her expected role. Rather than focusing solely on the way Jason Street, Lyla’s boyfriend, reacts to his accident, the show is devoted to how Lyla deals with the aftermath of her boyfriend’s accident and the repercussions that occur (Berg, 2006). This demonstrates that Lyla is more than just a support system for her boyfriend. Even after Lyla and Jason break up, her character continues to develop beyond the cheerleader girlfriend, proving that she was never and will never de confined to the arm of a man. As Seltzer (2011) states, Lyla loses her label as the star quarterback’s pure girlfriend in the first season and quickly acquires the negative label as an impure whore in episode 10 “It’s Different for Girls” (Berg, 2006). Further into the season, however, she moves beyond these fixed labels and discovers her ability to ignore labels altogether. She chooses to live her life according to her, and not from the judgments and labels of others.

Similar to Lyla’s constraints to one role in the beginning of the series, Tyra Collette is a character on the show that is forced into one specific role. She is treated as a school slut so often that she starts believing it herself and no longer sees her worth. The show challenges the stereotype of a school slut by exploring the ways in which the label influences how other characters see her and how she sees herself. In the first season, Tami writes Tyra off as being a bad influence. In season three, Tyra is depreciated even more by being told she doesn’t have what it takes to apply to the universities she wanted to and that a community college would be more appropriate (Berg, 2006). The mistreatment she receives from being labeled as the school slut sends her spiraling down a bad path, but she never takes no for an answer. She ultimately decides to transcend the labels that have been thrust upon her, and she breaks out of the mold that she is forced in. In season three episode two titled “Tami Knows Best”, she is elected student council president, and after graduation attends the University of Texas at Austin (Berg, 2006). Tyra is an example of a complicated character that pushes herself to reinvent her identity. She is able to grow out of her original label and see herself as having more value than just a sex object.

Jess Merriweather is another student that defies the social norm of being a woman, and she does so through her interest in football (Berg, 2006). As seen in the series, Jess is not confined to one specific role as a female. She shows her feminine side by playing the role of a mother to her younger brothers since their own mother passed away and by wearing tight, feminine clothing. However, she also portrays masculine characteristics by being interested in football. By showing both sides, she proves that a woman does not have to have all masculine traits to be interested in a typically masculine sport. Furthermore, her love of football does not eradicate her choice to follow traditional gender norms as a woman.

The women in the series also prove that they have the freedom to reinvent themselves and explore their identities without emasculating the male characters. They even go beyond that by playing a part in shaping the identities of the men in Dillon, Texas. For example, Coach Taylor is portrayed as the ultimate masculine character in the beginning of the series. However, as the series unfolds and the audience understands that the role of women is much more progressive than in typical sports narratives, we see this idealistic image of the ultimate masculinity for Coach Taylor get reinvented into a new, more realistic image of masculinity that is more inclusive of women.

Coach Taylor also shapes boys into respectful young men, but he does so by teaching them positive values of friendship, teamwork, dedication, and most importantly, respect for women. Tami Taylor’s anti-misogynistic attitude creates a domino affect of respect and equality from Coach Taylor to the players of his football team. Furthermore, Coach’s relationship with Jess Merriweather shows how impactful a woman can be to a man’s identity. Jess is able to help Coach Taylor overcome his somewhat sexist opinions about football, and he ultimately accepts her demands to have him as her mentor in coaching. She helps him expand his own role as a mentor from teaching only boys to now including girls in the once very gender-specific sport.

*Friday Night Lights* is never just a show about football. It is a show about a small-town community, family and human interactions. *Friday Night Lights* takes its viewers on a journey that showcases the female characters’ struggles of losing one label, acquiring another, and ultimately losing labels altogether and reinventing themselves. They are just as complicated characters, if not more, as the men in the series, and they face real-life challenges that are often pushed to the background of television.

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