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# Shallow Narcissist or Sad Spinster? Childless Female Characters in Contemporary Popular Film and Television

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**ABSTRACT**

The article charts the way childless women are portrayed in contemporary US-American popular film and television. I argue that these representations can be summarized as two distinct figures: The shallow narcissist and the sad spinster. Both figures are unworthy of recognition. The shallow narcissist refers to the voluntarily childless woman, who is being depicted as selfish, childish, and manipulative; the sad spinster refers to the involuntarily childless woman, who is depicted as asexual, lonely, sad, and pathetic. Both figures are founded in the discourse of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman) and teaches us that only a child can give meaning to women's lives. Without a child, there is no proper identity and no fulfilling relations or kinships. I also point out, though, that there are exceptions, such as Tanya McQuoid from *The White Lotus* and Diane Lockhart from *The Good Fight,* that bring important nuances to the prevailing stereotypes.

**KEYWORDS**

Voluntary and involuntary childlessness, feminism, queer theory

Once, having children was a necessity for survival: "In the preindustrial era, the survival of the community and economic wellbeing depended upon high fertility." However, "today, children no longer offer demographic or economic advantages" (May 2). In fact, one of the world's primary problems is overpopulation, an issue we, according to Donna J. Haraway, have to address, even at the risk of "a slide once again into the muck of racism, classism, nationalism, modernism, and imperialism" (6). Against this gloomy backdrop, one might think that women opting out of motherhood today would be depicted as messianic figures or at least as women who take responsibility for the future of the planet. The very opposite is the case. Despite several waves of feminism, the proliferation of LGBTQIA+ movements and insights of queer theories, in the eyes of Western culture, a woman with no children remains a morally questionable outcast, a ridiculous or even monstrous figure, because she challenges what Lee Edelman refers to as the "reproductive futurism" of our Western culture. As the Canadian poet Lorna Crozier writes in the essay collection *Nobody's Mother*, "when we speak of a woman without children we're speaking of the Other, one of those who lives on the edge of what our language and culture feel comfortable with" (29). In popular film and television, opting out of motherhood will lead to a conception of her as a failed woman who lacks not only family and child but also, and more fundamentally, the ability to mother altogether.[1] In real life it is rather difficult to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary childlessness: "Some people have no children due to economic barriers or to the circumstances of their private lives, although they would have wanted them; and vice versa . . ." (Chollet 101). In popular culture, things are less ambivalent and blurry and the distinction between the one and the other is more straightforward. In this article I argue that, while both women who are involuntarily and voluntarily childless are portrayed as Other and unworthy of recognition in contemporary US film and television, they are framed rather differently. In general, the involuntarily childless woman is depicted as sad and ashamed of her inability to properly fulfil her role as a woman (i.e., to have a child) and thus has the right moral values whereas the woman who chooses not to be a mother corrupts the natural order of things with her disturbed and self-absorbed personality.

Accordingly, in what follows, I will elaborate on the differences between two character tropes that I will identify as *the sad spinster* and *the shallow narcissist*. In contemporary US-American film and television, both are seen as lacking, wanting, and missing out, i.e., neither are portrayed as "child*free*," the neologism that attempts to describe the state of having no children less negatively than "childl*ess*." The shallow narcissist as a character trope refers to a voluntarily childless woman who is

[1] "'To mother' or 'mothering' refers to the tasks motherhood requires – 'mothering' may be performed by anyone who commits him- or herself to the demands of maternal practice" (O'Reilley 5).

beautiful, rich, and successful but also utterly childish and narcissistic. We meet her in twenty-first-century films such as *Gone Girl* (Amy Dunne), *Young Adult* (Mavis Gary), and *Blue Jasmine* (Jasmine) but also in earlier films such as *Fatal Attraction* (Alex Forrest) and *Basic Instinct* (Catherine Tramell). She also features prominently in recent series such as *The White Lotus* (Tanya McQuoid-Hunt), *House of Cards* (Claire Underwood), and *Succession* (Siobhan "Shiv" Roy). The shallow narcissist is a riff on the character trope of the *femme fatale*. As such she is sexy, cunning, and dangerous. At the same time, she has traits in common with the character trope of the bad mother or the witch mother in that her dangerousness is related to her lack of maternal instinct.[2] This is very much in opposition to the sad spinster, who is not a successful woman but a woman who has failed, is plain-looking, asexual, sad, and pathetic. She can be found in films such as *Girl on the Train* (Rachel Watson), *Notes on a Scandal* (Barbara Covett), and *By the Sea* (Vanessa) and series such as *The Secret She Keeps* (Agatha Fyfle). She is almost always depressed and, as a consequence, addicted to alcohol and suffers from both low self-esteem and self-hatred. Despite their obvious differences, both tropes are systematically represented as unworthy of recognition and both stand in opposition to the caring mother figure. As Joselyn K. Leimbach points out, "mothers are seen as 'proper' women, while women without children are perceived as 'improper' and treated as 'other'" (723). This, in turn, legitimizes a (female) fantasy of devaluing, at times even annihilating, the childless woman because she poses a threat to the heteronormative middle-class order. Below, I will examine these two character tropes separately, focusing specifically on middle-aged protagonists.

## Voluntarily and Involuntarily Childless Women as Pathological Failures

My point of departure for charting the general conception of voluntarily and involuntarily childless women is popular film and television, where prevailing tropes and narratives are both represented and reproduced. In *Hard-Core Romance: Fifty Shades of Grey, Best-Sellers, and Society*, Eva Illouz stresses that a bestseller "articulates the core cultural values and key experiences of the society in which it circulates." Thus, popular culture reproduces "the familiar," but in doing so also "formulates something that *many* people want to say but are unable to say, either because they do not dare say it . . . or because they do not have the language to say it" (22). Surprisingly, perhaps, Illouz also maintains that "in contradistinction to high culture, popular texts not only enact a problem but resolve it as well" (22–23). Unlike works of high culture,

[2] In *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, E. Ann Kaplan stresses that mothers are depicted as either good mothers (angels) or bad mothers (witches). As in Melanie Klein's psychoanalytical theory of the split between the good and evil breast, there is a split between "the ideal nurturing mother" and "the evil phallic denying mother" (Kaplan 21).

popular texts do not open ambiguous and ambivalent registers of emotion. In line with self-help books, they offer directions, logic, and order in a chaotic world. They cannot, however, perform this work for the non-normative person. On the contrary, popular texts typically legitimize stigmatization in that they reproduce the normative order and the othering of nonconforming individuals. Popular culture proceeds from a conception of what "the general subject" thinks, feels, and fantasizes about. Non-general subjectivities are examined and evaluated from this point of view by the norm-setting culture, including the viewer or reader. As Leimbach puts it: "Analyzing pop culture text provides important insight into discursive constructions of nonnormative identities" (157). Thus, social deviants are typically not seen from the inside but from the outside. We are *not* supposed to identify with them. This is a key device in popular representations of both voluntarily and involuntarily childless women. As regards the former, there are very few nuanced depictions of them, and they are evaluated according to the hegemonic discourse of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman). As Julia Moore and Patricia Geist-Martin point out, they typically "end up having children or are never explicitly identified as permanently and voluntarily childless, leaving their childbearing status open to interpretation" (234). The voluntarily childless woman may also regret her choice and end up as an involuntarily childless woman who lacks not just a child but any identity and meaning in life. In contemporary popular film and television in general, voluntarily as well as involuntarily childless women are typically represented as abnormal, pathological, and socially and psychologically challenged. The pathology is very often related to some childhood trauma that functions as an explanation – sometimes also an excuse – for their abnormal life. However, their pathological behavior can also be related to their childlessness. Often, the involuntarily childless woman is mentally ill from longing for a child, while the voluntarily childless woman has opted out of motherhood precisely because she is mentally ill. Common features of this childless pathology in general are paranoia, depression, mania, and addiction and these women often suffer from borderline personality disorder or are on the autistic spectrum. They can be very ambitious and competent but are still considered failures. Cornelia Klecker identifies the character trope "the antisocial heroine" or "female lone wolf," a woman who, for a variety of reasons, has chosen to live outside the heteronormative family structure and is either childless or a bad mother. Unlike her male equivalent, who is idealized for his ability to cope on his own, the antisocial heroine is almost always depicted as abnormal. As Klecker stresses:

> Severe psychological problems, such as bipolar disorder and PTSD, seem to be the common reason employed by these series as justification for the behavior of antisocial heroines and their rejection of fulfilling relational roles. Unlike the way male lone wolves

> tend to be portrayed, many of these television shows choose to emphasize the failures caused by the female protagonists' antisocial behavior. (450)

Not unlike the way same-sex desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, as Heather Love points out (*Feeling Backward* 21), childless women are depicted as abnormal sad failures, because they are unable or unwilling to reproduce the heteronormative family model or adhere to chrononormativity.[3] The general link between childlessness and failure makes identification and recognition less likely, since viewers cannot imagine a good life for a childless female character. Inspired by Halberstam, Alexandra M. Hill writes:

> In neoliberal society, I argue, the childless woman is regarded as a failure – in failing to reproduce, she has failed to uphold traditional gender norms, to extend the longevity of her family and nation (not to mention her social class), and to discipline her body into proceeding along a "normal" biological trajectory. (165)

As I intend to demonstrate in a close reading of the television series *The White Lotus*, failure can sometimes be understood the other way round: Failure can refer to various forms of queer resistance, such as the failure to reproduce stereotypical character tropes. In general, however, the viewer is left with the expectation that women must reproduce or, at the very least, engage in other forms of caretaking in order for them to have a meaningful life and an acceptable identity – not least to minimize the lonely state of old age.[4]

## Childless Women: A Historical Context

In order to understand why childless women today are seen as unworthy failures or "others," we need to conceptualize the childless woman as a queer figure who, in the course of Western history, has suffered stigmatization in much the same way as queer and trans persons have. Historically, being unmarried was essentially equated with being childless since childlessness was typically related directly to unmarried women, such as the spinster, the witch, and the nun. And an understanding of the childless (and unmarried) woman as sad and/or dangerous has been dominant throughout Western history. As historian Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller explains, in the seventeenth century, singlehood was considered a sinful state, "an evil to be exorcised from community life because solitary women menaced the social order" (11),

[3] Elisabeth Freeman identifies chrononormativity as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies towards maximum productivity"(3).

[4] Until recently, women who are no longer fertile were rarely given leading roles in film unless they were either someone's mother or grandmother or an enemy to eliminate. Middle-aged and elderly women were depicted as threatening or paltry, as if, in Mona Chollet's words, "ageing reveals women's fundamental darkness and malignity" (179). This was particularly pertinent if the women in question were still sexually active and, in a historical context, "appeared as immoral and threatening forces in the social order" (180). In more recent years, popular film and television does feature more middle-aged and elderly women in leading roles but still very few women without children.

and childless and unmarried women risked being considered witches. The eighteenth century saw this image change to some extent; unmarried and childless women were now looked upon with pity: "To be unmarried was disgraceful, a reproach rather than a sin, society regarded the spinster with more scorn than fear" (11).

The childless woman has in many ways been forgotten in historical and literary scholarship, cultural studies, queer studies, and feminist theory despite the fact that, as historian Richard Wall points out, women "who head households, live entirely alone, or never marry are clearly key elements of the social structure of any society" (141). According to historian Amy M. Froide, it is problematic that so little historical scholarship deals with unmarried and childless women, thus setting a norm (or reinforcing a norm) where married women are "the people who mattered" whereas unmarried and childless women are positioned as stigmatized others (3). Froide also emphasizes that the plight of unmarried and childless women in the past can shed new light on how we perceive minority groups today. In early modern England, for example, "married and widowed women [would] sit together in the matron's pews, while single women [were] seated separately" (1). Froide also stresses that "our present-day preoccupation with class, race, and sexuality has obscured the fact that marital status shaped in profound ways the life experiences of early modern women" (1). Pointing out the queer potential of these historical figures, she encourages more scholarship in this field since single women of the past created alternative forms of life and kinship. Figuratively speaking, childless women are still being seated separately and because of our present-day preoccupation with race, class, and sexuality, we do not acknowledge their contemporary queer potential either. As Froide points out:

> Focusing on singlewomen also changes the way in which we view the nuclear family and kinship . . . Singlewomen reveal the importance of a wider definition of family and of the ties of kinship . . . once we cease to view married adults as the norm . . . we find that spouses and children did not always form the most important connections in people's lives. (7)

Even today childless women remain underexposed in the cultural narratives of the West, and when they do appear, they usually, as I will demonstrate, just imitate or rehearse old scripted stereotypes. Thus, according to Heather Love, the childless spinster can be seen as a figure who reminds us about "knots, silences, and fractures that indicate the still unfinished business of feminism" ("Gyn/Apology" 306).

### The Sad Spinster

The sad spinster is typically involuntarily childless and from the start of the narrative painfully aware of her sad situation. She is lonely, utterly depressed as well as

decidedly less rich, successful, and attractive than the shallow narcissist. She often belongs to the middle class and has a job in which she functions as either helper of or opponent to a traditional nuclear family, such as nun, nurse, or teacher. Whereas the shallow narcissist refuses to see her life as meaningless, the sad spinster considers her life empty. For example, *By the Sea* is a film about an unhappily childless couple, who move to Southern France to try and heal their wounds. Vanessa (Angelina Jolie) is depressed and suffers from alcoholism, but at one point she reaches a somewhat paradoxical redemption by yelling: "I'm barren!" (01:47:00). She seems to realize and accept that her life as a childless woman is meaningless. According to Elaine Tyler May, "'[b]arren' is a term laden with historical weight. It carries negative meanings: unproductive, sterile, bare, empty, stark, deficient, lacking, wanting, destitute, devoid. It is the opposite of fertile, lavish, abounding, productive" (11). The sad spinster is a "failed Madonna" and is thus related to a general conception of the body of the mother as asexual. As Jacqueline Rose points out: "A mother is a woman whose sexual being must be invisible" (36). The lesbian spinster Barbara Covett (Judy Dench) from *Notes on a Scandal* is an important example. Like a destructive parasite, she lives off and for the destruction of other people's families and says about herself: "I'm an imposition, to be tolerated" (00:58:56–01:00:00). She suffers from a lack not only of sex but also of any kind of human contact, psychological as well as physical. As Barbara Covett describes the extreme loneliness of the spinster herself:

> People like Sheba [the woman Barbara Covett is in love with] think they know what it is to be lonely. But of the drip drip drip of long haul, no-end-in-side solitude . . . they know nothing. What it's like to construct an entire weekend around a visit to the launderette . . . or to be so chronically untouched that the accidental brush of a bus conductor's hand sends a jolt of longing straight to your groin. Of this Sheba and her like have no clue. (01:05:00–06:00)

The narratives of the sad spinster are usually centered around a voyeuristic situation in which she watches other people's lives in envy. Sometimes she even stalks women living a "normal" healthy life in a nuclear family, or women who are about to create such a family as is the case in *By the Sea.* The voyeuristic set-up is typically very concrete. *The Secret She Keeps*, *By the Sea*, *The Girl on the Train*, and *Girl at the Window* all feature sad spinsters watching, through holes in the wall or binoculars, families or lovers who are engaged in creating or nurturing a family. Often the sad spinster ends up kidnapping other people's children. This is how the male profiler from *The Secret She Keeps* characterizes the psychology of the traumatized childless woman, who has just stolen a child from the couple the profiler is talking to:

> [H]istorically a classic reason for a woman to steal a baby is that she can't have one or/and she is possibly trying to keep her relationship together . . . what we probably are

> looking for is a woman who is an outsider – she will seek a behavior to fill out an emotional hole in her life. ("Episode 4" 00:17:09–12)

These depictions of sad spinsters are driven by unambiguous reproductive futurism: Only a child can give meaning to a woman's life, and only children can keep couples together, which means that women without children are by definition envious of women who have children. As Rachel (Emily Blunt) in *The Girl on the Train* says about the women she watches from the train every day: "She is everything I want to be" (00:25:00–03).

The sad spinster is out of touch with reality and locked in pathological patterns of compulsory repetition, such as the traumatized murderer Susan Edwards (Olivia Colman) from the television series *The Landscapers*. She upholds a glamorous fantasy world, living for her imagined correspondence with the French actor Gérard Depardieu. The general cultural background for these conceptions is the idea that childless women, because of their lack of a child, are deprived of adulthood altogether. They are childlike and isolated women, who have lost their grip on the real world. In line with this, the sad spinster does not keep up with current technology and fashion. She could serve as a positive example of a person opposed to chrononormativity, but popular film and television resist such a reading by making her unworthy of recognition and identification.

The sad spinster also often suffers from a diffuse feeling of paranoia. She feels watched and judged from all sides. Interestingly, the cultural history of paranoia links it with masculinity. Sianne Ngai even calls it "a distinctively male form of knowledge production" (299). However, the moment a woman – in this case the sad spinster – acts on her paranoia, it loses its power and thereby the link to "thinking" and "knowledge production." This suggests that the paranoia felt by the sad spinster points back at her and loses its energy and power, even though her feeling of being judged and stigmatized for being childless is well-founded.

### The Shallow Narcissist

The shallow narcissist epitomizes the voluntary choice to not have children. Occasionally, she can be involuntarily childless, but this state will turn out to be self-inflicted: She has been too focused on her career or she has had too many abortions. And so, she herself is to blame for her miserable and empty life. The abortions and the more permanent opting out of motherhood are depicted as expressions of a pathological childishness and egotism. Unlike the sad spinster, the shallow narcissist is rich and successful but almost always also incapable of postponing her own desires and too emotionally flawed to sustain any healthy long-term relationships. She will often live alone or in destructive relationships, both of which are conditioned by

what, in the logic of the filmic narratives, appears to be hypersexuality.[5] In other words, voluntarily childless women are seen as oversexed, are "often blamed for being too sexual," and their aggressive and allegedly deviant sexuality legitimizes the viewer's dislike of them (Ségeral 182). For example, in *A Bigger Splash* the mute rockstar Marianne Lane (Tilda Swinton) is characterized thus by her ex-husband: "She can fuck and fuck and fuck and fuck" (00:25:00–05).

The shallow narcissist is also either someone who cannot grow up or who mourns the loss of youth excessively, such as the evil queen in *Snow White and the Huntsman* or Mavis Gary in *Young Adult* (both Charlize Theron). Even though the shallow narcissist is depicted as infantile, she is usually highly intelligent, but this trait is rarely depicted in a positive way. On the contrary, she uses her gift to manipulate and destroy other people in thoroughly materialistic games about power, sex, and money. These games are typically set in urban upper- or, at the very least, upper middle-class environments. The tendency to, as May puts it, present parenthood as "a major marker of adulthood" (9) applies to both tropes but their childishness is expressed in different ways. As explained above, while the sad spinster acts like a small child, the shallow narcissist behaves more like a teenager and is seen as an unruly or overgrown child. "Women who have no children," Leimbach writes, "are considered to have no responsibilities and thus to be like children themselves" (158). In this way, childless women can also come to symbolize general modes of subjectivization in the neoliberal epoch: "infantilization" (Barber), "pornofication" (Preciado), and "adulthoodphobia" (Schwartz). One representative example is the thirty-something adulthoodphobic character Mavis Gary in *Young Adult*, who is all dressed up in Hello Kitty gear. Except for the last season, "Shiv" from *Succession* is another prime example of a highly intelligent and yet infantilized childless figure. Rich, well-groomed, and elegant, Shiv would be classified "respectable" in Beverley Skeggs's vocabulary of performances of femininity (*Formations of Class and Gender* 103–10). At the same time, she is unsympathetic, manipulative, and castrating in the infantile incestuous battle with her brothers for the favor of their father. So, despite the performance of gendered respectability, she is depicted as an overgrown child who does not do her gender right. This is particularly visible in her marriage with Tom, whom she dominates completely – "the trophy wife," as her brothers call him. On more than one occasion she toys with his wish to have a child. She plays along to have sex and then takes it back afterwards. She manipulates and degrades him and afterwards admits: "I was being horrible – just for fun" ("Chiantishire" 00:41:18–45:00). Shiv is a woman viewers are unlikely to empathize with and despite her seeming respectability, she is depicted

[5] In rare cases, such as in *Blue Jasmine*, the shallow narcissist is actually depicted as frigid – but still deviant and pathological.

as pathological in her general lack of empathy and her overall lack of interest in becoming a mother herself. And yet, unlike the more murderous and abject depictions of the shallow narcissist from the 1980s and 1990s, whom the viewer is suppose to fear, hate, and dread, Shiv is, like many other overprivileged shallow narcissists, also an amusingly bizarre and humorous character, intended to make the viewer laugh. However, in the last season, Shiv actually becomes pregnant and decides to keep the child. Therefore, in a way, the series returns Shiv to "a woman's proper place" in the end. But Shiv stays in the bad mother paradigm since she refuses to mother herself. As she tells her own mother: "No, I'm not going to see it. I'm just going to do it the family way" ("Church and State" 01:01:55–02:00). "The family way" refers to Shiv's own upperclass childhood in which she was brought up by nannies and housekeepers. Shiv, in other words, intends to give birth but she does not intend to become a "proper mother." The show thereby illustrates how intertwined the paradigms of voluntarily childlessness and the bad mother are, and how all women in different ways participate in the normative notion of the good mother.

The classic example of the shallow narcissist is Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) from *Basic Instinct*. She is a hyperintelligent, cunning psychologist and bestselling writer of novels. As she puts it herself: "I am a writer. I *use* people for what I write" (00:29:24–27). She has a fortune of 110 million US dollars and lives an extravagant life with an original Picasso in the house and expensive cars in the driveway. She very much takes pleasure in sex, including SM and bisexual acts. However, she is not vulgar, a staple convention when sexually active women from lower classes are depicted. Like Shiv from *Succession*, Catherine Tramell dresses discretely, femininely, and expensively in silk and cashmere. Her make-up is natural, which, according to Skeggs, is read as respectable from a middle class perspective (*Formations of Class and Gender* 101). She is ice cold, sly, cynical, perhaps even dangerous – and, unlike Shiv, not in a humorous way. When her lover is killed with an ice pick in the beginning of the film, she shows neither grief nor compassion. In the legendary interrogation scene, she deliberately spreads her legs enough for the four officers (and the male gaze, as it were) to see her pantyless crotch under the expensive clothes. Asked whether she is sad that her lover is dead, she says: "Yes, I liked fucking him" and "I wasn't dating him. I was fucking him" (00:12:14–16 and 00:12:35–38). She appears to be only interested in sex and thoroughly indifferent to middle-class family values. "I hate rugrats," she exclaims in the last scene of the film that reveals her to be the cold-blooded murderer herself (02:02:00–02). Much like Shiv, whose behavior may be explained by her mother's rejection of her,[6] Catherine Tramell's oversexed pathology is grounded

[6] This is how Shiv's mother puts it: "Truth is, I probably should never have had children. Some people just aren't made to be mothers" ("Chiantishire" 00:27:45–53).

in – and thereby excused by – childhood trauma: Her parents died in a car accident. In the end, then, she is not so much a privileged psychopath as a sad figure. "I can't allow myself to care . . . I lose everybody," she sums up her life near the end of the film (02:00:00–02). As I will explain below, the degrading of the shallow narcissist is a stable convention of this paradigm.

Claire Underwood (Robin Wright) from *House of Cards* is another prime example. She, too, is a white, beautiful, cold, intelligent, and cunning woman. Her voluntary childlessness is distinctly marked and cannot, as Betty-Despoina Kaklamanidou points out,

> be seen as a positive representation as it is the trait of a thoroughly malevolent character. In fact, it may even be argued that Claire's choice not to have children adds to her abject female identity as patriarchy dictates that motherhood is a natural instinct. (287)

The shallow narcissist is routinely depicted as driven by equal measures of envy and disgust at the boring and conformist family life of the middle- or working-class family. In *Gone Girl*, the rich and highly intelligent Amy (Rosamund Pike) calls the local pregnant women "idiots" with "humdrum lives" (01:06:56–07:02). In *Young Adult*, Mavis refers to the nuclear family as being "trapped with a wife, kid and some crappy job" (00:15:12–15) whereas, as she says to a friend, "we got out, we got lives" (00:15:30–32). Frequently, this disgust gives way to or turns out to be a self-deluding coverup for envy in the course of the narrative. This change from successful and arrogant to envious and self-loathing is a key component in popular narratives about the shallow narcissist. The envy and disgust felt by childless women says very little about those towards whom these feelings are directed but a lot about those who have them, which corresponds with Ngai's view on how envy is being depicted in cultural representations. "[I]t has been reduced to signifying a static subjective trait: the 'lack' or 'deficiency' of the person who envies" (21). The shallow narcissist will almost always be at least eventually taken down from her pedestal and punished for trying to live a more enviable life of luxury than the one led by members of a middle-class nuclear family. *Blue Jasmine* is a good example: Near the end we find Jasmine sitting alone on a bench, babbling incoherently to herself. She is no longer superior but has become a silly, harmless figure. As becomes apparent from these examples, the shallow narcissist is almost always white and almost always upper-class. This has several reasons and meanings. According to Skeggs, the white middle class defines and practices what they consider to be the right values and gender performances, not least "natural" femininity, moderate sexuality, (nuclear) family values, and moderation in reproduction (*Class, Self, Culture* 99). Both the lower and the upper classes represent deviations from this norm, mainly but not only in terms of sexuality and reproduction. As Skeggs point out: "Excessive sexuality . . . is the thing which, par excellence,

is a threat to the moral order of western civilization" (100). From a middle-class perspective, the working and lower classes are considered vulgar, dirty, over-sexualized, and over-fecund. The upper class is deemed either lascivious or frigid and therefore depicted as women who either have too much or too little sex and thereby transgress the values of the middle class. Furthermore, both the upper class and the lower classes are deviant when it comes to motherhood. The lower classes are represented as dirty, disgusting, and reproducing too much (4), and the upper classes are often depicted as too clean and disciplined. They lack emotions and empathy and are therefore either absent bad mothers or voluntarily childless. This may explain why voluntarily childless female characters tend to be upper-class. It adds to their deviant "nature" and is another way of emphasizing that childlessness is abnormal, something for 'proper women' to avoid.

In popular US film and television series, it is hard, if not impossible, to find voluntarily childless women from the working and lower classes; the same goes for women of color.[7] The logic seems to be that people of color and poor people, due to their "lack of discipline and self-control" (Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* 102) are expected to bear too many children. Women from the upper class have too much discipline and are too ambitious, and therefore have none or too few. The depiction of the voluntarily childless woman as someone who is wealthy and successful but utterly shallow and lonely makes it evident for the female viewer that she is supposed to stick with middle-class values and to breed properly. The lesson seems to be that rejecting motherhood makes you a shallow person, and that you can avoid that by having children. Moore and Geist-Martin studied this from a sociological perspective:

> Recent research exploring intersections of voluntarily childless identities indicate that heterosexual white women face the most pronatalist pressure to have children . . . demonstrating a subtle but persistent cultural belief that certain women should be having fewer children. (244)

The stereotypical depiction of the shallow narcissist is an example of such pressure since this figure is only worthy and respectable on the surface, and nobody in their right mind wants to be a shallow narcissist. She often appears glamorous and celebrated, for instance, as a rock star in *A Bigger Splash* or writer in *Basic Instinct.* She is typically wealthy either from old money or her own ambitious choice of career, such as lawyer, psychologist, or bestselling author. In some instances, she has married into this status, as is the case in *Blue Jasmine*, but for her, too, entrepreneurship and materialistic superficiality are key character traits. In a sense, the shallow narcissist represents neoliberal values – but never gets any credit for this determined and

[7] There are rare exceptions, such as Kalinda Sharma (Archie Panjabi) from *The Good Wife* and Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh) from *Grey's Anatomy*.

ambitious lifestyle. On the contrary, in popular film and television this lifestyle is depicted as too excessive and at the same time too controlled and too materialistic. Catherine Tramell (*Basic Instinct*), Alex Forrest (*Fatal Attraction*), Tanya McQuoid-Hunt (*The White Lotus*), Claire Underwood (*House of Cards*), and Shiv Roy (*Succession*) are all successful but have somehow – and in very different ways – also failed as women. They are all presented to the viewer as too excessive, morally bankrupt, and unsympathetic.

In some rare cases, however, successful childfree women are, to some degree, being depicted as feminist heroines. Diane Lockhart (Christine Baranski) in *The Good Wife* as well as its spin-off *The Good Fight* is one example and Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall) in *Sex and the City* is another. Both Diane and Samantha have a lot in common with the typical shallow narcissist. They are white, rich, successful, intelligent, and cunning, and Samantha is also a hypersexual character. And yet they are both at the same time likeable and empathetic persons. Diane, for instance, is an idealistic feminist fighting for the rights of women and people of color. As her co-worker Lucca Quinn (Cush Jumbo) explains, she is not "a witch" but just a woman who "knows how men work" ("The Gang Deals with Alternate Reality" 00:23:32–33). Diane is a more complex and ambivalent character than the usual shallow narcissist. "She's passionate, idealistic and cunning," Lucca points out ("Inauguration" 00:40:33–36). However, even if Diane is less shallow and less self-absorbed, she still works "too much," and the story about her in many ways remains the story of a workaholic who lacks something essential in her life. As she temporarily loses her job, she breaks down and cries to her ex-husband: "I'm unemployable. How is that possible? How is my life suddenly so fucking meaningless? . . . How can you work so hard every single day of your life and have nothing to show for it? Not a friend?" ("Inauguration" 00:32:15-24).

Catherine Tramell and Alex Forrest in the 1980s and 1990s depictions of this trope are supporting characters and antagonists or even villains whom both male and female viewers are supposed to fear and despise. But today the childless woman can take the lead. In *The Good Wife*, Diane was still in more of a supporting role while the main female character was the rejected but loveable former homemaker and mother Alicia Florrick (Julianna Margulies). Since Diane is mainly seen through the eyes of the 'good mother,' she is depicted as more cynical and cunning and frequently antagonistic towards Alicia. In *The Good Fight* Diane gains more allegiance and also recognition because viewers are more often given the opportunity of siding with her perspective. As Rita Felski puts it:

> *Allegiance* speaks to the question of how ethical or political values – that is, acts of evaluating – draw audiences closer to some figures rather than others . . . Alligiance . . . is in play whenever we find ourselves siding with a character and what we take that character to stand for. (96)

Allegiance is not the same as identification, but the enhanced sense of allegiance at play in some contemporary examples may point to new conceptions of the voluntarily childless woman. As mentioned above, Diane Lockhart defies many of the negative characteristics of the shallow narcissist trope, which turns her into somewhat of a feminist heroine. Another new iteration of the voluntarily childless woman is what I call the failed shallow narcissist, which is a caricature or a drag version of the shallow narcissist.

**The Failed Shallow Narcissist**

Despite being childless, the shallow narcissist is in a sense a "bad mother" and can as such be seen as a riff on archetypal figures such as the biblical Eve, the phallic mother, the demonized *femme fatale*, and the whore. This sheds light on a general and important point emphasized by Adrienne Rich: "[A]ll women participate in the concept of motherhood – the childless woman to the same extent as the mother, insofar as they are nonetheless defined in relation to motherhood and to heteronormative patriarchy" (qtd. in Ségeral 181). However, as I have suggested above, the depiction of the shallow narcissist has changed over time, which the difference between Alex Forrest and Catherine Tramell and Tanya McQuoid illustrates well. Traditionally the shallow narcissist is someone we are supposed to fear; she is the enemy partly because she is oversexed and tries to steal other women's husbands, often the father of their children. This is the case in *Fatal Attraction*, in which the threatening behavior of the childless woman legitimizes that the good mother of the film eliminates the threat in the end. The obvious moral of these narratives is that the male protagonist should return to his wife and the nuclear family, still full of guilt but also now utterly aware of the true values in life. Viewers will likely not side with Alex Forrest but with the male protagonist Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas).

In *The White Lotus* the childless female character Tanya McQuoid (Jennifer Coolidge) is more difficult to categorize since she is not at all threatening but rather a laughable character or, as I would suggest, a failed shallow narcissist. The fact that she fails in her role as shallow narcissist adds an ambivalence to this otherwise rigid character trope. Tanya McQuoid shares many characteristics typical of the shallow narcissist: She is white, extremely rich, self-absorbed, and infantile. She cries when she cannot have her way and has no inhibitions and self-control when she tries to have her own needs fulfilled. But she is not in any way respectable (in Skegg's sense) or hyperintelligent, for that matter. She is vulgar, transgressive, and intrusive but also lazy, depressed, exhausted, simple-minded, and completely lost. As she describes herself: "I am a very needy person, and I am deeply, deeply insecure . . . I am like a dead end" ("The Lotus Eaters" 00:51:13–18). Being a dead end, she is not able to fool

or con anyone and, just like the sad spinster, seems paranoid but maybe not paranoid enough – since everybody around her, including the viewer, is in fact judging her, laughing at her and/or trying to steal from her. Unlike the traditional shallow narcissist, who is depicted as the perpetrator, Tanya becomes the victim. Interestingly, the fact that she refuses to be overlooked and insists on her right to take up space, both in the narrative and physically on the screen, gives her failure as a childless woman queer potential. She is a caricature or is undertaking what Judith Butler would identify as "drag" because her overdoing of stereotypical roles undermines and even ridicules heteronormative conceptions of childless women. She is in some ways hyperfeminine (e.g., she wears a lot of makeup and colorful dresses) but also acts inappropriately, is loud and unpredictable and, unlike the traditional shallow narcissist, who "behaves" according to her class and gender, she fails in every possible way. However, by failing, i.e., by misbehaving, overdoing, and caricaturing the stereotypical traits we recognize from the shallow narcissist, she – like Butler's drag – imitates something "for which there is no original" (214). Thus, Tanya demonstrates that the shallow narcissist only exists in the imagination of heteronormative discourse. Additionally, her failure also becomes her victory because, unlike the traditional shallow narcissist, the viewers side with her. They do not hope for her final destruction but actually cheer her on. Viewers feel an "ethical engagement" and allegiance, "a felt affiliation or solidarity with certain others" (Felski 97 and 84).

This feeling of allegiance is enhanced by her failure. Not just her failure as a woman but also her failure to live up to the stereotypical interpretation of the overprivileged childless woman. Tanya is not subversive or queer because she overcomes the clichés, as in the case of Diane Lockhart, but because she overdoes them and thus fails to do them correctly. As Halberstam writes about queer failure:

> We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities. (88)

## Conclusion

In this article, I have identified two character tropes in the depiction of childless women in contemporary film and television: the shallow narcissist and the sad spinster. Both, in different ways, portray childless women very negatively. While these two tropes have been rather predominant, I have also observed potential signs of change when it comes to the shallow narcissist. Even if these cases are rare, they point to the possibility of new conceptions of the voluntarily childless woman. Diane

Lockhart, in particular, is an example of such a departure. She shares many key characteristics of the trope but also breaks with them, not least with the unlikable traits usually associated with the shallow narcissist. Furthermore, some contemporary shallow narcissists, such as Siobhan "Shiv" Roy from *Succession* and Tanya McQuoid from *The White Lotus*, are depicted as humourous rather than dangerous figures – even though that does not make them less abject. Tanya is also an example of a drag version of the shallow narcissist, who I call a failed shallow narcissist. But it may be specifically this practicing of failure, the failure to reproduce stereotypical character tropes, that can contribute to drawing the childless woman out of her deadlock.

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