



## Challenging stereotypes? The older woman in the TV series *Brothers & Sisters*



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### ABSTRACT

The TV series, *Brothers & Sisters*, broadcast from 2006 to 2011 by ABC (USA) and a year later by Channel 4 (UK) with quite high audience rates, starts when the patriarchal figure, William Walker, dies of a heart attack and two female figures around their sixties come center stage: his wife, Nora Walker, and his long-term lover, Holly Harper. Once the patriarchal figure disappears, the female characters regain visibility by entering the labor market and starting relationships with other men. In that sense, both protagonists experience aging as a time in which they are increasingly freed from social and family constraints. However, their roles as nurturers keep on bringing them back to the domestic space in which they are safe from being involved in uncomfortable and unsuitable situations. Drawing on previous studies on the representation of the older woman in fictional media, this article intends to discern to what extent stereotypes related to the older woman are challenged through the two main protagonists of a contemporary TV series.

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### Introduction

Media is indeed a powerful way to construct, modify, and spread cultural beliefs. Television drama is a form of media, which gets into our households, almost without us realizing it and informs us, the viewers, of a series of representations and values that are ingrained in Western society and, at the same time, are either reinforced or undermined within that cultural representation, in this case, television drama. When referring to the study of media, Sue Thornham and Tony Purvis point out the powerful source television drama actually is when looking at it as the container of ideology, since it links “issues of the social and the material—issues of economics and power—with issues of representation—the narratives, images and forms which render the world meaningful” (2012: 75). Thus, according to Thornham and Purvis, television drama brings together “a concern with social and cultural structures with a concern for how individuals both represent those structures to themselves and make sense of public representation of them”

(2012: 76). When considering female aging, the media has been ungenerous by neither constructing nor spreading a positive image of the aging process in women. The aging and old woman has been represented as either a motherly and grandmotherly figure or the evil woman who uses her experiential wisdom to manipulate others.

In this essay, I aim to analyze the representation of the aging woman in ABC's television drama series *Brothers & Sisters* (2011), focusing on the characters of Nora Walker and Holly Harper. The series starts with the sudden death of William Walker, the patriarch of a large family, the lover and economic supporter of Holly's family and the owner and boss of his fruit company, Ojai Foods. From the first chapter onwards, Nora Walker and Holly Harper, both in their early sixties, take center stage in the series. Here, I intend to analyze the figure of the aging woman as represented by the two sixty-year-old protagonists of the series by exploring to what extent the cultural constraints and taboos related to the aging and old woman are questioned and undermined throughout the five seasons that compose the series. The fact that the series starts with the death of a well-defined patriarchal figure and that both Nora Walker and Holly Harper have to redefine themselves as

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women who are at the threshold of young old age seems to point out to the need of redefining the role of the aging woman in Western society as well as the cultural limitations traditionally attached to female aging. This article aims to explore to what extent these two characters can deviate from the conventional plot as aging female protagonists and still seem realistic and relatable to the audience. Although some contradictions can be traced both within the series as well as within the female protagonists themselves in relation to their condition of young old women in the United States in the beginning of the 21st century, it is a significant fact that the series portrays a development of the female protagonists after the death of the patriarch. As powerful containers of representation and meaning, *Brothers & Sisters* TV series' main protagonists, Norah Walker and Holly Harper, inform viewers of traditional structures attached to female aging, which are partly undermined in the series.

### Portraying the older woman through culture

Simone de Beauvoir and Susan Sontag were among the first scholars to point out the negative connotations attached to the aging and older women. In a chapter entitled "From Maturity to Old Age" in her book, *The Second Sex*, published in French in 1949, and in an article entitled "The Double Standard of Old Age" (1978), de Beauvoir and Sontag, respectively, contend that women are more drastically penalized when they start showing external signs of aging because those are interpreted as the beginning of the end of their fertile period. According to Simone de Beauvoir, "[w]hereas man grows old gradually, woman is suddenly deprived of her femininity; she is relatively young when she loses her fertility" (1997: 587). Similarly, Sontag argues that, "[a] man, even an ugly man, can remain eligible well into old age" (1978: 31), whereas a woman is not seen as a suitable eligible partner much earlier. For Sontag, when a woman crosses the line of being "very young," a lot of pressure is put on her in order to keep the signs of aging at bay so that she can still be considered an active part of society; otherwise, she is made invisible and put aside. In that sense, the body that starts showing signs of aging may be perceived as "the other" since there is a mismatch between what the woman feels and the role she is expected to perform in society. Moreover, it is also perceived as "the other" by those younger women who fear aging as the tombstone that will distance them from social visibility.

Some years later, Kathleen Woodward (1995, 1999) still refers to the pre-eminence of the visual in Western culture represented by the "surface of the body" (1999: 169) to explain why women are socially more affected by the signs of aging on their bodies. In her introduction to *Figuring Age. Women, Bodies, Generations*, Woodward exhorts the readers to consider the need to approach the aging process "in terms of growth and change" (1999: xiii) instead of in terms of decline based on the negative connotations attached to the aging body. For Woodward, changing the perspective through which female aging is approached is the only way to go beyond the limits of the restricted social and cultural space left to aging and old women. By her part, Ann Kaplan (1999) defines aging as a "traumatic experience" understood as compiling the loss of physical vigor that is attached to the loss of social status. Kaplan argues that such a traumatic experience is more acute in women than in

men since it is considered that women's value as childbearers and nurturers or as an object of desire dissipate with their youth. However, Kaplan sees the contemporary period, the era of technology with an impending aging population, as an opportunity for women to be "something after being young and desirable to men, after childbearing and motherhood" (1999: 190).

The representation of aging and old women in the media is still problematic. In her article, "The Female Aging Body through Film," Elizabeth W. Markson (2003) goes back to the Hollywood of the 1950s in which a very successful film entitled *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) presents a character, Norma Desmond, an actress in her fifties, whose only reason to continue living is to dream about going back to the screen as a youthful woman and trying to make that dream come true. Things have not changed much in this respect from the 1950s up until the present time since it is still not frequent to find positive images of elderly women either in television or film. After analyzing the portrayal of older women's bodies in feature films over the last six decades, Markson concludes that the most accepted positive image of aging in women is the "motherly" or "grandmotherly" figures (2003: 83). It is not a negative figure per se, but, as Markson contends, it responds to a restricted image relegated to "asexual motherhood, unattractiveness, genderlessness, or the grotesque" whereas "the female cinematic sexual body remains young, pure, and fecund for the male voyeuristic gaze" (2003: 91).

In relation to the portrayal of and roles played by elderly women in TV series, John Bell (1992) and Myrna Hant (2007) analyze the aging protagonists present in TV series from the 1980s until the present times. When considering *Murder, She Wrote* (1984–1996) and *The Golden Girls* (1985–1992) as shows with older women as the main protagonists, John Bell argues that despite presenting them center stage, the older protagonists are portrayed as affluent, always healthy and socially active members of the community, ideas which, according to Bell, "may satisfy fantasies of many older or younger viewers, but it hardly presents an accurate picture of American life" (1991: 310). Moreover, Hant offers a wide-ranging analysis of the representation of women from *Bewitched to The Sopranos*. For Hant, older women are either portrayed in the roles of carers and nurturers, as metaphors of old age with disease and isolation as their main components or within a parody pathos represented by the character of Livia in *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), in other words, intruding mothers who keep on complaining about the vicissitudes of old age. On the other hand, Hant refers to older women who are presented as dynamic, clever, and industrious women such as Jessica Fletcher in *Murder, She Wrote* (1984–) and Miss Marple in *Miss Marple* (1984–). However, Hant agrees with Bell on the fact that both of them are presented as spinsters outside the domestic role and, thus, their portrayal is focused on their detective skills rather than their family, emotional, or sexual experiences. In this respect, Bell points out that "sexuality is generally removed from the lives of elderly characters" (1991: 309). Hant refers to the character of Ruth Fisher in *Six Feet Under* (2002–2005) as a first step to portray the complexity of a woman in her sixties. Both in her marriage and after the death of her husband, she looks for ways of defining her individuality; a task which is full of uncertainties and struggles. However, Hant concludes by pointing out that in TV series it is "very rare" to find an aging

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