

Samantha Lemza

Presentation Abstract:

Grace and Frankie: Rewriting the Existential Maps of “Women of a Certain Age”

There has been quite a bit of research on the philosophies of why we tell stories, the human act of storytelling is something that seems to be engrained in our nature. Furthermore, there have been nearly scientific formulas devised by the greatest scribes of our generation in terms of *how* to most effectively tell stories, there are countless rules and regulations to follow in order to keep an audience engaged. The answers I seek are to a much more complicated question, put simply: whose stories do we tell? *Why* are these the stories we tell? The teen from a small town gets his story told time and time again, but the sixty-five year old woman rarely sees herself on-screen (unless, of course, it is as the title character’s wife/girlfriend/supportive sister/therapist/anything but the protagonist), and I want to know why. How do we decide whose story is worth telling? I believe that these populations are those with the most moving stories. Empathy is the core of each story told, and to deprive certain populations of an audience is to curse them with invisibility.

My work came to be from a required reading from my Fiction Field Production class. The author of the book, Mike Alford, details his theory that our lives can be translated into “existential maps...the principles with which we navigate our way through life.” Alford explains that seeing the human life this way can help with creating realistic and relatable characters. Each character has a “ call to develop, to progress, to grow up by freeing ourselves from the limitations of infancy” (Alford 3), and this description brought to mind the character arc of Grace Hansen from the popular Netflix series, *Grace and Frankie*. Despite the connection I’d made in my head, Alford continues to explain his theories through characters such as Spider-Man, or Lara Croft. I wondered, where do the rest of us fit? Do these principles cease to apply if we are not an action hero, or quite literally coming of age? I wanted to explore how *Grace and Frankie* defies the way older women have been depicted in media, and why it is crucial to how storytelling will evolve.

Grace and Frankie broke barriers, not just in terms of the age of its protagonists, but the topics it covers. Until now, writing television about the sex life of an eighty year-old woman was unheard of. Even if you’d pitched it to a studio, the first question they’d ask you would be, “Who wants to watch that?” With five critically acclaimed seasons and a sixth on the way, *Grace and Frankie* certainly proved that these stories aren’t just entertaining, but worth telling. I believe that our “existential maps” are never set in stone, and definitely not in one’s twenties. These maps are constantly being rewritten.. The storytelling in *Grace and Frankie* creates relatable characters regardless of the audience’s demographics, because the stories of these women’s lives are ones worth telling. Grace Hansen, played hilariously by Jane Fonda, is a character whose arc is so triumphant and timeless, and yet I’ve never seen anything like it. Grace was raised to see the world a certain way, and when her perfect world comes crashing down, all she’s left with is an identity that she did not curate herself. Her journey to discover who she truly is, all while in the last quarter of her life, is classic, empowering story.

This research shows just how important representation in media is. A story that was once considered “niche,” is now streamed by millions of people across age, race, gender, sexuality, and creed, all while tackling issues that are pertinent to all of us. Just one example is the effect *Grace and Frankie* has had on the morals of the older generation, as many have been able to identify with the gay characters on the show, and have apologized for their former prejudices. Stories make a difference, and storytellers have an obligation to show that we are all human. Older female characters in media used to be wives and nothing more, but now they are heroes, triumphant in their pursuit for happiness, no matter what age they choose to pursue it.

Works Cited:

Alsford, Mike. *Heroes and Villains*. Baylor University Press, 2006.

“Grace and Frankie.” Season 1-5, Netflix.