



**Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro**  
Centro de Educação e Humanidades  
Instituto de Letras

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**Queer couples in straight America: a study of representations of  
straight woman/gay man relationships in *A home at the end of the  
world* and *Will & Grace***

Rio de Janeiro  
2009

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Dissertação apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora: Prof<sup>a</sup>. Dr<sup>a</sup>. Eliane Borges Berutti

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Rio de Janeiro  
2009

## DEDICATION

To my daughter Maria Clara, who is the reason why I wake up every morning to struggle for a better life.

To my loving husband Eduardo, who has managed to keep up with my sleepless nights and busy weekends; who has been able to understand the nature of my work, although it is high beyond his scope of understanding.

To my family: my mother Heloisa, my father Alexandre, and my brother Thiago, for the daily exercise of tolerance and queer understanding; my queer sister Thamires, for defying every heteropatriarchal rule with courage and good humor.

To Brilhante, Guto and Vlad, for teaching me that every form of love is possible.

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My Godmother Norma, for the huge help given to me throughout this journey; for taking care of my daughter so that I could study; for staying awake during my sleepless nights to give me support. I would not have made it without you!

Professor Ricardo Correia Miguez, for helping me in the earlier stage of my work. Thank you for sparing some of your time to help a stranger find her academic way!

My professors and colleagues from UERJ, for the support, the ideas and the wonderful time we spent together. Thank you all!

New queer spaces open up (or are revealed) whenever someone moves away from using only one specific sexual identity category – gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight – to understand and to describe mass culture, and recognizes that texts and people's responses to them are more sexually transmutable than any one category could signify – excepting, perhaps, that of 'queer.'

*Alexander Doty*

## RESUMO

SANDOVAL, Tatiana Moura. *Queer couples in straight America: a study of representations of straight woman/gay man relationships in A home at the end of the world and Will & Grace*. 2009. 113 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literaturas em Língua Inglesa) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2009.

Este trabalho tem como propósito estudar a *queerness* de relacionamentos entre mulheres heterossexuais e homens gays no romance *A Home at the End of the World*, de Michael Cunningham, e no seriado de televisão *Will & Grace*. O objetivo é analisar tais relacionamentos do ponto de vista das personagens femininas principais – Clare e Grace, respectivamente –, comparando e contrastando os textos literário e televisual. A dissertação fundamenta-se nos conceitos teórico-metodológicos da teoria *queer*, nos quais se baseia a análise das personagens e de seus relacionamentos. Contudo, à medida que estabelece um diálogo entre um romance e um programa televisual, foi adicionado um capítulo sobre teoria da televisão. Além de fornecer uma visão geral sobre tal teoria, o capítulo mostrou-se relevante na discussão de *Will & Grace*. Por meio do estudo mais aprofundado da teoria *queer* percebe-se que *queerness*, ao invés de uma identidade fixa, pode ser mais bem compreendida como uma atitude de resistência às normas sociais heteropatriarcais. Portanto, apesar das aspirações convencionais de Grace e Clare, ambas agem de forma *queer* em várias situações, provando que *queerness* é um posicionamento que todos podem assumir; até mesmo os heterossexuais.

Palavras-chave: Ficção norte-americana. Teoria *Queer*. Televisão.



## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this work is to study the queerness of relationships between straight women and gay men in Michael Cunningham's novel *A Home at the End of the World* and in the TV sitcom *Will & Grace*. The intention is to analyze such relationships from the point-of-view of the main female characters – Clare and Grace, respectively –, comparing and contrasting the literary and televisual texts. The theoretical-methodological core of this thesis lies on the concepts of queer theory, based on which the characters and their relationships have been analyzed. However, as it establishes a dialog between a literary work and a TV show, a theoretical chapter on television theory has been added. While providing an overview of television theory, this chapter has also been really relevant in the discussion of *Will & Grace*. Through a deeper study of queer theory, one realizes that queerness, instead of a fixed identity, may be better understood as an attitude of resistance to heteropatriarchal social rules. Therefore, in spite of Grace's and Clare's conventional aspirations, they both act queerly in several situations, proving that queerness is a positionality which everyone may assume; even straight people.

Keywords: North American Fiction. Queer Theory. Television

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## INTRODUCTION

A charming and competent lawyer and a beautiful and successful interior designer live together, like the same things, and understand each other's feelings. What stops them from being one more conventional, happy couple? The fact that Will is gay, and Grace is straight. It was this unconditional, funny and sometimes moving friendship that inspired me to venture into this research. And the theme is far from being unusual.

Relationships between straight women and homosexual men have long been a relevant topic in popular depictions of queerness, contributing to the establishment of cultural assumptions about femininity, male homosexuality, and the allegedly natural links between them. Clues to contemporary social behavior can be found in mass media representations of relationships, which also provide social scripts for audience members to draw on as they think through and live out their own relationships. *Will & Grace* is a perfect example of such phenomenon.

Due to the significance of television in molding American values and behavior, besides my personal interest in the subject, I decided to use *Will & Grace* as a starting point, comparing and contrasting it to Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World*. This astonishing American novel depicts a queer relationship between a straight woman and homosexual men, presenting several aspects which may be analyzed in comparison to the sitcom. Both the sitcom and the novel provide relevant samples of how straight woman/gay men relationships work in the contemporary world. These works affirm the emotional and social value of relationships that cannot be neatly categorized into a "familiar" or romantic model. I intend to study the queerness of such relationships, as well as to analyze them through the woman's point of view.

Michael Cunningham was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on November 6, 1952. He grew up in California, where he lived until graduating from high school. When Cunningham was fifteen years-old, he was challenged to read Virginia Woolf's classic *Mrs. Dalloway*. He enjoyed the novel so much that the English writer soon became his inspiration, which prevailed throughout his literary career. Cunningham earned his English degree at Stanford University, in 1975, and received his Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1980. During the same period, the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Paris Review* published some of his short stories. Cunningham also

received many prizes, such as a Michener Fellowship from the University of Iowa (1982), and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1988).

In an article about Michael Cunningham in *Contemporary Gay American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, Reed Woodhouse calls our attention to the fact that Cunningham's "works seem to have come in two intense bursts: in 1981-1984 and in 1990-1991." (WOODHOUSE, 1993: 83) In the first period, he published some short stories and his first novel, *Golden States*. In the period from 1990-1991, two more short stories were released, "Clean Dreams" and "White Angel". The latter, an excerpt from *A Home at the End of the World* (which had not yet been published), is part of *The Best American Short Stories, 1989*, published by Houghton Mifflin.<sup>1</sup>

*A Home at the End of the World* was published in 1990. The novel presents us with an unconventional story about the different ways an individual may encounter love and the hardships of leading a life not dictated by social conventions. The novel begins with the relationship between two childhood friends in Cleveland, Ohio. Bobby and Jonathan meet at high school, two isolated opposites instantly drawn together. Jonathan is introspective, self-conscious, and unsure of his place in the world. Bobby, damaged by the loss of his brother and mother, seems hugely displaced, but under Jonathan's attentions he begins to open up, to feel again. Jonathan's ambitions drive him to New York, where he ends up living with an eccentric, older woman named Clare, who has several ideas about who she is, but most of them turn out to be wrong. Although Jonathan is gay, there is a lovers' connection between him and Clare which is far above physical lust. When Jonathan's parents move to Arizona, Bobby follows him to New York. The three of them form a queer love triangle: Bobby and Clare enter into a physical relationship and have a child, though the three decide to raise the child together as one family. They attempt to live their dream life in a house in Woodstock, with both men playing father to the child. When they appear to have achieved their goal of creating a queer family, a way of living that can include them all and fulfill their individual needs, it is Clare who remains unsatisfied. She leaves with her child to begin her life anew. Jonathan and Bobby stay behind to take care of an old lover of Jonathan's who is dying of AIDS.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Cunningham](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Cunningham)  
 Accessed on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

It is relevant to comment on the cultural, political and social importance of Woodstock, where the trio decides to establish a queer home. The Woodstock Music and Art Fair, which took place in 1969 in Bethel, New York, is considered the largest festival in history. More significant than the astonishing numbers, though, – an estimate of more than 400.000 young people – is the impact of the event. What the youth of America – and the elders who observed them – saw during the festival was the potential power of a generation that rejected the American traditional values and goals. Such experience deeply affected the minds and values of that generation, as well as the generations to follow.

For Reed Woodhouse, *A Home at the End of the World* “is without doubt his major work so far”, and “the one that most concerns gay readers.” (WOODHOUSE, 1993: 84) Detached from the fearsome, repressive “closet of the 1960s” as well as from the proud, “defiant ghetto of the 1970s”, (WOODHOUSE, 1993: 84), Cunningham deals with homosexuality without establishing it as the main issue in his characters’ lives and dilemmas. Instead, they present deep conflicts which arise from their insertions in a broader social sphere. “It is in fact the absence of fear on the one hand (imposed by the closet) and of arrogance on the other (demanded by the ghetto) that gives Cunningham not only his peculiar subject but also his characteristic voice. (WOODHOUSE, 1993: 84) *A Home at the End of the World* was highly praised by both the critics and the public. It “was quickly taken up by gay reviewers and bookstores as a triumph of ‘gay fiction’.” (WOODHOUSE, 1993: 87)

Cunningham won the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1993, and two years later, he published his epic novel, *Flesh and Blood*. It tells the story of the Stassos, a dysfunctional family, since their roots, through their present, and envisioning their children’s future.<sup>2</sup> The novel focuses on Constantine, a Greek immigrant, his Italian-American wife, Mary, and their three children, Billy, Susan, and Zoe. But it is drag queen Cassandra who provides the psychological center of the novel. Being regarded as Zoe’s “best friend and substitute mother”<sup>3</sup>, she ends up developing an unconventional friendship with Mary, acting as the mouthpiece of Cunningham’s criticism. According to [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), “as Mr. Cunningham well knows, there's a

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/writers/writerdetails.asp?cid=1015986&z=y>  
Accessed on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/11/specials/cunningham-flesh.html?\\_r=2&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/11/specials/cunningham-flesh.html?_r=2&oref=slogin)  
Accessed on October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

great deal hidden inside those identical suburban houses. In this novel, he throws all their doors wide open.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1995, Cunningham received the Whiting Writers' Award. More importantly, it was in the late 1990s that he published his masterpiece, *The Hours* (1998). In his best acclaimed novel, Michael Cunningham draws from the life and work of Virginia Woolf to tell the stories of three women during an apparently ordinary yet crucial day of their lives. One morning in 1923 in London, Woolf awakens from a dream that will lead her to start writing *Mrs. Dalloway*. Using biographical details, Cunningham recreates the events in this day of Woolf's life, like her conversations with her family, ordinary household issues, and her attempts to maintain her sanity. Such events are intertwined with a day in the life of a Los Angeles suburban housewife, Laura Brown, who reads *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1949, and takes care of her family while trying not to feel so suffocated with her domestic life. Cunningham's third character is Clarissa Vaughan, a lesbian book editor who lives in New York City at the present day. She is organizing a party for her best friend - and former lover - Richard, an HIV positive poet who has just won a great literary prize. As the novel develops, the lives of the three women converge, unexpectedly and movingly, at the night of Clarissa's would-be-party for Richard.<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly Cunningham's greatest success, *The Hours*, was granted with several awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction as well as the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Book Award in 1999. The novel was also adapted for the cinema, with Nicole Kidman, Julianne Moore, and Meryl Streep leading the cast. It was directed by Stephen Daldry, and achieved great success, being nominated for several prizes. Cunningham is said to have acted in the movie, as a man outside the flower shop. *The Hours* is Michael Cunningham's most remarkable achievement to date.

After the huge success of *The Hours*, Cunningham decided to work on a smaller, non-fiction book. *Land's End: A Walk Through Provincetown* was released in 2002. According to Barnes & Noble, “the book is a loving tour through the eccentric

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/11/specials/cunningham-flesh.html?\\_r=2&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/11/specials/cunningham-flesh.html?_r=2&oref=slogin)  
Accessed on Oct 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Hours\\_%28novel%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hours_%28novel%29)  
Accessed on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

little town at the tip of Cape Cod beloved by so many artists and authors, Cunningham included".<sup>6</sup>

In 2005, Cunningham published his most recent novel, *Specimen Days*. The book consists of three short stories, linked by elements in common, such as type of character (a young boy, an older man, and a young woman), setting (New York City), themes, and references to the poet Walt Whitman. One story takes place in the past, the other in the present and the third one in the future. The three sections are drawn together by the poetry of Walt Whitman, who is present throughout the book, not only physically, but also through quotations of his poetry, and even ideas and themes expressed through the voices of characters.

At present, Michael Cunningham works in the creative writing Master of Fine Arts program at Brooklyn College, as well as at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown (Massachusetts). Cunningham is gay and has had a partner for 18 years. However, he "dislikes being referred to as only a 'gay writer'", as he states that it is not his most relevant quality, although he cannot deny that the fact of being gay greatly influences his work.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the differences in language which the two media utilize to reach their public, I was able to spot several similarities between Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World* and the sitcom *Will & Grace*. Both works portray queer relationships between a heterosexual woman and gay men, discussing the conflicts derived from having a queer behavior in a straight society. More importantly, the female point of view is very well explored not only in the book but also in the sitcom. Relevant issues, such as aging and motherhood, as well as social stereotypes concerning career, family and sex, prevail in the minds of both Clare and Grace.

*Will & Grace* is a highly popular American TV series which tells the story of the queer relationship between Will Truman, a successful gay lawyer, and Grace Adler, a heterosexual woman who owns an interior design company. The sitcom also includes Jack McFarland, Will's gay friend, and Karen Walker, a millionaire who works as Grace's assistant in order to escape from spending time with her husband and stepchildren. Originally aired on the NBC network from 1998 to 2006, it was the first

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/writers/writerdetails.asp?cid=1015986&z=y>  
Accessed on October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Cunningham](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Cunningham)  
Accessed on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007.



gay show on American television to remain for more than five years among the top ten prime time shows.

When *Will & Grace* debuted on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1998, it was severely criticized, being unfairly compared to the sitcom *Ellen*, which had just been cancelled by ABC. The critics feared that *Will & Grace* would have the same fate as *Ellen*, whose popularity steadily declined after its main character came out. Also, it was claimed that a series about the “doomed relationship” between “a man and a woman who have no sexual interest in one another” would fail to draw the public’s attention.<sup>8</sup> However, *Will & Grace* proved to have an original appeal to viewers and critics alike, and quickly became a huge success. “The show became known for clever banter, pop-culture allusions and edgy double-entendres”,<sup>9</sup> says reporter Bill Keveney in a USA Today article about the show. *Will and Grace* made history, and its cast and crew suddenly gained renown.

The pop-culture references found throughout the text are definitely worth citing. To begin with, most of the episode titles are references to popular culture. For instance, “Fagel Attraction” (Season 4, Ep. 4.23) and “A.I.: Artificial Insemination” (Season 4, Ep. 4.26-27), refer to the 1987 film *Fatal Attraction*, which starred Michael Douglas, and *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, the 2001 Steven Spielberg movie, respectively. In “Grace, Replaced” (Season 1, Ep. 1.18), Will jokes about Jack’s looks, saying “and they said Tinky Winky was the only gay Teletubby”, in a reference to the children's TV series *Teletubbies*. In a mean allusion to Tom Cruise’s love life, Jack says to Leo: “You may have Penelope Cruz'd your way in, but you could just as easily be Mimi Rogers'd out.” (“Marry me a Little, Marry me a Little More” – Season 5, Ep. 5.08-09) Mimi Rogers was his first wife, who he divorced in 1990 and Penelope Cruz was alleged to be the woman who brought his second marriage to Nicole Kidman to an end. Such allusions not only enrich the comic quality of the text, but also manage to establish a connection to the spectators, being a key factor to the show’s huge success.

The sitcom was created and produced by Max Mutchnick and David Kohan, who are partners in a production company, KoMut, and had already been partners in other productions. All 194 episodes of the sitcom were directed by Executive

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<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will\\_%26\\_Grace](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_%26_Grace)  
Accessed on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2006-05-17-will-grace-retrospective\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2006-05-17-will-grace-retrospective_x.htm)  
Accessed on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008.

Producer and Director James Burrows, which remains a directing record until the present day.<sup>10</sup> According to Wikipedia, “the title characters of *Will & Grace* are based on Mutchnick and his best friend, Janet. Mutchnick, like Will Truman, is openly gay”.<sup>11</sup> Both Mutchnick and Kohan have received Golden Globe Award nominations, an Emmy Award, and a People's Choice Award.

The cast is led by Eric McCormack (Will Truman) and Debra Messing (Grace Adler). Eric James McCormack was born on April 18, 1963, in Toronto, Canada. A Canadian-American actor of Canadian, Scottish and Cherokee descent, he developed his acting talent at the Banff School of Fine Arts at Toronto's Ryerson University. Before *Will & Grace*, McCormack acted in some minor series and movies. But it was Will Truman who placed McCormack among the most popular American actors, having received one Emmy in 2001. McCormack claims to have intimacy with Will, as if he were a real person. “Will Truman has become so real for me, I actually worry about him. I'll go to bed thinking, ‘I hope the poor bugger's getting a little action’”<sup>12</sup>, he jokes. Eric McCormack is married to director Janet Holden, and they have a son, Finnigan. He currently has houses in Los Angeles and Vancouver.<sup>13</sup>

Debra Lynn Messing was born on August 15, 1968 in Brooklyn, New York City, to Jewish American parents. She majored in theater arts at Brandeis University and during college she went to London for further improvement. She subsequently received her Master's Degree in Fine Arts from New York University Graduate Acting Program.<sup>14</sup> She appeared in a series of television and film roles, including some episodes of the also successful *Seinfeld*, before auditioning for the role of Grace Adler. “In 2002, she was named one of the “50 Most Beautiful People in the World” by *People Magazine*. *TV Guide* picked her as its “Best Dressed Woman” in 2003”<sup>15</sup> She was nominated for several awards, and she won the Screen Actors Guild Award in 2001 and the Emmy Award in 2003. She currently lives with her husband and son in Los Angeles, CA.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Burrows](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Burrows)  
Accessed on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max\\_Mutchnick](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Mutchnick)  
Accessed on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.nbc.com/Will\\_&\\_Grace\\_Finale/bios/Eric\\_McCormack.shtml#main](http://www.nbc.com/Will_&_Grace_Finale/bios/Eric_McCormack.shtml#main)  
Accessed on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric\\_McCormack](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_McCormack)  
Accessed on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.nbc.com/Will\\_&\\_Grace\\_Finale/bios/Debra\\_Messing.shtml#main](http://www.nbc.com/Will_&_Grace_Finale/bios/Debra_Messing.shtml#main)  
Accessed on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debra\\_Messing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debra_Messing)  
Accessed on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008.

Will and Grace's history as best friends starts back in college at Columbia University in 1985. They are actually boyfriend and girlfriend, with Will still in conflict about his sexuality. After trying several ways to postpone sleeping with Grace, including a marriage proposal, Will finally reveals his homosexuality to Grace. She is shocked, hurt and angry at the time, but a year later they finally reconcile, becoming best friends.

Throughout the eight seasons of the show, several characters comment that Will's relationship with Grace is more like a couple than two friends. The pilot episode begins with Will managing to persuade Grace to leave her boyfriend Danny, which leaves her without a place to stay. Then she moves in with Will, in his apartment in New York City. As Will and Grace are always together, they have to deal with each other's personalities and issues, and they try to support each other in all fields of their lives. However, they are not able to deal with each other's relationships, as jealousy often interferes, being both insecure in such matter.

Will and Grace vainly attempt to engage in serious relationships without damaging their close connection. However, their unique queer love usually makes their lovers feel frustrated, as they seem to live in an exclusive realm, into which it is really hard to penetrate. As a consequence, they always end up ruining each other's affairs, and never seem to achieve their romantic goals. Grace has had several lovers since the first season, and is ironically famous for 'turning men gay'. Will, on the other hand, seems to have more difficulty in such matter, and often complains about loneliness. It is known that his fans – and the gay community as a whole – insistently criticize the show's creators for depicting its main gay character as a lonely, sexually unsatisfied bachelor.

Both Grace and Will have always wanted to have a child. After several unsuccessful attempts to conceive a baby naturally, they finally decide to resort to artificial insemination. However, Grace falls in love with Leo Markus, a handsome and affectionate doctor. After some reconsideration, Grace finally admits to Will that she does not wish to continue with the plan. They have their first big fight since the beginning of the show, and decide to end their friendship. Karen and Jack scheme to make Will and Grace friends again, eventually succeeding. Grace then gets pregnant, after a single sexual encounter with Leo. Although she has planned to raise the child together with Will, she changes her mind when Leo returns, moving away with him to raise their daughter together. Lonely, Will decides to adopt a boy

and raise him together with Vince. Using lies and manipulation, Jack and Karen plot once more to make Will and Grace meet up and reconcile. They make up and try to rekindle their friendship, although they are unable to return to their previous level of closeness.

Twenty years later, Will and Grace meet by chance when their children, Ben and Lila, move into the same college dormitory. Ben and Lila fall in love and, a few years later, he proposes to her. Karen and Jack's story ends with them living happily in Jack's luxurious apartment, growing old and rich together. The last scene shows Will, Grace, Karen and Jack reuniting for a drink. The group remarks that even though a lot of things have happened, their personalities have not considerably changed.

*Will & Grace* was the first well succeeded gay-themed TV sitcom in America, which is said to have opened the door to all the subsequent gay shows, such as *Boy Meets Boy*, *Queer as Folk*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *The L Word*. In spite of the initial criticism, the show has won several Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Media Awards for its defense of the gay community. It was nominated for eighty-three and won sixteen Emmy Awards. It was the second-highest-rated adult sitcom for five consecutive years, (2001-2005). *Will & Grace* never won a Golden Globe award, despite more than two dozen nominations. All the four main actors (McCormack, Messing, Hayes, and Mullally) have each won at least one Emmy Award. Each with three awards, both Sean Hayes and Megan Mullally hold the record of winning the most Screen Actors Guild Awards for the categories Best Performance by an Actor and Actress in a Comedy Series, for playing Jack and Karen in *Will & Grace*. Preceded by a one-hour retrospective, the hour-long final episode was broadcast on May 18, 2006, drawing in approximately 18.1 million spectators.<sup>16</sup>

Besides this introduction, my thesis is going to consist of five main parts. The first one is a theoretical chapter, in which I will discuss the concepts of queer theory, the various definitions and points of view defended by its main scholars, as well as some contestations the theory arises. The third chapter is a study of the theory of television, presenting an overview of the way in which this medium works, in order to have a better understanding of *Will and Grace*.

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<sup>16</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will\\_%26\\_Grace](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_%26_Grace)  
 Accessed on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

In the second and fourth chapters, I will analyze *A Home at the End of the World* and *Will & Grace*, respectively. Based on the theoretical and critical material previously studied, I aim to discuss the relationships between the main female characters – Clare and Grace – with gay men. I will attempt to deal with common themes which may serve as points of comparison and contrast between the novel and the sitcom.

The last part of my thesis is a conclusion chapter, in which I intend to present the results of my research, regarding the queerness of the characters studied and their unusual relationships.

In conclusion, I believe this study is of great relevance in the sense that it tries to show how literature and television portray relationships between straight women and gay men, besides the conflicts which emerge from them. In my point of view, discussing such issues is really important to subvert old-framed ideas of a heteronormative society. Both *Will & Grace* and *A Home at the End of the World* achieve such goal with sensibility and excellence.

## 1. VENTURING INTO QUEER THEORY

*Without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible.*

Frank Zappa

### 1.1 Queer: Main Ideas and (non) Definitions

The term “queer” has been employed throughout history with several different meanings. Although its contemporary vogue may lead us to think of it as postmodern, queer is actually a quite old term. It was first coined in the 16th century, basically meaning “strange”, “unusual”, or even “suspicious” or “not quite right”. In the late 19th century, it started being deployed to define sexual deviance (especially that of homosexual and/or transgender men). For most of the 20th century, “queer” was frequently seen as a derogatory term for gays and lesbians, and others who showed unusual gender behavior. In *Queer Theory – An Introduction*, Annamarie Jagose reminds us that “as recently as 1990 the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* glossed ‘queer’ as an almost archaic term” (JAGOSE, 1996: 74), and that it was believed that the term would decline in popularity and was fated to become obsolete. Contradicting such expectations, the term continued to be used and, in the 1980s, it gained new meaning and strength.

In spite of its prejudicial connotation, the term began to be employed by gay and lesbian activists as a “new form of personal identification and political organization”. (JAGOSE, 1996: 78) In a defying attitude, the first queer theorists transformed a once abusive and homophobic word into a new theory, grounded on constructionist ideas. In the article “How I Became a Queer Heterosexual”, Clyde Smith quotes Keith Hennessy’s definition of queer:

[...] an umbrella term which embraces the matrix of sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of the not-exclusively-heterosexual-and-monogamous majority. Queer includes lesbians, gay men, transvestites/transgenders, the radical sex communities, and many other sexually transgressive (underworld) explorers. (SMITH, 2000: 60-61)

In its broader sense, queer means anything that defies binary sex and gender stereotypes, anything outside the norm. Jagose explains that “queer may be used to describe an open-ended constituency, whose shared characteristic is not identity

itself but an anti-normative positioning". (JAGOSE, 1996: 98) Queerness is a way to simultaneously make a political move against heterocentrism while refusing to engage in traditional essentialist identity politics.

It is important to clarify that, although the terms "homosexual", "gay", "lesbian" and "queer" are definitely related to each other, we should not misinterpret them as equal. Not even the terms "homosexual" and "gay/lesbian" are always regarded as synonyms, as Alexander Doty points out: "I agree with those who do not find the word 'homosexual' as appropriate synonym for both 'gay' and 'lesbian', as these latter terms are constructions that concern more than who you sleep with". (DOTY, 1993: 2) In this sense, "gay" and "lesbian" are regarded as having a cultural implication, used as ground for community formation and political activism. Likewise, queer theory – although it can be seen as a development of gay and lesbian studies – takes a step further and evokes new reflections and uses. As Jagose explains, "queer is not simply the latest example in a series of words that describe and constitute same-sex desire transhistorically but rather a consequence of the constructionist problematising of any allegedly universal term". (JAGOSE, 1996: 74) Queer theory questions apparently stable and universal ideas of sex, gender and behavior, deconstructing fixed heterocentrist dichotomies, such as homo-/heterosexual, female/male, and even lesbian/gay.

Such deconstruction of dichotomies leads us to the discussion of gender, which has been a cause of debate among scholars. Queer questions binary notions of gender, "describ[ing] those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire". (JAGOSE, 1996: 3) Some theorists, however, claim that it is difficult not to utilize gender as an important element in the analysis of sexuality and social behavior. Doty exemplifies: "Where de Lauretis retains the categories 'gay' and 'lesbian' and some notion of gender division as parts of her discussion of what 'queerness' is [...], Judith Butler and Sue-Ellen Case have argued that queerness is something that is ultimately beyond gender [...]". (DOTY, 1993: xv)

Intrinsically connected to the above discussion is queer "skepticism about the self-evident status of identity categories". (JAGOSE, 1996: 101) Based on the poststructuralist criticism "of universalizing explanations of the subject and the world" (SULLIVAN, 2003: 39), queer theory rejects the notion of identity as stable, fixed and innate. As Sullivan explains, "for poststructuralist theorists there is no true self that

exists prior to its immersion in culture” (SULLIVAN, 2003: 41), which reflects on all spheres of society. “It is this sort of focus on the constructed, contingent, unstable and heterogeneous character of subjectivity, social relations, power, and knowledge, that has paved the way for queer theory”. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 42-43) Such issue has also raised a great deal of controversy, as some scholars see it as an apolitical or reactionary attitude. Others even label it as homophobic, as such philosophy erases identity categories and, consequently, the meaningfulness of the terms “lesbian” and “gay”. Such contestations will be more deeply discussed later in this chapter.

It is often argued that, if queer theory destabilizes the humanist notion of identity, then one should not transform it into another fixed identity category. Rather, queer is seen by some theorists as an attitude, a different approach to the world. Sullivan reasons that “it may be more productive to think of queer as a verb (a set of actions), rather than as a noun (an identity [...])”. Queer, thus, would be regarded “as a deconstructive practice”, instead of an ideology that would “furnish the subject with a nameable identity”. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 50)

While studying the different queer theorists, we come to realize that “there is no generally acceptable definition of queer; indeed, many of the common understandings of the term contradict each other irresolvably”. (JAGOSE, 1996: 99) Queer resists definition, and its meaning and efficacy depend on that, as queer defies normalization. Having elasticity as one of its main characteristics, the term may be used in a whole series of discussions and theories. As Jagose points out, “as queer is unaligned with any specific identity category, it has the potential to be annexed profitably to any number of discussions”. (JAGOSE, 1996: 2)

In this chapter, I will study the diverse implications of queer. My intention is to analyze and discuss its main aspects, uses and contradictions, instead of attempting to attach the term to any definitive meaning. After all, “this critical-theoretical-political ‘messiness’ about coming to a bottom line about queerness [...] is actually one of the strengths in this early period of queer identity, culture, and theory formation”. (DOTY, 1993: xiv)



## 1.2. Different approaches to Queerness: Main Scholars

As diverse as it could be, queer theory has been influenced and defended by several different theorists, critics and scholars. To begin exploring such theory, two books were essential: *Queer Theory: An introduction*, by Annamarie Jagose, and *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, by Nikki Sullivan. These seminal books presented me with the ideas of several important queer theorists, among those I have chosen a few who illustrate different approaches to queerness.

It is wise to begin with the poststructuralist influence on queer theory. The most important writer to be mentioned here is Michel Foucault, who was a notorious French historian and philosopher. Considered by many as one of the highest icons of poststructuralist theory, Foucault and his work greatly influenced queer theory. In general terms, poststructuralism criticizes essentialist and humanist ideas, which rely upon universal truths and generalizing ideas about the individual and the world. It rejects fixed definitions of homosexuality, freedom, repression, and other terms.

In the introduction to Foucault's *Microfísica do Poder*, Roberto Machado summarizes the philosopher's most relevant ideas. While describing his thoughts about power, Machado explains that

there is not in Foucault a general theory of power. That means that his analysis does not regard power as a reality which possesses some kind of nature, an essence that he would attempt to define through its universal characteristics. There is not something unitarian and global called power, but only diverse, heterogeneous forms, in constant transformation. (FOUCAULT, 1979: x, my translation)

Such consideration is essential for the understanding of Foucault's propositions, as far as the notion of universal truth is concerned. For him, such assumption should not be followed in the elaboration of theories and thoughts, as he believes that truth is a social idea which is culturally constructed. In "Não ao Sexo-Rei", Foucault declares that, "if [he] wanted to show off and assume a rather fictitious coherence, [he] would say that that has always been [his] problem: effects of power and the production of truth". (FOUCAULT, 1979: 237, my translation)

Based on the concept that truth is socially produced, we can understand Foucault's rejection of totalizing ideas, fixed categorizations and innate characteristics. For him,

every theory is provisional, accidental, dependant on a state of development of a research which accepts its limits, its unfinished state, its partiality, formulating concepts which clarify the data, [...] but which are soon revised, reformulated, replaced, based on newly worked material. (FOUCAULT, 1979: xi, my translation)

Such articulation can be connected to queer theory, with its gaps, inconsistencies, constant debate, and reformulations. Foucault's thoughts are not intended to be followed as an established truth or science; otherwise it would be destroying its own claim. Likewise, queer theory should not aim to be institutionalized or established as a role model to be followed, the "correct" position to be taken.

The presumption that there is a correct attitude, a right side we should defend, is also criticized by Foucault. Strongly against limiting dichotomies, he argues that "it is necessary to move to the other side – the 'correct side' – but only to try to break free from these mechanisms which create two sides, to dissolve this false unity, the illusory 'nature' of this other side which we defend". (FOUCAULT, 1979: 239, my translation) Such binary oppositions are seen as sterile, limited constructions which do not take into account the mutable and diverse elements which constitute social relations. Once more, the influence on queer theory is clear, as many queer scholars share the same criticism towards fixed binary oppositions and their limiting effects.

Michel Foucault, like other poststructuralists, believes that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power". (FOUCAULT, 1980: 95) In other words, resistance is part of power, not outside it; therefore, not opposite to it. Thus, for Foucault, it is inconsistent to try to establish an oppositional politics which aims to destroy the repressive other. What he suggests is that discourse, which works within the mechanisms of power, should be seen as a type of resistance. For him, discourse is unstable, heterogeneous and multivalent, just like identity. Foucault believes that identity is culturally constructed and that the subjectivity is shaped according to its relations with society. Such ideas have had big relevance in queer studies and its criticism of identity politics.

The first queer scholar to be analyzed here is Ruth Goldman, as her work was of great value to my understanding of queer theory. Analyzing her text "Who is That Queer Queer? Exploring Norms Around Sexuality, Race and Class in Queer Theory", we have a clear view of how revolutionary – therefore how queer – her ideas can be considered. The text begins with the following statement: "Several years ago, when I came across the term "queer theory", I thought I had finally found my academic

home, a theoretical space in which my voice would be welcome". (GOLDMAN, 1996: 169) The main fact which influences her sharp queerness is her bisexuality. She states:

The term queer emphasizes the blurring of identities, and as a young bisexual activist who had encountered a great deal of resistance to the concept of bisexuality within lesbian and gay communities, it didn't take me long to embrace all that I perceived "queer" as representing. (GOLDMAN, 1996: 170)

For Goldman, queerness "goes further than simply signaling an alternative sexuality"; rather, it is a way of expressing a multiplicity of "queer selves" of "stand[ing] in opposition to powerful societal norms". (GOLDMAN, 1996: 170) Queerness, therefore, would not only be related to sexual orientation, but also to race, class, intellect, and so on. Goldman, thus, criticizes queer theory in the sense that it "foreground[s] sexuality and gender [...] to the exclusion of all other notions of identity". (GOLDMAN, 1996: 173) She warns us to the fact that, "by failing to consider the ways in which such aspects of our identities inform our queer perspectives, we also fail to disrupt the hegemonic discourses around race and other anti-normative categories/identities". (GOLDMAN, 1996: 173)

Moreover, based on her own experiences as a bisexual scholar, Goldman complains that "although queer theory indicates a significant ideological shift from lesbian and gay studies, it has carried with it the essentializing categories of 'lesbian' and 'gay'". She also claims that in queer theory, bisexuality "is often disappeared at best and disarticulated at worst. Thus, in some ways, bisexuality has become the contemporary version of 'the love that dare not speak its name'". (GOLDMAN, 1996: 175) Thus, much of her work is focused on challenging such limitations in queer theory. She defends the idea that

if queer theory is to truly challenge the "normal", it must provide a framework in which to challenge racist, misogynist, and other oppressive discourses/norms, as well as those that are heterosexist and homophobic. We must not simply challenge heteronormativity but must instead question the very system that sustains heteronormativity. (GOLDMAN, 1996: 174)

Another important theorist in queer studies is Michael Warner. An acclaimed theorist, literary critic and professor of English Literature and American Studies at Yale University, Warner's works have greatly influenced not only queer theory, but also several other fields, such as literature and social theory. According to [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com), "Warner coined the term heteronormativity in an article

published in the journal *Social Text*, entitled, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet", in 1991.<sup>17</sup>

In the opening paragraph of his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, we come across the clear statement that queers do not want just sex, which implies that other issues besides sexuality deserve the writer's attention. He claims that "sexual desires themselves can imply other wants, ideals, and conditions. And queers live as queers, as lesbians, as gays, as homosexuals, in contexts other than sex. In different ways queer politics might therefore have implications for any area of social life". (WARNER, 1993: vii) Similarly to Ruth Goldman, Warner believes that other issues such as race, social class and intellectual formation are as relevant as sexuality and gender, and should be taken into account in queer studies.

In Warner's point of view, "the preference for 'queer' represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal". (WARNER, 1993: xxvi) Thus, queerness would represent more than a sexual issue, but a political position which defies the systems of power, permeating through all the fields of society. He even goes further, pointing out that queer scholars "want to make queer theory, not just to have a theory about queers. [...] "[Q]ueer" gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual, and normal includes normal business in the academy". (WARNER, 1993: xxvi)

Warner also deeply discusses the issue of heteronormativity in society, declaring that "the social contract is heterosexuality". As we have seen, the issue here is less the sexual orientation than the social practices attached to heteronormativity. He sharply criticizes the privilege conceded to heterosexuality in society, explaining that "so much privilege lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society". (WARNER, 1993: xxi) He calls our attention to the established notion that heterosexuality is the "natural" way of human relationships, and even the only one capable of reproduction; therefore, essential to the existence of humanity. Claiming for the denaturalization of heterosexuality, Warner aims to "assert the necessarily and desirably queer nature of the world". (WARNER, 1993: xxi)

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<sup>17</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Warner](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Warner)  
Accessed on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008.

Lastly, this research would not be complete without devoting some attention to the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. One of the most important queer theorists of the present time, the renowned American professor, theorist and critic has published several books on queer theory, from which *Epistemology of the Closet* deserves special praise. Highly acclaimed by both critics and readers, the book deals with extremely relevant issues concerning gay sexuality and their relationship with heteropatriarchal society.

As Sedgwick states, “the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century”. (SEDGWICK, 1990: 71) Ever since the Stonewall events, a great deal of discussion has been raised regarding the act of “coming out”, expressing one’s own sexuality and facing society. However, from the mid 1980s on, the stigma of AIDS led theorists to start questioning the meaning and validity of coming out. Not as simple as it seemed in the 1970s, coming out may be a really hard move, as it involves not only the person’s sexuality, but also a series of issues related to acceptance in society, such as family, work or legal relations, just to name a few. As Sedgwick observes, “every encounter with a new class of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets” (SEDGWICK, 1990: 67-8), which demand gay people to rethink their condition and insertion in society.

According to Sedgwick, coming out “can bring about the revelation of a powerful unknowing as unknowing, not as a vacuum or as the blank it can pretend to be but as a weighty and occupied and consequential epistemological space”. (SEDGWICK, 1990: 77) She highlights the importance of coming out, while acknowledging the reasons that lead gay subjects to carefully reflect upon the act. Although such revelation may be powerfully transformative, and “*might* perceptibly strengthen gay sisters and brothers”, it could definitely “endanger at least the foreseen course of her or his own life”. (SEDGWICK, 1990: 78)

Sedgwick takes a step forward when she relates “the figures of ‘the closet’ and ‘coming out’” to the various “sites of contestation of meaning in twentieth-century Western culture”, which “are consequentially and quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition”. (SEDGWICK, 1990: 72) Those sites include the oppositions private/public, secrecy/disclosure, masculine/feminine, homosexual/heterosexual, among others. Influenced by

Foucault's poststructuralist ideas, Sedgwick argues that standard binary oppositions limit freedom and understanding, especially as related to sexuality.

She reminds us that the content of all of these terms was determined around the turn of the century amid and through anxious questioning over who and what was homosexual. These opposing terms, all of which operate today, therefore have a residue of the homo/hetero definitional crisis. She calls our attention to "the plurality and the cumulative incoherence of modern ways of conceptualizing same-sex desire and, hence, gay identity; an incoherence that answers, too, to the incoherence with which *heterosexual* desire and identity are conceptualized". (SEDGWICK, 1990: 82) Sedgwick leads us, consequently, to question the stability of the terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual", opening up a wide range of queer possibilities to our understanding of sexuality.

### 1.3. Problematizing "Queer": Gaps, Incoherencies and Contradictions

As we have studied, the term "queer" encompasses a plurality of meanings and uses. Although the word is usually regarded "as a logical development in twentieth-century gay and lesbian politics and scholarship" (JAGOSE, 1996: 101), we can infer from its ambiguities that queer is definitely a special movement. Jagose points out that,

as the point of convergence for a potentially infinite number of non-normative subject positions, queer is markedly unlike those traditional political movements which ground themselves in a fixed and necessarily exclusionist identity. (JAGOSE, 1996: 101)

In Alexander Doty's point of view, in the early 1990s, it was not the time to try to define queer, as it may be considered to be at an early stage in both academic and political terms. He argues that "since working with(in) queerness is only a few years old in activism and in academe, however, this seems more a time for questions and proposals than hard-and-fast defining statements". (DOTY, 1993: xv) Jagose disagrees: "It's not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics". (JAGOSE, 1996: 1) However, she adds that such "fundamental indeterminacy" may be the basic cause of problems in the study of

queer. “Always ambiguous, always relational” (JAGOSE, 1996: 96), the term is described by Warner as “a largely intuitive and half-articulate theory”. (WARNER, 1993: 19) Given such definition, the term queer has been widely deployed in several different fields, serving to a high variety of purposes.

First of all, the refusal to define queer might be seen as potentially dangerous, as some scholars argue that the indefinability of the term cannot be realistically defended. Nikki Sullivan calls our attention to

the fact that Queer Theory courses are taught in academia, and that some articles are chosen for inclusion in such courses, and for publication in Queer Theory journals and books. [...] In other words, some sort of sense of what queer is (or is not) is at work in the judgements being made in these institutional situations. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 46)

It is also said that, in refraining from giving the term a specific definition, its scholars might fail to clearly express which kind of politics it aims to promote, transforming queer theory into a utopian or anarchistic ideal, with little real efficacy.

The political efficacy of the term has also been questioned, in relation to the queer rejection of the essentialist notion of self-evident, natural identity. According to some theorists, “to question the self-evident status of identity [...] may well be explicable in intellectual terms but is indefensible because it encourages apolitical quietism”. For them, “a coherent and unified identity is a prerequisite for effective political action”. (JAGOSE, 1996: 103) However, as Jagose cleverly observes, queer theory does not intend to erase or destroy identity within politics or culture. Rather, it “marks a suspension of identity as something fixed, coherent and natural”. (JAGOSE, 1996: 98) By refusing to assimilate socially constructed identities, queer defies heteronormative rules. “To think of identity as a ‘mythological’ construction is not to say that categories of identity have no material effect” (JAGOSE, 1996: 78), says Jagose.

The issue of identity is frequently connected to the deployment of queer as an umbrella term. As Sullivan states: “one of the problems with this particular use of queer as an umbrella term is that it does little if anything to deconstruct the humanist understanding of the subject”. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 44) Queer theory, thus, is accused of erasing differences between sexual identities – gay, lesbian, and so on – and even ignoring race, class and other social differences. “Queer’s totalizing gesture is seen as having the potential to work against lesbian and gay specificity, and to devalue

those analyses of homophobia and heterocentrism developed largely by lesbian and gay critics". (JAGOSE, 1996: 112)

Gay and lesbian activists often criticize queer theory "as having a 'de-gaying' effect", which may be regarded as nothing more than a modern version "of lesbian and gay despecification". (JAGOSE, 1996: 112) Moreover, they claim that queer theory goes against all the political and social achievements they have fought so hard to acquire. "The hard-won respectability and sense of community afforded by identifying oneself as lesbian or gay is lost in a term whose only specificity is its resistance to convention" (JAGOSE, 1996: 114), they protest. More radical theorists even see such effacing of gay and lesbian identities as a homophobic attempt to silence gays and lesbians and throw them back into "a new closet". (JAGOSE, 1996: 112) Of course, such idea seems too radical to deserve further discussion.

What we can see in such arguments is a reaction against "that version of queer politics which devalues the categories of lesbian and gay by representing them as dated, elitist, establishment, and consolidated by middle-class emphasis on commodity and capital". (JAGOSE, 1996: 115) Such section of queer politics perceives lesbians and gays as being part of the heterocentrist system, one more fixed category which reinforces the dichotomy homosexual/heterosexual. Gay and lesbian activists' political accomplishments are regarded, thus, "as signs not of progress but of how lesbians and gays have been assimilated into mainstream culture and values". (JAGOSE, 1996: 115)

As in any political community, we can find extremely radical activists in queer politics, who write pamphlets and articles against the lesbian and gay "enemy". As I have stated before, such a radical position should not receive much of our attention. It goes strongly against the basic notions of queer, which reject binary oppositions, fixed assumptions and attitudes.

In fact, queer theory does not intend to devaluate or suppress different sexual identities. As Alexander Doty clarifies: "part of what is being rejected here are attempts to contain people through labeling, so 'queer' is touted as an inclusive, but not exclusive category, unlike 'straight', 'gay', 'lesbian', or 'bisexual'". (DOTY, 1993: xiv) Jagose also explains "that queer theory does not simply default on the commitment of lesbian and gay studies to politics and community; what it does is call into question the knowledges which maintain such concepts as if they were self-evident and indisputable". (JAGOSE, 1996: 111) Actually, the most renowned queer



scholars make use of both ‘queer’ and ‘gay/lesbian’, selecting the term which is more suitable to each situation, in a clear demonstration that such terms are not intended to be effaced or erased.

It is clear that the broadness and indeterminacy of queer raises several questionings and discussions. Its gaps and inconsistencies make queer studies a hard field to venture into. While reading queer theory, I have come to one conclusion: queer is a non-exclusive theory, whose understanding requires openness of mind combined with a dose of caution. Therefore, such questionings are essential to the formation of a queer mind. Queer theory does not expect to become a role model or an essential truth. “Its principal achievement is to draw attention to the assumptions that [...] inhere in the mobilisation of any identity category, including itself”. (JAGOSE, 1996: 126)

#### 1.4. Homosexuality, Heterosexuality and Straight Queerness

Within all the issues discussed by queer theory, one which is particularly relevant to my research is the questioning of the terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual”. If one looks the terms up in a dictionary, one will find definitions like: “Heterosexual – A person who is sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex”; “Homosexual - a person, especially a man, who is sexually attracted to people of the same sex and not to people of the opposite sex”.<sup>18</sup> Although definitions like “having a *deviant* sexual desire” or “the *normal*, familiar form of sexuality” are not found in dictionaries anymore, the contemporary definitions present gaps, generalizations and misconceptions which should be more carefully analyzed.

In his article entitled “‘Homosexual’ and ‘Heterosexual’: Questioning the Terms”, Jonathan Ned Katz presents us with a summary of the historical background of both labels, first coined by Karl Maria Kertbeny, one of the first writers to study sexuality. Later used by doctors to describe deviant sexual behavior, the term “homosexual” then had its counterpart “heterosexual” to be contrasted to, although “the terms [...] defined two kinds of sexual perversion, judged according to a

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<sup>18</sup> <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=36888&dict=CALD>  
<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=37734>  
 Accessed on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008.

procreative standard". (KATZ, 1997: 177) As sex was not intended for pleasure, homosexuality was also seen as perversion. It was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the label "heterosexual" started being deployed to describe "natural" female-male relationships.

Such historical account calls our attention to the fact that both terms are cultural creations, and that they can be considered quite recent. Katz explains that, "though presented to us as words marking an eternal fact of nature, the terms "heterosexual" and "homosexual" constitute a normative sexual ethic, a sexual-political ideology, and one historically specific way of categorizing the relationships of the sexes". (KATZ, 1997: 178) Just like identity, sexual behavior is socially and culturally constructed, although essentialist thought is so deeply rooted in our minds that we do not realize it.

Far from "natural" and "innate", heterosexuality has been standardized by patriarchal society, and deployed as an instrument of segregation and domination. Its stable and monolithic status was considered unquestionable, being used as grounds for all sorts of exclusionist practices in several different fields of society.

However, as Janet E. Halley observes in "The Construction of Heterosexuality", its apparent stability is far from real. Making use of law cases to illustrate her arguments, she spots numerous contradictions and differences within heterosexuality. "Despite its representation as monolithic in its nonhomosexuality, heterosexuality as it operates in federal equal protection cases is a highly unstable, default characterization for people who have not marked themselves or been marked by others as homosexual". (HALLEY, 1993: 83) The diverse practices and behaviors within the so-called coherent heterosexuality are constantly covered by the lack of discussion over it, privileged by its inarguable status. Halley also clearly states that – as far as the legal system is concerned – the heterosexual category hides inside itself a reasonable number of silenced homosexuals, closeted by the fear of being criminalized. "And until they speak," heterosexuality "owes its glory days as a coherent social category to its members' own *failure to acknowledge* its discursive constitution, the coercive dynamics of its incoherence". (HALLEY, 1993: 86)

Queer theorists often argue that homosexuality has also been naturalized, incorporated into the heterocentric system and transformed into a fixed category, the same way as heterosexuality. Annamarie Jagose draws attention to the tendency to pose modern homosexuality as certain, fixed, coherent. She explains that

much is invested culturally in representing homosexuality as definitionally unproblematic, and in maintaining heterosexuality and homosexuality as radically and demonstrably distinct from one another. Yet modern knowledges about the categories of sexual identification are far from coherent. (JAGOSE, 1996: 18)

Like Katz, she favors the denaturalization of the terms. She clarifies that “to denaturalize either homosexuality or heterosexuality is not to minimize the significance of those categories, but to ask that they be contextualized or historicized rather than assumed as natural, purely descriptive terms”. (JAGOSE, 1996: 18)

According to Katz, such break with universalizing ideas is “subversive when applied to erotic and gender history, for it challenges our stubborn, ingrained idea of an essential, eternal heterosexuality and homosexuality”. (KATZ, 1997: 179) For him, to speak of heterosexual or homosexual behaviors as fixed, natural, radically opposites, is to generalize the issue, ignoring a whole variety of practices which do not exactly fit the binary notion of homosexuality and heterosexuality. As Jagose wittingly questions: “What sexual category describes a woman currently in a sexual relationship with a self-identified gay man? Is it possible to be homosexual without ever having had or intending to have sex?” (JAGOSE, 1996: 8) This is the point where the term “queer” comes in handy, as it opens up our scope of possibilities in understanding sexual behavior, encompassing all the in-between identities and practices which have been excluded by the heterocentric binary pattern.

To discuss such ideas, it is relevant to study Calvin Thomas, who may be considered a unique scholar in queer studies. In his seminal article “Straight With a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality”, he defines himself

as an “otherwise straight” subject – an academic man, a reader and professor of feminist, queer, and other theory, who has long been involved in a committed, monogamous, state-sanctioned, fully benefited, but nonetheless happy, childfree relationship with an artist and therapist who is a woman. (THOMAS, 1997: 84)

Thus, he elaborates his queer theory around the concept of “straight queerness”, raising interesting questions about which place heterosexuals might have (or might be allowed to have) in queer studies, as well as the reasons for straight individuals to be drawn to such theory. “Other than voyeurism, appropriation, theoretical trendiness, or the desire to be a “good” responsible heterosexual critic, what might the draw of queer theory for straights be?”, (THOMAS, 1997: 84) he asks. Clearly setting the terms “heterosexuality” and “heteronormativity” apart, Thomas

suggests that queerness, in this sense, does not concern sexuality itself; rather, it can be seen as an oppositional attitude. Thus, he sustains the opinion that anti-homophobic and anti-normative straights may well have a voice in queer studies.

In the same article, Thomas draws from Eve Sedgwick's definition of queer to discuss the openness of the term. "Queer", he writes, "involves the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning [that occur] when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made to signify monolithically". (THOMAS, 1997: 86) This would include all sorts of individuals, from lesbians and gays to "drags, clones, leatherfolk", "feminist men", or even straight individuals, "people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such". (THOMAS, 1997: 87)

From this point of view, it seems plausible to talk about "straight queerness", as Thomas states that "a straight person can't be gay, but a straight person can be queer". (THOMAS, 1997: 85) Queerness, in this context, is not regarded as purely related to sexual orientation, but to an attitude of criticism. He opens his article analyzing the intriguing expression "Critically Queer", inferring that it "suggests that, just as there is more than one way to be 'critical', there may be more ways than one (or two or three) to be 'queer'". (THOMAS, 1997: 83) Such multiplicity opens the way for "straight queer aspiration", (THOMAS, 1997: 84) that is, the possibility of heterosexuals to have voice in queer studies.

First, Thomas finds support for the possibility of straight queerness in queer theory itself. He claims that, as queer theory may be understood as "resistance to the regimes of the normal" (WARNER, 1993: xxvi), it appeals to individuals who share the same ideas, even if they cannot be classified within homosexual, bisexual, or transgender categories. Alexander Doty agrees, as he infers that "new queer spaces open up (or are revealed) whenever someone moves away from using only one specific sexual identity category [...] to understand and to describe mass culture". (DOTY, 1993: xvii-xix)

Thomas, then, starts reasoning about heterosexuality itself, and the ways in which straights could articulate their queerness. "Straights have had the political luxury of not having to think about their sexuality." Those who are "drawn to formulations of queerness [...] need to interrogate their own sexual practices and the exclusions and repressions that make them possible". (THOMAS, 1997: 89-90) As Nikki Sullivan argues, "since heterosexuality is socially constructed, it is therefore

open to change". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 126-127) Furthermore, if the sexual choice is made by different individuals, its practices will be shaped according to each person's own experiences and desires, leading to endless possibilities, thus illustrating "the heterogeneity of heterosexuality". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 127)

Sullivan takes a further step when she contrasts "heterosexuality" with "heteronormativity", the latter being the institutions, rules and orientations which privilege heterosexuality and poses it as natural and coherent. Sullivan clarifies that "heteronormativity does not exist as a discrete and easily identifiable body of thought, of rules and regulations, but rather, informs all kinds of practices, institutions, conceptual systems, and social structures". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 132) Thomas also makes such distinction very clear, when he explains that "heterosexuals may have some access to homo-ness, whereas heteronormativity is perhaps constitutively antisexual". He clarifies that "the problem, the obstacle, may be less straight sexual practices per se than the privileging of those practices". (THOMAS, 1997: 90)

Therefore, heterosexual sex does not necessarily mean heteronormative sex, as well as being heterosexual does not imply a heterocentric behavior. As Jagose observes, "discussions by self-identified straight queers tend to be marked by an almost painful tentativeness and self-reflexivity, and couched in terms of anti-homophobic analysis". (JAGOSE, 1996: 114) Calvin Thomas raises many interesting questions concerning heterosexual queerness, that is, against heteronormativity:

What is to prevent straights from [...] engaging in such protest even if the straights in question themselves behave largely (if not exactly) according to the norm? What would it mean for straights really to understand (and not just theoretically toy with) the queer argument that the normative regimens they inhabit and embody are ideological fictions rather than natural inevitabilities, performatives rather than constatives? After such knowledge, what normalness? (THOMAS, 1997: 85)

Such questionings are extremely relevant and may well serve as a starting point for my discussion of Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World*.

## 2. "A PERVERSE CREW": LOVE, FAMILY AND QUEERNESS IN A HOME AT THE END OF THE WORLD

*What is straight? A line can be straight, or a street, but the human heart, oh, no, it's curved like a road through mountains.*

Tennessee Williams

### 2.1. A Home at the End of the World

The reading of *A Home at the End of the World* has been a unique experience to me. Not only due to its catching plot and well-built characters, but also to its inspiring themes and interesting format. The book is organized in three parts, each one divided into chapters. The titles of the chapters are the names of their respective narrators – Jonathan, Bobby, Alice and Clare. Although the chapters are somewhat chronologically ordered, the multiple-voiced narrative inflates the novel with different perspectives towards the themes and the characters themselves.

Cunningham manages to work with the multiple narratives very skillfully, using the different points of view to show multiple layers of lives in the world, thus contributing to our variety of thought and open-mindedness towards the themes discussed. As the same events are portrayed through the eyes of different characters, an impartial, non-judgmental tone is established. As Reed Woodhouse wittingly states in his article entitled "Unlimited Embrace – A Canon of Gay Fiction, 1945-1995", Cunningham "is plainly not going to *condemn* Jonathan, Ned, or Alice for anything [...]". (WOODHOUSE, 1998: 177)

Moreover, by having the four main characters present themselves to the reader, the author establishes a connection between reader and narrator, captivating us. We tend to sympathize and identify with these characters, understanding each one's motives and conflicts. Woodhouse praises the writer's language and style: "Cunningham is seductive: his sentences are so ravishing, his irony so delicate and fleet, his pathos so lovely that one feels oneself in touch with the real day-to-day sadness of life". (WOODHOUSE, 1998: 179)

In the novel, Cunningham deals with themes such as family, relationships and the pursuit of personal happiness in a "sharp-eyed" (WOODHOUSE, 1998: 174) way,

intelligently deconstructing western heterocentric stereotypes. The story opens with both Bobby's and Jonathan's earlier childhood memories, in which Cunningham reminds us of the western image of the ideal family. "In 1968, our family would be photographed for the Sunday supplement of the *Cleveland Post*: my mother cutting into a shrimp casserole while my father and I looked on, proud, expectant, and perfectly dressed". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 19)

The perfection of the image, however, is ironically clashed with Jonathan's description of his parents' "cordial, joking relationship that involved neither kisses nor fights, [...] living together with the easy, chaste familiarity of grown siblings" (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 19), and preceded by a dramatically intense argument over Jonathan's "wrongful toy" (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 11), his pretty baby doll. Bobby's household, as well, with "a stale sour smell of soiled laundry and old food, a father who crept with drunken caution from room to room" (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 45-46), serves to call our attention to Cunningham's destabilization of the traditional patriarchal family. Such collapse of the ideal family opens our minds to the construction of the queer Woodstock family which will be formed later in the novel.

Reed Woodhouse also highlights the fact that *A Home at the End of the World* is not exclusively a gay novel, reminding us that it was very well received by gay readers, as it "found a different story to tell from the already passé one of coming out on the one hand, or of disco-dancing on the other". The novel "show[ed] the possibilities of telling a gay story that was literarily sophisticated". (WOODHOUSE, 1998: 182) In my point of view, Cunningham's work could be better classified, then, as a queer novel. It addresses a wider audience, privileging not only gay, but also straight, bisexual or asexual characters with equal attention and balanced depth. For Woodhouse, this

means gay fiction has finally grown up. No longer the product of a ghetto mentality nor aimed at one, it is free finally to examine the question of homosexual life in the largest possible context – a context which will inevitably place the gay character somewhat off-center. (WOODHOUSE, 1998: 183)

*A Home at the End of the World* is an astonishing literary work which provides a lot of material to discuss queer relationships, especially when the love triangle is concerned. Particularly interested in the female point of view, I intend to discuss such relationship through Clare's eyes, analyzing how queer she really is, trying to

establish her motives, her aspirations towards the relationship with both Jonathan and Bobby, and the reasons for her to break it.

## 2.2. Clare

Clare is the personification of the modern American woman of the 1980s. She lives in New York City with Jonathan, her gay best friend, and they plan to have a baby together. Within her queer circle of friends, she is regarded as intelligent, independent and cheerful. She seems like an open minded woman, whose richness does not prevent her from having all sorts of experiences, from drug experiences to making costume jewelry, from a homosexual affair to abortion. To patriarchal society, her appearance is odd, as she wears weird hairdos, extravagant outfits, as well as bright, colorful nail polish. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo explores the pressures brought on by society that worships the ideal female figure which causes female obsessions with appearance. She discusses the idea of the “material body”, calling our attention to the fact that those are socially constructed images, which are used as instruments of power and domination. She warns us about the control which culture holds over our lives, through the reinforcement of everyday habits and values:

Through routine, habitual activity, our bodies learn what is “inner” and what is “outer”, which gestures are forbidden and which are required, how violable or inviolable are the boundaries of our bodies, how much space around the body may be claimed, and so on. (BORDO, 1995: p. 16)

According to Bordo, “the various texts of Western culture – literary works, [...] artworks, medical texts, film, fashion, soap operas” (BORDO, 1995: p. 15), all contribute to build such images in our minds. Most women make a strong effort to fit in such patterns, assimilating socially constructed practices and ideologies, in an attempt to have a place in social life. In *A Home at the End of the World*, we notice that Clare goes against such tendency, struggling to defy social rules, which reflects on her looks. She claims “to be opposed to beauty in general” (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 110), which leads us to conclude that she dresses in an unconventional way in order to defy society.



From Bobby's point of view, Clare is absolutely queer, as her looks, acts and gestures seem not only revolutionary but also shocking. As readers, we have the tendency to believe so too, as Nikki Sullivan reminds us that "none of us can honestly say that we never read the gestures, the actions, the appearance of others as the expression of who we presume them to be". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 82-3) One of the most important instruments of social interaction, the body has the power of displaying an image to the world, which is generally interpreted as a true representation of an individual's personality. Sullivan adds that

if actions, gestures, and desires are seen as the expression of an innate self, it becomes possible not only to interpret others, but also to evaluate, and categorize them. And connected to this supposed capacity to know the other, is the possibility of self-knowledge. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 83)

Such statement leads us to argue that not only Bobby and the readers believe in Clare's appearance and language as a reflex of her inner self, but Clare herself is misled by such idea, as for some time she believes her constructed queerness will work out for real.

Jonathan, on the other hand, observes how Clare acts as a character, as he states:

Clare's rival was her own image, the elaborate personality she'd worked out for herself. She lived at a shifting, troubled distance from her ability to be tough and salty and "interesting". When her gestures were too perfectly executed she could be slightly grotesque – practiced and slick. I saw how it troubled her. Sometimes she embraced her persona with palpable defiance, looking out at the world as if to say *That's right, so what?* Sometimes she frightened herself. She had grown so adept it was hard for her to act out of character. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 112)

However, what we see from the very beginning is that Clare is having trouble to support her elaborated character. It seems to me that as time passes, age haunts her with greater strength, leading her to think more realistically about herself. When we finally have access to Clare's thoughts, we come across the following statement: "I wanted a settled life and a shocking one". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 142) Having such a paradox as Clare's first line clearly denotes her contradictory condition, as if two elements were clashing inside her mind: her true desires for life, and the constructed queer behavior she has decided to adopt and strongly fights to incorporate as her "real self". We can feel her frustration since the very beginning, when she confesses: "Now, in my late thirties, I knew less than ever about what I wanted. In place of youth's belief in change I had begun to feel a nervous

embarrassment that ticked inside me like a clock. I'd never meant to get this far in such an unfastened condition". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 142)

As the story develops, we gradually unveil Clare's mind; we are led to infer that her defying attitude and shocking appearance may be a reflex of her teenage revolt against the patriarchal system which repressed her mother. In a statement of rejection of the traditional family patterns, she declares that "people who've been well cared for can't imagine the freedom there is in being bad". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 279) Clare's queerness emerges from her questioning of heterocentric society and her fierce attempts to break free from it. As we have already seen, Michael Warner points out that queerness could be regarded as "thorough resistance to the regimes of the normal". (WARNER, 1993: xxvi) Therefore, Calvin Thomas concludes that it "would seem to invite, or at least not explicitly forbid, something like a 'queer aspiration'" (THOMAS, 1997: 84) on the part of the subjects who do not fit within the established categories of heterocentrism. It seems to me that queerness, for Clare, represents an alternative way to stand out, to show the world all her anger and disagreement regarding institutionalized patterns of behavior. Clare's queer attitude can be better discussed through the analysis of her relationship with the gay man and the asexual man of the novel, Jonathan and Bobby, respectively.

### **2.3. Clare and Jonathan**

Jonathan is the first character to describe Clare, as he introduces us to their queer relationship:

We were half-lovers. Together we occupied love's bright upper realm, where people delight in otherness, cherish their mates' oddities, and wish them well. Because we were not lovers in the fleshly sense we had no use for little murders. Clare and I told our worst secrets and admitted to our most foolish fears. We ate dinner and went shopping together, assessed the qualities of men who passed on the streets. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 109)

Although relationships of this kind are generally mistaken for friendship, Jonathan's description clearly classifies it as love. However, Jonathan is gay, a fact that places their relationship in a special realm, full of ambiguities and gaps. How could we classify it? Is it heterosexual? Bisexual? Asexual? Once more, the term

“queer” seems to better apply to the situation, as any attempt to use the common institutionalized labels seems useless.

A queer relationship between a gay man and a heterosexual woman is definitely not straight. Without the possibility of having sex – a fact which is taken for granted by both Clare and Jonathan – their relationship is based on love and trust. Clare tells us: “[...]I’d fallen in love with Jonathan’s intelligence and humor and, I suppose, with his harmlessness. He was neither frigid nor dangerous. Neither man nor woman. There was no threat of failure through sex”. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 278-279) Such “safe intimacy” is one of the facts which attract many women into relationships with gay men. According to popular culture, Clare could be called a “fag hag”, which is a woman who is extremely comfortable around homosexual males. However, she herself is generally heterosexual and enjoys the benefits of relationships with the members of the opposite sex, without the underlying sexual tension that normally is present between a male and a female who might enjoy sleeping with one another. Jonathan also feels safe with this type of love; he reveals that they both feel threatened by the possibility of breaking such safety and venturing into a more complex, serious relationship. “We waited, with no particular urgency, to see whether someone would claim one of us for the other, more terrifying kind of love” (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 109), he confesses.

For years, Jonathan and Clare have shared a flat in NYC. Apart from sleeping in separate rooms, they live a regular couple’s life of cooking, paying bills, going out. They talk openly about all sorts of issues, as Jonathan affirms: “Clare and I kept no secrets. [...] Perhaps it was our substitute for the creaturely knowledge other couples glean from sex. Clare and I confessed everything”. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 122) They even tell each other about their sexual adventures in detail, with “a shared attitude of ironic disdain”. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 121) However, when Jonathan meets Erich, we feel that such openness may not be entirely true, as he does not feel comfortable to tell Clare about Erich. He is only able to talk frankly about his unimportant sexual adventures, not about someone who has touched his heart. This makes their safe intimacy seem illusory, as when it comes the time to talk about his actual feelings, Jonathan is insecure.

On the other hand, we can also see his difficulty to talk about Erich as a failure to deal with the possibility of actually falling in love with someone, which would

threaten their queer relationship. Jonathan can see such fear in Clare's eyes when she persuades him to tell her about Erich. She uses a gossip tone, trying to sound both natural and curious, in an attempt to hide her feelings towards such threat. He observes her:

She took a deep swallow of her drink, and I thought I saw under her friendly avidity the plain fear that I would leave her; that I'd disappear into love. It showed in her eyes and along her mouth, which could go stern and disapproving despite her lavish crimson lipstick. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 121)

Clare realizes she will never be able to fulfill him completely, as there will always be the need for him to find a sexual partner. Being a heterosexual, it would be possible for Clare to have pleasure with him. Nevertheless, even if they managed to have sex and if he were able to satisfy her, she would never be able to satisfy him. Such gap in their relationship results in frustration for her, as we can clearly observe in Clare's pessimistic thoughts.

It's strange for two people to be in love without the possibility of sex. You find yourself planning trips and discussing money-making ventures. You bicker over colors for a house you'll never own together. You debate names for a baby you won't conceive. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 161)

If we clearly analyze Clare's thoughts, we are drawn to the conclusion that venturing into such a queer relationship is not as easy for her as she tries to convey. Although her attitude towards Jonathan's sexual adventures may seem open minded, and her looks might induce us to believe she is queer, the passages narrated by Clare suggest that she is not being able to carry on with her constructed queerness anymore. The situation starts becoming hard to bear when she realizes that Jonathan has more possibilities of falling in love with someone else than her. She realizes that "Jonathan had work, and a lover I'd never met. He had the latitude still available to a man of twenty-seven. With my breasts shifting lower on my rib cage, I wanted something permanent". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 162) Such a confession reveals Clare's wish to have a stable, heterosexual life. From this point of the novel on, what we observe is a growing desire to be a mother, to form a family, and "to do a better job with a child than [her] parents had done with [her]". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 162) However, she needs a man to be able to conceive her baby. And this is when Bobby comes into light.

## 2.4. Clare and Bobby

Bobby is quite a curious character. At first, we tend to see him as tough and independent, misled by his messy looks and monosyllabic talk. Alice describes him:

He looked hungry as a stray dog, and just that sly and dangerous. He sat at our table, wolfing roast chicken. [...] His hair was an electrified nest. He wore boots, and a leather jacket decorated with a human eye worked in faded cobalt thread. [...] I wondered if his parents fed him. [...] He did not smile. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 54)

In spite of the first impression, it does not take too long for us to realize that Bobby is in fact a fragile, needy person. Having grown up in a family in which the lack of communication and difficulty to connect were constantly present in their lives, Bobby had always looked up to his brother Carlton as a role model. Nevertheless, as Woodhouse ironically describes, “when Carlton dies in a freak accident, it happens so suddenly the reader is almost physically shocked”. (WOODHOUSE, 1998: 175) Such a shattering feeling strikes the characters deeply; the episode can be seen as the cause of the whole family’s collapse. Bobby survives, while his soul seems to have been killed at that shocking moment. As a consequence of such childhood issues, Bobby is not able to relate to people, as he bottles up his emotions, seeking refuge in his silence and inertia. Little by little, Bobby gains access to Jonathan’s family. When Jonathan moves to New York, Bobby stays with his parents, living a pointless life. “I stayed in Ned and Alice’s house for almost eight years. The urge to do nothing and not change caught up with me; for eight years I squeezed roses onto birthday cakes and thought of what I’d make for dinner” (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 127), he tells us. However, when Alice and Ned move to Arizona, Bobby is forced to go “out of the nest”. At that moment, he understands “that [his] life would change with or without [his] agreement”. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 128) Unable to have a life of his own, Bobby calls for both Jonathan’s shelter and support in NYC. That is when he meets Clare.

At a first glance, Clare and Bobby seem to find each other quite weird, although we can feel some sort of tenderness between them. He describes her:

On first sighting, she was like New York made into a woman – she changed and changed. I could tell she was beautiful in a sharp, big-nosed way that had nothing to do with magazines. Her hair was orange then – it bristled as if her brain was on fire. She was several inches taller than I, with dark red lips. She wore tight pants, and a tiger-striped shirt that fell off her shoulders. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 136)

Her appearance and attitude make him feel rather uneasy, as well as intimidated by her outgoing talk and strong attitude. He describes the moment he first shakes her hand: "I said hello and shook her hand, which was strong and sure as an apple picker's". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 136) Clare describes her first impression of Bobby:

He looked too much like a man who'd been in a cartoon accident. He might have had stars and planets fluttering around his head. You got the impression that he was slightly cross-eyed. But still, he touched you. Maybe because you believed that if you took your eyes off him for too long, he'd have another accident. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 142-3)

Although she is not passionately attracted to him, he calls her attention for his fragility. She confesses that "although [she] kept [her] hands off him, [she] couldn't deny Bobby's shaggy, lost-pony appeal". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 143)

Their affair starts in this mood, as Clare decides to take care of Bobby. She shows him new places, teaches him how to act, and changes his looks. "She took on the long work of redoing me" (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 147), he says. This attitude clearly shows how Clare takes the lead in their relationship, subverting the established patriarchal gender roles. Such behavior can certainly be considered queer, as it defies the norm, challenges the heterocentric pattern of "female embodiment as passive, penetrable, and powerless, and male embodiment as active, impenetrable, and powerful". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 123) Clare reshapes Bobby, molding him like clay – she begins it with a haircut.

For decades, Bobby has worn a long, wild hair in order to hide himself from the world, to make himself "the next best thing to invisible". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 128) Although visibly insecure, and rather unwilling to change, Bobby passively accepts Clare's orders while she cuts his hair. In popular mythology, the hair is a strong symbol of power and sexual dominance.

Some psychoanalysts and Freudians argue that long hair represents the id and aggression, and that cutting the hair is thus akin to castration. Hair is thus considered to be a potent sexual emblem, both for men and women, having many parallels with intercourse. Also, having short, cut hair is often viewed as being under society's control.<sup>19</sup>

Among the most popular examples are the story of Samson and Delilah, the act of shaving heads in Nazi concentration camps, and military haircuts. In a

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<sup>19</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long\\_hair](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_hair)  
Accessed on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008.

symbolic demonstration of power, Clare deprives Bobby from his long hair, showing his submission to her, which is going to be the basis of their relationship.

Bobby and Clare's affair instantly reminds me of the discussion of heterosexuality, both in the sexual sense and as an institution. Bobby's sexuality remains a mystery to us until he reveals his tendency to be asexual. "I had realized by then that I didn't feel what others called 'desire'. Something was missing in me. I felt love – the strain and heat of it, the animal comfort mixed up with human fear. [...] But nothing built up in my groin". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 141) Woodhouse also observes that

even after he begins having sex with Clare – and Cunningham catches brilliantly his goofy pleasure in doing so – he is never a demanding lover, and indeed sex quickly ends between them. What he needs, apparently, is the comfort of a woman, not her sexuality. (WOODHOUSE, 1998: 179)

Driven by love and submission, he has sex in order to please his beloved one, and not out of desire. Such characteristic contributes effectively for the inversion of gender roles in his affair with Clare, queering it even more.

According to Nikki Sullivan, "normal' heterosexuality" is regarded by society as "non-egalitarian, oppressive, violent, and central to the subordination of women". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 123) She describes normative sexual intercourse as a battlefield, on which only the man achieves victory (activity), and the woman is the loser (passivity). Such notion, she explains, is founded "on essentialised or essentialising notions of masculinity and femininity, activity and passivity, power and powerlessness, penetrator and penetrated". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 123) She also calls our attention to the fact that "compulsory heterosexuality" is an institution (rather than a natural inclination or choice) that plays a central role in the implementation and perpetuation of male domination". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 120) Thus, heterosexuality can be seen as one of the most powerful tools of patriarchy, helping to implement all its practices, rules, and designated roles for men and women. In an undoubtedly queer behavior, Clare defies patriarchy, as she deconstructs the essentialist notion of heterosexuality. Such attitude may be seen by Sullivan as feminist, when she states that "making a conscious and informed choice to participate in heterosexual practices without concomitantly endorsing the heterosexual institution could be regarded as a form of feminist praxis". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 126)

In her affair with Bobby, her position is clearly “male”. While reading this part of the novel, Simone de Beauvoir’s article “Destiny – The Data of Biology” came to my mind, in which she deals with the socially assigned roles of men and women in reproduction. She explains to us about the ideas that the female egg is static, while the sperm is energetically active: “motionless, the egg waits; in contrast the sperm – free, slender, agile – typifies the impatience and the restlessness of existence.” (BEAUVOIR, 1997: p. 44) The French feminist discusses the parallels which are drawn between such facts and the position of men and women during intercourse. Just like the egg, the woman is supposed to wait for the man not only to take all the initiative, but also to lead her through the sexual act. Nevertheless, Beauvoir clarifies that “on the respective functions of the two sexes man has entertained a great variety of beliefs. At first they had no scientific basis, simply reflecting social myths.” (BEAUVOIR, 1997: p. 39) Breaking with such social myths, Clare acts in a completely different way with Bobby. If we analyze their dialogue during their first sexual relationship, we clearly see the inversion of gender roles:

I stopped dancing and led him to my bedroom. He didn't quite participate but didn't resist either. I left the light off. I closed the door and said, “Are you nervous?”  
 “Uh-huh.”  
 “Don't be. This is just for fun. This is just because I like you. There's nothing in this world for you to be nervous about.” (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 168)

In the passage that follows, Clare leads the entire intercourse, from taking off his clothes, doing the whole sexual moves while he lies still, besides making him reach orgasm. “I guided him to the bed, and had him lie down. I'd never before been so completely in charge. If this was part of the aging process, I didn't mind it. There was something agreeably frightening about running a fuck”. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 168-9) As soon as their sexual intercourse is over, Bobby “start[s] weeping, openly and extravagantly as a baby”. She “[l]ies] down beside him and t[ells] him it [is] all right”. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 170) Once more the inversion of gender roles is clear, with Clare assuming a male position of taking someone's virginity, as well as of reassuring the crying, frightened virgin. When their relationship becomes stable, she continues to play a leading role, not only dealing with household and external issues, paying their bills, but also telling him how to style his hair and choose his outfits. She even plans her pregnancy without consulting him. As soon as she accomplishes that, her life changes.



## 2.5. A Queer Family

Since the beginning of part III, we can instantly feel a change in Clare. We see her reasoning more about herself, and what her true aspirations for life are. Since part II, there have been foreshadowings of Clare's emotional outburst, most of them related to her loneliness, the aimless nature of her life, her aging acting as a decisive pressure factor which triggers all her self-questionings. Frustrated, she describes herself as "an undecided, disorganized woman who fell out of every conventional arrangement. Who dragged her own childhood along with her into her forties". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 274) Her reasoning can be seen since her early lines in the novel. "Maybe I'll have my hair dyed back to its normal color. Don't you think a woman of a certain age should stop trying to look eccentric?" (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 110) she asks Jonathan. When he tries to comfort her, she shoots:

The difference between thirty-six and twenty-five [...] is that at twenty-five you can't look pathetic. Youth is the one overriding excuse. You can try anything out, do anything at all to your hair, and walk around looking perfectly fine. You're still thinking yourself up, so it's okay. But you get a little older, and you find your illusions starting to show. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 111)

This is exactly the process Clare goes through. As time goes by, she feels even more difficulty in keeping up her constructed queer persona. We can see her fabricated features being gradually removed, in a painful process of frustration and self-discovery. As she herself point out: "In my twenties I'd suspected that if you peeled away my looks and habits and half-dozen strong ideas you'd have found an empty spot where the self ought to be". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 144) She was probably right.

Until the end of part II, she is still able to carry on with her performative queerness, basically due to the fact that, currently, her queerness is more a matter of appearance than of real action. Triggered not only by the pointlessness of her life which stifles her more and more, but also by her age, Clare decides to put her theoretical queerness into practice, taking the lead in her affair with Bobby and planning to form a queer family.

Soon there would be an important addition to the list of things I was too old to do. I could see the danger: aging woman in love with gay man gets pregnant to compensate herself for the connections she failed to make. I couldn't follow that course with a straight face. Still, it gnawed at me. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 161-162)

In this point, we are already able to foresee that she may not be able to handle the situation, as she plans her pregnancy but cannot assume it for the men or even for herself. She reveals:

Now I wanted a baby, and I wanted to raise it with Jonathan. We could be a new kind of family. A big disjointed one, with aunts and uncles all over town. But I couldn't bring myself to confess what I was after. I was trying to stage my own accident. I just needed more time. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 204)

It seems to me that such “stag[ing] of [her] own accident” is actually a way of deceiving herself, as if it were just one more theoretical plan, like the ones she and Jonathan used to make. When she finds out she is pregnant, reality dawns on her, as she is not able to deal with it. That could be seen as her turning point in the novel, when she starts thinking about the price to pay for being unconventional. After realizing she is pregnant, her behavior changes in many ways. She becomes more fragile and dependent, being taken care of by the men for the first time in the story; she starts to listen to Bobby's advice, even being convinced by him and Jonathan to leave New York and move to a house in the country; above all, she starts questioning her own unconventional behavior, unsure if she wants her daughter to follow her footsteps. When Bobby and Jonathan propose to raise the baby together and form a queer family, she becomes desperate and confesses:

“I can't do it this way,” she said. “I should either be in love with one person, or I should have a baby on my own.”  
 “You are just scared,” Bobby said.  
 “I wish I was. I'd rather be scared than furious. And embarrassed. I feel like such a fool. What would we do, sign up for birthing classes together? All three of us?”  
 “I guess so,” I said. “Why not?”  
 “I'm not this unusual,” she said. “It's just my hair.” (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 255)

Jonathan and Bobby manage to convince Clare; the three of them move to Woodstock, forming an unconventional family. While discussing homosexuality and heterosexuality, Nikki Sullivan explains:

The distinction between life and death, [...] not only structures Western metaphysics, but also plays an integral part in the politics of sexuality – most particularly in the denigration of homosexuality on the grounds that it (unlike heterosexuality) is a sterile or non-reproductive, and unnatural relationship. Consequently, homosexuality is constructed as anathematic to ‘the family’ as the cornerstone of heteronormativity. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 43)

Clare, Jonathan and Bobby manage to break such paradigm, as they not only succeed in establishing a familiar household, but also give birth to a daughter,

Rebecca. Far from sterile, their family presents all the features of any “regular” one, with real possibilities of growth and prosperity – elements which are considered essential for the success of a traditional family. It can surely be considered a queer family, as it does not fit the heterocentrist model of family in “which homosexual family groupings are declared illegitimate or inauthentic”. (JAGOSE, 1996: 16) Queer behavior poses a sharp challenging of social rules, defying stereotypes about sexuality, gender, as well as the family institution. That is what they attempt to do, with both men playing the role of Rebecca’s father. For Clare, Jonathan is the one she loves, while Bobby plays the sexual partner’s role.

However, if we carefully analyze Clare’s attitudes in part III, we will notice that she does not really live the queerness of their family to a full extent. She plays the established, heteronormative female role, living an indoor life, while both men go out to run the family business. Based on her attitude of keeping her actions in the safe, conventional roles of mother and housewife, we can infer that she does not enjoy the queer part of her life as she used to. She criticizes their queer, dysfunctional family, discussing it with Bobby:

“Boys, boys,” she says, pulling away from my kiss. “What a perverse crew we are. What a deeply weird bunch.”

“We’re really, you know, not much weirder than any family,” I say. “At least we love each other. Didn’t you say that first?”

“Maybe I did. About a thousand years ago.”

I looked into her scared, aging face. I think I know what frightens Clare – a certain ability to invent our own futures has been lost. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 273)

As we move on, we come to realize that she actually enjoys being home and looking after her daughter, as motherhood fulfills her, soothing the emptiness of her life.

Being a mother was the weighted, unsettling thing. Being a lover – even an unorthodox lover – was tame and ordinary by comparison. Maybe that was the secret my own mother discovered. She’d thought my wild, undisciplined father would prove to be her life’s adventure. And then she’d given birth. (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 274-275)

For her, being a mother is much more rewarding than being a lover, or forming a queer family. In fact, what we see in the last chapters is Clare isolating herself more and more, slowly pulling herself and Rebecca away from the family.

When Erich is diagnosed with AIDS, being invited to stay in Woodstock with them, Clare once more starts reasoning. While taking care of Erich, both Clare and

her daughter Rebecca develop bonds with him, which leads her to feel anguished about the possibility of death brought by AIDS. Once more, she is insecure about whether she should raise her daughter in this environment, and we notice she is about to break up the relationship. She confides: "At first, I felt it as a vague unrest that fluttered around in my belly, halfway between nausea and pain. [...] Finally, after several months, I realized. I was coming to a decision". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 321) According to Woodhouse,

Clare, against her will, allows herself to be talked into moving to upstate New York, opening a café, and raising her and Bobby's child, Rebecca, with Jonathan. But it becomes clear that this pretend "family" is the men's fantasy – even the supercilious Jonathan's – not her own. (WOODHOUSE, 1998: 178)

I dare to partially disagree with the quotation above, as we should not forget that Clare's constructed queerness led her to believe that she really wanted to form the unconventional family. Although they have really convinced her to move to Woodstock, her desire to raise the child with the two men is expressed by her a few times during the novel. Also, I would rather classify the family as "queer" or "unconventional", not as "pretend family", as Cunningham brilliantly shows us that a queer family is as real and feasible as any "true family". Nevertheless, it is indeed clear that such family is not what Clare really aspires.

We may say that a combination of factors leads Clare to decide to leave the house, giving up the queer family. Motherhood, the dullness of country life, the threatening presence of AIDS. In spite of all that, if we analyze Clare's story, we come to the conclusion that she has reached her maximum level of queerness. Not able to maintain her queer persona anymore, she feels the need to go after the life she actually aspires. Motherhood has given Clare a real feeling to nurture, a palpable and intense love. "The love that cuts like an X-ray, that has no true element of kindness or mercy". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 328) That is the only reference of reality she has. She decides to cling on to it, making it the starting point of a new life.

Clare does not have enough courage to explain her feelings to Jonathan and Bobby. More difficult than breaking up a relationship is breaking up with queerness, assuming for yourself and for the others that you are not revolutionary or open minded enough. She leaves them without telling them the truth. While driving away from Woodstock with the excuse of visiting her mother, she thinks: "Forgive me,

boys. I seem to have gotten what I wanted, after all. A baby of my own, a direction to drive in". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 328)

## 2.6. How Queer is Clare?

While investigating Clare's queerness, I came across a wide variety of issues, many times contradictory. First of all, it is wise to recapitulate the difficulties in conceptualizing or defining a single meaning to the term "queer". As Goldman ironically points out,

depending on one's position and knowledge, queer theory lends itself to a variety of definitions, including: a theoretical perspective from which to challenge the normative; another term for lesbian and gay studies; another term for queer studies; a theory about queerness and queers (intentionally vague); another way that queer academics waste their time and taxpayers' money; or, at worst, [...] a plot by sexually perverted academics to recruit and indoctrinate unsuspecting young undergraduates. (GOLDMAN, 1996: 170)

As I have previously analyzed, such vagueness and contradictions in the definition of queer open up a wide world of queer possibilities, being really hard to decide whether someone is or is not queer. For us to establish such definition, it would be necessary to define what queer is, which "would be a decidedly un-queer thing to do". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 43) Queer calls into question any conventional understandings of identity, defying essentialist definitions and fixed categories. Thus, I do not think it would be queer to transform the term into a label. Instead, I opted to analyze Clare's attitudes, to find out the moments she behaves in a queer way and discuss them.

Despite all the indeterminacy attached to the term, most of the scholars studied in this thesis seem to agree with Michael Warner's definition of queer as an attitude of "resistance to the regimes of the normal". (WARNER, 1993: xxvi) This definition appears to me as the "queerest" of all, as it encompasses not only gays and lesbians, but also bisexuals, transsexuals, and even heterosexuals who do not wish to fit into heteropatriarchal norms. As Jagose explains, "queer retains [...] a conceptually unique potential as a necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation". (JAGOSE, 1996: 129) From this point of view, one could regard Clare as absolutely queer, as she truly struggles to subvert social stereotypes.

Another relevant issue discussed in queer theory is the rejection of binary oppositions, as well as universal truths. Drawing from Foucault's poststructuralist ideas, "queer emerges from the opposition to and subversion of such binaries of sexuality as hetero/homo and of gender as male/female" (SMITH, 2000: 61), which is "connected to the challenging of unified, essentialising, and universalising identities [...]".(SULLIVAN, 2003: 38) Consequently, queer theory defies the stability of the terms "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality", not only questioning their allegedly "natural" status, but also opening our minds to the multiplicity of sexualities which exist between and within them. Sullivan calls our attention to the fact that

deconstructing the presumed opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality, the 'unnatural' and the 'natural' is important, then, because it enables us to acknowledge the constructedness of meaning and identity and thus to begin to imagine alternative ways of thinking and of living. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 51)

That is exactly what Clare attempts to accomplish when she embarks on a queer relationship with two gay men, challenging the heteronormative notion of family: "a youngish (but not too young), white, middle-class, able-bodied, gender conformist, married, hetero couple and their obviously well-planned child". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 134) Clare, Bobby and Jonathan's queer family does not completely defy heterosexuality, but heteronormativity, which preaches the idea of heterosexuality "as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist". (WARNER, 1993: xxi)

Based on such differentiation between heterosexuality and heteronormativity, the idea of straight queerness seems perfectly plausible, as a means of

resistance to this normative interpretation of sexual difference as difference itself, a resistance in which straights could conceivably participate, not by surrendering or repressing their desire for sexual objects of the opposite gender, but by questioning the dominance of the assumption that such interest constitutes the natural paradigm of interest in the Other, or in others per se. (THOMAS, 1997: 86)

Once again, Sullivan observes the enriching possibilities of straight queerness, stating that

since queer need not be simply equated with same-sex relations, and sex between men and women need not necessarily be heteronormative, then queering what we usually think of as 'straight' sex can allow the possibility of moving away from stabilised notions of gender and sexuality as the assumed foundations of identity and social relations. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 134)

So, how queer is Clare? Well, I would say she acts queerly in many points of the novel, building up to her limit of queerness, until she is forced to admit – at least to herself - her conventional aspirations. At a first glance, Clare may seem as a fag hag whose flamboyant unconventionality serves as a disguise for her conventional desires. However, I dare to argue that Clare *is* queer in some points of the novel, being brave enough to assume a traditionally male role in her affair with Bobby, as well as playing an essential part in the formation of a queer family. Although her queerness is many times just theoretical, we can say that Clare truly wishes to be queer, as she really tries to be. For a moment, she believes her constructed queerness will work out as her real self, and we are tempted to believe it too.

In conclusion, I think the discussion of the main female character of *A Home at the End of the World* is relevant in the sense that it makes us reason about queerness and all its possibilities. Among them, straight queerness is a definitely interesting issue to be discussed, as it deconstructs stereotypes and destabilizes heterocentric assumptions. Studying renowned queer scholars such as Warner, Goldman and Thomas has greatly opened my mind to a queerer approach to this issue; I believe that it is important to follow Doty's advice that "any 'queerer than thou' attitude, based on politics, style, sexual behavior or any other quality, can only make queerness become something other than an open and flexible space". (DOTY, 1993: xv)

Therefore, judging or labeling Clare would be not only un-queer but also unfair. I have come to realize that, more interesting than defining Clare's queerness (or non-queerness) is analyzing her possibilities to express her queerness, acknowledging and praising her queer attitudes. As Calvin Thomas points out, "what queerly aspiring straights need to interrogate, challenge, and work toward changing is less their own sexual practices than their condition of possibility". (THOMAS, 1997: 90) Although Clare may not have been able to handle her queerness, she has shown us that being a queer straight is perfectly possible.

### 3. THE “SMALL SCREEN” ON THE SPOTLIGHT: A STUDY OF TELEVISION

*I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts. But I can't stop eating peanuts.*

Orson Welles

#### 3.1. Television: An Introduction

Television has always been an important element in American culture. Since the early 1940s, when TV started being commercialized in the USA, its importance in people's lives has experienced continual growth, and at present “ninety-nine percent of American households have at least one television”.<sup>20</sup> Much more than an ordinary household appliance, such indispensable cultural phenomenon will be the object of study in the present chapter.

Reaching millions of spectators throughout the country every day, television not only reflects but also helps molding American mentality and culture, depicting the most relevant issues in people's lives; gay themes are obviously an important aspect of American TV. In the first part of this chapter, I will make use of Ron Becker's *Gay TV and Straight America* to present a brief history of gay TV in the USA, since its closeted beginnings until the revolutionary 1990s, which influenced the open-minded shows of today.

Such powerful machine is based on several theoretical precepts, a net of elements and mechanisms, responsible for creating and broadcasting programs which need to appeal to diverse segments of the public. Accordingly, the second part will be devoted to the theory of television, discussing the most relevant aspects of the televisual process, based on the ideas of four theorists: Arlindo Machado, Ana Maria Balogh, François Jost and Elizabeth Bastos Duarte. I believe that such study, together with the history of gay TV in the USA, will provide us with the knowledge we need to better analyze the queer sitcom – *Will & Grace*.

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<sup>20</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Television\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Television_in_the_United_States)  
Accessed on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009.



### 3.2. From Ostracism to Fame: A Brief History of Gay TV in America

As we have previously discussed, television is regarded as a fundamental aspect of American culture. As Ron Becker points out in *Gay TV and Straight America*, “mass media play important roles in the construction and maintenance of national identities”. (BECKER, 2006: 05) Being one of the most important mass media in the country, TV has played an essential part in shaping American habits and social values. Therefore, the way in which American television has dealt with gayness could be paralleled with the evolution of American society towards the issue.

As far as gay-themed television is concerned, one could affirm that, just like individuals, TV was closeted in its beginning. Becker informs us that “throughout its first four decades, television virtually denied the existence of homosexuality. The families, workplaces, and communities depicted in most network programming were exclusively heterosexual”. (BECKER, 2006: 03) The 1970s and 1980s brought, though, a great deal of social as well as commercial and technological changes, paving the way for gay TV to emerge, exploding in the 1990s when “American television seemed obsessed with gayness”. (BECKER, 2006: 03)

#### 3.2.1. The 1970s – From National Marketing to Niche Marketing

The 1970s saw a transformation of American mentality in terms of marketing strategies. In the beginning, mass marketing was still the dominating philosophy in American business. Companies concentrated their efforts on finding marketing strategies which could fit their economical needs while reaching the biggest possible number of consumers. As the preeminent mass medium, television served very well to mass marketing purposes.

We learn from Becker that “the nation’s manufacturers, retailers, and service companies needed cost-effective ways to reach huge segments of the population with commercial messages. Television filled the bill”. (BECKER, 2006: 81) At that time, a huge percentage of American homes had television sets (97% by the late 1970s), reaching millions of viewers every night. The number of channels was still very limited, due to regulations and technological limitations. Thus, the three major networks, National Broadcasting Company (NBC), American Broadcasting Company

(ABC), and Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) maintained exclusive control and faced very little competition. “The Big 3, then, were the unchallenged masters of a fully mature and profitable industry in the 1970s, and the face of prime time reflected it. [...] Networks embraced the stability of homogeneity and formulaic programming practices”. (BECKER, 2006: 82)

In the late 1970s, however, a change in commercial approach started to take shape. The consumer public, once established in one huge block which represented the mainstream American public, was subdivided into smaller niche markets to be targeted, each one with its individual needs and characteristics. New research about the necessities and values of consumers sprang in the USA, leading mass marketing to give way to niche marketing. “Instead of homogenizing consumers into a uniform mass, target marketers sort them into different demographic groups by age, race, income, gender, and location”. (BECKER, 2006: 83) Such change not only influenced business and advertising, but also shaped the new mentality of the networks and the American audience regarding programming.

### 3.2.2. The 1980s – New Developments Fuel the Transformations

The changes which began in the late 1970s were intensely fueled during the 1980s, when new developments signaled a new scenario of American television, challenging the dominance of the Big 3. “On the one hand, the networks found themselves in a changing advertising world” (BECKER, 2006: 83), focused on niche audiences rather than a homogeneous mass; meanwhile, the advance of cable TV and independent broadcasting contributed to weaken the three networks monopoly, changing the identity of television in America.

The major responsibility for the erosion of the power of TV networks was the growth of cable industry. Becker acquaints us:

In 1970 only 7.6 percent of US homes received television programming via cable. By 1980 that number jumped to 20 percent and climbed steadily throughout the decade to reach 57 percent in 1990. By 1996, 98 percent of the country was wired for cable and 72 percent of Americans subscribed. (BECKER, 2006: 87-88)

Cable TV, together with the rise of independent broadcasting, allowed the appearance of a great number of new channels which offered new options for

spectators, thus stimulating competition and reducing the power of the Big 3. While in the end of the 1970s ABC, NBC and CBS together achieved 90 percent of prime-time viewers, such number dropped sharply during the 1980s and 1990s, reducing their share of prime-time spectators to 45 percent by the end of the 1990s. As Becker points out, “cable technology [...] changed the dynamics of television”, (BECKER, 2006: 86) highly influencing the content of the programs offered to the public.

Another important element which deeply influenced the development of TV programming in the 1980s was the discovery and advance of AIDS. Until the mid-80s, television managed to remain relatively distant from the issue, in spite of the rumors and discussions among American population. However, when movie star Rocky Hudson – acclaimed as a respectable and highly talented actor as well as sex symbol – died of AIDS in 1985, television networks were compelled to engage in the discussion of the issue.

The 1986 TV campaign “Don’t Die of Ignorance”, shown on ITV and the BBC, triggered a series of shows which dealt with AIDS, from interviews to series, from campaigns to debates. For the first time, safe sex was being discussed on TV, and programs featured orientations on how to use condoms and choose sex partners. On the other hand, homosexuality was shown on TV as one of the hazardous acts which could lead to AIDS. As the disease spread, the media reinforced the importance of monogamous, heterosexual relationships as a way to protect one’s health. Nevertheless, the advance of AIDS triggered an important change in the content of TV programs in America, contributing to the establishment its role as a channel for social discussion.

All these elements led to the great TV revolution of the 1990s, in which gay-themed TV blossomed. In the late 1980s, very few gay characters could be spotted in American TV programs, besides some gay references, many times hidden behind heterosexual plots and themes. In the early 1990s, on the other hand, “gay-themed episodes and references to homosexuality were everywhere”, (BECKER, 2006: 04) signaling a revolutionary era on gay TV.

### 3.2.3. The 1990s – Revolutionary Ideas Bring Gayness into TV

In the early 1990s, the changes which occurred during the 1970s and 1980s could no longer be ignored, not even by the big broadcast networks. Moreover, the 1990s was “a period in which America became increasingly preoccupied by debates over diversity, social fragmentation and cultural relativism”. (BECKER, 2006: 04) Multiculturalism was the trend, making Americans question notions of mainstream culture and look for diverse cultural manifestations. Gay and lesbian visibility increased significantly during this period, raising questions about gay rights, homophobia and other issues, including questionings about heterosexuality and its taken-for-granted stability.

#### 3.2.3.1. Narrowcasting targets the 18-to-49 years old demographic

In *Gay TV and Straight America*, Becker reminds us that one of the most important developments of the 1990s in terms of network TV was “the increasing importance of demographic numbers in general, and an obsession with a narrow segment of the 18-to-49 audience in particular”. (BECKER, 2006: 80) Considered the most economically active section of the consumer market, adults from 18 to 49 years old were aggressively targeted by advertisers – therefore by networks as well – , seen as the most profitable share. Consequently, there was a significant change in prime-time programs in the 1990s.

Programs developed to appeal to broader, family or old-fashioned audiences were suddenly considered outdated. Networks chose to focus, instead, on “edgy, ironic shows geared to specific adult tastes”, (BECKER, 2006: 80) giving such programs privileged positions on their scheduling. Gay-themed programs accounted for an important part of such new programming, and proved to have great appeal to the 18-to-49 segment. Becker argues that, “in the increasingly competitive era of the 1990s narrowcasting, network executives incorporated gay and lesbian material into their prime-time lineups in order to attract an audience of upscale, college-educated and socially liberal adults”. (BECKER, 2006: 81)

Within this segment, the more specific 18-to-34 segment – regarded as “cultural trendsetters” – seemed even more appealing to the networks and cable

channels in the early 1990s. “With liberal attitudes, disposable income, and a distinctively edgy and ironic sensibility”, (BECKER, 2006: 95) such audience was more difficult to be reached by the networks, as they watched less television, and seem to be selective, giving preference to Fox and cable channels. This was basically due to the fact that, for the majority of the spectators, cable TV offered a type of adult material which traditional networks failed to provide. Taking high risks and strongly investing in the young, upscale adult section, cable and Fox held the power over the segment, which triggered a profound change in network TV.

Seeing its future look bleak, NBC was the first of the Big 3 to take a step in changing its programming in order to appeal to “the young and the hip”. (BECKER, 2006: 97) Replacing shows like *Matlock* and *Golden Girls* by ones focusing on the 18-to-49 demographic such as *Mad About You* and *Homicide: Life on the Street*, NBC saw its ratings go up, making both CBS and ABC react and introduce edgy, hip programs in their schedules as well. Throughout the 1990s, the public saw a huge increase in adult shows, overflowing with gay material. Although the drawback experienced by *Ellen* “created concern about the viability of gay-themed programming” (BECKER, 2006: 106) and caused a reduction of gay material included by networks in their programming, gay TV strived and maintained its success among spectators. “The success of NBC’s hit sitcom *Will & Grace*, which debuted strongly in the Fall 1998 season, undoubtedly helped revive gay-themed TV’s stock”. (BECKER, 2006: 106-107)

### 3.2.3.2. The Politics of Gay-Themed TV: The “Hip” and “Edgy” Audience

The most important reason for gay TV to achieve success in the USA, however, was the new kind of public being developed within American society. Discussions about multiculturalism and social liberalism fueled the growth of a social trend in which “maintaining an appearance, at least, of social tolerance became the rigeur for those who wanted to be ‘hip’ and ‘sophisticated’”. (BECKER, 2006: 109) Thus, besides offering the gay public in general the opportunity to find something on TV with which they could identify, gay TV also appealed to this liberal straight audience. As Becker argues, “consuming gay-inclusive cultural representations

offered socially liberal straight viewers a convenient way to affirm their open-mindedness". (BECKER, 2006: 110)

Of course, such discourses were still far from practice in American society. In the 1990s, there seemed to be an urge to be an open-minded, non-prejudicial, cosmopolitan individual. Therefore, expressing support towards homosexuals or black people, for example, was almost mandatory within certain social circles. The 1990s saw, then, huge contrasts between socially liberal, edgy discourses and polls that indicated that most of the population was still firmly against gay marriage and adoption. While many people affirmed to be proud of having gay friends and enjoying gay culture, they still would not admit raising their kids without the presumption of heterosexuality and still presented homophobic ideas in their discourse. Nevertheless, "watching gay material on prime-time television, like going to a gay bar or having gay friends, was one way to be hip and demonstrate an edgy tolerance". (BECKER, 2006: 131)

In spite of it all, the inclusion of gay-themed material on American TV was extremely relevant to the discussion of homosexuality in American society. Not only because it increased gay and lesbian visibility, triggering discussions on gay rights and other homosexual issues, but also because it destabilized the notion of heterosexuality as "moral, legal, and normal", contrasted to the idea of homosexuality as "immoral, illegal, and abnormal". (BECKER, 2006: 07) Above all, it provided homosexuals with the opportunity to be included in the all-American tradition of watching TV, constructing and reaffirming their identities through the identification and criticism aroused by a great multiplicity of shows. "For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer viewers who had long lived with a television universe that usually ignored their existence, the increase of gay material on TV in the 1990s was no doubt moving, affirming, frustrating, entertaining, and insulting". (BECKER, 2006: 11)

As we have seen, television has been playing an essential role in the lives of American citizens since its beginnings. Such influence is the product of a whole series of mechanisms of production and circulation of programs, as well as of specific techniques to reach the public and touch their minds. These elements deserve a deeper analysis, which will be done in the following section.

### 3.3. Taking TV Seriously: A Study of Television Theory

When I started planning my research, numerous questionings were brought up, concerning the idea of working with television. I was well aware of the challenges I was about to face. Having a TV sitcom as inspiration for a literary research would require not only venturing into an unknown theoretical field, but also a dose of courage to defend such theory as deserving respect and appreciation.

The first book I read about the subject was *A televisão levada a sério*, by Arlindo Machado. Its preface brought me instant identification, as my challenge was clearly stated:

[...] Indeed, it does not sound very intelligent to declare yourself in love with television. While a confession of love for literature or any other sophisticated forms of art works as a demonstration [...] of education, refinement and elevation of spirit, the passion for television is, in general, interpreted as a symptom of ignorance, or even mental disorder. (MACHADO, 2005: 09)<sup>21</sup>

Although I do not intend to make any passionate declarations of love for television, I do wish to defend its value as art, positioning myself against the idea of “consider[ing] television a ‘smaller’ medium”. (MACHADO, 2005: 15) In the preface to *Televisão: ensaios metodológicos*, Elizabeth Bastos Duarte also acknowledges such academic prejudice, as she states that “this object is far from being considered with the seriousness it deserves. It is accepted to look at television, but we still get astonished sometimes, when university students dedicate their researches to it”. (DUARTE, 2004: 07) However, she also observes that a change is beginning to take shape.

First of all, it is essential to recognize the important role of TV in social life. Ana Maria Balogh, in her book *O discurso ficcional na TV*, calls our attention to the power of reach that television possesses, extending its scope of information and entertainment throughout the world. “Except for the radio [...], no other medium has a presence and permanence so strong as TV. Television stays virtually available for the spectator during almost all the hours of the day, every day, year after year in contact with the spectator”. (BALOGH, 2002: 25) Duarte complements such idea, when she states that television sets the rhythm of our lives. She defends the view that the importance and function of the media should not continue being ignored. “In

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<sup>21</sup> This quotation and all the following others in this chapter have been translated by me.

contemporary world, there are no more spaces outside the media”, she declares. “It works as a collective agenda, overdetermining the other spheres of the social”. (DUARTE, 2004: 20)

Another recurrent source of criticism is the association of TV with stupidity and banality. Constantly in need of large scale production to meet commercial demands, TV is often seen as a speedy monster that swallows quality in favor of popularity – it all comes down to rating points. Concerning that, I have found clear support in Machado, who claims that such an assumption is a huge mistake. He points out that “the phenomenon of banalization is a result of an industrial appropriation of culture and may be extended to all and any form of intellectual production of man”. (MACHADO, 2005: 09) Machado cleverly shows us that banalization may be found in all forms of art expression, although television normally takes all the blame. Consequently, he argues that “the same way that [...] there is still literature that does not conform to mainstream taste and cinema which expresses non-catalogued anxieties, there is also intelligent life on television”. (MACHADO, 2005: 10)

Machado believes that it is perfectly possible to achieve quality in televisual products, just like in all other forms of art. He reminds us that artistic production has always been influenced by social, religious or economical demands, and innumerable great works have been produced in spite of that. He proposes the search for “a concept of quality so elastic and complex that enables the valuation of works in which the industrial constraints [...] are not smashingly conflicting with innovation [...], in which the creators’ freedom of expression does not clash with the ratings demands”. (MACHADO, 2005: 25)

To conclude, I would like to highlight that the reading of these books have provided me with the initial support I needed to explore the new world of television theory. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that I do not intend to perform a deep research on semiotics. Instead, my aim is to have a general idea of the mechanisms of TV, understanding the elements that constitute high quality televisual texts such as *Will & Grace*.



### 3.3.1. Ask the Specialists: A Brief View of Some Relevant Television Theorists

As we have seen, television theory cannot be considered an easy field. Different sorts of theorists constantly debate over the functions, mechanisms and elements of TV, coining diverse terminologies which express their points-of-view. Among vast material about television theory, four theorists were seminal to my understanding of the topic.

Arlindo Machado is a professor of Communication and Semiotics at PUC-SP and USP. I confess that his book, *A televisão levada a sério*, brought me great relief to my anxieties towards television theory, with its clear language and fearless defense of the serious study of TV. Comparing it to literature and cinema, Machado clearly states that TV should not be considered inferior. “A seriously conducted research may demonstrate that the compilation of creative and intriguing works produced by television is neither bigger nor smaller than the one accumulated in other languages”. (MACHADO, 2005: 10)

Moreover, he proposes a change of focus when analyzing television. For him, the most relevant material to be studied should be the actual production of TV, what it really offers the public: the TV programs. He complains that “the attentions almost never focus on the collection of audiovisual works that television effectively produces and that the spectators effectively watch, but to the generic structure of the medium”. (MACHADO, 2005: 16)

Another relevant theorist to be studied is Ana Maria Balogh. Majored in liberal arts, she has a Masters Degree in Cinema and a PHD in literature. She is a professor of the graduate course of Communication and Media Culture at Unip-SP. In her book, *O discurso ficcional na TV*, she proposes interesting ideas, such as the notion of TV as an “anthropophagic machine”, a “devouring giant” that “generates and swallows programs, one after the other, incessantly”. (BALOGH, 2002: 25) Comparing it to our Brazilian anthropophagic nature as a society that incorporates, readapts and recycles cultures, religions and values, she states that TV is the clearest expression of such tendencies, as “an anthropophagic machine which swallows programs, previous languages, contemporary innovations, genres, styles”. (BALOGH, 2002: 26) While reading her work, I came across the expression “televsual text” for the first time. The term called my attention to an academic, serious approach to TV.

The third book analyzed was *Seis lições sobre televisão*, by François Jost. A French researcher as well as professor of Audiovisual Semiology at Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris, Jost has published several works about TV, being considered one of the most important specialists in the area.

Although his book presents complex language, it is not hard to realize that he bases his thoughts on the different levels of reality produced by TV, analyzing genres as established promises to the spectator, concerning such relations to reality. “Every genre”, he explains, “rests on the promise of a relation with the world whose manner or degree of existence conditions the acceptance or participation of the receptor”. (JOST, 2004: 33)

The last author, Elizabeth Bastos Duarte, was extremely important to my research. Not only due to her straightforward discourse (which helped me clarify some of the most important ideas posed by François Jost), but also to the detailed analysis of virtually every aspect of the televisual process. In my opinion, her book *Televisão: ensaios metodológicos* should be regarded as a seminal source of information about TV.

Duarte’s definition of “text” is worth quoting: “the material product of the process of signification, the discourse. The text is, then, the product of [...] the function contracted between expression and content, which may use the most diverse substances to its expression”. (DUARTE, 2004: 69) She claims that analyzing televisual texts should involve the whole process which constitutes them, “whose particular characteristics have repercussions in its structuring, both in form of expression and content”. (DUARTE, 2004: 69) Therefore, she defends the notion of the existence of a “televisual grammar”. She defines her concept of “grammar”: “a set of possibilities and restrictions which normatize and define the discursive practices and the means of textual organization in each medium”. (DUARTE, 2004: 54) Her deep description of the televisual process will serve to enrich the sections that follow.

### 3.3.2. Televisual Communication

Although specialists may defend different points-of-view towards television, they seem to agree in one point: the televisual communicative process is a complex

object of study, in which several distinct elements come together to form the televisual experience.

Duarte has a very clear definition of such process:

[...] Human communication mediated by television. It is a very complex process that comprehends elements of production and reception with the respective subjects involved and the wide and restrict constraints that shape them; the technical means of production, circulation and consumption of its messages; the messages themselves – the televisual products; and a profusion of sound and visual languages which, inter-related, express them". (DUARTE, 2004: 12)

Following this definition, one can easily infer that, to be able to analyze a televisual text, it is essential to understand the elements which constitute the communicative process that has constructed it, as Jost states:

analyzing a televisual program implicates in examining all the elements that participate in its communication: magazines edited by the TV networks to inform the professionals, press releases, interviews with creators or actors, title of the emission, advertisements, etc. (JOST, 2004: 30)

Naturally, Duarte also supports this idea, adding that “none of the categories used to analyze the televisual text can ignore the function of the televisual medium [...] in the definition of the rules which regulate the signical selections and articulations in the process of production of meaning in television” (DUARTE, 2004: 63) She also explains that televisual texts are “complex semiotic objects, which are expressed by using as substance different sound and visual languages: they articulate the verbal, the musical as well as different systems of visual signification”. (DUARTE, 2004: 54) Such elements deserve to be more deeply explored, serving as the starting point to our study of television.

### 3.3.2.1. How does TV work?

In her above mentioned book, Elizabeth Bastos Duarte proposes a reflection about television as “technical means of production, circulation and consumption of media messages”. (DUARTE, 2004: 54) In other words, TV is articulated through three kinds of “technological devices”: of production, which deals with the capturing of images and sounds, elaborating televisual texts with them; of circulation, concerning the transmission of televisual products; and consumption, which includes the

technology responsible for reception and decoding of signals, as well as TV sets. Naturally, the most relevant one to be examined is the production phase, on which our main focus will rest from now on.

According to Duarte, “the natural condition of all televisual production is complexity and hybridity” (DUARTE, 2004: 70), due to the multiplicity of possibilities generated by the technical means of articulating images and sounds.

Therefore, examining a televisual product is paying attention to the different languages responsible for its expression and also to the way in which they are articulated. [...] The visual and sound elements are allied [...], structured based on the ways of telling the narratives, on the discursive strategies as well as expressive mechanisms, selected and appropriate to television. (DUARTE, 2004: 70-71)

It is also relevant to briefly analyze the articulation of time in televisual texts. As far as transmission is concerned, one could claim that TV possesses a larger time flexibility than other media, as “in many of its productions, television does not project a fictional time and, although it works with narrative structures, it frequently does that in chronological and real time”. (DUARTE, 2004: 57) The innumerable combinations among recorded material, real time and live transmissions directly influence not only the structure but also the meaning produced by televisual texts. Nevertheless, Balogh reminds us that “audiovisual discourse presents much more restricted resources than literature to represent temporality”. (BALOGH, 2002: 76) She claims that literature – for being based solely on language – can use verb tenses to situate the reader within broader and more precise nuances of temporality. Television images, on the other hand, can only materialize in the present. She adds that, “besides this founding temporality, audiovisual discourse has only the flashback and the flashforward to deal with time differences in anachronical sequences”. (BALOGH, 2002: 77)

One of the most important characteristics of televisual texts – which distinguishes them from other kinds of texts – is discontinuity. Television depends on advertisers, a fact that imposes commercial breaks into its scheduling. Therefore, the plot of each program needs to be fragmented, a fact that directly influences the way in which meaning is delivered to the audience. Balogh believes that, “in this sense, TV is much more inserted in the contemporary world, which is characterized by discontinuous discourse and by the prevailing of the fragment over the unit”. (BALOGH, 2002: 94-5)

The “aesthetic of the interruption” concerns the division of televisual texts into segments, between which are inserted breaks for commercials. Machado explains that “frequently, such segments include, in the beginning, a small contextualization of what was happening before”, to help situate the spectators who missed or forgot some previous part of the program “and, at the end, a hook of suspense, that aims to hold the spectator’s interest until the end of the break, or when it returns the following day”. (MACHADO, 2005: 83) In narrative forms, such as soap operas or sitcoms, each episode constitutes one segment of a larger unit, the show itself, which may last for months, or even years. Also, each program represents one piece of the whole programming offered by the TV network.

Machado implies that serial language is necessary for the purposes of television, as “television programming as a whole constitute[s] an uninterrupted flow of audiovisual material, broadcast during every hour of the day and every day of the week”. (MACHADO, 2005: 86) The necessity to build programs at a non-stopping accelerated speed “demands television [to adopt] models of large scale production,” which make use of “serialization and infinite repetition of the same prototype” (MACHADO, 2005: 86) to achieve such goals. Moreover, the breaks perform a very specific function: “to explore hooks of suspense” which generate tension, in order to catch the spectator’s attention to the plot. Machado exemplifies it: “the best proof to such fact is the fact that even state televisions – those which do not depend on publicity to function – utilize the resort of the break in their schedules”. (MACHADO, 2005: 88)

The constant demands for fast production, added to the need to maintain the attention of the audience invariably leads the TV networks to make use of the “aesthetic of repetition”, which consists of the utilization of previously tested formats with a certain dose of variation and novelty. According to Duarte, “the need of velocity, of uninterrupted production clashes with the aspiration to the constant offer of new series of products presented as novelties”. She explains that, usually, “televisual production chooses to dress in new clothes what has been extensively tested or to combine two or more successful formats”. (DUARTE, 2004: 73) However, it is fair to observe that such practice does not necessarily doom televisual texts to banality or redundancy. The use of creativity and new forms of expression have been producing high quality televisual products, without sacrificing their pace of production or public acceptance. As Machado observes, “in the most privileged conditions of

production, it is possible to find really interesting serial structures, in which repetition becomes [...] the inaugural condition of a new dramaturgy". (MACHADO, 2005: 89)

### 3.3.2.2. Between reality and Fiction

It is believed that TV programs may be fictional – sitcoms, movies – or represent reality – news, documentaries. Nevertheless, theorists cast doubt upon such established definitions. Instead, they claim that television expresses different “worlds”, based on distinct levels of relation with reality.

First of all, we should question the assumption that images confer reality to televisual discourse. As Duarte points out, the development and growth of live transmissions have led viewers to have an illusory closeness to reality, as if the visualization of the images transported them into the real facts being broadcast. Duarte clarifies, though, that such images are already a product of selection and manipulation. Consequently, we can conclude that the image does not correspond to the reality. She observes that,

in the contemporary world, images seem to boast of some objectivity and fidedignity that lead us to overlook the fact that any image is, above all, the product of an intention: for it to be shown, it is submitted to an operation of transformation of what is visible into something seen, a process of bestowal of meaning. (DUARTE, 2004: 113)

Jost discusses the notion that the image is a sign, representing and relating to reality in different ways. Then, he clarifies that, “if the image is a sign, one cannot automatically consider it through one single angle of relation with the world”. (JOST, 2004: 88) In other words, it is more productive to analyze the relation between the image and its object and the purpose of its author than attempting to label it as reality or fiction.

Such idea becomes very interesting when broadened to the level of discourse. Jost informs us that many theorists believe that “every report, either verbal or visual, is, by nature, fictional”. (JOST, 2004: 91) He transports to discourse what Duarte observes about the images of the TV news broadcasts. Jost alleges that, even narratives such as news or History cannot be equal to reality. Such discourses present some trace of unreality, due to the fact that they represent the facts from

outside, not being part of them. Duarte supplements such proposition, as she specifies the way reality is handled on TV. She points out that

the portions of reality do not correspond to arbitrary selections: it is what is framed, it is the movement of the cameras, it is the editing and sonoplasty work that determine what will be showed and in which way. From this perspective, we are facing a construction of languages, not the real anymore, but a discursive reality. (DUARTE, 2004: 80)

In spite of that, Jost makes it clear that such idea should not be taken radically to the point of regarding such enunciations as false:

The deformation inevitably introduced by verbal or visual discourse – the order of the description or the choice of framing, the restriction of the point of view, the time of the narration, etc – should not be confused with invention, which belongs to fiction. (JOST, 2004: 94)

Both Duarte and Jost depict three different realms of reality expressed by television. The first one, which Duarte calls “meta-reality”, is the kind of reality that aims to express the real world, committed to narrating facts that have happened in the exterior world. It can be related to the “real world” depicted by Jost, in which the “transmissions [...] have an authenticating character”. (JOST, 2004: 36) The second type is “supra-reality”, which is based on fiction and has no commitment to the real world. Supra-reality would belong to Jost’s “fictional world”, in which “the objects, the actions, all the signs of fiction refer to an imaginary universe”, committed only to the “coherence of the universe created”. (JOST, 2004: 37) Lastly, “para-reality” is described by Duarte as “a new kind of reality broadcast by TV”. It is based on a controlled reality, which transports elements of the real world into an “artificial reality configured as a game”. (DUARTE, 2004: 83) Such reality dialogs with the “ludic world” proposed by Jost, related to playing, and in which reality is treated in a ludic way. “It is neither the real world, nor the fictional world: it is a world for us to laugh”. (JOST, 2004: 143)

The issue of reality on TV is an endless subject, as complex as television theory itself. Of course, my objective here is to have a panoramic view of the topic, in order to better understand the way TV produces reality and presents it to the audience, through genres, subgenres and formats.

### 3.3.3. Labeling the boxes: Genres, Subgenres, Formats

The first aspect one notices when trying to define “genre” is that such definition is as fluid as TV signals. Duarte opens her chapter on the subject with the following assertion:

Among television scholars, several ideas and paper have been spent on issues related to the statute and functions of genres/subgenres and formats in televisual production. The discussion becomes as more heated as the televisual products become more complex and hybrid. (DUARTE, 2004: 65)

Although gender classification may be a “common ground, constituted by what [Jost] calls the worlds of television”, necessary to the communication through all the instances of television until the audience, it “is far from being stable, it varies along the migrations the genres go through, from the conception of the programs until its reception”. (JOST, 2004: 31) Televisual texts have been developing more and more specific and complex characteristics throughout the years, assuming shapes which become harder to fit into the canonic classifications of the past. Each program may be seen from different points of view, conferring to it relevant characteristic which would place it into different genres. “A soap opera”, Jost exemplifies, “may be perceived either as fiction” – as it tells an imaginary story – “or also as a document about reality”. (JOST, 2004: 28)

Despite all the fluidity which confuses those who attempt to define genres, Balogh reminds us that such boundaries are necessary for the establishment of communication and understanding of the televisual texts by the audience. It is “useful to delimit the reach of the processes of reception and to speed up the recognition and the reading of the proper structural traits of each genre”, she states. (BALOGH, 2002: 90-1) She observes that there is still a tendency to classify televisual and filmic products according to everyday use: “drama, western, adventure, science fiction, etc. TV critics add to the known rubrics of genre which are proper to the medium, such as sitcoms, soap operas, among others”. (BALOGH, 2002: 90) Machado, in turn, proposes a more flexible definition of the term, which would match the hybrid speed of the contemporary world. He draws his notion of genre from Bakhtin, who believes that “genre is an agglutinating and stabilizing force within a certain language, a certain way to organize ideas, expressive means and resources” inside a specific culture. (MACHADO, 2005: 68)



Jost takes a step further when he chooses to discuss genre through its role, avoiding established definitions. Besides its regularizing, archiving and informative faculties, genre has the important function “of directing the interpretation of the receptor. The first action over the receptor which the network possesses is the issue of denomination: the name of the genre”. (JOST, 2004: 23) Duarte also believes that the literary classification of genres should not be used in television, as genres are constructed based on the development of television, evolution of programs, its subdivisions into subgenres, as well as the elements which regulate the functioning of the medium.

Instead, Duarte relates genre to the realms of reality proposed by Jost from which television operates to construct its products. She argues that the choice of such sphere of reality, “allied to the regime of belief which is proposed and the tone [...] would be the defining elements of the promise which Jost talks about, transmitted under the name of genre”. (DUARTE, 2004: 85) Through this angle, genre would refer to the realms of reality, “which are manifested through the form of subgenres and are realized into formats”. (DUARTE, 2004: 86)

In a work called “Televisão: entre gêneros, formatos e tons” - presented in the XXX Brazilian Congress of Communication Science - Duarte conveys a clearer definition of the terms. Always connecting genre to the three spheres of reality described by Jost and herself, she remarks that “genres would be virtual modelings, models of expectations, constituting in a first mediation between production and reception” (DUARTE, 2007: 05)<sup>22</sup>, which is expressed through the articulation between subgenres and formats. According to her, subgenre and format are “procedures of discursive construction which obey a series of structuring rules, involving selections and combinations in different levels”. (DUARTE, 2007: 05)<sup>23</sup> It refers to a set of choices regarding themes and the concepts in which such themes are inscribed, as well as narrative structures and other ways to express them. It is what makes the different programs distinguishable by the viewers. Format is the way in which subgenres are realized, which concerns the actual structuring of audiovisual products, the whole process of production of a audiovisual text.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.intercom.org.br/papers/nacionais/2007/resumos/R0399-1.pdf>  
Accessed on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.intercom.org.br/papers/nacionais/2007/resumos/R0399-1.pdf>  
Accessed on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008

As I have said before, it is not my intention to perform a deep study of television theory. Likewise, it seems relevant to focus my discussion of subgenres and formats on the sitcom, which will be of great value to the analysis of *Will & Grace*.

### 3.3.3.1. Laughter and Reflection: the Sober and Ludic Nature of the Sitcoms

Sitcoms have been a favorite for audiences of all ages, through different countries in the world. Originally a North-American tradition, they were usually based on a specific theme, and focused on a selected group of characters and recurrent setting, time, narrative strategies. In an article entitled “*Sitcoms: entre o lúdico e o sério*”, Duarte defines the subgenre as “chronicles of everyday life”, whose aim is “to entertain through the exposition of the small troubles of everyday life, flaws to which we are all exposed daily”. (DUARTE, 2007: 09)<sup>24</sup> Among the discursive strategies deployed in the sitcoms, she highlights “the repetition of situations, behavior, attitudes; [...] the inversion of roles, situations; [...] irony; [...] the caricature, the parody; [...] the exhibition of the casualty, [...] of the incoherencies inherent to life”. (DUARTE, 2007: 12)<sup>25</sup>

Duarte bases her analysis of the sitcom on the notion of tone, which she believes is really important to confer a specific point of view to the televisual text, as well as to establish a connection to the audience, suggesting the way in which they should react to the text they are being exposed to. She depicts it “as the presence of certain traits of content of the communicative situation, strategically structured in order to catch the spectators’ attention and invite them to share dispositions [...] proposed by the enunciator.” (DUARTE, 2007: 02)<sup>26</sup>

Following this path, Duarte presents us to a wonderful world of tones, narrowing down to the ones which constitute the basis of the sitcom: sobriety and ludicity. For her, “sober” is the kind of discourse that inscribes the text with sternness or seriousness, while “ludic” refers to the type of discourse that provides a dose of

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca\\_265.pdf](http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca_265.pdf)  
Accessed on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca\\_265.pdf](http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca_265.pdf)  
Accessed on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca\\_265.pdf](http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca_265.pdf)  
Accessed on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008

malice or jest to the dialogues. The tension between these two tones is enriched by others to provide the viewers with a rich experience that leads them to both laugh and reason.

It is interesting to observe the importance of laughter in the establishment of communication with the audience. Duarte reminds us that life presents us with innumerable comic and ridiculous situations, which are employed by television to create identification with the spectators. Sitcoms “sometimes make humor with everyday situations which [...], at the moment of their occurrence, seem serious or tragic; they denude practices, behavior, family, social or political values, showing their contradictions and incoherencies”. Making use of irony, which is placed “half-way between the comic and the tragic” (DUARTE, 2007: 11)<sup>27</sup>, the sitcoms are able to engage the audience in their stories, as well as to evoke people’s criticism towards social conventions. “The sitcoms count with the ludic conscience of the spectator” (DUARTE, 2007: 10)<sup>28</sup>, observes Duarte.

In conclusion, I believe the study of sitcoms is relevant to the sense that it helps us understand the functions and mechanisms which rule such a popular subgenre. This brief analysis of television theory will definitely be of great use not only to the discussion of *Will & Grace*, but also to the present thesis as a whole.

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<sup>27</sup> [http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca\\_265.pdf](http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca_265.pdf)  
Accessed on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca\\_265.pdf](http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca_265.pdf)  
Accessed on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008

#### 4. THEY ARE HERE, THEY ARE QUEER, THEY ARE A BIG HIT: THE MIND-OPENING ENTERTAINMENT OF *WILL & GRACE*

*Here is what unsayable about us: Jonathan and I are members of a team so old nobody else could join even if we wanted them to. What binds us is stronger than sex. It is stronger than love. We're related. Each of us is the other born into a different flesh.*

Michael Cunningham

##### 4.1. *Will & Grace*

When Max Mutchnick had the idea to create a show inspired on his own personal experience with his female best friend, he probably did not envision the wideness of the success his program would have. Haunted by the stigma of previous gay TV shows, *Will and Grace* was even predicted to be a failure by many critics. However, the sitcom about the queer relationship between a gay man and a straight woman called the public's attention not only for its witty humor and ironical tone but also for its sensible way to deal with serious gay issues. *Will and Grace* was a big hit throughout most of its eight seasons, becoming one of the most viewed gay sitcom of all times. What would the formula for such success be?

It would be interesting to start the analysis by the show's opening clip which, as Ana Maria Balogh observes, is a very important element in the presentation of a televisual text, as "it determines the atmosphere, the time, eventually the genre of the series and conducts the spectator's reading". (BALOGH, 2002: 71, my translation) Although the opening of our sitcom undergoes slight changes every season, its core remains the same: a light-hearted, fast-paced song sets the informal, contemporary, young New Yorker atmosphere; the letters of "Will" and "Grace" horizontally cross the screen, scrambling the two names as if they were as intertwined as the two main characters, while short images follow the same movement, showing the four main characters. First they appear in close-ups – presenting them to the audience; then in very short takes – providing a hint of their personalities, recurrent gags and

relationships.<sup>29</sup> The 16-second clip gives us a glimpse of what the show is about, while triggering our curiosity to watch the episode.

While watching the sitcom, the first aspect to call the viewers' attention is the tone. In "Televisão: entre gêneros, formatos e tons", Duarte informs us that tonalization represents "the conference of a point of view to the discourse which is being produced, from which its narrative wishes to be recognized". (DUARTE, 2007: 05, my translation)<sup>30</sup> It is the way with which the discourse is enunciated, conferring a series of gradations to the speech, thus giving a specific meaning or atmosphere to the text. In *Will & Grace*, the tone is mainly articulated between the two opposing axes studied in the previous chapter, which are a strong characteristic of sitcoms: the seriousness axis – which "confers effects of relevance to what is being enunciated" and the ludicity axis – whose "purpose is the mere entertainment of the receptor with what is being transmitted". (DUARTE, 2004: 127, my translation) The tension between the serious and the comic in *Will & Grace* is articulated in various ways, making use of text, images or situations to constantly provide us with both laughter and reflection.

The show presents quick, colloquial language – which makes the spectators' feel comfortable – without sacrificing the cleverness of its text. The ironic tone is present throughout the series, "confer[ring] effects of intelligence" to the text with the purpose of triggering "the reflection of the enunciatee about the content of what is being broadcast". (DUARTE, 2004: 127, my translation) Although it belongs to Jost's "fictional world", the text of *Will & Grace* is full of cultural references which relate to the gay world while identifying with contemporary life – and thus, to everyone. Intelligently written, it provides us with a range of jokes and situations which deal with the most important issues of gay/straight life, causing us to question our own views on such matters.

As far as queer theory is concerned, *Will and Grace* has proved to be a great source of study, as it deconstructs social stereotypes on prime-time TV. Nikki Sullivan highlights the importance of "queering popular culture" (SULLIVAN, 2003:

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69tdweNaHEY>

Opening credits of Season Four. Accessed on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.intercom.org.br/papers/nacionais/2007/resumos/R0399-1.pdf>  
Accessed on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

189), as a way to challenge heteronormative constructions instilled on us through cultural texts, such as books, magazines and TV shows. She defends the idea that queering popular culture represents “a process, a movement between viewer, text, and world, that reinscribes (or queers) each and the relations between them”. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 192) A queer TV show, then, should be able not only to expose and problematize issues, but also to establish a relationship with the spectators and the world, leading the viewers to question heteropatriarchal norms. Our sitcom does it brilliantly.

Firstly, Will and Grace’s relationship is queer in itself, as it “confounds the categories that license sexual normativity”. (JAGOSE, 1996: 06) In the show’s opening, Will and Grace’s images usually depict them hugging, kissing or dancing, appealing to the viewers’ heterosexually-constructed image of “couple”. This contributes to the intriguing feeling we have when we watch the series: could they be a couple? Such kind of questioning deconstructs established notions of homo/heterosexuality, as well as stereotypical images of gay or straight behavior, leading the viewers to reason about such concepts, opening their minds to new possibilities.

Our protagonist couple lives together, sharing their everyday life just like a heterosexual couple. In many scenes, their gestures and language depict such “regular” relationship, an image which is almost immediately broken by a gay reference – a comment about Will’s new boyfriend, of Grace’s ineligibility to be his lover, or even a sharp joke by Jack or Karen on Will’s sexuality. Such mixture of heterosexual references with gay elements ironically disrupts socially constructed concepts of gender, sexuality, family or couple. A great example can be found in “The Third Wheel Gets the Grace”, in which the traditional image of the couple bed is dismantled by both textual and visual elements. We can also notice from this passage that heterosexuality and homosexuality are both depicted in the same tone, being constructed and deconstructed before the spectators’ eyes with ironical majesty.

WILL: I'm back.

GRACE: Hi... God, I missed you. Ok, get in. [WILL CRAWLS INTO BED WITH GRACE] So how was the trip? How was the guy?

WILL: What can I say? It was hot, it was intense, it was nice, it was comfortable, it was boring, it was irritating, it was over. I couldn't stand him.

GRACE: I'm sorry to hear that. I was hoping you would fall in love. [...]

WILL: [CHUCKLES] How 'bout you? How's Nathan?

GRACE: [MOANING] Mmm... In a word... Bootylicious. Oh, it's so good, and the sex--

WILL: He likes it, doesn't he?  
 GRACE: He does.  
 WILL: Even though you're a girl.  
 GRACE: I know. Crazy, isn't it? And he does this thing--  
 [NATHAN POPS OUT FROM UNDER THE COVERS, STILL HALF ASLEEP.]  
 NATHAN: Guys, bootylicious is in the room.  
 [WILL GETS OUT OF THE BED.]

*Will & Grace*, Season 4, Ep. 4.01, "The Third Wheel Gets the Grace"<sup>31</sup>

If we carefully analyze the scene, we can identify some techniques that add to the queer message which is being passed. The camera angle, for instance, is essential for the effect the scene has on the viewers, as it – together with the low lighting and scene props such as pillows and blankets at a strategic position – helps concealing Nathan's presence in Grace's bed. As Will kisses Grace's lips and crawls under her covers, the camera closes on them, calling the spectators' attention to the duo, as they lie in bed, with Grace on Will's arms, mirroring a classic image of married couple in bed. The image strongly clashes with their dialogue, telling each other about their love/sexual adventures. Suddenly, the camera angle widens to reveal Nathan, reminding the "couple" – as well as the audience – that he exists.<sup>32</sup>

As we can see, *Will & Grace* makes use of several techniques to supply the spectators with a satisfactory dose of reflection upon serious matters, without downgrading humor. After all, as Duarte states, "tv is entertainment", (DUARTE, 2004: 50, my translation) and the sitcom provides us with a great deal of it, thus guaranteeing its success. Although the show presents several elements from which one could perform a queer analysis, mine will focus on Grace's point-of-view, attempting to discuss her conflicts and motives, as well as her contradictory feelings towards Will, Leo and the formation of a family.

## 4.2. Grace

Grace Elizabeth Adler is an interior decorator who lives in New York City with her gay best friend Will Truman. A neurotic, outgoing, selfish, clumsy, sometimes childish and funny woman, Grace is constantly in search of personal fulfillment, especially when love relationships are concerned. Although she is really responsible

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season4/willandgrace-401.htm>  
 Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> See annex for pictures 1, 2 and 3.

and successful in her professional life, her personal life always seems dismantled, as we can notice through her frequent complaints:

GRACE: [...] My life is so unfunny, [...] it's not even...funny. [...] I mean, m-my life is already a mess. I'm still renting an apartment, I don't have a driver's license, I'm not married, I live with a gay guy...

*Will & Grace*, Season 1, Ep. 1.08, "The Buying Game"<sup>33</sup>

Based on such outburst, we may deduce that Grace's aspirations match the so-called "female" dreams for life: a house, a husband, a comfortable life. One might even label her as an ordinary woman, trapped in old heteronormative patterns of femininity, proud of her "normal" heterosexuality, "a natural, pure, and unproblematic state which requires no explanation". (JAGOSE, 1996: 17) However, many of her attitudes may lead us to consider her queer.

Grace's appearance may cause impact on some viewers; her tall, sleek figure contrasts with long, red curls that often look disorganized. She could be identified with most contemporary women, with hair, breast size and wardrobe issues. Watching the show, we see that Grace is usually insecure about her appearance – especially about "her little-boy breasts"<sup>34</sup>, which are constantly the core of jokes by the other characters. Not always elegant or matching, Grace's outfit and hair usually draw mocking comments from Karen, such as the remarkable: "Your hair's already such a disaster that the Red Cross wouldn't give it coffee!"<sup>35</sup> Comparing her to Clare in *A Home at the End of the World*, we cannot say that Grace's appearance reflects an attempt to shock society. While Clare aims to break free from the "direct grip that culture has on our bodies, through the practices and bodily habits of everyday life", (BORDO, 1995: p. 16) Grace's looks could be seen as a natural result of her disorganized nature, evident not only in her clumsy manners and everyday accidents, but also in her childish tantrums and relationship difficulties.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, Grace is similar to Clare in her deep concern about her aging, experiencing a congruous feeling of urgency regarding the accomplishments of her life. In an outburst which

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season1/willandgrace-108.htm>  
Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season4/willandgrace-423.htm>  
*Will & Grace*, Season 4, Ep. 4.23, "Fagel Attraction". Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season3/willandgrace-318.htm>

*Will & Grace*, Season 3, Ep. 3.18, "Mad Dogs and Average Men". Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> See annex for pictures 4 and 5.



ironically combines Grace's serious fears with a comic description of a young girl, she screams:

GRACE: I haven't had sex in five months! And I was in Bloomingdale's this morning waiting on line to buy wrinkle cream, and this Jennifer-Love-Michelle-Sarah-Felicity-looking thing... bumps into me and says, "Excuse me... Ma'am." (SOBBING.)

*Will & Grace*, Season 1, Ep. 1.08, "The Buying Game"<sup>37</sup>

Another interesting aspect in Grace's life is her relationship with her parents. Her mother, an exaggeratedly dramatic actress called Bobbi Adler<sup>38</sup>, constantly annoys her with her over-criticism and extravagant manners. In the episode "The Unsinkable Mommy Adler", we have a hilarious first contact with Bobbi, while learning about Grace's aversion to her visits. After listening to a funny/criticizing/ridiculous message on her answering machine – an excellent resource which creates a sense of anticipation about a not yet known character, keeping the viewers interested in seeing her image – Grace confesses to Will her discomfort regarding her mother:

GRACE: God. Oh, god! I'm going down! She's--she's gonna nail me. I bet you within the first 5 seconds she's gonna be all over my--  
 WILL: Hair?  
 GRACE: No.  
 WILL: Nails?  
 GRACE: No.  
 WILL: Clothes?  
 GRACE: Ok, this is a little too much fun for you.  
 WILL: Love life?  
 GRACE: No! Stop it! She's gonna say that I'm ruining my life, that I'm never gonna meet anyone because I'm living with a gay guy.

*Will & Grace*, Season 1, Ep. 1.13, "The Unsinkable Mommy Adler"<sup>39</sup>

Apart from her mother's sharp comments such as "Change the shoes" or "I think I liked you better with your hair straighter", what Grace is really unable to face is the fact that much of her dramatic, vain, selfish personality has been inherited from her mother. Grace realizes that Bobbi's over-the-top remarks, show-like attitude and impersonations are nothing more than a frustrated attempt to break free from the

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season1/willandgrace-108.htm>  
 Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Grace's queer mother is played by renowned actress Debbie Reynolds, who is considered a gay icon in America. The title of her first episode in the series, "The Unsinkable Mommy Adler" (Season 1, Ep. 1.13), is an honorable reference to the movie "The Unsinkable Molly Brown" (1964), for which Reynolds was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season1/willandgrace-113.htm>  
 Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

subordinate role prescribed to her by heteropatriarchal society. Bobbi admits to Grace:

BOBBI: [...] I joke about your father, but I love him. You can ask him anytime, day or night, who is the love of his life, and he'll say, "I married her. And move over. You're blocking the TV."

*Will & Grace*, Season 1, Ep. 1.13, "The Unsinkable Mommy Adler"<sup>40</sup>

From this point of view, one could compare Grace's repulse towards her mother to Clare's, as both reflect strong efforts to resist the normative behavior which has been imposed on the women in their families. If we take into consideration the definition of queer as an attitude of defying the norm, we can regard Grace's behavior as queer, as "its immunity to domestication guarantees its capacity to maintain a critical relation to standards of normativity". (JAGOSE, 1996: 106) Struggling to unchain herself from her father's indifferent authoritarianism, Grace leads a queer life with Will, while she tries to overcome her frustration towards the fact that the "only thing [her] dad ever gave [her] was feet the size of canoes".<sup>41</sup>

It is also relevant to emphasize Grace's constant attempts to establish long-lasting relationships, which brings her a great deal of frustration, as she ends up failing and coming back to her queer relationship with Will. This contributes to Grace's low self-esteem, worsened by a past of ex-boyfriends who have become gay or bisexual. Hopeless, Grace feels that "[she] can't even get a gay guy to hypothetically marry [her]"<sup>42</sup>, and her reputation for turning men gay makes her even more insecure, as she fears the same may happen to her current boyfriend. However, we can clearly see that what jeopardizes her affairs is her queer behavior, evident in her unique relationship with Will.

### 4.3. Grace and Will

Will and Grace have a singular relationship. Best friends for several years, they have a long history together, sharing not only a flat, but virtually all aspects of

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season1/willandgrace-113.htm>  
Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season2/willandgrace-213.htm>

*Will & Grace*, Season 2, Ep. 2.13, "Oh, Dad, Poor Dad. He's Kept Me in the Closet and I'm So Sad". Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season1/willandgrace-113.htm>

*Will & Grace*, Season 1, Ep. 1.13, "The Unsinkable Mommy Adler". Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

their lives. Although Will's homosexuality excludes the possibility of sex, preventing them from being a heterosexual couple, in their daily routine they act exactly like one, queering the viewers' perception of "couple" while drawing unforgettable comments from Karen and Jack:

KAREN: I don't like the way she's so chummy with your husband.  
 GRACE: Please don't refer to him as my husband.  
 KAREN: All right, fine. I don't like how chummy she is with your non-romantic life partner.  
 GRACE: Also bad, so please stop, ok? [...]  
 KAREN: Your sexless lover!

*Will & Grace*, Season 1, Ep. 1.18, "Grace, Replaced"<sup>43</sup>

When Nathan (Grace's boyfriend in Seasons 3-4) asks Jack about Grace's whereabouts, Jack shoots:

JACK: Oh, breakfast with her boyfriend Will. Right now, they're probably doing that real cutesy thing where they nibble on a piece of bacon until they meet in the middle. [MOCKING WILL AND GRACE] "I missed you. I love you. I missed you, too." [IMITATING KISSING SOUNDS]

*Will & Grace*, Season 4, Ep. 4.01, "The Third Wheel Gets the Grace"<sup>44</sup>

The queerness of their relationship is explicit, as it does not fit established labels such as "homosexual", "heterosexual" or "bisexual", like the queer couple in *A Home at the End of the World*. Therefore, Grace may well be regarded queer, as Jagose observes, "queer may be used to describe an open-ended constituency, whose shared characteristic is not identity itself but an anti-normative positioning". (JAGOSE, 1996: 98)

The protagonists' intimacy usually draws comments from their friends and family, provoking jealousy in their eventual affairs, who usually feel excluded from their conversations and internal jokes. It seems like they have established their own language, mixing verbal communication with a profound knowledge of each other, which enables them to finish each other's sentences. One of such almost telepathic dialogues can be found in "The Third Wheel Gets the Grace".

WILL: Well... It's good, but it's not as good the--  
 GRACE: That place off the Rue de la--  
 WILL: Yeah, I know. Something about the way they--  
 GRACE: Yeah, and is the guy still there?

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season1/willandgrace-118.htm>  
 Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season4/willandgrace-401.htm>  
 Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

WILL: Oh, the guy that-- [IMITATING] Spoke like this? Ha ha!  
 GRACE: Ha ha ha ha! That was good.

*Will & Grace*, Season 4, Ep. 4.01, "The Third Wheel Gets the Grace"<sup>45</sup>

The speed with which Will and Grace perform this dialogue adds to the effect, as it causes on the viewers the puzzling and uncomfortable feeling of being completely out of the conversation. Right after the dialogue finishes, we are presented with a close-up on Jack and Nathan, expressing on their faces what we have just experienced: we are all cast out of the duo's exclusive world.

The couple's affinity is often contrasted to the intimacy of other couples in the series, generally straight couples who are unable to achieve Will and Grace's level of closeness, feeling awkward for envying a queer duo. Such strategy subverts the normatized concept of heterosexuality as "correct", "natural" or "unquestionable". By portraying a queer couple who interacts more efficiently than the straight ones, the producers of *Will & Grace* make the spectators realize that "heterosexuality is no more normal or natural than any other form of sexual relations". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 119)

Grace's relationship with Will is marked by an important issue: they have been a couple before. Although Grace may seem naturally comfortable with Will's sexuality at present, it is clear that such issue influences her attitudes towards him throughout the show. Several episodes portray Grace's resented and mixed feelings regarding Will and her, leading us to believe that, underneath her queer attitudes, she unconsciously wishes that he were straight. In "The Unsinkable Mommy Adler", she feels rejected when her mother suggests that they get married, to which Will replies that "even if [he] was straight, [he] wouldn't marry Grace". While everyone laughs at the absurd idea, the camera closes on Grace's face, revealing her disappointment and anger. Such technique is really interesting, as it makes us share Grace's feelings. The contrast between the image of Grace's facial expression and the sound of the other characters' laughter suggests to us that nobody seems to be aware of her emotions, giving us the sensation of being her confidants.<sup>46</sup> Later, she confesses: "[...] If I were gay, I would marry him."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season4/willandgrace-401.htm>

Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> See annex for picture 6.

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season1/willandgrace-113.htm>

*Will & Grace*, Season 1, Ep. 1.13, "The Unsinkable Mommy Adler". Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

In "Lows in the Mid-Eighties", a double-length episode which deals with Will's coming out, such issue is wittingly explored. The episode makes use of the flashback to draw a parallel between Will and Grace's story and the relationship crisis of an ordinary young woman they meet at a bar. Acknowledged by Balogh as "the most common way of manifestation of the anachronical sequence in audiovisual discourse", (BALOGH, 2002: 77) the interruption of the present time sequence by flashbacks accounts for both the ludicity axis– through the hilarious '80s appearance of the characters – and its seriousness axis of the episode – as it suggests that such problems may happen to anyone at any time.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, "Lows in the Mid-Eighties" gives us a clear picture of how hard it was for both of them to accept Will's homosexuality. As Sedgwick points out, "when gay people in a homophobic society come out, [...] perhaps especially to parents or spouses, it is with the consciousness of a potential for serious injury that is likely to go in both directions". (SEDGWICK, 1990: 80) At first, Will refuses to assume his sexuality even for himself. When Grace tries to push him to have sex with her, he proposes marriage, in a desperate attempt to avoid the act. "I panicked", he admits. "It was either that or have sex with her."

Fear of society, family and most of all, Grace's reaction has led him to find refuge in "the very equivocal privacy afforded by the closet". (SEDGWICK, 1990: 71) He is not completely wrong. When he finally comes out, Grace has extreme difficulty in facing his homosexuality, feeling diminished as a woman:

WILL: [...] Don't you see what a compliment that is? [...] I love you, so if I can't make it work with you, then it'll never work with any woman, because you're perfect for me.

GRACE: That is not a compliment. A compliment is "You're sexy, you turn me on," not "One look at you proves I'm a queer."

*Will & Grace*, Season 3, Ep. 3.08-09, "Lows in the Mid-Eighties"<sup>49</sup>

In *A Home at the End of the World*, such moment is not explored, as when Clare met Jonathan, he was already out of the closet. Such fact makes a big difference in terms of the two women's expectations. Clare is not disappointed about her friend's sexuality, while Grace's disillusionment with Will remains latent in her, breaking out in several moments of the sitcom. In an effort not to feel so diminished,

<sup>48</sup> See annex for pictures 7 and 8.

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season3/willandgrace-308.htm>  
Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

Grace has taken Will's "compliment" to create in her mind a sense of importance for being the woman who helped Will come out, the one who changed his life, the *only* one. Still in "Lows in the Mid-Eighties", when she finds out that Will has had sex with a woman in order to be sure of his homosexuality, she jealously asks: "Why didn't you make it awful with me?"

It is also essential to discuss a very important element in Will and Grace's life: their inability to maintain serious love relationships as a consequence of their unshared connection and dependency on each other. Firstly, neither Will nor Grace is willing to give up their secure emotional bond to venture into a new relationship. Mirroring Clare and Jonathan, they dread the moment when they will need to separate, having great difficulty to accept when the other's affair starts becoming serious. At the moment Will decides to donate his sperm to an old friend, Grace explodes, claiming that the sperm is *hers*; when she decides to marry and asks Will to walk her to the altar, he resentfully answers:

WILL: Look, Grace, I'll do a lot of things for you. I'll plan your wedding. I'll pick the florist. I'll even let you have input on your dress. But to actually be the one that hands you off to another guy, that, I can't do.

*Will & Grace*, Season 5, Ep. 5.08-09, "Marry Me a Little, Marry Me a Little More"<sup>50</sup>

From such situations, we can clearly see that, like Jonathan and Clare, both Will and Grace fear the moment when one of them may fall into "the other, more terrifying kind of love". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 109)

Moreover, their closeness causes a negative impact on their affairs. Not only because they feel ostracized from Will and Grace's exclusive language and synchrony, but also due to the fact that they have established a co-dependant set of habits which are so particular that it is extremely hard for someone else to take part. Thus, Will's and Grace's boyfriends end up feeling frustrated:

NATHAN: Well, I'm sick of feeling like the third wheel. I-I'm tired of this arrangement.  
 GRACE: What--what arrangement?  
 NATHAN: You two. Your whole little thing with the "why" and the "huh" and the "no" but the "yeah" but the "I." It's enough already. [...] I know Will's your friend, but I'm your boyfriend... And I want a special restaurant with you.[...] I want a secret language with you.

*Will & Grace*, Season 4, Ep. 4.01, "The Third Wheel Gets the Grace"<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season5/willandgrace-508.htm>  
 Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season4/willandgrace-401.htm>  
 Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

Nathan's complaint echoes the feelings of the majority of Grace's and Will's affairs, except for one, who manages to understand Grace's queer connection to Will, changing her life: Dr. Leo Markus.

#### 4.4. Grace and Leo

Comparing *A Home at the End of the World* to *Will & Grace*, one realizes that there is a fundamental difference between the main female characters: while Clare has lost her faith in herself, already envisioning a gloomy, lonely future in which her dreams pile up in "the list of things [she] was too old to do" (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 161), Grace still dreams. When she makes plans with Will about having a baby, she starts questioning her desires for life. Confused, Grace admits to Will that she sees his sperm as "safety sperm", to have a baby in case she fails to find "the one". Later on, she changes her mind and decides to move on with the plan. Trying to sound open-minded and adult, she assures Will that she does not keep any illusions of finding Prince Charming:

GRACE: [...] I know that I was a little freaked out before about waiting for Mr. Right, but it's a fantasy. I mean, what am I waiting for, some guy to ride up on a white horse?

*Will & Grace*, Season 4, Ep. 4.26-27, "A.I.: Artificial Insemination"<sup>52</sup>

In spite of such utterance, her attitudes indicate that she still secretly hopes her dream might come true, as it becomes evident in the events that follow.

In "A.I.: Artificial Insemination", Grace and Will get stuck in New York's traffic while trying to reach the doctor's office to have Grace artificially inseminated with Will's sperm. Worried about not arriving on time, Grace decides to jump off the taxi and take a shortcut, running across Central Park with the sperm in a paper bag, when she clumsily collides with a lamppost and faints. Grace slowly wakes up to the sight of a handsome man on a white horse, stretching his arm to help her stand up. According to [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com), the white horse possesses a variety of mythological meanings, commonly related "with warrior-heroes, with fertility [...] or

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<sup>52</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season4/willandgrace-426.htm>  
Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

with an end-of-time savior”.<sup>53</sup> Its best-known symbolism, however, concerns a popular fairy tale character, Prince Charming – a good-looking man who comes in rescue of princesses in distress. “Prince Charming” is also a term to describe the idealized man some women dream to find, a perfect match. In *Will & Grace*, the first appearance of the man on the white horse is a blurred close-up take which not only recreates on us the sensation of Grace’s dizziness after bumping her head, but also creates an ethereal image, suggesting that Grace’s dream may not be so far from reality. This is a crucial moment in the whole series, as it may completely change the course of the plot. Therefore, this moment is brilliantly used as an extremely relevant “hook of suspense” (MACHADO, 2005: 88) between seasons 4 and 5. The image triggers our curiosity regarding the man’s identity, only revealed in the following season.<sup>54</sup>

The man is Dr. Leo Markus, a charming doctor who unexpectedly touches Grace’s heart. While introducing herself to Leo, she is amazed to recognize in his speech all the qualities she has ever dreamed her “prince” would have:

LEO: I'm Leo Markus [...].  
 GRACE: Grace Adler.  
 LEO: Maybe I can take you out sometime, you know. [...]  
 GRACE: No. Uh, look, Mr. Markus--  
 LEO: Dr. Markus.  
 GRACE: Uh, Dr. Mark-- Doctor?  
 LEO: Yeah, I know. It's pretty boring. I'm just your nice, average, Jewish doctor.  
 GRACE: Look, I really, really have to-- Jewish? I-I gotta go... before I find out you come from money.

*Will & Grace*, Season 5, Ep. 5.01, “...And the Horse He Rode In On”<sup>55</sup>

Good looking, affectionate, successful as a doctor as well as “a wonderful kisser”, Leo perfectly qualifies as Mr. Right. More importantly, Leo represents to Grace the opportunity to find someone who is able to fulfill her, someone who can make her feel desired as a woman. As Luce Irigaray observes in “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine”, modern women have acquired a sense of desiring more from life than just performing the social role ascribed to them. “The woman”, she argues “[...] has long been nothing but a mother. Today, not only her entrance into the circuits of production, but also [...] the widespread availability of

<sup>53</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White\\_horse\\_\(mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_horse_(mythology))

Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>54</sup> See annex for picture 9.

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season5/willandgrace-501.htm>

Accessed on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2009.



contraception and abortion are returning her to that impossible role: being a woman. (IRIGARAY, 1985: 83) More than being a mother, Grace actually wishes personal satisfaction – which includes not only sexual fulfillment, but also love, companionship and the possibility of a steady relationship, possibly leading to marriage and children.

Grace decides to follow her dreams, getting married to Leo. After overcoming delicate issues regarding Will, she finally manages to have his blessing. She exchanges vows with Leo in the Jewish wedding of her dreams. Nevertheless, their marriage does not seem to work out properly, as Leo's constant trips for medical missions abroad bring doubt to Grace, making her continue to depend on Will for moral support. She cannot disconnect from Will; her queer love comes up when she meets the only woman he has ever had sex with – coincidentally Leo's ex-girlfriend. Grace's body language and voice are essential to the full understanding of her feelings. Her nervousness can be seen in her shaking hands which move faster and more clumsily than usual, in her stumbling but fast movements to walk, sit down or stand up, matching her exaggeratedly shocked tone of voice when she bursts: "OH – MY – GOD!!!"<sup>56</sup> Unable to hide her feelings, Grace explodes in jealousy of Will, seriously damaging her marriage with Leo:

GRACE: So what was it, Will? Why her and not me?  
 LEO: Excuse me! I had an actual relationship with this woman.[...] So how about a little jealousy for me?  
 GRACE: You know what, you're right. I'm sorry. I've been such an idiot. [...] it-it does kill me that you were with such an amazing woman for so long.  
 LEO: Thank you. That's all I needed.  
 GRACE: You're welcome. [TO WILL] So what was it, Will? Why her, not me?

*Will & Grace*, Season 6, Ep. 6.02, "Last Ex to Brooklyn"<sup>57</sup>

Finally, Leo betrays Grace during one of his missionary trips, bringing Grace into deep disillusionment. Although she truly loves Leo, she decides to divorce him and move back to Will's apartment. More significantly, she returns to her queer life.

#### 4.5. A Queer Family

Since the second season of *Will and Grace*, the couple shows the desire to have a baby. Like Clare and Jonathan in *A Home at the End of the World*, Grace and

<sup>56</sup> See annex for picture 10.

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season6/willandgrace-602.htm>  
 Accessed on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

Will frequently discuss the matter, expressing great excitement about the experience. In both stories there are passages in which the couples make plans for the education and nurturing of their kid, defending their points of view about parenting, arguing over baby names. Clearly defying the patriarchal model of family in which “the name of the father [...] determines ownership for the family, including the wife and children”, (IRIGARAY, 1985: 83) both Clare and Grace challenge heteronormative rules when they decide to form a queer family with their gay partners.

Will and Grace’s deep intimacy makes them seem to be a harmonious married couple that, in spite of sexuality difficulties, would be perfect to raise a child together. To some extent, this is true. They both have financial stability and affection to raise a child just like a heterosexual couple. Furthermore, the fact that Will is gay would only add to the bringing up of a queer human being, not chained to “the heteronormative model of identity in which gender follows from sex, and desire follows from gender”. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 86) In spite of that, they are well aware of the hardships they may find during the process.

The first problem to be faced is people’s reaction to their queer family. When she tells Karen about her intention to have a baby with Will, Grace tries to protect herself against any kind of mockery or prejudice:

GRACE: Ok, now, before you start judging and saying things like, "he's gay," and, "that's weird," and, "you're so flat that Will's gonna have to breastfeed..." you should know that we are very serious about this.

*Will & Grace*, Season 4, Ep. 4.26-27, “A.I.: Artificial Insemination”<sup>58</sup>

In spite of her insecurity about their friends’ and families’ acceptance to their plan, Grace defends her queer position of creating a family with Will – based on love and friendship instead of heterosexuality.

Another hardship to be transposed is, doubtlessly, conception itself, as sex has not been considered a possibility for them since Will’s coming out. After their initial attempt to have artificial insemination fails, they still try to ignore the possibility of sexual intercourse, thinking about other ways to conceive. While Grace is eating a ring doughnut, Will picks up a banana, and they wonder:

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season4/willandgrace-426.htm>  
Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

GRACE: If there was only a way to make this all simpler. You know? Just cut out the middle man.

WILL: Yeah, I know. Feels like there's this obvious solution that's just staring us in the face.

*Will & Grace*, Season 4, Ep. 4.26-27, "A.I.: Artificial Insemination"<sup>59</sup>

In this scene we can find one more example of how TV may utilize the contrast between image and text to create meaning. While the dialogue shows the characters' refusal to admit the possibility of sex, the image denounces them, sending a contradictory message to the public. The image of Grace's "doughnut" and Will's "banana" works with humor while touching their delicate sexual issue. Furthermore, it works as a hook of suspense to the second part of the double-length episode ("A.I.: Artificial Insemination"), as it intrigues the viewers' minds about the possibility of Will and Grace finally having sexual intercourse.<sup>60</sup>

Will and Grace's attempts to have sex prove to be a really hard project to tackle. Although queerness "denaturalize[s] heteronormative understandings of [...] sexuality" (SULLIVAN, 2003: 81) – making a sexual relationship between a gay man and a straight woman perfectly possible – in practice it might not be so easy. First of all, they realize that their intimacy as friends does not mean that they are comfortable enough to have a sexual relationship. Their frustrated efforts to touch each other, as well as the embarrassment in their voices and facial expressions show us how difficult the experience is for both of them.

It is interesting to observe the use of the serial language to build up tension, in order to catch the public's attention. The scene in which Grace and Will are supposed to have sex is fragmented into three main parts, intercalated with commercial breaks, as well as Jack's and Karen's subplots. The breaks, as Machado explains, occur in "moments of risk or plot decision, or the tensest moments" (MACHADO, 2005: 88) of the story. Thus, the scene's plot is suspended when Will and Grace are finally left alone in a hotel room; after a commercial break, we witness their embarrassment and frustration, until Grace enters the bathroom, promising to come back naked and put Will's "baby maker to work". In the following part, we finally realize – together with the characters – that they will not be able to fulfill the deed:

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season4/willandgrace-426.htm>  
Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>60</sup> See annex for picture 11.

GRACE: Will, you're my best friend. I love you. I love what we have together and...I don't want it to change. Sex changes things. [...]So, I don't think I can do it this way. Are you mad at me?

WILL: Yeah... maybe a little.

[WILL PULLS BACK THE COVERS. HE IS FULLY DRESSED.]

GRACE: What were you gonna do if I came out of there naked?

WILL: I had it down to two options: vamp or run.

*Will & Grace*, Season 4, Ep. 4.26-27, "A.I.: Artificial Insemination"<sup>61</sup>

In *A Home at the End of the World*, on the contrary, Clare and Jonathan never get to make any serious attempt to conceive. After all, Clare is presented with the option of getting pregnant by Bobby, which exempts her from the ordeal that Grace has to go through: trying to have sex with a gay man. After Will and Grace give up such idea, they decide to try artificial insemination once more. However, everything changes when Grace meets Leo.

When Will finds out about Grace's secret affair, he feels deeply betrayed. He pressures her to make a decision about the queer family right away:

WILL: [...] Do you wanna have this baby with me, or not?

GRACE: You said I could have more time.

WILL: That was before I found out you were sneakin' around behind my back. If you wanna back outta this, back out now. [...]

GRACE: So what you're saying is, if I don't do it tomorrow, you don't want to do it at all?

WILL: That's right, Grace. It's now or never.

GRACE: Well, if that's the case, I guess I have to go with never.

WILL: Oh, I can't believe this! This is only the most important thing we've ever done together, and you flake out on me? [...]

*Will & Grace*, Season 5, Ep. 5.03, "The Kid Stays Out of the Picture"<sup>62</sup>

The above passage is the first big argument between Will and Grace since the beginning of the show, being a turning point in the story. From this moment on, they both start questioning the true implications of their queer relationship.

When Karen and Jack plot to make them meet and reconcile, Grace and Will discuss their feelings and expectations towards each other, admitting the hardships of their queer love. The setting accounts for the "ludicity axis" (DUARTE, 2004: 127, my translation) of the scene, as they are zipped inside a kids' moonwalker at a child's birthday party, stumbling over each other, unable to keep their balance or stop

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season4/willandgrace-426.htm>  
Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season5/willandgrace-503.htm>  
Accessed on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

bouncing. It provides the audience with entertainment, while the characters are having one of the most difficult and serious conversations they have ever had.<sup>63</sup>

Will admits to Grace that it is not easy for him to support her in her romance with Leo, as he feels that no other woman would ever join him in such venture. To Will's eyes, Grace is absolutely queer, a woman who would dare to raise a queer family, completely different from the institution of "the family" as the cornerstone of heteronormativity". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 43) Nevertheless, he realizes that he will never be able to be the man she needs. When he complains that Grace has picked Leo over him, she shoots:

GRACE: I couldn't pick him over you because you are not an option for me. You know, I actually considered walking away from Leo for you. But then I started thinking about what our life would be like. Just you and me and our baby. [SIGHS] And that question hanging over my head.

WILL: What question?

GRACE: Was Leo the right guy for me? I don't know. [...]

*Will & Grace*, Season 5, Ep. 5.04, "Humongous Growth"<sup>64</sup>

From Grace's statement, one may infer that she actually wishes that Will were straight, so that she could choose him over Leo to live a "regular" heterosexual life, get married, have kids. As Sullivan observes, "heterosexuality as an institution is so embedded in our culture, that it has become almost invisible". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 121) Hidden inside our minds, it sometimes rules our desires, making things like marriage and social status seem indispensable for fulfilled, happy human beings. That may be the reason why Grace chooses Leo.

After her failed marriage with Leo, Grace moves back in with Will, reestablishing their previous relationship. Some time later, she accidentally meets Leo on an airplane, they have sex and she gets pregnant. When she finds out that Leo has another woman and plans to get married, she decides not to tell him about the pregnancy and raise the baby on her own. Marvelled at the new chance of being a father, Will decides to bring Grace's baby up. Kneeling in front of her, he opens his heart:

WILL: Listen to me. I already love this baby more than I could have imagined. And if you want me to, I'll be there for the whole thing. From diapers to college... which, quite frankly, I already assumed I'll be paying for.

<sup>63</sup> See annex for picture 12.

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season5/willandgrace-504.htm>  
Accessed on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

GRACE: You really mean it?  
 WILL: It would be an honor.  
 GRACE: So we're... we're gonna do this together?  
 WILL: We already are.  
 [WILL HUGS GRACE.]

*Will & Grace*, Season 8, Ep. 8.21, "Partners 'n Crime"<sup>65</sup>

Will and Grace start attending birth classes together, and the queer family finally seems to be a reality. However, Will is not alone anymore; his boyfriend Vince demands from him a steady relationship. Vince pressures Will to leave Grace and move to a new apartment with him, to which Will agrees, as long as he can take Grace and the baby with them. Will seems ready to establish a queer family – similar to Clare, Jonathan and Bobby's – in which Grace would be his child's mother, and Vince would be his partner. Vince disagrees:

VINCE: Will. I'm an old-fashioned homosexual. Okay? To me, family is two guys, some mid-century furniture, and a baby that doesn't look like either one of us.

*Will & Grace*, Season 8, Ep. 8.22, "Whatever Happened to Baby Gin?"<sup>66</sup>

It is explicit that Vince wishes for the heterocentrist model of family. This makes clear that "the 'straight mind' is everywhere", (SULLIVAN, 2003: 121) even in a homosexual's mind. On the other hand, Will has a queer view: "We can have all that. We can have both." He does not seem to realize the difficulties of establishing and maintaining a queer family in a heterocentrist society. Warner reminds us that "Western political thought has taken the heterosexual couple to represent the principle of social union itself". (WARNER, 1993: xxi) Heterosexuality has been institutionalized as the basis of society, making it really difficult to avoid complying with at least some of its implicit rules.

Faithful to his commitment to Grace, Will decides to give his love up in favor of their dream of having a baby. Nonetheless, destiny seems to play a new trick on him, as Grace discovers that Leo has broken up his engagement. Excited about what could be her last chance of having "a relationship with the real father of [her] child", she implicitly admits that she aspires for a settled, non-queer life which would never

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season8/willandgrace-821.htm>  
 Accessed on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/willandgrace/season8/willandgrace-822.htm>  
 Accessed on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

be possible with Will. She ends up following her heart, moving to Rome with Leo to raise their daughter together.

It becomes evident that Grace's queer family with Will could never work out, as she actually desires what most heterosexual women do: a stable relationship, based on monogamy, heterosexuality and family. In this sense, we may affirm that Grace, like Clare, is unable to maintain her queer behavior, surrendering to her "straight" aspirations. That leads us, once more, to question her queerness.

#### **4.6. How Queer is Grace?**

Grace is definitely a very interesting woman. Beautiful, clumsy, emotional, neurotic, successful at work and fragile in love, she incorporates a whole set of inconsistencies which turn her into an intriguing character, really rich to be studied. Once more, I come across the "decidedly un-queer" (SULLIVAN, 2003: 43) task of trying to define whether or not she is queer, which leads me to recapitulate some of the main points of queer theory, while comparing and contrasting Grace to the queer female character from *A Home at the End of the World*, Clare.

First of all, it is wise to remember the previously studied difficulty in finding a specific definition for the term. As Jagose clarifies, "there is no generally acceptable definition of queer; indeed, many of the common understandings of the term contradict each other irresolvably". (JAGOSE, 1996: 99) Based on such statement, not only it is impossible to establish a single definition of queer, but also unfair to classify someone "queer" or "not queer". Therefore, I have dealt with Grace's queerness similarly to Clare's, analyzing the moments in the sitcom in which she shows a queer behavior, rather than trying to attach her to any specific label.

The first similarity between Grace and Clare concerns both women's attitude of challenging heteronormative society, engaging in queer relationships with gay men – clearly defying the norm. Such behavior echoes the definition of queer as "a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal". (JAGOSE, 1996: 99) I reiterate my favorable opinion towards such definition, as it opens the term's scope to include all those who refuse to fit into heteronormative models of behavior. Grace may definitely be included in such group, as she truly makes an effort to break free from such labels.

I believe it is essential to discuss Grace's heterosexuality, as it constitutes a seminal issue to be analyzed. To begin with, her sexual orientation should not exclude her from being regarded queer, as Michael Warner clarifies that queer "defin[es] itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual". (WARNER, 1993: xxvi) Warner's argument explicitly opens the possibility for straight individuals to assume a queer position, regardless of their sexual practices. Besides, Grace's sexuality is at least contradictory, as her string of gay or bisexual boyfriends suggests a queer sort of heterosexuality – in which the subject has some kind of pleasure in homosexuality. Grace's relationship pattern could serve to exemplify what Sullivan calls "the heterogeneity of heterosexuality", (SULLIVAN, 2003: 127) acknowledging all the complexities and gaps of what has "attained the status of the natural, the taken for granted", (SULLIVAN, 2003: 119) thus subverting it.

As far as the formation of a queer family is concerned, Grace experiences a delicate conflict. Just like Clare, Grace is aware of the hardships of defying heterocentric society, her queer behavior clashing with her inner fears and prejudices instilled in her mind by patriarchal upbringing. At a first glance, one may think that Clare is "queerer" than Grace, as she is brave enough to form a queer family, while Grace gives the plan up. However, if we carefully analyze, we are able to observe that Clare "stage[s] [her] own accident" (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 204) without much reasoning, as she could not assume what she was trying to do, not even for herself. When she gets pregnant, reality slaps her, leading her to desperately confess: "I'm not this unusual". (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 255) In "A.I.: Artificial Insemination", we see Grace in a very similar movement, rushing to get inseminated while avoiding to ponder the consequences of her act. Differently from Clare, Grace is granted with an opportunity to reflect upon the subject when she misses the doctor's appointment and meets Leo. Judging from Clare's outburst regarding her pregnancy, as well as her subsequent thoughts and acts, we are led to imagine that, if she had been given another option, maybe she would have backed up, just like Grace.

Personally, I believe we should not blame our female protagonists. According to poststructuralist thought, "changing your life is not simply a matter of changing your mind. This is because we embody the discourses that exist in our culture, our very being is constituted by them, they are a part of us, and thus we cannot simply throw them off". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 41) Following from such statement, it seems



reasonable to claim that being queer does not exempt one from doubts, prejudices or even unconscious homophobia.

As a consequence, it does not seem fair to label Grace “not queer”, as she definitely behaves queerly in several moments throughout the sitcom. In spite of her dilemmas and heterocentric dreams, her relationship with Will surely queers our perception of love and marriage. After all, Grace and Will are able to establish a long-term queer relationship which lasts for the eight seasons of the sitcom, overcoming the sexuality gap with unconditional love and tenderness. Both were faithful to their love, enduring as long as they can. Moreover, the very act of planning to form a queer family with a homosexual man can be seen as a demonstration of Grace’s queerness, as it deconstructs the “religious and legal definitions of ‘family’” (JAGOSE, 1996: 16) which excludes homosexuality as unnatural or infertile.

To conclude, I believe the analysis of Grace’s queer moments in *Will & Grace* has proved to be really fruitful, as it has enriched my studies in queer theory while presenting me to the fascinating field of television. The parallels drawn between Grace and Clare have greatly contributed to such experience, broadening my understanding of straight queerness as a possible way of being. Calvin Thomas ironically defends such position when he argues: “Though lesbians and gays may be justifiably suspicious of me as an ally, those who are our [...] most conspicuous enemies [...] would hardly mistake me for a friend”. (THOMAS, 1997: 96) Like Clare, Grace may have surrendered to the “straight mind”. Nevertheless, she has equaled Clare in deconstructing social stereotypes and proving that a straight woman can be considered queer.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As my research comes to a conclusion, it is interesting to reflect about the process I have gone through, venturing into the fields of queer theory and television. It has been an enlightening adventure, full of obstacles, laughter, dilemmas and discoveries. At first, it seemed unorthodox to have a comic television show as inspiration for a thesis on literature; a daring attitude which led me to a lot of questions. Doubt and insecurity fluttered inside my mind, while I searched for a literary work that could match the topic raised by *Will & Grace*. The finding of *A Home at the End of the World* brought me relief; I realized that my queer research could become a reality.

The first step in my work was the study of queer theory, which I soon found out to be a pretty complex field. The reading of two queer theory books: *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, by Nikki Sullivan, and *Queer Theory: An introduction*, by Annamarie Jagose not only introduced me to the ideas of important queer theorists such as Michael Warner, Ruth Goldman, Eve Sedgwick and Alexander Doty, but also was seminal to my understanding of the multiplicity of meanings and uses of the theory.

Queer theory is an extremely interesting, as well as difficult subject to be studied. The more you research and discuss, the more possibilities you find, opening up your mind to an endless array of possibilities. Of course, I also came across a variety of contestations regarding queer theory, with its inconsistencies and gaps. Some theorists criticize the indeterminacy of the term, as they claim it is not only impossible not to define it, but it would also seem utopian to defend a non-defined idea. The queer rejection of the notion of identity as innate or self-evident is also highly criticized, as some scholars blame it for a possible lack of political efficiency. Furthermore, its use as an all-inclusive umbrella-term is said to be responsible for an erasure of gay/lesbian identity, social class, race and gender, devaluating them.

As we have already seen, such contestations should be partially taken into account; while they may be debunked as radical or reactionary, they trigger our reasoning, thus contributing to the construction of a more clear and open-minded idea of queerness. As Jagose points out, "this fundamental indeterminacy makes queer a difficult object of study; always ambiguous, always relational". (JAGOSE, 1996: 96) In my point of view, this is exactly what makes it fascinating. The openness

of queer theory really forces reflection, as we need to be aware of all the contradictions and intricacies that may lead us to radical assumptions, which can end up drawing us away from queer thought.

Highly influenced by the poststructuralist ideas defended by Michel Foucault, queer theory questions essentialist notions of the individual and life based on totalizing ideas and universal truths. Poststructuralists claim that “what we perceive as truth is constructed as such in and through its conformity with universalizing accounts [...] of subjectivity and sociality that govern particular cultures at particular times”. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 39) It also criticizes established categorizations of concepts such as identity, gender and sexuality, as well as fixed binary oppositions such as homosexual/heterosexual, masculine/feminine, and so on.

The reading of Foucault’s propositions was essential for the development of my research, as it helped clarify some contradictions and gaps inherent to queer theory. By stating that “every theory is provisional, [...] soon revised, reformulated, replaced, based on newly worked material”, (FOUCAULT, 1979: xi, my translation) Foucault infers that not even his theories should be seen as a stable, unchanging science or truth. Neither does he claim to be representing the “correct side” to stand, as that would imply the existence of the “wrong side”, relying on a binary opposition, a notion which poststructuralism has long fought to deconstruct. Similarly, queer theory does not intend to be defined or established as the correct theory to be followed. More importantly, “queer” should not be categorized with fixed definitions or classifications; the term would lose its queerness to become one more category, one more box to be labeled.

Following such ideas, I personally identify with the definition of queer as “resistance to regimes of the normal” (WARNER, 1993: xxvi). As I have previously stated, it seems to be the “queerest” definition of the term, as it is open enough to include not only lesbians, gays and bisexuals, but also “all those whose sexual identifications are not considered normal or sanctioned”. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 98) Such notion is fundamental to my analysis of the female characters in *A Home at the End of the World* and *Will & Grace*, as it acknowledges the possibility of straight queerness, opening our minds to a new perspective of sexuality and queerness.

While discussing the main female characters in both the sitcom and the novel – Grace and Clare – and their queer relationships with gay men, I had the opportunity to study interesting theoretical texts which called my attention to a series of issues

regarding queerness and all its possibilities. My initial intention was to try to establish the characters' queerness, investigating the attitudes and traits which could identify them as queer. However, the development of my studies of queer theory gradually led me to realize how difficult it is to define if an individual is or is not queer. As Sullivan observes, queer "potentiality can be taken up by anyone who feels themselves to have been marginalized as a result of their sexual preferences". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 49) Thus, "one might argue that the majority of the world's population is (at least potentially) queer". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 49) Such difficulty was a turning point in my research, as it caused me to rethink the basis of my analysis of Grace and Clare.

First of all, I came to see queerness as "a positionality rather than an identity", (SULLIVAN, 2003: 44) prompting me to search for situations and passages in which Clare and Grace show queer behavior, instead of attempting to identify innate queer identities. After all, if queer theory rejects universalizing notions of identity as being "natural, ahistorical, and universal", (SULLIVAN, 2003: 39) trying to identify a queer identity in the characters would clash with the very theory I am trying to defend.

Likewise, affirming that Clare and Grace are or are not queer would imply the establishment of a single definition of the term, which, as I have quoted before, "would be a decidedly un-queer thing to do". (SULLIVAN, 2003: 43). I came to the conclusion that labeling or classifying these women would not only transform the term into an established category – fixed within a binary opposition queer/non-queer – but also confer an essentializing characteristic to my research. In an attempt to follow Michael Warner's proposition "to make theory queer, not just to have a theory about queers", (WARNER, 1993: xxvi) I have opted to have a queer approach in the analysis of the characters, discovering the moments in which they act queerly and discussing them.

In *A Home at the End of the World*, we can find several passages in which Clare behaves in a queer way, in compliance with the previously studied idea of queerness as an attitude of defying the norm. To begin with, her "half-lover" (CUNNINGHAM, 1991: 109) relationship with Jonathan can be considered queer in itself, as they love each other, share secrets and plan to have a baby together, although Jonathan is gay. In spite of their difficulties in dealing with the sexual or emotional gaps between them, Clare and Jonathan manage to establish a queer relationship, deconstructing the heteronormative idea of couple and family.

When Bobby comes into the scene, Clare demonstrates a definitely unconventional behavior, as she assumes a role which would be considered exclusively male according to patriarchal society. While changing his appearance, influencing his acts, or assuming a leading role in their sexual intercourse, Clare subverts heteronormative stereotypes, bravely challenging the norm. She may be regarded “as a straight for whom the term ‘queer’ expresses an affiliation with antihomophobic politics” (THOMAS, 1997: 96); she explicitly states her aim to shock and challenge social rules.

Clare’s pregnancy marks a turning point in the story, as she dares to form a queer family with both Jonathan and Bobby as fathers of her baby, despite her insecurity towards her fulfillment within such situation. From this moment on, we witness Clare’s dilemma, her queer character fighting her conventional aspirations for life. Bitterness invades her, while she makes strong efforts to keep her constructed queer persona. Finally, she gives up, leaving the gay men behind in order to find her personal fulfillment.

Regarding the study of *Will & Grace*, I confess it has been a fascinating but wild experience. The unknown territory of television theory proved to be an interesting field to be researched, providing me with specific knowledge I had never imagined to possess. Among all the topics covered, the specific theory regarding the sitcom should be highlighted, as it has been essential to my analysis of *Will & Grace*. “[...] Half-way between the comic and the tragic”, (DUARTE, 2007: 11)<sup>67</sup> the discourse used in sitcoms works with the tension between two opposing axes: the “ludicity axis” and the “seriousness axis”, (DUARTE, 2004: 127, my translation) which are responsible for entertaining the audience while providing them some reflection about serious issues. Such elements can be constantly spotted in *Will & Grace*, creating in the audience an awesome mixture of reasoning and fun.

As far as queer theory is concerned, we may affirm that Grace’s journey is very similar to Clare’s. Grace establishes a queer relationship with Will – very similar to Clare and Jonathan’s, as she is his confident, wishes to have a child with him, while facing the same sexual and affectionate issues. On the other hand, Grace goes through the painful experience of disappointment, which Clare does not have. When Will comes out to her, she feels depreciated as a woman, as if “one look at [her]

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<sup>67</sup> [http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca\\_265.pdf](http://www.compos.org.br/data/biblioteca_265.pdf)  
 Accessed on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008

proves [he's] a queer". Such feeling constantly haunts her, which makes her constantly seek for fulfillment, unsuccessfully trying to keep steady relationships.

The queerness of Will and Grace's relationship is expressed in many ways, especially through the deconstruction of the heteronormative model of couple. Their affinity is constantly contrasted with the intimacy of straight couples, shadowed by the protagonists' profound knowledge of each other and singular interaction, shattering "the belief that all heterosexual relations function unambiguously" (SULLIVAN, 2003: 120). In addition, the sitcom works with heterosexual images and gestures which are mixed with homosexual references, queering the audience's perception of the boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality. By constructing and deconstructing sexuality before the viewers' eyes, *Will & Grace* manages to denaturalize such concepts, opening our minds to the implied rules of the institution of heterosexuality.

Another relevant topic to be remembered is Grace's attempt to be artificially inseminated with Will's sperm, which can definitely be seen as a queer attitude. Like Clare, Grace dares to plan a queer family, challenging heteropatriarchal notions of child conception, parenting and family relations. Moreover, if we take into account Calvin Thomas' idea of queerness as "the critical process by which straights can learn from gay and lesbian theory to make interventions into the reproduction of heteronormativity or compulsory heterosexuality", (THOMAS, 1997: 95-6) we may conclude that Grace's attitude is queer, as it breaks the reproduction of heteronormative patterns.

I would also like to highlight the introduction of Dr. Leo Markus in the show, which can be considered as a turning point for Grace. On a white horse, Leo comes to "rescue" Grace, giving her the opportunity of embarking into a heterosexual relationship in which she can be fulfilled both sexually and emotionally. While Clare does not see much choice in her life regarding an established relationship, Grace seems to have found Prince Charming and, therefore, the possibility of conceiving a baby and forming a "regular" family. After a lot of reasoning, arguments and guilt, Grace makes a decision similar to Clare's: to give up her plan of forming a queer family, following her heterosexual aspirations.

While studying Clare's and Grace's queerness, I had the unique opportunity to deal with a wide range of issues regarding sexuality, relationships and identity. In the end, I have come to the conclusion that we should not attempt to decide whether or

not they are queer. Rather, I dare to affirm that both Grace and Clare behave queerly in several moments of their stories, in spite of their conventional dreams. In her strong effort to defy patriarchal society, Clare has managed to establish queer relationships and a family with gay men, holding to her true desire to be queer as long as possible. Grace, in turn, ventures into a queer “marriage” with Will, showing society around them that a queer relationship can be as healthy, intimate and rewarding as any other form of love.

Finally, I believe this research has been essential not only to my academic formation, but also to my development as a human being. The study of queer theory has really opened my mind to an endless world of possibilities regarding gender, sexuality and behavior. A perfect choice, Cunningham’s *A Home at the End of the World* has been a great source of knowledge and questioning about concepts such as love and family, while moving me with the beauty of its text and story. In spite of my initial doubts, *Will & Grace* has proved to be a relevant work to be analyzed, not only for its quality as a television program, but also as a wonderful source of queer reflection. Grace and Clare may not have managed to maintain their queerness over their “straight minds”. (SULLIVAN, 2003: 120) Nevertheless, their queer attitudes deserve appraisal for their bravery to defy social conventions, while showing us that queer straightness is a possibility which should not be undermined. Concerning my original insecurity towards the bold adventure of finding inspiration in a television sitcom, I should only state that it could not have been better. The sitcom spirit was present in my mind and hands throughout the process, which ended up being like watching *Will & Grace*: enriching and fun.

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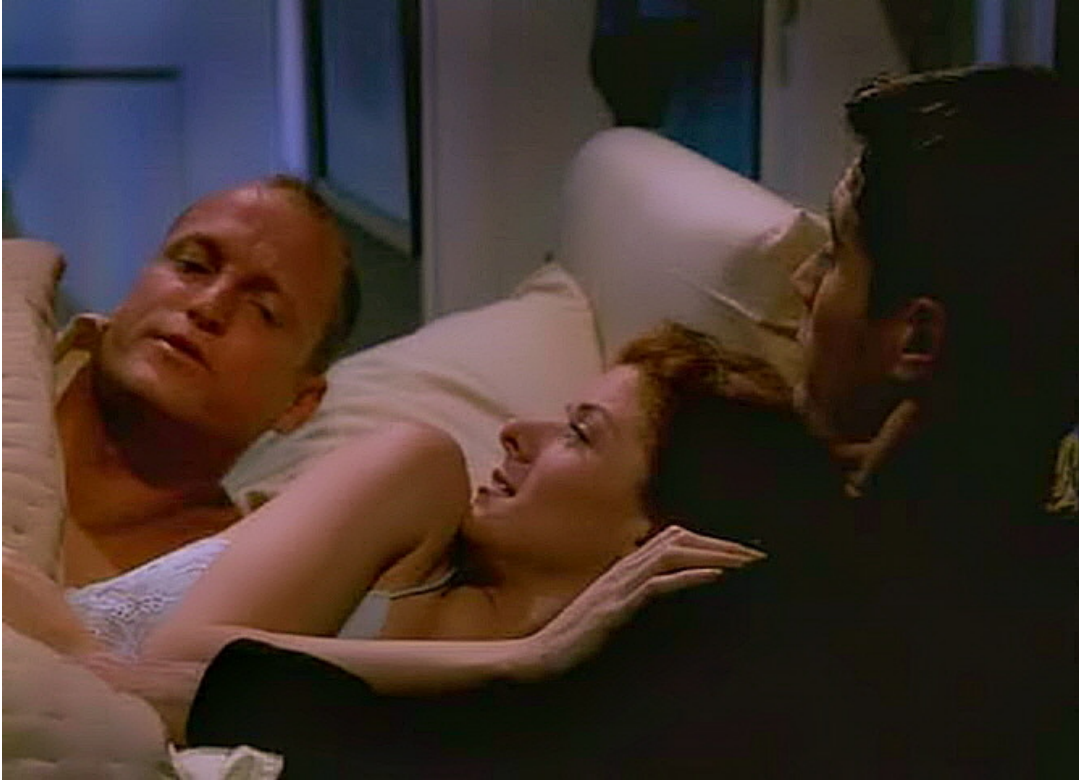
ANNEX – *Will & Grace* Pictures



Picture 1 – Will sneaks into Grace's bedroom. Props and camera angle hide Nathan.



Picture 2 – The couple in bed – heteronormative image, queer dialogue.



Picture 3 – Nathan appears, deconstructing the image.



Picture 4 – Grace's looks: disorganized hair, slim figure, not-so-modern clothes.



Picture 5 – One of Grace's tantrums: insecurity about her looks, aging and life prospects.



Picture 6 – Grace's disappointment upon hearing that Will would never marry her.



Picture 7 – Grace and Will in their '80s style. Comic element contrasts the hardships of Will's coming out.



Picture 8 – Grace's heartbroken expression about Will's homosexuality.





Picture 9 – The blurred image of Grace's "Prince Charming" on his white horse.



Picture 10 – Grace's overreaction when she meets the only woman Will has ever had sex with.



Picture 11 – Grace's doughnut and Will's banana: suggestion of sexual intercourse.



Picture 12 – Jack and Karen lock Will and Grace inside a kid's moonwalker.