

“I’m a Carrie!”...But Do I Even Want To Be?

Google “sex and the city quiz” and you’ll end up with 39,100,000 hits, the first few dozen pages filled with quiz links to determine whether you’re a Carrie, Miranda, Samantha, or Charlotte. For anyone who has watched the show, it can be pretty easy to pick the answers that you know will lead to your preferred verdict. While beloved, these characters have been so dully stereotyped that it can be easy to categorize them on beverage choice alone—champagne for Carrie, both glamorous and slightly airheaded; wine for Charlotte, sophisticated yet boring; martinis for Samantha, rambunctious and risqué; and beer for Miranda, a no-frills tomboy. Although this allows for a supreme level of entertainment, these stereotypes hold back an otherwise revolutionary show. As writer Brett Martin explains in his book *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From “The Sopranos” and “The Wire” to “Mad Men” and “Breaking Bad”*, “Its characters were types as familiar as those in ‘The Golden Girls’: the Slut, the Prude, the Career Woman, the Heroine. But they talked more explicitly, certainly about their bodies, but also about their desires and discontents outside the bedroom, than women on TV ever had before.”

Premiering in 1999 on the notoriously risk-taking HBO network, *SATC* was the first female-driven dramedy that put real-life topics, mainly those involving sexual encounters, on the prime-time table. Prior to its entrance on network television, shows with female leads leaned towards tamer subject matter: mild tiffs with friends, comical annoyances of husbands, trivial drama at work, etc. *Sex and the City* broke the mold in a way that immediately made headlines—even after the first few episodes, critics had already seemed to develop strong love or hate sentiments towards the thematic core of the show.

One of the main grievances was levelled at protagonist Carrie Bradshaw, a sex columnist whose

romanticized vision of life and love led to one emotional misfortune after another. Her most unlikable traits spiral out of the show's central relationship between Carrie and the elusive Mr. Big, an emotionally unavailable entrepreneur whom Carrie repeatedly chases despite his aversion to the commitment she so desperately craves. Throughout six seasons, Carrie's attachment to Big starts to feel more and more like an addiction, reaching its height when she cheats on long-term boyfriend Aidan with Big. It became immediately clear to viewers that Carrie is a woman whose self-identity is severely diminished when there is no man in her life. We see her jump in and out of relationships, flings, and one night stands with reckless abandon, never considering the consequences of her actions or acknowledging the disadvantages of her habit to attach herself to men too soon and too completely. The need for a male presence serves as a severe departure from the fun-loving single girl persona she cultivates in her columns, creating a noticeable dichotomy between perception and reality. Carrie is supposed to be seen as the epitome of the Manhattan single girl, the one who made it acceptable to be without a significant other. Her readers glamorize her decision to be a fiercely independent thirty-something, yet Carrie's true personality reveals that despite her claims to love single life and embrace it with an air of carefree charm, she yearns for commitment. As Faran Kentcil writes in *Elle*, "Carrie pretends to be independent and free-thinking, but at her core, she's a totally passive woman who can't lead an adventure or survive without knowing someone (or actually, *everyone*) is totally in love with her. Despite her 'girls just wanna be free' party line, Carrie Bradshaw still needs a guy to make her feel complete."

Carrie's reliance on men is portrayed as an endearing quality in the show, but in an age where feminism rules and women are taking more control over themselves than ever before, it's hard to see this need for male attention as anything but a handicap. In many ways, Carrie is a modern woman—she has her own successful career writing about a radical topic, she supports herself financially, and she values her female friendships to a marriage-level degree. Despite all this, Carrie's least redeeming

quality is a major one, an annoyance that is impossible to ignore since it shapes so much of the central plot. Emily Nussbaum of *The New Yorker* even goes so far as to label Bradshaw “[the] first female anti-hero on television”, a comment that is undeniably harsh but not without its merits. Throughout the course of the show, it becomes difficult to establish whether we are supposed to see Carrie as a hero or villain; even the writers and producers seem to flip-flop between letting us love her and giving us no choice but to hate her when she shows an inherent inability to be on her own. Carrie's insecurity at being without a man at all times, coupled with her denial in realizing this trait in herself, is disturbing.

Carrie's over-the-top vulnerability isn't the only widely criticized element of *SATC*— the show as a whole is one blown-up stereotype, offering a rose-colored view of New York City life. The women of *Sex and the City* seem to have an endless supply of money and free time that is extremely inconsistent with the realities of life as a New Yorker, especially considering that only one of the four women has an exceptionally well-paying job (Miranda, as a lawyer). Aside from the logistical exaggerations, the relationships between the women themselves are of a Stepford nature. Sure, the girls get in occasional fights, disapproving of each other's boyfriends or outfits, but there is never a true falling out, a fight so serious that it causes actual discomfort between these characters. As part of her story with *Interview* magazine, Lena Dunham offered her views on the trend of glamorizing female friendships, saying “I feel like a lot of the female relationships I see on TV or in movies are in some way free of the kind of jealousy and anxiety and posturing that has been such a huge part of my female friendships..”. It's interesting that it is Dunham who makes this comment, an actress and writer whose TV show *Girls* has been widely lauded as the antidote to the sugarcoated *SATC*. Contrastingly, *Girls* presents a brutally realistic portrayal of New York women and their friendships, opening the door on ordinary struggles about finances, relationships, self-image, and the like.

As a single girl in New York City, as well as an aspiring journalist, I can relate infinitely more to Dunham's Hannah Horvath in *Girls* than to Carrie Bradshaw. Hannah is an ordinary girl living in

Brooklyn trying to jumpstart her writing career; Carrie is an Upper East Side fashionista who freelances for *Vogue*. Hannah dates average guys with average jobs who sometimes can't even answer her texts; Carrie dates a gorgeous millionaire entrepreneur who spoils her with dinners and diamonds. Hannah and her friends hang out in kitschy coffee shops; Carrie and crew have standing brunch reservations at posh cafes. Hannah and her friends argue, get jealous of each other, and show their vulnerability to each other; Carrie and her friends absolve whatever temperate arguments they get into within a matter of days (sometimes minutes). Claire Danes, who wrote Dunham's cover story for *Interview*, sums up the disconnect between the alternate worlds of two shows set in the same city with the same general subject matter, saying "...while *Sex and the City* was a celebration of all of the cosmos, Manolos, and punny innuendos of a certain kind of single-girl life in Manhattan, *Girls* reflects the resignation—and in some cases, the entitlement—of another demographic..." My view of *Girls* being more relevant towards reality may be due to my age (the *Girls* characters are in their mid-twenties, a stone's throw from me, while the *SATC* characters are in their mid-thirties), but I think that the heart of these shows transcend age. Stripped to their base, both shows strive to depict what life as a New York girl is like when it comes to love, friendships, careers, and family.

While I, too, once fell prey to the shiny veneer of the Carrie Bradshaw character, I eventually realized that her confidence and independence is nothing but a front to hide her true self behind. In my eyes, Carrie is like the first boy you seriously date: captivating and exciting at first, but not really that great underneath it all. After many years of idolizing Carrie and aspiring to live her seemingly fantastic life, it was a tough realization to grow up and see my favorite TV "heroine" for who she really was. Though I'll always appreciate Carrie's fearless sense of style and her candid writing style, I no longer look up to Carrie as a person. I myself am confident and independent on my own, qualities I take great pride in. Why would I want to be like someone who can't do at 40 what I can do at 20? Carrie may be my next source of outfit inspiration, but in terms of life inspiration, I'll stick to women who can handle

the concrete jungle with nothing but their own hand to hold.

And for the record, I'm a Samantha.