

Netflix's Maid and representations of masculinities through social class: a textual analysis

Maid de Netflix y las representaciones de las masculinidades a través de la clase social: un análisis textual

Melissa Boehm

Montana State University Billings | 1500 University Drive, Billings, MT 59105, United States

0000-0003-1208-4136 · melissa.boehm1@msubillings.edu

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Abstract

Netflix's Maid chronicles the struggles of a heterosexual White single mother living in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Using the concept of hegemonic masculinities and qualitative textual analysis, this study examined the 10 episodes of the limited series Maid to document the social construction of working-class and middle-class masculinities. Sean's dysfunctional working-class life of six packs of beer and a single-wide trailer are juxtaposed against Nate's offer of tidy suburban middle-class comfort and safety. I argue the program reifies stereotypical portrayals of working-class and middle-class men based on their homes, jobs, family background, leisure activities, and use of alcohol and drugs. Sean does not respect Alex's bodily autonomy, her need for financial independence, or her need for freedom from emotional abuse. Similarly, Nate is unable to see past his entitlement toward Alex based on the material benefits he offers her like a reliable loaner vehicle, a clean two-story home, and pony rides for her daughter. I contend that Alex, the main protagonist, contests hegemonic masculinities to create her own space in the world without limitations dictated by the men in her life. Documenting how Maid tells the story of a woman and her romantic partners oppressed by hegemonic masculinities can provide insight into commonsense notions of romantic partnerships in the United States today.

Keywords: *Maid, masculinities, social class, textual analysis, hegemony.*

Resumen

Maid, de Netflix, narra las luchas de una madre soltera blanca heterosexual que vive en el noroeste del Pacífico de Estados Unidos. Utilizando el concepto de masculinidades hegemónicas y el análisis textual cualitativo, este estudio examinó los 10 episodios de la serie para documentar la construcción social de las masculinidades de clase obrera y clase media. La vida disfuncional de clase trabajadora de Sean, con seis paquetes de cerveza y una caravana, se yuxtapone a la oferta de ordenada comodidad y seguridad de clase media suburbana de Nate. En mi opinión, el programa reafirma los estereotipos de los hombres de clase trabajadora y de clase media basados en sus hogares, trabajos, antecedentes familiares, actividades de ocio, y consumo de alcohol y drogas. Sean no respeta la autonomía corporal de Alex, su necesidad de independencia económica ni su necesidad de liberarse de los abusos emocionales. Del mismo modo, Nate es incapaz de ver más allá de su derecho hacia Alex basado en los beneficios

materiales que le ofrece, como un vehículo prestado fiable, una casa limpia de dos plantas y paseos en poni para su hija. Sostengo que Alex, la protagonista principal, desafía las masculinidades hegemónicas para crear su propio espacio en el mundo sin las limitaciones dictadas por los hombres de su vida. Documentar cómo Maid cuenta la historia de una mujer y sus parejas sentimentales oprimidas por las masculinidades hegemónicas puede aportar información sobre las nociones de sentido común de las parejas sentimentales en los Estados Unidos de hoy.

Palabras clave: Maid, masculinidades, clase social, análisis textual, hegemonía.

1. Introduction

Maid premiered in October 2021 on streaming service Netflix. Each of the 10 episodes in the series ranged in duration from 48 minutes to 60 minutes and was inspired by Stephanie Land's 2019 memoir *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive*. The program stars Margaret Qualley as Alex, Nick Robinson as Sean, and Andie MacDowell as Paula and was created by Molly Smith Metzler. The program was nominated for three Golden Globe awards and has been one of Netflix's most popular programs with «469 million hours viewed in its first 28 days» (Otterson, 2022, p. 6). The program chronicles the struggles of a heterosexual White cisgender single mother living in the Pacific Northwest of the United States.

Television dramas featuring working-class and middle-class characters tend to reinforce negative stereotypes of these groups. However, programs can also challenge preconceived notions of acceptable behavior and serve as a model for social change. The program *Maid* contributes to the reification of social class stereotypes but is progressive in the main character's contestation of hegemonic masculinities.

Specifically, Alex seeks to reject the narrow gender role ascribed to her as a mother in an abusive heterosexual relationship with Sean. Though she stumbles at times, by the end of the series, she moves beyond financial dependence on a male partner. She insists upon remaining unattached throughout the series because she can rely only upon herself for emancipation from hegemonic masculine social structures in the working-class world with Sean and the middle-class world with Nate. I argue there are two main sites in *Maid* where Alex contests hegemonic masculine social structures and they are her relationship with Sean and her relationship with Nate.

To study the social construction of hegemonic masculinities in *Maid*, I performed a qualitative textual analysis. McKee (2003) states that textual analysis is a method in which a researcher studies media texts for representations of ideologies. Media texts are an important area of study because they «have to draw on existing ways of making sense of the world: these are then interpreted by people, and feed back into the texts that they themselves produce» (p. 46). I viewed all of the 10 episodes in the series a minimum of two times in January 2022. During the first viewing, I watched the series in its entirety without taking notes. During the second viewing, I documented the social construction of the main male characters Sean and Nate. My notes included visual elements related to stereotypes of social class like homes, jobs, family background, leisure activities, and use of alcohol and drugs. I also transcribed the dialogue in relevant scenes to precisely document the language used.

Textual analysis is not meant to provide generalizable findings about how viewers or even other researchers might interpret a text. It is an explorative method used by qualitative scholars to document «how these texts tell their stories, how they represent the world» (McKee, 2003, p. 17). Documenting how *Maid* tells the story of a woman and her romantic partners oppressed by hegemonic masculinities can provide insight into commonsense notions of romantic partnerships in the United States today.

2. Theoretical review

Relying heavily on theoretical works by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Messerschmidt (2018), this qualitative textual analysis of *Maid* documents the social construction of hegemonic masculinities paying close attention to social class. In both of these texts, the authors build on the original work of Connell from the 1980s when the term «hegemonic masculinity» was first coined. Much debated, the topic of masculinities and hegemonic masculinities continues to be investigated by scholars. This section provides an overview of the relevant literature on hegemonic masculinities.

Messerschmidt (2018) defines hegemonic masculinity as «those masculinities that legitimate an unequal relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities» (p. 120). These masculinities can diverge from dominant masculinities that are a collection of common behaviors by «ideal» men in a specific society. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) explain that hegemonic masculinity «was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men» (p. 832). They explained that even though most men did not perform hegemonic masculinity, by not challenging it, most men were complicit in the ways it affected everyone. This assertion underlines the self-perpetuating nature of hegemonic masculinity in that unless people overtly challenge hegemonic masculinity, it is unlikely to change.

Messerschmidt (2018) further argued that hegemonic masculinities operate «through the cultural influence and discursive persuasion, encouraging consent and compliance—rather than direct control and commands—to unequal gender relations» (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 120). While dominant masculinities provide models for men to emulate, the models are only hegemonic if they reinforce unequal gender relations: «Through the construction of hegemonic masculinities and thus unequal gender relations, situational notions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ embody culturally defined ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ gendered qualities, respectively, that in turn establish consequential masculinities and femininities» for individuals (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 121). When women are expected to perform the work that is less valued (often inside the home and unpaid) than the work performed by men (often outside the home and paid), a power imbalance is preserved.

Directly relevant to this study is the hegemonically masculine notion that women should perform childcare and household duties while men should work outside the home as breadwinners. Taken further, one form of hegemonic masculinity dictates that men maintain control of the finances and make all financial decisions. This subordinates women who then must ask men for money to buy food and other necessities for the family. In this instance, men don't ask for money or how the money should be spent; they simply spend it. Men have financial agency while women do not.

Many programs and other cultural artifacts reinforce unequal gender relations but provide small inklings of resistance. «Hegemony is a historical possibility, a state of gender relations being struggled for, and struggled against, by different social forces.... The most useful way to conceptualize hegemonic masculinity is to treat it as a collective project for realizing gender hierarchy» (Connell, 2016, p. 306). Throughout *Maid*, Alex is forced to face her place as subordinate to men. She even sees upper class Regina emotionally suffer when Regina's husband leaves her because she cannot give birth to their own child and instead must adopt a child (S1E4 Cashmere). The main difference between Alex and Regina is that Regina is financially independent and does not rely on her husband for income. Without money in a capitalist society, Alex is vulnerable to the patriarchal forces seeking to control her. Alex's mother even encourages Alex to accept sexual subordination in exchange for living in one man's house. Messerschmidt (2018) explained that «The hegemonic masculine social structure consists of different types of power relations... and therefore is continually and pervasively renewed, recreated, defended, and modified through social action» (p. 133). The series follows Alex's struggle against hegemonic masculinities and the literal cost to her and her daughter that the rejection imposes (lack of adequate housing, food, money, phone, etc.). The government programs, created by mostly White male policymakers, also reinforce hegemonic masculinities that assume men are best as breadwinners and women as financially dependent upon them.

Messerschmidt (2018) cautions readers to avoid conflating hegemonic masculinities with any «fixed character traits» because hegemonic masculinities often shift (p. 121): «There exist not one or a few hegemonic masculinities but, rather, hegemonic masculinities that are multifarious and found in a whole variety of settings» (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 122). In *Maid*, there are particular hegemonic masculinities that are visible and form the basis for conflict in the program.

Messerschmidt (2018) explained that there are three levels at which hegemonic masculinities should be analyzed: local, regional, and global. The local level encompasses «families, organizations, and immediate communities» while the regional level is «at the level of the 'culture' or the nation-state, as typically found in discursive, political, and demographic research» and the global level covers «transnational arenas as world politics... transnational business and media» (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 52).

These «regional» and likely «global» representations of hegemonic masculinities by Sean and Nate and the counterhegemonic practices by Alex are important because they were seen by Netflix viewers in the United States and abroad. «Regional hegemonic masculinities... provide cultural frameworks that may be materialized in daily practices and interactions» (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 53). Too often, at the regional level via television and film, women are portrayed in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles and unequal gender relations. For succinct examples, see Dow's (1990) study of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and her later study of *Murphy Brown* (Dow, 1990). For a more recent example, see Painter and Ferrucci's (2019) study of *Good Girls Revolt*. Some of these roles show women sacrificing their own happiness, satisfaction, and independence to maintain a relationship with a heterosexual partner. Though there are aspects of that in *Maid*, I argue that the main character's struggles in the program illuminates hegemonic social structures and then actively resists them. Alex leaves her abusive working-class partner Sean to fight his alcoholism and childhood trauma alone. She also declines the many offers of a relationship with Nate because of the unequal power between them.

3. Discussion

There are two main sites where hegemonic masculinities are socially constructed in *Maid* and they are embodied by the characters of Sean and Nate. Each site is socially constructed based on social class of the character. In her relationships with Sean and Nate, Alex contests aspects of hegemonic masculinities. Each site will be discussed.

3.1. Sean: Dysfunctional Working-Class Man

The first and main site in which Alex confronts hegemonic masculinity is in her relationship with Sean, a working-class White man, and the father of their two-year old daughter. Sean does not respect Alex's bodily autonomy, her need for financial independence, or her need for freedom from emotional abuse. In each of these ways, Sean aligns himself with aspects of hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously fulfilling negative stereotypes of working-class men.

Previous research has shown that men have historically been the breadwinners and «the idea of the provider is a major element in the construction of masculine identity; it is a moral as well as an economic category» (Morgan, 2004, p. 169). The ability to financially provide for his partner, Alex, and his daughter, Maddy, is one of the main themes of the series. Sean fails at financially providing for them while the other romantic interest, Nate, excels at it.

Working class masculinities are «collective, physical and embodied, and oppositional» (Morgan, 2004, p. 170). In media representations, working class and people without money are often mocked (Beynon, 2004; Butsch, 1992; Butsch, 2011; Katz, 2011; Newitz, 1997). From Ralph Kramden to Homer Simpson, male working-class characters often fill the role of the buffoon while middle-class families provide an aspirational model for sitcom viewers (Butsch, 1992). Though *Maid* is not a sitcom, Sean embodies many of the negative stereotypes often reserved for working-class men on television. Butsch (1992) explained that «When success is confined predominantly to middle-class series, and failure to the working class, the failing working-class men are thereby labeled as deviants who are responsible for their own failure» (p. 389). Sean is an alcoholic high school dropout who struggles financially and lives in a trailer in the woods. He works as a bartender and spends money on six-packs of Budweiser beer instead of food. When we see Sean's trailer, we, as an audience, are invited to see failure. Sheehan (2010) similarly argued that Ralph Kramden's «barren kitchen/dining/living area that served as the show's primary set constantly reminded Ralph, the show's other characters, and the viewer of Ralph's inadequacies as a provider and consumer» (p. 573). Sean's trailer home foreshadows his morality. We are taught to expect bad behavior from people who live in trailers, and throughout the series Sean is abusive and dysfunctional. His depiction continually reinforces negative stereotypes of working-class men.

When Alex becomes pregnant, she and Sean argue about whether to keep the baby. Alex later explains that Sean wanted Alex to have an abortion and when she refused, Sean, unable to contain his frustration, called her a «fucking whore» and screamed «What the fuck are you thinking? Fucking bitch! Think for a fucking second, Alex!» (S1E2 Ponies, 49:08). In his abusive attack, Sean expressed that he does not want responsibility for raising a child and felt it should be his decision, not Alex's. When women make decisions about their own bodies, hegemonic masculine structures are weakened, and this often leads to conflict.

The opening sequence in the series begins with Alex fleeing Sean's emotional abuse late one night. We learn that he had arrived home to their trailer drunk and during his rage, he punched a wall near her head and then threw a dish that shattered against the wall beside her and her two-year-old daughter's head. When Alex tells him she is leaving, he responds:

Where are you gonna go? I pay all the bills. Let you hang out with my friends. I let you move into my trailer, you drink my beer, eat my food. I let you mooch off me. I do everything for you. If you walk out of here, you'll have no one. (S1E1 Dollar Store, 35:05)

In this exchange, Sean articulates the dependency Alex has on him for her basic needs of housing, food, and social support from his friends. Alex's «mooching» off him by staying home and taking care of their daughter was demanded by Sean. We later learn that Sean has isolated Alex after giving birth to Maddy. Alex has no access to her own money, and she does not have any friends that are separate from Sean's friends.

Domestic abuse is one of the main themes in *Maid* and can have a cyclical component. In the United States, over «15 million children live in homes in which domestic violence has happened at least once. These children are at greater risk for repeating the cycle as adults by entering into abusive relationships or becoming abusers themselves» (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). In *Maid*, both Alex and Sean witness domestic violence as children. We learn that Alex's mother was abused by Alex's father when Alex was a child, and this was part of the reason Alex's mother left Alex's father. Alex's realization of the abuse retraumatizes her in Episode 5 «Thief» and steels her resolve to reject her father's help as an adult, except for a few dire occasions. The most important occasion is when Alex is desperate to maintain custody of Maddy and go to Montana to attend college. She asks her father to testify that he witnessed Sean's abuse while visiting their trailer (S1E10 Snaps). Alex's father declines to help: «If I saw anything, it was a young couple going through a rough patch. Sean is struggling with his sobriety... and needs empathy» (S1E10 Snaps, 25:49). Alex's father's allegiance to Sean as a man over his own daughter cogently demonstrates the deeply entrenched dysfunctional notions of manhood.

Negative stereotypes of poverty in recent films like *Hillbilly Elegy* or the television series *Shameless* encourage viewers to blame people in poverty for their plight. Neoliberal ideology implies that if people in poverty were simply more resourceful and less lazy, they could escape. This hints at a «culture of poverty» in which people in poverty learn dysfunctional habits that keep them from climbing out of poverty. The path out of poverty is much more complex than a willingness to leave. Yet, even though it was long ago debunked by sociologists, the culture of poverty explanation still finds traction today. It is ideologically useful because it shifts the conversation away from policy decisions that deny marginalized groups opportunities to advance and a lack of adequate social safety nets to individualized victim-blaming.

Violence against women by working-class men in this media text also reinforces negative representations of working-class men. Though Sean is clearly abusive, the series offers bits and pieces of Sean's childhood to possibly justify or at least contextualize his rage issues and abuse of Alex. Sean shares troubling childhood memories that he uncovered during his attendance at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings including his mother's Oxycodone addiction, physical abuse by his stepfather, and food insecurity (S1E6 M, 12:54).

Morgan (2004) reminds readers that stereotypes of working-class groups often invoked «the 'failed' masculinity of the downwardly mobile individual whose failure in class terms may be read as an indication of a weakness of character, which might also be gendered (lack of ambition, alcoholism, etc.)» (p. 171). Sean's alcoholism is couched in a more compassionate context than many media representations of men in poverty and/or working-class men. Viewers are invited to consider Sean's upbringing in a single-parent household, the history of physical abuse, and his mother's addiction to and overdose of Oxycodone as possible reasons for his chemical dependency. «The absent father and the lack of a stable adult male role model» might influence Sean's inability to cope with the world around him (Morgan, 2004, p. 174). Though Sean's narrative is complex in *Maid*, it still reinforces many negative stereotypes about working-class men, namely that they are deviant and should be blamed for their own problems. This victim-blaming obscures the social inequality inherent in a capitalist system. Specifically, it conceals the lack of adequate mental health services available to people like Sean who need them.

When Sean gets drunk and misses work, Alex searches for and finds him at a nearby beach they used to frequent in happier times. When she asks him if he is okay, he assures her «I'm fine. I'll be a mess when the coke wears off though» (S1E3 Sea Glass, 36:38). Illegal drug use and a lack of self-control are major themes in Sean's narrative and serve to reinforce the failure of his working-class upbringing. Almost anticipating Alex's thoughts about his current state, Sean begs her to believe «I'm sea glass. I'm not trash. Just give me time. I'm not» (S1E3 Sea Glass, 38:23). When Sean used the term «not trash» to refer to himself, he tried to distance himself from the derisive term of «white trash» often used to describe people in poverty.

Alex is not only responsible for their daughter Maddy, but both Sean asserts and Alex's father asserts that Alex is also responsible for Sean's well-being in later episodes. This too reveals hegemonic masculinities of women being responsible for and providing emotional support to men. Sean pleads «Look, I can't do this without you, okay?» (S1E7 String Cheese, 6:42). Sean's insistence and Alex's father's insistence that Alex help him overcome his alcoholism is problematic considering that Sean places all the responsibility on Alex and accepts very little responsibility for himself. When he continues to struggle with his drug addiction issues, Sean blames Alex. It is Alex's father, who instead of trying to protect Alex and Maddy, criticizes Alex for «walking away at the exact wrong moment» (S1E10 Snaps, 26:49). This again illustrates Alex's father's prioritization of Sean over his own daughter and granddaughter.

During the series, Alex ends up temporarily living in Sean's trailer again because she has nowhere else to go. Though she tries to maintain her financial independence and find work cleaning houses, she can only schedule house cleans on the weekends because that is the only time Sean is willing to watch Maddy. This ends her business because, as Alex explains, «no one wants their house cleaned on a weekend» (S1E8 Bear Hunt, 40:05). The prioritizing of Sean's job outside the home over Alex's reinforces hegemonic masculinity. He prefers that Alex stay home with their daughter rather than work outside the home and this prevents Alex from making her own money therefore forcing her to rely on Sean for financial support.

At the beginning of the series when Alex leaves Sean the first time, he files for full custody of their daughter Maddy, but Sean decides to end the fight due to Alex rescuing him from a drunken binge and his realization that full-time parenting is difficult work. Sean explained «I don't want full custody.

I mean, I do want it, but I can't do Maddy 24/7 and stay sober. I can't have my fucking mom living with me, triggering the shit out of me» (S1E3 Sea Glass, 45:05). This reinforces the notion that it is the father who chooses whether the mother should be permitted to care for their child and echoes presumptions of patrilineal property transfer. Sean's ability to effectively grant partial custody to Alex underlines the hegemonic social structures in which they live.

Sean further isolates Alex from the outside world when he returns the borrowed vehicle to her friend Nate without her permission which leaves her stranded at the trailer with no transportation. The only remaining vehicle at the trailer is Sean's. With no money or transportation of her own, she is completely reliant on Sean and must ask him for food money and additional funds to keep her phone. He refuses to give her money for her phone and Alex loses this final connection she has to the outside world. In the isolation, she falls into a deep depression. This is yet another example of forcing women to stay in the home thus restricting traditional women's roles in a patriarchal society and robbing them of their independence and life choices.

Throughout the series, we see Alex first accept and later reject hegemonic masculinities that limit her bodily autonomy, financial independence, and her freedom from abuse in her relationship with Sean. She leaves Sean a second time with nothing but the clothes she is wearing and Maddy in her arms. Alex seeks safety at the Domestic Violence shelter where she is again welcomed. Her emancipation from Sean sets in motion her counterhegemonic path to financial independence for her and her daughter.

3.2. Nate: «Safe» Middle-Class Man with Conditions

The second site where hegemonic masculinities are socially constructed is in Alex's relationship with Nate. In the series, Nate's character provides a stark contrast to Sean. Butsch (1992) stated «Middle class men competently fulfill their many roles. They are typically intelligent, rational, mature, and responsible—what the culture expects a man to be» (p. 390). Butsch (1992) continues «the father, especially, was calm and affable, in stark contrast to the hysteria that typified the slapstick comedy of the working-class series» (p. 394). In *Maid*, the chaos could be represented by Sean's rage and his lack of financial stability. Nate never raises his voice and is financially stable.

Though *Maid* was inspired by Stephanie Land's 2019 memoir, the characters in the fictionalized program have important differences. The character that Nate appears to be based upon and figures prominently in the series warrants only a few paragraphs in Land's 268-page book as «Todd.»

Readers are introduced to him in this way:

A man I'd been on a few dates with, Todd, was coming over to pick us up.... Todd insisted I borrow a car he didn't drive anymore.... I really didn't know what I thought of Todd, or if I liked him in a serious way or not. (Land, 2019, p. 193)

She then shares her ambivalence toward him which confuses her:

He checked the fluids, turning signals, brakes, and headlights with a knowledgeable efficiency that I found attractive. Todd did have a lot of qualities I admired—he worked construction while

building his own cabin on a wooded property near Port Townsend—I wasn't sure why my heart wasn't there. (Land, 2019, p. 195)

In the process of adapting the book to the television series, Todd was transformed from a carpenter to a structural engineer named Nate. I argue this particular social construction reflects stereotypes about middle-class superiority. The contrast between Sean and Nate would not be as stark if Nate were a carpenter as he was in the book. It also erases the possibility of a conversation about class consciousness between the main male characters. Mastrocola (2017) defines class consciousness as an «awareness of one's place and degree of agency within the broader socioeconomic and political structures, especially as it relates to those who hold a similar place» and argues that television characters seldom have class consciousness (p. 3). *Maid* is no different. By changing the working-class character Todd to the middle-class character Nate, there is no discussion of shared class struggles by working-class men in a capitalist system. Neither Sean nor Nate have any sense of class consciousness and in a program about working-class lifestyles, it is a troubling omission.

Nate lives in a two-story house in a nice neighborhood with paved streets and tidy neighbors. His retired parents live in Newport Beach, and he has a master's degree from the University of Washington. Nate has no visible addiction issues, hinted at by his statement that he «can't drink beer after 8 pm because it messes with my stomach» (S1E7 String Cheese, 13:41). Nate is most often dressed neatly and wears a tucked in button-down shirt with a fleece-zip vest over it. He sometimes goes to work early (catching the ferry at 6:05 am in S1E2 Ponies) and is eager to help Alex with small gifts like coffee, breakfast, and a phone charging cable (S1E2 Ponies). He later lends her a Ford Explorer (S1E4 Cashmere), helps secure a spot for Maddy at a prestigious daycare, and eventually provides a temporary home where Alex, Maddy, and Alex's mother stay for a few days (S1E7 String Cheese).

Recently divorced and sharing parenting responsibilities for their son Brady with his ex-wife, Nate appears to be a kind and generous person who longs for Alex as a girlfriend. He asks her out several times throughout the series and each time, Alex firmly tells him she's not interested in dating. This first occurs when Nate saves her from certain financial ruin by lending her an older Ford Explorer. In a later episode, Nate again tries to insinuate himself into some sort of romantic relationship by repeatedly requesting play dates for their two children. Alex replies, «Well, it was getting kind of weird how many times you asked» (S1E6 M, 10:03)

When Alex has no other option but to stay with Nate at his comfortable home, he asks her out again, in his living room. This time, he offers to take her out to dinner. She tries to explain the situation to him more clearly:

I am charity. I am. I mean, you feed me, house me, board me, hot-water me. You are the only difference between us sleeping in a bed and sleeping on the street tonight. Yeah, I just don't know how I could go to dinner with you and sit across the table from you and share an appetizer, because it's not equal between us. (S1E7 String Cheese, 25:00)

Nate replies that if they like each other, «That's equal, right?» (S1E7 String Cheese). Alex reiterates her reluctance to date anyone by replying «I don't think I can be with anybody right now» (S1E7 String Cheese). Like Sean, Nate does not listen to her desires and sees no issues with the power imbalance between them. This reinforces the notion that if men provide women with financial security, in

exchange, women are open to romantic relationships. Nate's display of hegemonic masculinity predictably fails at «a positive hegemony» in which men see women as equals and work to ensure social conditions for that reality (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 853).

Shortly thereafter, Sean supports Alex while her mother becomes abusive and then has a mental breakdown. That trauma is deeply troubling to Alex and Sean comforts her. They end up sleeping together. When Alex returns to Nate's house early the next morning, Nate said «I saw Sean. How hard is it to just send a text? Hey, I'm not coming home. I'm gonna fuck my ex» (S1E8 Bear Hunt, 3:05). Alex tries to explain that her mother was in the hospital and Nate then apologizes. Alex clarifies «No. Uh. I did sleep with Sean. I'm not gonna lie to you about it and I'm sorry» (S1E8 Bear Hunt). Nate then asks Alex to pack up her daughter and leave. Having nowhere else to go, Alex ends up living with Sean again.

In that exchange, we see that Nate believes Alex owes him for all that he provides for her. At the very least, Nate expects her to avoid physical intimacy with anyone, especially Sean, if she won't share that with him. A man's ownership of a woman's sexuality is a trait of hegemonic masculinity in the program and Alex even unnecessarily apologizes to Nate about having sex with Sean.

Nate's sense of competition with Sean and perhaps self-doubt about his own embodiment of masculinity prompts this derisive remark «What is it about this guy? Fucking peach fuzz» (S1E8 Bear Hunt, 4:13). Nate's internalization of one form of hegemonic masculinity is the ability to grow a beard, a sign of virility, compared to Sean's patchy facial hair (Kaplan *et al.*, 2017, p. 395). As Messerschmidt (2018) explains «properly accountable bodies construct relational and discursive social structures, and they signal and facilitate through their appearance and action the maintenance of hegemonic masculine power dynamics» (p. 130). It would seem that in Nate's mind, real men grow full beards like him and less masculine men like Sean have «peach fuzz.»

The exchange further shows Nate's entitlement as a suitable middle-class man for Alex when he asks «Okay, he can make a drink. I can make a skyscraper, but you're going back to him?» (S1E8 Bear Hunt, 4:15). Nate is furious and jealous that Alex would have sex with Sean instead of him because he «makes skyscrapers» and Sean «makes drinks.» Nate's classist characterization of Sean demonstrates that he feels entitled to Alex valuing him over Sean in part because of Nate's social class. When Alex rejects Nate's advances, Nate becomes angry because he feels entitled to Alex. Hegemonic masculine structures dictate to Nate that he should be chosen over Sean because of his social status and ability to financially provide for Alex. When Alex rejects Nate because of the unequal gender relations inherent in their current life situations, Nate is confused and does not understand why Alex will not date him. This shows how deep-seated these ideas are in Nate's mind as a middle-class man and is similar to Sean's inability to comprehend why Alex would not stay with him either.

These two sites of representation and later contestation of hegemonic masculinities via Alex's relationship with Sean and her relationship with Nate are important areas of analysis. Alex's eventual resistance to subordination to the men in her life illustrates what challenging hegemonic masculinities might look like in a television series. Though both relationships analyzed are different in their own way, the folly of hegemonically masculine traits are laid bare and ultimately rejected by Alex.

4. Conclusion

The program *Maid* illuminates hegemonically masculine traits of the two main male characters in the series. It also reinforces social class stereotypes throughout the series. White working class and men without money on television are often mocked and blamed for their own financial struggles (Butsch, 1992; Butsch, 2011; Katz, 2011; Morgan, 2004). The social construction of working-class character Sean in *Maid* supports those findings. Sean is portrayed as an abusive alcoholic who lives in a trailer and works as a bartender. Many of his troubles stem from a traumatic childhood in a lower-income family where drug abuse and physical abuse were common. It is no surprise then that Sean fails in many ways at providing for his small family.

Portrayals of middle-class men on television in contrast are seen as competent and intelligent, an aspirational model for all (Butsch, 1992, p. 390). The character of Nate in *Maid* lives in a nice house and is financially secure. His white-collar work as a structural engineer affords him many accoutrements of a middle-class world including reliable vehicles, a prestigious day care for his son, and pony rides at a nearby horse stable. Nate's generosity and kindness toward Alex is conditional because it is based on his desire to become romantically involved with Alex.

It is also important to point out that the social class of Nate's character was changed when the book was adapted for television. In the book, Nate's character was a carpenter but, in the series, he was a structural engineer. I find this problematic because it erases any opportunity for the two men to have a discussion of class consciousness or experience class solidarity. Instead, Nate's character further reinforces the difference between vilified working-class men and valorized middle-class men. However, both men are hemmed in by forms of hegemonic masculinities. These forms of coercion are recognized and eventually rejected by Alex.

As Messerschmidt (2018) stated «hegemonic masculinities can be contested and undermined through alternative practices that do not support unequal gender relations» (p. 142). In the social construction of Alex throughout the series, she takes part in «counterhegemonic practices that critique, challenge, or actually dismantle hegemonic masculinity» (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 142). By the end of the series, Alex has left Sean to attend college in Montana. She breaks free from her financial dependence on him and no longer tolerates his emotional abuse. Her conditional friendship with Nate has also ended and she becomes more self-sufficient. Neither Nate nor Sean understood or wanted to «democratize gender relations, abolish power differentials, or stop reproducing hierarchy» (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 853). Both Nate and Sean benefitted from the established gender hierarchy without trying to change it. They were therefore complicit in it though in different ways.

Alex's pursuit of a degree rather than another man symbolizes Alex's emancipation from «subordination and oppressive gender relations» and also her family's expectations (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 150). In her relationships with Sean and Nate, Alex «embodies reflexive counterhegemonic practices» (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 150). The program's narrative provides a model for individual women who are trapped in hegemonically masculine ways of being a woman and want to free themselves.

Future intersectional analyses of *Maid* could focus on the ways women like Paula (Alex's mother), Regina, Yolanda, Danielle, and Denise reinforce and/or reject hegemonic masculinities. Related

research should explore and document the social construction of masculinities related to social class in other popular contemporary programs like *Shameless*. Another media text in which domestic violence is a major theme is *Big Little Lies* however, the perpetrator is upper middle class. Analyzing his social construction could provide a contrast to the social construction of Sean in *Maid*. Constructions of abusive partners could also be documented by studying movies like *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991), *Fear* (1996) and *Enough* (2002).

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Semblanza de la autora

Melissa Boehm is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at Montana State University Billings. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in media studies and public relations and earned her PhD in Mass Communication with a graduate certificate in Women's and Gender Studies from Ohio University. Her research agenda focuses on media representations of marginalized groups, especially women in poverty.