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White Male Apologists:
How Online Fandom Treats Their Pet Narcissists

A Thesis in Media & Communications

by

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Abstract

The largest network of fans and fan works is found in online spaces. Online fandom contains the biggest conversations surrounding pop culture, as well as the feelings and fantasies of fans. Especially in recent years, there are many pieces of pop culture that forefront bad people as the protagonists. These pieces of media are self-aware and purposeful in how they present these characters as complex but still awful people. This paper focuses on three characters like this; Joe Goldberg from *You* (2018), Coriolanus Snow from *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, and Dennis Reynolds from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005). All three of these characters are played by conventionally attractive able-bodied White men, and throughout all three of their narratives they repeatedly and knowingly choose to harm others, physically and emotionally. Despite this, they all have fan bases that ignore, accept, excuse, or praise their behavior. I explore what these fans say and how they feel about these characters in online spaces, including the fantasies that fans create about these characters within fanworks. Through examining this phenomenon, I am able to explore the cycle where reality and fantasy impact each other; how the real world, which is structured around giving White men the most power, impacts the fiction that is created, which impacts the fantasies that fans create for themselves and others, which in turn impacts reality again. Certain meaningful sections of online fandom both reflect and reinforce the patriarchy, as well as Western-centered aestheticism.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Table of Contents	3
Introduction	4
Joe Goldberg: Everything I Do, I Do For You This Thesis	14
Coriolanus Snow: Snow Lands On Top (Of Me)	26
Dennis Reynolds: The Implication	38
Conclusion	50
Works Cited	53

I

Being a fan of something can take many forms. Most of us would describe ourselves as fans in one way or another, whether we are a ‘casual enjoyer’ of a show, or we plaster our walls in memorabilia. We are engaged by a storyline, a particular actor, or the feelings we find ourselves experiencing while watching. Many of us enjoy connecting with other fans, meeting someone new and discovering you like the same media, dissolving social awkwardness and sparking friendship. There are countless reasons for why we are fans.

Being fascinated by characters who exist outside of the acceptable social and legal norms is not a new phenomenon. In more recent years, extremely flawed protagonists have become especially popular, as Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerway discuss in their book, *Horrible White People: Gender, Genre, and Television’s Precarious Whiteness*. They explore the type of popular television that centralizes deeply flawed protagonists, focusing on shows that “proliferated after the Great Recession and peaked between 2014 and 2016... they star mostly White actors. Most of them also engage directly with discourses of liberal political progressivism and racial inequality, albeit from the distinctly White perspective of their main characters” (4). The authors explain that ‘horrible’ is a:

purposefully broad, intentionally provocative term and refers to the characters’ attitudes and behaviors as well as to the ‘cringe’ response they might induce in viewers... their ‘horrible’ behaviors are often shocking, revolting, or purposefully heinous in part to stand out in a sea of ‘too much TV’... and in part to appear progressive by challenging dominant norms of civility, gendered decorum, and middle-classness. (6)

While Nygaard and Lagerway employ a fairly strict definition, their book draws attention to the fact that there are a significant number of popular shows that feature protagonists who are indeed, in one way or another, horrible, such as *Broad City* (2014) or *Fleabag* (2016) as the authors discuss, or *Succession* (2018) and *Veep* (2012). These characters' Whiteness is also an important factor in why they are allowed to be horrible or able to push societal boundaries. These characters are awful, but they exist within the safety of being a part of the dominant group in the socio-political hierarchy. By showing yet another White perspective, these shows are not pushing any boundaries too far.

In my own time spent in online fandom, I have come to see the disturbing pattern of fellow fans obsessing over characters played by attractive White actors and ignoring, excusing, or praising their characters' horrible actions. The reaction to Tom Hiddleston's Loki in the 2012 *Avengers* film was one of adoration by fans. He has become such a fan favorite that his character went from being a villain intent on enslaving the human race to a reluctant anti-hero, shown as almost harmless, over the course of his appearances in various Marvel Cinematic Universe films. His appearance, in fact, was most definitely a factor in this change; in addition to being known as a very talented actor, Hiddleston is a known heartthrob and his attractiveness carried over into his character.

I am most certainly not the only one to notice this trend. In blogger and fandom analyst Stitch's (online pseudonym) article, "*In Fandom, All Villains Aren't Treated Equally*," they argue that fans favor venerating and redeeming White male villains who have committed atrocities over appreciating and exploring villains played by non-White/non-male actors. They write, "For a

villain played by any other kind of performer, fandom shuts down any attempts at redemption arcs or nuanced readings or even super stanning, calling the characters problematic and dredging up their bad behavior in a way that they just don't do for white male villains." For people who don't spend much time in fandom spaces, this statement may seem surprising, but for those of us who do participate in online fandom, this is a familiar statement. Stitch focuses on villains in huge blockbuster films like Marvel Cinematic Universe releases and Star Wars, but the observations they make about those characters are applicable to many characters outside of these franchises. They share that they have watched the Star Wars fandom "constantly [portray Kylo Ren] as the secret protagonist of the current trilogy, a character whose violence is always glossed over because he just can't help himself," and how they do the "same thing for Armitage Hux, a character who is literally and obviously a Nazi parallel. All while writing off the Black male hero of the film as comedic relief or as a selfish figure who can't stop lying – and is *clearly* more awful than any of the film's actual (but totally misunderstood) villains because they think he's obsessive and creepy towards his own best friend." To this day, Rey/Kylo Ren and Hux/Kylo Ren are by far the most popular ships written about on Archive of Our Own, featuring in almost ninety percent of the 69K fanfictions within the Star Wars prequel trilogy fandom. It is not just an exploration of the characters on their own that dominate the fandom space, but specifically the characters imagined in romantic/sexual storylines.

In Rukmini Pande's *Squee From the Margins*, she observes that:

scholars who are interested in the fandom around the critically acclaimed and cult hit television show *Hannibal* (2012–15) are free to concentrate their analysis on its

operationalization of universal tropes regarding horror, monstrosity, and cannibalism, without needing to acknowledge the fact of their deep racialization... What has not been registered so far in this interest is any acknowledgment of the fact that Hannibal's whiteness is at the heart of the narrative's ability to aestheticize the aforementioned taboos... In examining the fan work around Hannibal as grounded in the exploration of universal horror tropes, these discussions inevitably elide the fact that these tropes are specifically white, with their subversiveness only evident under such conditions. Hannibal fandom's subversiveness thus depends on the ways in which white crime and white evil are considered almost inherently worthy of exploration and nuance in a way that is simply not available for nonwhite characters in similar molds. (197-198)

The fan works themselves about *Hannibal* on Archive of Our Own are dominated by the ship Hannigram, between the two main characters, Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham, with approximately seventy-five percent of the fanfictions featuring this ship. This focus makes more sense for *Hannibal* than it does for *Star Wars*, as the entirety of the show is canonically about the intense relationship between Hannibal and Will. However, as Pande points out, the focus on their relationship and the horror tropes the show uses relies heavily on the fact that Whiteness is treated as a universal experience; their Whiteness is not what is deviating from the norm, so there is no need to examine that Whiteness when analyzing the show.

Pande and Stitch's observations are the foundation of why I want to dive into the topic of how fans treat terribly flawed characters, and in particular White male characters. Understanding how a character, by dint of being a White male, can somehow unlock deeper levels of exploration

of the human psyche within fans (and scholars) can give us a better look at how structured around the hierarchies of racist and patriarchal aestheticism our media landscape truly is. I argue that online fandom spaces feed on and reinforce these racist and patriarchal hierarchies by focusing their attention on their attraction towards White male characters, and that this is most obvious when fandom ignores, apologizes for, or praises the blatantly negative actions or traits of awful White male characters. This behavior within these spaces is a part of a cultural and psychological cycle that internalizes and normalizes acceptance of harm, especially as perpetrated by White men.

II

In this thesis, I intend to dive deeper into fan feelings and actions surrounding several White male characters. I focus on three characters: Joe Goldberg from *You*, Dennis Reynolds from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and Coriolanus Snow from *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. All three of the narratives these characters are in are created with the clear intention of acknowledging and displaying how terrible these characters are. By this I mean that they make choices of their own free will that are shown to be harmful to other characters, and they receive no meaningful or long-lasting sympathy or redemption from the narrative, despite being main characters. In addition, their creators and/or actors have shared that these characters are not meant to be relatable, idolized, or otherwise morally good. *You*, a crime-thriller-drama series, is told from the perspective of Joe Goldberg, and his actions clash with his inner monologue which insists he is a good person. Dennis Reynolds is part of an ensemble comedy cast, and every

character is so horrible that it is difficult to describe anyone as a pro- or antagonist, but easy to agree that they are all awful even if they make us laugh. Coriolanus Snow is a character most people are familiar with as the distant and powerful dictatorial villain of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, but he is the protagonist in this prequel, which is meant to explore how he became the man readers first knew. I also chose these characters because they are visibly fan favorites, characters who I repeatedly came across during my casual time in online fandom spaces, and their fans were pervasive enough to grab my attention.

To examine how fans treat these characters, I am exploring several popular online fandom spaces, primarily Archive of Our Own, Reddit, Tumblr, and YouTube. There is a certain amount of overlap between most fan spaces; for example, the practice of posting compilations of TikToks on YouTube, or of reposting screenshots of tumblr, reddit, or twitter posts to each other.

The website Archive of Our Own was created in 2007 by the Organization for Transformative Works. The OTW is a nonprofit organization founded by fans who believe “fanworks are transformative and that transformative works are legitimate.” On their website, they explain their goal to preserve the history of fanworks, as well as legally and commercially protecting fan creators. They work to foster fan creativity, identity, and community. Commonly known as AO3, it is a collection of works created by fans, primarily in the form of fanfiction (also called “fanfics” or “fics”). Most users are readers, and the most casual way to interact is to give a fic “kudos,” which is AO3’s positive rating button. Readers can also comment on chapters and converse with the fanfic writers. Many writers use “beta readers,” other fans who proofread their fanfics before they publish them to the site.

The history of fanfiction as an expression of fan appreciation and creativity is long, and it is primarily associated with female-identifying fans. Theories abound for why women and other non-men dominate the world of fanfiction, one of which comes from the 1992 work *Textual Poachers*, which hypothesizes that “the reason for such a massive schism between male and female producers is that transformative works represent a medium in which female audience members try to repackage mass-produced media that caters mostly to males in a format that brings them—rather than men—pleasure” (Massey 1.4). One of the most prominent types of fanfiction that seems to bring these fans pleasure involves slash fiction, fanfiction featuring two male characters in a homosexual/romantic relationship (which is also, quite often, explicitly erotic). These pairings (of any combination of gender) are also known as “ships,” and the practice of imagining these characters together is called “shipping.” Again, there are many theories for why this happens, which might partially be because there are millions of fans who participate in this activity, and it is difficult to generalize such a large number of individuals’ behavior. Some of the most popular theories involve the ability for women to explore and reconfigure masculinity, femininity, and gender roles through two male characters; being able to enjoy a sexual scenario that does not subjugate or objectify women, as many porn does; plainly enjoying attractive men in sexual scenarios; and, “many women cite the relationship dynamics between male characters in mass-produced media as a driving force,” because “mass-produced media’s representations of interpersonal relationships between male characters are often very compelling but unexplored on-screen or in text in their canons” (Massey 2.4). Whatever the

reasons, be it a combination of the above or some unmentioned motivation, the result is astronomical publications of fanfiction.

The millions of fanworks are navigable through “tags,” which are words or phrases attached to a work in order to make it searchable and categorize it. The tags that authors attach to their fics range from the fandom name and characters they are writing about, to the type of content within their story, to random thoughts the author wanted to include for people to see as they browse. The fics are categorized by fandom, and within that they are also rated for maturity level. Readers can filter in/out the type of content they wish to see; for example, a reader could search for a fanfiction written within the *Harry Potter* fandom, including the characters Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, with a M/M relationship, specifically the relationship Harry Potter/Draco Malfoy, rated Teen and Up Audiences, over 5k words, taking place in a Coffee Shop Alternate Universe. In this way, AO3 has created a streamlined way for fans to find the exact type of content they want to consume. Unlike “normal” media, readers generally know exactly what is going to happen in a fic, and they know it will most likely satisfy their desire.

In order to gather my data on AO3, I used the filtering system to sort the fics within each fandom by hits, meaning views/reads, in descending order. I focus on the top ten fics with the most hits, and discuss the tags and tropes that reappear and seem to be the most popular.

Founded in 2005, reddit is one of the most-visited sites in the world. Its ‘about’ page declares that it is “home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection.” Users, called ‘redditors,’ can create specific forums about whatever topic they want, which then gather a community of folks who want to share in that topic. Redditors can

interact by creating posts - which can then be up- or down-voted, depending on public opinion - and commenting. Forums are moderated by administrators, fellow redditors, and usually contain a list of community guidelines in order to maintain a pleasant environment. There are over 73 million users active daily, with over 100K active communities, and over sixteen billion posts and comments. The forums range from every imaginable topic, and within the forums are even more specific types of conversations occurring. Here, fans can create forums for their selected media, where they can post memes or other humorous content, posit theories, and prompt discussions. According to the Foundation Marketing team, the most popular reddit posts are those under 120 characters, posts with questions receive the most comments, and posts without questions receive more upvotes. They also report that forty-two percent of internet users 18-24 use reddit, and that the reddit population leans slightly more male than female (Simmonds).

Tumblr is a blogging platform that is well-known as an online gathering place for fandoms. On its 'about' page, it shares that it was founded in 2007, and that there are over 595 million blogs. Similar to AO3, it uses "tags" to categorize the posts users make, and the tags range in the same way from literal references to the content to random or extra thoughts the user wanted to add. While the tag system is specific and used by most users regularly, the search function on tumblr is infamous for being almost entirely ineffectual. Therefore, unless one reblogs and tags a post accordingly to one's own page, it is extremely easy to lose a post forever. Curating one's own experience on tumblr is one of users' favorite features, being able to choose which blogs and tags one follows and blocks, but it is still much less controllable than finding content on a site like AO3 or reddit. The posts on tumblr range wildly in length and content.

Generally speaking, though, the most popular tumblr posts tend to be fandom-related and/or humorous. Users can DM each other, reblog and add to other's posts, and comment.

To gather my data on these sites, I found it more difficult to sort posts by popularity from all time, partially because of the sites' limitations, and partially because many of the most popular posts within a fandom are not entirely relevant to my thesis. Instead, I spent time within each fandom space and focused on sentiments that were repeated often by multiple fans, or had received a high number of likes/reposts/upvotes.

I also briefly reference the site Letterboxd, "the social network for film lovers," which allows users to track the films they watch, rate them, and share reviews. The reviews range from traditional in-depth analysis of the film, or a one-liner similar to a Tweet. For this site, I sorted the reviews by most popular in descending order.

In the following chapters, I introduce each character and the background of the media they appear in. Using the types of online fan engagement outlined above, I determine fans' general feelings towards the characters as well as specific fantasies that they engage in for each one. In exploring these fandom spaces I analyze how these characters are treated, and what this treatment implies for broader real-world social interactions.

Joe Goldberg: Everything I Do, I Do For You This Thesis

I

When it comes to fictional men who do awful things and yet manage to maintain a fanbase, Joe Goldberg is a perfect model. Not only is he an example of the type of character I am examining, but how his fans treat him mirrors a phenomenon that occurs in reality; real life criminals, including serial killers, convicted of violent and vile acts, receiving admiration and attempts to gain their attention and romantic/sexual favor. Perhaps the most famous of these men is Ted Bundy, to whom Joe Goldberg is repeatedly compared. It is a logical comparison, as there are plenty of parallels to be drawn between Joe Goldberg and the real-life serial killer. Both garner an intense fascination from the world, not only from the repulsiveness of their crimes, but because of their appearances. It is difficult, in fact, to hear someone talk about either man without also mentioning how handsome and charming they are, and how at odds this is with their brutal actions. Many fans of the show openly declare that Joe's attractiveness is the reason that they like him, and it is well-known that Bundy received much romantic attention from enamored women while he was imprisoned.

Perhaps one of the most important similarities between these men is that both were/are presented to the public through the medium of television. Bundy's trial in 1979 was one of the earliest to be televised nationally and garnered a huge audience who followed it in arguably a very similar way to how viewers today consume *You*, including an abundance of young women who would gather in the courthouse. Interviews with those young women were also televised, where they shared their magnetic feelings towards Bundy and how charming he was, and how his

appearance caused them to question his guilt. If people are so willing to question the guilt and sympathize with these men, as long as they are attractive and on their screens, what effect does that have on our daily lives?

The creators of *You* intentionally make Joe relatable to audiences in order to add complexity to both the character and audiences' feelings towards him. However, fans respond to this by arguing about whether Joe is good or bad, thus flattening character, and/or giving in to their attraction towards him and romanticizing the parts of him that are deeply negative.

II

The crime thriller series *You* that began airing in 2018 is based off of Caroline Kepnes' book of the same title, published in 2014. It is told in the first person, from the point of view of Joe Goldberg. Through voice-over narration the series is able to preserve the audience's access to Joe's inner voice. Played by Penn Badgley, Joe is an obsessive stalker and serial killer who believes his actions are always righteous in the name of love. In a Patrick Bateman-esque manner, his actions and words often contrast starkly with what he is actually thinking, coming across as a very charming, considerate, and genuine guy, all the while manipulating, kidnapping, hating, and murdering the people around him. Unlike Bateman, Joe does not accept what he is and continually tries to convince himself (and therefore the reader/viewer) that he is not a bad person.

The audience first meets him working at a bookstore in New York City, and follows as he stalks and manipulates a woman named Beck into falling in love with him. At the end of the

season, she finally discovers who he really is, and he murders her before escaping scot-free. During the second season, he begins the process again, falling in love with a woman named Love. Instead of killing her, it is revealed that not only is she also a murderer who is extremely similar to him, but she is pregnant with his child. He spares her, and he spends the third season trying to get out of his homicidal marriage with her while stalking yet another woman, Marianne. Finally, he kills Love and gives his infant son to a child-less couple whom he knows will care for him, before faking his death and fleeing to London. Yet again, he focuses on another woman, Kate, but he is being tormented by an unknown serial killer who seems to be trying to frame him for a series of high-profile murders. In a plot twist, it is revealed that this other killer has been Joe hallucinating all along, his consciousness splitting into two; one who stalks but is attempting to avoid violence and death at all costs, and the other who has been keeping his former lover Marianne captive and murdering everyone. At the end of the season, Joe “kills” his other self, and is now married to his new lover, Kate, who is also one of the richest and most powerful people in the world.

III

Ironically, when Kepnes was first writing Joe she had misgivings about labeling him a serial killer. In an interview, she explains she felt, “He’s not a serial killer, he meets these terrible people and has these awful thoughts, but he’s very sensitive” (Baker). Kepnes’ statement reflects an argument that reappears with frequency within online fandom discussions; the question of whether or not Joe is a psychopath, which will be discussed further later in this chapter. While

his original creator most definitely has sympathy for him, his actor has a different feeling.

Badgley is known for reminding his fans that Joe is not to be rooted for. In one interview with him, he says, “Joe is never going to be happy—because he’s a *murderer*! That’s where I feel like we all get a little lost, but actually it’s right there in front of you. He’s never going to be happy or accept anyone, end of story. And yet somehow it’s not the end of the story, and people keep watching” (Adrian-Diaz). In another, he answered the question “why is Joe Goldberg likable?” with “Well, because I play him. Probably not very well. Meaning, if he was a real serial killer, maybe he wouldn’t be *that* likable. It’s my fault... and the writers” (WIRED). Badgley’s perspective is that fans of the show should most definitely not be fans of Joe, that they should hate him and root for his downfall. Unfortunately for Badgley, Joe does have a likability and a relatability that fans sympathize with, and he acknowledges that to some degree it is intentional on the part of the show’s creators.

You uses a number of strategies to convince audiences to sympathize with Joe. For one, constantly being in his head and hearing his perspective automatically makes viewers more likely to sympathize with him, as the “spectator is blinded by familiarity with him, and perceives others as morally worse” (Vaage 90). Even if we do not initially like Joe, it has been shown that “repeated exposure increased the ratings of all stimuli - even those that were rated as unlikable originally” (Keen et al. 134). When an audience likes a character, just as when we like someone we know in real life, it becomes harder to condemn them, even if we know they have done something bad. In this way, *You* sets up the audience from the very first moment to empathize with Joe.

There is also a level of humorous relatability in Joe's inner monologue, especially because he often finds himself in awkward social situations that most people can empathize with. The humor helps to break down our guard, allowing us to begin accepting his version of events. One video on YouTube is even titled "joe goldberg being my favorite comedian [sic]," with 764K views, and consists of clips from the show that are particularly ironic or funny. The comments section is full of people echoing their favorite funny moments from the show, but there are a decent number that are also supportive of Joe. In one notable example, one user comments, "Joe's a decent person when he's not killing people. I learned from this series that it's ideally best not to be the focal object of a stalker's obsessive limerence. It's better being friend zoned with someone like Joe. He's actually supportive of everyone else but his romantic partners." This comment has 1.3K likes. It raises the immediate question; can someone be a decent person if they are also a serial killer and a manipulative stalker? These fans feel that if Joe were not a criminal, he would actually be a good person. His judgmental attitude towards everyone around him and his extreme narcissism do not seem to be deterrents.

Another user's comment lists a number of reasons why they think the Joe in the series is not as bad as the version in the books, saying:

he's the same guy who protected Ellie Alves, saved Claudia and her son Paco, insured [sic] his son a happy childhood by giving him up to people he knew would give him one, sacrificed his freedom by letting Candace lock him into his own cage, and knowingly threw out the spare key had for it to [sic] willingly face the consequences of his lifelong serial killing spree.

This handful of fairly good deeds seem enough to cancel out the guilt for his worst crimes.

Rather than acknowledge that Joe is a complex character who is capable of both good and bad, comments like these attempt to fit him into one of the two categories, flattening his complexity and making it more comfortable for audience members to enjoy sympathizing with him.

The other characters are also crucial to helping us accept Joe. In every season, Joe finds himself enmeshed in a group of people who embody exaggerated stereotypes about aspects of modern culture. They are shallow, vapid, self-absorbed, usually rich, and frankly annoying. Often, the viewers find themselves aligned with Joe in their opinions of the other characters. These types of characters have been referred to as “contrast characters.” In the original definition, coined by Vaage, contrast characters’ main function is to make “antiheroes morally preferable,” although they “do not have to be the greater of two evils to be perceived as such by the chosen point-of-view” (215). (Almost) none of the other characters are stalkers or serial killers like Joe, they are just obnoxious. However, because the audience is in Joe’s mind, that fact makes them *seem* worse. An example of this in the show, as observed by Carlisle Lynch in “Another Likable Serial Killer: Fans’ Representation of ‘You’s’ Joe Goldberg Through Memes,” is the comparison between the season one character Peach Salinger and Joe. Lynch notes that Joe “looks down on Peach... because she uses her last name to get anything she wants,” and that he is “not materialistic, and this sets him apart from his serial killer counterparts. The fact that Joe appears to be a simple man who doesn’t have social media or care about what he looks like also plays into the reason why his audience views him as an antihero” (7-8). Joe’s moments of humanity, including his love of books and his genuine care for childrens’ wellbeing, all draw us in, helping

us to forget what he is until we are forcibly reminded by seeing him commit another crime. Again, imagining Joe as “better” than the other characters allows audiences to agree with Joe while not feeling uncomfortable with the fact that they are identifying with a bad person.

In a series of comments on a YouTube video titled “Joe From You Is Too Creepy,” a compilation of some of Joe’s most disturbing moments, a number of fans express their dislike of Beck, the woman he stalks and seduces in season one. A couple users share, “I tried to like her. I think she’s boring,” “I didn’t like her when she cheated Joe [sic],” and “Sameeee, so when she died i eas happy with it [sic].” Some comments take it further, one saying, “Soo i think joes obsession with Beck and all of that aint right but Beck is just a girl who wants someone to do everything for her nothing really does what she want and with all that love that Joe gave her she cheated on him and [I] am soo happy that he killed her she just boring and really annoying [sic],” while another complains, “She was so annoying and made so many stupid decisions and then got mad at Joe for like nothing!” Even if these fans felt that Joe did not entirely do right by her, they were still excited by her murder and sympathized with Joe. Part of this may come from the fact that there is an “attraction [in] the enjoyable experience of empathizing with someone in power” (Vaage 90). Joe had power over Beck, and he exerted it when he killed her, which simultaneously fulfilled these fans’ wish that she would get some sort of comeuppance for her perceived wrongdoings, as well as disappear from the show. Despite being a victim in every sense of the word, Beck’s death felt justified to these fans because they were tired of enduring her presence.

The fan base does have a certain self-awareness, though. One commenter responded to the hate Beck was receiving by arguing that the show was making a point by making Beck

unlikable, that “society tends to only sympathize with victims who are sympathetic and how basic human decency and rights shouldn’t be ‘earned’ by certain actions or character traits, it should be the default.” Fans repeatedly discuss how Badgley’s acting and the show’s writing do a very good job at distracting the audience, and frequently they agree that Joe is most definitely a bad person, and they are just fascinated by how the story is unfolding and playing with their feelings.

However, online discourse repeatedly returns to the argument surrounding Joe being “good or bad,” although not always using those exact words. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, whether or not Joe is a psychopath is a very common discussion among fans. Over and over, the fact that Joe seems to experience empathy and remorse is brought up as a reason for him being unable to fit the definition of ‘psychopath.’ The implication within these arguments is that it would be okay for fans to relate to and sympathize with Joe if he *isn’t* a psychopath, and that it would not be okay if he *is*. These discussions tend to avoid the nuance of the truth; that Joe experiences emotions and appears to have some form of moral code while simultaneously being a narcissist who enacts extreme harm against others.

IV

It is interesting to consider the gaze as it applies to *You* and its fans. As discussed in Xinyan Yu’s “Construction of Mutual Gaze: A Review of Studies on Male Gaze, Female Gaze, and the Mutual Gaze,” ‘the gaze’ is “more than just looking, and it implies a psychological

relationship of power in which the gazer is superior to the object being gazed at” (2). As a viewer, one is seeing everything from Joe’s perspective - literally experiencing his gaze, and how he turns it on the women he obsesses over. According to some perspectives, the male gaze is “reinforced by cinematic male text whereas even if the text is written by a woman, she is unaware that she has also internalized the male gaze” (Al-Ghabra 29). When we put this perspective in conversation with the original author, Kepnes’, statement in an interview that she “completely understand[s] people who romanticize the story and look the other way,” and that she “was writing her fantasy boyfriend who was also ‘a bit of a nightmare,’” it becomes plausible to believe that *You* perpetuates as well as critiques the male gaze (Baker). It enforces a White male heterosexual ideal, wherein the man exerts a power and dominance over others, particularly over a female partner.

Besides Badgley’s talented acting, it is his (and therefore Joe’s) appearance that affects fans’ feelings quite often. On the same video last discussed, someone commented, “The thing with Joe is I don’t know if he should rot in hell or be invited to my bedroom.” They received a number of comments agreeing, including one that declared, “girl! same defo [sic] bedroom and then just stalk me lol.” There are hundreds of fan-edited videos on YouTube as well as other social media sites like Instagram and TikTok that focus on Joe’s physical appearance, emphasizing his sexual appeal to other fans. Underneath these edits are comments like, “THE PERFECT KILLER,” “i know he killed 18 people but hear me out” followed by heart eyes emojis, and “Joe Goldberg being charismatic as always.” In these spaces, discussions of whether

or not being attracted to Joe is morally acceptable are rare, replaced by pure appreciation for how handsome he is.

Beyond just his physical appearance, his behaviors are treated as being attractive as well. In their study of the memes shared online about *You*, Lynch notes a post captioned ““he be killing people and still able to text back. Don’t settle for less ladies,”” and uses it as an example of “the way that fans and viewers romanticize Joe” (13). Although the original poster and the many people who retweeted it (including the official *You* account) were likely mostly focused on the humor and irony of the caption, sentiments like these are still romanticizing.

Fans also express their desire for Joe, and their subsequent idealization of him, in fanfiction. At the time of this thesis there are 455 total fics written under the *You* (2018) tag on Archive of Our Own. The top ten fics, sorted by hits, are all focused on sexual relationships, although there is a variety of ships instead of a clear dominant favorite.

The fic with the most hits, called “I Saw You,” is told from Joe’s point of view in the same style as the show, but instead of following Beck, his object is you, the reader. You are treated to being idolized by Joe in his inner monologue, and the description of you is kept intentionally vague but flattering, with no name given, so although you as the reader may not fit exactly with the you in the fic, you can still imagine yourself as this person whom Joe finds mesmerizing. Throughout, Joe is characteristically entranced with you, extremely attracted to you, attentive to details about your life, and takes action to protect you from harmful situations. He also murders your mother and kidnaps someone who you end up killing in self-defense,

effectively trapping you in the relationship forever, even if you are happy with the outcome. In a twisted way, the fic has a happy ending, for Joe at least.

The most basic takeaway of *You* is the horror of having someone stalk you, and realizing just how much of your life is available for anyone to access. Being the “you” in *You* means that you are going to have your life examined and judged, be manipulated and lied to, and almost definitely killed. You are not supposed to want to be “you.” Despite this, “I Saw You” has twice as many hits as the next popular fic, 35K compared to 17K. It reflects the many comments fans leave on videos of Joe declaring that they wish he was stalking them. Ultimately, in this fic and these fans’ minds, Joe’s obsessive behavior is seen as flattering and desirable rather than horrific and controlling. It is not that difficult to see how fans of the show may be enamored with the idea of a handsome man willing to do anything for them, and so Joe’s creepy and criminal behavior is thusly overshadowed by how attracted to and in love with you he is, and how much he cares about your happiness and well-being.

In this type of fic, the man Joe really is is visible in the same way he is in the show; he remains in control of every situation, ready to manipulate and kill to maintain that control. There is another type of fic, though, where he is written to be just as hapless as the rest of us are. “Bottom Joe Goldberg” is a popular tag, and among the top ten fics are the tags “almost innocent Joe Goldberg,” “Joe is really trying,” “soft Joe Goldberg,” and “idiots in love.” This characterization is similar to the one Joe in the show wants us to believe about him, and what he believes about himself - that he is charming and genuine, a hopeless romantic, and maybe a little innocent in his sweetness. This makes him appear harmless, and excuses his behavior just as Joe

excuses it for himself; he believes himself to be forced into difficult situations that make him lie and kill, but really he is a good guy. These fics agree with him, reinforce that image of him, despite the pile of bodies as blatant evidence to the contrary.

V

You is a show that does its best to touch on a variety of contemporary issues, including White privilege, misogyny, digital privacy, and many others. While its intentions are to be self-aware and to critique these topics, the online fandom often steers away from these complex discussions, instead attempting to flatten Joe into being an overall good or net bad person/psychopath. There is an unwillingness to accept the nuance of his character. The fans' attraction to him also causes the romanticization of him and his actions, including the manipulative, controlling, and dangerous ones. When fans do this, they are internalizing their acceptance of people like Joe. Reality contains, unfortunately, men like Joe. In this fictional world, the audience is given the chance to understand him, to find him relatable, and to question their own judgment. The fantasies that these fans construct using this fiction imagine him to be successful, and for him to be worthy of the love and sympathy that he feels he deserves. What these fans believe about Joe gets becomes one of the things they draw on when confronted with how to react to a real person like Joe. Although Joe is a fictional character, he is part of a cycle of reality and fantasy that reflect and reinforce our culture.

Coriolanus Snow: Snow Lands On Top (Of Me)

I

Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy was a cultural phenomenon in both book form and blockbuster films, grossing over \$3 billion in box office sales and selling over a million copies. Her story of Katniss Everdeen, a girl plucked from poverty and oppression to become the symbol of a resistance captivated audiences worldwide. Her fans were united in her hatred of the ruthless President Snow, who orchestrated and enforced the Games and the continued oppression of the nation of Panem.

Ten years after the third book in the trilogy was released, Collins published *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, a prequel taking place 65 years before the first *Hunger Games* novel. It follows an eighteen year old Coriolanus Snow living in the Capitol in the years after the war with the districts. Far from being president, Snow and his family have lost all of their wealth and are barely hanging onto their home or able to feed themselves. He is desperate to hide his family's disgrace and maintain the Snow name and power, his eyes set on winning the Plinth Prize which will allow him to attend the prestigious Academy. In order to win the prize, he must successfully mentor a tribute throughout the tenth Hunger Games. At this time, the Games are poorly run and barely watched, and the sinister Dr. Gaul wants the student mentors to help increase entertainment and viewership. The tribute Snow is assigned to is the girl from District 12, Lucy Gray Baird, who has a personality and voice that captures the Capitol's attention. Snow manages to convince Lucy Gray to work with him to help get her through the Games, and they develop romantic feelings for each other. Lucy Gray wins and is sent back alive to District 12, but Snow

does not receive the Plinth Prize. Instead, he is exiled to be a Peacekeeper in the districts as a punishment for cheating to help Lucy Gray win. In District 12 Snow and Lucy Gray are reunited and able to pursue their budding romance. At the same time, Snow's childhood friend Sejanus Plinth is working with district rebels, accidentally involving Snow, who kills the mayor's daughter. Snow betrays Sejanus to the Capitol, leading to Sejanus' execution. In order to escape persecution, Snow and Lucy Gray plan to run away. During their escape in the woods, Snow finds the murder weapon with his fingerprints on it, the last piece of physical evidence that links him to the mayor's daughter's death. He destroys it, and realizes that Lucy Gray is the only witness to his crime left alive. At the same time, she realizes that Snow's loyalty lies with the Capitol, and she flees from him. He returns to the Capitol where he is taken under the wing of Dr. Gaul and is adopted by Sejanus' parents, who know nothing of his involvement in their son's death. His family's wealth and good name reinstated, the book ends with Snow set on his path to becoming President.

In writing this prequel, Collins was interested in exploring the beginnings of the Hunger Games that the trilogy readers know, as well as exploring why Snow is the way he is. In an interview about the book she said she wanted to "plant the seeds" for who Snow in the trilogy was (Scholastic). She explains, "Snow's authoritarian convictions grew out of the experiences of his childhood...but given all that, you still need to leave room for Snow's personality. Is he a product of nature or nurture? Everyone of his generation experienced trauma, loss, and deprivation. And yet Sejanus, Tigris, Lucy Gray, and Lysistrata turned out very differently. For whatever reason, Snow has a very controlling personality. Then he experiences one of the most

out-of-control emotions, falling in love. It turns out to be a bad combination.” While *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* did not receive the same level of acclaim and popularity that the trilogy did, fans of the series were still very interested in the backstory Collins had crafted. It made President Snow a more multi-dimensional villain and gave more context for the Games and the world of Panem in general.

The book is told in first person from Snow’s point of view, which is vital to understanding his motives. He is very focused on appearances, and his goal is always to appear favorable to the most powerful people. Every act of kindness he performs comes from a place of selfish desire rather than a genuine want to help. He helps Lucy Gray and treats the tributes like people, not because he believes what is happening to them is wrong and they deserve better, but because he wants to gain Lucy Gray’s trust and the popularity of the Capitol viewers so he can win. He likes Lucy Gray because he feels she is his, and her talent helps him win. He is polite and friendly to Sejanus because his father is incredibly powerful and the donor of the prize he is hoping to receive. When given the opportunity to gain power by betraying the people who care about him, he does so, sending Sejanus to the gallows and turning on Lucy Gray to silence her. Hearing Snow’s inner voice lets us know that the charming, seemingly-caring boy struggling through a difficult world is actually ruthlessly ambitious and calculating. The film adaptation, released in 2023 and starring Tom Blyth, does not retain Coriolanus’ inner monologue. The audience thus loses the insight that they would have if they were to read the book, and are presented with the same charming, earnest-seeming boy that the other characters are.

With the casting of Blyth, almost all discussion of Snow's character was immediately buried under a lustful appreciation for his appearance. However, even fans of the book who have a better understanding of Snow's true nature participated in the adoration of Snow and the romanticization of his relationship with Lucy Gray both before and after the casting was revealed. I argue that fans online objectify Snow by focusing on his attractiveness regardless of the extent of their knowledge of his actions, distracting from nuanced discussions of his character, as well as romanticize abusive power dynamics in heterosexual relationships rooted in sexism and gender roles.

II

Tom Blyth's version of Snow receives a completely different reaction than Donald Sutherland's received during the original trilogy. Instead of his actions, his appearance is the main trait that fans focus on. The dialogue of the film itself references Snow's appearance, with other characters mentioning how handsome he is or calling him pretty. While fans still acknowledge that he is awful, there is the ever-present 'but' - he is so attractive *but* they know they cannot root for him. The conversations also differ slightly from the ones fans of *You* have; whereas fans of *You* often praise Badgley's acting for bringing nuance to the character in addition to his appearance, fans of *TBOSAS* almost exclusively refer to Blyth's attractiveness as the reason they struggle to accept his actions.

In "The Construction of the Mutual Gaze," Yu argues:

In contrast to the traditional media's overemphasis on 'muscularity,' 'manliness,' and other masculine qualities expected by a patriarchal society and its domination of power suppression, 'businesses are using fresh meat' and other white and tender male celebrities in accordance with the needs of female fans. The male celebrities are made according to the precise demands of female fans, resulting from the commodification of women's needs... The female gaze has been undermined by capital. The female gaze has been manipulated by capital. Capital aims to stimulate women's consumption, turning men into objects produced in the consumer society, symbolic commodities that cater to women's consumption aesthetics. (4)

This analysis echoes a similar argument in Ana Fazekas' study of desire and the female gaze:

While making the gaze *female* makes it visible, as the *male gaze* is naturalized in cultural perception, the point is also that, if the constituted *female gaze* is only the *male gaze* with changed direction, there is not much *toppling the patriarchy* at play, only a role change in the same choreography. (6)

What these authors describe is how casting an actor like Blyth is a deliberate attempt to cater to heterosexual women's sexuality and desire. The female gaze is focused on Snow; however, just as the male gaze objectifies women and female characters, reducing them to objects of visual pleasure, in this flipped version Snow has also been reduced to an object of visual pleasure. The complexity of his character has been overshadowed and largely ignored by the intense attraction that fans have for him.

Youtube and TikTok are full of fan-made edits of Blyth as Snow. One such video is titled “thirsting over young coriolanus snow,” with 97K views. The video’s creator includes the caption, “these casting directors know they’re foul for casting tom blyth as snow.” Predictably, the comment section is full of fans thirsting over young Snow: “Lucy Grey is such a silly goose, honestly who cares if he killed people... he’s so fine;” “Bro Lucy Gray is so strong. I would have folded fr;” and “okay but snow with the the buzz is so hsjenskosiwbend [sic].” Another popular video, titled “Coriolanus Snow TikTok Edits That Make Me Want To Become A Snow Defender” with 39K views, also has some revealing comments: “I don’t care if he was money hungry, I don’t care if he was a psycho, I don’t care if he evicted his own [cousin] out of the capitol, and I don’t care if he tried to kill someone he was in love with, he is still the sexiest man alive;” and “why did i immediattely [sic] come out of this film a snow defender lmao. I literally cannot. I have no morals.” The last comment received the reply, “Morals don’t apply to liking (young) [sic] snow lol. He’s just so gorgeous I don’t blame you.”

Even if these fans do not actually believe what they say, that Lucy Gray should stay with him, or that morals don’t apply to him, their comments reveal the important fact that his appearance is a major distraction from taking the story, and him, seriously. In the comments of one TikTok edit, a fan wrote, “I refuse to believe that him and president snow are the same man.” On the film review site Letterboxd, one of the most popular reviews is, “if villain bad why sexy,” with 13K likes. Another review shares, “even when snow was young and hot, he still a completely manipulator son of a bitch,” with 2.5K likes. These comments are humorous, but they

still betray the genuine attraction and adoration of Snow, and the influence of aestheticism upon the viewers.

In the article “Rooting for the Bad Guy: Psychological Perspectives,” the authors Richard Keen, Monica McCoy, and Elizabeth Powell, discuss this influence in regards to casting villains: the repeated use of physically attractive people to play the role of the villain taps into another basic human tendency - the association of what is beautiful with what is good. In numerous studies, beautiful persons have been given higher ratings on measures of social desirability, intelligence, success, happiness, persuasiveness, and potency, than their less attractive counterparts... physical attractiveness, along with strength and humor, was one of the best predictors of which characters were liked. (Keen et al. 135)

Beauty is perceived as an indication of moral good, and Snow is extremely beautiful. Thus, his harmful choices and any defects in his personality are obfuscated by desire.

III

One of the other fan behaviors following the release of the film is a romanticization of Snow and Lucy Gray’s relationship. Rather than being viewed as toxic, fans perceive it as romantic and tragic. These fans do not acknowledge the abusive elements present within the relationship, although neither does the film. In the book, one of the most revealing passages about how Snow feels about Lucy Gray begins chapter twelve:

His girl. His. Here in the Capitol, it was a given that Lucy Gray belonged to him, as if she’d had no life before her name was called out at the reaping. Even that sanctimonious

Sejanus believed she was something he could trade for. If that wasn't ownership, what was? With her song, Lucy Gray had repudiated all that by featuring a life that had nothing to do with him, and a great deal to do with someone else. Someone she referred to as "lover," no less. And while he had no claim on her heart — he barely knew the girl! — he didn't like the idea of anyone else having it either. Although the song had been a clear success, he felt somehow betrayed by it. Even humiliated. (Collins 137)

This moment does not have an equivalent in the film, nor does the audience get Coriolanus' internal crisis at the end of the book when he decides to abandon Lucy Gray in the woods on her own because he hates the woods and has the chance to return to his old life. Instead, the film plays into the tragic love story, particularly with the line, "It's the things we love most that destroy us," which President Snow delivers at the end, as a reference to the original trilogy in which he tells Katniss the same thing.

In video edits fans make of them there is typically a sad or bittersweet love song as the background. One such video with 34K views puts Snow and Lucy Gray to the song "Arcade" by Duncan Laurence. The lyrics, particularly "loving you is a losing game," emphasize the star-crossed lovers aspect of their relationship, torn apart by circumstance rather than the choices that Snow makes. The comments express fans' disappointment that the couple are not able to be together, feeling that Snow and Lucy Gray would be happy in a different life.

Fans are able to explore this different life within fanfiction. Of about 2.2K fics written under *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* tag on AO3, most – well over 60% – were published or updated after the film was released. One of the top ten fics with the most hits includes the tags

“morally ambiguous character,” “complicated relationship,” “sugar daddy,” and “possessive behavior.” The first two tags are generous, if technically correct, descriptions of Snow and his relationship with Lucy Gray, while the second two indicate that their power imbalance and Snow’s control of Lucy Gray is seen as an enticing positive. Multiple of the top ten fics’ plots involving this ship focus on a version of events where Lucy Gray is forced into a relationship with Snow as a “reward” or “prize” for him, and they go through a Beauty and the Beast-type love story. Approximately the same number of fics within the top ten that have the Coriolanus Snow/Lucy Gray Baird relationship have the Coriolanus Snow/Sejanus Plinth tag. Canonically, Sejanus views Coriolanus as a sympathetic friend who agrees that the Capitol’s treatment of the districts is wrong, while Coriolanus only tolerates Sejanus and is friendly to him because his father is a wealthy and powerful man in the Capitol. Coriolanus betrays Sejanus to Dr. Gaul, and his actions directly result in Sejanus’ death. Sejanus goes to his death firmly believing that Coriolanus was his true friend who did all he could, which is what his parents also believe when they take Coriolanus in as a thank you for his loyalty to their son. Regardless of the canon, their relationship is rewritten into a sexual/romantic one in slash fiction. While their dynamic has less of a power imbalance than Lucy Gray and Snow’s, the fan writers still acknowledge “unhealthy relationship” and other toxic traits, but include them as a net positive to the romance.

The most popular fic with 60k hits, titled, “Safe and Close at Hand,” by user framboise, follows Lucy Gray and Snow’s relationship following the games, where she is gifted to him and they enter into a romantic and sexual relationship. The story explores the tension and toxic elements of their relationship, with Snow having complete power over Lucy Gray as she is

isolated in the Capitol. During their first explicit sexual encounter, their dynamic is summed up quite neatly with the line, “she is, his manner seems to say, his prey and he the predator.”

Although the fic acknowledges the toxic and controlling aspects of Coriolanus’ relationship with Lucy Gray, overall these are treated as positives. In one of the chapters, Lucy Gray gets sick which sends Coriolanus into an overly-protective spiral. In the last chapter, Coriolanus commits his first assassination for her, with the promise that he will do so again. His power and control over her are seen as desirable qualities; her lack of freedom is bearable and even enjoyable because she has a man who keeps her in luxury and safety.

This type of Beauty and the Beast plot reflects stereotypical ideas about gender roles and heterosexual relationships. It is observed in “Rooting for the Bad Guy” that:

The bad guys we root for...are almost universally attractive. Further, most (sane) people probably do not consider fictional characters when making long-term relationship plans.

Thus it is easy to see how the driving force behind a fantasy ‘fling’ with a bad guy is his attractiveness and swagger, rather than his niceness. (Keen et al. 140)

However, even if it is a character’s physical appearance that is what initially draws fans into their fantasy, there is still a real-world effect that this has. Al-Ghabra’s summarization of this recycled fairy tale is that, “the moral of these stories is that ‘they live happily ever after’ despite the abusiveness... today these ill-disposed messages are so deeply embedded into popular culture that it is hard to pinpoint them because they are also circulating under systems of neoliberalism and whiteness” (30). In addition, they argue that these types of stories “reinforce masculinity, gender and systems of domination and normalize violence towards women” (35). While the film

does not give Lucy Gray and Coriolanus a happy ending, fans express their desire for their relationship while also revealing their own internalized idealization of toxic masculinity and abusive/controlling behaviors within relationships. This fantasy is emphasized over and over as the fics within the fandom repeat this trope.

IV

Prior to the release of *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, Coriolanus Snow was universally reviled as the main villain of *The Hunger Games*. Once the prequel was released, however, appreciation for the character increased significantly. Fans were enamored with this version of young Snow and the seemingly star-crossed relationship he had with Lucy Gray. His questionable relationship with her was rewritten by fans into a Beauty and the Beast style narrative that romanticized his controlling and power-hungry nature and reinforced masculine and heteronormative standards. Blyth's casting as Snow only intensified this love for the character, and online mentions of the movie were overwhelmed by fans openly thirsting over him. The intense aestheticism that fans display through their difficulty with associating a beautiful Snow with his dark nature and harmful actions is a correlation to the phenomenon in reality where people allow their biases about a person's appearance influence their beliefs about them, rather than confront the reality of their personal choices. Men like Snow – deceitful, controlling, power-hungry – do exist and exert their power over the others (especially women) in their lives, be it in a boss/employee role or a romantic partnership. The fiction of *TBOSAS* was meant to explore the mindset of a man like that, and how he makes those harmful choices, and

not necessarily to excuse him, even if they made him attractive with their casting. The fan's fantasies, however, show how appealing his controlling behavior can be made to appear, and how beneficial and exciting for the woman he focuses on. This attitude has repercussions in the real world, where women who are in abusive or controlling relationships, or who have been sexually assaulted or harassed, receive little support because it is believed that she should *want* that attention and that treatment, especially if the man is considered attractive. This contributes to a culture that systematically denies support for victims and reinforces harmful beliefs about masculinity and femininity.

Dennis Reynolds: The Implication

I

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia is the longest-running live-action sitcom, and is still currently on air. It was created in 2005 by Rob McElhenney, along with his two friends, Glenn Howerton and Charlie Day. The trio continue to be writers for the show and star in the main roles, along with Kaitlin Olson and Danny Devito, the latter of whom joined in season two. *It's Always Sunny* differs greatly from the previous two works discussed, as it is a completely different form and genre of story-telling.

The sitcom has undergone some changes as far as subject matter since its creation. In the 1950s and 60s, popular sitcoms were focused on domestic, socially conservative American families. During the 1970s there was the rise of 'socially relevant' comedies, sitcoms which brought social and political issues into (humorous) discussion. There was a shift back towards conservatism in the culture, and while more complex sitcoms managed to remain popular, there was a return of shows about domestic families with small problems in the 80s. During the 90s the shows would focus on families composed of friends rather than relations. Sitcoms have had the flexibility of both "incorporat[ing] and contain[ing] change; they both address and prevent political action, and they may be read as both conservative and progressive forms, sometimes simultaneously... Although their formulaic nature may appear to limit the implications of the debates they engender, many sitcoms allow for contrary reading. They thus provide the ideal sites for critical examination of tensions and contradictions involving gender, the family, race, social class, and the dynamics of post-modern culture" (Morreale xii). Sitcoms are a type of safe space

within fiction where viewers are able to test out ideas, often over and over, knowing that whatever happens there will be no major consequences.

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia follows the rule of sitcoms that the situation cannot change. The argument for this being that “were [the characters] to acquire experience, then evolution would occur and the show could not continue... This is usually handled by establishing a character or group of character (the stars) whose discursive hierarchy is the one that will be repeated again and again” (Morreale 107). Over the nearly twenty years that the show has been running, the dynamic between the characters has changed only minutely. The five main characters, referred to as “the Gang,” run a decrepit bar in Philadelphia while getting up to what can most appropriately be called hijinks. The characters are insufferable, barely tolerant of each other, but are bound together by the fact that they are the only ones who understand each other. It is an “‘anti-sitcom’ like *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where there is... ‘no hugging, no learning’ (Steinmetz et al. 224). In this way, the creators of the show are trying to, as McElhenney puts it, “literally [deconstruct] the sitcom... where most sitcoms try to make the characters as lovable and likeable... as possible, we try to go the opposite, which is to make them as deplorable as possible, just to see if we can get away with it” (Steinmetz et al. 224).

Where in a crime thriller series like *You* or a dystopian action film like *TBOSAS* the audience can expect or at least hope for the characters to receive some type of consequences for their actions, it is understood that when one is watching a sitcom – especially one of this variant – the characters are never going to be justly punished or learn from their mistakes. Instead, the

audience is expected to sit back and enjoy the hilarity that emerges from the characters dealing with the situations they find themselves in, usually of their own making.

Played by Glenn Howerton, Dennis Reynolds is arguably the worst of the Gang, perhaps outranked only by Danny Devito's character, Frank Reynolds. Throughout the series, Dennis is shown to be deeply misogynistic, seeing women primarily as either sex objects or useless to him. In the tenth episode of the fifth season, he reveals what he calls the 'D.E.N.N.I.S. System,' which he designed specifically to emotionally manipulate women into sleeping with him. He is also extremely manipulative, cruel, and abusive to his closest friends (the rest of the Gang), as well as anybody else he encounters in his day-to-day. He cares absolutely nothing about the well-being of anyone other than himself, and has a firm delusional belief in his own superiority, literally believing himself to be a 'golden god.'

He gets darker, though. In the fifth episode of the twelfth season it is heavily implied that he is a pure sociopath who murdered his ex-wife, or at least may have been involved in her death. There are also heavy hints throughout the series that he has either killed other people, or has at least given very serious thought to it.

Glenn Howerton himself has said that he believes Dennis' darkest moment to be the 'implication speech' in season six, episode three, "The Gang Buys A Boat." The main storyline of this episode follows the Gang buying a very run-down boat and their excitement about all the things they hope to use it for. Each character has different ideas of what their boat should be, but Dennis and Mac are planning on using it to impress women. While out buying supplies, Dennis

mentions to Mac the need to buy a mattress, to which Mac expresses confusion. Dennis goes on to explain why exactly having a boat will be so useful for hooking up with women:

Dennis: The whole purpose of buying a boat in the first place is to get the ladies nice and tipsy topside so we can take them to a nice, comfortable place below deck and you know, they can't refuse, because of the implication.

Mac: Oh. Uh, okay. You had me going there for the first part, the second half kind of threw me.

*Dennis: Dude, dude, think about it. She's out in the middle of nowhere with some dude she barely knows, you know, she looks around and what does she see? Nothing but open ocean. 'Aah, there's nowhere for me to run! What am I gonna do, say no?' *shakes his head**

Mac: Ok. Yeah, that seems really dark.

Dennis: No, no, it's not dark, you're misunderstanding me, bro.

Mac: I think I am.

Dennis: Yeah, you are. Cause if the girl said no, then the answer obviously is no. But the thing is she's not gonna say no, she would never say no, because of the implication.

Mac: ...Now, you've said that word, implication, a couple of times. What implication?

Dennis: The implication that things might go wrong for her if she refuses to sleep with me. Now, not that things are gonna go wrong for her but she's thinking that they will.

Mac: But it sounds like she doesn't want to have sex with you—

Dennis: Why aren't you understanding this?

Mac: I don't know.

Dennis: She doesn't know whether she wants to have sex with me, that's not the issue!

Mac: Are you going to hurt women?

Dennis: I'm not going to hurt these women! Why would I ever hurt these women? I feel like you're not getting this at all!

Mac: I'm not getting it.

This scene exemplifies Dennis' lack of concern for consent, which is repeatedly shown to be relegated exclusively to caring only about escaping legal ramifications. His plan for getting women to sleep with him is premeditated and based entirely on trapping the women rather than wooing them. He is aware that if a woman directly refuses him, he cannot force them, as he tells Mac "if the girl said no, then the answer obviously is no." He also knows that a woman in this situation will likely not be eager to have sex with him, anticipating that she will be thinking, "She's out in the middle of nowhere with some dude she barely knows." Instead of using this forethought to make the woman more comfortable, or just accept that she will be unwilling, he plans a scenario where a woman will not directly refuse him. While it is never explicitly stated that he has sexually assault or raped anyone, there is a heavy *implication* that he would do it if he knew he could get away with it, or has already done it and gotten away with it.

While *IASIP*'s primary goal is not to be educational, it does still contain levels of social commentary that their audience can absorb. All of the characters are awful in different ways, but they take turns being the audience stand-in, or the person acting as one 'should.' They are a replacement for the laugh track of other sitcoms which signal to the audience how they should be feeling. In this scene, Mac is acting as the stand-in, questioning Dennis' motives and uncomfortable at how disturbing he is being. We, the audience, are supposed to be sharing Mac's point of view in this moment, baffled and horrified, even if we are also laughing at the horror.

Of course, as previously stated, *IASIP* is a sitcom, and while its humor is often on the dark side, the show rarely ventures into the truly serious for very long, so Dennis is never fully exposed as a rapist or serial killer and justly punished. Instead, his behavior is played to various

comedic effects with the writers emphasizing that he never succeeds and is never celebrated. The closest he has come to being a halfway decent person was leaving at the end of season twelve to be with his newly discovered son. Even this does not last long, as he returns at the end of the first episode of the next season, claiming to be supporting financially from a distance.

Dennis Reynolds is established canonically as an awful person, literally incapable of learning from his mistakes, trapped both by the form of the sitcom and because of who he is. There are reasons given within the show for why he is the way he is, but none of it is excused. Despite this, there are significant portions of the fandom who view him with pity and sympathy.

The creators of *IASIP* make it clear that the characters are to be laughed at and ridiculed for being awful people. Despite this, fans choose to focus on the parts of the show that portray Dennis as a victim, and reinterpret him as a victim of circumstance, excusing his behavior. They also use his canon and fan-imagined relationship with Mac to absolve him of guilt and “cure” him of being an awful person. These fans contribute to the normalization and excusing of toxic and abusive behaviors, especially by White men, as well as a type of black-and-white thinking that avoids the uncomfortability of a complex reality.

II

The general opinion of *IASIP* fans is summed up neatly by one fan’s response to an anonymous poll; “*IASIP* is a smartly written show about vapid, amoral, horrible people.” Reddit is an extremely popular online space for *IASIP* fans, under the subreddit *r/IASIP*. Created in 2010, the sub has 1.1 million members and a short list of community guidelines. The very first

guideline is “No political posts,” followed by, “Civility.” The show covers a range of controversial and dark topics, and fans are willing to discuss some of the social commentary and politics within the show, but there is an avoidance of being perceived as too political or aggressive. It is emphasized by community members that the goal of this fandom space is to just enjoy the comedy. Therefore, most of the content posted by fans is humorous, either highlighting favorite jokes, using a gif or screenshot from the series as a meme, or creating their own ways to laugh at the characters. This particular fandom space is very affirmative, unwilling to posit any changes to how the show presents the characters and themes. Dennis is accepted as another awful character, but neither his actions nor his backstory are particularly dug into.

While Reddit is a very affirming, cautious space when it comes to fanworks, other spaces online are very transformative in their treatment of Dennis (and the other characters). On tumblr, 2.7K blogs follow the tag #dennis reynolds, and 4.3K follow #MacDennis. MacDennis is the ship name aptly assigned to Mac and Dennis, the most popular ship within the *IASIP* fandom among those who participate in such activities.

The tumblr *IASIP* fandom is much smaller than the Reddit forum, and has no set community guidelines or administrators. Posts on tumblr tend to remain humorous, but when it comes to posting about Dennis, there is a certain fondness that is not found (at least not nearly as frequently) on Reddit. Many posts about Dennis, while laughing at him, simultaneously pose him as silly or ridiculous, but still relatable. One of the tags/phrases that reappears in association with #dennis reynolds is “Dennis apologist.” This is usually used by a fan of Dennis to describe themselves. A prime example of such use is tumblr user twunkmac posting “it’s not that i think

dennis reynolds didn't do anything wrong it's just that i love him anyway," with the attached tags, "#Number One Dennis Reynolds Apologist right here." To some level, these self-aware fans are acknowledging that they are praising a character who does not reasonably deserve it.

Overlapping these fans are those who find him "soft," finding moments of vulnerability in the series to show him as a more sympathetic character who deserves some level of happiness or success. A frequently referenced episode is season twelve, episode eight, "The Gang Tends Bar." At the end of the episode, Dennis yells at the rest of the Gang, upset at them for not helping him run the business, and for not realizing that he has feelings which were hurt by their thoughtlessness. Mac then reveals that he bought Dennis an RPG-7 rocket launcher as a gift, causing Dennis to tear up, deeply touched by his friend's consideration and care. This scene is also used by many MacDennis shippers, as it depicts one of the few genuinely tender moments between the two men. By focusing on these rare moments, fans are giving them more weight than the majority of the show where his actions prove him to be a much less caring person.

One video posted on YouTube, titled "Dennis Reynolds Has Feelings," with 284K views, is a compilation of moments from the show where Dennis is not in power, being insulted or abused, is sad or otherwise upset, and generally not as powerful as he imagines himself to be. There are plenty of moments to choose from, as nobody in the Gang has escaped unscarred by some form of trauma, including Dennis, who in addition to growing up with extremely self-centered and uncaring parents and being unpopular in school, was raped by the school's much older librarian when he was fourteen. Dennis himself does not acknowledge this incident as rape, on the basis that "men can't be raped," and he believed it to be consensual. In other

shows, putting villainous characters in situations like these convince viewers to reconsider their judgment of them. O'Dette explains in "Yesterday's Tyrant" that "viewers sympathize with characters not because they are good, but because they are victims" (217). This reinterpretation of Dennis often concludes that he is not responsible, or at least not fully responsible, for his harmful actions.

The comment section of this video is full of fans that sympathize with Dennis and discuss his tragic backstory: "A lot of Dennis' deplorable traits are just a mask he uses to gain a sense of control over the gang and to cope with the abuse he experienced as a child;" "dennis isnt ACTUALLY a serial killer he's just a pathetic little guy who has an obsession with control because he was abused as a child!! nobody understands him like i do;" "the sad thing about dennis is that the group is so toxic and his emotions are so confusing all the time that when he does 'Feel something' its so strong that it makes him breakdown. He doesn't show his emotions and it makes him seem crazy, but i guarentee if people treated him normally, he wouldn't be walking away with pills for bpd, he's very insecure, emotional bursts, guy needs love damnit!" The recurring theme of these comments is that Dennis is not a bad person, but a victim. His circumstances growing up were so terrible that they forced him to change and do things did not really want to do, and deep down he really cares and is dealing with deep mental health issues. Realistically, Dennis can be both a victim of his circumstances and most definitely have resulting trauma from them, while still also being at fault for the many awful things he has done to other people. In fact, this is how the show portrays him, although it spends much more time on who he is now and his unwillingness to acknowledge his wrongdoings. Separating the full onus of

responsibility from Dennis partially excuses him from them, and makes him a more palatable person, as well as someone who it is more widely acceptable to relate to and fantasize about.

III

At the time of writing, there are nearly 4K fanworks written under the *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* fandom on Archive of Our Own. Of these, about 97% involve Dennis Reynolds. The most popular ship within the fandom is Mac McDonald/Dennis Reynolds, also written as MacDennis, with only 61% of the fics labeled with this tag. Of the top ten fanfics with the most hits, seven involve MacDennis, while the other three involve slash fics with other male characters.

Dennis' canon relationship with Mac, his best friend, is a very toxic, manipulative, and at times abusive codependent relationship. Mac is canonically gay, although he does not officially come out until much later seasons, despite his repressed homosexuality being referred to by the other characters frequently for the entire run of the show. He is also canonically attracted to Dennis romantically and sexually, believing him to be extremely intelligent, attractive, and impressive in all the ways that Dennis himself wants to be viewed. Through Mac's eyes, Dennis immediately becomes a more sympathetic man, deserving of his unconditional love, and a more attractive man.

The fic with the most hits, about 50K, titled "Mac and Dennis Conduct an Experiment," follows the characters as Dennis convinces Mac to have sex with him in order to prove once and for all whether or not Mac is gay. Predictably, they follow through with the experiment and their

romantic feelings for each other emerge. Dennis' appearance is praised using Mac's attraction, phrases like "Dennis's smooth hips, Dennis's gorgeous thighs," among other much more explicitly lustful descriptions.

Many of the MacDennis fanfictions are told through Mac's eyes. Not only is his tragic backstory unlocked, but there is a reason for all of Dennis' worst faults. The reason Mac and Dennis are so codependent in the show is because they are secretly in love with each other. Dennis' extreme sexism and treatment of women is explained as a result of him actually being secretly gay and deeply repressed. His predatory relationship with sex and disregard of consent is excused because he himself is a victim of sexual assault and rape. Through Mac's love, and simultaneously through the fans' love, Dennis is absolved of his worst sins.

IV

Although the show itself encourages fans to accept how horrible its main characters are without attempting to redeem them, fans of Dennis repeatedly find ways to posit him as a victim, and therefore, in their flattened view of him, unable to also be held responsible for the wrongs he has committed. In reality, someone who harms someone else usually has an underlying reason for why they are doing it (as per the saying, "hurt people hurt people"). In the fiction of this show, the focus is on how ridiculous and narcissistic these characters are, yet so many fans dive into finding a way to show Dennis as not responsible for his own actions. His previous suffering supposedly cancels out his guilt and he can live happily. The bit of understanding and depth that fans achieve when discussing why Dennis is the way he is is lost when they then decide that he

cannot therefore be responsible. Echoing out into reality is this type of black-and-white thinking where a person cannot exist as both victim and abuser, cannot have complexities

Conclusion

The characters that I explore in this thesis are complex fictitious individuals that prompt audiences to consider the motives behind others' actions, and to attempt to understand parts of society and our culture that one may not consider in their day-to-day lives. Telling and exploring these types of stories is an important part of helping us all expand our worldviews. However, I have shown that when it comes to particular aesthetic qualities, discussion becomes quashed under fan attraction and desire. Joe, Coriolanus, and Dennis all fit in their own ways into an ideal of beauty under patriarchal Western standards. Once it is established that these men are good-looking, then the belief that they must somehow be good morally follows, in the way of aestheticism. These White, attractive men are able to garner sympathy simply by being White, attractive men.

One thing I want to make clear is that I firmly believe that fictional stories centered on flawed or awful people are important, just as fans' fantasies and engagements with the works are valuable and valid. What I hope my readers will consider, however, is how these stories and the ways they are received both reflect and can affect our real-world experiences.

There is a cycle in which reality and fiction affect each other. Real life informs our imagination, from which stems the fiction we consume. That fiction and the fantasies we create from it then also affect how we perceive real life. In Professor Henry Bacon's *Blending Fantasy*, he brings up that "research made in cognitive studies have suggested that similar, if not exactly the same cognitive mental functions, are involved in processing person-/character-related notions," and goes on to say, "Character construction across the three domains [reality, fiction,

and fantasy] almost irresistibly involves blending of notions thought to be accurate descriptions of real people, models appropriated from fiction, and hopes and desires as well as fears and anxieties crystallized in our fantasy” (83, 86). Basically, we have an internal rolodex of people and their behaviors, which is constantly being updated by our perceptions of both fictional and real people. Our imaginations, which draw on these rolodexes, are important for our day-to-day lives. Imagination is part of our critical thinking; it helps us anticipate the future and problem-solve, which includes predicting how others feel and what they will do, as well as informing how we react. Bacon continues his argument; “Good fiction engages us by feeding energy into the fiction/fantasy interface, electrifying the fantasy/reality interface in our mind. Thus, although one might not actually fall in love with fictional characters they certainly may inspire our fantasies and notions about what love could or should be about—for better or worse” (88). His connection of fiction to ideas of love, I believe, are particularly relevant to what has been explored in this thesis.

Joe, Coriolanus, and Dennis repeatedly find themselves in romantic relationships created by their fans. These fan-created relationships take elements of their original media, including the toxic, negative, and otherwise bad elements, and turn them into positives for a happy ending. While this does not necessarily mean that all of these fans are searching to trap themselves in abusive relationships, it *is* a good time to remember that “Men scoring high in Dark Triad traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—turn out to be unusually attractive to women” (Buss 55). These characters and the fantasies that fans have about them do impact real life and how people react to the real men they come across who reflect the characters. In addition,

online infrastructure “polarize societies by sorting us into groups of like-minded people: the ‘echo-chambers’ where views and understanding of reality - however skewed - are nurtured and amplified, without any reality check other than that provided by social media” (van der Weel et al). If we are exposed to characters like this and find excuses for them based on our personal attraction to them, and if we spend time in an environment online that exacerbates this phenomenon over and over, doesn’t this mean that we should be more vigilant of how our personal biases are nudged in real life?

If you are thinking that this is too dramatic of a statement to make, that most people are perfectly capable of recognizing harmful behaviors in their own lives, then I would like to prompt you to consider the people who are real but who do not directly affect us; people our friends and family know, celebrities, politicians, and even actual killers (a la Ted Bundy). Consider the many White male celebrities who were implicated at the height of the #MeToo movement but who received abundant support, or the admiration of the fandom surrounding the Columbine shooters. This is a cycle of belief and behavior, reflected in fiction and reality, where we believe the beautiful people in our life are inherently good and so shift the narrative to fit that belief.

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