

English 280, First Place; Professor, Dr. Timothy Helwig

Unspoken Words: What Our “Friends” Say About Us

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Audience Analysis (140 Words): This analysis is written for white, middle class Americans who follow popular media and social trends. It could be published in a popular social analysis magazine, such as *The Atlantic*. The analysis primarily focuses on the audience’s values of strong friendships and equality among social classes, gender, and race. The goal is to inform readers on the stereotypes associated with race, gender, and social class and shed light onto the influence the popular television show *Friends* has on these stereotypes. *Friends* was the first of its kind to combine family and work life into one show at turn of the century and its influence on its large audience was incredibly significant. It is a call to action to recognize the stereotypes in popular television and media, especially the latent comments, and to eliminate the negative impacts they have on viewers.

“Television speaks to our collective worries and to our yearning to improve, redeem, or repair our individual or collective lives... Television comments upon and orders, rather than reflects, experience, highlighting public concerns and cultural shifts” (Sandell 143). A common misconception is that mass media is a reflection of the people it targets. However, it is, in fact, the complete opposite; the people reflect the media they consume. With mass media, particularly television shows, shaping the minds of audiences all across America, many people fall victim to believing in the stereotypes commonly represented in their favorite late night sitcoms. Whether the stereotypes commenting on race and social class are blatantly portrayed or more subtly hinted at, their influence on viewers still reinforces many of the negative assumptions about each social location and suppresses the truth about our diverse social culture.

The turn of the century brought with it an immensely popular television series, *Friends*, and its new perspectives on family and work life, as well as social location. Six friends, Phoebe Buffay, Rachel Green, Joey Tribbiani, Chandler Bing, and Monica and Ross Geller, share their lives together while living in a Manhattan oddly void of crime and economic struggle. The late

night sitcom gained immense popularity since its premiere in 1994, all through its ten seasons, because of its progressive take on friends, family, and life as a “thirtysomething”. “These narratives reflect and reproduce dominant understandings of our social world and therefore are important sites for analysis” (Gullage 179). *Friends* became the pioneer of the Generation X movement, renewing an appreciation for friendships, offering a positive outlook on unconventional families, and relieving the sense of urgency to figure out one’s life. Although the six main characters are all considered white with middle class standing and little opportunity for upward or downward mobility, the show uses many cases of subtle visual rhetoric to make comments on each character’s varying social class and race. As Lisa Marshall explains, “when characters show resistance to dominant ideologies, they are often mocked or their comment is turned into a joke. Humor is used to maintain dominant ideologies” (140). As a sitcom, *Friends* draws most of its successful humor from its latent comments on deviation from race or social class. Unfortunately, as progressive as some of the aspects of the show are, it still has the tendency to reinforce negative stereotypes through these deviations.

Although each character is presently middle class during the show, characterizations through flashbacks or discussion of their previous experiences helps to show deviations in their social class standings and reflect a delusional take on social mobility. In various instances, it is mentioned that Phoebe’s mother had committed suicide when Phoebe was very young, her father abandoned her, and she spent a few years living in the streets, obviously locating her in the lower class during her youth. Her bizarre habits and personality as an adult (offering to be a surrogate for her long lost brother’s children, quirky comments and dress, terrible driving) reflect her lower class history, suggesting the stereotype that lower class members are typically very flawed and unconventional in comparison to the middle class. Phoebe’s dramatic lifestyle change does pose

that upward mobility is feasible, however the struggle to attain that gain was largely bypassed. Rachel, on the other hand, grew up in a very upper class household, in which she was able to get a nose alteration in high school, she was considered the “cool kid”, and remained dependent on her father’s income until she was about twenty-eight years old. Because of her upbringing, Rachel reflects a lot of negative upper class stereotypes, such as being air-headed, selfish, and a spendthrift, as well as valuing appearance over all else. However, she also transcends some negative upper class stereotypes when she starts working as a waitress (her downward mobility to the middle class) to earn her paycheck, making her self-reliant and financially independent from her family and friends. These characters have exhibited previous social class mobility, but throughout their lives present during the show that mobility no longer seems possible after they have reached the equilibrium of the middle class, despite the struggles they face.

Monica is an unusual representation of class status because it appears she was raised middle class, but her former characterization proposes otherwise. Monica stands out, in particular, from the rest of the group because she used to be “Fat Monica”. Her deviation from American beauty standards suggest deviation from that ideal middle class standing that she has achieved by the present time in the show. “The ideal body functions as a discursive construct wherein fatness emerges as a degenerate space of over-consumption and laziness. These characteristics are inscribed on many bodies deemed to be socially threatening, specifically bodies of color, immigrant or ‘alien’ bodies, and the bodies of the working class and poor,” states Amy Gullage, a graduate from the Graduate Collaborative Program in Women and Gender Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. The evidence provided by Monica’s family in her flashbacks of “Fat Monica” suggests she was raised in middle class, but Monica herself deviated from her family in her physical appearance and was

even often made fun of by her own parents for her weight. Snide comments about how much she eats or how her size is too large for normal activities (such as when her father indirectly insists she is too large to fit in the camera shot in season 2, episode “The One With the Prom Video”) are used to create comedy. “One means of understanding how Fat Monica elicits laughter is explained by applying the superiority theory of laughter... people laugh when they encounter a person or situation in which they feel intellectually, morally, or physically superior” (Gullage 182). Unfortunately, *Friends* representation of “Fat Monica” reinforces not only that being overweight is something people should be ashamed of, but also that people with larger bodies do not belong in the ideal middle class category.

One of the weaknesses of *Friends* is that it lacks realism when it comes to socioeconomic mobility. Each character loses or changes jobs at some point within the series, but never does it pose as a threat to their financial stability. During the second season, episode “The One with Five Steaks and an Eggplant”, the group gets into an awkward situation in which Joey, Phoebe, and Rachel confess their personal fiscal issues in comparison to Ross, Monica, and Chandler’s steady income. In this episode, the group is all out celebrating Monica’s new job promotion and Ross’s birthday. Monica poses that everyone split the bill on the expensive dinner so Ross does not have to pay, which generates conflict when Phoebe, Joey, and Rachel do not have the money to pay for more than what they each ate (the cheapest and rather unsatisfying selections from the menu). Even though their struggles to pay for fancy dinners and Ross’s birthday gift of expensive concert tickets are made apparent, they still do not show any signs of reaching downward mobility (becoming working class or deviating from middle class standards). Comedy arose from the irony of Monica losing her job soon after this discussion. “This episode centered on a realistic plotline, but because it was a comedy, the story attempted to gain more laughs from the

audience than worry about the characters' well-being" (Marshall 151). In other words, the show strays from realism in order to achieve comedy, but instead also ends up achieving a very unrealistic perspective on what life is like living paycheck to paycheck. This, in turn, teaches audiences the false idea that middle class status, once achieved, is very hard to lose.

Aside from social class, *Friends* also makes some important remarks towards race. Phil Chidester, an assistant professor in the School of Communication at Illinois State University, claims that "because whiteness does function as a marker of identity and difference that is founded in and perpetuated through social discourse, it becomes important to examine the rhetorical character of this racial position." *Friends* often uses visual rhetoric, more specifically the lack of racial diversity throughout the show, to make comments on race and racial stereotypes. The setting of Manhattan, one of the most racially diverse communities in the nation, is unusually lacking representation of racial others during the shows entirety. All six members of the exclusive group are white and, throughout the ten seasons, no other race has been able to penetrate their circle. This shortage of diversity is often perceived as support for superiority of white people and white culture. The members of the group often have new relationships with people of other races, but each of them are eventually rejected for not fulfilling the inner group's expectations.

More specifically, Ross's failed relationships with Charlie (African American), Julie (Asian American), and Emily (English) exhibit attempts by racial others to permeate the borders of the group that ultimately end in failure. In Seasons 4 and 5, Ross gets into a spontaneous relationship with Emily, Rachel's boss's daughter from England. Due to her frequent travel and their short times together, Ross grew impatient and quickly asked her to marry him. Their relationship subsequently ended when Ross accidentally said Rachel's name on their wedding

day. However, their relationship does pose that, despite Emily being white, her strong English heritage is what kept her from becoming a part of the group. Her accent was frequently mocked by the friend group and her family was rejected for their unruly demand for money. Ross's relationship with Charlie in Season 10 is rather short-lived, especially since in the process of trying to court her, she falls in love with Joey instead. After she realizes Joey's incompetence, she dates Ross, then dumps Ross a few episodes later by professing her love and making out with her ex-boyfriend in front of him. Her color is never explicitly noted by any of the other friends. In fact, it is even painfully avoided. Still, she fails to get involved with the core of the group. Ross starts to date Julie in Season 2 during his trip to China, only to return home to Rachel, who has just realized her feelings for him. Rachel's jealousy fuels fury and vicious comments towards Julie. "Such openly verbal rejections of this potential violator of the *Friends*' closely-guarded internal purity are intensified by the visual nature of Julie's difference as a marker of her nonbelonging" (Chidester 165). Rachel's hatred toward Julie, although not openly fed by racism, leads viewers to believe that the racial other has no place in their all-white circle of friends. This is only reinforced by the fact that Ross rejects Julie for being "not Rachel", or not white. All three of Ross's relationships with racial others varied by degree, but even his marriage could not penetrate the purity of the circle.

Joey is often a target for comedy because even though he is a part of the group, he has a very prominent Italian background which draws him out from the others. His "impurity" is emphasized by the negative qualities that are assigned to his character, such as his laziness, his stupidity, his unrefined social skills, and his blue-collar jobs. Still, he fails to deviate from a middle-class status or show significant signs of financial struggle and he remains as a part of the group. "Joey's character serves as a visible boundary between what is white and what is not quite

white, between what is acceptable to the in-group and what must be ultimately rejected in order to maintain the purity of what lies within” (Chidester 165). Over the seasons, Joey is constantly chided for his actions, whether he does not understand a joke, he cannot answer a question, or he blatantly hits on women. In “The Pilot”, the group of friends is sitting in the coffee shop when a runaway bride, Rachel, bursts into the café. Joey’s first instinct is to turn on his charm and make a move. However, Monica scolds him for his crude behavior. Many instances like this occur throughout the show, which not only reinforces the values of the group for Joey, but also imprints the white, middle class ideals of this homogenous group onto its viewers.

“Television plays a predominant role in the lives of most Americans: families organize their living rooms around the television set; people arrange their schedules around favorite shows; and fans discuss and dissect what happened on last night’s episode” (Todd 855). With the emergence of Generation X came a new type of television: sitcoms that rejected the materialism of earlier generations and stressed the importance of a chosen family. *Friends* was a rising star at the top of this new television culture with its relatable pack of six close, all-white, middle class, young adult friends surviving and thriving in the heart of New York. It was progressive for its time; blending family and work life, showing nontraditional families, straying from gender roles, and bringing meaning back to having close friends. Unfortunately, its comedy also comes with a price. Stereotyping social classes, body types, and race, eliminating social class mobility after achieving middle class, and eliminating the realities of life in the city are all points in which *Friends* draws its audience, even if none of these are even directly spoken about. Even audiences today are still rewatching favorite episodes, connecting with their favorite characters, and reliving the lifestyle *Friends* represented, unaware of the negative influences the show is having on their perspectives on race and social class.

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