

How to be a Stereotype:

Analysis of *How to be Single* (2016)

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Abstract

Stereotypes are a staple in comedic films because they allow for more focus on jokes than on character identity. *How to be Single* (New Line Cinema, 2016) is no exception to the romantic comedy tropes, clichés, and stereotypes. Alice represents the “innocent girl”, Meg the “spinster”, Lucy the “shrewish wife”, and Robin the “manic pixie dream girl”. Even so, it is more progressive than other films of the genre because the characters prove to be somewhat more complex than their initial stereotypical categorization and break the romantic comedy formula.

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Each year around Valentine's Day, Hollywood releases a film featuring big name actors and actresses who embark on an adventure full of enough romance and comedy to satisfy singles and couples rushing the theaters. In 2016, *How to be Single* (New Line Cinema) became one of the latest additions to the romantic comedy genre. Romantic comedies are rarely hallmark models of progressive gender stereotypes. They tend to focus on white, heterosexual relationships in which two fairly equal protagonists overcome all obstacles for love (McDonald, 2007). *How to be Single* follows a group of young adults in New York City as they navigate love and relationships. Although the main characters in the film fall into common gendered stereotypes, each character breaks the stereotype in a different form, resulting in a somewhat more progressive film than most peers of the genre.

How to be Single centers around four young women living in New York and some of the men that are significant parts of their lives (Ditter, 2016). The plot primarily focuses on Alice (Dakota Johnson), who begins the film by moving to New York after breaking up with her four-year-long college boyfriend Josh (Nicholas Braun) because she wants time to learn how to live alone. She befriends Robin (Rebel Wilson), a loud party-loving, alcohol-loving, one-night-stand-every-night kind of girl. Occasionally Alice spends time with her older sister Meg (Leslie Mann), who is a baby doctor, single, and career-focused and decides to finally have her own baby through a sperm donor. The film also introduces Lucy (Alison Brie), a woman intent on finding her husband and spends countless time with online dating sites to find her true match. Lucy often sits in the bar below her apartment to peruse dating sites and connects with the bartender Tom (Anders Holm). Tom is a man who has no plans to settle down and often makes fun of the

intensity of Lucy's search for her husband. The rest of the film follows the adventures of each of these characters. Alice has one night stands, dates a single dad named David (Damon Wayans Jr.) for several months, tries to get back together with Josh, and eventually realizes she needs time to be single and not conform her identity to whatever man she is dating. Robin continues to enjoy being single for the whole film. Meg meets a younger man named Ken (Jake Lacy) and they fall in love despite her fear of being in a relationship. Tom falls in love with Lucy, but Lucy meets a man offline named George after having a breakdown in a bookstore; she marries George and giggles at Tom's confession of love. The film details the journey of each of these woman as they define how they choose to be single or how they choose a relationship.

Every character in the film is distinct and different, but they all conform to popular gender stereotypes. The females are particularly oriented in stereotypes, perhaps due to the plot focusing on the women. These female stereotypes help audiences understand the identity of these characters quickly. Comedy is a genre that is especially fond of using stereotypes because it allows for more time to focus on jokes rather than defining character identity (Kan, 2004). *How to be Single* is no exception to the romantic comedy tropes, clichés, and stereotypes. However, it is more progressive than other films of the genre because the characters prove to be somewhat more complex than their initial stereotypical categorization.

Alice, the main protagonist, represents the "innocent girl" stereotype by naively thinking she could briefly break-up with her boyfriend and then they could get back together (Medden, 2017). She is also the innocent girl in that she must be taught how to be a single woman in New York. Learning how to be a proper single women often involves conforming to larger gender stereotypes. In one of these instructional moments, she and Robin go to a bar, and Robin

instructs her to “go get [them] some drinks” (Ditter, 2016). Alice takes out her wallet, Robin grabs it and declares, “No you don’t buy the drinks, boys buy the drinks” (Ditter, 2016). Later on, Robin comments on Alice’s apparently large quantity of pubic hair by calling it a “long term relationship pussy” (Ditter, 2016). Both of these moments are surrounded with jokes to soften the fact that this enforces gender scripts that say women should look a certain way if they want to compete in the sexual market and that say men should buy things for women. However, these jokes are not maintained throughout the film. For example, Robin frequently brings her own alcohol to events and Alice pays the tab at times, both disproving that men should always pay. At the end of the film, Alice reveals herself to be more complex than the innocent girl stereotype. Although she does make mistakes with men, she learns to break free on her own rather than relying on a man to “save” her. By the end of the film she learns what being single means to her and how she wants to be single; in her case, that means there are no men in the picture. Alice decides to use single-dom as a chance to do the activities she wants to do that she may not get the opportunity to do in a relationship.

The other women in the film also embody complexity while representing common female stereotypes. Meg represents the “spinster” through her lack of relationship at an older age and abnormal behavior by trying to push away the clearly interested Ken (Medden, 2017). She also enforces the stereotype that pregnant women are overly emotional and hormonal as she gets extremely angry anytime somebody calls her crazy while pregnant. However, conversations about her becoming a mother never center on her lack of a husband or partner – she simply wants a child and there does not need to be a father. Although she does represent the norm that women should be mothers, her lack of desire to have a father in the picture counters the norm. Her

relationship with Ken further breaks Hollywood convention because she is the doctor and he is a receptionist. The film comments on the reversal of these roles when Meg asks “what is the male version of a receptionist” and he answers “receptionist” (Ditter, 2016). Ken also is thrilled about the prospect of becoming a stay-at-home dad and Meg being the breadwinner. Therefore, although Meg falls into the spinster and overly emotional pregnancy categories, she blatantly reverses stereotypes about how a woman should be a mother. A woman’s role as a mother is one of most defined cultural stereotypes, so Meg’s defiance of norms is a notable step forward.

Lucy represents the “shrewish wife”, particularly through her intense desire to get married and in comparison to the carefree, fun Tom (Medden, 2017). She is neurotic, direct and knows what she wants in a man, although she is not powerful enough to be an iron maiden. She is arguably the most stereotypical and least likable of all the characters. There is some punishment for her unappealing behavior because it results in public break-down. Then she meets somebody offline instead of through her many algorithms, teaching audiences how ridiculous her behavior was. However, she ultimately gets what she wants in the end and is happy. Rather than falling for her foil character Tom - who, in conventional romantic comedy tropes, would be her final love as he teaches her how to be more free - she meets a man who accepts her for who she is (McDonald, 2007). She achieves her goal of marrying a man eighteen months after meeting him. Ultimately, although she does not transform her stereotype by the end of the film, it is progressive that she does not shed her negative stereotype and remains a protagonist.

Robin is the main female character that cannot be easily placed within a formula. A general stereotype is that a “good” woman is respectful, monogamous, and focused on family

(Medden, 2017). Robin disobeys all these qualities with her constant partying, drugs, and inability to even remember who she sleeps with. Despite her characterization as a “bad” woman, she is equal to the other female protagonists. The film makes no effort to change her behavior. By the end of the film, she is still extremely happy to continue with her adventurous lifestyle. There have been more TV and films in recent years that celebrate a woman’s right to sleep with many men and go out until the early hours of the morning, such as *Sex and the City* and *Trainwreck*, but these generally all end with the promiscuous female finding her mate and settling down into a monogamous relationship (Lee, 2016). In contrast, there is never a man who almost sways Robin from her chosen path of singleness. This is defiant to gender norms. It could be argued that Robin falls into the manic pixie dream girl category, but rather than existing to inspire men she exists to inspire Alice (Medden, 2017). Instead of being defined through the eyes of a male, as is characteristic of a manic pixie dream girl, she is defined through the eyes of a female friend. Therefore, even if she falls into a stereotypical category she does not do so in a traditionally stereotypical manner.

The majority of the female characters embody common female stereotypes, but they all break the formula in different ways. *How to be Single* is certainly not the most progressive film out there. It is a predominately white and heteronormative film. Most of the comedy revolves around the stereotypes, which likely reinforces these as defining female attributes (Kan, 2004). The characters evolve, but are still relatively two-dimensional instead of complex beings. However, it does not let these stereotypes dictate the entire plot of the film. It uses these stereotypes to break typical romantic comedy tropes and create somewhat more complex characters. It also does not rely on all stereotypes; for example, it makes no reference to the

appearance, weight, or ethnicity of any of the characters which is a refreshing change from most comedies (Lee, 2016). Perhaps most significantly, the plot emphasizes a woman's autonomy to choose her own path and define what being single means to her. There is not a singular path the characters must follow. Overall, *How to be Single* is not a revolutionary or blatantly progressive film. Nevertheless, it takes baby steps in a genre wrought with gendered stereotypes and tropes, inspiring hope for more progressive content in the future.

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