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Depiction Analysis of *Cagney and Lacey* and *Bones*

The television shows *Cagney and Lacey* and *Bones* are similar in that they feature women working in law enforcement—the former being police detectives and the latter being a forensic anthropologist who assists the FBI in murder investigations. The three characters that appear in both shows represent a unique aspect of women on television: they are in fields traditionally dominated by men. The ways in which they live and work—such as their environment, society, and the consequences and responsibilities they must face in their lives—are sometimes similar, but at other times, vastly different.

What are the characteristics of the physical environment?

Both *Cagney and Lacey* and *Bones* take place in large cities (New York City and Washington, D.C., respectively). Both shows have central meeting places: the police station in *Cagney and Lacey* and the lab of the Jeffersonian in *Bones*. These are the bases from which the law enforcement agents in each episode are deployed and the centers for information about their cases. Without meeting at these locations and speaking to their co-workers, they would never be able to solve their cases.

However, the time of day in which cases are solved differs between the two series. *Cagney and Lacey*'s crime cases seem to be committed and solved at night and in back alleyways, busy streets, or seedy buildings in dangerous neighborhoods. The crimes in *Bones* are often solved during the day and can take place in fields, people's homes, stores, and so on. Because of the night/day difference, viewers watching the shows may get the idea that New York City is a more dangerous place at night, but on the other hand, because the *Bones* cases are solved at all times of the day, viewers may believe that Washington, D.C., could be dangerous at any time.

The time differences between the two series may have something to do with the occupations of the main characters. Cagney and Lacey are both detectives who often go undercover to solve a case. They do so in many different settings, such as a bar in the episode “Witness to an Incident.” Their job is to casually talk to people who may have information about the case and build up to a lead as to who the perpetrator is, and they must blend in (with clothing, appearance, etc.) to the places they are surveying.

In *Bones*, murders are usually the crimes to be solved, which means no time must be wasted in trying to solve them. Dr. Brennan and Agent Booth have grieving relatives to assist them in finding the murderer. They must be upfront about their investigation; they cannot wait to go undercover. By dressing in suits with identity tags, they are very direct about the fact that they are law enforcement agents. They want answers immediately to solve the case and put the grieving relatives at ease, so they do not waste time hiding their identities.

Perhaps law enforcement identities are more overt in *Bones* and more concealed in *Cagney and Lacey* because of the cities in which the series take place. As *Bones* takes place in the nation’s capital, the show has a responsibility to reinforce the image of the capital as a safe place with effective law enforcement. (This is especially true given that the FBI building is housed right in the city.) Moreover, *Bones* takes place after 2001, when Washington was attacked by terrorists on September 11th. The show wants to prove that the city is being protected, and the best way to do this is by swift investigation of every crime. This is why Brennan and Booth waste no time in getting to the root of every murder case to which they are assigned. Because *Cagney and Lacey* often go undercover to solve the New York City’s crimes, it shows that New York police have more of a “citizen law enforcement” approach, in which people must look out for each other in the big city. While *Cagney and Lacey* takes place before September 11, 2001, it still shows what was evident on that day: that New York residents can come together to help keep each other safe.

What is society like?

The main characters of each series can be read by different theories of character. Mimi White says that female characters that are depicted as working in traditionally male-dominated fields have an

“unusual degree of strength and independence” (185), which may be empowering to the women who view these shows. However, it is the degree of power that they exude that may be more or less relatable to viewers.

The two characters from *Cagney and Lacey* can be read by the discursive theory of character in which viewers see characters not merely as individuals but as symbols and metaphors for social power structures and hierarchies (Depiction Analysis Handout). *Cagney and Lacey* was a groundbreaking show because it was one of the first times that women were shown in a role usually delegated to men, and through their time on the show, the characters fought to break stereotypes usually imposed upon them by men. Producer Barry Rozensweig is quoted in *The Complete Guide to Primetime Television* as saying that airing the show “was a chance to make TV history” (182). The success of the show proved that was true and that female viewers were responding to these characters as role models. It also helped that the characters were portrayed as holding a job while trying to juggle a personal life on the side. Mary Beth Lacey is a wife and mother, and Christine Cagney has several long-term relationships over the course of the show. The characters also grow in their work in law enforcement, as Christine Cagney becomes a sergeant by the end of the series. The show had a supportive discursive rating from female viewers because not only did the characters juggle work and home schedules, but they also proved to be productive members of the workforce.

Dr. Temperance Brennan of *Bones* would likely be read by a realism theory of character, in which the audience interprets the character as an individual and responds on the basis of only taking the individual at face value (Depiction Analysis Handout). Dr. Brennan may have support from female viewers because not only is she working in a male-dominated scientific field, but she is very highly educated, having earned her Ph.D. in forensic anthropology. However, support for Brennan may end there. Throughout the episodes, Brennan is accused by her co-workers of throwing her education in their faces. In the “Pilot” episode, her partner, Agent Booth, says that she “talks about her doctorate every five minutes.” Brennan also reminds Booth that the next closest forensic anthropologist is in Montreal, so her work is invaluable. In the episode “The Man in the SUV,” Jack Hodgins, her co-worker in the lab who

also holds a Ph.D., was a Rhodes Scholar, and was in the top of his class, says that Brennan can still make him feel like a cretin with her overly scientific way of speaking about everything. Brennan also hesitates to interact socially with her friends and co-workers, as she would rather stay in the lab and work. They refer to her as “not normal” in this way (“A Boy in a Bush”). Because Brennan seems to focus so heavily on her education and importance to her field, she may be a turn-off to female viewers who believe such a high level of education and the respect that Brennan has/demands are too difficult to achieve. Also, because her co-workers refer to her as abnormal for being too work-oriented, she may not be taken seriously by viewers. Though Brennan’s status as a highly educated female TV character is something to be commended for the people who created her, it is not so unusual to have women in high places in the workforce, thanks to series such as *Cagney and Lacey*. This is why viewers may identify with the detectives more so than with Brennan.

What are the consequences that flow from our actions?

As both *Cagney and Lacey* and *Bones* are law enforcement shows, the characters must deal with certain consequences from the cases they are assigned. The biggest issue that both series deal with in the selected episodes is discrimination and its effects on the cases.

In the *Bones* episode “The Man in the SUV,” Brennan is assigned to identify the remains of a man whose car exploded from a bomb implanted in it. The man is a member of the Arab-American Friendship league, and because of his ethnicity and the nature of the crime, it is suspected that he is a terrorist. This terrorism theme is especially important because the show aired after the September 11th terrorist attacks, and the perpetrators were of Middle Eastern descent, just as the man is in this episode. The man turns out not to be a terrorist, but the immediate assumptions made by authorities that he is a terrorist are reflective of assumptions made by authorities after the 2001 attacks. As a nationally aired TV show about law enforcement, *Bones* has a duty to reflect real-life situations of people in such a field. It also has a responsibility to show the consequences of these situations. In this case, it is the consequence of assuming that the man is a terrorist when he really is not. He is an innocent man who lost his life because someone else had planted a bomb in his car.

Consequences of law enforcement agents' making assumptions also occur in *Cagney and Lacey*, especially in the episode "Date Rape." In this episode, the male police officers are making light of date rape, saying that every woman who cries "date rape" was simply scorned by her boyfriend or deserves it because she is promiscuous. Detective Cagney also joins in on these jokes and is not exactly in a hurry to solve the case, much to the frustration of her partner, Lacey, who realizes the severity of the problem, especially to the victim. However, the victim's attacker returns and badly beats her. It is after seeing the victim in the hospital that Cagney realizes the severity of date rape and urges the men to stop joking as well. From then on she is adamant that the attacker be apprehended and arrested. This episode shows that Cagney and the male police officers were wrong in assuming that the victim would not be hurt again because her date rape was a non-issue. This episode also allows the viewers to consider that even though police officers should know the law, they do not always make the best decisions in every case because they may initially be unaware of the consequences that come with them.

What are our responsibilities?

The Depiction Analysis Handout says that TV shows featuring law enforcement officers often unrealistically portray them as people who are always heroic, never do anything wrong, and never have to suffer negative consequences. However, both *Cagney and Lacey* and *Bones* seem to contradict that stereotype. As mentioned in the previous section, the shows portray the law enforcement characters as having to deal with the consequences of cases that they do not always solve properly. In both episodes, the characters make discriminatory assumptions that are detrimental to the speed and efficiency of solving their cases. Law enforcement is about serving and protecting people, not making assumptions about their lives. The *Cagney and Lacey* and *Bones* characters who make wrong assumptions eventually learn the error of doing this, and by the end of the episodes, the cases are finally resolved.

These TV shows realistically depict the responsibility of law enforcement officers and show, according to *The Complete Guide to Primetime Television*, that not every case works out (182). This is especially true of the *Cagney and Lacey* episode "The Informant." In this episode, the detectives hire an informant (who is a drug user) to go undercover at a school to bust a drug-dealing ring. Cagney does not

trust the informant, knowing that he could start using drugs again, but Lacey trusts him to be clean and wants to keep working with him. The detectives are embarrassed at the end of the episode when they discover that the informant dealt drugs at the school and contributed to the hospitalization of a student who went through a glass window while high on the drugs. The detectives are not only embarrassed to put their faith in someone so untrustworthy, but they are questioned by Lacey's young son as to why police would use criminals to help them in their work. Lacey worries that her son is getting the wrong idea about police work, but Cagney says they only use them when absolutely necessary.

While all of the *Bones* episodes conclude with the murderer being located and arrested, making Brennan and Booth seem heroic, the characters have to deal with responsibilities while they are working at solving the cases. These responsibilities come in several different forms. For one, they must deal with the grieving relatives of the victim appropriately. When talking with these people, Brennan is often very scientific and wants to get straight to questioning them about where and when the victim was when he or she was killed, and with whom. She describes the remains that were found in very graphic detail. (After the car bomb in "The Man in the SUV," she tells the relatives that the remains were seared into the ground.) This causes frustration with Booth, who tells her she must not put the specifics of the investigation before the feelings of the grieving relatives. Brennan's "all work all the time" way of life is not a responsible way of interacting with these people.

Another responsibility Brennan has is the concern over whether the people implicated in the case will have their lives drastically changed as a result of the investigation. This is true in "A Boy in a Bush," which deals with a foster child being taken away from his mother and brother when the mother is implicated as the murderer of her other foster child. When it turns out that the mother is not the murderer, Brennan must struggle to get the boy back into the mother's home and with his brother again. Booth is not sure that this is a possibility, but Brennan urges him to make the reunion happen because she knows what it is like to be in foster care and how difficult it is to be separated from family.

Both shows highlight the fact that law enforcement agents have responsibilities for the well-being of the people they serve in each case. Even though the responsibilities are handled differently by case and

by show, both shows make a realistic portrayal of the motions law enforcement agents must go through when working on a case. This is better than portraying them only as heroes with no faults.

How should we evaluate ourselves?

Because of the portrayed responsibility of law enforcement agents and the success of the women in their jobs in solving cases and in managing their person lives, viewers would do well to identify with the characters of both series.

Both series also highlight perspectives from both single and married women. In both series, the single women (Cagney and Brennan) come off as very headstrong, always believing that they are right. When their partners tell them that they are wrong or that they should consider another view, they get mad and storm off. (This happens in “Witness to an Incident” when Cagney will not reconsider seeing a gun at the scene, as well as in “The Man in the SUV,” when Brennan will not consider that the victim’s wife is having an affair.) They are so headstrong because they are single and only have their own perspectives to consider, making a married person, such as Lacey, seem foolish for stepping back to evaluate her opinions and worry that they might affect her family members. (Lacey often consults her husband about her cases, and in “The Informant,” she worries that the drug use that is prevalent in the school she is investigating will become a problem for her son in the same way it has for the students.) However, considering one’s opinion does work in some cases, as it does for Lacey in “Witness to an Incident,” when it is proven that there was no gun at the scene and that Cagney was wrong. Brennan has also been accused of being too work-focused and not sympathetic to the victims she works with. (In “A Boy in a Bush,” she tells people to pull back emotionally from the case and not be upset that a child has died. However, she later advocates for getting the child’s brother back to his mother, showing sensitivity to the case.)

This is not to say that the headstrong characters are always wrong, though. Cagney is right not to trust the informant, and Brennan’s hunches about who the murderers are are usually right. (She knows who the bomber is in “The Man in the SUV” and convinces Booth to shoot at him to stop him from exploding the bombs.)

Both series prove that law enforcement agents have different ways of approaching cases, whether being forthright with one's opinions or stepping back to consider other options. However, because both of these methods help solve the cases, it shows that compromise and teamwork are the most important aspects to the dynamics of the characters.

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