

8-2020

## Hello, I'm Fat: Finding Myself in A Hulu Original

Mac Clark

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/student-works>



Part of the [Television Commons](#), and the [Women's Health Commons](#)

---

### Scholarly Commons Citation

Clark, M. (2020). Hello, I'm Fat: Finding Myself in A Hulu Original. , (). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/student-works/158>

This Undergraduate Research is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Works by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [commons@erau.edu](mailto:commons@erau.edu).

Mac Clark

May 15th, 2020

### **Hello, I'm Fat: Finding Myself in A Hulu Original**

My first relationship happened when I was 18. We matched on Tinder and spent the following month doing everything people in relationships do, just without the label. This casual mindset was not my choice, and neither was the constant feeling of disappointment. I yearned to be respected; I knew it wasn't right for him to sleep through our dates nor return my texts for days at a time. I wanted a real relationship, one where I wouldn't have to beg for clarity, but as a fat, young woman, I believed this lesser form of relationship was my only option, so I obliged.

I felt like I deserved less romantically because I have been conditioned to believe that my body wasn't normal. I thought if I was easygoing enough to look past the red flags, maybe someone would be gracious enough to look past the way I looked. The series *Shrill* (2019) focuses on Annie, a young journalist who is navigating the world as a fat woman. Like me, Annie struggles with feeling less than because of her body, and lack of self-worth is prevalent in her dating experiences. In the show, Annie has her own version of my Tinder boy, his name is Ryan. Ryan also refuses to label his relationship with Annie and continuously treats her like garbage. In the first episode, Annie has to sneak out of the backdoor of Ryan's house after they hookup, because he does not want his roommates to see her. Annie has to scale a fence to leave his backyard and ends up falling over into a ditch...yet she never protests, no matter how disappointing Ryan's actions become. Ryan refuses to wear a condom and Annie is afraid of insisting that he does because she doesn't want to lose him- so she gets pregnant as a result.

However, this was not the first time the characters had unprotected sex, or the first time Annie compromised herself for Ryan. It is later revealed that Annie has taken the morning after pill numerous times after hooking up with Ryan but because she is over 175 pounds, the pill was ineffective. Though reluctant, Annie continues to see Ryan because she believes he is her only chance for a romantic relationship. Ryan, to put it nicely, is an asshole, but Annie's response to his problematic behavior always comes in the form of quiet acquiescence. She silently, and continuously, forgives him, and I completely understand why. When I watched Ryan flirt with another woman in front of Annie, I was transported back to cuddling with Tinder boy, watching the notifications from dating apps dominate his lock screen. I kept silent at times like these because, like Annie, I believed he was my only chance at a relationship. The silence crushed me. It was exhausting, but I chose to stay quiet because I felt like I wasn't worth more.

While it wasn't reassuring to see Annie struggle in her dating life, it was comforting. My weight has always impacted my romantic life, and watching Annie go through the same issues I did validated my experiences of insecurity. As someone who has been fat for her entire life, I was taught to be grateful for any male attention I've received, no matter how toxic. This need to feel romantically validated comes from identifying as a cis-gendered woman, and the constant self-awareness that comes with that identity. According to Berger (1972) women are always thinking about how they present themselves, because how we appear to others, especially men, determines the way we will be treated. I wanted, more than anything, to be treated like I deserved love. I, like Annie, compromised my treatment to have the chance to experience love, or whatever we accepted in its place.

It may be hard to understand why Annie and I allowed ourselves to be treated poorly by men, but from our perspectives, as women who have always been overweight and have felt the societal expectations from that identity, it makes perfect sense. As an American woman, I have been conditioned to believe there is a standard of ideal beauty, and an integral component to that is being thin. Although the standard of beauty is constantly changing, making it almost impossible to achieve, thinness prevails (Kilbourne, 2014). The expectation to be skinny is ever-present, and because I have never met this standard, I've spent most of my life feeling undeserving of romantic affection, or really, happiness in general. I've been conditioned to believe that I cannot exist comfortably as a fat person because only thin people are allowed to enjoy their lives. *Shrill* combats this idea. Annie is beautiful, smart, trendy, happy, and, most importantly, she is fat. Although she struggles, Annie has friends that support her, a family that loves her, and a career which she succeeds in, becoming one of the only fat women on TV just living her life, without it being turned into a punchline or a cautionary tale. *Shrill* offers its audience something that has never been seen before, a woman who does not have to choose whether she will be fat or happy.

Previous to *Shrill*, being fat in media equated to being miserable, disgusting, or a joke because, in our culture, fatness violates a code of feminine behavior. Fat women are classified as unfeminine, rebellious, and sexually deviant, either being over or under sexualized. These traits stigmatize women and their reputations, as thinness is a patriarchal tool used to determine how a woman will be perceived (Rowe 1990). If a woman is "too fat" she will be stigmatized, leading to the only representations of plus size women in media falling into two categories: comedy and tragedy. Regarding comedy, fat women have been the butt of jokes for decades. An example of

this is the sitcom, *Mike & Molly* (2010-2016). One of the main characters, Molly, falls victim to all the usual fat tropes: she is working-class, actively trying to lose weight, and spends the majority of her screen time cracking jokes at her own expense. She even meets her husband at an Overeaters Anonymous meeting, reiterating the idea that fat people can only be loved by other fat people. However, Molly's character is accepted because she is funny, and as long as you are funny, being fat is allowed. Additionally, Molly is accepted because she is not comfortable with being fat, which is the other category fat women fall into. For instance, the Netflix show, *Insatiable* (2018-2019), focuses on the story of Patty, a recently-skinny teenager who has drastically lost weight as a result of having her jaw wired shut. Patty spends the entirety of the show resenting her former self, saying how much of an out of control loser she used to be, and how she is so much happier with her newer, thinner body. In flashbacks, we see Patty, who is played by the actress in a fat suit, spend all of her time sitting on her couch, binge eating. However, after losing the weight, Patty is able to make friends, compete in beauty pageants, and even receives attention from boys, all things which were impossible for her character before. Patty's weight loss is seen as a success story, showing the audience how much better a person's life can be if they are thin, and how depressing it is to be fat. However, these motives do not drive Annie. In *Shrill*, Annie's weight isn't a joke, and she is not disabled by it; she is able to live a normal, full life, without feeling like she needs to change herself. Being fat is not Annie's only character trait. While it is an important part of her identity, it is not the only thing that defines her. The show touches on the societal pressures from being overweight, but instead of blaming Annie and turning her into a victim of her weight, the show highlights her struggles, and how she is working to overcome them. Annie's character is more than just fat; fat is just a part of her.

However, while fat is not her only identity, she still faces the pressure to be thinner every day, and one of the most frequent instances of this pressure comes from her mother, Vera.

One of Annie's challenges in the series is her relationship with her mom. As seen with *Mike & Molly* and *Insatiable*, it has been conditioned in women for generations that being thin is the only acceptable body type, and Vera feeds into this standard. Though she is mostly supportive of Annie, there is an obvious tension between the two regarding her daughter's size. Vera passive-aggressively nudges Annie to lose weight. She buys Annie a pre-packaged diet plan and encourages her to exercise more, subtly reminding Annie that she needs to change herself. In a tearful monologue, Annie recalls a moment where her mom made her a separate dinner from the rest of her family, a bowl of Special K, so "boys could like her." Vera, a woman who follows a "Thin Diet," is more concerned with how society will perceive her daughter's body than how Annie will perceive her own body, showing that body insecurity is a vicious generational cycle that is almost impossible to break (Hilton, 2019). Annie's experience with generational body-shaming is one that has reflected in my own life, with my mother. When I was young, I watched my mother, my first role model, be openly dissatisfied with her appearance. She would try new diets, avoid being in photos (if she did manage to be photographed, she would say how fat she looked), and would constantly mention how she needed to lose weight. As a child who had a body type that was similar to her mother's, I started to become aware of her frustrations, and I adopted them. I became the 8-year-old who worried about how big my stomach was getting or the ways my thighs jiggled when I ran. By third grade, I was aware of my body being surveyed and I started to survey myself through the eyes of others, putting an enormous amount of pressure on myself to be thinner (Berger 1972).

The pressure to be thin was not just from my mother or the media. Like all overweight children, I experienced moments of direct fat-shaming. When I was younger, I was constantly reminded that I was overweight, and how that was a bad thing. Swimming was a natural part of life growing up in Florida, but I was not allowed to wear a bikini like all of my friends; my mom stopped buying those after my rounded belly stuck around past my years as a toddler. I distinctly remember being at a pool party in the second grade where I was the only girl wearing a one-piece. When one of my classmates asked why, another elegantly chimed in, "Because she's fat." I was shocked; I had never been called that word before, and although I didn't quite understand its connotation yet, I knew it wasn't a good thing to be. That comment tainted swimming for the next decade, and even today, 12 years later, is one I can vividly recall. Experiences like these are universal to fat women. In the show, a little Annie is seen avoiding the pool on a family vacation by hiding away in her hotel room reading. Her mom encourages her to swim, but she won't because she is insecure about her body in a swimsuit. Annie, like every other child her age, does want to go swimming but her fear of publicly wearing a swimsuit overcomes her. Later that night, she eventually sneaks out to an empty pool to swim, showing the only time little Annie can be comfortable in her bathing suit is when she is alone. I watched this scene and saw a young girl who struggled with the same issue I always have, and for the first time, I felt normal; I felt like I wasn't alone in my experience. Feeling normal is life-changing for a girl who has spent her entire life feeling abnormal.

Recently, however, I have begun to shift my mindset of feeling like an outsider. This is because in the last few years, the body positive movement has made its way into mainstream media. The movement, which includes empowering ideals such as fat acceptance and detaching

moral values from food (Keating, 2019), has inspired me to start becoming more comfortable in my body, without the constant feeling that I need to change it. These movements have not come without backlash; critics are quite vocal about their belief that body positivity glorifies obesity and “unhealthy lifestyles.” However, while the movement does promote universal body acceptance, it is not praising fatness. Instead, the movement focuses on learning to be comfortable in your skin, rather than punishing yourself for existing in what society deems an unconventional body. The ideas of body positivity haven't fixed me, and neither has watching *Shrill*, but both have allowed me to realize that I am not the problem. It is not a crime to exist as a fat woman, and although it has taken me 19 years, I am finally ready to accept that fact.

In the fourth episode of *Shrill*, Annie goes through a similar journey, and it comes to a head at the “Fat Babe Pool Party.” After seeing an ad in her work calendar, Annie decides to head to the pool party. When she walks in, Annie is greeted with a variety of other fat babes, each dressed in colorful swimsuits. The women are carefree, simply existing as beautiful women, completely comfortable in their own skin. Though Annie, who is wearing jeans and a blouse, makes it clear that she is only there “as a journalist,” her attitude quickly changes as she begins to experience the pure joy of the party. In one powerful scene, a babe grabs Annie’s hand and leads her to a dance party. At first, Annie is uncomfortable, but as she watches the other women dance to Ariana Grande’s “One Last Time,” she lets go of all inhibitions and joins in. Annie and the women become a colorful blur, unbothered by what jiggles, or how they are unable to hide in the broad daylight. Instead, they are able to completely enjoy themselves in-the-moment. With this boost of newfound confidence, Annie discards her modest outfit and reveals a color-blocked swimsuit. Liberated, she jumps into the pool with childlike joy. Annie swims through the water



as if she is Esther Williams, navigating around the other empowered women. At this moment, her character has broken through her insecurity and allowed herself to experience pure, in-the-moment happiness, showing the revolutionary concept that fat or happy is no longer a choice they have to make.

While swimming or dance parties may not be out of the ordinary for a normal-sized character, they are radical for plus size people. Our society does not allow fat women to live carefreely. For a fat person to dance, swim, or simply be comfortable in their own skin without worrying about others judgment is an act of rebellion (Laurion, 2019). I cried the first time I watched this episode. I was able to see a fat woman, who, like me, had finally let go of the heavy burden of other people's opinions, and she was praised for doing so. When I watched Annie dive into the pool with the other fat babes, I felt pure liberation. I can only imagine if I had seen this episode as a little girl; I would have seen this positive representation and felt more normal about the way my body looked. And just as *Shrill* has inspired me, it is sure to inspire the generations of girls growing up right now.

Nevertheless, even with the influences of the body positive movement and media such as *Shrill*, there are still times where I wish I was thin. My childhood experiences, along with society's stigma against my weight, have caused my body image to be permanently warped, and as much as I try to reverse the damage, I am not sure I will ever be able to escape the ideologies of beauty and normalcy. One of the most realistic elements of *Shrill* is its portrayal of this conundrum; though Annie is on a journey to empowering herself, her body image issues are not solved with the end of an episode. Annie is navigating how to exist comfortably in her body but she still falls victim to society. This realness is what makes her character so intriguing; she

represents every woman's moments of self-doubt. Like other women, I find myself trying to be more accepting of my body while at the same time, a day does not go by when I do not think about my weight. Some days are better than others, but there is an ever-present conflict inside of me, battling whether or not I should be happy with my outward appearance. Like Annie says, "It's a fucking mind prison, you know, that every fucking woman everywhere has been programmed to believe" (Shrill 2019). However, as a size 14, I am privileged to exist in a fat body in which most of my issues are internal. While most of my problems stem from low self-esteem, there are more serious issues for people of larger body-sizes. Our society's anti-fat mentality means structural oppression for fat people above a certain size, which includes discrimination through issues such as unaccommodating seats on transportation or treatment at hospitals (Keating, 2019).

Shows like *Shrill* are so important because they give representation to a group that has been marginalized from society. Not only does *Shrill* normalize fat bodies but the series has also done something which very few shows have done before: it has given fat women permission to comfortably exist. Annie shows women that being fat doesn't mean you are not beautiful, smart, or worthy of love. *Shrill* goes against our culture's mainstream ideologies while bringing the everyday life of a fat woman to a broader audience. The show does a remarkable job of not only presenting these issues but also showing them in a realistic light, with the main character, Annie, struggling through various aspects in her life. Her problems are not just solved with the end of an episode, or even the season, normalizing the idea that the journey to self-love is not linear. These important dialogues, which are shown through a relatable main character, have allowed me to feel represented in a way that no media piece has ever before. *Shrill* has empowered me on my

journey to self-acceptance, and although I know I have a long road ahead of me, it is comforting to see and know that I am not alone. I will no longer be making myself palatable to fit into the mainstream because I have started to unapologetically accept my body, along with every glorious roll and stretch mark that comes with it. Annie says it best, “I’ve wasted so much time and money and energy, for what? I’m fat. I’m fucking fat! Hello, I’m fat” (*Shrill 2019*).

## Works Cited

Berger, J. (1972). Chapter 3. In *Ways of Seeing* (pp. 45-64). Penguin Books.

Hilton, E. (2019, March 18). *Annie & Her Mom's Relationship On 'Shrill' Shows How Body Insecurity Can Be A Vicious Generational Cycle*. Bustle.

<https://www.bustle.com/p/annie-her-moms-relationship-on-shrill-shows-how-body-insecurity-can-be-a-vicious-generational-cycle-16961408>

Keating, S. (2019, June 12). *I Am My Own Curvy Wife*. BuzzFeed.

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/shannonkeating/smash-the-wellness-industry-dieting-body-positivity-women>

Laurion, A. (2019, March 25). *Shrill's Pool Party Episode Showcases a Special Kind of Joy*.

Slate. <https://slate.com/culture/2019/03/shrill-pool-party-aidy-bryant-joy.html>

Rowe, K. K. (1990). Roseanne: unruly woman as domestic goddess. *Screen, Vol. 31* (4), 408-419. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/31.4.408>

TEDx Talks. (2014, May 14). *The dangerous ways ads see women* | Jean Kilbourne |

*TEDxLafayetteCollege*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy8yLaoWybk&t=80s->