

## ***Glee: Give Us Something to Sing About*** **Catherine Tosenberger**

For a show that has received accolades for diversity, the decision to center *Glee* through the viewpoint of teacher Will Schuester, a straight, white, able-bodied man, can be seen as problematic. While the show does use Will, and gay teenager Kurt, as the focal points for its critiques of normative masculinity, *Glee* often fails in its goals of progressive representation. For example, in the episode “Throwdown,” Will’s privilege is front and center, but criticism of that privileged position is ultimately rejected: by having Sue, the series’ villain, draw attention to the fact that the minority students feel neglected, by having Will equate the unpopular hobby of glee club with institutionalized systems of oppression (“You’re in Glee club, you’re all minorities!”), and by concluding the episode with Will handing solos to the straight, white, and able-bodied Finn and Rachel, while everyone else (once again) sings back-up, *Glee*’s commitment to diversity and Will’s position as inspirational ally start looking rather suspect.

The pilot episode was initially promising, setting up Will as the show’s anchor but maintaining a critical distance on his behavior. In the scene where Will blackmails Finn into joining the club, the camera zooms in on a flyer on his bulletin board: “Priority #1: Help the Kids.” This ironic commentary on Will’s character seemed to disappear after the second episode, when the show’s point of view collapsed entirely into Will’s, and an idealistic but flawed teacher became Saint Will Ministering to the Outcasts – and like all saints, he must be persecuted. In Will’s case, his tormentors are women: Sue, the deranged cheerleading coach; Terri, his verbally abusive wife; and Rachel, his egocentric star pupil.

However, while *Glee* often edges close to misogynistic stereotypes with its female characters, it also strategically feminizes Will. He is a high school teacher of the humanities and the performing arts, all fields dominated by women; in the gender hierarchies of McKinley High, an interest in glee club is considered decidedly un-masculine. Moreover, he is presented as sensitive, even weepy, and his emotionally accessible teaching style is set up in direct contrast to Sue’s authoritarianism. Throughout the first season, Will is placed in situations more commonly associated with women’s experiences. He is the target of constant remarks about his appearance and personal relationships. He is often the object of unwanted romantic attention, such as student crushes. He even gets slut-shamed. But as a straight man protected by systems of institutionalized privilege, he is never presented as being in actual danger – instead, these situations are mined for comedy.

For example, with the student crushes, Will’s fears about Suzy and Rachel are framed in terms of what the girls will do to themselves, not what they could potentially do to him. When Emma publicly calls him a slut, there is no suggestion that he will be in serious danger of the harassment and assault that women tagged with the label often face: during his “walk of shame” down the hallway, the two jocks performing the “we’re not worthy!” genuflection at him drive the point home that for straight men, rumors of sexual activity increase social status.

These torments heaped upon Will’s head sometimes appear to exist merely to render him a sympathetic martyr, and the strongly feminized nature of many of the

problems he faces enables him to be a tortured outcast without ever being put into the physical, sexual, and economic danger a woman in the same position would. However, the very fact that Will is so consistently feminized does open up a space for a critique of the toxic strictures of normative masculinity; this critique is one of *Glee*'s strong points, as evinced by the sensitive portrayal of Kurt, and his relationship with his traditionally masculine, but supportive, father. Finn's primary struggle throughout the series is to reconcile his desire to perform in the glee club with the demands of his social circle, which ridicules this as unmanly. In Will, Finn finds a mentor who does not adhere to traditional definitions of manliness; Finn's relationship with Will opens the door to his friendship with the more overtly transgressive Kurt.

The shell game *Glee* plays with Will's privilege is not always successful, and the fact that the show is so deeply mired within his viewpoint raises a number of problems – his trials are often presented as externally-induced martyrdoms rather than springing from his own issues and blind spots. However, his position as the central character does provide a vector for the show's denunciation of gender policing, and an opportunity to model ally work. Whether *Glee* will let him live up to his potential, and thus truly make the glee club the haven for marginalized people it claims to be, remains to be seen.