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A feminist look at Yellowjackets

The television series *Yellowjackets* follows a high school girls' soccer team, the Wiskayok Yellowjackets, whose plane crashes in the Canadian wilderness, leaving them stranded for nineteen months. The show moves constantly between the past and the present, revealing what happened in the woods but also how each girl carries that trauma into adulthood. The show is a mix of psychological horror, comedy, and drama, while examining the roles women are forced into both by society and by each other. What makes *Yellowjackets* so interesting from a feminist lens is the way it portrays the cultural idea that “good” women are stable, selfless, and moral. Instead, the series portrays a group of girls/women who are capable of leadership, violence, jealousy, and even cannibalism. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that patriarchal storytelling forces women characters into being the “angel” or the “monster”. In many ways, *Yellowjackets* pushes back against this by showing characters who occupy both roles simultaneously. Their madness is not simple but a response to many factors like trauma, patriarchy, and ultimately being lost in the woods for a long period of time. *Yellowjackets* plays with the idea of the “madwoman” by making the characters embrace the darker parts of themselves that are considered “monstrous” to survive.

One of the immediate feminist elements in *Yellowjackets* is the dynamic between Jackie and Shauna and the way it portrays the “good girl” persona. Jackie is the perfect example; at home she is the captain of the soccer team and in a longtime relationship with her boyfriend Jeff.

She is popular at school, while being pretty, kind, and overall, socially perfect. But the wilderness did not reward her for perfection. After the crash Jackie cannot lead or adapt, losing her influence over the team since the other girls find her lazy and incapable in the wild. Shauna, who lived in Jackie's shadow back home, becomes the one who grows in the wilderness. She becomes decisive, resourceful, and dangerous. However, Shauna finds out she is pregnant after the crash and the father is Jackie's longtime boyfriend Jeff. Her pregnancy, which is something that would have permanently damaged her reputation at home, becomes a central focus of the group and her identity in the woods. The building tension between Shauna and Jackie, who were best friends at home, reveals how much their friendship was always shaped by expectations of how girls should behave. Jackie being the angelic role model while Shauna was the supportive sidekick. When their friendship falls apart, Jackie tries to force Shauna back into her old place, and when Shauna refuses, Jackie treats Shauna like a villain. But instead of the show siding with the "angelic" Jackie, it allows Shauna's dark "monstrous" side to exist. The fight between them, and ultimately Jackie's death, symbolizes that the "angel" cannot survive the wilderness, while the "monster" or the girl who breaks the rules does.

In Season 2, Episode 2 of *Yellowjackets*, one of the show's most shocking and symbolic moments happen. After Jackie's death, which happens when she sleeps outside after her fight with Shauna and freezes, the girls struggle for weeks with what to do with her body. Since the ground is too frozen to dig a grave, they leave her body in a shed. When they discover Shauna talking to and playing with Jackie's body, it becomes clear how the group's grief and isolation has begun a descent into madness. After accidentally cooking Jackie at what was supposed to be her cremation, the girls cannibalize her out of hunger and desperation. The scene directly challenges the idea/stereotype that women are less violent and more civilized than men. Instead of just

mourning Jackie, the girls take agency acting out of hunger and desperation to live. It is a disturbing scene, but it is also powerful, it is a turning point in the show where the group's humanity begins to crumble.

The way *Yellowjackets* approaches emotions and female anger is another way feminism is present. Traditionally, women's anger and emotions are always treated as something shameful or irrational. Lottie's storyline is a good example; at home she is heavily medicated and diagnosed with schizophrenia. After the crash she eventually ran out of medications and started having visions. The other girls initially see her visions as signs of madness. But the longer they are out there and the more desperate their situation becomes, the more the group turns to Lottie for guidance. Whether she "has powers" or psychological problems does not even matter, part of the group recognizes something in her that they need. Lottie becomes a leader of her own little "cult" because of this and embraces her visions and uses them for guidance. Natalie's anger works in a similar way. She had a rough home life which made her tough, which made her an outsider in school. But her toughness becomes a strength in the wilderness. She is the one who hunts, the one who breaks up fights, and the one who does not break down in moments of stress. Her anger is what allows her to survive and ultimately become the first leader of the group. These portrayals suggest that female anger and emotions are not a flaw but a natural response to stress and trauma. The show treats it as something human rather than something that needs to be suppressed.

In "The Madwoman in the Attic", the "attic" is a metaphor for the confinement women experience under patriarchy. The "attic" is the space where their repressed selves are hidden away. In *Yellowjackets*, the wilderness functions as a version of the "attic". The girls are cut off from society, but instead of it silencing their identities, it brings them out. The crash strips away

the roles society gave them. Jackie is no longer the popular girl, Natalie is no longer the outcast, and so on. Instead, the wilderness exposes who they are without male authority, parents, school rules, and all the norms of girlhood.

One of the clearest examples of this is Misty. In high school, Misty is socially rejected because she is an intense and clingy people pleaser. In the wilderness, she becomes extremely valuable as she knows first aid and saves Coach Ben's life after the crash. Once the girls see this, they start to treat Misty better which is almost addictive for her. After feeling wanted by the girls, Misty finds the plane's emergency transmitter and destroys it, trapping them in the woods, so she can stay wanted and helpful. Misty is very morally ambiguous throughout the show which is what makes the show so fascinating. She is both helping and sabotaging, or an angel and monster. Shauna, too, undergoes a transformation. She started as the shy sidekick of Jackie, but after the death of her baby in the wilderness, she becomes a cruel ruthless leader. In her adult storyline, she is trying to hide the wilderness version of herself. But she cannot, she still has anger, violence, and impulsiveness, they are just hidden behind her suburban mom life. Her relationship with her daughter Callie reveals how much she fears who she used to be and how hard she tries to hide her old self.

One of the more emotional parts of the show is the adult timeline, which reveals what each woman becomes after their rescue. Just like the "madwoman" in Gilbert and Gubar's metaphor is trapped in the attic, unable to express herself, the Yellowjackets are trapped in the wilderness, unable to talk about or admit what they did to survive. Their adult lives show that even though they left the wilderness, the wilderness never left them. Shauna struggles with impulses that she tries to hide from her family. Natalie is a struggling addict with self-destructive tendencies. Lottie starts her own cult in upstate New York, still struggling with her

hallucinations/visions. Misty is the most stable and cheerful of the survivors but still has some concerning and slightly psychopathic tendencies. While Taissa is well known politician that is dealing with a second personality that ends up killing her dog and causing problems while the real Tai is sleeping. Each has tried to build a life that covers their past but it none of them can escape it. What they experienced in the wilderness has left them too traumatized and complex to fit or live in a simple life or narrative. In “The Madwoman in the Attic”, Gilbert and Gubar talk about how women authors had to represent themselves outside of the “angel” and “monster” narrative the patriarchal society forced onto them: “...the images of "angel" and "monster" have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervaded women's writing to such an extent that few women have definitively "killed" either figure.” (Gilbert and Gubar 812). The women in *Yellowjackets* do not fit either the “angel” or “monster” role. They are fully complex characters that cannot be simplified to either.

Yellowjackets is a women led show and has an almost all female community unregulated by men. This is a contradiction to a critique by Veronica Hollinger mentioned by Johanna Smith in her essay ““Cooped up” with “Sad Trash”: Domesticity and the Sciences in *Frankenstein*” which says that women characters were “created in response to male desire” (Smith 363), referring to Mary Shelley’s female characters in *Frankenstein*. But *Yellowjackets* removes men almost entirely from the wilderness timeline, which allows the girls’ relationships with each other to be the focus. There are no patriarchal expectations shaping their behavior. Throughout the show the girls become more ritualistic which leads to the “hunt” scenes which is where a survivor is chosen at random and literally hunted and eaten after. But the show portrays their collective trauma and madness as a product of their environment. The girls’ descent into rituals and violence is the show’s clearest connection to the “madwoman” trope. But rather than one

girl, *Yellowjackets* has a group of women whose trauma manifests together in disturbing ways. But the show tries to push back against judgment, their behavior is disturbing, but it is understandable. It is survival, grief, and an attempt to make order where there is none.

What also stands out about *Yellowjackets* is the wilderness timeline and how few male characters it includes, and the ones who are present gradually fade into the background. Travis, starts the series as defensive and often misogynistic, trying to assert control and making sexist comments. But by Seasons 2 and 3, he becomes almost irrelevant, overshadowed by the girls and the chaos around them. Coach Ben similarly fades to the background. He is initially the adult role model of the survivors but his disability and refusal to adapt to the girl's survival tactics leave him isolated and powerless. Which leads him to leave the group and hide off in the woods, scared he might be the next hunt. But both characters show how *Yellowjackets* focuses its narrative on female survival and trauma, letting the girls shape the story's direction, not the men.

Yellowjackets ultimately refuses to let its characters be categorized into the kinds of women Gilbert and Gubar say patriarchal narratives rely on. Instead of "angels" or "monsters," the girls and later the women they become are shown as messy, resourceful, violent, loving, and scared all at once. Their trauma and experiences do not define them, but it complicates them in ways where they cannot be simply categorized. The wilderness exposed parts of themselves that they would have never seen in the ordinary world. The adult timeline shows how hard it is to return to the roles society expects. The show's ability to embrace their complexity is what makes it such an interesting piece of feminist media, one that shows that women will always exceed the labels placed on them.

Works Cited

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