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## **She Has It All: Love and Character Depth in *Jane the Virgin***

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### **For the Classroom**

This essay engages with the cultural significance of a piece of pop culture. It actually began its life as a review for a single episode of *Jane the Virgin* before evolving into an analysis of the series as a whole, rooting its argument in the television show and opening wider, bringing in many sources to support the author's claim that *Jane the Virgin* is a model show for an audience looking for a feminist portrayal of women of color.

"She Has it All: Love and Character Depth in *Jane the Virgin*" uses a television show as its primary source and exemplifies the importance of pop culture in first-year writing courses. Ask your students to perform a mini-version of this assignment in one class period, choosing a television show or film—maybe a favorite of theirs, but maybe not—and exploring theme(s) present in the media. Then, ask if they can connect one of those themes to some concrete visual details.

## She Has It All: Love and Character Depth in *Jane the Virgin*

Samantha Lamkin

With love triangles, murder, and evil twins, *Jane the Virgin* sounds like a typical soap opera. *Jane the Virgin* is a television show aired from 2014-2019, that follows the life of Jane Villanueva (Gina Rodriguez) and the drama that is around her. In recent years, it has been a growing trend to make media representation more feminist, and to portray women in a better light than it has in past years. Feminism is “the advocacy of women’s rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes,” (Feminism). In the past, women have largely only been shown as the love interest for men, as sex objects, or completely dependent on a man. While the effort to show women in better light has increased, it is still prominent in the media for women to be seen as a lesser value than a man. The transgressions have become smaller, but it is rare to find a show that puts as much effort into being feminist such as *Jane the Virgin* does. *Jane the Virgin* is feminist due to its portrayal in the plot, the production, and background.

The overall premise of the *Jane the Virgin* is Jane Villanueva is in a relationship with Michael Cordero (Brett Dier), but due to an unfortunate patient mix up at the gynecologist, Jane is accidentally, artificially inseminated. The baby’s father is revealed to be Rafael Solano (Justin Baldoni), Jane’s old crush turned hotel boss. In the classic telenovela style, Jane is caught in a love triangle between Michael and Rafael throughout the whole series, with every telenovela cliché available. A telenovela is a Latin-American soap opera, and *Jane the Virgin* leans heavily into the genre’s tropes, such as love triangles, long-lost fathers, and crime lords.

*Jane the Virgin* is feminist through the portrayal of Jane, among other characters, within the plot. In every episode, it shows Jane as a strong female character even through all her struggles. The show puts a focus on Jane’s career and family life just as much as it does with her love life. A point that is made in the article “Jane the Virgin Is One Of The Most Feminist Shows On TV For Many Reasons, But Especially These 5,” states “the show could have exclusively focused on Jane’s pregnancy and romantic drama, but instead, pays just as much attention to her professional life,” (Piwowski). As a telenovela, it would have been acceptable for *Jane the Virgin* to focus solely on Jane’s love life, as most telenovelas do. Instead, *Jane the Virgin* puts just as much emphasis on Jane’s personal goals and her profession instead of making her just a character in a love story. In season 1, episode 11, “Chapter 11,” the entire plot point of that episode was Jane deciding between two different careers; one being a practical job, and the other being her dream job (Urman). Throughout the series, *Jane the Virgin* shows Jane’s struggles with balancing being a waitress and following her dreams as a writer, which is a prominent plot line in every season. The show follows Jane’s path onto finding her direction in her professional world. She is shown going to college again to help write her novel, as well as her struggles with getting her novel published. This is why *Jane the Virgin* stands out in the genre and made a large impact in Hollywood. Jane is viewed as an independent woman who is driven to better her professional career, all while wanting a romantic relationship. Shows with love triangles can easily show the girl as one dimensional, only interested in love, yet this show went above and beyond to make a point to focus on Jane’s professions.

Despite all the women in the Villanueva family ending with their own happily ever after, the strong matriarchic family does not weaken with the presence of men. In the beginning, the Villanueva family only consisted of Jane, Alba (Ivonne Coll), and Xo (Andrea Novedo), all of whom were single. All three women needed each other and supported each other despite having their arguments or differences. When they started getting into romantic relationships one by one, this did not hinder their need for each other in any way. Throughout the whole series,

the women in the Villanueva family never falter from needing each other even when they find their own romantic partners to help support them. An example of this is when Jane relied on Alba and Xo to help raise Mateo, even when she had a rotation of two men in her life to help her raise Mateo. Every step of the way, each of them depend on the advice and approval of each other, even if it does not agree with what their male counterparts want to do. The females in the Villanueva family are shown as a strong, tight-knit family whether there is a presence of men or not.

*Jane the Virgin* has a refreshing outlook on telenovela side character plots due to its portrayal of women. Not only does it show Jane as independent, but the all the female side characters as well; they all have their own back story and plot as well as all being strong within their characterization. Petra Solano (Yael Grobglas) is a major side character that makes a large impact on the show throughout the whole series. At first, she is just seen a cheating wife to Rafael, but soon becomes her own character that has an in-depth backstory. Her past choices come back to haunt her, but Petra learns from her mistakes and has a large character growth. In the beginning, all Petra wanted was to get rich, but by the end of the series, she has a supportive family and becomes a strong businesswoman. She uses her commanding personality to take a sinking hotel into a prospering business, which Rafael could not achieve. Petra turns a failing hotel into a successful company. This makes Petra's character even stronger because she is a successful businesswoman who built the company from the ground up. Petra has to go through many struggles, such as forced medicinal paralysis, yet she overcomes any obstacles that come her way to climb to the top and provide for her family.

Another way *Jane the Virgin* expresses feminism is through breaking gendered roles that are generally seen as male jobs. A large female side character that affects the plot majorly is Rose Solano (Bridget Regan). At first, she appears as the new wife to Rafael's father figure, Emilio Solano (Carlo Rota). The police believed Emilio Solano to have been the infamous drug lord, Sin Rostro. Sin Rostro is the drug lord that is involved with multiple murders and operates an underground plastic surgery ring to change the faces of criminals. In the beginning of the show, both the police and the narrator do not even consider the possibility of Sin Rostro being a woman. In season 1, episode 12, "Chapter 12," Rose is revealed to be Sin Rostro, only after she brutally murders her husband, Emilio. Both the audience and the narrator are stunned into silence because it was not a possibility that had crossed any minds. The narrator even states "I don't know what to say. I'm just as surprised as you are." The narrator generally leads the audience through the story with knowledge the audience does not know yet, along with quippy comments throughout the episodes. For the narrator to label Sin Rostro as a man without even thinking Sin Rostro can be a woman just shows how uncommon it is for a woman to be a villain. In the media, men are almost always the ones to be seen as villains, which is why Sin Rostro's true identity came as such a shock. Women are portrayed as softer and more emotional, which is usually viewed as a weakness. What makes the reveal of Sin Rostro's identity so surprising is Rose was portrayed that very way before the reveal. Once her identity is blown, *Jane the Virgin* shows how a female villain can be just as cunning and manipulative, all the way until her very end.

Besides portraying strong female characters, *Jane the Virgin* also shows contrasting lifestyles such as different sexual preferences like celibacy or promiscuous. "Although Alba and Xo share wildly different views on sanctity, chastity, marriage, and the values of feminism as a whole, they come together to raise Jane and support each other through the good and the bad," (Dutta). Throughout the series, Alba and Xo have many fights about how Xo approaches her life, mainly in her sexual behaviors. Alba believes in waiting until marriage, but Xo loves to have casual sex. These contrasting beliefs have made their relationship strained, but in the end, they always come together to do what is best for Jane. "It can be seen that *Jane the Virgin* addresses feminist issues within themes of female characters being in control of their bodies," (Docker). This is special because in early feminism, women would shy away from feminine

traits and old traditions like romance novels or celibacy. While Alba may have chosen celibacy because of tradition, Jane was going to wait until marriage as a choice. When Jane did have sex before marriage, she also did this as a lifestyle choice and was not ashamed of her actions. *Jane the Virgin* shows that in modern times, women can have different lifestyles and still have strong characteristics.

One more notable reason *Jane the Virgin* portrays feminism within the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the large female staff behind the camera. *Jane the Virgin's* crew makes a point to keep the staff predominantly female. "The Best Show on TV is Jane the Virgin" tells that "*Jane the Virgin* was developed by a woman, Jennie Snyder Urman, and puts a notable emphasis behind the scenes on female voices," (Chaney). Her team writers consist of 10 women and 3 men, and half of the episodes are directed by women (Dockterman). The emphasis of women is not to oppress men, but it is to make women's voices heard, especially in regard to a story about a strong, independent woman. The show gives obvious insight on some topics that usually only females have to think about and shows the thought process of how a female in certain situations would think. For example, the choice of abortion to an unplanned child is an obstacle that Jane faces in the first episode. It is clear that in the writing that this topic is not brushed over, but rather faces it as a real struggle, as it is for many women. Small details like these are what give *Jane the Virgin* the finesse and care that most other shows do not express. In this time of history, it is especially important for women's voices to be heard in Hollywood because of how in recent years the mistreatment of women in the industry has been so exposed in the #MeToo movement. The effort to make the *Jane the Virgin* crew an open, female based staff is the extra detail that makes *Jane the Virgin* so feminist.

Another thing on *Jane the Virgin* highlights is the use of melodrama within the storytelling. In the article "Modern Melodrama: How the American Telenovela *Jane the Virgin* Updates the Sentimental Novel," Natalie Rose compares *Jane the Virgin* to well-known sentimental novels of the 19th century. It explains how *Jane the Virgin* uses common traits of the sentimental novels, such as melodrama and an active narrator thorough out the story. It states, "even though *Jane the Virgin's* plotlines are quite modern, the show's themes can be traced back to the popular and commercially successful sentimental novels of the Romantic era, penned by the 'scribbling women' of the nineteenth century," (Rose). In the past, sentimental novels or telenovelas were viewed as something only for women and were not important pieces of art. Soap operas, telenovelas, and sentimental novels were once looked down upon, but *Jane the Virgin* uses the melodramatic tactics that those genres are known for and creates a show worth praising.

*Jane the Virgin* uses the telenovela tropes shamelessly, using evil twin siblings and bringing characters back from the dead, and shows that these classic telenovela plot lines are not too cheesy. It embraces these tropes in their full glory, turning what was once a genre looked down upon into a show that is loved by all. In Alison Hurman's "The Nice Girl Finishes First," the article explains how *Jane the Virgin* executes traits of a telenovela well, while also stay grounded and not being over the top. This illustrates how artistic the writing is, and how there are crazy plot points, but there are also simple, close to home ones too, (Hurman). Some ways *Jane the Virgin* turns the stereotypical tropes into noteworthy story telling is the grounded reactions to the situations that appear in the show. Sophie Hayssen describes how the show is meta, frequently calling itself out on the over the top plot lines. Melodramatic plot lines are a large part of telenovelas, which *Jane the Virgin* is a modern meta version of. Although Jane discovered her long-lost father, it is her true to human nature reaction that makes the story so relatable despite the strange circumstances. In the end of the article, she explains how *Jane the Virgin* can use soap opera tropes and still be feminist in her article "Genre, Feminism, and Anonymous Narrators in *Jane the Virgin*," (Hayssen). The stereotypical plot lines of every telenovela may have once been viewed as cheap shots to create drama to keep the audience engaged, but *Jane the Virgin* shows how with good writing and acting, the telenovela tropes can

just as good story telling as any other genre. *Jane the Virgin* uses melodramatic traits throughout the plot, showing how what was once seen as a lesser genre can be just important of an art as more serious dramas.

It can be argued that these reasons do not make *Jane the Virgin* feminist. With the growing demand for the media to show more feminist traits, *Jane the Virgin* goes above and beyond. Most shows are still written and directed by men, yet the production staff of *Jane the Virgin* is predominantly female. For every major side character, the show makes sure that each character has depth and purpose. Even the main antagonist, Sin Rostro, is a female character whose plotline does not depend on a man. *Jane the Virgin* shows women of all backgrounds in the work force and how it effects their daily lives. Jane is a waitress and an aspiring author, yet her working two jobs is shown as making her a stronger woman rather someone who cannot provide for herself. *Jane the Virgin* takes the stigma against soap operas and proves that it is a genre that can be loved by all. *Jane the Virgin* make a large effort to create a show that is a positive place for women.

*Jane the Virgin* puts great care into creating a feminist show. It has strong, female characterizations while also using telenovela tropes, which was once seen as a lesser than art form. Behind the scenes, the show puts an emphasis on hiring female workers, which is important issue in today's society. *Jane the Virgin* portrays feminism in every aspect the show could approach it with, such as the plot, production, and history of it.

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