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Seth Rogen and the Beta Male: An Exploration of Masculinity in *Freaks and Geeks*, *Knocked Up*, and *This Is the End*

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Seth Rogen and the Beta Male: An Exploration of Masculinity in *Freaks and Geeks*, *Knocked Up*, and *This Is the End*

by

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Abstract

Seth Rogen and the Beta Male: An Exploration of Masculinity in *Freaks and Geeks*, *Knocked Up*, and *This Is the End*

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It has been suggested that gender is a societal construct and as such its features can shift depending on the beliefs of society (Connell 77). If this is the case, then hegemonic masculinity, as defined by Raewyn Connell, should also shift its features based on societal changes. In this project I examine Seth Rogen's representation of beta male masculinity in his performances in the television show *Freaks and Geeks* (1999), and the movies *Knocked Up* (2007) and *This Is the End* (2013). These texts were chosen because Rogen, an actor who I argue embodies the contemporary beta male in U.S. film and television, is a significant character in each. I use textual analysis of the films and television show to track how masculinity is portrayed and how one text paved the way for the others through the actor's rising star status. I also briefly examine Jason Segel in *Freaks and Geeks* and Jay Baruchel in *This Is the End*. I explore how critics and fans receive Rogen, as well as the societal context surrounding *Freaks and Geeks*, *Knocked*

Up, and *This Is the End*. I use discourse analysis to understand how these texts fit in to the cultural climate in which they were released. This project aims to identify the type of masculinities these texts endorse and whether they accept or challenge the most idealized societal norms of masculinity at the time of production. How do the masculinities depicted in these texts differ from dominant hegemonic masculinity as reinforced in prior decades of film? How can masculinities that historically fall outside of the dominant hegemonic standard now be framed as another type of hegemonic masculinity? Not only will this project look at how these masculinities function within the texts themselves, but I will also place them in context with the social and cultural landscape of the time in which the texts were released.

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Introduction

In 1999, Judd Apatow and Paul Feig released the now cult-status television show *Freaks and Geeks*, a show about the lives of Lindsay Weir, a straight-A "good" girl who has decided to befriend the school's "freaks," and her brother, Sam, a freshman who, along with his two friends, are the school's "geeks." Each episode reveals a different aspect of high school life and highlights different characters beyond Lindsay and Sam. Even though the show only lasted one eighteen-episode season, both Apatow and several of the male actors in the show have gone on to have successful careers producing and portraying male characters who seem to reject the hyper-masculine, muscular action hero of movies such as *The Terminator* (1984), *Braveheart* (1995), and *Armageddon* (1998) discussed in the scholarship of Yvonne Tasker and Susan Jeffords (Tasker; Jeffords). While actors such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis display features traditionally linked to hegemonic masculinity such as hard, muscular bodies and physical aggression, actors featured in the more recent works of Judd Apatow, Seth Rogen, and Evan Goldberg such as Rogen, Jonah Hill, Jason Segel, and Jay Baruchel do not physically embody masculinity in a way that is considered normatively dominant, nor do their actions fit what traditionally was expected of such men. The characters portrayed by these actors are often non-aggressive and lack ambition. They are not married and therefore cannot easily be "breadwinners" or protectors; in fact they even have difficulty finding a female romantic partner. Even though characters played by Rogen, Hill, Segel, and Baruchel stray from socially reinforced expectations of masculinity in this regard, the

situations they encounter in their films also are oftentimes (with the exception of *This Is the End*), more realistic than the situations found in blockbuster action films like *Armageddon* or *The Terminator*.

Many examinations of masculinities in films include minor focus on "the loser" or "the wimp," such as Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America* and Donna Peberdy's *Masculinities in Film Performance*. Actors such as Steve Carell in *The 40 Year Old Virgin* and Adam Sandler in *Punch Drunk Love* are touched upon by Kimmel and Peberdy but are not the primary focus of their studies. With a few exceptions, they are brushed off as lesser masculinities or masculinities not worthy of more than a section or, at most, a chapter. Also, referring to the characters played by actors such as Rogen or Hill as "losers" or "wimps" reinforces negative connotations audiences may associate with these characters, making them unlikely protagonists. While so-called losers or wimps in U.S. films and television in the post-millennial era may deviate from what is expected of them in terms of an American masculine identity, their labeling by these scholars suggests that their deviation implies that masculinities are less valid than those that more closely conform to dominant hegemonic standards.

In this project I examine the masculinities performed in *Freaks and Geeks*, *Knocked Up,* and *This Is the End* by the actors who appear in this television series and in these films, particularly Seth Rogen, while also comparing these characters to those played by Segel in *Freaks and Geeks* and Baruchel in *This Is the End*. I have chosen these characters and texts because they have not previously been studied in depth in regards to masculinities. Popular discourse has noted the male ideal presented in

Apatow's and Rogen's films. For instance, Sharon Waxman of the *New York Times* writes about the success "life's losers" have in films such as *Knocked Up* (Waxman). Other studies of masculinities in film, and specifically of the "loser" and the "wimp," have focused on movies like *The 40 Year Old Virgin* and *Punch-Drunk-Love* and Carell's and Sandler's characters respectively but have not examined the actors I will study.

Keeping this literature in mind, I will examine Rogen's masculinity in three of his projects. *Freaks and Geeks* follows Lindsay (Linda Cardellini) and Sam (John Francis Daley) through a year of high school and illustrates a typical high school experience of students who do not fit into the 'popular' crowd. While the show focuses on Lindsay and Sam, each episode also features other characters and their personal struggles and triumphs. *Knocked Up* depicts the journey of Ben Stone, a stoner stuck in a state of arrested development, and Alison Scott, a responsible woman employed with a major television network, after a one-night stand results in an unplanned pregnancy and Alison chooses to keep the baby. *This Is the End* is an account of the end of the world due to the biblical apocalypse. While attending a party at James Franco's house, Rogen, Hill, Craig Robinson, Baruchel, and Danny McBride are the few surviving party-goers after the start of the Rapture. The actors play fictitious versions of themselves and attempt to survive the end of days.

Freaks and Geeks, Knocked Up, and *This Is the End*, I argue, offer new material through which to examine shifting norms of American cinematic masculinities. Through analysis of these texts I will attempt to reclaim these characters from the categories of loser or wimp and in the process define a new masculine category, the "beta male." I

have chosen to name the category beta male because of its distinction from the term "alpha male." An alpha male is one who depicts Raewyn Connell's description of dominant masculinity and strives to maintain dominance over both women and other more marginalized men, such as queer or gay men (Connell 77). Additionally, an alpha male typically has a hard, muscular body because such a body is viewed in contemporary American culture as a sign of control of oneself (Bordo 57). It is critical that an alpha male maintain an impenetrable, invulnerable body as traditionally dominant masculine men penetrate and are not penetrated (Bordo 55-58). I will show that beta male characters of these movies in contrast to alpha males, tend to be bumbling, out-of-shape, overweight to some degree, less certain of their place in life, and responsive to the women in their life. Scholars often describe cinematic wimps and losers as lazy and without ambition. I will argue in contrast that ambition is important to the post-millennial beta male, but it does not manifest itself in an expected fashion such as through high-paying jobs and wealth. It is this iteration of hegemonic masculinity in film and television on which I will focus for this particular project.

The beta male has a long history in American culture and possibly served comedic purposes to make the alpha male look better. For more information on the history of masculinity in the United states, Gail Bederman's book *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* explores the changing norms of gender in the United States in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. This project will not focus on historical images of beta

males but on the contemporary depictions of the beta male as represented through Seth Rogen's film and television roles and star image.

By using Rogen and his developing star image as an example of the contemporary beta male, I will demonstrate how versions of masculinities previously characterized by negative connotations are no longer presented as inferior but rather as examples of the expanding definitions of hegemonic masculinities in the 2000s. While acknowledging this evolution, I will explore Rogen's particular role in millennial film and society as a beta male. Even though societal expectations of masculinities still produce a hegemonic hierarchy, a new masculinity might challenge social order as it currently stands. My goal is to encourage scholars to embrace analysis of diverse examples of masculinities as distinct but equal rather than ignore the cinematic and televisual beta male as encouraged by categorizations like "wimp" or "loser."

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to examine and define beta male masculinities, it will be critical to have an understanding of the contemporary societal norms of masculinity. For the sake of the project I will label current understandings of dominant hegemonic and heteronormative masculinities as "alpha male" masculinities. Alpha masculinities are held to a high standard because they fit within societal constructs of valued traits of masculinity, compared to beta masculinities, despite their potential to represent a new hegemonic masculinity. In order to define "alpha masculinity," I will draw from the works of scholars such as Connell, Kimmel, and Susan Bordo.

Alpha Masculinity

As Connell reviews in her work on hegemonic masculinity, the concept of hegemony grew out of the work of Antonio Gramsci and his study of class relations and how at any given point a cultural group gains power and maintains social order and its dominance within society (Connell 77). Hegemonic masculinity is the particular version of masculinity that is recognized and accepted by the dominant interests in a society, which is held up as the idealized standard (Connell 77). According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity "guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77). While hegemonic masculinity is related to power and who holds societal power, Connell acknowledges that not all of the men who embody the most visible representations of hegemonic masculinity are the most powerful (Connell 77). In order for a masculinity to be considered hegemonic, there must be a general consensus and acceptance of the authority and access to power of a particular masculinity (Connell 77). For Connell, it is critical to understand that hegemonic masculinity is a product of a specific cultural time, allowing for cultural identity to shift and redefine the culturally accepted dominant hegemonic masculinity. This potential to shift implies that hegemonic masculinity is not a set of fixed qualities but rather a malleable and changing set of characteristics that changes as cultural ideology evolves and can be challenged (Connell 77).

One key element of hegemonic masculinity is the concept of subordination. As previously mentioned, hegemonic masculinity implies and reinforces the dominance of men and the subordination of women (Connell 77). Not only is the subordination of

women important to hegemonic masculinity, but the subordination of homosexual or otherwise "less masculine" men factors into the establishment of dominant hegemonic masculinity (Connell 78). Homosexual men are subordinated and oppressed in a variety of ways in American society, including in the work place, on the street as victims of intimidation as well as violent crime, in "cultural exclusion," as well as through previous danger of being imprisoned for violations of sodomy laws (Connell 78). Because of these ways in which gay men are devalued in American society, the representations of gay masculinity appears toward the bottom of the hierarchy of masculinities and is often subject to feminization through stereotypes of their stylistic tastes and lifestyle (Connell 78). While it is arguable that homosexual men bear the brunt of oppression and subordination from the dominant hegemonic norm, heterosexual men who do not conform to dominant masculinity are also subject to similar oppression (Connell 78-79). Men who display characteristics of "wimp," "motherfucker," "mother's boy," or "geek," among a whole slew of others, are often denigrated, and their masculinities seen as less legitimate than the dominant hegemonic standard of masculinity (Connell 79).

Wimps and Losers

By understanding Connell's description of hegemonic masculinities, it is easier to discern how the actors and characters in *Freaks and Geeks, Knocked Up,* and *This Is the End* deviate from dominant American hegemonic standards in society and Hollywood film and differentiate themselves from "alpha male" masculinity. Work on "wimps" and "losers" done by Kimmel, Peberdy, and Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer identify characteristics of these hegemonic masculinities. In Kimmel's book *Manhood in*

America, he explains that the wimp is a departure from the masculinity best embodied by John Wayne. The wimp offered a man who was "warm, sensitive, cuddly, and compassionate" (Kimmel 193) rather than a harder, both physically and emotionally, masculinity exemplified by Wayne. Described as the "sensitive New Age guy," film characters of the 1980s such as Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie* (1982) and films such as *Three Men and a Baby* (1987) portrayed men embracing the experiences of women by masquerading as a woman or becoming "mothers" (Kimmel 193). Despite a new recognition of motherhood and women's experiences, the new man still expressed his superiority over women by proving that he could be a better woman and mother than a woman, preventing him from forming a truly equal relationship with women (Kimmel 193). This also was the era in which *The Terminator*, *Rambo*, and similar muscular action heroes held sway. Additionally, popular musicians like John Lennon called for the destruction of the "macho ethic" in this era (Lennon qtd. in Kimmel 193). However, even though this "new man" was preferred as the masculinity of the decade, it did not convince many Americans (Kimmel 193). The new man risked being perceived as a wimp or a sissy, causing "real men" to reject the new iteration of masculinity favored by feminists like Betty Friedan (Kimmel). However, even though the wimp was appealing to some women, other women were not as accepting. Many took issue with these cinematic wimps not truly wanting to be equal or share power but rather no longer wanted to be the breadwinner of the family (Kimmel 194). Additionally, according to Kimmel, many women were not thrilled by how accommodating wimps were to their needs. Rather than sweeping women off of their feet, wimps were more likely to ask

permission for everything and lack a sense of certainty (Kimmel 194). Kimmel also explains that the wimp in these films "lacks a sense of purpose, including a sense of sexual purpose" (193).

Finding sexual purpose and gaining sexual experience for men is a common theme not only throughout Kimmel's work but also in other works examining representations of masculinities in various eras in film. In the book *Contemporary Hollywood Masculinities* by Kord and Krimmer, the wimp/loser is examined in the context of several films in the [decade] including *The 40 Year Old Virgin* and *Punch-Drunk Love*. Kord and Krimmer explain, as Kimmel suggests, that a loser is in a state of "arrested sexual development" (Kord and Krimmer 200-201); once a loser overcomes his sexual inexperience, he will be able figure out the rest of his life and will evolve (Kord and Krimmer 200-201). Kord and Krimmer also state that the loser is not a dominant masculinity, but rather is a "niche" masculinity that is easily identifiable (Kord and Krimmer 197).

Kimmel, as well as Kord and Krimmer, make note that losers and wimps are not dominant versions of masculinity. Even though Kord and Krimmer challenge the notion that losers should change and question the need to "fix" losers (Kord and Krimmer 206), an implication that something is wrong with a loser remains. Kord and Krimmer continue to refer to this particular masculine type as "loser," suggesting that even though the loser may not need to be fixed, it is still a masculinity that is aligned with failure. While Kord and Krimmer and Kimmel describe performed masculinities that are compassionate and

sensitive, their labels of losers and wimps suggest that these particular masculinities are inferior to other masculinities that follow dominant hegemonic standards more closely.

Peberdy in her book *Masculinity and Film Performance* also explores the notion of what she terms "wimps" in cinema. Specifically, she makes the distinction between hard and soft masculinity, indicating that wimp characters tend to be "soft" while real men are "hard" (Peberdy 108). Susan Bordo in her book *The Male Body* similarly talks about norms of masculinity in society in terms of hard and soft. Bordo writes "to be exposed as 'soft' at the core is one of the worst things a man can suffer in this culture" (Bordo 55). For Bordo, soft refers not only to being physically soft but to being emotionally soft or vulnerable (Bordo 55-58). If a man has a body that has not been hardened and controlled through exercise or is soft because of poor (uncontrolled) diet and obesity, or if a man is open with his emotions, then his masculinity is seen as less legitimate than if he is "hard." As Kimmel mentions, wimps are compassionate and sensitive (Kimmel 193) and therefore can be considered soft. It is important to keep notions of hard versus soft in mind in both the physical and emotional sense when examining how the characters in *Freaks and Geeks, Knocked Up,* and *This Is the End* interact with other characters in their respective narratives.

While I do not necessarily disagree with the characteristics that these scholars use to describe the wimp and the loser, it is the negative connotation that I wish to challenge. Moreover, because of shifting notions of masculinity, dominance, gender relations, and social change, I believe dominant hegemonic masculinity is becoming more flexible and expanding its qualities in popular media. Dominant hegemonic masculinity is becoming

dominant hegemonic masculinities. Because of this shift, film and television have begun to embrace characters and plots depicting the beta male as protagonists. With the growing success of films such as *This Is the End*, earning $98,847,912 as of September 6, 2013 (imdb.com), and the rising star power of actors such as Rogen and Hill, loser and wimp masculinities are included in a new version of dominant hegemonic masculinities. While Connell's definition of alpha males still stands, the masculinities presented in *Freaks and Geeks*, *Knocked Up*, and *This Is the End* may provide its audience with alternative dominant hegemonic masculinities. Thus, rather than treating the loser and the wimp as "niche" masculinities, in this study I analyze mainstream films as well as a cult classic television show to demonstrate the pervasiveness of beta male masculinities and show the positive characteristics now associated with them. In order to do this, I examine the chosen texts, film and television reviews, and audience reception to the texts and the actors to gain a better understanding of how critics and fans in the United States responded to them. Repositioning the loser and the wimp as beta males allows me to examine societal reception to determine if a new dominant hegemonic masculinity has emerged in the current cultural climate. If there is a new dominant hegemonic masculinity, then societal standards have expanded to include more diverse representations of masculinity rather than holding all men to one strict standard. By determining whether or not there is a new sense of dominant hegemonic masculinity, it is easier to understand the cultural climate surrounding sex and gender norms. Additionally, since the beta male encompasses more than one masculinity, he is not beholden to singular set of norms. By embracing multiple versions of masculinities, beta male

masculinities may become more inclusive where previous standards of masculinity are not.

Beta Male Comedies

David Greven's article "'I Love You, Brom Bones': Beta Male Comedies and American Culture" explores the beta male comedy primarily through the films *Knocked Up* (2007), *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008), and *I Love You, Man* (2009). Greven takes up how these comedies, in his opinion, offer a new crisis in masculinity but still manage to uphold "misogyny, homophobia, and racism" (Greven 405). Greven attributes the beta male's ability to behave in ways not typically expected of men to the progress women are making in the workplace and women's adoption of male characteristics. To illustrate this point, Greven references Alison Scott from *Knocked Up* and her willingness to embrace "the fraternal sphere", allowing her to be able to accept Ben and his friends despite their unconventional looks (Greven 411). Additionally, heterosexual relationships and marriage disrupt male friendships explored in *I Love You, Man* and *Knocked Up* by the end of the film (Greven 410). The films explored by Greven end in marriage or a heterosexual relationship. Even though the films feature displays of male friendship, it is ultimately overshadowed by heterosexual romantic elements. Greven also discusses the homoerotic overtones that beta male comedies exhibit and the homophobia potentially reinforced by using homosexuality as a comedic strategy (Greven 415). For Greven, while beta male comedies reflect shifting social norms including the "acceptance of queer people and the difficult struggles of a postfeminist era", these comedies also suggest that "manning-up" is the only way to deal with these

changes (Greven 418). Greven's view of beta male comedies is useful to my study especially his point about women's growing success in the workplace as part of the reason beta males are allowed to behave as they do, however; there is room to expand his assessment, especially in regard to male friendships.

METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the versions of Rogen's masculinity performed in *Freaks and Geeks*, *Knocked Up*, and *This Is the End* and thus craft a definition for beta male, I use textual as well as discourse analysis. I focus on how the performances of the actors compare, contrast, and potentially evolve as well as on how the characters interact with each other within the film itself. My primary research questions are: How have several films and television included and embraced new images of masculinities? How have audiences embraced or otherwise reacted to these images? Does the inclusion and acceptance of shifting qualities and versions of masculinities in these television and film texts indicate a more inclusive definition of hegemonic masculinity? Some other questions I will keep in mind: How are masculinities represented within the texts and how do they vary between characters within the same social circle? For instance, how is Rogen's character, Ken, similar to or different from Segel's Nick in *Freaks and Geeks*? Also, it may be useful to look at how a particular actor portrays masculinities across texts. By focusing primarily on Rogen, I am able to construct a stronger case regarding evolving norms. Foundational also to this analysis are theories of hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and performativity as well as concepts from star and celebrity studies.

While textual analysis is critical to my project, discourse analysis is important to place the movies in a cultural and social context. Masculinity is not fixed but rather the product of a particular cultural and historical context (Connell 77). To examine effectively the masculinities represented within *Freaks and Geeks, Knocked Up,* and *This Is the End,* it is critical to understand the cultural landscape in which they were produced. In order to understand the texts within their social and cultural context, I examine interviews with the actors concerning their movies as well as film reviews in major newspapers and magazines such as the *New York Times*, *Variety*, and *Rolling Stone*. I also pay attention to how Rogen's co-stars and directors and the critics discuss his performances.

Beyond analysis of film and television reviews and interviews, I include an analysis of how audiences received these texts. I use Facebook and Twitter to find reactions by people of the texts as a whole as well as the star status of the actors in the films, particularly Rogen. Facebook and Twitter are particularly useful in determining the level of social appeal of the characters and prove crucial in determining whether beta male masculinity can be considered a new dominant hegemonic masculinity.

I chose to examine *Freaks and Geeks, Knocked Up, and This Is the End* because of their release dates and the characters within the texts. Released in 1999, 2007, and 2013 respectively, the texts are almost evenly dispersed from the end of the 1990s up to present day, allowing for an examination of any changes in representations and reactions to those masculinities through the decade of 2000s and the early 2010s. Also, Rogen has major roles in all three texts, allowing me to focus on a specific, consistent example of

performing masculinities throughout the texts. However, because I am only looking at two movies and one television show, the scope of my study is limited; given the time constraints of the project, it was necessary to limit the material being examined. Each film or television show includes a handful of characters that could be analyzed in terms of masculinity but special attention is paid to Rogen. Rogen and Segel are not the main characters in *Freaks and Geeks*. Rather than focusing only on the episodes in which they factor prominently, I look at their development over the course of the show's one season in order to allow for more nuance of character analysis. Additionally, because I am focusing primarily on Rogen, I focus on his developing star image

It is important to note that *Freaks and Geeks*, *Knocked Up*, and *This Is the End* are all comedies. While the type of comedy differs in style and delivery, these texts are not considered dramas. Since this study only examines comedy films and television, it is impossible to generalize about how masculinities are being portrayed in other genres such as drama, thriller, action, horror, or romance. The choice to focus on comedies does allow me to explore the freedom men within comedies have or do not have to experiment with gender expression in a way that may both deviate from social norms and remain relatable to the audience.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter One

Chapter one examines *Freaks and Geeks* and Rogen and Segel specifically. This is the first instance of Rogen, Segel, and Apatow working together and allows me to begin to examine beta male masculinity and its appearance in television at the beginning

of the 2000s. Also, *Freaks and Geeks* was the vehicle for Segel and Rogen's first major roles in television or film. *Freaks and Geeks* displays the masculinity that Rogen and others will evince in later texts. Similar to "wimps" and "losers," in contemporary culture, the terms "freaks" and "geeks" have negative connotations associated with them. I examine the freaks in terms of how their masculinities are represented in both positive and negative light. The personal relationships, both platonic and romantic, of Rogen's character, Ken Miller, and Segel's character, Nick Andopolis, serve as a starting point for this exploration. Beyond focusing on the representations of masculinity within the text, I explore interviews and critical reviews of the show at the time of its release. Audience reactions were harder to come across because of the time in which the show was released, but it is also useful to examine how the show is received presently as a cult favorite.

Chapter Two

Chapter two focuses on the movie *Knocked Up* and Rogen's performance as Ben Stone. Produced eight years after *Freaks and Geeks*, *Knocked Up* will serve as a check point to examine how the masculinity of Rogen's characters has evolved from television to film and from Rogen's character in high school to characters past their college years. Additionally, attention is paid to how others in the narrative view Rogen's character and whether or not they view his masculinity positively or negatively. I also explore how this compares to societal standards of dominant hegemonic masculinity as described by Connell and Kimmel and other images of masculinity within the film. In addition to exploring Rogen's masculinity, I examine how film critics and audiences received the

movie in order to gauge the social and cultural context and notions of hegemonic masculinity at the time of release.

Chapter Three

Chapter Three focuses on *This Is the End*. This film offers a more comprehensive look at how masculinity is portrayed in Hollywood film and popular culture via performances by several Hollywood beta males—Rogen, Hill, Jay Baruchel—and their relationships with each other as they play "themselves" in a fictional film narrative. *This Is the End* differs from *Freaks and Geeks* and *Knocked Up*, in that it focuses on the actors as fictitious exaggerations of themselves as actors and celebrities. How Rogen and Goldberg chose to write and direct caricatures of Seth and the others can serve as an indication of how they desire to represent their own masculinity as star figures as well as suggest how they believe others view their masculinity. *This Is the End* was released arguably at the height (so far) of Rogen's popularity and provides the project with the most recent depictions of beta male masculinity. *This Is the End* will allow for comparisons to male figures in *Freaks and Geeks* as well as *Knocked Up* and permit a creation of a nuanced performance of beta male masculinity as it has evolved from 1999 to present day. By recognizing the similarities and differences between textual representations of masculinities and critical and audience reception, I demonstrate how beta male masculinity has changed in order to fit within the social norms of American society. I also explore the social context in which the film was released. I consider popular discourses in this time period about gender, particularly masculinity, in

both popular culture and social contexts by examining news stories and popular television shows such as the television series *New Girl* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*.

Conclusion

The conclusion brings together the observations from the previous three chapters in order to create a definition of cinematic and televisual beta male masculinity that fits the current social landscape. I identify areas in my own research that can be built upon and expanded, as well as areas overlooked that are worth pursuing beyond the scope of this project.

Chapter 1: The Beta Male and *Freaks and Geeks*

Masculinities have had multiple variations of representation throughout film and television at any given time with particular iterations being more popular and having more appeal given the societal context in which they were produced. The muscle men of the 1980s gave way to the fatherly figures of the 1990s (Jeffords, 245). At the end of the 1990s the popular image of the American male had morphed from a hypermasculine action hero a la Rambo or The Terminator to a less sensationalized father figure (Tasker, Jeffords). In addition to physical changes, personality traits of popularized male characters started to shift. Rather than media texts favoring males who either did not show emotion or only displayed anger, aggression, or apathy, some male characters emerged with not only emotions but also empathy and compassion. Some father figures such as Dan (played by John Goodman) from *Roseanne* (1988-1997, ABC) were shown as sensitive and soft-spoken, which challenged dominant gender relations and expectations (Senzani, 237). While adult male protagonists in film were often less muscular and more emotional, a shift within high school and college dramedies (comedy-dramas) also took place by the late 1990s. With the proliferation and success of shows such as *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003, The WB) and *Felicity* (1998-2002, The WB) (imdb.com), there was a distinct model of what high school and college teens should look like on television offering idols much like James Dean in the 1950s. James Van Der Beek's Dawson Leery and Joshua Jackson's Pacey Witter brought the youthful, blonde baby-faced teen and rugged bad boy archetypes respectively to *Dawson's Creek* while Scott Speedman's Ben Covington and Scott Foley's Noel Crane offered the brooding

bad-boy and handsome overachiever to *Felicity*. While their characters were meant to be identifiable as fringe personalities at their respective schools—playing the filmmaker, nerdy artist, and the troublemaker types (particularly Dawson and Pacey in *Dawson's Creek*)—the actors chosen were ultimately heartthrobs for fans to fawn over. This chapter will explore the show *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000, NBC), a sixty-minute comedy about the high school life of Lindsay and Sam Weir and their groups of friends, the "freaks" and the "geeks." The main focus will be on how the characters Ken Miller, portrayed by Seth Rogen, and Nick Andopolis, played by Jason Segel, challenged the Hollywood heartthrob expectation that was common within high school shows of the time and created a new representation, the beta male, that would eventually gain popularity later in the decade. Nick and Ken serve as examples of beta males in film and television at the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s. By understanding their representations, I will be able to explore further how the beta male has evolved, specifically through roles portrayed by Rogen over the years.

THE 1990S CULTURAL CLIMATE

The early 1990s saw a shift in the types of masculinities being portrayed in popular movies and television. According to Susan Jeffords, the 1980s were filled with films that featured hard bodies and action spectacle such as *Rambo* and *Die Hard* (Jeffords 245). These hard bodies were often meant to convey an image of toughness similar to how politicians wanted to convey a sense of resolve and power. However, just as political masculinities shifted in the 1990s, male film protagonists also saw changes. Rather than focusing on hard bodies and outward, physical aspects, representations of

male protagonists in film began to focus on their inward lives such as their emotions and "psychological goals" (Jeffords 245). Movies at the end of the eighties such as *Three Men and a Baby* (1987) and *Look Who's Talking* (1989) begin to feature a fatherly figure as the main masculine portrayal (Jeffords 254). Fathering becomes a key component to the masculinities being represented in 1990s films and is indicative of a more emotional, ethical, and committed man (Jeffords 254). Other popular films of the 1990s that illustrate a more emotional, inwardly focused masculinity include *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *Titanic* (1997), and *American Beauty* (1999). While some movies do not follow this logic, Jeffords's point is the importance of recognizing the popularity of the character who "learns to love" (Jeffords 245).

In addition to Jeffords's exploration of shifting masculinities in film, a change also occurs in family sitcoms, with special focus on the father. Alessandra Senzani explores how sex and gender relations were challenged in the show *Roseanne* (1988-1997, ABC). Roseanne's husband Dan, played by John Goodman, offered a special dynamic both as a father and as a husband. In the pilot episode, Dan is unemployed; throughout the series he often struggles with his job security while Roseanne takes control of the financial stability of the family, working odd jobs to make ends meet each month. Senzani writes that Dan's character is more sensitive than other father character at the time; and he shows less aggressive ambition than was often expected of men in family sitcoms, especially when being the breadwinner was viewed as essential to maintaining a socially acceptable masculinity (Connell; Senzani). While Dan may be more sensitive and not the primary breadwinner of the family, he is not depicted as dumb

or insufficient but rather intelligent and supportive, traits that are desirable to women (Senzani). Rather than presenting the "lazy" or "dumb" stereotypes that portrayals of the working class man often perpetuate, Dan shows another side of working-class masculinity that aligns itself with the representations of father figures in the films of the 1990s (Senzani). With shifts in film and television regarding the representation of men in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it makes sense that in addition, alternative representations of teen masculinity were produced for television.

FREAKS AND GEEKS: A HISTORY

In 1999, NBC took a risk and bought episodes of a show that wanted to depict the realities of high school rather than glamourizing and sensationalizing those experiences such as seen in shows like *Dawson's Creek* (Lloyd). Created, co-written, and co-produced by Paul Feig and directed, co-written, and co-produced by Judd Apatow, *Freaks and Geeks* (1999) follows the lives of Lindsay and Sam Weir and their circle of friends throughout a year in high school. *Freaks and Geeks* was meant to be an unabashedly real depiction of Feig's high school experience. Rather than making sure each character always achieves a victory, the characters faced failure, both in class and in relationships. *Freaks and Geeks* encouraged the audience to relive their own uncomfortable high school experiences (Lloyd). *Freaks and Geeks*, which only ran

Figure 1.1 Title Card

eighteen episodes, served as either the first or the first major role for many of its stars (Lloyd). Many of the cast continue to act in films with each other and to collaborate on projects with Apatow. Rogen and Segel in particular have worked on several projects with Apatow beyond *Freaks and Geeks.* Even though the series has risen to cult status and may continue to grow as more people have access to the show via streaming websites such as Netflix, the show was unable to gain enough traction during its original run to save it from cancellation by NBC (Lloyd).

Casting was a critical part of the production of *Freaks and Geeks*. In order to capture the realities of Feig's high school experience, the cast had to be just right. According to Apatow and Feig, the cast was chosen because they were believable as high school students in how they appeared, talked, and interacted with one another (Lloyd). Busy Philipps, who plays Kim Kelly on the show, stated how *Freaks and Geeks* was often described as the anti-*Dawson's Creek* and that the cast was often noted for their lack of conventional good looks. According to Philipps, one review said, "You won't find any pretty people on *Freaks and Geeks*" (Philipps qtd. in Lloyd). Each actor was picked instead for specific quirks they brought to the portrayal of each character. For instance, Martin Starr was selected to play Bill Haverchuck because of the physicality he brought

Figure 1.2 Cast and crew of Freaks and Geeks

to his performance such as his open-mouthed, blank stare (Lloyd). According to Apatow, Rogen, who was sixteen at the time of his audition for Ken, initially came off as disgruntled, angry, and crazy in his audition. Rogen explained that he was "angry and repressed" mostly because he had yet to have sex with a girl, giving Apatow and Feig the wrong impression of his personality. Because Rogen came off as sarcastic, Apatow and Feig began to write Ken in a similar manner. However, as Rogen's personality changed from the audition process through production, so did Ken. Similarly, Segel was cast as Nick Andopolis because of the similarities Apatow saw between him and Nick. According to Apatow, Segel was great to write for because of the connection they had with each other and the desperation Segel brought to the character (Lloyd). With the show cast, the writers began using their own high school experiences to brainstorm compelling, realistic situations to write for their characters (Lloyd). Techniques used to elicit genuine reactions from the actors included improvisation of particular scenes and then reworking them in order to incorporate the actors' reactions. One episode that made heavy use of this technique was "The Little Things," in which Ken finds out his girlfriend Amy (Jessica Campbell) was born with ambiguous genitalia (Lloyd). The

Figure 1.3 Seth Rogen as Ken Miller

goal of *Freaks and Geeks* was to present the television viewing audience with an experience that was unabashedly real and unglamorous (Lloyd). Beyond showing real experiences, the characters were also to be relatable. Because high school teens as well as adults can watch *Freaks and Geeks* and potentially find themselves within the characters, the gender roles needed to parallel the era. Rather than offering unattainable images of masculinities, *Freaks and Geeks* presents viewers with representations of males that could be recognized from their own lives.

Even though the series was not able to capture an audience large enough to save it from cancellation, the show has now reached cult status and may continue to gain in popularity (Lloyd). In addition to gaining cult status, *Freaks and Geeks* also served as the origin of "The School of Apatow," the stable of actors used frequently in Apatow films, particularly Rogen, Segel, and James Franco (Lloyd).

"REAL" HIGH SCHOOL, NEW MASCULINITIES

Freaks and Geeks' attempts at a realistic version of high school, one that differed from the too-perfect scenarios of shows such as *Dawson's Creek*, challenged standard television representations of gender and sexuality. While Lindsay Weir (Linda Cardellini) and Kim Kelly (Busy Philipps) do not attempt to meet challenges to traditional ideas of femininity, especially in regards to body images and standards of beauty, my focus will be on Rogen's Ken and Segel's Nick. While both characters are secondary to Franco's Daniel Desario and John Francis Daley's Sam, Ken and Nick offer fruitful grounds in which to interrogate representations of masculinity, particularly as it relates to alpha and beta males. David Greven explores the concept of the beta male in

his article "'I Love You, Brom Bones': Beta Male Comedies and American Culture," focused on films of the 2000s. Greven defines the "losers" in beta male comedies as characters who are not conventionally handsome, out of work, out of shape, and generally distinct from the typical leading man (Greven 405). While the last characteristic does not apply to these males, utilizing Greven's definition of the protagonist in beta male comedies, I will explore Ken and Nick as beta males.

Throughout the series, Ken offers a sarcastic contrast to Nick. Nick is a sincere dreamer, and his life goal is to be a famous drummer. Yet Nick also is easily swayed into trying new trends, such as disco, in order to impress his current female object of affection. Ken in contrast, often uses snarky comments and sarcasm to relate to other people, even when he is fond of someone. When he first meets Amy, whom he eventually dates, he makes fun of her for playing the tuba in marching band. Where Nick is wide-eyed and romantic, Ken is blunt and ineloquent. Both characters evolve over the course of the show, with Ken showing a softer side, especially after he lands Amy as a girlfriend, and Nick slowly realizing that his dreams are bigger than his talent (Lloyd). Their development as characters allows them to embody characteristics of the beta male and differentiate themselves from other dominant characteristics of masculinity.

Both Ken and Nick fail to live up to the standard of dominant 1980's hegemonic masculinity as described by Raewyn Connell in her book *Masculinities*. Neither Ken nor Nick seems to achieve their goals. Even though Ken eventually dates Amy, he still does not have a solid idea of what he wants to do with his life. Nick tries and fails at many things like the drums, pursuing relationships with Lindsay, disco, and school. Ken and

Nick do not seem to have the characteristics society upholds as necessary in order to allow them to graduate eventually, go to college, obtain a good job, find a wife, and become the primary breadwinner of a family. Even though Connell explains that dominant hegemonic masculinity is impossible for any male to match, society places value on coming as close to those ideals as possible (Connell 77). Because of the impossibility of reaching that particular version of masculinity, multiple masculinities are part of society with some versions being more universally valued than others. Ken and Nick do not live up to the expectation that they should be dominant in all relationships, particularly in regards to women, nor do they conform to the "hardness" a man is supposed to exhibit through either their bodies or their emotions (Bordo 55). Dawson Leery or Pacey Witter from *Dawson's Creek* might also be considered freaks. Their behaviors fit with the outsider label assigned to them by those in the upper echelons of high school, including the adults. However, even though Dawson and Pacey are seen as fringe members of the high school community, their good looks compensate for viewers and critics (Lloyd). Ken and Nick are not romanticized within their high school environment. They face problems that are believable and embarrassing in order to elicit laughter and empathy from the audience.

Rogen's Ken is arguably the straight man to Franco's Daniel and Segel's Nick. Ken also does not accept the principle female character, Lindsay, into their group as readily as Daniel and Nick do. Lindsay is a straight A student and former mathlete. After the death of her grandmother, Lindsay attempts to redefine herself and decides to make friends with the "freaks." In addition, Daniel or Nick generally bring about the

situations in which Ken finds himself, often putting him in the "sidekick" role. Because he never has any romantic interest with Lindsay as Nick does nor is he the leader of the freaks like Daniel, Ken takes a secondary role within the show. His character is unremarkable: he does not appear to encounter the same academic trouble as Daniel and Nick. He lacks Nick's ambition. Even though Nick's dreams of being a drummer may be misplaced, Nick is dedicated to his twenty-nine piece drum kit and even goes so far as to audition for a band. Meanwhile, Ken floats through school and even within his group of friends. Ken smokes marijuana but does not take it to the extreme stoner levels like Nick. And while Ken may like girls and desire to date them and maybe have sex with them, Ken does not change his personal style to gain a girl's attention as Daniel does in "Noshing and Moshing," nor does he write poetry, as Nick does for Lindsay. Ken is the representation of the average high school student, a representation that may be the toughest to make interesting. While Ken is already ostracized for being a freak and a burnout, he is not even able to excel at failing. Nick and Daniel may be failures, but at least they are spectacular failures. Ken is average in his failure and risks social invisibility.

The storyline in "The Little Things" brings Ken out of social obscurity within his own group and gives him visibility within the televisual realm. This particular episode was meant by the writers to complicate what was currently playing on network television (Apatow qtd. in Lloyd). The episode deals with Amy's confession to Ken about being born with ambiguous genitalia. While the episode was transgressive in content and likely would not have been produced had the show not been on the verge of cancellation

(Apatow qtd. in Lloyd), it is a pivotal episode for Ken as he grapples with his own understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. When Amy initially divulges her secret to Ken, he claims that he is fine with it after she confirms that she is otherwise fully female. Upon further reflection and discussion with Nick and Daniel, Ken begins to pull away from Amy. Ken must face questions about whether or not he is gay since he is dating someone who could have anatomically been a male. As Ken pulls away from Amy, Amy recognizes what is happening and separates herself from Ken in an effort to protect herself. Eventually, after a brief, awkward talk about his sexuality with the guidance counsellor, Mr. Rosso (Dave Allen), and a heartfelt talk with Sam in the restroom, Ken realizes he is being ridiculous and reconciles with Amy. Unfortunately, "The Little Things" is the last episode before the series finale, and the audience does not have the opportunity to see how Ken and Amy's relationship develops.

"The Little Things" and an earlier episode, "The Garage Door," allow the audience to experience Ken as more than just a tangential sidekick. These episodes show Ken's uneasiness and awkwardness about girls and how he should act on first date. Rather than being portrayed as a sexually aggressive, horny teen, Ken is shown as unsure and lost trying to navigate the world of girls. Because Ken is unsure of himself rather than being portrayed as a suave lady's man for whom dating and sex come naturally, he can be differentiated from hypersexualized teens and college students more readily

offered to the television audience of the time, with the exception of *Boy Meets World* (1993-2000, ABC) which follows Cory Matthews and friends from middle school through college. Rather than focusing trying to have sex with Amy on the first date, in "The Garage Door" Ken is more concerned just about kissing her. While Ken, Nick, and Daniel and their dates are at the Laser Dome for what was supposed to be a Pink Floyd light show, Nick and Daniel make fun of Ken for hesitating so long to kiss Amy. For Nick and Daniel, kissing and making out are the most important parts of their time with girls, and Ken should be able to initiate the first kiss without a problem. In Michael Kimmel's book, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, one chapter focuses on "hooking up" and sexual relationships with women and their importance in a boy's development into a man (Kimmel 2008, 198). Ken, however, seems to be struggling with the most basic elements of dating which calls into question the representation that high school boys easily deal with sexual relations. Even though Ken and Amy eventually kiss, Ken does not go about it in a smooth way, basically staring at Amy until she brings up the subject. *Guyland* implies it may be easy for some boys to talk about and initiate sex, but it may also be hard for some boys to approach sex, as demonstrated by Ken in "The Garage."

Figure 1.4 Ken and Amy kiss at the Laser Dome

While Ken is an example of an unremarkable high school failure, Nick is an example of someone who fails in big ways. Nick develops a romantic interest in Lindsay early in the season and spends a great deal of effort attempting to woo her and, eventually, sustain a relationship with her. As Apatow mentions in his interview with *Vanity Fair*, Segel was able to portray the anguish of failure and the desperation to achieve any success felt during high school, specifically as it applies to finding a girlfriend or boyfriend (Lloyd). Nick is the embodiment of a lovelorn teenager who has no idea how to pursue a romantic relationship with a girl. While Ken is unsure of how to build a relationship with Amy and tends toward non-action—any progress made is prompted by the taunting of Daniel or Nick—Nick has the opposite problem. Nick thinks he knows. He attempts grand gestures such as poetry, songs, and single roses with sappy notes. While Nick is trying to be suave and romantic, his gestures make Lindsay visibly uncomfortable, and Nick is framed more as a well-intentioned stalker. The episode "Smooching and Mooching" best demonstrates Nick's ill-executed attempts at romance and sex. In the episode, Nick, after getting into an argument with his father about his future, leaves his house and ends up staying at the Weirs. Daniel and Ken, upon hearing of Nick's new living situation, suggest ways to facilitate sex with Lindsay, despite the fact that Lindsay and Nick are no longer dating. Heeding Daniel and Ken's advice, Nick attempts to seduce Lindsay with the promise of a

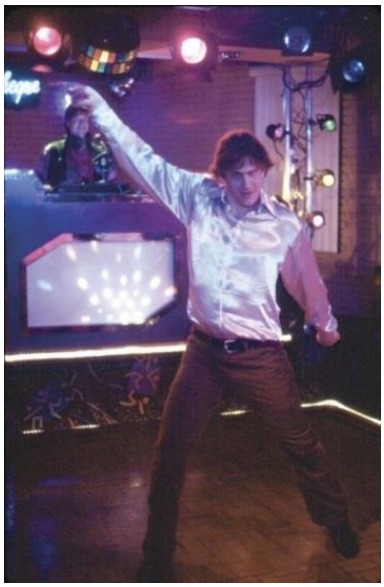

Figure 1.5 Nick dances disco

massage while donning a black and white striped thong, only for his advances to be rejected by Lindsay and witnessed by Sam. While this may be the most extreme example of Nick trying to seduce Lindsay, his actions are not limited to his quest for Lindsay. Once Lindsay has made it clear that she is not interested in him in a romantic way, Nick moves on to another girl and even goes so far as to take up disco-dancing, something he has vehemently objected to throughout the series, in order to make a romantic connection. Even though his grand gestures for Lindsay failed in that he was never able to sustain a romantic, let alone sexual, relationship with Lindsay, Nick does not seem to learn from his actions and continues his methods of grand gesture.

Nick, like Ken, is unable to navigate successfully a high school relationship and thus seems to fail at a keystone moment of development from a boy to a man. With Nick and Ken seemingly unable to bridge the gap between boy and man with their failures in the romance department, their suspended adolescence is indicative of the child-like quality of a "beta male." Because they have to work at their relationships and are not always successful, they are more willing to try to make a relationship work which may be appealing to female viewers. Rather than being able to use their social position or good looks to help them find a girlfriend, Nick and Ken must learn other skills, like communication. Even though Nick and Ken are arguably still children, their suspension of adulthood echoes the arrested development displayed in later cases such Ben Stone in *Knocked Up* (2007). Through their inability, regardless of desire, to make any sort of sexual connection with women, Ken and Nick represent the rejection that is the stuff of high school nightmares. Their failures, born out of the writers' and creators' personal

experience, allude to masculinities other than the hyper-stylized and romanticized notions of high school males being perpetuated by shows such as *Dawson's Creek.*

While Nick and Ken are in high school and are not married, they either lack overall ambition (Ken) or suffer from misplaced ambition (Nick). Without proper ambition, the implication is that they have no real future. While Nick's father clearly explains Nick's options either to pull his act together and focus on realistic goals or go into the military, Ken does not have this sort of guidance and flounders in uncertainty. Because Nick and Ken do not have clear plans beyond high school, or for the rest of high school at that, they are setting themselves up for a rough entry into adulthood. Even though they are high school juniors, there is no discussion about college or what should come after high school. Even though the geeks—Sam, Neal Schweiber, and Bill Haverchuck—are freshman and clearly not at the top of the high school hierarchy, they are driven to do well in school, and parents, teachers, and counselors do not fear that they will not succeed. While it is normal not to have a clear direction in life in high school, that Ken lacks vision for himself and no visible support system seems to set him up for a difficult adjustment to adulthood.

Even though Ken and Nick are better at connecting with women at an emotional level than most men, because they struggle to navigate romantic and sexual relationships they fail to live up to societal standards of dominant masculinity. However, because they are pursuing relationships with women, they are positioned as heterosexual and spare themselves from marginalization as gay or queer. While Ken briefly questions his sexuality in "The Little Things," because Amy confirms that she has entirely female

anatomy, he ultimately accepts her sex and firmly situates himself as heterosexual. While the introduction of a potentially sex and gender ambiguous character was meant to destabilize how relationships on network television are represented, because of the final resolution of episode, Ken is able to stabilize his own sex and gender identity to himself and his friends. The crisis of male-ness and masculinity is short-lived and easily resolvable in an episode. Even though beta males may not be suave and are in a state of arrested development, they are decidedly straight which places them in a higher position in the hierarchy of masculinities. While it may be expected for a man to protect his masculinity above all else, Ken opts to preserve his relationship ignoring social expectations. Prior to this act Ken is not a distinctive character, but after his acceptance of Amy's secret Ken shows that he is a beta male by refusing to abide by societal ideals of dominant hegemonic masculinity. Even though Ken could be read as a beta male prior to learning Amy's secret, once he accepts her secret, he is able to further differentiate himself from other dominant forms of masculinity. While Ken may have initially believed his masculinity and sexuality could be threatened by dating Amy, he ultimately decides that Amy is more important. Ken chooses a partnership with Amy rather than asserting his dominance and ending a relationship. Because Ken decides that he is not willing to end his relationship to protect his gender and sexual identity, Ken grows into his status as a beta male.

Additionally, Ken's and Nick's positions as secondary characters to the Weirs and Daniel Desario serve as a reminder of their beta status. While Daniel occupies a strange space in between "alpha" and "beta" that, because of the limited scope of the study, I will

not interrogate, his stories are given preference over the stories of Ken and Nick. Even within the dichotomy of Ken and Nick, Nick is clearly given priority over Ken, given Nick's aggressive interest in Lindsay. The hierarchy of characters is replicating the hierarchies of masculinities beyond television. However, while the beta male may be lower in the hierarchy than more traditionally accepted masculinities, because real experiences of the writers shaped these characters, it is arguable that the beta male may be more recognizable in society and may serve a different social function. Connell's version of dominant hegemonic masculinity is an envisioned masculinity. Connell acknowledges that it is impossible for a man to commit himself fully to every tenet of dominant hegemonic masculinity. Despite the impossibility of achieving dominant hegemonic masculinity, society still values those ideals. However, the qualities of the beta male may be more realistic and attainable to other men and therefore may serve as an embodied hegemony; it is important to separate what society thinks from what society does. While it is likely that dominant hegemonic ideals will be in place for an unforeseeable amount of time, it is possible that other masculinities are actually able to be represented.

While Ken and Nick are supposed to be teens in 1980, *Freaks and Geeks* was produced in 1999, at the end of the Bill Clinton's second term as president. The 1990s saw a shift in masculinities. While Clinton presented the American public with a sensitive and empathetic masculinity, his sexuality (read: heterosexual and hypersexual) and various political stances against child abuse still gave him enough "toughness" to prevent embodying a less hegemonic masculinity than that of Ronald Reagan or George

H. W. Bush (Malin 58-59). Like Clinton, the masculinities in *Freaks and Geeks* also display sensitivity and empathy. Ken and Nick are examples of men who are more focused on internal development rather than physique. In addition, Ken and Nick do not seem to have the same ability as Clinton did to rely on other aspects of their masculinities, such as an ability to "kick ass," to keep them firmly within dominant norms of masculinity. Ken and Nick have no ambition or misplaced ambition and are not interested in demonstrating their power. Additionally, Ken and Nick are not typically handsome and do not have hard, muscular bodies. Rather, Ken and Nick are soft both physically and emotionally.

After this television series, Rogen often has had influence over his character either through writing, producing, or direction; however, *Freaks and Geeks* was his first role, and he did not have much input into his character. Because it is useful to create a star image in which fans can believe (Gamson 144), it is important to know that Rogen has had authorial power over his characters. Even though Rogen did not create Ken, Apatow and Feig created the character based off of their perception of Rogen. While Rogen was not yet a star when Ken was written for him, Ken is still a reflection of how other people saw him. While Ken and Rogen are not one in the same, this is an example of how a successful image may influence the characters an actor later chooses to portray. As Rogen's career has advanced and he has gained more authorial power, he at times has had the opportunity to tweak how his characters are represented and how characteristics like his masculinity are portrayed. Indeed, Rogen plays a caricature of his star persona in *This Is the End*, which will be discussed later. Even though aspects of Rogen's

characters may be influenced by how Rogen and his agents want him to be perceived, the characters actors play are not the only component of a star image nor are the characters always identical to an actor's star persona. Still Rogen used ken to launch his star image.

CRITICAL AND FAN RESPONSE TO *FREAKS AND GEEKS*

Even though *Freaks and Geeks* accepted its fate of cancellation mid-way through its first season due to low ratings, the show was critically acclaimed and had a loyal fan base (Teachout). A two-page ad from DreamWorks in the September 24, 1999, *Daily Variety* features the headline "DreamWorks Television Congratulates Judd Apatow, Paul Feig and the Cast and Crew of 'Freaks and Geeks' on a Great Show That Has The Critics Raving" (*Daily Variety*). In the two-page congratulation ad are excerpts from various entertainment magazines and newspapers. Praises include: "Funny and heartbreakingly real, 'Freaks and Geeks' is the fall's best drama" (*Teen People*, October 1999); "The best fall drama aimed at any demographic" (*Time Magazine*, 20 Sept. 1999); and "One of the season's best shows…stunningly funny and moving…with impressive realism and subtly, they've captured high school as a caste conscious battlefield" (*Rolling Stone*, 19 Sept. 1999). In addition to *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Teen People*, *Freaks and Geeks* also received high praise from *TV Guide*, *Elle*, *USA Today*, and *Newsday* reflecting the variety of demographics to which the show was able to appeal (*Daily Variety*).

Journalists such as Eric Schmuckler and Terry Teachout from the *New York Times* both gave favorable opinions of the show, lauding its dedication to producing well written, poignant, and realistic stories for its characters. Teachout credits the show's realism and tendency towards embarrassing the characters as reasons for why the show

was not able to pick up enough of an audience to raise its ratings and save the show from cancellation (Teachout). Teachout posits that the show's realism disturbed viewers because it was too close to their own experiences in high school, and people do not want to watch real life. Rather, they want to watch television to be distracted from their lives (Teachout). Schmuckler and Teachout both express how *Freaks and Geeks* portrays a realistic image of what it was like to go to high school in the '70s and '80s and serves as a nostalgic look of middle aged individuals at their youth (Schmuckler, Teachout). In addition to receiving favorable write-ups in the *New York Times*, *Freaks and Geeks* was also nominated for three Primetime Emmys. Nomination categories include "Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series," for the pilot episode and "Outstanding Casting for a Comedy Series" in 2000, which it won, and another nomination in 2001 for "Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series," for the episode "Discos and Dragons" (imdb.com).

Many viewers, upon learning of *Freaks and Geeks*'s pending cancellation, looked to the power of the internet to attempt a grass-roots effort to "save-our-series" campaign (Farache). As a part of their campaign, fans were able to raise enough money to put out a fan advertisement encouraging the network to reconsider their decision to cancel the show and advocating that others try watching the show themselves (*Daily Variety*, 27 Apr. 2000). The campaign which,

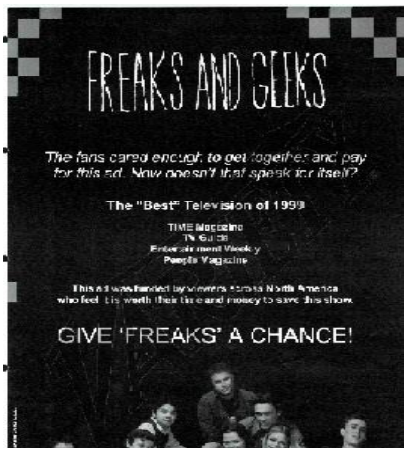

Figure 1.6 Save-Our-Series poster

according to the advertisement, was called "Operation Haverchuck" used the tagline "Support from fans who care" and even went so far as to set up the website www.haverchuck.org (*Daily Variety*). While the campaign was not able to bring *Freaks and Geeks* back for a second season, it was able to land a marathon of all of the unaired episodes of the series to provide closure to the fans (*E! Online*). This campaign and the show's critical acclaim may offer evidence that the viewers and critics found the characters, including the beta male characters, appealing.

The sense of verisimilitude of the characters and stories of *Freaks and Geeks* might be a part of the reason the show was not able to gain a large enough audience to boost ratings. Because of the outpouring of praise for how relatable *Freaks and Geeks* was not only to those who were in high school in the late 1970s and early 1980s but also to those in high school at the time of the show's airing and those who generally identify with "freaks" or "geeks," it seems recognition of these characters as realistic portrayals of high school students occurred. Because the fan base for *Freaks and Geeks* was easily able to recognize the characters, then it may be that the identities portrayed within the show embody hegemonic identities even though they are not what society considers as dominantly preferred in regards to masculinity. By positing a variety of portrayals of masculinity, the first step to recognizing multiple hegemonic masculinities has been realized, with Ken representing one alternative masculinity to mainstream audiences.

Chapter 2: The Freak is *Knocked Up*

As noted in Chapter 1, *Freaks and Geeks* represented new masculinities on television, masculinities that were laid-back and less physically fit. Seth Rogen's Ken Miller, though not the smoothest nor the most debonair male, is still able to find himself in a romantic relationship by the end of the series. While Ken's masculinity exists in repeated reruns on Netflix, Rogen has continued to portray similar versions of that masculinity throughout the 2000s. *Knocked Up*'s Ben Stone and Rogen serve as a representation of the issues of being a male faced by millennials in his uncertainty and further demonstrates Rogen's ongoing cultivation of a star image as a beta male.

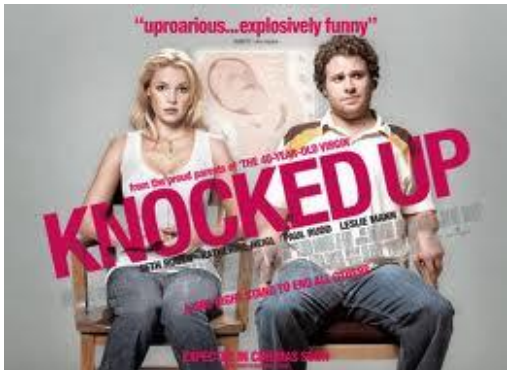

Figure 2.1 *Knocked Up* Movie Poster

Rogen's first major film, *Knocked Up* was released on June 3, 2007; Rogen plays Ben opposite Katherine Heigl as Alison Scott. The film focuses on Alison, a career-oriented entertainment journalist, and Ben, an unmotivated stoner, and their navigation of an unplanned pregnancy (Scott). In its opening weekend on 2,871 screens, *Knocked Up* made back its 30 million dollar budget with a box office total of $30,690,990 (imdb.com). *Knocked Up*'s domestic box office gross by the weekend of September 23, 2007, was $148,734,225 (imdb.com), indicating its success as a summer blockbuster. Critics such as A. O. Scott from the *New York Times* also praised the film, saying that *Knocked Up* "strikes me as an instant classic" and "*Knocked Up* made me smile and

wince; it made me laugh and almost cry. Above all it made me happy" (Scott). While *Knocked Up* was not nominated for an Academy Award or a Golden Globe, it did received the honor of being named one of The American Film Institute's Movies of the Year in 2007 alongside Academy Award winning movies such as *No Country for Old Men*, *There Will Be Blood*, and *Juno* (*Variety*, 19 Dec. 2007). Additionally, *Knocked Up* received the People's Choice Award for Favorite Movie Comedy. The People's Choice Award is significant because it is the only award on which people outside of Hollywood and the film and television industry vote. *Knocked Up*'s success at the box office and acclaim from critics and the general audience indicate that *Knocked Up*, like *Freaks and Geeks* is more than a comedy about stoners or outcasts, rather the audience enjoyed it.

Knocked Up is an example of a subgenre that, as noted by both Scott and Sharon Waxman of the *New York Times*, became prominent in television shows and films during the early 2000s (Scott; Waxman). *According to Jim* (2001), *8 Simple Rules* (2002), and *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005) pair an unkempt "loser" or "lovable loser" with a woman who is "too good" for him, too attractive, or too successful (Scott; Waxman). The "lovable loser" is still prominent in films such as *Superbad* (2007), *Step Brothers* (2008), and *The Hangover* (2009). A "lovable loser" can make mistakes, especially in regards to social etiquette, and still be likable and end up the object of a woman's affection. While Ben could also be considered a loveable loser, his evolution throughout the film suggests that he is not content with being someone for whom a woman settles. Scott's review of *Knocked Up* emphasizes the unlikeliness of Ben and Alison successfully being together and Alison's hesitance at staying with Ben once she has decided to keep the baby (Scott).

However, Scott notes that while Alison is unsure of how Ben will function as a father given his slacker approach to life, she is also cautious of making him change in who he is as a person (Scott). Despite his past, Ben eventually does willingly seem to change once he figures out how he needs to work with a person who is not a videogame partner or roommate (Scott). In the end, Ben is still appealing to Alison despite his attitude, personal appearance, and choice of recreational activities. Rather than being doubtful about the future because of how attractive Alison is and how unattractive Ben is, it is useful to look at what other of Ben's characteristics would make him appealing to women and why his particular masculinity may acceptable.

In Waxman's article, "Giving the Last Laugh to Life's Losers," Judd Apatow, the writer and director of *Knocked Up* and *Freaks and Geeks* (1999), discusses how he wanted to continue to champion the underdog because he himself identifies as an underdog (Apatow qtd. in Waxman). Waxman also describes the audience's positive reaction to test screenings of *Knocked Up* and asserts that while men provide a larger audience for movies, women relate to the situations, emotions, and characters presented in the film (Waxman). The reason for widespread enjoyment of the film may be that social expectations of men and women were changing (Greven). More women were pursuing full-time careers while more men were staying home. To see a woman in a high-power job and having her success potentially threatened by an unplanned pregnancy may have resonated with the women in the audience. Additionally, Rogen noted in an interview with Waxman that he believes that the vast majority of men act like the characters in *Knocked Up* and other movies like *40 Year Old Virgin* (Rogen qtd. in

Waxman). Rogen explained that these characters are reluctant to grow up and face real responsibilities, and that he feels that conversely few people want purposely to take on situations that make their life significantly more difficult (Rogen qtd. in Waxman). Despite the ethos of hard work engrained as one of the country's ideologies through tropes like the "American Dream," Rogen noted his belief that many people would rather take on fewer responsibilities and keep their life as easy as possible. Jobs and families may sound nice in theory, but realistically they mean more work and less time to devote to oneself. News sources such as CBS, *The Wall Street Journal*, and Forbes, similarly have questioned the millennial generation about its sense of entitlement and narcissism (Alsop; Kabani; Levin-Epstein). Rogen's comments about the desire for fewer responsibilities seem to support the questions about the ambition of the generation targeted by films like *Knocked Up*. Even though it is Rogen's opinion that the majority of people in their audience tend toward the less ambitious lifestyles of Ben and friends in *Knocked Up,* evidence suggests that it is not just Rogen who believes that millennials are less ambitious than previous generations. Because of the stigma that may come from being a part of a generation that is considered entitled and self-absorbed (Alsop; Kabani; Levin-Epstein), millennials are challenged with proving themselves beyond their slacker reputation, much like Ben does in the film. Although *Knocked Up* is a comedic film, Apatow has noted that he means for it to be a commentary on how real men experience real life as underdogs but manage to succeed (Waxman).

FROM STONER TO (UNLIKELY?) FATHER

While Waxman alludes to Ben's willingness to change for Alison and the good of their baby, critics typically do not discuss Ben's qualities that might make him a good partner or a good father. Much like how scholars such as Michael Kimmel, Elisabeth Krimmer, and Susanne Kord use words like "wimps" and "losers" to describe the kinds of characters in films like *Knocked Up*, reviews of the film use the same language (Waxman; Travers).

By societal standards, it would seem from these reviews, Ben is a loser. He does not have a job and lives off of money won from having his foot run over by a mail truck, lives in the United States illegally (he is from Canada), and spends most of his time smoking marijuana with his small group of friends/roommates while trying to compile a list of all of the scenes in movies in which audiences first see the breasts or pubic hair of female stars for a startup website. Even though Ben has aspirations of finding wealth through a successful company, he does not work a regular job to bring in income nor is he worried about finding one. Ben has not needed to be concerned about people other than himself, but also does not appear to have a provider mentality. In addition, Ben did not plan on Alison becoming pregnant but rather ignored responsible sex practices for faster gratification, suggesting that he is not in control of himself and does not routinely think

Figure 2.2 Alison and Ben at the gynecologist

ahead. In contrast to Ben, Alison is a hard worker and has recently been promoted to on-air reporting for the entertainment news station for which she works. She is goal-oriented and driven to succeed and perform at her highest professional potential. Alison enjoys planning and maintaining control of her life situation.

Given these factors, it seems obvious that reviewers or general audience members would be incredulous about Ben and Alison being together as a real couple rather than one forced together by pregnancy. However, even though Ben has qualities that seem to make him an unfit father, as mentioned by A.O. Scott, Alison is reluctant to change him (Scott). Alison does not want to change Ben in order to make him an appropriate father for their child but would rather let him stay in the child's life without being romantically tied to him. Once Ben realizes that Alison cares about him enough not to change him, he takes it on himself to change. Ben moves out of the house he had been sharing with four other roommates, finds a paying job, and finally reads the baby books he had promised to read, thus, he is able to help Alison when she goes into labor and cannot get ahold of their doctor. Ben is able to rise to all of the initial challenges fathers and families face during birth and proves to Alison that he could be the person with whom she would want to raise their baby.

Figure 2.3 Ben reads the baby books

On the surface, Ben may seem like a loser through and through; however, Ben's determination to be a suitable father to his child and partner to Alison manifests itself well before the "self-improvement" montage toward the end of the film. Several times Ben tries to change his ways in order to prove to Alison that he will be a suitable father and partner. Ben reaches out to his father for advice, asks Alison what she needs him to do, and tries to set-up his poorly planned website sooner than expected. While these efforts inevitably fail for one reason or another, they are efforts nonetheless. Because of these failures and Ben's pre-established status as inadequate, these efforts are insufficient to change Ben's standing. Had Ben been more conventionally attractive or had a well-paying job, Alison may have overlooked his other failures. Alison holds him to dominant hegemonic standards that echo those laid out by Connell. Ben cannot live up to those standards, especially since dominant hegemonic ideals are not realistic; however, Ben's efforts, though small, are actions. Even though it may seem unbelievable for Ben and Alison to end up together, the plot is setup so that Alison recognizes that traits such as a high-paying job and conventional good looks are not qualities that necessarily result in being a good father. Because Ben cares enough to try, he qualifies as a father.

Figure 2.4 Debbie and Pete

Alison and Ben are contrasted to Debbie (Leslie Mann), Alison's sister, and her husband Pete (Paul Rudd) throughout the film. Debbie and Pete marry because Debbie became pregnant much like the situation of Alison and Ben. Pete is a less than perfect husband and father and is often absent from home. Debbie thinks that Pete is cheating on her, but it turns out that he is sneaking out to spend time with his male friends to play fantasy baseball. However, because Pete is more conventionally attractive and has a high profile job as a music executive, he demonstrates characteristics of dominant hegemonic masculinity. Even though he is less invested in parenting than Ben seems to be, Pete is able to fulfill the breadwinner role and therefore seems to be a more suitable husband and partner. While Debbie criticizes Pete and temporarily kicks him out of the house for caring more about his friends than his family, Debbie eventually takes him back without any real evidence that he has reformed his ways. Conversely, Alison only realizes her desire to be with Ben after he changes his ways and demonstrates responsibility. Since Alison is already in a job that pays well, she does not need Ben to be the breadwinner; however, she does need Ben to show responsibility. For Alison, having a job that allows Ben to support himself is a signifier that he is trying to take on more responsibility.

Rogen's Ben, much like his character Ken in *Freaks and Geeks*, is an unspectacular failure. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, Apatow expressed his thought that Ben in *Knocked Up* is just Ken, grown up and getting a girl pregnant (Apatow qtd. in Lloyd). Given that the creator of *Freaks and Geeks* and *Knocked Up* has compared Ben and Ken and even gone so far as suggest they are one in the same suggests that Ken and the masculinity he represents transcends high school and is not "just a phase" of adolescence. At first, Ben is clueless when it comes to being a partner, much less a father. Eventually Ben finds a job and attempts to fit himself into the breadwinner role, but not without failing multiple times first. His website idea has already been taken; he is overly concerned about his bong during an earthquake; he does not read the baby books he had purchased with Alison; and he sides with Pete rather than Debbie and Alison concerning Pete's fantasy baseball incident. While none of these individual moments is spectacular in the analysis of his failure, they do increase Ben's status as a loser and as an unfit father.

Ben is twenty-three, does not have a reasonable plan for his career, and unexpectedly is going to be a father because of a rather typical for him bad judgment call during a drunken hook-up. It makes sense that he fails in multiple little ways. However, his failures, though expected and small, are magnified because he ignores societal norms of dominant masculinity. Pete, in contrast, has failed in major ways at being a father and husband by lying to his wife, refusing to communicate his needs and desires clearly or at all and not listening to his wife's, and being absent from his family in favor of his friends. Still midway through the plot of the film he is a more acceptable model of masculinity

because of his ability to display other characteristics that mark him as a suitable choice for a father and husband. It is not until Ben unexpectedly comes through for Alison in the end that Alison and Debbie seem to prefer Ben's qualities over Pete's.

Even though Ben's early failures taint him as an inferior choice for a father and a husband and prompt reviewers to suggest that Alison, as a beautiful, ambitious person who has major goals for her career and a desire to succeed at the highest level, deserves someone better (Scott; Waxman), upon further examination, Ben may develop into just the kind of person with whom a woman wants to be. Alison has a high-status job, is used to living in upper-middle class accommodations, has more refined tastes in food, and generally holds her standards for living above those that Ben enjoys. While it may seem obvious that someone who looks like Ben, chubby and unkempt, would not be good enough for a stereotypical beauty such as Alison, when appearances are taken out the equation and only actions are looked at, Ben may become more appealing to women compared to Pete. One thing that characters like Ben in *Knocked Up* and Ken and Nick from *Freaks and Geeks* have going for them is that because they know they are not the physical ideal of what a man should be, they have to try for relationships. Even though they are often characterized and criticized for their slacker attitude, once men like Ben find themselves in relationships, they may try to maintain them in whatever way they can even if their efforts are misguided. They are more likely to listen to women and treat them as equal partners and share in the responsibilities of the relationship. Men like Pete who are conventionally good looking and have well-paying and glamorous jobs may believe these qualities are enough and shirk other aspects of partnership and parenthood.

The initial suggestion then that women like Alison deserve better than men like Ben eventually seems questionable considering that, besides looks, the film represents Pete as ultimately more incompetent than Ben at parenting. Pete has been married for ten years and still does not understand how to be a father, a husband, or family caretaker. While everyone has different definitions of how to be a father and husband, in terms of caring for family, Pete does not seem to be interested in working with Debbie to develop their expectations of the roles. Ben may not have had feasible ambitions but Ben is honest in how he feels for Alison and how he feels about the baby. While Ben may seem physically less than desirable, the film suggests looking beyond appearances and financial situations and at his moral character and intentions. Ben shows willingness to try to make the best out of an unplanned situation and willingness to compromise open up lines of communication where men like Pete have closed them. Ben *wants* to help Alison as she becomes a parent. Even though they have been thrown into this situation unwillingly, Ben, rather than running away from it, is ready to support Alison and help in any way he can.

Prior to his elevated efforts to prove his worth as a father, Ben could be considered a man-child. His concept of appropriate behavior concerning money, employment, relationships, and friendships echoed those of a teenager. Once Ben realizes that he wants to be a part of his baby's life, he makes great efforts to change his lifestyle and grow from a man-child to a better male. Ben realizes that if his actions and choices are childlike, he will never be able to prove to Alison that he can successfully provide and care for their baby. Even if Ben's job does not make him the primary

breadwinner in his relationship with Alison, it shows that he is willing to take their situation seriously and adapt his life for the good of the child. Additionally, Alison does not force change on Ben. Ben chooses to change for Alison. He wants to support her as best as he possibly can and puts his own lifestyle preferences aside. While Greven may argue that these changes are a sign of manning-up and upholding dominant norms of masculinity, something is to be said of Ben's choice to change for Alison. Ben wants to work with Alison as a team and chooses to change for their betterment as a couple. Ben eventually displays a teamwork ethic and a desire to help Alison rather than forcing Alison to help herself. Even though Alison is prepared to take care of the baby by herself, she eventually sees the benefit in having Ben around to help. Alison does not relinquish control to Ben, but she does allow him to step in and help.

While the beta male existed in film prior to the 2000s, he was not always represented as desirable. Pete, though more attractive and successful than Ben, upholds dominant notions of fatherhood by earning money but not providing emotional support. While Ben may not serve as the primary breadwinner, as he transforms from man-child to beta male, he is able to provide emotional support and open communication in a manner that ultimately make him desirable to Alison. Both Ken and Ben learn how to reconcile their needs with the needs of those about whom they care to create a supportive relationship that is beneficial to both people. Because Ben and Alison end the movie together, it is clear that Alison reacted favorably to the changes Ben made in his life and now sees the good in beta male characteristics. Alison may have enjoyed spending time

with man-child Ben but it was not until Ben transformed into the beta male that she recognized the partnership he offers.

THE STAR IMAGE OF ROGEN

2007 was an exceptionally eventful year for Rogen. Rogen had played minor roles in film and television since *Freaks and Geeks* ended in 2000 with roles in Apatow's *Undeclared* (2001), a guest appearance in an episode of *Dawson's Creek* (2003), and a supporting role in Apatow's *40 Year Old Virgin* (2005) (imdb.com), but 2007 was truly a breakout year for Rogen. This year, he helped write and appeared in *Superbad*, starring Jonah Hill and Michael Cera, while also starring in *Knocked Up*. Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* hailed Rogen as a "true star" and commended him on his sharp, dynamic performance as Ben (Travers). Just as *Freaks and Geeks* was praised for the verisimilitude with which it presented the high school experience while staying poignant and funny, *Knocked Up* was similarly acclaimed.

Apatow is a champion of the underdog and continues to be with *Knocked Up*. The beta male masculinities within this film help elevate non-dominant masculinities out of the stigma often placed on them by society. Because Ben is the character with whom the audience is supposed to empathize instead of Pete, *Knocked Up* subtly demonstrates that dominant hegemonic masculinity ideals are not the ones that make for a better relationship or life. As Apatow and Rogen expressed in their interview with Sharon Waxman, they believe that productions such as *Knocked Up* represent a real segment of the population often overlooked or alienated because they are seen as outcasts and underdogs by society and themselves (Waxman). However, the success of films like

Knocked Up suggests that the themes and images within the movie are widely relatable. Besides *Knocked Up*'s high profits at the box office, it has a seven out of ten average score from 232,376 users on The Internet Movie Database, a ninety-two percent positive rating from top critics and an eighty-three percent positive rating from the audience on Rotten Tomatoes, and has a fan base of 2,261,782 on Facebook. Given that both Rotten Tomatoes and Facebook are fan-based forums, having a high rating or millions of fans shows that ordinary viewers widely and positively received the film.

Additionally, a fan website is dedicated to *Knocked Up*. While the website only has 1,591 fans registered, it still serves as a fruitful place to explore the fandom of *Knocked Up*. The website is anonymously created by one fan or a group of fans and is open for others to join (FanPop: *Knocked* Up). Fans post comments, photo galleries, lists of links related to *Knocked Up*, and user-generated polls. The polls range from questions about other works the actors have done to the attractiveness of Leslie Mann and Katherine Heigl, but the question that stands out the most is "Would it have made the movie less funny if James Franco hadn't been fired as Ben (because he is really good looking)?" (FanPop: *Knocked Up*) The fans who voted overwhelmingly decided that Rogen was the best choice for the role, with only six percent preferring Franco over Rogen (FanPop: *Knocked Up*). While this particular poll considers the casting of the film, it also questions the reality of the plot devices being used. Part of what makes *Knocked Up* comedic is the difference between Ben and Alison in terms of physical attractiveness. While Franco is part of the Apatow group of actors, he is also the "heartthrob," an alpha male and was included in *People*'s "Sexist Man Alive" list in 2008

and *Glamour UK*'s "Sexiest Men" men 2013 (*People*; *Glamour UK*). He is not chubby like Rogen; he is also not gangly like Martin Starr or Baruchel. Had Franco been cast as Ben, there would have been great similarity to Pete, potentially making Alison's rejection less believable. While only six comments are on the poll, one post helps support that Rogen was the better choice of the Apatow group because of his body and appearance: "as much as i am in love with james franco's hotness, seth Rogen is cute in a chubby way and was perfect for the role. :)" (FanPop: *Knocked Up*). This particular fan acknowledges that he/she believes that Franco is "hot" and that because of that, Rogen was more suited to the role. Additionally, without Rogen as Ben, the fans believed that the film would not have retained its level of comedy potentially harming the message which is partly about beta males winning a "hot" romantic partner.

Ben is not considered attractive partially because of his weight, however; Rogen has not maintained his size since *Knocked Up*. Rogen's weight has been discussed in media, especially in 2009 when he lost thirty pounds to prepare for his role in *The Green Hornet*. However, Rogen said that he was having a difficult time keeping the weight off (*The Huffington Post*). Even though Rogen was praised for losing weight, as soon as he started to regain it, media outlets like the *Daily Mail*, *The Huffington Post*, and a variety of other smaller celebrity gossip sites jumped on the opportunity to point out the weight gain. At the same time Rogen was losing weight and the regaining it, Hill, one of Rogen's friends and fellow actor in *Knocked Up*, was experiencing a similar situation. Both Rogen and Hill made news for losing weight but made even more news by gaining it back. Because neither was able to maintain their newly slimmed figure, Rogen nor Hill

has celebrity images of controlling of their own bodies, thus distancing them from dominant hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Additionally if they become too trim, it is possible that they may lose their iconic star identities as beta males.

Rogen's Ben, like Ken, is an example of a beta male in film. Ben is represented as an underdog who overcomes the overwhelming odds against him and lands the girl at the end of the movie. As he's noted to interviewers, Ben serves as a sort of revenge statement by Apatow to all of those who underestimated him and counted him as an underdog (Waxman). However, even though Apatow means Ben to be an underdog in order to speak to the underdogs in his audience, Apatow may also be speaking to the mainstream. Given the state of the economy, the uncertainty of jobs, the increasing cost of higher education, and the seemingly decreasing value of college degrees, a great number of millennials, like Ben, are in a suspended state of uncertainty

Figure 2.5 Ben is uncertain

2007 and the success of *Knocked Up* and *Superbad* marks the turning point of Rogen's career as a writer, actor, and star figure. Prior to 2007, fans of *Freaks and Geeks* and *Undeclared* knew him, but *Knocked Up* bolstered Rogen's career and solidified his star status. Since 2007, Rogen has gone on to star in *Pineapple Express* (2008), *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008), *Funny People* (2009), *This Is The End* (2013), which he also wrote and directed with Even Goldberg, and the forthcoming *Neighbors* (2014). Rogen

also appeared in a Super Bowl advertisement for Samsung in 2013. In addition to his film credits, Rogen has an impressive social media presence, with 1,292,464 fans on Facebook and 1,616,767 followers on Twitter.

Rogen uses his Twitter page to enhance his status as an identifiable person, but also someone who could be ordinary if not for his status in Hollywood. Beyond promoting his projects and his friends' projects, Rogen also uses Twitter to post pictures of himself doing mundane things like smoking brisket, making barbeque sauce, finding amusing ordinary things in public, and enjoying other activities. Because Rogen uses his Twitter account like non-celebrities do to post mundane things from everyday life, it attempts to make Rogen and his beta male image as easily identifiable. While Rogen's use of Twitter is all part of creating a specific star persona, Twitter offers a fabricated glimpse into the life of a celebrity, trying to show people that popular actors like Rogen find enjoyment in the same things as "regular people", which should allow his fans to connect with him better than if he were using a film, talk show, or magazine to communicate his image. Rogen alludes to his own physique and acknowledges that he does not fit into the norms perpetuated by Hollywood. In a tweet promoting his upcoming film *Neighbors* (2014), he refers to the movie poster which features him with a baby and co-star Zac Efron. The tweet accompanying the photo of the movie poster says, "Here [is] the poster

Figure 2.6 *Neighbors* Movie Poster

for my next movie #Neighbors. I'm the worst looking person on it!!" (Rogen, 17 Dec. 2013). Rogen and Efron are meant to be contrasted against each other, establishing the conflict of the film, by which chubby and older is described as less attractive. Even though Rogen has a successful Hollywood career, it is based on playing average or unattractive underdogs. Even though Rogen has slimmed down over the years, he still is not Hollywood buff. He acknowledges this, he hopes, to his advantage on his Twitter account, conducting himself to create a star image compatible with the characters he portrays in television and film. Because of his attempt to make his characters easily identifiable to audiences and an accurate reflection of many males' life experiences, it is important that Rogen uphold his image as an ordinary guy in social media.

BEN STONE: DEFENDER OF THE OUTCAST, ICON OF MILLENNIAL HEGEMONY

Ben Stone is clearly intended to be initially viewed by the other characters in the film and the audience as loser, underdog, outcast, stoner, and failure, indicating that he is possibly unfit for a romantic or intimate relationship and fatherhood. Rogen's characters perpetuate the trope favored by television shows where the "schlub" achieves the hot wife (Waxman), but he does so by changing—becoming more ambitious, assertive, responsible, and responsive. Despite his initial coding as a loser, Ben seems to be representative of the situation faced by many millennials given the uncertain economy. While it may be desirable, more 'manly,' and a textbook example of dominant hegemonic masculinity to be a fit, attractive, and rich man, the reality for many men looks more like Ben's reality. Even though *Knocked Up* is a comedy, it portrays difficult situations with a sense of truth and honesty that suggests that the audience is meant to

think about why the situation is funny rather than just producing cheap humor for easy laughs. More significant, though, is that Ben does "man up." The narrative requires he change if he is to win the woman and happiness. Thus, manliness requires emotional maturity even if he remains "average" looking.

Connell notes that dominant hegemonic masculinity is not a realistic goal and that it is impossible to embody fully all of the qualities of dominant hegemonic masculinity (Connell). In this regard, Ben Stone is a case for another contemporary hegemonic masculinity. Other characters in *Knocked Up* or movies outside of the Apatow/Rogen canon can represent different masculinities, each another type of enacted masculinity. Ben may need to change, but he is not unusual, alone, or unfit for society.

Freaks and Geeks and *Knocked Up* are representative of Seth Rogen's early career and breakout performances. Both performances depict a masculinity that is non-normative; Ken Miller of *Freaks and Geeks* and Ben Stone of *Knocked Up* do not live up to the standards of a masculinity that dictate that men should be hard, ambitious, and clearly in a position of dominance over women and gay men, and, if a man is married, the "breadwinner" for the family rather than the caretaker or homemaker (Bordo; Connell). Ken and Ben are able to navigate relationships with women in a way that shows an effort to work with them rather than ignoring their needs. While the context of Ken's relationship with Amy is different than Ben's relationship with Alison, both characters are initially semi-clueless in how to pursue each relationship, but after much trial and error, both successfully figure out how to maintain them. Ken and Ben, while they have

relationships with their male friends, overlook the complexities of those relationships in order to focus on their relationships with women.

Chapter 3: *This Is the End*: A New Chapter for Seth Rogen and the Beta Male

While looking at how the beta male interacts with women and pursues romantic relationships is critical in the discussion of new hegemonic masculinities, it is also crucial to look at how the beta male navigates platonic friendships. While romantic relationships with women are important components to hegemonic masculinity, homosocial bonding and relationships with other men are equally crucial. David Greven in his exploration of beta male comedies focuses on movies in which, even if the plot focuses primarily on male friendship, the film ends in a romantic relationship with a woman for at least one of the characters. Greven does not consider that beta male comedies may exist outside of plots which explore heterosexual relationships.

This Is the End, written and directed by Rogen and Evan Goldberg, starring Rogen as Seth Rogen, Jay Baruchel as Jay Baruchel, and James Franco as James Franco, focuses on the friendship between Seth and Jay during the apocalypse. Seth and Jay are struggling with maintaining their friendship and must resolve their conflict while facing the end of the world. Critics and fans generally well received the film, which was also a success at the box office, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Each of the actors plays a hyper version of their star persona. By playing an exaggerated version of their star image, the actors acknowledge how fans and critics view their star persona. While *Freaks and Geeks* and *Knocked Up* attempt to play off of real experiences, *This Is the End* uses real and imagined relationships such as the one between Jay and Seth and Seth and James to create a fictitious comedic fantasy about the Rapture. During the biblical

version of the end of day, according to the Book of Revelation, those who have lived by Christian values will be saved while those who have not will face Satan and his demons and descend into hell (Catholic.com).

This Is the End marks a critical departure in Rogen's beta male films. Rather than exclusively focusing on heterosexual romantic relationships or having the film end with a romance coupling, *This Is the End* focuses on Seth's male friendships and steers clear of any heterosexual romance. Once Seth, Jay, James, Jonah Hill, Craig Robinson, and Danny McBride find themselves on the wrong end of the Rapture—they do not immediately ascend into heaven—they must navigate the homosocial relationships amongst themselves while fighting to survive the apocalypse.

In addition to navigating male friendships, *This Is the End* engages with the actor's "star quality" and star status (Dyer). Because the actors within the film are all portraying stereotypical exaggerations of themselves, they are acknowledging the power the audience has in recognizing how these particular actors are viewed. Even though Rogen has the ability to shape how the audience views him through his roles, interviews, and social media presence, the power of interpretation of his actions lies with the audience. Even though Rogen may try to construct his star image one way, if his fans read his movies and actions in other ways or as disingenuous, over the top, inauthentic, or in any way that Rogen and his agents do not intend, what the public perceives as his image may be vastly different. In order to understand how the characters, particularly Seth, were constructed for the film, it will be important to examine how audiences, fans, and critics have constructed "Seth Rogen" in reviews and fan content. Additionally, it

will be critical to understand the televisual context in which *This Is the End* was released in both the theaters and DVD and Blu Ray.

MILLENNIAL POPULAR CULTURE, *THIS IS THE END*, AND THE PUBLIC

While Rogen and other actors in the Judd Apatow ensemble such as Hill and Jason Segel have a long history of playing contemporary beta males, they are not the only beta male characters in popular culture. The beta male is returning to the television networks in an iteration different from that of the favored chubby husband with a hot wife from the 1990s. Popular shows such as Fox's *New Girl* (2011-?) and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-?) feature characters representative of the beta male. Nick Miller and Winston Bishop, played by Jake Johnson and Lamorne Morris respectively, in *New Girl* and Detective Jake Peralta, played by Andy Samberg, in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* all provide interesting versions of the beta male.

Figure 3.1 Jake Johnson as Nick Miller

While Rogen's Ken and Ben may not have been the most ambitious characters, recent portrayals of beta males including Seth in *This Is the End* as well as the examples from television all show an increased level of ambition. Even though ambition is generally associated with traditional standards of dominant hegemonic masculinity, the way these beta males express ambition is different. In *New Girl*, Nick was a law student who passed the bar but chooses to work as a bartender because that is what makes him happy. While Nick lives in a large loft, he

shares it with three other roommates, and is often shown having issues making rent. Even though he has the potential to have a higher-paying job, he would rather be a bartender and does not base his worth on the amount of money he makes. Winston played basketball in the international leagues and then became a sports radio announcer before deciding to follow his own interests rather than those his parents had for him. In *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, Jake is a dedicated, though goofy, detective. He is determined to do his job well and bring criminals to justice but does not want to sacrifice his sense of humor while doing it. Even though he has ambition to be the best detective he can be, he also does not want to follow the rigid structure in place. He wants to do his job and have fun doing it. While Jake has a strong sense of responsibility, it is easy to overlook it because of his goofiness. Finally Seth in *This Is the End* is clearly an ambitious person as he writes, acts in, and produces films, yet even though his house is a multimillion-dollar piece of real estate in Hollywood, he is not caught up in the status of being a Hollywood actor. While his friends are actors, he tries to stay in touch with less famous friends like Jay whom he knew before he discovered Hollywood success. Beta male ambition has an element of humility to it that does not imply superiority over another person. The need to dominate, whether it be in a romantic relationship, a friendship, or the workplace is curbed, and while competition may still occur, a greater desire is to fulfill a goal for the good of others rather than solely

Figure 3.2 Andy Samberg as Detective Jake Peralta

to prove one's own dominant masculinity. Additionally, just as the beta male must try in romantic relationships, he must put effort into maintaining his friendships. Beta males may not enjoy conflict; however, they will do their best to amend mistakes they have made. Compromise and communication are important for a beta male to maintain his friendships. They simply value friendships and family relationships and are seemingly less selfish than alpha males.

In addition to these portrayals of a humbler ambition within the beta male, these examples from television also represent different body types, races, and ethnicities. While Nick, Winston, or Jake do not have a hard, tight, fit physique indicative of masculine norms (Bordo), they also are not necessarily considered excessively soft or unruly. Rather, the beta male body types offered in Fox's comedies run the gamut from tall and lanky to average height with a little bit of a beer belly. Because of the variety of body types depicted, beta male masculinity is shown as an inclusive masculinity which does not have set body standards like those imposed by existing standards of dominant hegemonic masculinity. Inclusiveness of body types allows the beta male to truly display an embodied masculinity rather than an envisioned one. Rather than excluding a man because he is too fat as dominant hegemonic masculinity does, beta male masculinity transcends body types and rather focuses on personality. While many of the beta males from the Apatow canon are from a

Figure 3.3 Lamorne Morris as Winston Bishop

Jewish upbringing, actors like Morris prove that the beta male is a recognizable figure beyond Jewish ethnicity. Morris is a black actor whose character, Winston, fully embodies the confusion and uncertainty displayed by previous examples of the beta male such as Ben from *Knocked Up* and Ken from *Freaks and Geeks*. Winston's secondary plot line is indicative of his beta male status on *New Girl*. His story lines are few and far between; when they do happen, he is portrayed as incompetent both in finding a satisfying career or a romantic relationship. One of his storylines involves him stealing an ex-lover's cat and then becoming a "crazy cat man," preferring to spend more time with the cat than people. Also, in the episode "Sister II", Winston decides he wants to be a police officer for the Los Angeles Police Department but fails his entrance exam. Despite his failure, he still is determined to pass the exam and fulfill his desire to become a cop. Even though it took three television seasons of Winston floundering in confusion and discontent, he is now starting to exhibit the quiet ambition demonstrated in characters like Ben. Winston, Ben, and Ken all come from different backgrounds and have had a variety of different life experiences, but all of them have confusion, uncertainty, and modest ambition in common.

Ken and Nick in *Freaks and Geeks* are confused about life in general and channel their confusion into awkward high school relationships and misguided attempts at pursuing pipe dreams. Ben initially believes he has his life together and is living the dream of smoking copious amounts of marijuana while working on his website cataloguing all of the nude scenes in movies. When a one-night stand results in an unplanned pregnancy, Ben is faced with the confusion of how to deal with having a child

and how to reorganize his life to account for lives other than his own. Seth as portrayed in *This Is the End* differs from the previous examples because he seems to have his career together and has achieved Hollywood success. His confusion comes from navigating friendships and bonding in ways that differ from being blaringly drunk or talking about one night stands or other sexual acts.

With shows like *New Girl* gaining popularity on television and the beta male appearing in primetime television viewing schedules, *This Is the End* and its characters fit into the current screen culture. *This Is the End* opened on June 12, 2013, played on 3,055 screens in the United States during its opening weekend, and earned $20,719,162 in its first weekend. As of September 29, 2013, *This Is the End* earned $101,362,894 not including its box office from international distribution (imdb.com). The film had an estimated budget of $32,000,000, which it was expected to make back within five days of opening in theaters (Stewart). Despite competing with other major summer blockbusters such as *Man of Steel*, premiering in the same weekend, *This Is the End* was still able to bring in a strong showing at the box office, marking it as a successful summer comedy.

Figure 3.4 *This Is the End* Movie Poster

While *This Is the End* was clearly a success at the box office, the reviews of the film were somewhat varied. While publications such as the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Variety* all mention how funny the movie is, there seems to be some

indifference to the type of comedy being performed. A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* in particular makes mention of the dying breed of the stoner, slacker film:

> The problem is not that Seth and Jay and the rest are still rolling joints and trying out naughty material on one another in the comfort of their ever-larger and plusher homes. The problem is that they seem to be motivated, more and more, by professional duty and brand awareness. Solipsism has turned into schtick, and their childish interest in themselves betrays a confining lack of curiosity about anything else. (Scott, 11 Jun. 2013)

Scott seems to suggest that Rogen and those with whom he frequently works have stunted the evolution of their plot topics in order to cater to the beta male image they have crafted for themselves. Scott's mention of "schtick" may imply that comedic moments in past films were carefully written for a purpose rather than written for the laughs. Rogen's past films were funny without trying, but *This Is the End*'s use of schtick seems forced in order to maintain the beta male image created in previous films. However, even though Scott makes note of this trend within Rogen's films, he does believe that they will eventually move on to cover other topics including but not limited to death, politics, and homosexuality (Scott, 11 Jun. 2013). Scott goes on to write "I think they know it's time to move on, and *This Is the End* is both a protest against, and an acknowledgment of, this reality" (Scott, 11 Jun. 2013). While Scott may believe that *This Is the End* is or should be the last of the typical stoner comedies favored by Rogen, it is not to say that this is the end of beta males in comedy. Moving beyond slacker-stoner humor may be important to maintaining the box office success of Rogen's beta male image. By slowly expanding into other topics and genres, Rogen may be able to become a widely represented character and image of masculinity.

While reviews from critics were mostly positive, the fan base for *This Is the End* also is a marker of its success. The movie has its own Twitter account, which has 19,969 followers, and has 981,950 followers on Facebook (@ThisIsTheEnd; Facebook.com). Both the Twitter and Facebook accounts are active and were used to promote the film. Fans commented on posts and tweets, and while some commenters are not fans of the film and are critical of how funny the movie actually is, many of the comments are about how much someone enjoyed it or are quotations from the movie suggesting that the material is memorable. The *This Is the End* Facebook and Twitter account posed the question "What's your favorite line from *This Is the End*?" on October 18, 2013. While the responses on both accounts varied, many of the quotations listed made reference to either masturbation or penises such as "I like my dick tent," "You're telling me James Franco didn't suck a dick last night? Now, I know you're lying," and "I'd suck a dick for half a cracker!" Additionally, some people offered up entire scenes as their favorite quote. One of the most frequently cited scenes is the argument between Danny and James about Danny masturbating and coming on James's pornographic magazines.

Unfortunately, most of the posts do not explain why a particular quotation was their favorite, but many of the commenters end their entry with "lol" or "laugh out loud" indicating that these lines may be memorable because they made the audience member laugh. Even though not everyone has the same favorite quotation, posts are "liked" giving recognition to the rest of the movie. Even if the fans' favorite lines are not necessarily declarations of whether the fans can relate to the events or characters, the repetition of these lines is indicative of the impact the film had on its viewers. Because

the film was able to make an impression and produce lines that are able to be recited from memory or easily found on the internet implies that the film was not only funny, but memorable. Even though it is not uncommon for audience members to have their favorite line from a film, occasionally a movie is enjoyable to watch then easily forgotten.

Creating a film that sticks with an audience despite the unrealistic setting of the end of the world indicates the success of the film and the tactics used by Rogen and Goldberg. Despite the fact that audiences likely cannot anticipate the apocalypse specifically, the relationship between Seth and Jay and the drifting apart of friends is a situation many people have experienced. Even though *This Is the End* is an outrageous comedy featuring severely exaggerated characters, including a devil with an extraordinarily large penis, the extravagance of James Franco's imagined mansion, and the general lifestyles of Hollywood stars, the overall themes of friendship, forgiveness, and goodness are easily relatable to the audience, allowing for the film to be memorable beyond its excess.

Figure 3.5 Jonah Hill about to be penetrated by the devil

HOMOSOCIALITY AND THE BETA MALE

As previously mentioned, *This Is the End* differentiates itself from *Freaks and Geeks* and *Knocked Up* because of its focus on male friendships rather than romantic

relationships. Additionally, the beta male changes rather than holding on to earlier ideals of masculinity. One of these ideals is male bonding. In order to better understand the friendships within the film, it will be important to explore homosociality.

One of the major aspects of a boy's journey into manhood, according to Michael Kimmel, is homosocial bonding which is the creation of friendships and connections between two people of the same sex (Kimmel, *Guyland*). While Kimmel's book, *Guyland*, focuses mostly on men ages sixteen to twenty-six, because of the unstable nature of the economy and the difficulty millennials are having transitioning into adulthood, it is useful to implement some of Kimmel's findings to older men as they linger in an extended transitional state. Kimmel specifically talks about homosocial bonding within the context of sex in the chapter "Hooking Up: Sex in Guyland." Throughout the chapter, Kimmel emphasizes that men use hooking up, rather than committed monogamous relationships, as a way to prove themselves to other guys (Kimmel, 206). Talking about casual sex is a way for men to establish an order amongst themselves and gives them leverage to reposition themselves in the hierarchy of masculinity (Kimmel, 207). Homosocial bonding through sex talk serves as validation amongst men to prove one's masculinity. Sex talk refers to conversations that take place between male friends about women they want to have sex with, women they have had sex with, and other sexual acts they have done. Even though guys want their friends to think they are having sex, "hooking up" is a favorite term because of its vague connotations. A male could say he hooked up and mean he kissed someone, while their friends believe that more happened (Kimmel 196).

While no explicit, heterosexual sex occurs within *This Is the End* (although the devil, who has an unusually large penis, rapes Jonah), plenty of talk about sex happens and, more specifically, masturbation, pornography, and oral sex. Additionally, James is accused of performing homosexual acts, specifically sucking another man's penis. Such accusations and suggestions are meant to challenge each other's masculinity. Kimmel explores similar fraternity hazing rituals and describes the phenomenon as a way men regulate and legitimize other men's heterosexual masculinity (Kimmel 101-102). Jokes about masturbation and penises are thrown about generously throughout the movie with plenty of focus on male-to-male giving or receiving of oral sex.

Even though the characters within the movie do not seem offended by the accusations of homosexuality, the jokes, often used as small insults amongst friends, allude to a problematic tenet of Raewyn Connell's dominant hegemonic masculinity, that while the represented heterosexual masculinity may not live up to society's standard, it still asserts dominance over gay men. While the film's gay jokes may be made with no intentions to offend, because they are used negatively as insults, the "good" intention is not unproblematic. It is almost never an insult to call someone straight, so for straight men to use homosexual acts as an insult is an instance where straight men are asserting their dominance and power over gay men. While the beta male may have a romantic relationship with a woman, still an implication is that homosexuality is something that can be mocked or used as a joke and certainly used as a way to check or validate another man's proper masculinity. Even if those making the jokes are "allies" to the LGBTQ

community, they are using their power and star power as the norm to dominate those who are less powerful.

While homosocial friendship is used to explain why these men stay in James's house during the apocalypse, it is also used to depict interpersonal relationships between the characters, especially Seth and Jay, without romance as the goal. David Greven's article "'I Love You, Brom Bones': Beta Male Comedies and American Culture," focuses much of its attention on male camaraderie as it relates to a romantic endgame, specifically in the 2000s films, *I Love You, Man* (2009) and *Knocked Up* (2007). *This Is the End* similarly focuses on how male friendships are performed and uses Seth and Jay's rocky relationship to allow the audience to see how men navigate the realm of friendship without an overarching romantic relationship to muddy the experience. Greven argues that beta male comedies always end in a new heterosexual relationship, engagement, or marriage (Greven); however, this is not the case in *This Is the End*. Other than a few cameos of prominent female Hollywood stars like Mindy Kaling and Rhianna during the pre-Rapture party scene and a quick appearance by Emma Watson after the start of the apocalypse, women factor very little into the structure or plot of the film, mostly serving as quick diversions from the real conflict.

Not only does *This Is the End* differentiate itself from the beta male films analyzed by Greven, but it also marks a differentiation from my previous case studies of *Freaks and Geeks* and *Knocked Up*. *This Is the End* is able to focus on personal male relationships between Seth and Jay and how other men affect their relationship, with most of the tension coming from Jay's jealousy of Seth's relationships with James and Jonah.

What is important within these relationships is not with whom they are in a relationship, but rather Seth's and Jay's careers have had different success trajectories and have introduced them to a different friend group, thus causing them to grow apart rather than maintaining their friendship.

At the beginning of the film, the audience sees Seth waiting at the airport for Jay and the subsequent excited greeting when Jay emerges from his gate. While everything about the relationship seems fairly normal, once they have a chance to catch up in the car, their tensions become apparent. Jay mentions that he has not been in Los Angeles in about a year because of his dislike of the city. Quickly, the audience learns that while Jay may not like Los Angeles, Seth has assimilated to many aspects of the culture. Seth's embrace of Hollywood culture separates him from Jay and the last shred of his Canadian origins. When Seth and Jay eventually arrive, an excessively large house greets Jay which Seth has lovingly and proudly renovated. Jay makes note of the extravagance of Seth's lifestyle, saying, "So this is how the other side lives." While it is clear that Seth and Jay have very different life circumstances, Seth, with the best intentions, attempts to recreate their old way of living through providing a massive amount of marijuana, junk food, movies, and videogames (which can be played on Seth's state-of-the-art 3D television). While Seth tries to recreate the relationship he had with Jay, once they are at James's house for a party, it is clear that there has been a rift in their friendship. After the Rapture, Seth realizes just how damaged the friendship is and attempts to repair the bond. By the end of the film, Seth and Jay are able to use their rejuvenated friendship to save their souls.

The bonding done by Seth and Jay both in the past and during the apocalyptic events becomes a critical part of their friendship once it is tested by Seth's greater Hollywood success. Beta male friendship seems critical, as it allows Seth and Jay to reconcile their differences of career success and subsequently their differences in lifestyle. Because Seth and Jay are able to connect through drugs and video games, they are able to establish a common ground through which they repair their friendship. While Kimmel may discuss how men build friendships through discussions of sex and women, the beta males represented in *This Is the End* choose other methods of developing friendships which take them back to a time before their Hollywood careers. Indeed, the bonding as shown in the film is not the only way for beta males to grow close. While sex talk may be one way to create hegemonic spaces of masculinity, males may also connect through communication that focuses on other pleasures that unite the friendship. Even though Jay and Seth use videogames and drugs at the beginning of the film to re-build their connection, they realize their method of bonding must evolve if their friendship is to survive. It is not romance which makes or breaks their relationship, but rather their investment in the lives of each other despite the difference in their success in careers. Rather than using the talk of sex to rekindle their friendship and strengthen their bond, Seth and Jay talk out their feelings about their friendship rather than projecting their bonding on to other subjects.

Discussion and communication of feelings extends beyond just Jay and Seth to include Jonah, James, Craig, and Danny. While those seeking refuge in James's house do indulge in discussions about sex and check each other's heterosexual masculinity through

jokes and jabs challenging each other's sexuality, there are still moments of heartfelt discussion between them, which only strengthens their friendships.

Creating and maintaining lasting friendships is important for Seth as a beta male. Rather than letting Jay go because he is not at the same place career-wise or geographically, Seth wants to make his friendship with Jay work. Despite Seth's best efforts to pretend that his friendship with Jay has not changed, he realizes that the difference in his life as compared to Jay's warrants change. Seth has embraced the Hollywood lifestyle, which represents dominant masculinity expectations through the consumption of material goods purchased with the money made off of his success in a high-powered field. Once Seth realizes that he has changed he can relate to how Jay is feeling. In the end, Seth and Jay are able to repair their friendship and ascend into heaven. Their salvation is symbolic that their friendship in the end is better than in the beginning.

Given that the representation of beta males interacting with women is different than men who uphold ideals of dominant hegemonic masculinity, it makes sense that the representation of the way beta males build rapport with friends and maintain close friendships is also slightly different. Seth and Jay demonstrate a connection that is much more focused on one another and their relationship with each other. While I am not suggesting that discussions of sex and relationships have no place in the homosocial bonding of beta males, especially since it is a major point of discussion in *Freaks and Geeks* and *Knocked Up,* it does seem that it is less prominent in *This Is the End.*

STAR PERSONA AND THE BETA MALE

The crux of the temporary failure of Seth and Jay's friendship is partially about the success or lack thereof their film careers. Despite Rogen's many slacker/stoner roles, he has been able to make a name for himself and elevate his star status. While he may not be at a superstar level nor does he fit the 'hard body' standard perpetuated in popular culture as a symbol of desirable manliness, he has raised his star reputation above that of Baruchel. Rogen is still a beta male, but the exaggerated self-representation in *This Is the End* demonstrates the success of the beta male to exist into the star system of mainstream Hollywood culture. In a review of *This Is the End* by *Variety*, Seth is described as "the guy everyone likes, the good-natured goof who, apart from shedding several pounds, hasn't been changed much by his Hollywood fortunes" while Jay is described as the "gangly, awkward, slightly neurotic one who doesn't quite fit in with Seth's newer, more famous friends" (Chang). In the film, while Seth has changed from the person Jay thinks he should be on a personal level, Seth is still able to maintain the "good-natured goof" image.

Even though it may be difficult to separate Rogen from the characters he plays since they are all similar, and he seems to play himself in *This Is the End*, it may be helping Rogen to curate a specific star image that emphasizes the averageness of his life. Because his characters are relatable even in unusual circumstances, Rogen is making his masculinity and the masculinities of others in his work accessible to audiences. Believing that Rogen the person is similar to Ben, Ken, and "Seth" allows audiences to see what beta male masculinity looks like. Because Rogen seems to create and portray

identifiable characters, then it may be important that his characters match the image he puts forth in daily life.

Rogen's Seth, though not a direct reflection of who he is as a person, may allude to his presumed authenticity as a star personality. According to Joshua Gamson, some fans crave authenticity in their stars; the markers of a star's authenticity cannot be faked in order to ease suspicion of false representations (Gamson 144). For fans to believe in the authenticity of a star's image, then the star must exhibit markers of authenticity such as seeming lack of control or privacy, but these techniques cannot be revealed as such. Otherwise the sense of authenticity could be lost (Gamson 144). As discussed in an earlier chapter, Rogen has stated believes that average men would identify with Ben Stone and his situation (Rogen qtd. in Waxman). Also, his work in *Freaks and Geeks* was built on experiences had by members of the writing teams as well as the actors (Lloyd). By portraying realistic characters, Rogen's star persona is difficult to separate from his work. P. David Marshall explains how an actor, even though he/she may work to alter his/her acting styles, risks being caught up and stuck in old ways of acting (Marshall 105). In order to combat this, a star needs to transgress by doing something outside of his/her expected projects (Marshall 106). One way that an actor is able to transgress his/her type is by working with directors or actors with whom he/she does not normally collaborate (Marshall 111). Rogen frequently works with the same people, creating expectations for his work. Even though Rogen may be associated with beta male comedies, it may be a strategic move to please his fans and their desire for an authenticity. This authenticity helps audiences relate to both Rogen the actor and

Rogen's characters and emphasizes a new version of beta male masculinity. By embodying another type of successful masculinity, Rogen adds to its recognition and legitimation, potentially dampening the dominance of the unattainable dominant hegemonic norm often represented by Hollywood.

Conclusion: The Freaks, The Stoners, and Seth Rogen: What Do They Mean For the Beta Male?

The beta male, as I have been exploring through the filmography and to a lesser degree star promotion of Seth Rogen, appears to be representative of millennial culture, offering young men of this generation someone to relate to while they navigate the toils of a fickle economy and the criticisms of older generations along with the normal confusion that comes with being a young man. The beta male of the early 2000s as depicted in Ken Miller in *Freaks and Geeks* may have started off as a slacker who would prefer to be high rather than obtain good grades or a job, but as the millennium evolved, so did Rogen's representation of the beta male. While mostly a grown up version of Ken, Ben Stone begins to show some ambition even if it is initially misguided. Even if a beta male is successful, like Seth Rogen in *This Is the End*, he can still be confused about how to navigate his success and his friendships. While a beta male may experience success in one area of his life, it is likely that there is still confusion in other areas. The idea that a person needs to have his/her entire life together, however, is unrealistic to expect, and confusion is not necessarily a bad thing. The beta male questions himself and his life frequently, allowing for greater evolution of self, creating a sensitive, empathetic person that exists beyond his job or physical features.

The beta male, offers a different masculinity than current definitions of dominant hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, rather than being marginalized as losers and wimps, beta male masculinity may be more appealing today than masculinities that champion complete domination, marginalization of gay men and women, and physical and sexual

prowess. With new economic and social realities, the theoretical version of dominant hegemonic masculinity may not be enough in the exploration of sexes and genders. While I do not believe that version of dominant hegemonic masculinity as laid out by Raewyn Connell has no place or is no longer useful in the exploration of masculinities, Seth Rogen and his work provide fruitful ground through which variations in contemporary masculinities can be examined.

Through various case studies, I have explore the concept of the beta male and beta masculinities in millennial television and film. Using Seth Rogen as an example, I have explored characteristics of beta masculinities and call for further contextualization of the beta masculinity as a hegemonic masculinity. The characters are more in touch with their emotions, less certain of their role in society, especially in regard to their position in the family and the home, and willing to listen and communicate needs and desires and compromise.

Chapter one focused on *Freaks and Geeks* and the characters of Ken Miller and Nick Andopolis. Ken and Nick, though seemingly undesirable given their status as "freaks," show that compromise, effort, and communication are important in successful relationships. Despite their unconventional looks, because of these qualities, Ken and Nick are still able to have some success entering into relationships, even if they are not long term. Rather than easily moving in and out of relationships as is the norm in shows like *Dawson's Creek,* Ken and Nick have to put effort into their relationships. In addition to their need to communicate, compromise, and invest their time into relationships, Ken and Nick also represent the confusion and uncertainty faced by many young men both in

high school and college. They are uncertain of their futures but also do not feel the need to figure out their plans past high school. Rather than being aggressively ambitious and motivated by power and wealth, Nick and Ken concern themselves with their passions and their desire for love. Ken and Nick seem to position themselves as equals with their partner and take an active interest in their lives rather than focusing on the benefit of the relationship for them. Additionally, their confusion and their failures are meant to be a reflection of a realistic high school experience. Because the audience may relate to the characters the show provides alternative examples of masculinities with which men can identify.

Chapter two focused on the "grown up," mid-decade versions of the freaks and puts their beta male characters front and center. Rogen plays Ben Stone, who is essentially an older version of Ken. Ben is contrasted with Pete and challenges the notion that being in a high-profile and high-paying job make a man a better candidate for husband and father. Even though initially Ben is not Alison's first choice of partner and father, Ben demonstrates his willingness to communicate, compromise, and demonstrate effort in his attempt to prove himself to Alison. While these qualities are introduced via the men in *Freaks and Geeks*, Ben applies them to situations outside of the realm of high school in a situation that has consequences beyond whether or not a girl will go to the movies or a school dance with him. At the end of the film, Ben's beta male is portrayed as the superior choice of partner over Pete's alpha male, not because Alison is settling, but because Ben is willing to invest himself in their relationship rather than disappearing when it matters most. Ben is an example of a beta male who is flexible in an era where

women are no longer expected to stay at home with the children and are succeeding in high-powered careers. Rather than being intimidated by a shift in the "breadwinner" dynamic, Ben adapts to the situation and changes so the both partners are working together.

2013 introduced a newer, more successful, and slightly slimmed down Rogen. Even though Rogen is a successful Hollywood actor, director, writer, and producer, his representation of himself as actor and star in *This Is the End* is indicative of how he tries to be an ordinary figure who just happens to have a bigger house. While Seth is arguably ambitious, he does not embody dominant hegemonic norms of masculinity by not adopting an air of superiority over Jay's less successful career. The film also demonstrates how beta male friendships encourage discussion of feelings rather than deflecting their closeness on to discussions of sex as a way to check and legitimate one another's masculinity. Just as a beta male must put effort into maintaining romantic relationships, time must be spent on developing and sustaining friendships. Seth and Jay's friendship provides options beyond dominant hegemonic norms of connecting that value communication and emotions over methods that serve to police masculinity. Seth and Jay have different lifestyles, but both put importance into remaining friends regardless of how the other chooses to live. In the end, it is their friendship that saves them, not their relationships, sexual or otherwise, with women. By focusing on strong friendships rather than superficial friendships, the beta male allows room for men to identify with others. Additionally building friendships based on trust and communication with each other rather than bonding over heterosexual sex, provides space for gay men to

identify as a beta male. In addition, while Rogen recognizes his Hollywood success in the narrative, he is still an average person. Because of the level head he takes in regard to his stardom and celebrity, he offers an alternative example of beta masculinity.

While this project focuses mainly on Rogen and a few other current examples of beta males in television, this subject can be extended and expanded in future research to include examples of other contemporary beta males in comedy including Jonah Hill, and Jason Segel. Furthermore, the study of the beta male needs to be expanded to include beta males from different time periods such as the radio, classical Hollywood, and early television eras. The beta male is not new and the study of Rogen should be put in conversation with explorations of other historical representations of masculinity. Additionally, it would be beneficial to look at films outside of the Apatow and Rogen and Evan Goldberg realm. In order to understand the scope of the beta male and his place in media, it is also important to look at comedies beyond slacker/stoner comedies. An exploration of dark comedies, romantic comedies, and a more detailed analysis of television comedies would provide a more expansive analysis of the beta male in comedy, especially when looking at actors other than Rogen and those heavily influenced by Apatow.

In addition to expanding the analysis of beta males to other types of comedy, it is important to look at drama, horror, thriller, and action movies in order to determine whether or not the beta male is represented in genres other than comedy. While the beta male's presence in comedy speaks to the overall acceptance of the beta male as a comedic figure, it is critical to understand where the beta male fits in other genres. Hill,

who has roots in slacker/stoner comedies, provides a useful example of how the beta male can adapt to a role in a "serious film" by looking at his career which includes two Oscar-nominated films *Moneyball* (2011) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) and his individual nominations for Best Actor in a Supporting Role for both films (imdb.com). Beta males can be relatable in comedies because they focus on situations which are easy to identify with or are typically viewed as "awkward" such as high school, romantic relationships, and friendships in different life stages.

While the beta male arguably is becoming an alternative hegemonic masculinity, the representations of masculinities within *Freaks and Geeks*, *Knocked Up*, and *This Is the End* have elements that are problematic. The women in each of these case studies are more ambitious and have more dominating personalities than their beta male counterparts. However, despite a shift in the representation of the characteristics of men and women, there are still problematic issues when it comes to the beta male and references to homosexuality. *Knocked Up* and *This Is the End* in particular are full of dialogue which implies that being gay, or being called gay, is an insult. Additionally, none of the representations of beta males includes gay characters. All of the characters explored in this project are identified as heterosexual males. Dominant hegemonic masculinity is set up to exclude feminized gay men by maintaining that any man must remain in a dominant power relationship with any man who identifies as homosexual (Connell 77); with this in mind, future research could examine how GBT men express or do not express characteristics of the beta male. Recently, the LGBTQ community is gaining rights and acceptance by the United States society, so for notions of masculinity

to continue to exclude gay men and deny their masculinity may be increasingly outdated and against the societal mindset.

While the aim of this project is to lay a foundation of what beta male masculinity looks like in millennial television and film, many areas need to be explored in order to fully understand the beta male in American film and mediated culture. By exploring how beta male masculinities are embodied in other areas of film, television, and culture, it will be possible to create an even stronger argument that dominant hegemonic masculinity is changing and shifting to include other representations of more realistic expectations of men. While Connell's definition is still useful, it is time to expand notions of hegemonic masculinities to include not only those idealized by society but also the masculinities that are realistically embodied and relatable to the men who try to emulate them.

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