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Dan Ketchum
University of Denver

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Masculinity, Audience, and Narrative Structure: A Comparison of *True Blood* and *Dead Until Dark*, and of Jason and Lafayette in the TV Series

Structurally, Charlaine Harris' *Dead Until Dark* and season one of Alan Ball's *True Blood* differ most noticeably in their narrative point of view. In the novel *Dead Until Dark*, the reader experiences the story world from the protagonist's (Sookie Stackhouse) first person perspective. No story information is revealed unless Sookie discovers it; the reader never knows more or less than she. In this way, the narration could be described as "subjective."

True Blood, however, which is adapted from Harris' novel series, features an ensemble cast, and the narrative moves freely between several storylines and characters. In this way, the show could be described as 'omniscient,' though there are moments of limited subjectivity. Bordwell and Thompson describe the omniscient structure as "unrestricted," where the viewer is privy to information that not all of the main characters know: "we know more, we see and hear more, than any of the characters can" (89). By contrast, they would describe the cinematic equivalent of the subjective *Dead Until Dark's* as

"restricted" to a character's POV: "we don't see or hear anything that [s]he can't see and hear" (89). The novel remains solely restrictive throughout, though some *True Blood* scenes adopt this approach, often to add suspense and terror, or relay a drug or dream sequence.

By comparing chapter three of the novel with episode three of the show, the advantages of each narration style will become apparent. Most importantly, the unrestricted structure of the series delves into the personal stories of about ten characters that vary in demographic combinations of male, female, vampire, human, white, black, straight, and queer to create many developed, unique, and more fully realized characters,



more interesting binary oppositions, and more real world discourses than in the novel. This decision, in combination with the choice to make the Sookie/Bill romance a smaller part of the show, opens the audience of *True Blood* beyond the limited, mostly straight female audience of the book. In addition, the characters of Lafayette and Jason present an intriguing exploration of masculinity and male roles.

Narration, Perspective, Character, and Audience

The opening lines of chapter three of *Dead Until Dark* clearly illustrate the subjective, restricted narrative style of the novel: “The phone was ringing. I pulled my pillow over my head. Surely Gran would get it? As the irritating noise persisted, I realized Gran must be shopping or outside working in the yard.” In this passage, and throughout the book, the reader is psychologically situated inside the mind of Sookie Stackhouse. In film, it would be impossible to convey without speech or voice-over that Sookie thought Gran would get the phone, only to decide that she must either be shopping or outside. One advantage of *Dead Until Dark* is that we get to hear the many thoughts and emotions that Sookie experiences as they occur in the story world: “with the headache and regrets of someone who has a terrible hangover, though mine was emotional rather than alcohol induced, I stretched out a shaky hand and grabbed the receiver.” The downside of this limited approach is that we are *stuck* inside Sookie’s mind, often subjected to a dull recounting of every mundane action in her working class day: “I showered and pulled on my work clothes...I ate cereal and brushed my teeth, and told Gran where I was going when I tracked her down. She’d been outside planting petunias out by the back door.” Harris could have chosen to remove these details, but she kept them, likely to make Sookie seem like an ‘every woman,’ and to make the extraordinary events contrast with the ordinary.

Another advantage of the restricted narration of Sookie Stackhouse lies in “curiosity and surprise...confining the plot to an investigator’s range of knowledge



plausibly motivates concealing other story information” (Bordwell and Thompson, 89). When Sookie approaches Dawn’s house, a rich detail ominously foreshadows Dawn’s fate: “I looked down at the concrete porch. The pine pollen had begun falling two days ago...Dawn’s porch was solid yellow. Mine were the only footprints. My scalp began to prickle.” In many ways, Sookie is an investigator, and the in-the-moment, intensely psychological storytelling helps the reader feel her fear, anticipation, curiosity, and horror as the crime thriller aspect of the hybrid mystery/romance novel unravels.

Another advantage of the narration in *Dead Until Dark* are the moments of pseudo-omniscience, in which Sookie reads the thoughts of other characters. While these thoughts are still filtered through Sookie, and only available from her perspective, the reader gains telepathic insight and information not typical to a mystery novel. In addition, we occasionally learn about the emotions and thought processes that develop minor characters:

I didn’t want my own thoughts anymore. I relaxed, dropping my guard, and listened to the thoughts of others. Out of the clamor, I picked one thread and concentrated on it. Kenya Jones was looking beyond us, she was thinking of everything that she and Kevin needed to do to keep the investigation as textbook perfect as Bon Temps police officers could. She was thinking she’d heard bad things about Dawn and her liking for rough sex...I tuned into another channel. JB was thinking about Dawn getting killed during rough sex just a few feet away from him. While it was awful, it was still a little exciting. And Sookie was still built wonderful. He wished he could screw her right now. I switched...

Harris cleverly employs Sookie’s telepathy for a dual purpose: 1) to provide exposition otherwise unavailable to her character and 2) to give brief glimpses into the

minds and hearts of minor players in the story. The fact that Bill cannot be read and Sookie refuses to read Sam gives their characters more mystery and intrigue.

In practice, the most significant limitation of Harris' narration style manifests in terms of audience. The singular perspective of Sookie as narrator consequently restricts the major audience of the novel to heterosexual females. She describes in detail the erotic qualities of males: "A tasseled head poked out. 'wha you doin' Sookie Stackhouse?'" asked a slow, deep, male voice. I peered at him for a minute, finally placing the face while trying not to look too closely at the fine, bare chest underneath". These depictions are especially common with Bill, where masculine power, feminine urges, and complicated depictions of consensual sexuality combine for a potent relationship: "'No', he said, his mouth almost on mine. 'I won't force you.' I fought the urge to kiss him, but at least I knew it was my very own urge, not a manufactured one." In *True Blood*, we miss the full affective and psychological complexity of Sookie simultaneously desiring and being repelled by Bill, but in exchange we gain a fuller picture of the many denizens of Bon Temps. The conflicted, virgin, doting, arguably feminist waitress Sookie, with her intense vampire man-crush might seem boring or un-relatable to many readers, and her description of men and sex with men might make heterosexual male readers uncomfortable.

The show, by comparison, gives us many protagonists, characters of both genders, multiple orientations, several races, all with a constellation of unique personalities. The show cuts between multiple storylines in several locations, peering into the homes and lives of about seven main characters in season one. Tara, who is not even in the first novel, becomes a strong African-American



female voice: hilarious, confident, and feminist. The viewer peers into Sam's personal life, a working class, rural, everyman, who is likely more relatable to straight male viewers than Sookie. Jason and Lafayette provide the audience with the two most fascinating depictions of contemporary masculinity. Jason is hyper-masculine and very straight, validating himself through countless sexual encounters with young women, yet at the same time he is harshly sensitive to the smallest criticism of his virility. In contrast, Lafayette's gender is aggressively queer and proud of it. He seems only sexually attracted to men, though his orientation is never labeled. These two radically different male leads open the audience to more straight male and gay male viewers, offering them a bold study of maleness and gender performance.

Comparison of Lafayette and Jason – Masculinity, Insecurity, Self-Confidence

In both the book and show, Jason is characterized as an irresponsible, dim-witted playboy, and wrongfully accused as the murderer of women in the town. In the series, we examine his personal life, and because of this extended narrative POV, he becomes a more sympathetic and likable player. In a moment of restricted narration (in a flashback), we see the horror on his face when he believes that he accidentally strangled Maudette Pickens to death. In another episode, his storyline is devoted to an intense bout of priapism. Through a combination of reaction shots, dialogue description, and clever use of off-screen space, we simultaneously empathize and find humor in his predicament. Jason's greatest personal strength and weakness is his sexuality. His obviously lean and cut body is constantly on display in the show; a moment when he is found wearing an entire shirt is rare.

Often, Jason is completely naked (though no full frontal nudity is shown) and engaged in graphic (though simulated) sex with various women such as Maudette, Dawn, and Amy. His sex gives him great personal validation, as seen through his arrogant smirks during, brilliantly culminated in one shot of him checking himself out in the mirror, a reference to the extremely narcissistic character of Patrick Bateman in the film



adaptation of *American Psycho*. Like Bateman, Jason's erotic desires bring out intense aggression. He has a penchant for rough sex, and even pretends to be the psycho killer as revenge on Dawn in episode 3. This extended scene plays out through another restricted narrative viewpoint, that of Dawn, who (along with the audience) momentarily believes that the masked man attacking her is the true killer. In a ridiculously deep, raspy voice Jason restrains Dawn and growls, "I probably should have told you I have a highly addictive nature, and I'm gonna need to suck more of that sweet stuff out of you...don't fight me, or I will hurt you." Though he was joking, and his sex is always consensual, he has forceful and addictive sexual habits.

Jason's sexuality is also a source of great conflict and personal insecurity. Women he sleeps with continually wind up dead, making him the prime suspect of their murders. When Jason cannot achieve an erection in one instance with Dawn, he takes it personally, even though he has had sex multiple times that day. He feels jealous of vampires because they possess sexual abilities that he physically cannot imitate. The combination of these two psychological anxieties produces explosive results in the following scene with Dawn in episode 3. Dawn yells at him, "just because you lost your hard-on doesn't mean you need to have *afucking* meltdown. Believe it or not, the world does not revolve around your *dick*." Jason then angrily gestures at his off-screen penis and begs Dawn to stop talking about his momentary inability to get hard. He tries to stay confident and in control, but when Dawn turns a gun on him, he is revealed naked and vulnerable, as Dawn berates him about his arrogance and flaccid state, noting that vampires never go soft. As he scrambles to leave, the audience gets more full-frame views of his nearly naked body, and he bursts into a fit of male rage when he gets in his truck.

For Jason, the world *does* revolve around his dick, and the smallest insult to his virility destroys his sense of self worth. This moment of physical and emotional impotence leads Jason to obtain the V from Lafayette, a character who couldn't be more confident about his sexuality and gender identity. Instead of feigning male arrogance which thinly veils a core of insecurity and sexual addiction, Lafayette is truly content and complete performing his atypical masculinity.

In the book, Lafayette is only briefly introduced in chapter 3 and briefly described as 'wearing make-up.' In the series though, he's a multi-dimensional radical queer, aggressively and hilariously redefining stereotypes of masculinity, blackness, and homosexuality. He boldly defies the gender binary and conventional male traits typical of

a conservative, white, rural setting. His muscular, fit, masculine body is sharply contrasted with his make-up, hair wrap, and feminine clothing, which includes a kilt in one scene! He speaks in an effeminate tone, and lovingly addresses his female



co-workers as "hooker," He is undeniably charismatic and funny; when Tara arrives with a gash on her head, he calms her down, offering this hilarious medical advice: "naw, you just need to put some peroxide on that, then take two vicodin, with a BIG glass of red wine, then smoke some BADass ganja, baby. And by the time you wake up...UHNN! All heal." There is a clear feminine quality to his mannerisms; he gestures wildly, dances around, snaps his fingers, and strokes his head wrap ties as if they were his long hair. He also has a wide variety of jobs: cook, road worker, drug dealer, and prostitute. Unexpectedly, his feminine grace can immediately snap to male physical dominance when threatened, like when he easily puts Jason in a tight hold.

Lafayette has a wonderfully optimistic attitude. When he laments his back breaking job on the road crew, he follows it by shaking his hips saying "but I ain't complaining baby, no I ain't cause it gives me this bod', UHNN! And this bod' is gonna

be my fuckin' tickETTE outta here." He emphasizes syllables in a dramatic manner, and adds little UHNNs reminiscent of a sassy black woman archetype. VIBE magazine accurately sums up his lovingly contradictory personality, "Lafayette is a gay man who is flamboyant and egregious but at the same time isn't stereotypical. He's masculine but also feminine and will knock any man out if he's pushed that far." In one particularly memorable moment, Lafayette asserts himself at Merlotte's after three redneck patrons joke to "hold the AIDS" on their burgers. When Lafayette hears of the remark, he freezes, removes his earrings and apron, and struts over to their table with the burgers. Towering over their table with his beefy arms exposed, he asks, "who ordered the hamburger...with AIDS?" when they laugh at him and confirm their burger deluxe order, he launches into an enthralling gay rights diatribe and personal validation:

In this restaurant, burgers come with lettuce, tomato, pickles, mayo, and AIDS! Does anybody got a problem with that? ... Faggots been breeding your cows, raising your chickens, and even brewing your beer long before I walked my sexy ass up in this motha' fucka'. Everything on your goddamn table got AIDS.

He licks a burger bun and smashes it on one of the men's faces. They attack him, but he immediately fights back and easily restrains them back into their seats. His masculine aspects inform his feminine ones in that he unleashes his physical and vocal male power to protect against the discrimination of his feminine, queer qualities.

His self-assured confidence and self control in all aspects of his life prominently contrasts with Jason's rambunctious self-doubt and compulsive behaviors. This comparison plays out most obviously in the scene where Jason comes looking for Viagra at Lafayette's at the end of episode 3. Jason meekly and quietly asks for Viagra, continually uncomfortable and ashamed throughout the conversation. He keeps looking down, covering his lap with a pillow, while Lafayette prances around wearing gold pants and a shirt. Lafayette proudly shows off his V, and sternly threatens Jason not to tell anyone about it. When Jason doesn't come up with the money, Lafayette has him dance in his whitey-tighties for Lafayette's website: "that's my Jason" he says, as if Jason's a

toy or possession for him to play with. Jason hops around for the camera as the diegetic music ironically plays the lyric “I like to do manly things.” Lafayette and Tara both watch, their gaze (and the audience’s) voyeuristically fixed on his exhibitionist show.

The power relationship always has Lafayette with the upper hand, Jason willing to demean himself for his vices. Though Lafayette certainly indulges in sex and an array of drugs, he maintains moderation and personal dignity. Jason, on the other hand, has an insatiable appetite for women, and his addictive personality carries over into a V obsession, all of which began because of his crippling fear of impotency. On a V and sex rampage, he has sex with a skuzzy woman in the dirt behind Merlotte’s, not caring when Tara pours filthy trash all over their half-naked bodies. He continues to thrust himself into any female orifice he can find and eagerly seeks out vampire blood any chance he can get.

Actors Ryan Kwanten and Nelsan Ellis perform the Jason and Lafayette respectively, and their characters in turn are performing their gender, since unlike a person’s sex, gender is a conscious act of self-portrayal. This multi-layered web creates a wildly fascinating exploration of masculinity and orientation, especially when considering the personal lives of the actors. Ryan Kwanten is an Australian actor, who is a supporter of gay rights and has a gay brother. Strangely, he remains very tight-lipped about his own orientation, though there is much speculation on the internet that he is gay. Kwanten says of his orientation, “It was Einstein who once said, ‘The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.’ We almost know too much about far too many actors in this day and age — to the point where it becomes harder and harder to see them as a character. So I’ve always tried to maintain somewhat of an air of mystery” (towleroad.com). Unlike Kwanten, the character of Jason struggles to validate himself as a virile, desirable, assertive, hegemonic male, so he very consciously exudes the straight, male vibe. The character would likely be extremely defensive if anyone assumed Jason was anything but heterosexual.

On the other hand, Nelsan Ellis is a straight male who’s asked to perform a radically queer, bi-gender character. Ellis says that he used his mom and sister as

inspiration for Lafayette's mannerisms. Regarding getting into character on set, he recalled, "I have more makeup on than any of the females in the cast. Once they get me with the fake eyelashes and the eye makeup, I listen to some Rihanna and I'm there" (philly.com). Ellis nails the difficult task of playing a gay man while avoiding stereotypes or boring depictions. Lafayette shatters the myth of the gender binary, presenting a glorious amalgam of male, female, gay, queer, black, and southern characteristics, unashamed of his multiple minority statuses. In the article "The Only Haircut That Makes Sense Anymore" author Matias Viegner declares that "it no longer suffices to merely identify the Western homosexual with a position of poverty or victimage...if we continue to build a cultural politics around the theme of oppression and alienation, we will never learn to speak" (Grever et. al, 130).

Viegner instead suggests using radical speech to express the novelty, pleasure, and liberation that arises from boldly asserting your LGBT identity. Both the character of Lafayette and Nelsan Ellis seemed to have mastered this radical speech and performance and represent the LGBT community with a unique, positive voice. It's almost unfathomable that Ellis himself is not a fearless diva like Lafayette. It's ironic that a cisgender, straight actor plays a character with ambiguous sexuality and gender identity, while an actor with a mysterious orientation plays a hypermasculine, straight, hegemonic male.

Lastly, the physical build of both actors fits their characters marvelously. They are both muscular and traditionally masculine, but they have important differences. Kwanten is lean with an average frame, without an ounce of fat on his body. His face, especially his eyes and lips are quite boyish. He exudes a more teenage sense of masculinity, and his young eyes reflect his insecurity and immaturity. By contrast, Ellis is massive, with a giant frame and much bigger muscular mass. His stance is sturdy and his face more ruggedly masculine, and



even with his make-up and feminine clothes, his dominating male presence is undeniable.

Conclusion

The narrative omniscience of the show beyond the perspective of Sookie opens the audience to many more viewer demographics. Including complex male characters as protagonists has resulted in 48% male audience for the show (vulture.com). It's extremely popular; by Season 2, it became HBO's most watched show since *The Sopranos*, and it was the top selling TV Series on DVD in 2009. One unexpected audience is the cult following among the LGBT community as evidenced by message boards such as "The Gays of Day Time – True Blood." Lafayette has become one of the fan's favorite characters among gay and straight Truebies alike. He and Jason reflect two ways to present oneself as masculine in contemporary society, and they smartly avoid tired male archetypes. Alan Ball and his team have taken the narrowly-written, women's pop-romance-crime novel, and transformed it narratively into a sprawling epic. It's a juggernaut of a TV series that has a sizable audience in almost every demographic. Some might be turned off by its over-the-top, shocking sex and violence, and wild fantasy characters, but I think Alan Ball would defend the series with this gem from Lafayette: "Well you go ahead on, hooker with your badass. Good for you. It ain't possible to live unless you crossin' somebody's line."